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Career Funneling, Perceptions of Success, and Their Impact on College Students at Scripps,  
Pitzer, and Claremont McKenna Colleges

by  
Carina Schick

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF ARTS

Professor Jeff Lewis  
Professor Barbara Junisbai

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### Abstract

The *U.S. News* top college ranking lists have created a narrowing definition of collegiate and career success. Students are told an elite education is the ticket to a successful life, one filled with a high achieving career, meaning, and happiness. Through peer, familial, and media interfaces students are inundated with societal definitions of success such as fame, wealth, and status. Socialization primes adolescents to work towards these goals. This idealized type of success is only accessible to a select few, leading to dissatisfaction and creating pressures on students to work towards their college admission at early ages. This thesis examines the pressures elite college students face to become successful before, during, and after graduation and how striving to become successful funnels students towards similar college and career goals at the top of ranking of lists. Original research is adapted from Amy Binder, Daniel Davis, and Nick Bloom's article, "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs" and conducted at the Claremont Colleges to research the definitions of success, career aspirations, pressures, and their influences.

## Prologue

Matt Feeney and his wife are the parents of two grade school children. Feeney is a writer for the *New Yorker*, and his wife is a counsellor at a local Catholic high school in New Jersey. In 2016, Feeney reflected on the pressures his family and young children then faced during the early stages of the college admissions process, publishing “The Poisonous Reach of the College-Admissions Process.” Feeney is humble enough to admit his generation did much less than his kids at age ten, mentioning he sees his daughter doing more homework in the fourth grade than he did throughout high school. But homework is just the beginning. What really astounds him are the pressures he and his children face to build resumes and begin thinking about their college and career choices at increasingly early ages. This additionally increases demands on him as a parent. Matt must work alongside his children at soup kitchens, coach their Little League teams, and encourage them to spend more hours on homework so he can take comfort in knowing his children have achieved success.

The Feeneys, like many other parents, struggle to balance their children’s future success and their current well-being. Parents are not alone in adding pressure; colleges are to blame, too. As of 2018, ninth grade students can open an account with an Ivy League College and tuck their accomplishments into an online portfolio. On this development, Feeney remarks, “In the present environment, of course, ‘*can* start a portfolio in ninth grade’ translates into ‘*must* start a portfolio in ninth grade,’” pointing out this will soon become the new normal. Feeney critiques elite colleges, blaming them for his children’s stress and premature college-admissions scares. Impeccable grades and test scores have become a basic foundation for entrance to prestigious schools, and colleges simultaneously require students to excel academically while also differentiating themselves from the crowd. In Feeney’s words, doing so has created a “surfeit of

smart and eager high-school students” that “compete with one another,” rather than the much friendlier and more encouraging environment he grew up in (Feeney 2016).

Now that perfect grades and test scores have become foundational thresholds for admission, colleges are increasingly turning to other means for students to demonstrate good values and outstanding character, all while being able to juggle six Advanced Placement classes and band practice. Parents add to this pressure, wanting their children to get into not only a good college, but a small set of elite colleges that come highly ranked. Individuals are willing to do anything to get the thick envelope in the mail. Feeney's wife is a counselor with a direct window into the lives of college applicant families. The high school limits college counselling to juniors and seniors. There are simply not enough counselors to meet the demand of parents wanting immediate attention for their children as soon as they enter high school, believing by then the juniors and seniors only policy will be "too late" for their students to apply and matriculate to an elite college (Feeney 2016). It is both the parents who push their children to succeed, and colleges that entice students with promises of elite degrees that drive students towards increasingly younger and more robust accomplishments that many adults in previous generations scarcely recognize.

College admissions pressures seep into children's grade-school experience, with increased time in his children's day spent doing school-related activities. Feeney points out his concern over pushing his kids to spend their time in the right places. He must worry about encouraging them to complete activities for their resumes years before they will ever write one. Should he be coaching a baseball team or be a Boy Scout leader now so his kids can reap the rewards later? He hopes the long-term benefits public schools preach about the increased

responsibilities will provide his children with good opportunities, because if it does not, “the costs it imposes are real” (Feeney 2016).

Feeney’s family is an example of the beginning of a long college and career journey towards success. Once a student is accepted to an elite college, students move on to the next goal—career success. Students feel the heat to pick the right major that will become a “resume line” and interview talking point. Where once a college major was an opportunity to academically challenge one’s self or study a field of interest, now one’s college major is a networking strategy. Majors and fields-of-study are key determinants for a college graduate’s first job; therefore, picking the best one for a potential career is crucial. The search for internships begins shortly after admission. Peers, professors, and the career services department flood college students with information about how to create a portfolio and solid network. Freshman and sophomore year groundwork of club meetings, summer internships, and good grades set students up for junior year summer, where students are told this is the year to land a good summer job, in the hopes of a return offer after graduation. For those who did not receive summer offers, students graduating without a job report feeling like a failure (Moreau & Leathwood 2006).

Students submit dozens of applications, attend networking events, and must maintain their grades, social life, and well-being. The pressure to be at peak performance throughout college is intended to lay the groundwork for the rest of a student’s life. The elite college environment stimulates the pressures to be successful after graduation but leaves students to accomplish these tasks relatively on their own. Students receive mounds of information about a select few jobs that promise success and little information about unconventional or potentially



unworthy choices. At this stage, graduating elite college students have been funneled towards success their entire lives.

In the pages that follow, we move from the individual perspective and experience of Feeney and his family to see how these concepts—definitions of achievement and success imposed by powerful societal institutions like schools, colleges and universities, and families effect young people; and the extent to which young people internalize or challenge them—play out in a community. That community is Scripps, Pitzer, and Claremont McKenna Colleges, all members of the prestigious liberal arts world of The Claremont Colleges, which on average have an acceptance rate of 14.8%. As we will see, college students today are presented with a very narrow definition of success, one which for many is unattainable. The experiences of 41 Claremont Colleges students, interviewed and surveyed in this study, reveal the effects of exclusionary conceptions of success, and the ways that our society has adapted to achieve these, setting up a system with little support for demands placed on us.

## Introduction

The dream of success is deeply rooted in the fabric of our nation. The American Dream promises that any individual—regardless of class or situation they were born into—can attain their version of success through hard work (Adams 2017). Generations of individuals have grown up believing in this principle, but while the vision of success remains similar, the criteria to get there has shifted. Once a surefire ticket to social mobility *and* a job (re, the GI bill), a college education has less and less proved to be the best way to obtain jobs in a competitive market; college is no longer the final destination—no longer the panacea—students were lead to believe (Seoul 2018). As a consequence, college is no longer a goal in-of-itself, but yet another proving ground of competitiveness to reach the next milestone: a secure job (hopefully with benefits) that will provide long-term financial security. In this new type of applications game, we are altogether dismissive of the costs, both financial and emotional, this shift has placed on the young adults who have worked so hard to get to college, only to find they must do it all again.

From the time students begin thinking about college until their first job, adolescents are undergoing crucial developmental processes which are important for becoming healthy, well-adjusted members of society (Erikson 2015, Poole 2011). Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson's developmental theories of adolescent and adult development say life is marked by the conflicts encountered during distinct stages. Between six and twenty years old, children go through two stages, industry versus inferiority and identity versus role confusion. First children begin to compare themselves to peers and see how they measure up. They develop a sense of pride or feel inadequate depending on their performance academically, socially, and in their family life (Erikson 2015, Poole 2011). Then they are tasked with identity versus role confusion; where an adolescent's main task is to “explore various roles and ideas, set goals, and attempt to discover

their ‘adult’ self to develop a sense of self (Erikson 2015, Poole 2011). Struggling to find their identity, teenagers may be confused about their future and look to others for guidance.

Levinson’s Seasons of Life theory describes the transition to adulthood right after college.

During this stage, a person makes concrete decisions on their own regarding their values, lifestyle choices, relationships, and occupation (Levinson 1981). This is when college graduates decide what they want to do, and they face pressures driving them towards valued careers.

Adolescents' life stages are accompanied with finding themselves, looking towards the future, and gaining confidence in themselves. They are tasked with discovering what they want to accomplish in these stages and have multiple avenues for receiving information about the path forward, which often includes a successful life. This period and the transition into adulthood is when students are primed with narrow definitions of success accompanied by information about attending a prestigious university and getting a high-paying job. During these developmental periods, students must conquer each life stage and often do so by adapting their behaviors to those learned from their parents, peers, and from college ranking lists.

These critical developmental stages in a child and adolescent’s life, leaves them susceptible to the pressures of a narrow and idealized version of success, which can be detrimental to a student’s well-being. In a recent consensus study by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, researchers found students at high-achieving schools are experiencing “higher rates of behavioral and mental health problem compared with national norms” (Breheny 2019, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al. 2019). High-achieving students can “suffer significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and delinquent behavior, at least to three times the national average” (Breheny 2019, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al. 2019). At high-risk are

children who tie their self-worth to their levels of achievement. In another study conducted by the organization, Challenge Success, three-quarters of high school students reported “often or always feelings stressed by their school work” and two-thirds were “often or always worried” about getting into the college of their choice (Breheny 2019, <https://www.challengesuccess.org/>, accessed 5/2/2020). An elite education can come at a high cost of emotional well-being.

In particular, the relationship of the young adult to the media is one way these goals are defined. We look to the *U.S. News* rankings to guide and place value on our decisions. Each year, acceptance rates decline at the schools at the top, signaling the school's value: if thousands apply for such limited space, this signals that those spaces must have value. What kind of value? "Alumni Starting Salaries" is the second thing a casual viewer will see on *U.S. News Rankings*, just below the statistics on class size and acceptance rate. Our country has created college selection and career track processes that are simultaneously competitive, as students want to attend top schools and work for prestigious businesses, and one that begs us to live up to a standard of excellence that, if is not fulfilled, will potentially lead students down a less celebrated path.

Education has long been marketed as a path towards upper social mobility, and all Feeney and his wife want is for their children to have a better life than they did. Education at an elite college seems like the perfect marriage between these goals: elite colleges promise elite careers and ample benefits that will make their children happy. Feeney's children, like the thousands of other students in the United States, feel the pressure to be successful. At younger and younger ages, parents, schools, and the media are informing students of what this means: attending an elite college as a necessary stop on the path to success.

## Roadmap

In this thesis, I examine the pressures young adults face to get into an elite college in the hopes of becoming successful in their career and how this definition of success is limited and perhaps unattainable for the majority of people. First, I describe how I became interested in this topic and explain how Amy Binder, Daniel Davis, and Nick Bloom's article, "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs," provided a framework for my research. Next, I review relevant literature on college and success, first exploring how parents, peers, and community agents of socialization collectively shape our ideas about which paths lead to success, and what defines success and failure. I then turn to the literature on social comparison to see how these close relationships are not only part of an adolescent's development of behaviors, but also compound pressures of success that students face. I examine the rising use of technology in adolescent development and how media interfaces have changed social behaviors of adolescents and the college admissions process. I look to define different avenues of success in our current society and how the narrow definitions have created a winner's take all society, setting up the majority of society for discontent and failure. This process funnels individuals into striving for an elite education that top college rankings perpetuate and specific career paths that, I argue, aid the funneling of success and its pressures on adolescents to achieve greatness.

With the concept and research design behind "career funneling" as a baseline, I evaluate the influences felt by students at Scripps, Pitzer, and Claremont McKenna Colleges. Building on findings from that seminal article, I conduct original research to determine the key pressures students at my institution have felt in the academic and career worlds and how their own experiences have guided their way there.

### Personal Interest

My personal interest in this topic comes from the pressures I feel as a student at an elite liberal arts college. Before coming to Scripps, I grew up with two forces that shaped my view of the world—my close relationships with my family and my small town life. Football and Christianity were the local religions, and a third of my graduating class went to the local community college. Every day I went home where I was surrounded by parents who encouraged me to be the best version of myself and work hard. Through my parent's educational examples, I was promised that a good college education would make my future self and family successful. In high school my educational aspirations were modeled for me by my older sister who attended Swarthmore College, a prestigious liberal arts college on the East Coast. Though people could scarcely pronounce it and did not even know where it was, that did not impress others nearly as much as the fact that it held a cozy spot on many rankings' lists. That was all that was needed for the community to praise her accomplishments. It was very simple: I wanted to be like that.

The small town and familial success criteria were different from my collegiate success. Now, physically removed by hundreds of miles, my parents, high school teachers, and conservative peers had less of an influence on my future and current interests. I watched my peers get summer internships at FANG (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, and Google) companies. Grades and career advice were provided at every turn, from professors, readings, workshops, bosses, and my college peers, who though are barely older and scarcely wielding more mature life experiences than my own, seemed to know more about the current U.S. job market than all the people in my hometown combined. With each interaction, I felt increasingly unworthy of attending an elite institution, and set increasingly rigorous academic, career, and social goals to

reassure myself I belonged. Yet each new goal that was not met, I was disappointed with myself and anxious to meet the next one. I am a confident person; how could I be feeling this way?

In my organizational studies class taught by Professor Barbara Junisbai, we read “Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire ‘Prestigious’ Jobs” by Amy Binder, Daniel Davis, and Nick Bloom. For perhaps the first time, I realized I was not alone in succumbing to the pressures of an elite education. The authors coin this phenomenon, “career funneling.” Elite college universities promise innovation and creativity, empowering students to have agency and choice; however, most students begin their professional careers in similar fields and the same few careers. This pipelining of student’s careers into a “narrow band of elite sectors,” lights up the paths towards success to consulting, tech, or finance jobs are marketed as worthwhile investments that will lead to success (Binder, Davis & Bloom 2016). There are only a few spots in these promising careers and statistically, it is unlikely that most of my peers or I would end up there; this mismatch between the elite college world telling me to spend my time working towards these goals and the reality of my strengths and future goals that creates self-doubt.

This study gave me a better understanding of where these feelings and pressures come from. My Claremont College experience, living, working, and studying at an elite institution had narrowed my once broad definition of a successful life. I wondered if others at the Claremont Colleges had similar experiences. I was compelled to explore how becoming successful—and what success entails—has become an integral part of a college student’s goals for their future.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### Developmental Social Psychology, Socialization, and Media Influence:

Definitions of success and the pressures faced from the constraints of how it is defined are rooted in the dynamic interactions with the environment and developmental processes growing up. Interactions with others, ourselves, and our surroundings shape our definitions of success, which attributes to future career and collegiate goals. Families, parents, and community agents of socialization create messages that guide our experiences and help shape our ideas of a path towards success. In this section, I will define socialization and outline the major factors that aid in a child's development, noting families at young ages define much of a child's actions and goals. As a child reaches adolescence, peers become more prominent figures and have as much influence over behaviors that impact academic and social performance. In outlining socialization and social comparison, it becomes clear an individual's definition of success and the pressures that come along with wanting to achieve it, are largely shaped by the relationships formed at early ages. The rise of technology has changed how adolescents receive behavioral cues from peers, academic sources, and the college admissions process. Understanding how media interfaces interact with adolescents and why they have such influence, is useful in understanding the pressures students face in a world inundated with technology.

