

Understanding How Senior High School Students Choose a College Degree Program: A Phenomenological Study

Ralph Andrei T. Del Rosario*, Adeya Rafaella L. Cruz, Chelsie Nicole P. Bartolome,
Novelyn I. Manipon, Angelica Mei I. Dela Cruz, Joseph A. Villarama
Central Luzon State University, Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, Philippines

*Corresponding author email: ralphandrei.delrosario@ushs.ph.education

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Abstract. The college programs that SHS students choose influence their lives as young adults. It defines their future careers and significantly changes the course of their lives. With this in mind, many factors influence the decision-making process of incoming first-years. With the implementation of the K-12 Program in the Philippines, costs needed for education have further soared. Apart from this, parental and familial relationships could also influence most students' education, as they serve as children's pillars of support, meaning parents, finance, and many other elusive factors could potentially inhibit SHS students' choices when entering college. Therefore, to provide even more insight into the career decision-making process of incoming college students, it is necessary to solidify an understanding of how exactly different factors affect graduating STEM students' choices. To explore this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants using ten (10) general, parent-related, and finance-related questions. The thematic analysis was used to find the results. It had been divided into six (6) themes: parental and familial factors, financial factors, environmental factors, capabilities and interests, perspectives on the STEM strand, and confidence/belief in choosing the right field. The results highlighted that familial and financial influence were the most prevalent factors. Students' environment, skills, and preferences also played a significant role. Additionally, the interviewees' positive views on STEM and their confidence that they have thoroughly analyzed all other factors have also played a role in their college program decision-making process.

Keywords: Parental relationships; Financial status; STEM students; Career; College.

1.0 Introduction

College programs determine the majority of what most aspiring adults become in life (Cuy & Salinas, 2019). The decisions they make during their time in universities and colleges significantly impact the flow of their career (Zaini et al., 2021). Students who have reached and completed tertiary education have a higher likelihood of becoming successful in the adult world, improving their chances of having a better life in virtually all aspects. One thing that influences college students' programs is their strand in Senior High School (SHS) (Malaguial et al., 2023). These strands include, but are not limited to, Accountancy and Business Management (ABM), Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS), General Academic Strand (GAS), Technical-Vocational-Livelihood Strand (TVL), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) (Malaguial et al., 2023).

Senior High School is also in conjunction with our current K-12 educational system (Mokher & Mella-Alcazar, 2024). The Department of Education (DepEd) recognized that the previous and relatively brief ten years of primary and secondary education did not suffice for the majority of students, as it put the Filipino students' quality of education lower than those of international schools; there was a very apparent need for an improvement with the country's educational system, thus implementing and extending the length of said primary and secondary. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

education to twelve years in total. A system of education known as academic tracking tracks students' progress and places them in groups according to their academic levels (Jotform, 2024). It has been proved that SHS graduates have higher proficiencies for developing middle-level skills and have a higher rate of employment/entrepreneurship (Carada et al., 2022). The goal is to ensure that each student is on the best learning path for their needs and circumstances (Cogal et al., 2019).

Apart from this, parental support is considered an essential aspect of child improvement, especially in terms of nourishing children socially, psychologically, and physically (Rathee & Kumari, 2022). Recent research demonstrates the importance of parent-child bonds in kids' learning processes, which is now recognized as a significant influence on both their academic success and day-to-day functioning (Li et al., 2022). Therefore, parental involvement in school, such as participating in parent-teacher conferences or assisting their child with academic problems, is critical for children's academic outcomes (Lara & Saracosti, 2019).

Money places restrictions on consumers' daily lives, particularly those of students. It is challenging for consumers not to buy different needs and wants, which causes financial shortages among students (Acbang et al., 2018). As the financial cost necessary to successfully pass and graduate college slowly but surely increases – and the aid for finance remains virtually stagnant – most college students continue to struggle to provide the necessities vital for their respective career paths (Brausch, 2018). The invested resources of college students are directly proportional to the quality of education they receive (Baker, 2018).

