

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

By

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my grandmother, who passed away a month before I submitted my thesis, and to my parents.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for all ways supporting me, my friends for always cheering me on, my boss for always being flexible with my schedule and for professors for getting me this far. A special thanks to Dr. Trencher for always being there to teach, listen and advice. The other members of my committee were wonderful as well.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

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This thesis explored what goals and motivations propelled students to pursue a college education. The data was collected using semi-structured one-on-one interviews along with focus groups. The finding was then compared with the historical purposes of education. To that end, the history of the education system of the United States was examined to see how the purposes changed over time as well as to contextualize the views found in the interviews and focus groups. Cora Du Bios's work on values helped to frame the historical context as well as point to cultural motivations for college. Victor Turner's work on liminality helped to examine the state of anxiety that students go through as they attend college, transitioning into adulthood. This was juxtaposed with the neoliberal turn of the American economy which created a liminal state that the current college students found themselves having to navigate. Placing students in a very precarious position when they are trying to determine the best course of action for their future.

## INTRODUCTION

This study looked at the purpose of education, specifically college education as seen by college students and recent graduates. K12 education is compulsory to a certain extent within every state, but a college education is not mandatory. A few of the questions of interest in this study included how do young people decide to make a four to five-year investment in their future? What motivations propel them to make the decision and what are the financial ramifications of such a decision? Focused on individuals between the ages of 18-38, who have had at least four years of K12 education within the United States, this study narrowed its focus, at least in part, on the American education system. In the process of examining why college was important to young people, the participants were keen to explore the importance of primary education. They discussed what impact primary education has had on their lives; why it is still necessary in today's world; and how it is failing to do its job.

Chapter one of this thesis will discuss the methodology of this study. Chapter two of this thesis will explore the history of education within the United States to contextualize the question of educational purpose. Chapter three of this thesis will examine the findings of the focus groups and interviews to synthesize their differing opinions into coherent answers to the question of the purpose of education. Chapter four



will focus on framing the findings into theoretical frameworks of liminality and values, as well as framing the neoliberal turn of the American economy to examine how the participants are reacting to it. Young people are keenly aware of the changing world, including the shift in the economic spheres. This study looks into their struggles to pursue some semblance of their idea of the American dream, while still managing to become financially stable independent adults.

## CHAPTER ONE: METHODS

This study was comprised of three different research methods. First focus groups and semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with participants between the ages of 18-38. Next archival research was conducted on the history of the American education system and policies. The two sets of data were then analyzed to determine any correlation. All of the participants of this study were recruited using several different methods. Emails were sent out to several different academic departments within George Mason University. Then in-person conversations with students attending introductory classes along with flyers were utilized. Finally, word of mouth and snowball recruitment by friends and colleagues of the participants and the primary researcher helped to gather a large enough number of volunteers. A range of fields, from the traditional range of the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences, was selected for general classroom recruitment in order not to oversaturate the pool of participants in a single field as well as to broaden the perspective of the study. The pool of participants was initially larger but narrowed to eleven given the time constraints; many of the participants were not able to coordinate their schedule with the primary researcher.

The focus group, as the first method of study, was chosen to extract data from strangers in a relatively quick time frame. To encourage further participation all focus groups were between one and two hours. Focus groups allow participants to answer

questions, bounce ideas off their peers as well as differentiate participants' opinions and beliefs with little intervention from the facilitator. When participants speak, their peers are quick to ask clarifying questions or agree or disagree, explaining themselves through their own experiences. All focus groups began with the same question from the primary researcher, “what is the purpose of education?” The majority of all recorded data came from conversations in an attempt to answer this question.

A major drawback of focus groups as a method occurs when participants self-censor due to the projected opinions of their peers (Carey and Asbury 2012). Self-censorship is an issue for participants in any situation involving strangers. Signs of such behavior can be seen through their body language but not always. One of the ways this was mitigated was the use of video cameras to records all focus groups. If any signs of anxiety or hesitation were noted, it was addressed later as part of an interview. A second potential drawback to focus groups is a tendency of a group to veer off-topic. As the facilitator, it was possible to gently intervene in tangents as they occurred.

The second method for this study was semi-structured personal history interviews. The primary purpose of this kind of interview following focus group interactions was to get a better sense of the individuals that participated in the study. The one-on-one interviews additionally provided material that was able to mitigate some of the drawbacks of the focus groups. Hesitation, for example, from participants during the focus groups, could be addressed during the interviews. The interviews allowed participants to share more intimate details of their experiences without fear of being overheard or issues of confidentiality. The study included four focus groups and seven individual life history

interviews between eleven participants. Of the seven life history interviews, two were not recorded due to equipment error. One of the focus groups also had to be redone again due to equipment error. However, detailed notes were taken during each of these instances and the notes were used instead.

The eleven participants, from a variety of backgrounds, included six males and five females ranging from age 19 to age 33. Four of them were born in the United States; nine of them would show up on the US Census as ethnically, racially or culturally mixed and one of them is both Trans and gay. All of the participants are currently attending George Mason University or have recently graduated from college. The age range of the selected participants was set for two reasons. The decision to limit the research to an age range that was broad enough to detect age-related differences. A limit of 20 years was chosen based on the traditional definition of a generation (Strauss and Howe 1991). This was further reduced to 15 years based on recruitment. Of the eleven participants, nine of them were between the ages of 19-25.

The third method for this study was historical archival research. Using books and articles, a history of American public education was found out of the policies that the United States had implemented from the colonial times to the present. This was done to determine any underlying beliefs or purpose that might have been traditionally transmitted over generations within families. The analysis was conducted using three sets of theoretical anthropological and sociological frameworks, that of values, liminality and a neo-Marxist take on Neoliberal economics.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW-SELECTED HISTORY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

For this study, the history of education in the United States was broken into four sections. The first section will look at the time between 1636 and 1830. These were the early days of the second wave of immigration into the Americas. For this study, the first wave of immigration, that of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, will not be examined. During this period the guiding factors determining the goal and substance of education were formalized and unified. The second section, the time from 1830 to 1920, saw education become more consistent with that of factory assembly lines. The Civil War and the beginning of the first stage of the Industrial Revolution in the United States helped to push the content of education to focus on reinforcing a Common School Curriculum and the promoting the values of the dominant culture at the time, that being wealthy, Anglo Saxon, protestant males. The dominant culture moniker will be used to refer to this population for the remainder of this paper. Though their demographics will change with time, such as the expansion of who can be considered white and the inclusion of females into their ranks, the influence of this group on American culture is such that it warrants remembering. The third section was from 1920 to 1975. During this period the basic foundations of present-day public schools were put in place, including standardized testing and the prominence of math and science. Finally, the last section was from 1975 to the present. This period saw the creation of the Department of Education

and the greatest levels of federal input into the American education system in the history of the country (Boers 2007; Good 1962).

#### Section One: 1634 to 1830

In the early days of the development of the United States, Puritans, an English Calvinist sect, seeking freedom from religious persecution from the Church of England, sought refuge in the Americas. The basic tenets of their faith have had a long-lasting influence on American society, especially in the early years. Believing they are born with sin and need to redeem themselves, Puritan beliefs focused heavily on (1) learning to read the Bible, (2) a strong Protestant work ethic and (3) honoring, fearing and obeying God. This was true for fathers at home and the development of government. Religion was the first major factor that influenced American education, however as the colonies grew, four other factors influenced the state of education: philosophy, social aspects, economics and politics (Boers 2007). Though varied, all of these factors boiled down to obey God and get a job. The first two laws that effected education were the Massachusetts Law of 1642 and the Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647 (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Good 1962; Wynn and Wynn 1988).