### Developmental Psychology:

Social psychologists propose human beings are born blank slates, and through the dynamic process of socialization, individuals adapt their behaviors. Robert Watson's textbook, *Psychology of the child: Personal, social, and disturbed child development*, defines socialization as the "process of helping children become the adult members of the society to which they belong...whereby an individual becomes a member of a society by achieving ways of



experiencing and behaving which are in conformity with that society's values" (Watson 1959, p. 101). Children are taught "to develop a behavior repertoire considerably narrower in range than that of which they are capable" because individuals seek to conform to their surroundings (Watson 1959, p. 101). This view of acceptable behaviors refines an individual's behaviors so they can efficiently and happily get through life.

Guiding this process are social agents, which are individuals or circumstances that play a role in shaping behavior. These include but are not limited to families, peers, mentors and other "countless little acts" that "must be done in a 'right' or 'proper' way" which teach us behaviors to adapt to our environment" (Watson 1959, p. 101). Social agents can influence learned behavior actively and passively and may not be easily identifiable. Not all aspects of an individual's environment will play a role in their development; as Watson notes: "Children learn from certain individuals and not from others," depending on their levels of development and prior learned behaviors (Watson 1959, p. 101).

Three social agents that are universally accepted by developmental psychologists are the roles of families, social class, and culture. Families aim to develop certain behaviors and attitudes for their children, ones they value and "draw upon their heritage of social class behavior in their individual fashion" (Watson 1959, p. 110-113). As parents are the most likely to be involved in their child's life early on and continuously throughout their lives, their influence begins early and creates a lasting impact. As a child grows older, familial social agents lose impact; however, Watson states these relationships endure because a majority of an individual's social behaviors are ingrained in them by their families at a young age.

Developmental social psychology classifies social class as the way "people live, think, work, and play in different ways" (Watson 1959, p. 111). Each social class has its own set of

behavioral expectations. The social class a child grows up in, models behaviors and influences the messages told to them about behavioral expectations. Similarly, culture is a collection of individual's influences that are ongoing and fluid. Culture is both the social agent and a force changing its behaviors (Watson 1959, p. 114). In a cyclical manner, when culture changes, so will the influences acting to create an individual's surroundings; thus, impacting the learned behaviors of the child. Watson notes this relationship with culture is "not passively molded by the processes and agents of socialization," rather an individual chooses aspects of his past and present experiences to merge the two, forming personality (Watson 1959, p. 115). Culture demonstrates how agents of social change may be a fluid and interactive force, developing alongside a child's learned behaviors.

Socialization is a useful framework for examining how students throughout their school years are shaped by their environment and relationships, cultivating definitions of success along the way. Ann Masten and Douglas Coatsworth's "The Development of Competence in Favorable and Unfavorable Environments: Lessons from Research on Successful Children," found the more supportive a child's environment was and the healthier their relationships with peers, adults, teachers were, the more self-regulation and competence the children possessed. Both self-regulation and competence predict how productive and well-behaved a citizen will be.

Generally, well-adjusted members of society have a better chance of becoming successful because they can follow rules, organize themselves more efficiently, and form more meaningful relationships (Nawaz & Gilani 2011, p. 34). Adhering to these guidelines, internalizes a sense of self-efficacy, which is an important developmental accomplishment, because "children's beliefs about their own success affects their behavior" in a positive way (Masten & Douglas 1998, pp. 205-208). Competence spurs feelings of self-efficacy, which is correlated to higher

achievements, accolades, and levels of success (Nawaz & Gilani 2011, p. 38). Importantly, competence and self-efficacy are valued highly by potential employers, and the more a child can demonstrate these skills, the more likely they will be accepted into an elite college and job (Masten & Douglas 1998, pp. 216). In other words, social agents help shape (un)successful behaviors.

Masten and Douglas explain that a child's level of competence begins with their parents but evolves alongside peer relationships. Parents are the foundation for setting expectations and rules for children's behavior as early as two years old, as active and passive agents. They construct behavioral meaning directly by creating rules for their expected behaviors and model what this means to them. At early ages, children have no choice but to become compliant with these rules because they are reliant on their families for basic needs and social support. It is within the interest of the child to uphold behavioral expectations set actively and passively as failure to comply with parental rules "may seriously compromise later social functioning at school and with peers" (Masten & Douglas 1998, pp. 209). Development theorists argue that peer relationships have roots in family relationships, as competence, self-efficacy, and the ability to follow social rules impacts the way children get along with others. The more children develop these skills, the healthier their peer relationships will be. Families can actively steer children towards peers who exhibit more valued skills, such as higher academic achievements and staying out of trouble (Masten & Douglas 1998, pp. 208-211). Acceptance of friends by family members was extremely important to initiating and maintaining their relationships; particularly before children reach high school.

Masten and Douglas argue that although families have overarching influence over most aspects of their child's life, including peer influence and academic achievement, peers can

reinforce or push back on these values; which plays a significant role in the development of a child's future goals and opportunities. For example, the study found the more high-achieving peers a child had, the higher their satisfaction with school, expectations, grade, and test scores (Masten & Douglas 1998, p. 211). On the other hand, if a child's peers were disinterested in academic achievement, the more likely a child was to struggle in school and their relationship with their families. This push back may have a deleterious effect on a parent's academic encouragement.

Peer and parental influences in a child's socialization are linear. If a parent instills competent behaviors in their child, the more competent the peers they are drawn to will be because they share similar values and behaviors. This is an ideal "ecological network of peers and adults that support education achievement," in which a child is academically and socially supported (Masten & Douglas 1998, pp. 211). When parents and peers have differing behavioral expectations, children can struggle with confidence and their academics suffer. The more unified directions a child can receive from peers and parents who share the same educational and personal goals, the more competent a child becomes because there is a clear path forward.

This research shows a variety of factors contribute to the socialization of a child, but familial agents have the longest and most fundamental impacts on their behavior. Tiffany Wang's "I'm the Only Person From Where I'm From to Go to College: Understanding the Memorable Messages First-Generation College Students Receive From Parents," expands on how truly lasting this impact is, by researching the effect family members have on their children when receiving messages from their parents at college. This article shows that receiving small text messages from their parents at college is "a supportive and socializing force that influences

the course of message recipients' lives" by changing behaviors to be in line with their parents (Wang 2014, p. 207).

This parental messaging shapes a child's life before and during college, arguably for the better. "Through supportive and socializing messages, parents can embed college advice within a personal and collective dream of higher education" and frequent messages can even make the transition into college smoother. Parental support for college students to complete their degree, integrate smoothly with peers, and prepare for a job after college was found to be positively correlated with strong parental influence. This increases the likelihood of student success, or at least success that is relative to the parent's and student's definition of it (Wang 2014, p. 271). Wang found students with encouraging parents were more likely to have better grades, social lives, career prospects, and remain close to their families after college (Wang 2014, p. 272). This familial bond that reaches into the daily actions of a college student can shape their values and interest in getting a college degree, how hard they studied, and even the path they were interested in taking after school.

Although parents do not attend college with their children, the impact they have on college student's behaviors is undeniable. Even without being in the same environment as their children, they maintain their relevance as a social agent. Wang's articles highlight the integral role families play in defining college student's futures. As one participant noted, she "sought to use her past to help her during college" because she knew the road her parents wanted her to go down would lead her to better opportunities. She found her motivation for success through her family (Wang 2014, p. 282).

Family behaviors can influence the career paths a child pursues. Samia Nawaz and Nighat Gilani's "Relationship of Parental and Peer Attachment Bonds with Career Decision-

Making Self-Efficacy among Adolescents and Post-Adolescents,” describes how the level of parental and peer attachment bonds can influence career choices later in life. Researchers emphasize that even though parents “do not necessarily attempt to influence their children’s particular occupational choices, they are active agents in influencing their children in a broad range of areas of their career development” (Nawaz & Gilani 2011, p. 34). Children take cues from their parents about acceptable careers through years of career development opportunities, educational tracks, and (non)verbal approval of specific careers. The study found families that had high attachment, were heavily influenced by their parent’s approval of their careers. As some “parents believe that only certain careers will lead their children to success,” parental influence in a child’s life can play a significant role in the career they pursue and the perceived value of success (Nawaz & Gilani 2011, p. 34).

Socialization makes sense of the influences that give each person’s behaviors meaning and explains why everyone upholds different values and behavior. Regardless of the differences in learned behavior, social psychology suggests we all share social agents of culture, social class, family and peers. These are known factors that shape how we view the world and the paths we take. Through these learned behaviors, we learn what success means and how to achieve it in our own lives.

#### Social Comparison:

College is a time in a student's life when their parents are not with them. Although Wang might suggest parental influence is difficult to escape, the college experience is relatively void of parental figures. Therefore, many turn to their peers for social behaviors and expectations which leads to comparison and judgement. Many fall prey of comparing themselves to others which

comes in many forms: attractiveness, wealth, intellect. Social psychologists label this phenomenon social comparison.

Leon Festinger's "A Theory of Social Comparison Process," says social comparison occurs "when an individual compares himself or herself to another person" (Wheeler, Suls, Martin 2002). Human beings are inclined to seek out evaluative criteria to quantify behaviors, which can decode feelings and intentions behind the actions of oneself and others. Social psychologists suggest that understanding behaviors is easier when there are "related attributes," or "attributes correlated with and predictive of the particular ability or opinion to be evaluated" (Wheeler, Suls, Martin 2002). Peers offer related attributes such as age, educational experiences, and social interests, making it easier to compare one's own behavior. Adolescents socially compare themselves to their peers as a mechanism for gauging appropriate behaviors.

Social comparison theory can be divided into two categories: downward and upward. Downward comparison is when an individual likens themselves to "someone worse off than themselves" and verifies that "someone ha[s] even more of the negative trait than themselves" (Wheeler, Suls, Martin 2002). This boosts self-esteem and reduces distress. Alternatively, upward comparison occurs when we equate ourselves to others who are better off than we are (Wheeler, Suls, Martin 2002). This form of social comparison is often tied to our goals, as individuals strive to be like someone in a desirable position. In general, individuals tend to yearn for things they do not have and work towards achieving that goal, rather than to associate themselves to others who are worse-off. Social psychologists note focusing on comparison to others is not good for our self-esteem and sets us up for a lifetime of dissatisfaction. Since there will always be someone better off, striving to be the best is a never-ending process.

Kendra Cherry's "Social Comparison Theory in Psychology" explains the cycle of unhappiness that upward social comparison can cause. Cherry says, "In cases where your comparisons are not effective, you might find yourself getting into situations that are too difficult or complete for your current skill levels" which causes unhappiness (Cherry 2019). She uses the example of racing:

"...if you compare yourself to your friends and feel that you are pretty physically fit, you might sign up for a marathon believing that you have the ability to finish with no problem. When race day arrives, you might find yourself surrounded by people who are much more athletic than you and realize that your initial assessment of your abilities was overly optimistic" (Cherry 2019).

In this example, the individual uses downward social comparison which makes them enthusiastic and proud of their abilities, causing them to jump to the next skill level and reevaluate their goals. Then when this individual examines their skill levels using upward comparison, they are met with disappointment. There can always be a new baseline to strive for when comparing oneself to others and Cherry suggests this is not a good indicator of ability or self-worth.

Social comparison transpires across all age groups, genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the influence of peers and the comparison to others is especially strong during adolescence. In F.F. Furstenberg's "Sociology of Adolescence," researchers describe how a changing world has impacted the transition into adulthood, which effects a child's socialization process and social agents. Three decades ago, a rise in higher education enrollment and a high paying labor market was accompanied by a disappearance of employment opportunities for youth. This change forced young adults to prioritize school and put off a career, creating a "more distinct phase between childhood and adulthood" that we now call adolescents (Furstenberg 2001, p. 94). Families were caught in a dichotomy of having their children rely on them more economically but less emotionally. With children relying on their



families at older ages, “parental control was relinquished, and peer influence became more prominent” (Furstenberg 2001, p. 94).

The age range classified as the transition of childhood to adulthood has widened because of the rise of social media, individuals entering the labor force, and having families much later in their lives. With unfettered access to the internet, children feel less dependent on their parents even though they are still financially reliant. This results in a longer period of semi-autonomy on families compared to a several decades ago (Furstenberg 2001, p. 95). There is no longer a direct separation of adolescents from either families or peers. Rather, it has become a balancing act, trying to juggle familial, relational, and professional identities (Furstenberg 2001, p. 95).

The growth of industrial jobs liberated adolescents from their parents and “created a labor market shaped by economic needs and demands for skills;” thus, raising demand for higher education. This increasing demand in higher education was accompanied with decreased parental oversight and families relied more on “outside institutions, most notably the school and community” to get their children into an elite institution. Parents feel they have the greatest influence in their child’s educational lives because they are investing in their futures. During this stage, parents may find themselves stuck between wanting to prolong stages of adolescents, so their children are protected from the pressure of adulthood, and not wanting their children to be left behind in comparison to their peers (Furstenberg 2001, p. 97). This further increased the influence of peers because students were spending more time at school. At the same time, students feel a sense of power and autonomy amongst their peers compared to their parents where more control defaulted to them (Furstenberg 2001, p. 94). In the process of trying to do what is best for their children’s education and future career, parents drive them into the arms of their peers, introducing social comparison and new social agents earlier in their lives.

There are many forms close relationships can take, such as peer, family, co-worker, or romantic partner. Throughout our lifetime, those who we are close to eb and flow, but Kathy Kram and Lynn Isabella's "Mentoring Alternative: The Role of Peer Relationships in Career Development" argues that adolescents seek out mentorship-like relationships because there is personal gain and this gain influences their development. A mentor provides "young adults with career-enhancing functions, such as sponsorship, coaching, facilitating exposure and visibility," preparing young adults for organizational advancement and psychosocial support (Kram & Isabella 1985). Although generally mentors are older than their mentee, the more important distinction is the transfer of knowledge or guidance. This study argues peer relationships serve similar functions to that of a traditional mentor and found they were "important alternatives" because they "offer a degree of mutuality that enables both individuals to experience being the giver as well as the receiver" (Kram & Isabella 1985). This mentor-like relationship that can occur between peers further highlights the importance of peer influence in adolescent development, as peers could potentially seek guidance from others their own age and not consult with parents or other adults. Relying on peers as mentors increases the likelihood of social comparison which has been noted as a critical component guiding a college student's decisions.

Another critical aspect of this study is the examination of how age affected peer influence and importance. During the transition from college to accepting a first job, an individual pass through two stages of career development. The first stage is known as exploration, defined by the period of transition from college to work. It is "a stage of self-explorations and making preliminary choices" (Kandel & Lazear 1992). The next phase is the establishment phase, which includes a person getting their first job and the struggles of learning to make mistakes and take on greater organizational responsibility (Kandel & Lazear 1992). Kram and Isabella note during

this time there is extreme “concern for professional identity and desire to feel self-confident and competent in organizational life” (Kram & Isabella 1985, p. 124). Through such a time of transition and uncertainty, individuals rely on their peer relationships to provide “emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship” helping one another to “define professional roles and to acquire competence and confidence” (Kram & Isabella 1985, p. 126). Though peer influence declines on average at the age of 18, individuals seek confirmation from their peers most often during times of uncertainty, such as graduating from college and moving on to the next chapter of life (Eugene Kandel and Edward Lazear 1992).