The two factors stated above – money and parental relationship – have been proved by countless studies to be vital in determining the career decisions and college majors of students, both locally and internationally. If one is interested in improving their chances of achieving a more successful future, money and parental support are two of the most essential components to put into consideration. Through this study, the researchers aimed to contribute insightful information regarding the improvement of success in the field of career decision-making. For students with low socioeconomic status, seeking higher education is their primary tool in overcoming poverty (Peng & Yue, 2022). In a report by Pew Research Center in 2021, an employee with a bachelor's degree earns more than an employee with a high school diploma and no college degree (Schaeffer, 2022). Hence, it is essential for students to select the most suitable degree program because it will create job opportunities for them in the future.

Planning a career path is a complex process, thus causing an impact on students' mental, economic, and social health (Levin et al., 2020). However, students experience conflict in making career decisions until the completion of their college degree. Career indecisiveness may damage their professional and social lives. Furthermore, career indecisiveness leads to jobs unaligned to the employees' interests and capabilities, eventually affecting their career satisfaction. Career satisfaction is a crucial factor in employees' performance and motivation, for it impacts their productivity and efficiency. A negative impact on an employee's career satisfaction leads to damage to their well-being and job performance (Boštjančič & Petrovčič, 2019).

Thus, understanding the factors and influences affecting students' career decision-making is crucial, for it will affect their professional lives and socioeconomic status. The researchers saw a need to shed light on how specifically parental and financial factors affect STEM students' decision-making process for the programs they have pursued in college as an attempt to provide more beneficial insight into the field of education and career planning.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

An in-depth *phenomenological approach* was utilized in this qualitative study. A phenomenological approach proved to be the best for this study as it aimed to find the causes and motives behind college students' decision-making process. The researchers also did not need to interact with the participants for a long period since the desired results could already be collected through the use of a simple *semi-structured interview*. *Purposive sampling* was utilized to identify individuals who met the specific criteria for the research study. By targeting college students who had pursued STEM as their strand in SHS but were presently enrolled in a non-STEM-related program at a university, the researchers were able to narrow their focus to a specific subgroup with shared

attributes. This strategic approach enhanced the coherence and relevance of this study. While the inclusion of five participants may seem limited, it adheres to the qualitative research principle of data saturation, which emphasizes depth and breadth of information. Furthermore, five individuals were chosen to ensure that there was sufficient data and to formulate reliable conclusions.

2.2 Research Participants

The chosen participants were five (5) college students of ages 18 and above who have graduated in SHS from the STEM strand and continued their college journey by taking a non-STEM-based program. The researchers and interviewees conducted the interview through Google Meet, an online video-communication service platform.

2.3 Research Instrument

This study utilized a semi-structured interview as the instrument to answer the research objectives. The interview consisted of ten (10) questions: four (4) general questions regarding the interviewees' educational background, three (3) specific questions regarding parental relationships, and three (3) specific questions regarding financial status. Follow-up questions were asked accordingly.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedures

The interaction with each of the five interviewees was audio- and video-recorded to preserve the information they provided for the researchers' study. The transcribing of the interviews took 20 minutes to 1 hour, depending on its length. The researchers reviewed the transcribed interviews and familiarized themselves with their contents. After familiarizing the transcript, the researchers derived codes relevant to answering the research questions from the interviewees' answers. The researchers reviewed these derived codes to identify patterns and generate themes. The generated themes were examined to ensure they answered the research questions. For the last step, the themes were defined and named for further discussion. Data triangulation and cross-checking were also observed to maintain the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the results.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed after the five participants were interviewed, and the results were concluded accordingly. The researchers used thematic data analysis, a methodological approach that supports phenomenology, to identify and interpret patterns, themes, and meanings within the qualitative data. The researchers used a systematic process and categorizing approach to break down the varied participant experiences into coherent themes reflecting the essence of the similarities of their decision-making process. This analytical approach contributed to uncovering the underlying patterns, reasons, and factors driving the participants' decisions. Through thematic data analysis, the overall understanding of college students' decision-making process is better understood. (Castleberry, 2018; Kiger, 2020).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The undertaking of this study was reviewed and had been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Central Luzon State University (CLSU) with the ERC Code 2023-171.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Based on the thematic analysis done, the narratives of each interviewee had been summarized and compared with one another, ultimately leading to six (6) themes embodying the recurring factors behind every bit of vital information shared by the interviewees. Additionally, these themes are arranged in order of what influenced the interviewees from most to least.