The first law called on parents to teach their children how to read, while the second law called on towns to hire teacher(s) or build schools if there were enough families to warrant such a step. The primary goal of the age was to teach young people how to read through rote memorization and to accept the values of the Bible. However, as the colonies grew so did the need to employ the growing population. Trade and

apprenticeship schools sprang up for young people, mostly boys, but some girls were allowed to attend schools when the boys were not present. These schools were for people who would not or could not seek leadership or clergy roles. For those individuals, Latin and grammars schools were more appropriate, which was then followed by attendance in one of the earliest colleges of the New World, such as Harvard, founded in 1636. There was a strong belief at the time that education was a means to “end crime, eliminate poverty, provide equality of opportunity, improve the economy, train workers, create social stability and create political stability (Boers 2007, 11–12),” This list of value of education can still be considered to be true as we will witness from the participants of this study.

During the time of the Revolutionary War, there was a slight shift in the purpose of education. The ideals of the Protestants, mostly the Calvinist tenets still held supreme, however, there was a push towards a loosening of the rigid school structure and the introducing of other subjects besides the religious doctrine. This created a school environment where teachers enforced strict rules on students, requiring obedience, silence and a strict sense of punctuality, effects that are still familiar. Influenced heavily by the enlightenment, people like Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin envisioned a different model for schools. A move away from rote memorization to create intellectual individuals, who would be able to think rather than simply spout religious doctrine. Early influential Americans advocated for the introduction of more utilitarian materials in addition to the “ornamental” knowledge, or knowledge on being gentlemen of the age that did not have direct utilitarian functions. So pupils were taught apprentice skills, such

as carpentry and blacksmithing, which would be useful to them along with knowledge such as Latin or ethics, which was seen as “ornamental” (Boers 2007).

Noah Webster, though he disagreed with the loosening of Calvinist ideals in schools, wanted to create a distinctly American society separate from the English and therefore joined in with this new direction for changing school structures (Boers 2007). With the formation of the United States, the Common School Movement sprang up to create a curriculum that would foster the values of the dominant culture and unite the colonies under a new national identity.

The ratification of the US Constitution had two important impacts on education. First was instituted by the First Amendment, the separation was of the church and state, and the second was instituted by the Tenth Amendment, which made education policy the purview of the state governments, rather than the federal government. Both of these have had long-lasting impacts in the future. One of them was the further loosening of the rigidity with which Calvinist tenets were taught at school. However due to Protestants being a part of the dominant culture, even without religion being taught at school, Protestant tenets and values became a part of the Common School Curriculum and therefore was seen more as secular values rather than religious. The perspective of English philosopher John Locke, who saw the mind as a blank slate which education would properly fill, changed how pupils were viewed. Females secured their roles as ideal teachers at this time as they were seen as natural nurturers (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Good 1962; Wynn and Wynn 1988).



## Section Two: 1830 to 1920

From the 1830s there was a push back against the more dominant culture, as this was a time of great diversity in America. With immigrants coming from all over the world in large numbers beginning even before the 1830s, American society began to rub against sizable populations of people who were not white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants. From Native Americans who had arrived before the Europeans, Mexicans in the South, Chinese in the west and Irish Catholics in the east, the US was going through growing pains. Irish Catholics, in particular, found it hard to live in a society where their children were going to schools paid by their tax dollars that was teaching them anti-Catholic tenets and sentiments. There was a push to solve this issue by the proponents of the Common School Movement, but their failure to rectify the issue led to the formation of Catholic private schools (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Wynn and Wynn 1988). Interestingly in the process to remove religion from schools, cemented Calvinist ideas into secular ideals.

After the Civil War, the issue of racism was exacerbated. With a history of segregated schools already present in the north before the war, the idea of separate but equal became of paramount importance afterward as it became the law of the land. While this was happening industrialization was in full swing and there was the push for the factory model of education from Frederick Taylor. This push focused on punctuality, work habits, and standardization for the sake of efficiency and to create factory workers, or human capital, right off the assembly line of school. This was the first shift away from the Common School Movement into the Comprehensive School Movement (Boers 2007;

Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983). This new plan created standardization of differentiated curriculum and predetermined tracks for students to follow for future job goals. This was for a boost for the economy as more vocational schools were created. However, as the common values that were touted were still the values of the dominant culture, there was a wide disparity in educational quality that was seen in populations that did not belong to the majority. Minority populations such as the poor, Native Americans, African Americans, and Irish Catholics, saw this disparity in poorly funded schools with little to no proper equipment. Only the Irish Catholics were able to band together to escape this disparity by creating their own private school system. The situation was much worse for Asian and Mexican immigrants, as both groups were denied citizenship and schooling for a period. When they did have schooling, many of these groups faced rampant deculturalization efforts to assimilate them into the dominant culture. By 1918 school was compulsory for every young person up to a certain age, as Mississippi became the last state to pass a compulsory education law.

### Section Three: 1920 to 1975

This period saw the 100% Americanization programs being introduced to schools to improve national unity. This brought American values into schools with things such as playgrounds, auditoriums, organized sports, school assemblies, student government, and student newspapers. Schools were reflecting the major institutions of American society within them (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Wynn and Wynn 1988). The

1920s brought with it an economic boom followed by the Great Depression, two World Wars, the post-war economic boom, as well as the Cold War.

Since the Industrial Revolution, more and more women had been entering the workforce. After the women's suffrage movement, the need for better education for people increased, however, it wasn't until the Women's Movement in the 1960s and 1970's that proper education reform was added with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1972, which brought about better gender equality in all forms of education (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Wynn and Wynn 1988). The Civil Rights movement and the fight against poverty helped generate more money for education while creating greater opportunities for people of color. All the while the Communist scare of the Cold War created a need for a back to basics approach to education and reinforced the teaching of math and science fields to stay ahead of the USSR on the technological field.

#### Section Four: 1975 to the Present

Since 1975 there has been a back and forth in education policy as the two major political parties of the United States have gained and lost power. President Carter created the Department of Education, and with it, a unifying source of direction the American education system had not seen since the country's inception. President Reagan however, pushed back by decreasing federal spending on education which he saw as state purview. President H. W. Bush saw a continuation of this, as the country moved towards a religious and conservative direction for 12 years (Boers 2007). This brought a shift in the economy as neoliberal ideals became the base of American economic and political

practice (Harvey 2005). Primarily put in place by President Reagan, this new economic model shifted the terms and policies of American public education significantly restructuring them to teach specific fields of study and towards the use of specific mechanisms arranged to ensure specific knowledge i.e. efficiency, standardized tests and efforts to measure what has been learned. President Clinton's tenure did little to address the conservative economic and political turn of the nation. While he increased funding for education as the perceived link between education and employment, he did not turn away from neoliberal policies (Harvey 2005). President W. Bush implemented the largest law on US schools, No Child Left Behind; a policy that forces annual testing and record-keeping on an unprecedented level (Boers 2007). President Obama continued that line of policies by creating the Common Core standardization.

### Two Models of Educational Purpose

According to Robinson (2010), the major threads that tie various ideas about the purpose of American education together are academic and economic. Academia has had the role of producing new knowledge while the economic side has been concerned with the ability to create human capital, i.e. workers, who would be able to utilize that knowledge to improve the economy. Education has also been seen as a civil religion (Bankston and Caldas 2009). Though not an entirely American idea, civil religion as an explanation brings to the foreground questions about what values an American citizen should have and who controls the values taught.