Peer relationships are fundamental to so many aspects of a young adult's life, including college and career decisions. Realizing the impact social comparison has on these decisions and our well-being is necessary for understanding the pressures college students face and why they are funneled to achieve certain goals. The more likely a peer is to achieve an accolade or be deemed successful, the more upward comparison takes effect and we want to work towards achieving those goals. This increased reliance on peers for longer periods of time and away from familial influences, has given social comparison more weight; and thus, adolescents are more broadly exposed to their peer's successes.

#### Media Influence in Adolescent Development:

As social psychologists emphasize, individuals do not grow up in isolation. In the 21st century, technology is part of these everyday interactions and a child's development. Media devices such as televisions, game consoles, cell phones, and computers are integrated into the home, peer relationships, and the education system. They have become “one of the most prevalent ways in which adolescents gather information about their environment” and this impacts the behaviors and attitudes individuals are exposed to and adopt (Lloyd 2002, p. 75).

Examining how these devices effect development is important to understand where college and career expectations are modeled.

Blake Lloyd's "A Conceptual Framework for Examining Adolescent Median Influence, and Social Development," frames Erik Erikson's adolescent development theory as a way of understanding how biological and psychological behaviors are shaped by the media influences. During adolescence, individuals are in stage 5, where the conflict is identity versus identity confusion. Here, they "contemplate "personal strengths and weaknesses" and synthesize "past, present, and future life experiences" (Lloyd 2002, p. 87). Erikson says this is the point in an individual's life where individuals sum "all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become, like the people he depended on" with what "they promise to become in the anticipated future" and what they want to "become compared to what others expect of them" (Lloyd 2002, pp. 79 & 87). Adolescents who struggle during stage 5 of development, have difficulty "developing intimate relationships, fulfilling work goals, and contributing to society in general" (Lloyd 2002, p. 87).

To construct their identity, adolescents are "constantly seeking out information about themselves from others within specific contexts" (Lloyd 2002, p. 79). Erikson argues healthy development includes increased interactions with peers and distancing from parents. Lloyd's article argues since Erikson's research, other factors need to be included in the identity formation of adolescents; including the technology adolescents use to interact with their peers and gather information. Television, online videos, music, and social media become resources for young people to gather information about accepted social behaviors. (Lloyd 2002, p. 85). The rise of peer interactions online has drastically increased, and adolescents turn to their computers and phones to reinforce socially competent behaviors.

Jay Giedd's "Digital Revolution and Adolescent Brain Evolution," describes how the increase in technology use has changed adolescent behaviors by increasing the connectivity of peers and the multitasking students are faced with when accomplishing menial tasks. Giedd says adolescent's brains are highly adaptable to their environment, known as "plasticity" (Giedd 2012). Plasticity of the brain leaves adolescent's malleable to their surroundings; especially technology that taps into the brain's addictive qualities and stimulates the emotional sides of our brain with instant gratification rewards. Giedd remarks:

"...adolescents spent an average of 8.5 hours per day interacting with digital devices, up from 6.5 hours in just 2006" and "Thirty percent of the time they are simultaneously using more than one device, bringing daily total media exposure time to 11.5 hours" (Giedd 2012).

In 2010, the Kaiser Foundation reported that two-third of the time when teens are doing homework, they are also doing something else such as instant-messaging, listening to music, texting, surfing the internet, or viewing their social media (Giedd 2012). This means adolescents have increased exposure to their peers and factors that shape their behaviors and leave them susceptible to their influences, explained by the plasticity of their brains at this point in their development. Adolescent behaviors adapt to mirror the behaviors modeled.

One of the most drastic changes to adolescent development is the impact Facebook and other social media platforms have had. In 2012, adolescents had an average of 834 Facebook "friends." Of these 800+ social media contacts, 100-200 of these contacts remained in contact on a monthly basis. Online interfaces have changed the way adolescents interact with their peers and the behaviors adopted in their relationships (Giedd 2012). Adolescents may not be maintaining meaningful relationships online and this causes loneliness and questions of identity formation (Lloyd 2000). Giedd argues "technologies allow adolescents to "mirror and magnify existing traits and tendencies" which fulfills social needs with very little direct social contact

(Giedd 2012). Technology has quickly become the medium for adolescent engagement which shapes their learned social behavior and has influence over their future interests and goals.

Colleges utilize technology to connect with and market to students. Nathan Daun-Barnett and Dilip Das' "Unlocking the potential of the Internet to improve college choice: a comparative case study of college-access Web tools," says the online search process is broken into three phases. The first phase, known as the predisposition phase, is when a student is passively observing online information about the college's resources such as career exploration, academic planning, and social marketing (Daun-Barnett & Das 2013, p.124). As the college application process unfolds, students enter the search phase, where they spend a lot of time weighing their college options through online sources and checking entry qualifications. Counselors, teachers, parents and peers guide students' college interests and students go online to research. This is the phase college websites were designed for (Daun-Barnett & Das 2013, p. 126). The choice phase is when students apply to colleges and "weigh their alternatives in terms of careers and institutions, and make decisions about whether to attend (and if so, whether to delay enrollment) and where" (Daun-Barnett & Das 2013, p. 126). During this stage, college application websites, cost management resources, and social media are important sources for a student's final decision. Throughout every stage of the college admissions process, students can be engaged online.

Colleges are aware of the increasing reliance on technology to connect students to a potential school. Marcia Turner's "Like, Love, Delete: Social Media's Influence on College Choice," declares college admissions professionals leverage social media to boost enrollment. In 2014, the NACAC reported that over 75% of college admission offices used social media to recruit prospective students and 41% of school officials "believe they can directly attribute an increase in enrollments to their social media efforts" (Turner 2017, p. 32, NACAC 2017).

Turner says families and students begin their college search on college and review websites, and once they are about to apply or make a decision, they turn to social media for a “sense of what the campus and students are like” (Turner 2017, pp. 32 & 33). Colleges utilize four social media platforms, each with a specific purpose. Facebook is generally used to connect with parents, Twitter is a resource for admissions officers to answer questions, and Instagram and Snapchat are student-focused (Turner 2017, p. 32). Social media gives colleges an opportunity get creative and “convey their institutions' unique personality and community” (Turner 2017, p. 32). In 2017, 40% of college freshman reported seeing their college’s social media page was the deciding factor in accepting their offer; demonstrating the power a college’s online presence and marketing has on adolescences.

Throughout the college search process in all three phases, Daun-Barnett and Das found online resources are the foundation for college information and choices. Turner’s article highlights how colleges use this reliance on the Internet, to connect with students and families. Technology has the power to shape the behaviors and social competency students feel during the college admissions process, as the high levels of plasticity and volume of interactions online have become a social agent in the development of adolescents. College websites and social media presence become another factor for shaping the college and career goals students want to achieve.

The debate of which factor, families, peers, or technology is the largest in adolescent development is inconclusive, as all relationships and environmental factors bring different social behaviors and expectations. Families are, and will always be, a large influence that shapes how individuals were raised. Semi-autonomy between parents and their children, provides lasting impacts and oversight into life decisions, such as college and career choices. At the same time,

adolescents spend more time with their peers and away from their families. Since adolescents are susceptible to social comparisons, young adults may turn to their peers for guidance, rather than their parents. Students increasing reliance on technology to mediate relationships and gain information has created a new platform, prompting socialization, social comparison, and the college admissions process. Each person has a different story to tell about the factors that influence their college and career paths the most. It is indisputable that all three factors are significant, each playing an important role in guiding young adults through pivotal milestones in their lives such as college decisions and career choices.

### Defining Success:

I have outlined major influences in the development of students such as peer, familial relationships, and technology, that shape definitions of success. Through this socialization students are informed of the value of an elite education and work towards reaching their goals for however they define success, relative to their own situations and experiences. These different social agents and environments explain why success is individualistic in nature. However, our society shares experiences, providing commonalities among individuals. Referencing these shared experiences, I will explore how success takes on several frameworks in different facets of our lives including society, career, and collegiate. Thus, giving a more holistic approach about what it means to be successful and the pressures faced on the way up the ladder.

### Societal Success:

Certain figures in society today model what success looks like. For example, Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama or the man at the end of the street with the huge house can be a model of societal success, one that is emulated and praised. These individuals have been listed among the topmost successful individuals in the past decade. Although society has not produced



a list with a one hundred percent satisfaction, there are a few characteristics that seem to be solidified into the general public's idea of a successful person.

For example, Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon, is considered the most successful man of 2019 by major news sites such as CNBC and CNN (Clifford 2019 & Duffy 2019). The media, which is considered the voice of the masses, has defined Bezos as the epitome of success. There are many aspects of his life that are valued—wealth, ingenuity, care for employees, personal work- life, and distinguished career. There is not one specific aspect of his life that undoubtedly can pinpoint why society classifies him as successful; however, his wealth and esteem created from his career and well-roundedness of his life create envy. Many want to know details about his background, schedule, and personal life, in the hopes of one day becoming as successful as him. This form of success is known as the entrepreneur.

We have combined money, fame, and intellect to create the widely celebrated title of an entrepreneur. This may come as no surprise that this is the definition the media pushes, as our screens are saturated with news about wealthy, famous, and successful people. Every year since 2011, Forbes has released its “30 under 30” list, describing “600 revolutionaries in 20 industries changing the course—and the face—of business and society” ([forbes.com/30-under-30](https://www.forbes.com/30-under-30), accessed 3/24/2020). These young entrepreneurs are praised for their ingenuity, wealth, and social change. This list includes actors, scientists, and the promised future leaders of the nation. Being on this list is an honor people strive to be recognized for, and the younger an individual is who can be accomplished, the more successful they are considered. But what is it about the people on this list that make them so desirable and worthy of high praise and accolades?

Our society today places high value on individuals who invent businesses and simultaneously look to benefit a societal problem while also making money. Anand

Giridharadas' *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, explains this current phenomenon of idolization of the elite and innovative. He says, "A successful society is a progress machine. It takes in the raw material of innovations and produces broad human advancement... the system... has been organized to siphon the gains from innovation upward" (Giridharadas 2018, pp. 8-10). In other words, a society is valued when its members actively work towards change. Combined with the sheer number of articles and lists of the acclaimed and successful, the model of an entrepreneur becomes a common narrative of success in America. These lists and societal ideals that praise young adults set examples of what life could be if they go down the right path, and as previously discussed, online sources impact adolescent behaviors.

Although innovation, intelligence, and wealth sound enticing, societally defined success can easily go too far and the draw of money can take over in a potentially harmful manner. "Zeroing in on the dark side of the American Dream: A Closer Look at the Negative Consequences of the Goal for Financial Success," discusses how the pursuing financial rewards as a determinant for success leads to self-esteem and has negative psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with life (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, Kahneman 2003, p. 531). Because finances are extrinsic motivators and rewards, humanistic psychologists argue that they are contingent on "approval of other people, and having' instead of 'being' distract[s] the individual from the meaningful aspects of life, hinder[ing] the individual from achieving his or her inherent potential as a human being" (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, Kahneman 2003, p. 531).

Even if the drive to be financially successful is not always negative, because setting and achieving goals promotes happiness and satisfaction, the nature of financial success stems from materialism, which can offset these positive outcomes. According to the researchers, materialism

promotes possessiveness, non-generosity, and envy; notably “all three had negative correlations with happiness and life satisfaction” (Nickerson et al. 2003, p. 531). All ages and groups are impacted by the dynamic emotions financial success evokes, but there are two groups that are the most displaced: college students and low-income individuals. Materialism and goals of financial success negatively affect college student’s satisfaction in their relationships, standards of living, and fun and is correlated to depression and anxiety (Nickerson et al. 2003, pp. 531-533). This group is suitable to the pressures of materialism and the influence of their peers as noted by social comparison theories.

Nickerson et al. argue that low-income individuals are unhappy when they have strong financial goals because they must work harder than average to achieve the kind of financial goals that are advertised. The results showed the higher the base income, the more satisfied individuals became with financial wealth because they were able to earn money with relative ease and spend it on leisurely activities and close relationships. However, when base income was low, the more money an individual earned, the less they were satisfied. Lower income groups with high financial aspirations reported they spent little to no time with friends or family because they were working all the time (Nickerson et al. 2003, p. 535). Thus, this study demonstrates high financial goals for many individuals leads to dissatisfaction in their life and creates harmful pressures that impact quality of life. The benefits and ideals that are praised by society are in part due to the comforts someone has with a higher income has and hides the potentially empty path of materialism and wealth.

#### Holistic Success:

Success defined as the entrepreneur lifestyle has its shortcomings because with wealth or fame, dissatisfaction and emptiness can follow. For that reason, I propose a second definition of

societal success, which can fill the missing pieces. This form of success satisfies our human nature and fulfills aspects of our lives that cannot be measured. This success can be defined as holistic success, that celebrates a well-balanced approach to life and taps into our humanity. This point of view stems from a balance between connecting with oneself and their goals. Linda Zander's *Super Sized Success: 9 steps to maximize riches in minimum time*, defines holistic success well, writing: "Success is defined as a balanced achievement of wealth and well-being through consistently living the truth of one's grace-inspired values" (Zander 2016). Blogs, self-help books and famous talk shows focus on this aspect of success, guiding individuals towards a comprehensive approach to life. Though this version of success stems from a less material place, it still directs people towards a specific and valued way of life.

This approach to a successful life is seen as the antithesis to a one-size fits all and taps into the individuality in everyone. Christina DesMarais's "17 Daily Habits Practiced by Highly Successful People," is the perfect example of a step-by-step guide to becoming successful through this well-rounded lens. Many of these steps involve wellness and educational gains, including advice to practice SAVERS habits (silence, affirmations, visualizations, exercise, reading, and journaling). Reading a chapter or a section out of a book a day, connecting with a loved one, and getting a full night's sleep are steps towards success (DesMarais 2019). DesMarais says, successful people are organized, seek out constant and tough feedback, and can endure short-term pain for long-term gain (DesMarais 2019). But perhaps the most important part to becoming successful by this definition, is to "Find your purpose, refer to it, and let it guide your path" (DesMarais 2019). A well-balanced, successful person knows who they are and what goals they are looking to achieve. They then use the steps to becoming organized and

mindful to achieve these goals in their personal and professional lives. These daily practices outlined, are generally good habits for productivity and happiness.

### Career Success:

There are two main trends in the societal definition of success—the entrepreneur and the well-balanced individual. In both cases, these definitions relied on work as a criterion, using pay, status, and work-life balance to evaluate success. To better understand these societal definitions and a large part of an individual's life journey, I will explore what it means to be have a successful career.

Peter Heslin's "Conceptualizing and evaluating career success," breaks down career success into two categories—objective and subjective criteria. Objective criteria is more easily recognizable and quantifiable, using metrics of "Salary, salary growth, and promotions" (Heslin 2005, p. 115). This is often the career success individuals think of. Yet, objective success leaves out the qualitative and unmeasurable aspects of why individuals feel successful at work. This is where subjective criteria steps in. Subjective criteria encompasses success relative to each person and describes factors which may not be visible to others. Generally, organizations describe these metrics as job or career satisfaction. Many careers value subjective career criteria; such as teaching and medicine, because they judge their levels of career success on "the learning and other attainments of their students" and the "lives they save" (Heslin 2005, p.115). It is the satisfaction they feel that makes them feel successful. Heslin's research highlights the importance of a job that provides meaning, arguing if this criterion is not met, a lack of motivation and satisfaction follow. Normally, having a good salary and getting promoted is not considered sustainable or successful on its own.