Theme 1: The Parental and Familial Factors Influencing Strand and Career Decisions

Parents and family proved to be the most influential factor in the six themes based on all of the interviewees' responses. Most of what their parents and families have said whenever career decisions are brought up has generally influenced what they want to go for as their career.

In connection to this, all interviewees agreed that their parents had given them insights and requests on their possible careers. The participants shared that some of their families had subtler and weaker influences on them, while others had a much more substantial and direct impact.

One of the interviewees shared that their parents had only given them hints, suggestions, and recommendations on what path they should choose for their future career path:

"They told me that it was my choice. But they would say things like, 'Try Accountancy,' so, yes, it was Accountancy."

On the other hand, one participant stated that their parents had influenced their decisions with more than just suggestions and recommendations. They believed that their parents were the single most important factor as to why they chose the program that they had in mind:

"Back then, they had already kind of sculpted me – they had molded me to become a doctor, nurse, or public health worker. My parents had a big influence on me, socially and culturally, that's why I should choose a Bachelor of Science in Public Health. And whatever happens, I should still choose it."

Based on the information gathered, they were aligned with the findings of Nawabi and Javed (2019), wherein the parents and guardians are crucial variables in how they evaluate decisions made by their children. Parents play a significant role in their children's life decisions – from when they are born to when they become adults. Although their influence on their children diminishes the older they become, they remain, and they have solidified their role as their children's primary support throughout their lives.

According to another study conducted by the University of York (2019), parents from well-educated backgrounds positively impact their children's academic development, regardless of hereditary propensity. Participants with parents in high-ranking professions or are employed in higher-than-average compensation will likely recommend that the participants follow in their footsteps. The majority of the time, the participants believe they should be achievers. That is why better-educated parents prefer to have children who are similar to them.

The findings led the researchers to conclude that parents influenced the participants' decision-making abilities. Depending on how sure the interviewee was with their program of interest and how open-minded the parents were with their child's chosen program, the mothers, fathers, and other family members could influence their children's choice by either a small or large margin.

Theme 2: The Effects of Finance in Strand and Career Decisions

Another significant factor that the interviewees considered was their respective financial situations during the decision-making process of their desired program and school.

Regardless of the interviewees' household income, they had all chosen the program that had the most practical, convenient, and inexpensive option.

As for those less financially secure, it was clear that they expressed their reluctance to enter universities beyond their family's financial capabilities, choosing the least expensive outcome to prevent further financial problems from arising.

One of the interviewees shared their experience on the compromises that needed to be made in order to make sure that both the interviewee themselves and their siblings were able to receive proper education, even if it meant that it was not their priority program and that it was a very foreign field of study for the interviewee.

"My siblings studying in a private school was already a huge burden, so if I also decided to study in a private school, then our financial expenses would become a lot bigger. That's why, even if I was not familiar with the course at first, I still decided to pursue it because it is a public school – because there is no need for tuition fees."

Another interviewee had stated that in order to make the most out of their financial resources, they needed to have made an agreement with their cousins to make sure that they will all be able to get proper, high-quality education.

"I also think that we can save [money] since there are four of us here. If I did pursue my studies at SLU, I would've had to pay double since the rent of a solo condominium unit would've already been equivalent to the tuition fees. But because there are four of us (studying in UP), that means that me and my cousins could split the expenses for our condo."