The main purpose of education as understood when looking at it as a civil religion is a faith in education; specifically schooling, that it will solve social problems. The distinction between education and schooling is made to point out how education can occur anywhere and is often unregulated, while schooling requires attention and regulation. During the early years when it was necessary to create good Protestants, schools were created to teach every child how to read, specifically to memorize the Bible. The message and regulation came from the church. When the idea of separation of church and state was institutionalized schools did not lose their religious ideals. Mainly due to early schools being church or community-run. They did not interact with the government. By the time local governments had taken control of schools, many of the Calvinist ideals were integrated with other core tenets taught as part of being a good citizen, thus the values taught as part of the Common School Movement were at basically Protestant values. However, when Catholics sent their children to school, they were able to see the stark differences that Protestant based education was having, particularly when faced with anti-Catholic rhetoric (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983).

Another major Protestant tenet that made its way into the Common School Curriculum was a strong work ethic. The ideas of hard work, discipline, time management, and frugality were a part of the Protestant ethic, by showcasing such behavior people showcased God's favor. It is part of the "self-made man" ethos of American workers. Which meshed well with the new requirements of the new industrialized workplace. Education manufactured workers who had the necessary skills at a steady pace to improve America's economy. Students were taught in batches,

grouped with their age peers. The capable students progressed, while the incapable failed out (Robinson 2010). Protestant tenets were now the backbone of capitalism (Wilk and Cliggett 2007).

The two World Wars and the Cold War brought along geopolitical issues that forced America to return to the school systems to try and solve them. War pressures increased research in physics and engineering. This, in turn, helped fuel the steady stream of scientists and mathematicians who carried the torch that the scientists, who helped to win the race to harness atomic power that helped the US win the Second World War, left behind. In 1957, when the USSR launched Sputnik, it seemed that America was losing the intellectual race and therefore schools redoubled their efforts to increase the attention to math and sciences (Bankston and Caldas 2009; Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983). The American school system played an important role in the battle against Communism. As a civil religion, it was up to the school system to keep the religious Protestant values of the dominant culture alive as an antithesis to the atheist communist values. To that end, God became cemented in American schools through the addition of “under God” in the American Pledge of Allegiance (Bankston and Caldas 2009).

During the Civil Rights Movement, the nation turned its attention to issues of poverty, racism, and inequality. Schools played large roles in solving these struggles as well as efforts from the government to aid with their relief. College campuses saw the youth take active roles in organizing and protesting for a variety of these causes. The Head Start Program was an effort to combat poverty while, the school bussing was an

effort to enforce racial integration of schools (Bankston and Caldas 2009; Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983).

The model offered by Robinson (2010), pull together economic and academic spheres as the pillars of education. The role of the economic pillar is to train young people with the necessary skills they need to obtain a job and to increase the state's economic output. The role of the academic pillar is to learn and to generate new knowledge (Wynn and Wynn 1988). To that end, students are taught what it means to be good citizens and how to be productive members of society. In the history of the US, post-secondary schools have been the site of research and the creation of new knowledge. High school education was seen as the key to a good job. In the 1960s this trend shifted and college education became the minimum requirement for a job in a profession.

#### Brief History of College in America

The history of colleges in America is also useful to look at as early colleges were not institutions of knowledge generation. Early colleges such as Harvard and William & Mary were created to instruct religious and civic leaders. Academic education was for the elites of society, while the everyday man was intended to attend vocational schools and take apprenticeships (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Wynn and Wynn 1988). From this time onward, there has existed an idea in the American school system that certain people were just not meant for education, regardless of whether this was due to differences in class, race, or other criteria. The industrial model of schools showcase how the smart students succeed, and moved on to more schooling, the average ones

passed and got jobs, while the inept ones failed out and must to make do with whatever the economy has to offer them (Goodlad and McMannon 1997; Robinson 2010).

In the 1860s, investments were made to make education cheaper for the common man. After World War II, the GI bill brought college within reach of thousands of veterans and later state universities and the rise in the number of community colleges made college education a reality for many Americans (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Wynn and Wynn 1988). However, by the 1970s as the market became saturated with college graduates, a college degree no longer became a guarantee for a job, but the educational apparatus was already on full swing. Vocational schooling went down and students were pushed in mass towards colleges (Chang 2011; Wynn and Wynn 1988).

Schools have been seen as a microcosm of society but also the starting point of national socialization and assimilation. Regardless of cultural background, socioeconomic status, race or gender, it is a commonly held view that American education should help to generate civically-minded Americans who have the values needed to function in society beneficially. As already stated, the values that have been taught throughout the history of American education has been that of the dominant culture.



### CHAPTER THREE: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

In the interviews and focus groups conducted, participants provided a variety of possible purposes for education. These discussions are summarized here and broken down into four categories. The first category explores general purposes; these are purposes attributed to education by almost everyone but there was very little explanation offered. They were given as a matter of fact answers. The second and most discussed area was economic. Whether it was anxiety over debt, future job prospects, or the belief that education was a financial investment for a larger future return, every single participant had something to say about the topic of money and the role it played in education. The third purpose, specifically for college, was for a transition to adulthood. All of the participants were legal adults, yet many did not believe themselves ready for adult responsibilities. Thus college was seen as a safe space during which adulthood could be explored with limited risks. Finally, the participants discussed the last category, failures of the American education system. All of the participants were adamant that the American education system was still necessary, but what was also clear was that it was failing. The disagreements that participants had revolved around was what was failing and how the system should look like in the future. They felt that the world is changing yet the education system is not keeping pace and much of what is taught now is either useless or outdated.

### Category One: General Purposes

All of the focus groups began with the same question “what is the purpose of education?” All of the interviews began with a different request, “please provide a history of your education in the US.” All discussions that occurred sprang from these initial thoughts as a base for the participants to bounce off of. All of the interviews, however, did end with the question of purpose for education as a means for the participants to wrap up their thoughts and summarize their opinions and experiences. In the very first focus group one, as a means to ground the question, participants 14, 92, 34 and 41 discussed the difference between the American school system and education as a concept. They determined that education can take place anywhere, but if it happens outside of school, it is usually social knowledge taught. For them, what is learned in schools is academic knowledge. Participant 14 was keen to bring to attention how the school system is not the only institution in our society that teaches, but it is the major one, so for her academic education can also occur elsewhere.

This discussion then turned to one about the nature of school curriculum and power that state and federal governments have due to their ability to craft these curricula. Participant 14 said “I think it’s in some ways indoctrinations... it’s more so (about social) order, it’s to keep us here, while people profit off of it.” Participant 92 asked about the issue of curricula. She said what a school system teaches is determined by politicians. Standards made by the state and federal government are now suspect because of the political nature upon their creation. The group then provided examples, such as why do we learn about certain historical figures instead of others? Or why would a non-scientific

origin story such as intelligent design need to be introduced in a science class? In many ways, schools can be considered a place of indoctrination as the effects of the Common School Movement, with its push to integrate the values of the dominant culture into the America culture, are still felt today. What is unclear is if that is what the participants were reacting to.

For participant 34, the primary role of the school system is to create civic citizens. People who are aware of this nation's history and political structure so that they may engage in democracy. To that end, for him, literacy was foundational knowledge that was needed by every citizen of a democracy. He believed it was the role of primary schools to teach young citizens this skill. Participant 41 felt that being a good citizen, and to a greater degree being an upstanding human being, required more than literacy. He felt that a general education, referred to in all discussions as the core classes that schools require students to take regardless of their major or field of study, is necessary for the well-rounded individuals. The participants went back and forth on this issue. Participant 92 agreed that individuals needed a holistic education that included the teaching of a variety of subjects, even those outside of the individual's field of study or interest. Participant 41 showcased how understanding math and science informed his interests in art and made him a better storyteller and artist. In other focus groups participants 89 and 67 agreed with this sentiment, but participants 55 and 16 were not so keen. For these two, such classes were a waste of time and resources. They saw it as students having to pay for classes that they will not use because it has nothing to do with their field of study.