Heslin's research notes satisfaction may be the more important aspect of an individual feeling successful at work, as "individuals who are dissatisfied with many aspects of their jobs are unlikely to consider their careers to be successful" (Heslin 2005, p.116). Individuals tend to be satisfied at work if they feel more successful than their peers, fit the organizational culture, and align their values with the career field and goals they have (Heslin 2005, pp. 121-128). Again, many facets combine to make someone feel or appear successful; however, these general criteria- subjective and objective- are repeated patterns to look for in the workplace to recognize successful peers or view yourself as successful.

Douglas Hall and Dawn Chandler's "Psychological success: When the career is a *calling*," articulates how the model of psychological success is a useful tool for understanding the role objective and subjective success have in an individual's working life. This study argues that neither subjective and objective holds more importance for defining career success; rather each describes a different viewpoint to evaluate a person's career—internal and external (Hall & Chandler 2005, p, 156). Until recently, objective career measurements such as wealth and status were the focus of career success research. Given the rise in technological advancement, globalization, and other factors that have increased employee autonomy, subjective career measures such as job satisfaction, self-awareness, adaptability, and learning have become more salient (Hall & Chandler 2005, p, 156).

To understand the interconnected nature of objective and subjective careers, it is important to understand the model of psychological success, which "develops in a cyclical fashion as a result of setting and attaining challenging goals" (Hall & Chandler 2005, p, 158). The more an individual accomplishes tasks that objectively measure performance, their subjective feelings about their performance rises. For example, an employee who is offered a

promotion (objective performance criterion) feels pride and self-confidence about their career-related abilities and more devotion to their new position (subjective performance criterion), because they worked hard to meet their deliverables. Accomplishing objectively measured performance goals, is accompanied by a rise in self-esteem, identity competence, and increased involvement in work (Hall & Chandler 2005, p. 158). The psychological model of success demonstrates how personal and societal definitions of success interact with one another. Career success is neither objective or subject; rather it is a combination of our surroundings, experiences, and humanity.

Hall and Chandler questioned why there is a division in definitions of success between personal versus materialistic desires, motivating employees to work towards either or both goals. Which brought them to their discussion of a career calling. The researchers found that an individual who felt their career was their calling, or “work that a person perceives as his purpose in life,” exhibited higher levels of self-awareness and adaptability (Hall & Chandler 2005, p. 164). Both are skills that assist individuals greatly in the workforce. In a world characterized by frequent transitions, individuals are faced with unfamiliar situations and are expected to be resilient and succeed. Those capable of responding to these circumstances thrive. More so than ever before, self-confidence, self-awareness, and adaptability are important to career success. Comparatively, Hall and Chandler found individuals who worked more for objective goals were less satisfied and considered themselves less successful because they lacked deeper meaning that made working hard worthwhile. The researchers said it best: “Objective success can be understood by measuring what one has attained, but the deeper sense of fulfillment comes when those attainments measure up favorably with one’s own inner purpose” (Hall & Chandler 2005,

p. 173). If there is not a deep sense of fulfillment in work, success is a distant goal and the pressures to keep up perpetuate a cycle of emptiness and personal disappointment.

An indicator of psychological career success is timing. Academics note “when a person is exploring a change and is about to enter a new learning cycle, by definition [they are] not yet competent in the new area of work. Therefore, it is “unlikely that [they] would feel successful” (Hall & Chandler 2005, p. 158). During transitional times at work, objective success becomes a powerful indicator for feeling success and a better motivator. Accomplishing an objective task is an evaluative measure that provides tangible feedback. An employee at this stage of their learning cycle, is more likely to be drawn to these goals than personal feelings of success. How others view new employees drives this behavior as well. Colleagues are only able to judge a new employee’s abilities on their performance and objective measures. Therefore, a new employee might find themselves lacking confidence and act as a learner. This position would motivate employees to set and execute new goals, which begins a new cycle and overtime builds more subjective confidence (Hall & Chandler 2005, p. 158). This evidence is important to examine in relation to this thesis, as college students enter the workforce as learners, lacking feelings of subjective career success, they must on objective measures to guide them.

Joanne Ciulla’s *The Working Life*, expands on how much of how oneself and others might determine the criteria for career success, subjectively or objectively, is determined by positionality. Ciulla says career choices are captured by four values. There is “meaningful work, or work that is interesting and/or important to you, or to others in society’ leisure, or free time to do the things you want; money; and security” (Ciulla 2000, p. 16). An individual’s situational needs determine which values take precedent. For example, “The new graduate may choose the resort job, because he or she likes to spend summer months surfing or traveling, but this might



not be an option if the person has a family to support” (Ciulla 2000, p. 18). Ideally, we would all want to have a job that satisfies all four values, but “we make tradeoffs, and these tradeoffs signify what we value most” (Ciulla 2000, p. 16). These values translate to understanding why an individual strives for success differently depending on their priorities at the time. Fame, wealth and personal well-being hold different weight for younger individuals who do not have savings, authority in the workplace, or a family to support. Their ideas of success may look different compared to a soon-to-be retired couple who can focus on leisure time.

Relative to these four values, are the differing levels of pressures individuals face to conform to their peer’s opinions about their life choices. Amanda Shallcross’ “Getting better with age: The relationship between age, acceptance, and negative affect,” examines the relationship between age and levels of interest to please others. Younger ages had higher, adverse reactions to negative comments; whereas, older individuals were less likely to react negatively. These findings showed that the younger a person is, the more they are to adhere to pressure in society, compared to older generations who look inward for satisfaction (Shallcross, et al. 2013). Additionally, John Rowe and Louis Kahn’s “Successful Aging,” describes how aging increases the need for individuals to focus on what is important to them. They report, getting older increases the need to “cope with impending or existing illnesses, losses, and other challenges” so “older people often find ways to meet these challenges” by focusing on self-reflection and wellness (Rowe & Kahn 1997). This furthers the idea that situationally, people who are younger in their careers and life would lean towards objective values to judge their success. And explains why older generations look more towards a well-balanced and happy life. People in their earlier years must work so they can get the stage in their life where they have

safety to work on their holistic success. Stories are rarely told about an older person regretting their decision to turn down a job offer and spend more time in the office.

Another aspect that can shed light on how individuals define and shape the meaning of career success, is career management research. Career management is the conscious planning of an employee's career, used to enhance personal growth and financial stability, which leads to greater life fulfillment. Career management aligns the aspirations of individual employees with current and future organizational needs, providing skills to understand the job application process and employee-organization fit (Greenhouse et al. 2019). Organizations use career management to mold their employees with the skills that will give them a return on their investment (Hirsh 2007, p. 6). Benefits for an individual range from knowing how to best manage income, being aware of new opportunities and how to best market oneself to employers and have autonomy in a large part of one's life (Hirsh 2007, pp.6-8). By unpacking information used by organizations as a hiring guide and examining the training criteria new employees use to build their skills, career management is a useful framework for understanding where individuals receive information about career success and meaning. Perhaps unknowingly, career management guides employees towards specific career paths, reinforcing the ways we apply for jobs, work, and navigate the workplace.

Individual's careers "have been portrayed as a linear path with vertical growth opportunities in the particular organizational hierarchy resulting in the accumulation of job competencies and job experience" (Coetzee 2018). This statement assumes life is a progression towards success: an individual attends an elite college, gets a prestigious job with their degree, will be financially stable, and is therefore personally fulfilled. Nowadays, careers and the road to

success are not linear. The workforce has changed drastically as individuals change jobs more frequently and have more flexibility to change their careers (Bolles 2018, pp. 9-11).

Career management is meant to give clarity to these fluid and dynamic work environments. One tool researchers argue helps employees adapt are person-environment models, which propose matching an individual's skill sets, personality, and interests to the environment. Person-environment matching provides greater career satisfaction, adaptability, and employees reportedly stayed at one organization for a longer period of time. Popular management books, such as *What Color is Your Parachute?*, by Richard Bolles instructs its readers to use the "Parachute Approach." This job hunting technique starts thinking "not with the job market, but with yourself" to find "among all your gifts which ones you most love to use" and only then do you look for a job (Bolles 2018, pp. 19-24). Bolles says individuals will have long term happiness and their skills will align with the job; thus, providing choice and autonomy.

These career management research methods are used in organizations around the world and have a widespread impact on the ways organizations and employees interact. From the literature about social agents and the media, these sources may reinforce normalized work behaviors. Employers look to foster a work environment that meets criteria of self-enlightened employees who have picked the career that fits their skill set, are content with their job, while simultaneously working hard towards their next stages in their career. This research helps shape our understanding of what a successful person looks like to an organization- enlightened, autonomous, and interested in their work. Career management gives potential employees and organizations several methods to have successful careers. This framework is correlated with life satisfaction and fulfillment; however, it can narrow perceptions of what a happy life and career success means.

Work creates meaning in our lives, often signifying more than financial security and status. Ciulla describes how the meaning of work has transitioned from one of necessity or status and is now a crucial part of human identity. In the past century, individuals began to define their characteristics, goals, and values based on their occupation. Ciulla believes without work, human beings would organize activities similar to that of a work environment, because work “satisfies various psychological and social needs as discipline, connectedness, regularity, and self-efficacy” (Ciulla 2000, pp. 4-15). She argues the structure of work guides our daily actions in a way that satisfies our basic needs. But work is only one part of this identity. It cannot bring out “what is best and most distinctive about human beings” like leisure time can (Ciulla 2000, p. 192). This is the time when “our abilities to think, feel, reflect, create, and learn” shine (Ciulla 2000, p. 192). Work is meaningful, because it shapes leisure time, satisfies a basic need to survive, builds self-efficacy and creates relationships. We are not complete without work, because our humanness drives us to be engaged with ourselves in a meaningful way. Possibly the search for meaning through work-structured activities is where our preoccupation with becoming successful stems from.

Societal and career success are goals in a lifetime of endeavors. Career success fuels societal definitions of success. They are interconnected and are all highly praised and desirable definitions. The road to these successes, generally begins at a college level. Next, I will backtrack to an individual’s educational years, unpacking the weight an elite degree carries and with it, the expectations for greatness and a college ranking system that perpetuates these ideals.

### The Role of Education in a Successful Life:

Higher education has become, for most of us, the preparation needed to lead us towards the career we desire. As we seek to gain entry into the most desired career paths, we discover through many sources that education is one of the surest ways to get there. Many employees become successful because they have an impressive educational background. And not just any education, an elite one at that. Universally, an elite college education is thought to lead to a prosperous life. As Daun-Barnett and Das' three phases to the college admissions process suggested, online resources are the foundation for college information and choices (Daun-Barnett & Das 2013). College rankings are often one of the first steps in one's journey, priming students with expectations of excellence. Accompanied with adults and other online sources relaying information about value of an elite education, adolescents see these colleges as their gateway to a happy life.

Every year, the *U.S. News* releases the best colleges of the year article that sends students, parents, and colleges into a frenzy. For thirty-six years, the news site has ranked colleges, based on a unique methodology, comparing undergraduate institutions in the United States and placing them into ten categories. These categories include: retention rate, graduation rate, graduation rate performance, social mobility, faculty resources, financial resources, standardized test scores, student excellence, high school standing, and alumni donations (U.S. News.com, accessed 1/21/2020). Liberal arts colleges are ranked separately, due to slightly different ranking criteria. All top schools, liberal arts and not, have tuition over fifty thousand dollars, flashing their elitism and consumer's willingness to pay hefty prices to attend (U.S. News.com, accessed 1/21/2020). These college's names alone promise fortune and prestige, but some of their perceived value may be coming from their ranking.

College brochures, books, articles, and the internet agree that a college education increases success, health, and happiness. Any student will find the *U.S. News* article, “2020 Best Colleges” as a top article in the Google database using “college” as the key word. Individuals who peruse the internet are primed with thoughts of competition, elitism, and name recognition due to the titles of these articles and questions. Further down, articles about the innumerable ways a college education, and a good one at that, can benefit your life. This information becomes part of the socialization process in adolescents and alerts students of an elite college’s importance.

From a young age, students and families are saturated with information about the value of a college education and almost all Americans view a bachelor’s degree as an essential part of a happy and good life. A survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2018, said about 84% of Americans agree a college education provides better job opportunities and a comfortable lifestyle, and 47% say higher education is critical to for high achievement (U.S. Bureau 2018). About 66% of Americans who did not attend college say they wished they had and want that for their children, believing it is a direct path to success (Braxton 2016). This rang true for almost all parents—going to college will improve their children’s quality of life and is something families work together with their children to achieve. This deep-seated belief that a college education is crucial for an individual’s success is steadfast in the United States and is one that has perpetuated income inequality, elitism, and puts pressure on individuals who continuously strive to be better than the generation before.

The recent shift from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge-based one, has increased skill-based criteria needed to get jobs. Having a higher degree is assumed to teach more skills and provide better career opportunities (Ciulla 2000). Although an elite education is expensive,

many think of it as a “down payment on your future” (Braxton 2016). Many articles echo, “high school graduates who don’t go to college end up working in the service field jobs that pay low and don’t offer advancement opportunities” (vista college.com, accessed 2/2/2020). Easily accessible articles framed service and manufacturing jobs in a negative light, stating a higher education gives you the opportunity for a rewarding career. This increasingly adds pressure and creates the assumption that certain careers are preferable to others, narrowing successful career choices.

Pro-college education articles say an elite college education will better your career, finances, as well as personal satisfaction, relationships, and health. Higher education is thought to provide skills that will make one better at their job, such as self-efficacy, perseverance, and time manage. These skills are known to provide job security, as productive workers make employers happier (Taris & Schreurs 2009). There is also the belief that higher education will boost self-confidence because highly educated individuals are “better equipped to deal with life’s mental challenges” (Braxton 2016, vista college.com, accessed 2/2/2020). With everything from finances and job security, to health and wellness on the line, an elite education offers future happiness and well-being. Even if these goals seem extreme to equate college education and future happiness, young adults must grapple with these definitions of success.

Not only do these college ranking lists and sentiments about elite colleges solidifying future success pile pressure on students, but also on the schools themselves, creating a cyclical process where elite colleges are dependent on their rankings for success. James Monks and Ronald Ehernberg’s “U.S. News & World Report’s College Rankings: *Why They Do Matter*,” examines the pressures colleges face to cater towards these rankings. College administrators and admissions officers become pressured to earn a spot among the elite, because the ranking of a

college has a large impact on the college's acceptance rate, standardized test scores, alumni database, and career outcomes for their students (Monks & Ehrenberg 2010). All of these statistics are significant factors that bolster income, endowments, and acclaim for the institution.

Monks and Ehrenberg used the top colleges as a case study, investigating how the change in ranking over the course of several years impacted college's admission rankings, yield rates (fraction of their applicants that they won't admit), and the average SAT scores of the freshman class. Colleges with low admission rates, high yield rates, and high SAT scores were highly ranked were considered more elite. Colleges with these factors noted their alumni earned higher salaries and were offered better jobs (Monks & Ehrenberg 2010, p. 42). For example, when Yale first achieved a top position in the *U.S. News* ranking, the college "experienced a big increase in its admissions yield the following year" (Monks & Ehrenberg 2010, p. 44). In comparison, when any college on the top 40 list dropped in their ranking, there was "an increase in an institution's admit rate of almost 2 percentage points" (Monks & Ehrenberg 2010, p. 46). Higher admission rates impacted the income class, with less selective grades, test scores, and a lower yield rate. As a result, less students committed to that university because their ranking was lower and the college was considered less prestigious (Monks & Ehrenberg 2010, pp. 45-47). This study suggests in the minds of students accepting and applying to colleges, rank impacts who is applying and how many students want to apply there.

