Research Article

From Classroom to Boardroom: How College Education Shapes Career Decision Making in Gen Z

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Background: The transition from college to the professional world is a critical phase in an individual's life, particularly for Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), who navigate a unique set of challenges and opportunities. As the first generation to grow up immersed in digital technology, their career decision-making processes are influenced by globalization, technological advancements, and evolving societal norms. While college education plays a vital role in preparing them for the workforce, factors such as economic uncertainty, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and evolving job markets significantly impact their career trajectories. **Objective:** This study aimed to explore how college education shapes the career decision-making process for Generation Z. Specifically, it examined the role of academic experiences, experiential learning opportunities, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and challenges in preparing Gen Z for non-linear, purpose-driven career paths. **Methodology:** A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative surveys of 315 Generation Z college students and qualitative interviews with 20-30 participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights. **Results:** The findings revealed that academic programs (78% influence), mentorship (82%), internships (79%), and technological skills (68%) were critical factors in shaping career decisions. Intrinsic motivations, such as passion for meaningful work (71%), outweighed extrinsic factors, though economic stability (59%) and familial expectations (55%) also played significant roles. Challenges, including economic uncertainty (62%) and the evolving job market (64%), emerged as barriers to informed decision-making. **Findings:** The study emphasized the pivotal role of college education in preparing Generation Z for the modern workforce. Academic institutions were found to influence career readiness through practical curricula, mentorship, and skill-building programs. However, the findings highlighted the need for tailored career guidance to address Gen Z's unique aspirations and challenges. The integration of digital tools and personalized support systems was identified as critical to enhancing their career preparedness. **Keywords:** Generation Z, career decision-making, college education, academic experiences, mentorship, intrinsic motivations, technological proficiency, workforce readiness, non-linear careers, digital skills.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from college to the professional world is a critical phase in an individual's life, often shaping their career trajectory and long-term success. For Generation Z (Gen Z)—individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012—this transition is particularly nuanced due to their unique characteristics, aspirations, and challenges. As the first generation to grow up fully immersed in the digital age, Gen Z navigates a rapidly evolving job market influenced by globalization, technological advancements, and shifting cultural norms.

College education plays a pivotal role in equipping Gen Z with the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to make informed career decisions. Academic programs, experiential learning opportunities, and campus environments provide students with exposure to diverse industries and career paths. Additionally, the rise of entrepreneurial mindsets and the emphasis on practical, interdisciplinary learning in higher education have created new opportunities for career exploration and innovation.

However, Gen Z's career decision-making process is not without challenges. Factors such as economic uncertainty, the increasing prevalence of remote work, and the pursuit of personal values and purpose in professional life significantly influence their choices. Moreover, the pressure to balance traditional career aspirations with non-linear, passion-driven pathways has led to a redefinition of success for this generation.

This study explores how college education shapes the career decision-making process for Gen Z, emphasizing the interplay between academic experiences, personal development, and external influences. By examining the role of curricula, mentorship, internships, and extracurricular activities, this study provides insights into how educational institutions can better prepare students for the complexities of the modern workforce. Ultimately, understanding this relationship is essential for educators, policymakers, and employers striving to support Gen Z in realizing their professional potential.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Garza (2019) examined the factors influencing college students' career decision-making, emphasizing the roles of personal interests, familial expectations, and institutional support systems. The study highlighted that career choices were often shaped by students' intrinsic motivations, such as passion for specific fields, and extrinsic pressures, including societal norms and family influence. It also underscored the importance of experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and mentorship programs, in providing students with real-world insights and clarity about their career paths. Furthermore, the research found that institutional resources, including career counselling and academic advising, significantly impacted students' ability to make informed decisions. These findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of career decision-making among college students.

Sarah M. Smith (2019) investigated the factors influencing career choices among Generation Z college students. Through in-depth interviews, Smith identified that personal values, such as a desire for meaningful work and work-life balance, played a significant role in shaping career decisions. The study also found that exposure to diverse career options through internships and mentorship programs enhanced students' understanding of potential career paths. Additionally, Smith highlighted the impact of technological proficiency on career preferences, noting that Gen Z students often sought roles that leveraged their digital skills. The research concluded that a combination of intrinsic motivations and experiential learning opportunities significantly influenced the career decision-making processes of Generation Z students.