Participant 92 talked about how in today's world of high specialization, people often do their jobs in a vacuum, but the consequences of their actions still ripple across society. Any new technology created, when designed without thinking about their consequence can lead to social and moral implications that were not thought about due in large part to specialization. She provided the example of social media and how it provides access to a lot of personal data about people but she questioned whether the implications on the issues of privacy were discussed by the creators of these technologies prior to their launch. The conclusion for her was that general education serves to provide a basic level of information on a myriad of topics so that people, regardless of which field they go into, will be able to have some opinion or know how to think through those issues if and when it affects their lives. For her, general education provides for the well-roundedness of individuals that is a necessity for democracy.

Finally, the participants discussed education as the civil religion of the country, though that phrase was not used. Essentially there was a hope that education would provide solutions to the problems they were facing. Education is highly valued and seen as necessary. Four of the participants debated whether or not they would attend college. For the rest, it was either a foregone conclusion or the only path they were offered. All of the participants believed on an individual level that it would help them to reach their personal goals. Both participants 16 and 64 wanted to give back to their parents. Participant 92 felt that she was now in a position to help her family due to her education which other members of her family did not have. Interestingly of the seven participants who were born outside of the country or had parents born outside of the country, six of

them had active parental support or push to complete education through college; it was a necessary goal. For the remaining five participants who were both born in this country and had parents who were born in this country, attending college was an option, but the choice was theirs to pursue it or not. There was a unanimous agreement that going to college was still important.

### Category Two: Economic Motivations

For eight of the participants, the purpose of education revolved around economic reasons i.e. it was to pay for college and find a job. One of the very first answers provided in this study was by participant 34, who said the basic purpose of education “was social mobility, to be better off than our parents.” Whether this still holds true or not today, he could not say but the consensus was that jobs are necessary for survival in the modern world. Regardless of their level of support, each participant had responsibilities that they had to manage. These ranged from personal to familial, from present to future. Four of the participants wanted to give back to their parents, be their social security in the future and needed to be on a path to support them when the time came. Four of the participants had dreams they were pursuing which were not the most lucrative, but their passions drove them into a field that required them to making a living in one form or another. Four of them spoke of their debt, which was already accumulating and that the need to pay that off required a good-paying job.

Along with this drive for a job was the anxiety that came with financial matters. All participants were keenly aware of the importance of finances in their lives and the

stresses that came with trying to survive in this economy. At one point participant 92, who had a full-time job, had to take another one just to make ends meet. Eight of these individuals had taken out loans to pay for their education, loans they signed for when they were still teenagers, with a very limited understanding of how the market worked. However as participant 41 stated, the long term impacts of debt were not unknown to him. He was experienced with debt due to the situation his parents were in, but when he voiced his concerns to them about paying for college he was told debt was normal. Then he remarked “that doesn’t sound normal, right? It doesn’t seem like it should be normal. But everyone was saying it was normal. That shouldn’t be normal.”

Already tens of thousands of dollars in debt and studying in a field he described as being highly competitive and traditionally not being highly lucrative, the worry of how he will manage to pay off those debts weigh heavy on him. Out of fear for this looming problem, participants 23 and 16 started saving for college in high school. Participant 16 worked part-time jobs every summer in high school. Even with her savings, participant 23 had to work three jobs during her freshman year to pay for college. There was an implicit understanding that their families would not be able to assist them in their education.

The other major anxiety that was associated with the economy was trying to figure out what the job market would look like when they graduated. With the rapid pace of technological evolution, jobs were being made obsolete at a faster rate than new jobs were being created. There was a discussion about whether or not participant 55, who was now an accountant would be out of a job due to the advances of AI programs. Concerns

about choosing the right major were in everyone's mind. Participant 41 choose his dreams but he fears that even though his field of study may make him happy, he might be jobless and/or homeless in the future. Participant 94 only said that she wanted to help people but had no idea in which field. Her interests were too varied. Though she did take out loans, she does have parental support if she needs it. A safety net that has allowed her to be more selective with her exploration of a career path. For participant 16, who had parental emotional support but financial support was not guaranteed, the choice was clear. He chose to future a career path that would help ensure he would be able to financially take care of his responsibilities instead of pursuing his dreams. He said "...if you took the money aspect out of it... if I didn't have to worry about making money, I probably wouldn't have been a computer science major." When asked what he would have pursued, he replied, "writing. I think about it every day."

### Category Three: Transition to Adulthood

The third category discussed by the participants was the transition into adulthood. College is seen as the stage when these young adults go from children to adulthood, a period in which they have more responsibilities and freedom while still having the safety net of the institution to fall back on and in most cases, their families as well. Participant 67 put it best when he said college was a "safe environment for adulting," (the act of engaging in adult-like behavior, such paying bills on time or managing to eat a healthy meal.)

The first few semesters of college can become a trial by fire. Five of the participants talked about failing at least something before they were able to manage their responsibilities properly. From time management to proper diet and sleeping habits, the students entered college unprepared. Participant 16 mentioned how he failed a class three times because he wasn't able to manage it. Participant 89 said she almost failed out of several classes due to her lack of test-taking skills. She talked about how college allowed her to change her habits but choosing to be around more responsible people. Participant 41 spoke of having to manage work, classes and family life because his loans do not cover food and living expenses and failing to manage at times. He said “with my family life being so rough, I got really worried about being able to afford food... because of that, I got into a bad relationship with food. I get scared of losing my food so I overeat.” He followed that up with, “...I’ve got art commissions to do and I’ve got homework to do. If I do the homework, I’ll have that done for class, but I won’t get the art commission done, which I need to get the money to attend the class in the first place.” He was very clear in placing the blame for his troubles on his financial instability, regardless of how he chooses to use his time, he would have to sacrifice something.

Learning to manage one’s resources, such as time, money and energy are all important aspects of growing into adulthood. However, for participants 67 and 89 both the importance of college was highlighted as a time for self-discovery. This was highlighted by their exploration of different majors. Participant 55 mentioned how changing careers after already have a job is much harder than exploring another major by attending a class in colleges. He saw colleges as opportunities requiring little financial



and time investment required. Participants 16 concurred, but choosing the right major was of very high importance for him. He had personal and familial responsibilities that required him to obtain a job that would provide him with the financial stability that he needed to take care of those responsibilities. The field he chose, computer science, was not a field he loved to learn about. He learned to love it once he was able to master the fundamental knowledge of the field such that he could think with it.

For participant 94, this decision wasn't as clear cut. She said she only wanted to help people, regardless of where that led her. For her college was a time to explore her interests. The stark difference between participants 94 and 41 is the product of financial support. College brings with it a myriad of experiences that students are educated in, outside of the classroom. The anxiety that comes with failing yet trying again cannot be taught only experienced, as was the case of participant 16. Choosing to forgo meals to pay for tuition is a decision not made lightly yet that is what participant 41 had to decide. The transition into adulthood is filled with new freedoms and responsibilities but also for many it is filled with navigating decisions with no clear answers and their options are only further narrowed due to their financial realities as both participants 41 and 16 as well as participants 64, 92, and 23, can attest to.