Nicholas Bowman and Michael Bastedo's "Getting on the Front Page: Organizational Reputation, Status Signals, and the Impacts of *U.S. News and World Report*," explores the power of elite college ranking lists. College ranking can influence attitudes towards particular institutions in two main ways. Students and parents may view rankings as an "expert opinion" that helps define institutional quality" because the ranking "compiles both objective statistics and



perceptions of knowledgeable individuals,” indicating colleges on these lists are superior (Bowman & Bastedo 2009). Secondly, “students and parents are likely to internalize the hierarchy presented in the rankings, perhaps even without their conscious awareness” and be persuaded by messages of success (Bowman & Bastedo 2009). These rankings persuade the general public to believe these college’s education is better, setting a precedent that top-ranking colleges have higher gains after graduation, such as better jobs and higher incomes.

College selection is influenced by a student’s own perceptions and others of the college, including peers, parents, and counselors, all who have influence over a student’s college decision. A college’s ranking may unknowingly bias prospective students to want to attend a top-ranking college, in the hopes of achieving the greatness marketed to them (Bowman & Bastedo 2009). This perpetuates the elite nature of these already top-tier schools. Ranking lists reinforce student’s interest in attending an elite school, making more students apply, acceptance rates lower, and as a result the college’s ranking increases.

Elite colleges at the top of the list are seen as a standard of excellence by employers, students, and perceived by society as a place for the best of the best. But there are hundreds of universities in the world. In the United States alone, there are over 4,000 degree-granting universities. Are these colleges that much better than the others? There are mixed findings. Author Valerie Strauss exclaims the *U.S. News* ranking has influenced the entire college system by playing “down inputs (selectivity) and emphasizes “outputs (graduation rates, commitment to serving all economic classes)” (Strauss 2018). Meaning, college ranking lists are a numbers game, thriving on the success of their alumni data bases, donations, and turnover rates. She argues the ranking system decides for its audiences what is important and “for some reason, consumers and schools themselves put a great deal of stock in the outcome” (Strauss 2018).

Strauss is not alone in her opposition of the college ranking system, that she argues is nothing more than a successful marketing strategy. *The Atlantic* releases an article every year about the dangers of glorifying colleges on the top colleges list, hoping to use their platform to minimize the impact of their *U.S. News* competitors. They urge their wide audience to be aware of the dangers of the college ranking systems, saying by supporting them we are perpetuating a system that bolsters inequality and encourages colleges to cheat the system (Tierney 2013). Tierney says colleges “actually lie when reporting numbers to *U.S. News*” (Tierney 2013). The college ranking system has pushed colleges to take desperate measures to boost their ratings, including, increasing their tuition costs, decreasing class sizes, and lying about test scores

Research about selective colleges raises questions about the monetary and emotional price students and families pay for these institutions. Jenne Brand and Charles Halaby’s “Regression and matching estimates of the effects of elite college and career achievement,” followed individuals from the beginning of their college admissions process to their entrance into the workforce. The authors concluded elite college students “yield an advantage with respect to educational achievement and occupational status” (Brand & Halaby 2005, p. 750). One reason they suggest elite college graduates have these advantages, are the support system that brought them to the college. The researchers found elite college attendance was directly tied to “achievement in high school, and family socioeconomic status” (Brand & Halaby 2005, p. 750). Regardless of their elite degree, these support systems and skills would give an individual occupational and educational advantages.

James Monk’s “The returns to individual and college characteristics: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth,” explored the differences in value between elite private, liberal arts, public, and degree granting universities. Monk wanted to know if students and

families were getting a return on their investments. He found “graduates from highly or most selective colleges and universities earn significantly more than graduates from less selective institutions” (Monk 2000, p. 278). Graduates from non or less competitive institutions earned approximately 5% less than graduates from competitive institutions and graduates from highly or most competitive colleges and universities earned 15% more than competitive college graduates (Monk 2000, p. 286). Monk’s research suggests a college’s reputation and ranking does have an impact on the wages earned after college, as elite college graduates have overall higher wages than non-elite graduates.

Brand, Halaby and Monk’s research proposes graduates of elite colleges have better career and financial success compared to non-elite colleges. This research supports the goals of success elite college students are primed to desire: occupational status, high levels of intelligence, and high pay. Many factors contribute to these findings, such as the support system college students have at home, general levels of cognitive skills, and work ethic. Perhaps, what gives elite college students better outcomes is the perceived value of their education by employers, family, and peers. Even if the top college lists and the marketing of elite colleges is a factor contributing to elite college graduate’s success, research supports there are monetary and career value payoffs. Although these are objective criteria and may not be suggestive of an individual’s happiness or internalized feelings of success. Although the *U.S. News* ranking system for colleges has its critics, the numbers do not lie. A low acceptance rate and high tuition have become an idealized dream for many families who are looking to give their children the best future. It offers the hopes of becoming successful in life and in their career. An elite college education promises a happy and financially fruitful life, fulfilling the two main aspects of

societally defined success. This is why thousands of people tune in every year to see where their college or their dream school ranks according to *U.S. News*.

### Success and the American Dream:

The definitions of success in societal, career, and collegiate aspects of our lives, shows the messaging adolescents are receiving from many places to become successful are precise. The specificity of these definitions suggests only a few can fit the criteria, leaving the rest to feel defeated or continue to strive for unattainable goals. This next section explores who is capable of achieving success and proposes most are unable to achieve it.

The narrative told by generations of Americans that hard work, a good education, and a little luck will make you successful has gone by the wayside. The narrative has shifted to the promise of being elite. Ross Gregory Douthat's *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class*, describes his time at Harvard University. His educational and familial life ushered him down a successful path. Douthat grew up attending a private high school, notorious for sending its graduates to ivy league universities. He grew up like most, believing a Harvard education would secure financial, career, and personal success. By many standards, Douthat by birth is more privileged than the average American, but Harvard is a whole other ballgame. Douthat's book describes his experience of being at one of the most prestigious colleges in the world, teetering between the opportunities of being elite because he attended an elite university; while still being an outsider, surrounded by the wealthiest individuals in the country (Douthat 2005). He critiques this idea of the American Dream of success, saying it is not truly attainable for everyone.

Douthat argues individuals born into the elite lifestyle and with networking connections are those who have access to the success marketed by Harvard. His book details college

adventures about attending social clubs and parties, and the burning necessity to get into the best one to solidify a job offer. There are the obvious privileges of going to a school like Harvard- name recognition and money- but perhaps the real privilege goes beyond that. The elite of the elite at Harvard, are offered spots in “finals clubs” which according to Douthat is more than your typical college Greek life. It is in these finals clubs, that student’s network with one another, providing a web of friends and business partners (Douthat 2005, pp. 53-83). Douthat’s roommate, Nick, shared his bad experience of not getting into a prestigious club. Nick worked just as hard as his peers to work for an investment bank or a consulting firm “all through the senior year recruiting process he watched the final club sailing upward, borne to impossible height by their endless array of alumni connections” while he struggled to gain connections (Douthat 2005, p. 81). Nick was not accepted into a finals club because they only accept Harvard students who are connected to an alumnus, parent or have name recognition. He was successful enough to get into an elite institution, but not enough to make it to the top of the group because he lacked a background of success.

If a Harvard student gets cut from a finals club, their network is limited, and they lose the potential ties with well-connected students. Ironically, Douthat says the people who make it into the finals’ clubs, are those who do not need a Harvard education; rather, they use the college as a networking opportunity and if this fails, they have the safety net of their respected parents to fall back on. This perpetuates the cycle of elitism, widening the gap between the upper and lower class. Harvard alumni and students, regardless of their place in or out of finals club, generally are at the top of the ladder wherever they go. This is not to say a Harvard education holds little value, rather it demonstrates even with an elite education some can achieve societal and career success more realistically and with less costs to their personal lives and financial means.

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who have fewer social agents directing them towards success are less likely to have a solid network and rarely are admitted into finals clubs.

Once an individual reaches the workforce, there are many factors that contribute to success—location, work ethic—but there is always the hope that anyone can make it big. Sadly, that may be less probable than most think due to a winner- take-all system that pulls the wool over one’s eyes due to the elite nature of humanitarian and entrepreneurship. Anand Giridharadas’s argues “A successful society is a progress machine. It takes in the raw material of innovation and produces broad human advancement” (Giridharadas 2018, p. 8) Giridharadas says America’s machine is broken because the individuals who are providing the materials for human advancement, change, and policy are at the top already and continue to solidify their place by “advocating” for those at the bottom. The entrepreneur model of success discussed early, is praised for helping those less fortunate. In reality, these programs mainly benefit the founder of the organization, providing them with accolades and incomes. Giridharadas argues the power of the entrepreneur seeps into our government and drives social changes, giving the elite power to shape what that social change is. (Giridharadas 2018, p. 12). These innovators, sometimes unknowingly, masquerade as change makers who make personal profit by doing good for society when their actions are actually perpetuating a system where only the elite can make societal changes.

Often, entrepreneurs set out to make change, by having an idea that solves a societal problem such as unclean water, poverty, or a lack of access to healthcare. Many use these issues as a starting point for their business and hide under a selfless agenda. These individuals are called “winners.” Giridharadas says a winner enjoys a combination of “making money, doing good, feeling virtuous, working on hard and simulating problems, feeling [their] impact,

reducing suffering, spreading justice” (Giridharadas 2018, p. 38). In the hopes of benefiting themselves and society, they create a new program instead of tackling systematic issues, leaving the root problem intact. This is a good solution for the entrepreneur because root problems of systemic issues are controversial and difficult to change. These root problems present a win-lose situation, as either the attacker or the system itself must succumb to change. But in the traditional win-win scenario we are more familiar with, “There are still winners and losers, the powerful and powerless, and the claim that everyone is in it together is an eraser of the inconvenient realities of others” (Giridharadas 2018, p. 49).

Ideally, win-win scenarios could benefit anyone because everyone could have the opportunity to offer a solution to a problem and profit from it. But entrepreneurship and policy making are exclusionary, occupied by individuals who speak on behalf of others and gain power from it. Perhaps its genius, is that it is a discriminatory system in disguise of one that promises a better future for all. The elite and innovative thrive while the “Unintelligent, poor, indigent,” “people who don’t want to work twenty-four hours a day” and “people who don’t live to invent and create” falter to dig their way out from the bottom (Giridharadas 2018, pp. 49-51). This win-win society where entrepreneurs put band aids on large scale issues and make a fortune, is a highly praised practice. Giridharadas’ research suggests that some of the definitions of success that many uphold and work towards, such as the successful entrepreneur or financially secure individual, is highly unattainable.

This limited view of who is the most likely to become and benefit from society's definition of success suggests the criteria for success should be reevaluated. There is restricted room for people in these elite organizations and not everyone can afford to create or fund a new idea that promises better opportunities for our society. Yet, we self-selectively funnel ourselves

upward to meet this criterion in different facets of our lives because we have been told from a young age this is a justified and meaningful path.

In Summary:

Completing a college education continues to be a baseline for success and happiness. A college education is a critical rung on the ladder towards a lifetime of accomplishment. The expectations of the American Dream remain, but as college admissions became harder and the pressures impacted students at increasingly younger ages to work harder and with high intensity impact, the criteria for success comes at higher costs. Top-ranking college and successful people of the year lists narrow our definitions of success, to ones that are less attainable and realistic for most. Elite colleges market that this education will provide a desirable career and stable lifestyle, which research validates elite college graduates have higher occupational status and more financial stability.

Status and money are not always suggestive of happiness, although the psychological success model argues it may not hurt to have either. What these definitions do demonstrate, is how narrow definitions of success have become—and they are prevalent. More and more people are gunning for the same, limited number of spots for elite colleges and jobs. The hope and expectations of college students to reach these high reaching goals has driven us down a path that sets us up for failure and dissatisfaction, as many feel pressures to go down a path that may not satisfy their needs.

The influences and factors leading someone to an elite education are a complex. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that striving to reach these ideals has created classrooms of anxious high school and college students on their journey to pursue success through an elite education and career. Socialization and social comparison theories say our behaviors are



dynamic and changeable and the power to change these definitions are possible. While these pressures felt by college students will likely fade with time as their priorities shift away from their peers, this literature explains where students receive messages of success and where their anxieties come from. For further exploration of elite college students' experiences, I collected data at Pitzer, Scripps, and Claremont McKenna Colleges.

## Chapter 2: Research Design and Limitations

### Experimental Replication:

To study career funneling and definitions of success at Scripps, Pitzer, and Claremont McKenna Colleges, I replicated to the extent possible the research design from Binder, Davis, and Bloom's 2016, "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs." Using an observational study methodology, 56 semi-structured interviews were conducted at Stanford and Harvard Universities. Students interviewed had diverse backgrounds, majors, and were evenly divided between genders and grades.

To recruit interviewees, the researchers targeted pre professional clubs based on the most pursued jobs of the decade- finance, consulting, tech, and legal fields (Binder, Davis, Bloom 2016). They hypothesized these clubs guide students towards specific career path and are influenced by career funneling. In addition to agreeing to interviews, club officers sent the researchers club handouts, emails, and social media posts (Binder, Davis & Bloom 2016, pp. 23&24). To ensure there was a sample size beyond the three popular careers and a representative sample, the researchers interviewed students of all majors and career interests. All interviews were conducted in person and ensured confidentiality.

Binder, Davis, and Bloom's data revealed elite college students were susceptible to career funneling and narrow definitions of success that created pressures to become successful after graduation. Four major themes were discussed. Many interviews reported they had little information about the labor market before getting to college, which made them easy targets for career information on campus and guided them towards majors and careers their peers and college valued. Many students were driven by their parent's level of success, to either maintain it

or strive for more. Students felt pressure, regardless of their field of study, to work in tech, finance, law, or consulting because these fields were considered prestigious and worthy of their college's elite title. Both elite colleges created mechanisms of pressures that left their students vulnerable to pressures fostered by and within the institution, in the hopes of becoming successful with their degree (Binder, Davis, Bloom 2016).

### Methodology:

For my thesis project, I began with the overarching question: Does career funneling happen on any of Claremont College's campuses and what influences these student's definitions of success? Like Binder, Davis, and Bloom's research which examined two elite colleges for control and reliability, I looked to my college campuses for participants. The Claremont Colleges are a great place for replicating the career funneling article. Similar to Harvard and Stanford, which are highly ranked research universities, the Claremont Colleges are small, elite liberal arts colleges ranked among the top 30 best liberal arts colleges in the United States. The liberal arts education empowers students to develop interdisciplinary skills and prepare them for the complexities of the world by tackling systematic issues in different walks of life. Articulating the liberal arts education well, is Claremont McKenna College's (CMC) moto: "Learning for the sake of doing" (cmc.edu, accessed 4/26/2020). These liberal arts colleges provide residential learning. Students live on campus, surrounded by their peers, in hopes of continuing the learning process outside the classroom. Students are drawn to these colleges for their acclaimed educational value, residential living, and consortium environment.