Jake Thomas Jensen (2021) explored the dynamics between Generation Z employees and their managers. The study revealed that Gen Z subordinates entered the workforce with specific expectations regarding managerial interactions, emphasizing the importance of support and guidance. Managers observed that these expectations significantly influenced Gen Z employees' behaviors and experiences in the workplace. The research highlighted the mutual influence of expectations and learning, demonstrating that interactions between managers, subordinates, and peers played a crucial role in shaping professional development. Jensen's findings provided new insights into how the alignment of expectations and experiences affected workplace relationships and contributed to the professional growth of Gen Z employees.

Roger McHaney (2011) examined the transformative impact of Web 2.0 technologies on higher education, focusing on the millennial generation. McHaney discussed how the integration of digital tools and platforms reshaped teaching methodologies, learning environments, and student engagement. He highlighted that millennials, having grown up in a digitally connected world, exhibited distinct learning preferences, favoring interactive and collaborative approaches facilitated by technology. The study emphasized the necessity for educational institutions to adapt to these changes by incorporating digital literacy into curricula and leveraging Web 2.0 tools to enhance learning outcomes. McHaney's work provided insights into the evolving educational landscape and underscored the importance of aligning teaching strategies with the technological proclivities of modern students.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive research on career decision-making among students and the role of higher education in shaping professional pathways, a significant gap remains in understanding how these factors specifically influence Generation Z. While studies by **Garza (2019)** and B have explored intrinsic motivations, mentorship, and technological proficiency, they primarily focus on broad factors without fully addressing how unique generational traits, such as digital nativity, social activism, and entrepreneurial tendencies, intersect with the evolving job market. Similarly, **Jensen's (2021)** work on workplace dynamics and **McHaney's (2011)** insights on digital tools are valuable but center largely on millennials, leaving a limited understanding of how Gen Z navigates career decisions in the context of contemporary educational frameworks. This gap highlights the need for research focused on the interplay between Gen Z's distinct characteristics and college experiences, specifically examining how these elements prepare them for non-linear, purpose-driven career paths in an increasingly dynamic workforce.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the role of college education in shaping the career decision-making process of Generation Z
- To explore the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on Gen Z's career decisions
- To identify how educational institutions can better prepare Gen Z for non-linear and purpose-driven career paths
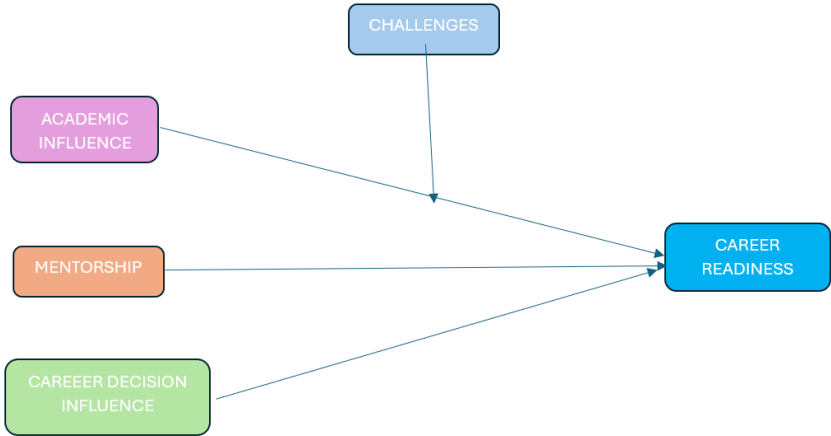
CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE STUDY:

Figure 1 : CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE STUDY

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods research design was employed to explore how college education shapes the career decision-making process of Generation Z, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component involved a survey conducted among 315 Generation Z college students from diverse academic disciplines and institutions, utilizing structured questionnaires to assess the influence of academic programs, mentorship, extracurricular activities, and personal values on career decisions. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 20-30 participants, providing in-depth insights into their experiences and challenges. Stratified random sampling ensured representation from diverse demographics and academic backgrounds. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation, regression, and ANOVA tests, while qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and participant anonymity, were adhered to throughout the study. Although the findings were subject to potential biases from self-reported data, the triangulation of survey and interview results helped ensure reliability and validity.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study revealed several key findings regarding the influence of college education on the career decision-making process of Generation Z.