#### Category Four: Failures of the School System

The final category of this study, discussed by the participants, is the failures of the school system. In discussing what the purpose of education is, the participants indulged in a lengthy explanation of how the system is broken or how the system had failed them.

And in some cases, it was simply a matter of how the system had not helped them enough but all of the participants stated how the education system was necessary.

Participant 14 started by discussing how the entire educational system indoctrinates the individuals into a way of thinking that may not be in their best interest. Further discussion with participant 41 focused on debt normalization in American society. Students who were still teenagers were making financial decisions that may affect them for decades to come. The discussion of paying for college, in general, elicited a strong reaction from the participants, as participants 14, 16, 23, 41, 55, 67, 89, 92, and 94 all had to take on multiple jobs, and/or loans to pay for their education. Even those participants who had financial means to pay for their education were limited in their decisions related to where they go to college. Participant 41 mentioned how choosing to go to a college he could afford to go but was limited in the field he could study. Financing college is a limiting prospect.

Many of the participants found it difficult trying to reconcile their cultural identities while living in a country where they were not a part of the dominant culture. Participant 23 did not like using the family name during high school because it was too Hispanic and she was embarrassed she did not have a name what similar to her classmates, such as “Smith.” She wanted to hide her name because she felt that her classmates thought her different and “exotic.” Participant 92 reported feeling left out of place in high school as one of the few Hispanics in her predominately white school. Placed in classes with a majority of white students based on strong academic skills while

other Hispanics were in less rigorous classes. This created a situation in which other students left her out based on perceptions of “race” and academic success.

Participant 92 went on to say:

I used to remember in high school, even in this place, some things were happening here that you couldn't explain, but there...stereotypical discriminatory undertones happening. For example, in my high school, and...I think a lot of people can relate to this, I don't know. But in my high school all of the Caucasian people, all the jocks, all the cliques, all of the different cliques were on the second-floor cafeteria. On the bottom floor of the cafeteria were the people of color, and I thought that was very interesting and all the teachers were upstairs.

Here she showcased how the segregation, whether it was self-segregation or not, can easily become normalized. A fact she noticed, most likely due to her being on the outside of both groups.

Though participant 92 was displeased with high school experiences when it came to how people of different cultural backgrounds behaved, participant 41 was very pleased. Identifying as a white LGBT+ and brought up in a conservative family, school was a lifeline. Due to his identity, participant 41 was felt isolated from much of his peers. School and the teacher and other adults there helped to provide him with the emotional support he craved. It also introduced him to people of other cultures which helped to expand his world view. But aside from the issue of identity, high schools are filled with issues of communication. For participant 16 this became an issue when an incident with another student resulted in him becoming bullied by that student. Though he does not place direct the blame on anyone, he does say that the school was incapable of solving this issue because he was unwilling to seek aid.

In the academic realm, participants 16, 55, 89 and 34 all mentioned issues they faced with general education. This was felt both in high school and college. Participant 89 felt that teachers no longer taught students information they would consider valuable because they were preoccupied with teaching material associated with the end of year exams. The participants advocated that teachers should have more freedom to determine their curriculum so has not to turn the American system of liberal education into one of rote memorization. Participant 55 was particularly adamant about this as his country of birth has a school system based on rote memorization as the primary method of learning. He did not mind the rote memorization as a method; what he objected to was the “extra useless” information such as art or history as those subjects did not pertain to anything he wanted to pursue. Participant 55 expressed the view that education should be optional and geared solely toward a career. Therefore general education, both in high school and in college was expensive and superfluous. But participant 16 argued that the best teacher was one who gave life lessons, despite not teaching the actual subject of the course well. Nine of the participants echoed a needed for more life skills to be taught in schools, including how to pay taxes, apply for loans, or evaluate one’s credit score. The participants did not disregard the importance of academic knowledge but felt that too much attention was placed on academic knowledge rather than on life skills. Their absence of knowledge about financial matters contributed to their sense of unpreparedness when they entered college.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

To understand the range of data collected from the eleven individuals during the focus groups and individual life histories, three separate theoretical models were used together to piece together one cohesive narrative. The three models selected are values, liminality, and neoliberalism. Values have two meanings. They are commonly thought of in relation to something of worth i.e. a valued possession, or as a principle. The value looked at here will be one synonymous with principle or quality or as Williams (1967) put it; the criteria by which a cultural group's norms and behavior orientation are judged. As noted earlier, American values are consistent with Enlightenment ideals melded with Protestant ethics. These values have had a role in shaping the country throughout its history. Though values are persistent, they are not universal nor immortal. As each generation comes and goes they add to and change the cultural makeup of the nation and therefore shift aspects of these values. Thus the heterogeneous nature of America also has had deep involvement in terms of how they have evolved. However, by examining them along with the different sub-groups of Americans, we can explore the so-called American melting pot to see how things bubble up and down, dissolve and recombine in new and exciting ways.

Liminality, for Turner, (1967) is the space between grounded structures. Originally thought of as the space within a rite of passage, it is best described as a time

between and betwixt (Turner 1967). Change is a constant of life, in particular here I focus on ideological positions in which a person goes from holding one view to another. The time in between that transformation is the liminal space, during which time an individual holds neither position but both at the same time. This idea helps us to explore the anxiety of uncertainty that comes with change and how human beings experience and survive it. Finally, Harvey's (2005) examination of neoliberalism showcases how the shift in economic practice from a neoclassical position to a neoliberal one is large enough that it engendered a shift in economic and eventually cultural terms. The Presidency of Ronald Reagan, from 1980 to 1988, has helped to propel the neoliberal shift, which was set in motion in the 1970s, in America through policies and practices. To examine the question of the purpose of education, students referred constantly to the economy and how it has shaped their lives, decisions, and how they saw their future. No analysis of education at present can be situated without an exploration of how the American economic underpinnings and practices have changed since then and continue to influence everyday life in America.

### The Protestant Work Ethic

The Protestant work ethic is at the center of much of American values and can explain, at least in part, much of the economic and political decisions that have been made by Americans through the centuries. As stated earlier, original colonists were religious refugees who had lost the ideological battle in Britain. Their form of Protestantism was Calvinist in nature and Puritan to be exact. Some of the tenets that

defined their faith included a belief that individuals are born in sin, that individuals must do work good works to redeem themselves, and it is only through Christ that redemption can occur. The Protestant work ethic is centered on the idea that an individual should always be working to improve his life for the better. Part of that ethos included that accumulation of capital for the use or betterment of himself, family and community i.e. a life well lived, was proof of virtue. Ideals of efficiency and hard work, but also literacy and individual accountability all became cemented as part of American values during this time.

Cora Du Bios makes the argument that much of the content of the American value system can be traced to the Protestant work ethic and the Christian dogma held by the majority of Americans of that time. Drawing from the works of Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn and others, who set the groundwork for values, Du Bois came up with a few conceptual rules for American values (1955). Arguing that as is common in western cultures, these conceptions are understood as dualistic in nature, simultaneously struggling for consistency even amongst contradictions. We can see this clearly in the Christian concept of good and evil, where the opposition is in full display, but the dualistic nature also exists in conservatism and liberalism where the differences are more political and an individual can hold both types of views quite comfortably without the contradictions affecting them, such as pro-life and pro-capital punishment. But neither good or evil or political views are values rather they are qualities that can affect values. From this Du Bois (1955, 1233) gave four presuppositions of the American value system that helped to derive three values: effort-optimism, material well-being, and conformity.

Later Robin Williams (1967, 33) added to this conversation by explaining how values form and change, listing 15 different values which included activity and work, moral orientation, equality, freedom, and democracy.