The Claremont College provide a unique research opportunity, as each college has their own organizational culture and simultaneously interact as a unit—the consortium. Students major, take classes, and form friends across the campuses. These unique organizational cultures,

with shared experiences, influences each student's college experience. I narrowed the scope of my research to CMC, Scripps, and Pitzer because these colleges have strong organizational cultures. CMC emphasizes economics, finance, and government. The college prides themselves on Athenaeum talks, where prominent speakers connect with students and summer networking trips to Washington D.C. and Silicon Valley for future internships and jobs. Scripps is the historic women's college, with an emphasis on intersectional feminism and the importance of equitable social institutions. Pitzer's identity focuses around social justice, environmentalism, and the arts. Each organizational culture works in harmony with the others and presents an opportunity to see if these values championed by the schools reflect their definitions of success, career aspirations, and pressures students face during their college journey.

Based on the literature and Binder, Davis, and Bloom's research, I predict student responses from the three colleges will define success and their career aspirations in close resemblance to their college's cultures, or the campus at which they spend most of their time. CMC will show the most career funneling and narrow definitions of success, Scripps in the middle, and Pitzer the least. I predict the amount of pressure students feel to become successful or enter a specific career path is a product of socialization from a young age. Lastly, the narrower a student defines success, the more pressure they will feel during their time in college.

Research was split into two forms of data collection. The first was an online Google survey, which I posted on several relevant Facebook pages (i.e. "Scripps Current Students" "Claremont Consortium Class of 2020," etc.). I chose to utilize this platform because it is a fast way for students to connect across the three campuses and was the best way to cast a wide net of students from different majors, ages, and backgrounds.

The Google Document Survey mirrored questions asked by the original researchers and was sent online, using a short answer format. The survey began with an overview of the study, including IRB and my contact information, confirming their consent for using their information for my thesis, and clarifying the purpose of the study. The survey asked participants for general information about what school they attend, intended or declared major, and general background information about their family. Several questions asked about their career's interests are, where they came from, and how long they have been thinking about specific careers. Questions about their definition of success and what influenced their understanding of a successful career, life, and college experience. This was to detect potential influences of their socialization. Room was left at the bottom of the survey for general feedback or comments. The full questionnaire is included in Appendix A-C.

For the in-person interviews, eight students whose surveys noted they were involved with an accounting, consulting, or law club, or pre professional club on campus. To maintain a representative sample students who indicated they were involved in traditional liberal arts majors were contacted, to diversify research and see if an individual's major, or what led them to choose this major, impacted answers about career funneling and their experiences on campus. Five of the interviewees were contacted directly because they communicated in-person or over the phone their interest in the topic. The thirteen interviews were conducted in person and on the Claremont campuses, each lasting from thirty to sixty minutes. Four interviews were conducted at Pitzer and Claremont McKenna College and five at Scripps College.

Before the interview began, a consent form was given to participants to sign and a verbal agreement was also confirmed. In the consent form, a brief overview of the purpose of the study was provided, along with information of where data is being stored, and statement guaranteeing

privacy. Each student was asked if they desired any additional information about the study. The questions asked during the interview used similar or the exact questions used in the Google Document Survey to ensure consistency. Any additional questions were prompted as a follow-up or to clarify. At the end of each interview, a debriefing form was handed out, informing interviewees of necessary contact information if needed and reiterating the purpose of the study, which can be referenced in Appendix B-E. For each interview, notes on a laptop were taken with detailed paraphrases and quotes of the student's answers. The information is stored on a laptop with the researcher. No contact information was used for the results and conclusion.

Before interviewing students both online and in-person, the Scripps IRB Board approved this thesis proposal. Each student confirmed consent and was ensured privacy. The full IRB proposal is available upon request. For further questions or inquiries about the IRB process, please contact [irb@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:irb@scrippscollege.edu).

### Limitations:

This research had its limitations. Time and budget constraints impacted the ability to survey and interview more students from the three colleges. This restricted the scope of this project and limited the diversity of student's majors, socioeconomic status, career aspirations, and age. The sample of 33 surveys and 13 interviews is a small sample size for the population size of approximately 3,500 students. The small sample size leaves room for error and may not be representative of the larger population size, influencing potential results.

Potential research bias occurs because data was collected, because I was a senior at Scripps College. Participants may have been inclined to respond to my survey or accept an interview due to their familiarity. As many of the seniors at the Claremont Colleges are required

to complete a senior thesis, seniors may have been more interested in completing mine due to relevancy and interest in career research before graduating. This could explain why Scripps students had the most interviews and survey responses. Freshmen were the least likely to respond to my research, with 7.1% of survey responses and three interviews. Because the survey was posted on Facebook groups and I contacted clubs directly to reach out to students, freshman are the least likely to be involved in pre-professional clubs and have relatively little career experience. With each grade increase, there were higher levels of participation.

Given most of the questions on the online survey were short-response answers and were not required to complete the survey, not all questions were answered by each student. This could mean that students had an adverse strong or weak interest in responding to the questions. This may hinder the reliability of responses and concrete evidence to support claims in the discussion below. Due to the qualitative data that was collected, exact calculations present potential errors from the translation of information to a category that best corresponds with the student's answer.

Identifying information including gender, age, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity were not questions asked in either the survey or interview to ensure students feel comfortable responding to the survey. Some of these markers were discussed in their answers to other questions, such as background information or influences of success. Upon further reflection, these identifying characteristics are important for further research to determine possible connections to a student's college and career experiences and is a limitation in this current study.

### Chapter 3: Results and Findings

Due to the qualitative nature of the survey and interview results, I quantified each major topic of study by creating categories that encapsulate the survey and interview responses. To compare, answers were sorted by college and method of data collection. I will break down demographics of students, definitions of success and career aspirations, and their major influences that drove them to these definitions by college as well as method of data collected, i.e. survey or interview. The data was distributed by grade, college attended, major(s), relevance of career aspirations to major, when the student thought about working towards an elite education and career, parent's income levels, parent's education level, student's prior education experience before college, definitions of success and influences shaping it, career aspiration and influences shaping it, and level of pressure felt to reach their definition of success. The data is presented in the tables below.

**Table 1:** Percentage of Surveys and Interviews Completed and Grade in School

	Surveys			Interviews			Total		
	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer
<b>Surveys - Interviews</b>	10	12	11	4	5	4	14	17	15
Freshmen	10%	8%	9%	25%	20%	25%	15%	14%	17%
Sophomores	20%	16%	18%	25%	20%	25%	21%	18%	22%
Juniors	20%	25%	18%	25%	20%	-	21%	23%	9%
Seniors	50%	50%	55%	25%	40%	50%	43%	45%	53%

**Table 1** represents the breakdown of surveys and interviews by college and grade. Seniors are more likely to respond to survey and interview requests than any other grade, and freshman are the least likely by a large percentage. There was relatively even distribution across the colleges of responses from each college, with Scripps having the largest response rate and CMC the lowest. Interviewees at the colleges were conducted across each grade, except for a junior representative from Pitzer.



**Table 2:** Percentage of CMC, Scripps, and Pitzer Student’s Declared or Intended Majors

Majors	Surveys			Interviews			Total		
	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer
Economics or Accounting	30%	8%	-	25%	20%	25%	28%	14%	13%
Humanities	-	25%	-	-	-	-	0%	13%	0%
Social Science	20%	8%	27%	25%	-	25%	23%	4%	26%
STEM	20%	25%	9%	25%	40%	0%	23%	33%	5%
Arts	-	8%	18%	-	20%	25%	-	14%	22%
Government-Political Science	30%	8%	9%	25%	20%	-	28%	14%	5%
Interdisciplinary	10%	17%	36%	-	-	25%	5%	9%	31%

**Table 2** illustrates the distribution of majors at CMC is clustered with economics, accounting, government, and political science majors being the most reported. Scripps and Pitzer had a wide variety of major responses, scattered with more academic interests. Scripps students reportedly had the most variation in their major fields.

Claremont McKenna College has the highest percentage of economics, accounting majors, and government and political science majors. In total, these respondents covered 56% of responses, which is unsurprising due to the strong economic, accounting and political identity of the college. Of note, was the lack of diversity in majors across the campus responses. There were no humanities or arts majors and only one response of an interdisciplinary major. From this sample set of data, funneling of academic interests is clear, as CMC students were either pushed by their college to pick their major or chose the college because of their interests in the field. As one sophomore remarked, “At CMC, I feel pressure to pick the best major.... I think what my peers and college tell me shows that I should be doing it too” (Survey 7 Claremont McKenna College, 12/18/2019).

Three students noted they chose CMC because the “economics and government departments are known goods” and when they “toured CMC in high school, the school spoke to [them] because of their strong networking prospects that the econ and gov departments

marketed” (Survey 1 Claremont McKenna College, 12/11/2019, Survey 3 Claremont McKenna College, 1/18/2019 , Survey 8 Claremont McKenna College, 2/24/2020). In other words, CMC’s strong academic and career culture is a draw for future students who know what they want to do after college and is alluring to students who know are unsure of their next steps. The high reported number of CMC students with majors Binder, Davis, and Bloom said were popular among employers and successful careers, proposes CMC exhibits funneling towards successful careers through its emphasis on majors.

Pitzer students had the lowest percentage of economics, accounting, government, political science in the population sample. All other students fell under interdisciplinary, social science, and art majors. Social justice, environmental, and media studies fields were relatively evenly distributed across the colleges, but Pitzer students reported high levels of interest in these fields even if it was not their major. A government major told me:

“I feel guilty sometimes for not taking environmental policy or social justice courses. But I am lucky that my friends know so much about it. That way, I get to have a more practical major for after college but still get the benefit of the Pitzer vibes” (Interview C Pitzer College, 3/2/2020).

This example demonstrates the college’s identity draws or shapes students towards these fields of interest, even if it is not something they study in the classroom. A few students echoed feelings of guilt for not adhering to these intuitional values and reported molding their conversations to fit in academically and by reading specific authors or news sources. This unofficial academic hold over students in their major decisions and interactions with their peers, funnels students to be socially and politically aware of their organizational culture.

Pitzer and Scripps leaned into their liberal arts roots with more interdisciplinary and humanities majors, which was not surprising given what we know about their organizational

cultures. Both college's major distributions were dispersed across different disciplines, but Scripps saw the highest reported levels of major distribution. This was unexpected, as I predicted Scripps would show a tighter concentration of majors than at Pitzer; however, at least a third of the Scripps student's interviewed and surveyed majored or minored off-campus. One CMC finance and accounting major at Scripps student said "I barely spend any time at Scripps. Only to eat and sleep really. I have not taken a class here since Fall 2017" (Interview C Scripps College, 1/31/2020). This student said all her information about classes, professors, and career advice came from the campus she spent the most time at, CMC. This is supported by the socialization literature, demonstrating values and behaviors are influenced the most by a person's direct environment.

Another potential explanation of the relatively even distribution of the majors at Scripps, is the organizational culture of a traditional women's college. This organizational culture described by students was less aligned with fields of study and more as a way of thought and approaching situations. Scripps students reference their general education requirements—gender and women's studies, race and ethnic, CORE—as the root of these over-arching feminist values (Survey 9 Scripps College, 11/27/2019 & Interview 2 Scripps College, 2/15/2020).

**Table 3: Educational and Financial Backgrounds of Students**

	Surveys			Interviews			Total		
	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer
<b>Parent's Income Levels</b>									
Upper	20%	8%	-	25%	-	-	23%	4%	-
Upper-Middle	60%	33%	27%	25%	40%	75%	43%	37%	51%
Lower-Middle	10%	25%	18%	25%	60%	25%	18%	43%	22%
Low-Income	10%	17%	9%	25%	-	-	18%	9%	5%
<b>Parent's Education Levels</b>									
Some College, High School, or Below	10%	8%	18%	25%	-	-	18%	4%	9%
One Parent Completed Bachelor's Degree	10%	8%	0%	25%	20%	25%	18%	14%	13%
Both Parents Completed Bachelor's Degree	40%	25%	18%	25%	60%	75%	33%	43%	47%
One Parent Completed Higher Education	20%	25%	9%	0%	20%	0%	10%	23%	5%
Both Parents Completed Higher Education	10%	17%	9%	25%	20%	0%	18%	19%	5%
At Least One Parent Attended Prestigious University	20%	17%	-	-	40%	25%	10%	29%	13%
<b>Student's Prior Education Experience</b>									
Public School	40%	42%	45%	50%	40%	50%	45%	41%	48%
Private or Charter School	50%	25%	18%	50%	40%	50%	50%	33%	34%
Boarding School	10%	17%	-	25%	20%	-	18%	19%	-
IB or AP Classes Offered in High School	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 3** gives identifying background information about Claremont College students.

There was relatively normal distribution, skewing slightly towards higher income levels. CMC students had the lowest and highest recorded parental income levels and Pitzer had no students report their parents were in the upper-class. Scripps parental income levels were more evenly dispersed. Recorded parental education levels showed relatively normal distribution, with most student's parents having received a bachelor's degree. Several students indicated one or both of their parents attended a prestigious college at some educational level. Approximately half of the students attended a public school and a third of Pitzer and Scripps students attended private or charter school. Half of CMC students reported attending a private or charter school. A small number of students at Scripps and CMC attended boarding school. All students said their high school offered college preparatory classes, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes.

As mentioned in the literature review, parents and school environments are key factors of socialization which guides our interpretation of student's definitions of success, an elite

education, and pressure they feel to reach these goals. Influences before coming to college that guided students towards an elite education; whether it was parent's education, their high school experiences with college preparatory classes, or income levels, all these factors can direct students towards the value of an elite education (Watson 1959, p. 111). In these regards, the colleges were more similar than not. Income level paralleled parental income level. Higher income levels coincided with higher educational levels of parents. All but two students from these upper-middle- and upper-class income brackets reported both their parents completed their bachelor's degree or higher. Educational levels of their parents and the level of prestige of their college, was also correlated to income, all of the parents who attended a prestigious school were in the middle-upper or upper-class. Students who reported lower income levels reported their parents did not have as high levels of education.

Income levels are important determinants for the levels of pressures students felt to attend an elite institution, as well as the definitions of success and career aspirations students desire. Showing an inverted distribution, where students with low and high income levels expressed the most pressure to attend an elite university and get a successful job. For example, students of the highest and lowest income brackets reported feeling the most pressure to attend an elite institution. Some suggested this was because they wanted to maintain their parents' level of success or do better. In order, CMC, Scripps, then Pitzer students reported the highest percentage income, which coincided with the levels of pressures they reported to become success (**Table 6**). CMC students said having a parent attend a prestigious college or have a college degree, and then watch them become successful at work, increased their desire to have the same for themselves. A senior reflected, "Growing up, I saw my parents going to nice restaurants and on

nice trips, and I wanted that lifestyle. I wanted nice things and knew I would be disappointed in myself if I couldn't" (Interview B Claremont McKenna College, 2/8/2020).

Similarly, students who reported parents in lower income brackets expressed high pressures to attend an elite college and become successful. Students across the campuses emphasized their experiences growing up watching their families struggle, which guided students to want more for their futures. One student said: "My mom told me I was smart, and I could get into a good school so I could provide for my future family better than she had for me. Watching her struggle is why I decided to go to CMC" (Survey 2 Claremont McKenna College, 3/4/2020). This was biggest factor for her educational and career aspirations, to achieve the American Dream and work hard to be better than the previous generation. I noticed students from lower-income families ended up at a small, elite liberal arts college because they were motivated to become successful. This motivation was guided by their upbringing, reinforced by behaviors modeled to them and directly to them by their parents.