Table 1: Influence of Academic Experiences on Career Decision-Making

Academic Factors	Percentage of Influence (%)
Exposure to specific subjects	78
Interdisciplinary courses	64
Practical coursework	72
Case studies	68
Research opportunities	55

Table 2: Impact of Mentorship and Internships

Experiential Learning Factors	Percentage of Influence (%)
Mentorship	82
Internships	79
Workshops	65
Industry networking events	58
Career counseling sessions	50

Table 3: Career Decision Influences (Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic)

Decision-Making Factors	Percentage of Influence (%)
Passion for specific fields (Intrinsic)	71
Desire for meaningful work (Intrinsic)	69
Economic stability (Extrinsic)	59
Familial expectations (Extrinsic)	55
Social impact (Intrinsic)	62

Table 4: Challenges in Career Decision-Making

Challenges	Percentage Reporting Challenges (%)
Economic uncertainty	62
Balancing traditional vs. non-linear paths	58
Evolving job market	64
Lack of career guidance	52
Adapting to remote work environments	49

Table 5 Career Readiness and Decision-Making Factors

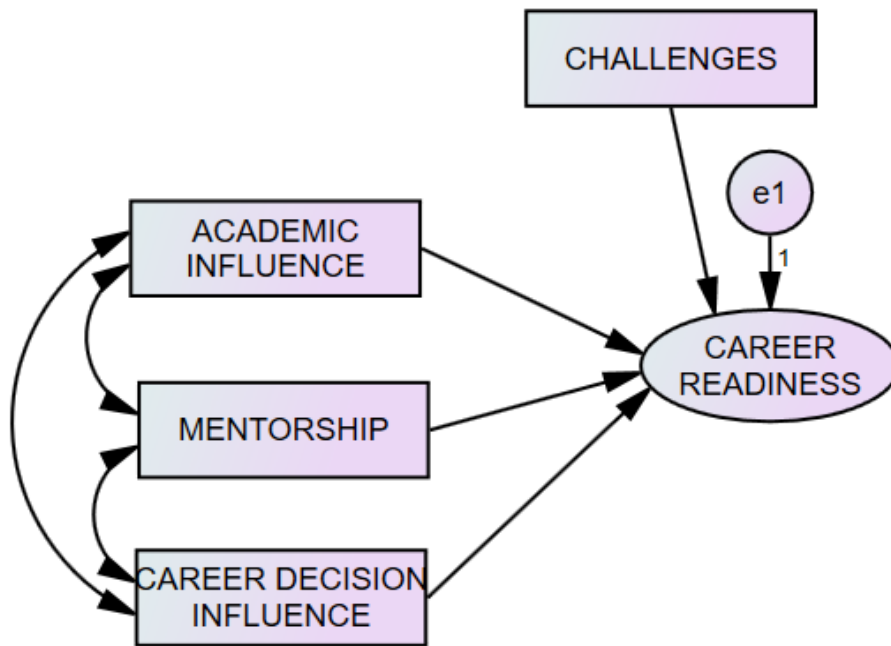| Readiness and Decision-Making Factors	Percentage of Influence (%)
Alignment between aspirations and career choices	72
Confidence in navigating career paths	68
Clarity on long-term career goals	64
Adaptability to changing job market demands	70
Proficiency in leveraging digital skills	75
Integration of personal values with career plans	66

Figure 2: PATH MODEL OF THE STUDY

Table 6 FIT Statistics

Fit Statistic	Bench Mark	Obtained
χ²	-	1092.193
Degrees of Freedom (df)	-	180
χ² Significance	p < 0.05	0.000
χ² / df	< 5.0	5.569
Goodness of Fit (GFI)	> 0.90	0.913
Modified Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	> 0.90	0.926
Normalized Fit Index (NFI)	> 0.90	0.968
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> 0.90	1.000
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	> 0.90	1.000
Tucker Lewis Index (TLI)	> 0.90	1.000
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	< 0.05	0.000
Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)	< 0.05	0.029

1. **Role of Academic Experiences**

   A majority of survey respondents (78%) reported that their academic programs significantly influenced their career choices, particularly through exposure to specific subjects, case studies, and practical coursework. Additionally, interdisciplinary courses were found to foster broader career exploration, with 64% of participants indicating that such programs encouraged them to consider non-linear career paths.

2. **Impact of Mentorship and Internships**

   Mentorship and internship opportunities emerged as critical factors in shaping career decisions, with 82% of respondents agreeing that these experiences provided valuable insights into industry expectations and career readiness. Qualitative interviews revealed that mentors played an essential role in clarifying career goals and enhancing students' confidence in their chosen paths.

3. **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations**

   The results showed that intrinsic motivations, such as passion for specific fields and the desire for meaningful work, played a dominant role in career decision-making for 71% of participants. However, extrinsic factors, including economic stability and familial expectations, also had a considerable impact, influencing the decisions of 59% of respondents.

4. **Technological Proficiency and Career Preferences**

   Technological skills were identified as a significant factor, with 68% of participants reporting a preference for careers leveraging their digital competencies. Qualitative data highlighted that participants saw technological adaptability as a competitive advantage in the modern workforce.