Another crucial finance-related factor is the influence of scholarships and other incentives in order to solve most aspiring students' lack of financial resources.

"Other than having free education at CLSU, we also receive incentives for academic awardees. This is per semester and because the amount given is quite large, it is a huge help for my budget and allowance."

Furthermore, the interviewees chose or pursued STEM as a strand in senior high school due to financial considerations. According to the responses gathered, the fact that the school is a no-tuition public school further cemented or sealed their decision to pursue STEM, despite their preference for another strand.

"USHS, being a public school, further motivated me to stay and pursue STEM."

A study by Humayon et al. (2018) discovered that economic factors, personal interests, and family influence had a significant impact on students' career decisions. Although it did not have the highest influence among the factors, it was the third-most influential factor among the factors mentioned in their study.

Abusama et al. (2023) also mentioned the importance of finance in education. According to their findings, many students choose their respective programs for financial reasons, opportunities, settings, and demand. This implies that students deciding on their future program usually base their course of action on the most financially effective option.

With all of this in mind, the researchers safely concluded that finance played a significant role in the education or studies of college students.

Theme 3: The Environment and other External Factors

One of the factors observed among the interviewees' responses regarding their decision-making is their environment, specifically their peers, location, and experiences. This meant that before deciding on what career path they wanted to pursue, they first put into consideration certain things like the difficulty of transportation, the people (e.g., students and teachers) that they were going to interact with, and the actual location of the campus.

One of the interviewees explained that, due to their location and residence, it was inefficient and impractical to study in a different school:

"I had a feeling that I was going to have a hard time adjusting to the location of the supposedly new school I was going to transfer in... Especially because the pandemic had just started at that time, and I didn't think that it was going to be reasonable if I was going to change schools."

Another interviewee had also shared that she was able to discover her current program a random interaction with another applicant when they were taking an entrance examination

One of the participants revealed that a peer of hers introduced her to her current non-STEM program:

"I had no idea what Public Administration was before I applied to U.P. I had the chance to talk to another applicant who revealed that they wanted to take Public Administration."

Another interviewee revealed that the people around them influenced her decision:

"But of course, there were external factors that influenced my decision, like my peers, church family, and my acquaintances working in different fields. Would they recommend their job? How is their experience with that field?"

Peer pressure plays a significant positive and negative role in influencing students' behavior and decision-making process regarding their career choices (Kaur, 2020). Additionally, peer interactions with students can influence their career decisions and academic performance (Moldes et al., 2019). However, it may also cause students to inhibit negative behaviors and bad decisions that may impact their personal adjustment to their environment (Sahu, 2022).

The consistent pattern shown by the interviewees led the researchers to conclude that the students' environment, specifically friends and peers, influences and encourages their decision-making.

Theme 4: Capabilities and Interests of the Participants

Another theme that had been seen to be prevalent among all of the interviewees was their skills and preferences. To a certain extent, though not as impactful as the previously mentioned factors, the participants had considered their likes and abilities before deciding on what program they had chosen for college. However, due to other more influential factors, like a student's familial, financial, and environmental situation, the interviewees shared that they had needed to compromise and find the best alternative given all of the factors to be considered.

One of the interviewees mentioned that their current program had started from curiosity to learn about it on the Internet. They had then realized that what they had found from searching through the Internet was aligned with their interests:

"I got curious about what Public Ad was; hence, I searched through the internet. I discovered that public ad covers public service and policy reforms, which were some of my interests. I also found out that public ads focus more on essay writing. I knew I could get through it, so I put it as one of my choices, and that is where I passed."

This specific finding is in conjunction with a study by Pascual (2014), wherein it was implied that the biggest reason why Filipino college students tend to prefer science-related programs the most and agriculture-related programs the least is because of their interest in what is deemed to be the "popular courses" in the country. The study shows that whatever program is aligned with the college students' preferences (i.e., science-related programs) proved to be the more prevalent option.