Pitzer students with moderate income brackets reported feeling less academic and career aspiration pressures (**Table 6**). Several students shared the sentiment: "My parents are proud of me for working hard and doing something I love. It helps that my education is better than theirs, they can't tell me what to do as much" (Interview A Pitzer College, 12/4/2019). This example suggests parents in middle income brackets may have weaker reactions about their student's desire to attend an elite university and their career goals. In an interview, a senior suggested this is because "There is no pressure from my parents to do anything in particular. My parents know I have a good head on my shoulders and I don't think they think I will fail in life because I have made it this far, I mean look I am attending a pretty great college. I can't go that wrong" (Interview D Pitzer College, 1/28/2020). Pitzer college student's parents who were in the middle

to upper-middle class overwhelmingly had subdued opinions about their student's future success and goals, or that is how their children felt.

Students across the campuses had a relatively even distribution of educational backgrounds before attending one of the Claremont Colleges. Several students reported feeling high levels of pressures to attend an elite school because of their high school. Interestingly, it was not the public or private nature of the high school (i.e. public versus private versus boarding school), rather the rigor of the curriculum and location of the school that drew students to an elite education. Students who attended schools in prominent job markets and notoriously affluent areas, such as the Bay Area, New York City, and other East Coast states, said they were told the value of an elite education from early ages. Six students from the Bay Area remarked their high schools had a cut-throat environment and their families, peers, and business surroundings hinted at the importance of attending a prominent college. These students reported higher income and parental education levels as well; indicating their whole lives were surrounding by greatness. In one interview, a Palo Alto, California resident reminisced of her senior year in high school, where it was common for a list to be sent around about where a student was accepted into college.

“It was the giant spreadsheet where people could see your every accomplishment. Some even put their college admissions essays on there. You would talk all day about how much better or worse you were than someone. It felt like we weren't even whole people, only judged by your academic achievements” (Interview D Scripps College, 3/28/2020).

The organizational culture of student's high schools was a determining factor in students majors, job interests, and levels of pressures they felt to achieve success. Binder, Davis, and Bloom's research found the job market students are exposed to shape the pressures and career aspirations

of students. They found students at Stanford, which is in Palo Alto, California, were guided by intensity of the Bay Area (Binder, Davis & Bloom 2016, Watson 1959).

Regardless of the prior educational institution attended, all students in the sample population attended a school that provided college preparatory classes. These classes prepare students for the academic rigor of college and are often geared towards high school students looking to attend elite colleges. Taking IB or AP classes has become an integral part of the college admissions process and is considered a differentiating factor among applicants. One Pitzer student even remarked he was expected at his public high school in New Haven, Connecticut to “take all the AP classes offered” and anyone who did not do the same “was labeled stupid. It sounds terrible but these are the kids we all thought would attend a state school and most of the time did” (Survey 3 Pitzer College, 12/15/2019). These college preparatory classes that are shared experiences of the Claremont College students guide students down the path towards college and a good one if they take many classes offered. There were shared sentiments that taking these classes made their education superior and suggests this was an aspect of a student’s environment that funneled them towards an elite education. Students believed these classes would give them an edge a better future.



**Table 4:** Career Aspirations and Level of Relation to Major

	Surveys			Interviews			Total		
	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer
<b>Career Aspirations*</b>									
Finance or Accounting	10%	8%	-	25%	20%	0%	18%	14%	-
Consulting	30%	17%	9%	25%	20%	25%	28%	19%	17%
Technology	20%	33%	18%	25%	20%	0%	23%	27%	9%
Government or Law	30%	17%	18%	25%	20%	25%	28%	19%	22%
Teaching	10%	8%	9%	-	-	-	5%	4%	5%
Arts	-	8%	18%	-	20%	-	-	14%	9%
Environmental Policy	-	8%	27%	-	-	50%	-	4%	39%
<b>Most Influential Career Aspirations*</b>									
Peers	0%	8%	-	25%	-	-	13%	4%	-
Family	50%	50%	45%	50%	75%	50%	50%	63%	48%
School Mentor, Professor, Counselor	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Combination of Peers, Family, College Experience	40%	25%	55%	25%	25%	50%	33%	25%	53%
Hometown Identity	10%	17%	-	-	25%	-	5%	21%	-
<b>Relevance of Major to Potential Career</b>									
Not Relevant	10%	17%	27%	25%	20%	50%	18%	19%	39%
Somewhat Relevant	30%	33%	18%	25%	20%	-	28%	27%	9%
Relevant	60%	50%	55%	50%	40%	50%	55%	45%	53%
<b>Age Started Thinking About College &amp; Career</b>									
Before 5th grade/Too early to remember	70%	33%	27%	75%	80%	50%	73%	57%	39%
Between 6th -8th grade	30%	50%	55%	25%	20%	50%	28%	35%	53%
Beginning of High School	-	8%	18%	-	-	-	-	4%	9%

\*Frequency of responses

**Table 4** shows student's career interests and major influences of these aspirations. Like the findings in **Table 2**, students career aspirations were tied to their college's organizational culture. This is seen with half of the students reporting their college major was related to their career aspirations. Pitzer students reported the highest percentage of majors with little to no relevance to their career aspirations. Almost all students reported thinking about their future college and career decisions before high school, with most responses showing they thought about it before the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Lastly, the data table shows a mix of their career influences, but a majority of students reported their families were the biggest influence. The rest of student's career aspiration influences were a mixture of other factors.

Student's career aspirations aligned mostly with their college's organizational culture, or the college they spent the most time at. Based on the career funneling article, I predicted CMC students would have the majors most relevant to their careers, because the college culture

directed students towards specific majors and these departments have solid career tracks and networking events. As Pitzer and Scripps' academic cultures are less focused, there might have been more freedom with their major choices that would not reflect their career interests. My assumption was not supported, as students across campuses had similar levels of major relation to their career interests. A majority of students reported their majors were relevant to their career aspirations because their academic, personal, and career interests aligned. Students then received information about potential careers through their major departments. In one interview, a Pitzer student said their major was the way they received the most information about their potential career field through professors, lectures, and readings (Interview 1 Pitzer College, 2/1/2020). Other students reported their majors played a significant role in their career interests because of the sheer amount information. This finding is supported in the literature review and what is known about social agents impacting adolescent's decisions (Erikson 2015, Poole 2011).

Income appeared to play the largest role in the lack of relevance of a student's major to their career interests. Several of these students reported coming from a high income bracket, attended a rigorous high school, and had parents with higher levels of educations. Students in this category, were more likely to view their college education as a "time of exploration" and believe employers "don't care about majors, especially at a liberal arts school" (Survey 6 Pitzer College, 12/17/2019 & Survey 2 Scripps College, 11/28/2019). Many of these students indicated they would likely be pursuing popular career tracks such as consulting, tech, teaching, or marketing. When asked why these careers were on the table, they said they felt they were "worthwhile careers that make decent money" (Interview 4 Claremont McKenna College, 1/29/2020). Two students even said consulting was appealing because "it looks great on a resume and makes lots of money quickly...Plus that is what everyone seems to be doing these

days” (Survey 7 Scripps College, 3/9/2020). Career funneling research proposes these students may ditch their majors after college because they are susceptible to the influence of others who they see doing valued and well-known jobs (Binder, Davis & Bloom 2016). Many students in this category reported apathy for their career choices, guided by information about potential careers that they saw were accepted by their college’s culture. One CMC student stated it well:

“As a freshman I remember there was a huge form party celebrating seniors who received high paying jobs, and they all were for the same things- government, consulting, and accounting. I was pretty unsure at the time what I wanted to do, but the praise those students got, was pretty motivating” (Interview 2 Claremont McKenna College, 2/24/2020).

**Table 4** illustrates how students across the campuses felt their parents have the biggest effect over their career aspirations. The literature supports this finding, which emphasized the massive role families have in child and adolescent development, an influence that lasts throughout and beyond college (Wang 2014). Many students reported their parents encouraged them to attend an elite university and guided them towards specific careers. Numerous said their parents modeled the work behaviors they wanted such as a “strong balance between work and home,” “doing something for work they loved” and working hard to “be able to give [their] future children the same quality of life that my parents gave to me” (Survey 3 Pitzer College, 12/15/2019, Interview D Scripps College, 3/28/2020).

Not so subtly, parents also approved or disapproved of their children’s career choices. Some remarked their parents were “really supportive as long as I want to do something white collar” and “my parents told me tech is the only field to get involved in with the current job market” (Survey 1 Scripps College, 11/18/2019, Survey 4 Claremont McKenna College, 2/12/2020). To maintain peace and please their parents, students let their parents’ guide them. Generally, in a positive direction, towards careers that would give students job stability. At least

one student from each college reported feeling stressed or anxious about getting a job after college their parents would approve of. Regardless of their child's reaction to their career messaging, parents were found to contribute to potential career aspirations.

Although research in the literature review mentions how influential peers are for shaping college student's career aspirations, only a handful of students said their peers had the most influence over their career aspirations or pressures to find a career. This did not support my predictions and I was surprised to find 4% of Scripps and 0% of Pitzer students felt peers influenced their career aspirations; especially because the colleges are residential, and students interact with their peers frequently. Further research is needed to explore why these colleges reported low levels of social comparison.

A few CMC students their peers were influential in their career aspirations, which is more in line with their organizational culture. Students at CMC reported seeing what their peers were doing for internships and jobs "helped define what's normal" (Survey 1 Claremont McKenna College, 12/11/2019). One mentioned that in the spring semester, all they hear from their peers "is what job they are applying for next and when their they have an interview. Seeing how much attention they get makes me want to apply for the same things" (Survey 4 Claremont McKenna College, 2/12/2020). These students noted they did not come into college with a clear path, which can explain why their peers had more of an influence over them because their parents were not as present (Nawaz & Gilani 2011). Additionally, the clear identity of CMC provides students with ample information about potential jobs and majors, many guiding towards the top majors (Interview B Claremont McKenna College, 2/8/2020). Below, **Table 5** illustrates CMC students also reported a notably higher percentage of peer influence on their definition of success compared to the other colleges. This suggest students at CMC were influenced by their

peers because their college's organizational culture created a competitive and preprofessional atmosphere, where students were encouraged to attend career-related events. Thus, creating a space for students to discuss their career opportunities more with their peers.

Most students thought about college and career decisions before high school. Little less than a half of all students in the sample population reported thinking about it before the 5th grade. One Scripps student joked that they felt like they even thought about their career before leaving the womb (Interview D Scripps College, 3/28/2020). Pitzer had the lowest number of students report they thought about college and career decisions before 5th grade. This data supports the literature discussed, showing students are introduced to college and career goals at early ages in their life (Nawaz & Gilani 2011).

**Table 5: Definitions and Influences of Success**

	Surveys			Interviews			Total		
	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer
<b>Definitions of Success*</b>									
Happiness/Contentment	15%	29%	29%	25%	28%	27%	20%	29%	28%
Financial Stability due to Career	25%	19%	14%	25%	22%	20%	25%	21%	17%
Change Systematic Issues	15%	5%	29%	13%	11%	20%	14%	8%	25%
Having a Family	5%	5%	-	13%	17%	13%	9%	11%	7%
Work-Life Balance	30%	33%	14%	25%	22%	20%	28%	28%	17%
No Response	10%	10%	14%				5%	5%	7%
<b>Most Influential Definition of Success*</b>									
Peers	10%	8%	9%	25%	-	-	18%	4%	5%
Family	50%	58%	55%	50%	40%	75%	50%	49%	65%
Teachers/Professors	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Combination of family, peers, college identity	30%	25%	27%	25%	20%	25%	28%	23%	26%
Hometown/Background environment	10%	17%	0%	0%	20%	0%	5%	19%	0%

\*Frequency of response

**Table 5** shows the definitions of success and the people or environmental influences that most impact this definition. Students had a relatively even dispersal of what success means in their lives. Students across the campuses most frequently reported success to them includes happiness, financial stability, and work-life balance. All colleges, but particularly Pitzer, noted changing systematic issues was an important to a successful life. Family was the most significant

factor in student's definitions of success, followed by a combination of a student's college environment.

Overall, students defined success in similar ways: happiness, financial stability, and work-life balance. Although, each college differed slightly in their most frequently used definition. Attesting to their social justice and environmental culture, Pitzer students mentioned the importance of systemic or environmental change in many interviews and surveys. CMC students had a slightly higher percentage of responses mentioning career-related success, as financial stability ranked higher than happiness or contentment. However, CMC student's most emphasized aspect of success was work-life balance. CMC students continuously stressed they did not want to give up their careers for their personal lives, but it was the joy of working hard in both areas that would leave them feeling successful: "Success to me is the perfect split between working hard, getting a drink with my friends after work and then coming home to my kids, eating dinner, and playing soccer in the yard" (Interview 2 Claremont McKenna College, 2/24/2020).

Scripps students reported happiness and work-life balance almost equally. Perhaps this is due to the mix of interdisciplinary interests and gender. Gender remained anonymous for all participants; however, Scripps is a historically women's college with most of the student body that identifies as female. Interestingly, compared to the co-ed colleges, Scripps responses had more mentions of family included in their definitions of success. In half of students' explanations about work-life balance, Scripps students mentioned the importance of being a working mother. One said "Ideally, I could have a job that provides awesome maternity leave. I do not want to sacrifice having a family or my career" (Interview E Scripps College, 4/2/2020). It is possible

that this finding – most prominently seen in the one women’s college – may represent a difference in socialization that sets different definitions of success depending on gender.

Students also felt their families influenced their definitions of success the most, like the findings of career influences and the socialization literature previously mentioned. Parents reinforced their expectations of a successful life verbally and nonverbally, and students had strong reflections about the impact of this guidance. One student mentioned his parents told him “the best foundation for life is to have a steady income and promising career” (Survey 1 Claremont McKenna College, 12/11/2019). Gratefully, he said without parents pushing him towards an elite education, “he would be much worse off” (Survey 1 Claremont McKenna College, 12/11/2019). Another said their family values made them want career and financial success because they wanted “to make their family proud and sacrifices worth it” (Interview 1 Pitzer College, 2/1/2020). This student mentioned how proud they felt sharing successes with their loved ones.

Comparatively, a few students said their parent’s influence guided them towards a narrow and uneasily attainable version of success, that added stress and anxiety. A graduating senior turned down a job offer that they loved because their parents conveyed that it could hinder future career growth, saying, “It hurt to get a job that I loved and say ‘no’ to it. Now, I have to look for jobs I don’t really want to make my parents happy. They think a different career field would make me happier, if I had good benefits and salary” (Interview D Scripps College, 3/28/2020). Another said that they had a close relationship with their parents, and this added pressure to please them:

“I don’t want kids and I would be okay not getting married. But this would kill my parents. When I tell them, I want to focus on my career, they tell me working moms have great benefits

now... It definitely makes me feel terrible and I question my future” (Survey 1 Scripps College, 11/18/2019).

These students expressed specific criteria their parents had in mind for their future careers and family lives, suggesting to their children that a secure job and family values was what success looks like. And the students were listening, changing their career prospects and internalizing guilt about their romantic futures.