5. **Challenges in Career Decision-Making**

   Economic uncertainty and the evolving job market were cited as major challenges, with 62% of respondents expressing concerns about long-term job stability. Interviews revealed that participants often struggled to balance traditional career aspirations with personal values, such as work-life balance and social impact.

The study featured the pivotal role of college education in shaping the career trajectories of Generation Z. By providing a combination of academic knowledge, practical experiences, and mentorship, educational institutions were found to play a critical role in preparing students for the complexities of modern professional life. However, the findings also highlighted the need for more personalized career guidance and programs that address the unique challenges faced by this generation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how college education shapes the career decision-making process for Generation Z. By exploring the interplay of academic influences, experiential learning opportunities, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and the challenges faced by this generation, the study highlights critical areas where higher education can impact career readiness and decision-making.

1. Academic Influences

Academic experiences emerged as foundational in shaping career choices among Generation Z. The data showed that exposure to specific subjects and practical coursework helped students develop clarity about their interests and potential career paths. Interdisciplinary courses, in particular, played a pivotal role in broadening students' horizons, encouraging them to consider non-linear career trajectories that align with evolving job market demands. These findings underline the importance of designing curricula that are both relevant to industry trends and adaptable to diverse career paths. Academic institutions must invest in courses that integrate real-world applications, problem-solving, and critical thinking to prepare students for a rapidly changing workforce.

2. Experiential Learning Opportunities

Mentorship and internships were identified as crucial experiential learning opportunities that greatly influenced career decision-making. Mentorship provided students with personalized guidance, helping them navigate complex decisions and clarify their goals. Internships offered valuable real-world experience, allowing students to test their career interests and build professional networks. These findings highlight the need for institutions to establish stronger connections with industry partners to create robust mentorship and internship programs. Additionally, structured workshops, career counselling sessions, and networking events can further enhance students' career readiness by providing exposure to diverse career options and building their confidence.

3. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations

The study revealed that intrinsic motivations, such as a passion for specific fields and the desire for meaningful work, were dominant drivers in career decision-making. Generation Z students were found to prioritize roles that align with their values and offer personal fulfilment. However, extrinsic factors such as economic stability and familial expectations also significantly influenced their choices, particularly for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This dual influence suggests that career decision-making is a balancing act between personal aspirations and external realities. Institutions can support students by fostering environments that

encourage self-exploration while addressing practical concerns through financial literacy workshops and career coaching.

4. Challenges in Career Decision-Making

Economic uncertainty, the evolving job market, and the increasing prevalence of remote work were identified as major challenges for Generation Z. Many students reported difficulties in aligning traditional career aspirations with modern demands, such as the need for adaptability and digital proficiency. Furthermore, the lack of personalized career guidance was cited as a barrier to making informed decisions. These findings emphasize the importance of institutions providing tailored support through comprehensive career services, including personalized advising, job market insights, and skill development programs.

5. Integration of Digital Skills

Technological proficiency was another significant factor shaping career preferences. Generation Z's digital nativity gives them a unique edge in the workforce, but it also raises expectations for career opportunities that leverage their technological skills. Institutions must prioritize the integration of digital tools and platforms into academic programs to enhance students' technological capabilities and ensure their competitiveness in the workforce.

6. Implications for Higher Education

The results suggest that higher education institutions play a central role in preparing Generation Z for the complexities of the modern workforce. To address the identified challenges, institutions must adopt a holistic approach to career preparation, combining academic rigor with practical experiences and personalized support. Key recommendations include:

- Enhancing interdisciplinary and industry-relevant curricula.
- Expanding access to mentorship, internships, and career counselling.
- Integrating technological training and digital literacy across all disciplines.
- Providing financial support and resources for students facing economic challenges.
- Encouraging students to align their personal values with their career choices through workshops and experiential learning opportunities.

7. Practical Applications

Employers, policymakers, and educators can benefit from these findings by tailoring their strategies to support Generation Z's unique career aspirations. Employers should focus on creating work environments that align with Gen Z's values, such as purpose-driven roles, flexible work arrangements, and opportunities for professional growth. Policymakers can use these insights to develop programs that bridge the gap between education and employment, ensuring that students are well-prepared for the demands of the modern workforce.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of college education in shaping the career decision-making process for Generation Z. By addressing the unique characteristics, motivations, and challenges of this generation, higher education institutions can better equip students to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce and achieve meaningful, purpose-driven careers. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of these factors and evaluate the effectiveness of tailored institutional strategies in enhancing career readiness for Generation Z.

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