In Du Bois' view, these values are derived from the Protestant work ethic. The idea of effort-optimism centers on hard work, salvation, and perfectibility. If humans are born with sin and must work to reach salvation, then it stands to reason that hard work will result in the improvement of assignment in life after death. Material well-being or property accumulation is simply viewed as a sign of that hard work being rewarded. And when we all strive for such goals, we all become in basic ways very similar. In the early days, the perfectibility of people was pursued through the school system. Christians were taught how to read the Bible so that they could save their souls. They were taught a trade so that they could earn a living but also contribute to society and show off the material wealth they had gained as proof of their goodness.

From this framework, it is not hard to see how the protestant work ethic and Puritan values lined up very well with capitalistic ideals. From the Middle Ages, the economy was tied very deeply with religious ideas of morality and the power of the state. The main shift in the colonies was the importance of the individual as part of this concept. In 1776 Adam Smith took these ideas and added on a secular understanding of value and the importance of the individual's role in the economy and how an individual's self-interest projected to the nation's wealth in this book *The Wealth of Nations* (Wilk and Cliggett 2007). All of this tied neatly with the ideals of democracy. Now we see the new nation of the United States, a child of the Enlightenment, unified by a common set of



values derived from Protestantism, governed by the will of the individual, that would be lead to progress via a set of capitalistic ideals that translated individual progress to the national progress.

However, as the nation progressed in the past centuries, it has undergone several changes. In looking at the history of education in this country, I had divided that history into four sections for easier analysis. All of these periods of change can be explored through Turner's (Turner 1967) idea of liminality that was further elaborated by Sharon Zukin (1991). Turner looked at liminality on the micro-level, exploring how individuals lose their sense of identity when they go through changes from one status to another, such as a child to adult. During the liminal time, the individual is neither child nor adult yet both at the same time. Zukin used this to discuss how economies that shift from one mode to another can have a similar disorientating effect on its citizens.

In the first section (1636 to 1830), colonies were formed that established a home in the wilderness, a war is fought for independence, and finally emerges as a new state. In the next section (1830 to 1920), there is a vast expansion of territory, an escalation of immigration, several wars, including the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution which shifted the country from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. In the third section (1920 to 1975), that economic shift was cemented in the time frame, in quick succession there were two World Wars, a global economic depression, and a shift in economic policies (to a protectionist stance) followed by the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Student Movement. It was, in short, a time of rapid social, political, and economic changes in a short period of time. Finally, in the last section (1975 to present),

the Cold War ended, America emerged as the world's only superpower. It changed economic policies again (an aggressive neoliberal shift) and now fights to keep its economic dominance globally (Boers 2007; Button and Provenzo, Jr. 1983; Wilk and Cliggett 2007; Wynn and Wynn 1988).

The neoliberal turn occurred in the late seventies and early eighties, following the economic recession of the seventies. To reinvigorate the economy, governmental protectionist and interventionist policies were removed as the government rejected Keynesian economics for the Hayekian model (Harvey 2005). Corporate powerhouses lobbied the government to decrease the government hold on the market and allow it to flow free in the name of individual freedoms. The market's influence was expanded into arenas that originally had little to no market input. That idea that market solutions could benefit all aspects of the economy propelled these expansions, and as a result education along with other institutions of society became regulated by market forces, especially on college campuses and in the private sectors. But these changes didn't shift power from government to consumers as was claimed, rather they shifted it to private institutions and corporations, who amassed power through consolidation of market sectors and judicial decisions (Harvey 2005).

### Making Sense of Things

The participants in this study are part of a generation that is being sandwiched by socioeconomic forces in such a way that they are left uncertain of their present as well as their futures. American values can be used to describe the forces that propel young

people towards college. Whether this is coming from the perfectibility of man argument or the concept of education as America's civil religion, it showcases how there is an optimistic view of progress that exists amongst Americans. DuBois's "Effort Optimism" explains this very well. This value centers around the notion that work is a positive good and will result in positive rewards. In this view, she links "effort optimism" with the importance of education as both are investments into future positive returns (Du Bois 1955). Next, we see the current economic framework of Neoliberalism in which Americans have little understanding of the shift that led to the recession of 2008 and little means in many cases, both financial and experiential, to traditionally transmit the changes that have been instituted that changed the American cultural landscape. Market ideology has spread into sectors of society that were not seen as financial in nature (Harvey 2005). This can be seen on college campuses and felt in the wallet. With the tension constructed between faith in the education system and uncertainty in the economic system, the participants are left in an anxious state and Turner's liminality helps to illuminate the "neither here nor there" anxiety experienced by the participants.

When we examine the education system we see adolescents, being prepared for life as an adult. Using the values of our forbearers, these students are trained to be civic citizens and economically savvy, while they pursue a path to adulthood that will benefit the society writ large. It is easy to see how the American school system works well as Arnold Van Gennep's "*The Rites of Passage*" from 1909. As described by Turner (1967) adolescents are removed from society, during which time they are placed in locations with their peers, taught by their elders on the values of their society and then reintroduced

back into society. In our society, this occurs in 12 or more years but the general ideas still stand. When applied to the college years, the example condenses and in many ways becomes far more formidable. During that time the students are removed from their families, sometimes for the entire duration, and they are neither children nor adults, yet treated as both by the faculty and staff of the institution even though they are legally adults under the law. Which is evidence that the institutions themselves are grappling with large scale cultural shift. Turner's view of strong bonds forming during this time is both present but not universally felt. In colleges and universities the large number of students makes universal bonds very unlikely. Also the plurality of cultural, social and economic backgrounds that students come from also hinder the formation of such bonds (Turner 1967). Even so strong bonds can form during this time due to the shared anxiety as participant 41 and 89 can attest.

One of the purposes for education and college, in particular, was mentioned by participant 67 when he called college a safe place for "adulthood." This is a term used by college students that suggest that many of these participants, all of whom are legal adults, do not consider themselves to be adults; as if they are missing some key component of adulthood. But the entire college experience can be summed up as a liminal time. The participants are exploring different ideas, challenging norms and beliefs, all the while trying to find a path to adulthood in their exploration of their majors. They are thrust into a world of freedom unbeknownst to them along with all the responsibilities that come with it. Participant 89 recalled how she had to learn quickly to not skip classes as she did

in high school. College is a bubble, a reflection of society, but it is not a society on to itself. The consequences of their actions here do not radiate as far.

Aside from being college students, there are other liminal aspects to their reality. Living in a multicultural society, whether it was due to being born in another culture, having family members from another culture, or being born in the United States, can place a student in uneven ground. Not knowing where they fit is always a struggle. Participant 92 gave an example of being too white for the Hispanic kids and too Hispanic for the white kids. Participant 23 looks white but was ashamed of her Hispanic last name. Now in college, she is exploring her heritage in an attempt to bridge the gap between where she grew up and where her ancestors came from. Not being able to place yourself as part of a larger group can be daunting.

This is reflected in the liminal experiences that are a part of the LGBT+ identity, as LGBT individuals are born into groups who they cannot share that identity with. Participant 41 spoke of being born female but identifying as male in gender, which creates a literal liminal body. The liminal experience here is far more removed from Turner's example. Due to the social prejudice that comes with being a member of the LGBT+ community, placement into the liminal space can be both implicit and explicit. The initial identification is followed by journey generally taken alone and most members must find their path on their own, then with the help of mentors.