With this in mind, the researchers were able to safely conclude that, although inferior to the other previously mentioned factors like parents and family, money, and location, an individual's academic preference tends to also influence the overall decision-making process of those aiming to look for their desired college program.

Theme 5: The Perspective of the Participants Regarding STEM

Another prevalent factor apparent to every interviewee was their general view on the STEM strand. Every participant believed STEM to be a safe and stable option, especially for students still unsure of what they will continue pursuing. Consequently, this affected their decision.

The interviewees also believed STEM to be a helpful and safe strand in preparation for college studies, regardless of its connection to whatever non-STEM-related program they had taken. The participants believed that STEM, although not wholly related to their current programs, helped them more than they initially thought despite their non-STEM-related careers. This made it easier for the interviewees to let go of their strand to pursue a program that is not as connected to STEM.

One of the interviewees shared that choosing STEM as their strand for SHS was the right decision. Although the program they had chosen was non-STEM-related, they shared that they would have made the same decision if they had the opportunity. Their confidence in the STEM strand being beneficial to their chosen program had made it easier for them to pursue a career that was not entirely related to their SHS strand:

"I would still go with choosing STEM because my course right now is heavily math related. So, I think STEM helped me a lot in my current course, so I'm not experiencing that much difficulty."

One of the participants also shared that specific subjects that are covered by the STEM strand proved to be beneficial for general college studies, as it boosted students with preparatory college materials.

"Yes. Actually, it's an advantage... Our foundation in STEM has a big role. And also, in research, because in every semester, there is research... And in Math, all of the courses in college have Math subjects, so it helps out in that sense, too. ...being a STEM graduate is an advantage."

These narratives are in connection to the results from a study conducted by (Gonzales & Digo, 2024), wherein selecting the right academic track or strand can help propel high school students' skills when they get the chance to go with their preferred course in college. In the case of this study, the interviewees, as SHS students who had taken the STEM strand but had chosen a non-STEM related program in college, the academic strand that they chose significantly helped them overcome difficulties in their college life, regardless of how related they are to the STEM strand, as this strand covers a wide variety of general academic necessities that can help students become more prepared with their college studies.

With this in mind, the researchers were able to conclude that STEM, although not entirely connected to their programs, had still shaped the interviewees to an extent, influencing what they would ultimately choose in their careers, as the universal benefits that can be learned from the STEM strand had made them more confident in choosing from a wide range of college programs.

Theme 6: The Participants' Confidence and Belief on them "Choosing the Right Career"

In conjunction with the positive impressions that the interviewees had of the STEM strand, they also shared that they were confident with what they had done in the past and trusted in themselves that they had made the best decisions for their careers.

The interviewees believed that whatever decision they had made during their time in SHS in STEM was the right choice and that they had considered all of the factors possible, leading to them feeling confident and content with their decisions.

Additionally, when asked if they would change their past decisions if they had the opportunity to do so, every single participant was completely satisfied with how things have ended up in their current academic lives. All of them stated that they were completely prepared for the undertakings of their respective careers and would not want to change to another program, even if they had the chance.

One interviewee, proud and satisfied with the decision that they had made during their SHS times, shared that:
"I'm quite happy with my course, so far."

Another participant had mentioned that, though they experienced struggles, the fact remained that they still felt content that they had made the right decision, and that they were grateful that the confident decision that they had chosen when they were in SHS proved to be fruitful now that they were in college.

"Although it's hard, I'm still having fun. ... So, I was able to ... appreciate more the gifts and talents the Lord has given me in the sense that I could help others using this field – this course. That's why I realized even more that, 'Oh, this really is for me.'"

The findings analyzed from this study's interviews are in conjunction with the study of Lee (2024), wherein it was stated that the satisfaction of college students with their education had a positive relation with their overall life satisfaction. This implies that for students to feel more positive about their current college life, they would need to feel content and satisfied with the decisions that they had made in the past that led to where they are now.