Another high response to the influences of success, was the elite college environment as a whole- peers, family support, and the college’s culture. Social psychology research notes that socialization is a multifaceted and dynamic relationship of the many interactions’ students have with their environment (Furstenberg 2001, p. 94). Coming to college, students distance themselves from their parents and make new relationships. Students in this category often mentioned having close relationships with their professors. A few said professors gave “more career advice than College and Career Services” and one said their professors stood in for their parents when making important decisions (Interview D Scripps College, 3/28/2020). Peers actions drove students to apply for jobs they might not have known about and discover new passions:

“My peers at Pitzer inspire me every day to be aware of my actions and how they impact others. I am not a social justice major, but I believe social justice is part of everything we do here. They remind me to be a better person and I want a job and life filled with that” (Interview B Pitzer College, 2/18/2020).

Supported by the literature, students acknowledged their college experience as a whole shaped their versions of success (Furstenberg 2001). It was the community, living on campus and in proximity with their peers and professors, and the continuous relationship with their families that influenced their ideal version of success.



**Table 6:** Level of Pressure Felt by Students to Achieve Definition of Success

	Surveys			Interviews			Total		
	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer	CMC	Scripps	Pitzer
<b>Level of Pressure Felt to Become Successful</b>									
Low	10%	8%	19%	0%	0%	0%	5%	4%	9%
Medium	30%	33%	45%	25%	40%	60%	28%	37%	52%
High	60%	58%	37%	75%	60%	40%	68%	59%	39%

Students were asked if they felt pressure to live up to their definitions of success. **Table 6** shows very few students felt low levels of pressure to be successful during their time in college. Half of Pitzer students, and a little less than half at the other colleges, reported feeling medium levels of pressure to become successful. Most of the students reported feeling high levels of stress to become successful, especially CMC students. Pitzer students recorded feeling the least amount of pressure with Scripps in the middle.

A notable pattern that could attribute to student's level of pressure, is the age students started thinking about their college and career plans. Students who reported high levels of pressures were also most of the students who began thinking about college at any early age (**Table 4**). The literature review mentions how impressionable children are, wanting to overcome the conflict they are presented with during developmental stages (Erikson 1994). One student recalled hearing about "how great elite colleges were on the news when I was really little, and I have wanted to go to one ever since" (Survey 7 Scripps College, 3/9/2020). Due to the early age success was introduced, students may have felt high levels of pressure to reach their goals because of the length of time spent working towards them.

**Table 6** shows how many students report medium to high levels of pressure to become successful. Based on the literature review and personal experience at the colleges, this was predicted. Again, the organizational cultures of the colleges can describe the differing levels of pressures, with Pitzer at the lowest and CMC at the highest. In general, students felt pressure to

academically, socially, and professionally succeed. Not all students said this pressure was negative. One student articulated: “When I say pressure, I also mean the aspects of my life that guide me to do something bigger and better than myself. Not just the pressure to conform and be the best” (Interview 2 Claremont McKenna College, 2/24/2020). However, many said the pressure they have felt to become successful can be “debilitating” or “devastating” (Survey 1 Scripps College, 11/18/2019, Survey 4 Claremont McKenna College, 2/12/2020). Another said, “The pressure I have felt to be successful has followed me my whole life. Some days the pressure gets to me and I give up. Other days I can’t sleep because I worry so much. It is almost debilitating” (Interview C Claremont McKenna College, 1/23/2020). Each student had their own story of the pressures they felt to become successful, what guided them there, and how it impacted their future goals. Even with potentially unknown factors contributing to a student’s journey to success, the data shows many found these pressures to be intense.

#### Notable Findings:

Several findings in my data coincided with expectations and research from the literature review and Binder, Davis, and Bloom’s study. Much can be learned from examining the student’s backgrounds, as thoughts about what the future should look like for those students often began in or before middle school. The environment a student adopted their behaviors from and new social agents in college, impacted their choices about majors, career prospects, and personal versions of success. The organizational cultures of each college influenced the decisions students made, as anticipated by the literature review and career funneling research. Overall, students at Scripps, Pitzer, and Claremont McKenna Colleges had more similarities in their responses about their definitions and influences of college and career success. Parents were found to affect these goals more so than peers.

This research expanded on aspects of the career funneling article, exploring the pressures college students face in addition to the environmental aspects of an elite college campus. The data found an inverse relationship between income levels and high levels of pressure to become successful to maintain or generate more than a student's parents. Unlike the career funneling research, students did not mention institutional pressures to live up their elite college name and all but two CMC students said the college's career planning services does not play a huge role in their future or adds to their pressures to become successful. I anticipated finding lower responses than Harvard and Stanford students about career funneling, and my data reflects this. The liberal arts critical thinking curriculum provides students with a broader education and career scope. Although there was less emphasis on specific careers, students were influenced by their families, peers, college, and hometown to become successful after graduation and having financial, personal, and career success are the overarching criteria. Perhaps most importantly, students at all three colleges reported feeling high to medium levels of pressure to become successful and anxieties that accompanied the journey to reaching these extensive goals.

#### Chapter 4: Further Research

To further investigate this topic, more time should be spent interviewing students from across the three campuses and extend the research to all five colleges. As the Claremont Colleges are a consortium, examining how each college works individually and together can be helpful to understand the experiences of students. Gathering more comprehensive background information would be useful to see what factors contribute to the socialization of the students and what draws students to each college: the elite name, the liberal arts values, or the identities of the colleges. Expanding the research to potential students and alumni of the Claremont Colleges could also be beneficial in understanding career funneling and collegiate pressures students feel to be successful. Seeing if their definitions of success and career aspirations changed once they were acclimated in the work force could provide insight into the unique influences that only impact students in college.

As the definition of success is complex, so are the factors that influence it. If additional research is conducted, having all students conduct in-person interviews would provide clarity and opportunity for follow-up questions to ensure consistency among the results. As many of the surveys and interviews differed in the depth of information provided, additional questions could eliminate these discrepancies. If these additional interviews were to be conducted, an outside source is preferable to conduct interviews to reduce bias when answering the questions. Each passing year provides a unique opportunity to examine the pressures elite college students face, particularly with the increasing dependence on technology. Further research would be helpful to explore the extent college ranking lists and media presence impact a student's journey towards a successful life.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis journey explored how sociological drivers influence high-achieving students' college and career paths. From a young age, children undergo important developmental processes and continues to look for guidance through their transition into adulthood. Along the way, socialization from families, peers, and technology impact a student's learned behaviors. Peers provide evaluative standards. Upward and downward comparisons are guideposts for students' achievements, while looking upwards to better themselves can damage a student's self-efficacy and self-worth. Rising technology seep into student's lives, at a time when they are vulnerable to outside pressures. They look to these media sources to provide norming behaviors and expectations. It is through these developmental processes, that students learn of the value of an elite education and derive definitions of success from these environmental influences.

Success is unique to each person, as it is an accumulation of an individual's experiences. But through mass media, college rankings, and relational guidance, there are three entrenched definitions that are emulated by society—the entrepreneur with status and wealth, a holistic and well-balanced life, and a financially secure and meaningful career. Bombarded with information about these definitions, students use these frameworks to guide them. The first step to achieving one of these successful lifestyles is through an elite education. Parents and students are encouraged by a college's ranking to believe this educational experience will provide fortune, fame, and happiness. And, elite college graduates do in fact have higher earnings and occupational statuses. Nowadays, an elite education is only a steppingstone towards a successful career and life. When many high-achieving students are gunning for the same achievements, inevitably, the majority will fall short of this top tier.

Examining success and career funneling at the Claremont Colleges showed the impact these definitions can have on students. Students were feeling the pressures to become successful, driven by their upbringing and institutional environment. Each college with its own organizational culture, influenced student's career aspirations and values of success. Remarkably, these differences were small and given the small sample population size, were rather insignificant. Importantly, students reported success in their lives means happiness, a better world, having a well-balanced life, and being financially stable. The experiences of students across the campuses can teach us about ourselves and the world we live in, showing us what truly matter. The research and the data showed career funneling, pressures, and high expectations are part of the sociological landscape of wanting to get into an elite college and career. Claremont College students celebrated their many accomplishments and hard work, because of *and* in spite of all of these pressures.

This educational journey is full of pressures and can be a challenging time. Nonetheless, it is a valued part of the human condition and along the way students reported feeling pride in their accomplishments. In the process of working towards a successful life, high achieving students are equipped with a powerful tool to navigate their surroundings—the critical thinking skills developed by a liberal arts education. The forces that may occasionally weigh an individual down, are also be those preparing them for their next chapter. Students in this thesis will graduate. They will become members of the workforce and parents, lead meaningful lives, and change the world. As people age, parents and peers influence diminishes. Eventually, one's self becomes the main force driving one's own social behaviors and those around them. The expectations to become successful, will remain steadfast. With the skills students of the

Claremont Colleges acquire and the intelligence, care, and work ethic I saw in my peers, it is my hope and prediction, they will navigate these pressures and become examples for others.

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### Appendix A: Survey Form

This project is being conducted by Carina Schick as part of a senior thesis at Scripps College. The study is concerned with "career funneling" at elite institutions. Career funneling is the phenomenon where college students end up with the common jobs at the end of their educational experience, typically in high-tech, finance, or consulting fields. This happens regardless of their major, personal interests, or background. This study recreates "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs" by Amy Binder, Daniel Davis, and Nick Bloom which is a study focusing on career funneling with Stanford and Harvard students. This interview is based on the methods from those researchers, and will use students from Pitzer College, Scripps College, and Claremont McKenna College. Interviews and surveys are being used to see how the college relays information to its students about what potential careers are after graduation.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are 18 years or older and attend either Scripps, Claremont McKenna, or Pitzer College. The questionnaire should take 15-25 minutes to complete, depending on how much detail you would like to provide. The data collected will be anonymously used in the thesis and identifying characteristics of participants will be stripped. Contact information is only asked in case the researcher would like to follow-up with you. It is not necessary to provide any identifying information about yourself or give this information. Additionally, the information you choose to share it confidential and will be stored and protected on one laptop, with limited users (researcher and professors). The information used in this study will not be used for any further studies.

If you consent to the researcher using this information for their senior thesis, please indicate this consent below. Submitting your responses further indicates your consent and that the researcher has informed you of your consent.

Participation in this study includes answering written questions online. Participation in this study is voluntary and can be stopped at any time without penalty. Several resources you can contact if you find yourself distressed in anyway by this study are:

Scripps IRB: [irb@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:irb@scrippscollege.edu)

Claremont Colleges Counseling Services: (909) 621-8202

Carina Schick: [cschick4495@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:cschick4495@scrippscollege.edu)

Appendix B: Multiple Choice Survey Questions\*

1. If you consent/do not consent to these terms, indicate below?
  - I consent to these terms.
  - I do not consent to these terms.
  - Other:
2. Contact Information: Email and Name. Only asked for researcher's follow-up questions or possible interview to discuss answers further.
3. What school do you attend?
  - Scripps College
  - Pitzer College
  - Claremont McKenna College
  - Other:
4. What year in school are you?
  - Freshman
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
  - Other:

\*Interview participants were asked the same questions.



Appendix C: Short-Answer Survey Questions\*

1. Intended Major- If undecided, please put as "undecided" below.
5. Can you give some information about your background? (Family, area of residence, educational experience, etc.)
6. Did your high school offer AP, IB, or any other college preparatory classes?
7. What age or time in your life did you start/or have you started thinking about what jobs you would like to have and college you wanted to attend?
8. What are your plans after graduation?
9. What career are you pursuing?
10. Do you think the college you chose to attend influences the careers, major, or internship opportunities you are interested in? Why? If possible, provide examples or stories about your experiences.
11. What is your definition of success?
12. Referring to your answer from the previous question, where do you think this has come from? How much do you think your peers, family, or outside resources influence this definition? Please explain.
13. What information around campus do you see giving you career/networking advice?
14. Did the jobs you thought you wanted at the beginning of college change over the course of your time at the Claremont Colleges? If so, from what to what? Why do you think it has changed?
15. What does your future career mean to you? Is it for wealth, status, power, other?
16. What do you think your peers do for their careers after graduating college? What are the most popular career paths at your school?
17. Does what your peers want to do for a career impact your decision in any way for your career choices?
18. Does what your family, mentor, adult figures in your life do for a career impact your decision in any way for your career choices?
19. Have you felt pressure to become successful before or during college? Where do you believe this pressure comes from?
20. How much does your college major impact what you want to do after school?
21. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at the Claremont Colleges, your major, or background that has influenced your future career interests or definition of success.

\*Interviews participants were asked the same questions.

### Appendix D: Interview Consent Form

This project is being conducted by Carina Schick as part of a senior thesis at Scripps College. The study is concerned with career funneling at elite institutions. Career funneling is the phenomenon at elite institutions where college students end up with the common three jobs at the end of their educational experience. This typically happens regardless of their major, personal interests, or background. This study recreates “Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire ‘Prestigious’ Jobs” by Amy Binder, Daniel Davis, and Nick Bloom which is a study focusing on career funneling with Stanford and Harvard students. This interview is based on the methods from those researchers, and will use students from Pitzer College, Scripps College, and Claremont McKenna College. Interviews and surveys are being used to see how the college relays information to its students about what potential careers are after graduation.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are 18 years or older and attend either Scripps, Claremont McKenna, or Pitzer College. The questionnaire should take 15-25 minutes to complete, depending on how much detail you would like to provide. The data collected will be anonymously used in the thesis and identifying characteristics of participants will be stripped. Contact information is only asked in case the researcher would like to follow-up with you. It is not necessary to provide any identifying information about yourself or give this information. Additionally, the information you choose to share is confidential and will be stored and protected on one laptop, with limited users (researcher and professors). The information used in this study will not be used for any further studies.

Participation in this study includes answering either verbally or written. Participation in this study is voluntary and can be stopped at any time without penalty. Several resources you can contact if you find yourself distressed in anyway by this study are:

Scripps IRB: [irb@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:irb@scrippscollege.edu)

Claremont Colleges Counseling Services: (909) 621-8202

Carina Schick: [cschick4495@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:cschick4495@scrippscollege.edu), (916) 872-5793

Participants are encouraged to ask questions and your participation and time are appreciated. If you consent/do not consent to these terms, indicate below. Please sign your full name and date:

Name and Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E: Interview Debrief Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey or interview. Your input is an important part of the study. As a reminder, please do not discuss this study or your experience with others outside of the Investigators and the IRB, since this could potentially affect the responses of future participants.

You answered several questions (survey or interview, verbally or written) about your experience on the Claremont College campuses about careers, success, and the impact your college campus has on your perception of potential career paths. This information will be used to discuss the concept of career funneling and see to the extent it happens on Pitzer, Scripps, and Claremont McKenna's campuses.

If you would like to contact the chief investigator, Carina Schick, at any time regarding questions, comments, concerns, or have feedback, please feel free to do so at any time. If you are experiencing any emotional distress, information for counseling services is provided below. Again, I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions.

Scripps IRB: [irb@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:irb@scrippscollege.edu)

Claremont Colleges Counseling Services: (909) 621-8202

Carina Schick: [cschick4495@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:cschick4495@scrippscollege.edu), (916) 872-5793