In Turner's description of liminality, he mentions the need for elders who guide the "neophytes" into the adult world of their society (1967, 99). In large part, this role is played by teachers and professors. However, due to the pluralistic nature of America,

finding an appropriate mentor or elder for each individual is not easy. Participant 41 discussed how he sought out guidance from teachers and librarians when he could not find guidance from parents. Participant 16 mentioned how one particular teacher was great, not for his teaching ability, but for the life lessons he offered.

The students feel unprepared in their anxious state. Aside from being in a period of their life when they are becoming adults, the participants must also cope with the liminal stage of America's economy (Bettis 1996). It has long been expressed that the US is shifting from an industrial age to that of an information age. The important factor here is shifting, as this change isn't occurring everywhere or to every industry simultaneously, but affects the society at multiple macro levels as well as individual micro-levels. One of the many aspects of this shift is the proliferation of robots and AI in the American economy. It is important to note that some sectors of the economy are changing modes from industrial to information service, while other sectors are still thriving as industrial hubs due to the rise in automation and robotics (Chang 2011).

The move towards AI and automation has put several industries on a path that will require fewer people for basic tasks. With the rapid technological evolutions occurring so quickly jobs are becoming obsolete at a rate that makes any predictions about future job market difficult to track. Participant 94 mentioned how these changes, though leading to progress, do not take into account the jobs for those who cannot do more skilled labor. The moral question of what happens to individuals who lose their jobs to machines when they cannot do other tasks arises. In an example participant 94 explained how she

witnessed an autistic Walmart greeter excel at his job, however, it is a position that Walmart said they will get rid of soon.

In the universities, the neoliberal turn has not gone unnoticed. More and more universities are using market strategies to survive. Students are treated as consumers and professors as labor. Tenured professors are encouraged to retire while they are replaced by part-time adjuncts (Anfara and Mertz 2006; Chang 2011; Robinson 2010). The syllabi of successful professors are replicated in an attempt to turn the university into a degree churning factory. The addition of online classes further exacerbates the issue. This is just another dehumanizing part of the system such that no single individual is allowed to become a uniquely unreplaceable cog.

With the rise of neoliberalism, many of the protections that would have mitigated these issues are no longer in place. There was a time when an individual in the US would have one or two careers in their lifetime, and most jobs, from grocers to lawyers, provided a living, if not equally comfortable wage. That has changed drastically since the neoliberal turn. Now due in large part to consolidation, large markets are controlled by very few individuals and corporations. People now have to have several jobs to make ends meet and most people have five to six jobs before they find a career. For Americans, their jobs are their livelihoods, their healthcare, and sometimes their identity, think of the question “what do you do?” as a form of greeting.

Ha-Joon Chang (2011) summarizes this neatly when he explains how students are aware of these changes. The students' decision making is on the individual micro-level, reasonably so, rather than the macro nation-state level. Therefore the efforts they make to

improve their livelihood, though it may pay off for them, generally always does not always benefit the country, i.e. what is beneficial for individual economically will not always benefit the nation economically. Chang (2011) provides the example of when jobs become people's livelihood, it is unreasonable for people to try out risky career paths. In South Korea, this has ballooned into a large percentage of science majors going into the medical field, such that the medical schools are inundated while other fields that require such talented minds are left bare. This is an ill-advised strategy for resource management as it wastes a lot of money and time. Participant 89 provided another example that illustrated this issue in American. She relayed a story about a friend of hers who has attempted to get into the GMU nursing program for 4 years but due to high competition that individual has not been able to. Now that individual is left with the painful choice of trying a different career path, and admitting defeat or trying again and hoping for a different result. In this instance, the talent of the student is wasted on a fruitless endeavor while time passes. This does not help the student nor the fields which could make use of the student's talents.

Participant 16 also mentioned how he did not pursue his dreams of writing simply because he did not feel it would be a lucrative field. He chooses computer science instead and had to learn to like it. But there is no guarantee that what has happened to the medical field in terms of attracting student talent will not occur here. Participant 55 also went into accounting for a similar reason. When we look at the impacts that the neoliberal turn has had on the American education system, we can see that these changes have not gone unnoticed. Participant 55 had one of the most critical views of the education system



of all of the participants. In a line of thought similar to Chang, participant 55 discussed how college degrees are just prerequisites for jobs. Participant 64 called it a status symbol. In his home country, participant 64 said that there is a saying that you can't even be a construction worker these days without a college degree.

Chang explained how education has become more appealing for individuals, therefore more and more people are pursuing their college degrees. This can be attributed to the civil religious understanding of education as well as the American effort-optimism, ideas which have radiated outside of America in our current globalized world. The example Chang (2011, 188) gave was like a theatre, if one person stands for a better view, people behind that person will stand to see as well. It will continue until everyone is standing and no one is comfortable. The market is currently inundated with an educated labor force so employers can demand higher levels of education in their selection process. Once a high school degree was all that was required for a job, but then it became a bachelor's degree. Already many employers are demanding a master's degree for similar positions, all the while mechanization is allowing capitalist to "de-skill" the workers.

Interestingly participant 55 also makes many of the same arguments as Chang when he talked about how there is inflation on the value of education. Participant 55 was the most adamant about how general education is a waste of time. He said so much of college is wrapped around courses that do not help with the student's future careers. Most people in the developed world have jobs where their skill level does not need to be that high. The service sector is filled with replaceable employees who do not have the skills of comparable positions a century ago or from other developing countries. Think of a

worker in a hardware store in the US to that of one in the developing world. Another example would be how useful knowledge of biology is to a cashier or classical literature to an accountant (Chang 2011).

It is important to note that this critique revolves around the idea that education's main purpose is to provide a job. In this neoliberal economic environment, positioning careers as the main goal of education for the participants is completely valid. But such a position is untenable from the perspective of the national market as a whole. It will be inefficient, allow a small group to benefit while the vast majority flounders. It would be far more effective to have safety nets in place that would allow students to take risks in their career choices and explore the entire market. All of the participants of this study have been in America long enough to be influenced by its cultural values. Values, such as hard work is rewarded and education leads to success, have created generations of people who are optimistic about education. At the same time, this population is inundated by society to follow their dreams and many of them do so at great financial risk.

The risk-takers, however, generally come from the population of students who are financially well off. The students who are culturally mixed and do not have the means to pursue their dreams, generally make decisions based on their skills and the economy as they understand it. The financial realities of loans, jobs, and healthcare are already putting pressures on a few of the participants like participant 41 whose debt and financial issues are causing him to have health problems or participant 89 who wants to remain hopeful about education, but having already graduated college and not being employed making that prospect harder. The few participants who are neither financially well off but

still pursue their dreams into non-lucrative careers paths do so with an anxious reality. They are going through a liminal stage in their life while the country is going through a liminal stage of its own.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Currently, there are roughly 20 million college students and 56 million K12 students in the United States (“The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics)” 2019). The government has stated the importance of K12 education through its compulsory education policies. However, a college education remains optional. This study found that there are multiple purposes and goals that motivate students to pursue a college degree.

The American educational system was constructed out of Enlightenment thinking, maintained with the Protestant ethics, and structured out of the necessities of the Industrial revolution. Originally the goals of education were simple; it provided the means to salvation by helping people read the Bible and get a job. Both of these components, the religious and economic, have changed over the years, and in doing so changed education along with it.

The religious aspects of education became integrated into the secular, from which a civil religion was born. Faith was placed on education and the belief that with enough hard work, anything was possible. The underlying American values that originated from the protestant work ethic, Du Bois’(1955) “effort-optimism,” remains in the cultural waters. As such many of society’s ills were placed at the feet of education to solve such as poverty and racism. The economic aspects of education were driven by capitalism,

which in the American setting was the product of the ethics of Protestantism and the needs of the Industrial Revolution. This created an education system where students are taught in batches as if on an assembly line (Robinson 2010).