Additionally, in another study conducted by Wong & Chapman (2022), it has also stated that the quality of education, student services, and academic programs played a significant role in determining the life satisfaction of college students, implying that the environment, curriculum, and society within a school or university influence the how a college student views their life as.

Thus, with this in mind, the researchers concluded that the interviewees had made their past decisions for their college programs specifically because one of the factors that influenced their choice was their confidence and belief that they had chosen the right path.

4.0 Conclusion

Given the analysis of the narratives from the interviewees, it is undeniable that family and finance significantly impact one's career path and program. They both played an essential role in determining a college student's future. If one wants to improve their chances of achieving a better future, it is crucial to note that money and their relationship with their parents can help or hinder them in reaching their aspirations.

Furthermore, family seemed to be the more dominant factor since, similar to the situation of one of the participants, financial problems—on certain occasions, like getting a scholarship—can be alleviated more easily than parental problems. As a result, many people who have qualified for scholarships can expand the opportunities they can get and also decide from more choices.

The concept of scholarship played a very significant role in providing free tertiary education, positively impacting the chosen programs of the participants who have qualified for it. It improves financial capabilities, allowing a student to focus on other critical financial hurdles without having the problem of worrying about expenses and tuition fees.

Apart from this, the researchers have also discovered that the scope of influence is limited to one's parents and one's own other family members (e.g., cousins, grandparents, siblings). Other factors like one's own peers and community members also played a role in career decisions. Therefore, to improve their chances of success, apart from parents and finances, seeking advice from other family members, guardians, friends, teachers, mentors, and the like can also play a significant role.

Additionally, one's interests and capabilities also had a substantial impact in dictating what a college student would choose as their program, sometimes even having more influence than with finance and parental relationships. In other words, there are times when it would be better to follow one's desires/ambitions than to listen to other people's opinions.

Lastly, STEM, as a whole, had—for the most part—a positive effect on almost all of the interviewees and their respective programs, stating that, regardless of their program's disconnection with STEM, it still proved to be helpful with the majority of the programs present within a program. This proved to be a surprising and unexpected result, indicating that for people still undecided about what program they would like to take for college, STEM could be a very safe choice that offers vast opportunities for future career paths.

Future researchers should focus on interviewees from the lower class or lower middle class. In this way, they can derive more accurate answers regarding the influences of financial status on the students' career decision-making. It is also recommended that future researchers interview more than 5 participants to make the data more dependable. Additionally, future researchers can consider former STEM students from different schools aside from those from University Science High School. They may also consider finding interviewees from different strands besides the STEM strand to establish more inclusive data. This way, researchers could derive more diverse and accurate data from the interviewees. Additionally, future researchers may include a broader scope of variables. Instead of focusing only on parental relationships, they can also consider other interpersonal relationships and interactions, such as students' relationships with their teachers, friends, peers, and environment.

As for the government, this study recommends and urges us to continue aiming for equal opportunities and more inclusive education for everyone. Government support may also include increasing the funding for education to ensure that local universities and public schools can accommodate more students and provide a supportive learning environment for them. The interviewees' responses also highlight the importance of financial aid and scholarships from the government.

Moreover, since the study tackles the importance of education, it is recommended that teachers and school officials know and understand the importance of educational or academic opportunities for students. Additionally, teachers may also personally look into the influences and factors affecting their students' career decision-making to help them reach their full potential.

With regard to students and families alike, it is recommended that they use the findings of this research as a stepping stone to look into all of the related factors when it comes to career decision-making, even those that are possibly elusive and minor. It is also recommended that they always maximize their resources and collect as much preliminary information as possible to ensure that they or their children can get the highest quality education they can be provided.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm their equal contribution to every part of this research. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this paper.

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7.0 Conflict Of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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