On college campuses, America's neoliberal turn has intensified the anxiety that students already feel. The liminal experiences of transitioning into adulthood coincide with the economy's shift. The markets are in flux and the students are caught in the middle trying to gauge the situation and plan their futures. Acquiring a job is of paramount importance. A job means livelihood and healthcare, but also a means to pay off past debts and save for the future. However, this is not a simple calculus for students. They are caught between an economy with no guarantees and American values that tell them they can succeed at anything with enough effort. So they are left to decide between pursuing their dreams, no matter how fraught with risks, or pursuing financial stability, regardless of any regret that may entail. Anxiety is the only guarantee. Unfortunately for the participants, that uncertainty seems to be a hallmark of adulthood.

In this study, the participants determined that education has many purposes. In many respects, the goals and purposes of education have not changed. During the colonial times, education sought to eliminate crime and poverty, provide equality of opportunity, improve the economy, train workers, and create social and political stability (Boers 2007, 11–12). Much of these goals still hold true. What is different is the economic conditions in which education is pursued today. Also, individuals, in pursuing an education, do not take into account the macro-level goals of the nation. Therefore what is good for the individual is not necessarily good for the country and vice versa. What

was seen from the participants of this study was that education provided a means to get a job and a safe space in which to transition in adulthood. Though a college education may provide financial security, that is not a guarantee, as participant 89 can attest. And the college years will always be a time of transition and therefore will always remain a liminal state.

This study was limited in many aspects due to time and number of participants and therefore is far from exhaustive. It would be interesting to have follow-up interviews with the participants of this study. One, to explore deeper many of the ideas brought up in this study such as adulthood, two, to examine ideas that were touched upon but never explored such as education as a necessity for democracy, and three, to examine how the participants react to the findings of this study. As such I would like to dig deeper into how participants view them themselves in relationship to their ideas of adulthood. Another avenue of exploration would be an examination by the participants of the history of education in the United States. The history was originally left out so as not to cloud the participants' views, but the introduction of it now would provide a base for the participants to contextualize their views and experiences.

APPENDIX A

**Questionnaire**

*Please fill this out if you wish to participate in this study. The information will be used to determine if you are eligible for this study. If you are found ineligible for the study OR you decline to participate in the study, your questionnaire will be destroyed. All your information will be securely stored and will only be available to the research investigators. This form must be submitted in person. This is NOT an informed consent form. You will receive the informed consent form during the information session. The study will involve 1-2 hour long focus groups and interviews.*

*In order to participate in this study, you must have lived and studied in the United States for at least four years (K-12) as well as be between the ages of 18 to 38.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
(city, state, country (if outside US))

How many years of education within US: \_\_\_\_\_

Specify all the levels of education that you have attained in the US: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Specify the number of years you have lived in the US: \_\_\_\_\_

List the number of places you have lived outside of the US and how long you have lived there: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you identify with a particular ethnicity, including American (*describe as best as you see fit*): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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Major(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Minor(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Please specify all times you would be available for the focus group and/or life history.  
Each session will take no more than two hours: \_\_\_\_\_

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## APENNDIX B

### The Purpose of a College Education INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to determine what the current college age generation (here determined as years of age 18-38) views as the purpose of an education. Specifically to determine the motivations for seeking a college degree.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in one or more focus groups and a life history interview, depending on how many participants we receive for this study. Each session will be one to two hours long. The focus groups will be video recorded. The life history interviews will be audio recorded. These recording will be securely stored for 5 years as required by IRB and then destroyed. At least one investigator will be present at each session, and will take notes. The focus groups will be a discussion facilitated by the investigator(s) but discussed primarily by the group. The life history will be semi-structured interviews.

#### **PARTICIPATION INVOLVEMENT**

There are two major activities for this study. Both are required for participants.

##### Focus Groups

Focus groups will be in the form of guided discussion led a researcher. You will be asked questions designed to provide a chance to discuss views with other participants. Researchers will guide the discussion and take notes. This section of the study will also be video recorded. Each focus group will last 1-2 hours. Although focus group participants will be asked to keep the contents of the discussion confidential, due to the nature of a focus group, the researcher cannot control what participants might say outside of the research. All participants must be respectful of their fellow participants.

##### Individual Life Histories

Individual life histories involve the participant and at least one researcher in a semi-structured interviewed. Notes will be taken. Interviews will be audio recorded. Each interview will last 1-2 hours.

### Audio/Video Taping

The focus group will be videotaped and the life history interviews will be audiotaped. Recordings will be transcribed and used for further analysis. All recordings will be done digitally and the digital copies will be stored securely in portable hard drives under lock and key in the primary researcher's GMU office. No recording or part of the recording will be used for purposes outside of this study. All data recorded for this study will be destroyed once the thesis has been written up. All transcriptions of the data will be stored for at least 5 years. All digital records will then be deleted.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the focus group with the understanding that it will be videotaped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the individual life history with the understanding that it will be audiotaped.

### **RISKS**

The risks include possible stress and discomfort from confrontations and or disagreements with other participants. They also include possible loss of confidentiality from other participants.

### **BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits to this study. You may enjoy the shared discussion among members of a cohort regarding a significant life experience.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All recorded data, audio/video recording, will be stored in portable password protected hard drives only. None of these recordings will ever be stored on any device with internet access. None of these recordings will ever be transferred via the internet. Only the Investigators will have access to these recordings. All physical data stored in the PI's office under lock and key. All names and identifiable data for the each participant will be changed randomly but codified so that they are identifiable only by the investigators, in other words made into de-identified data. The de-identified data could be used for future research without additional consent from participants. The ID key to match individuals with their codes will be stored under lock and key separately from the codified data. All video and audio recordings will also be stored separately from the other keys and data until such time as they can be destroyed. All collected information of participants who leave the study midway will be destroyed if possible. If not it will be disregarded until such time as that data can be destroyed, as which time it will be. The focus groups and the life history interviews will be conducted and recorded in a private room. Although focus group participants will be asked to keep the contents of the discussion confidential, due to the nature of a focus group, the researcher cannot control what participants might say outside of the research setting.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary. You must be between the ages of 18 to 38 to participate. You must also have studied within an US educational institution for at least 4 years during K-12 years. You may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. All data collected will analyzed by the researchers in the following semester, therefore your decision to participate or not participate in the study will have no impact on their standing in class or on their grades. All of the data collected from you will not be used and will be destroyed when appropriate. There will not be any compensation for participation, however food and drink will be provide during each interview.

There are no costs to you or any other party. You may also withdraw your consent at any time before this study is concluded. It is your responsibility to seek out the researchers if you wish to withdraw from the study and/or if you wish to withdraw consent for any part of this study except in regard to the confidentiality of other participants.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Susan Trencher and Mohammed Rahman from the Anthropology Department at George Mason University. Susan Trencher may be reached at 703-993-1441 or at [strenche@gmu.edu](mailto:strenche@gmu.edu) for questions or to report a research-related problem. Mohammed Rahman may be reached via email at [mrahman6@gmu.edu](mailto:mrahman6@gmu.edu). Please remember that email is never confidential. You may contact the George Mason University Institutional Review Board office at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the research staff, and I agree to participate in this study.

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Name

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Date of Signature

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## BIOGRAPHY

Mohammed Rahman was born in Bangladesh and attended K12 in the United States. He graduate from George Mason University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology and Religious Studies in 2012. He will graduate with a Master of Arts degree in Anthropology in 2019.