



# Identity Exploration or Labor Market Reaction: Social Class Differences in College Student Participation in Peace Corps, Teach for America, and Other Service Programs

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## Abstract

Service programs and other short-term work experiences have become much more common for young adults after college graduation. Emerging adulthood has become a widespread explanation for this phenomenon, namely that a new life stage has arisen between adolescence and young adulthood in which emerging adults prioritize identity exploration. However, using in-depth interviews with juniors and seniors at an elite university, I find that this explanation overlooks two critical social constraints that young adults face during this time period that are shaped by their social class: work values and labor market conditions. Rather than all students seeking to participate in service programs in order to engage in identity exploration, I find four orientations towards service programs, shaped by social class background, current sense of financial stability, and work values: 1) participating as a backup plan to boost résumés, 2) seeking meaningful short-term work during an unsettled stage of life, 3) seeking opportunities to enact identity projects around helping others, and 4) using the programs to facilitate long-term career entry. Thus, I argue that the rise of short-term work experiences after college graduation should not be viewed as young adults engaging in a distinct life course phase prior to entry into full adulthood. Instead, the rise of these programs should be seen as a response to students' social class backgrounds and the various labor market constraints each group faces.

**Keywords** Service programs · Social class · Transition to adulthood · Emerging adulthood · Work values

Service programs, such as Teach for America (TFA) and the Peace Corps, have gained popularity in recent years. In the decade since the economic recession from December 2007 to June 2009, applications hit record numbers for TFA (Teach for America 2018a) and near-record numbers for Peace Corps (Butterfield 2015). The scope of service programs has

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massively increased as well, and there has been large growth in nonprofit secular and religious programs using either AmeriCorps or private donation funding (Stiffman 2017). The rise of these programs fits within the broader trends documented in sociological and psychological research of young adults taking a longer time to transition into stable, long-term careers than they did in the past (Settersten and Ray 2010).

Service programs are short-term programs with specific time limits, usually one or two years, that are oriented toward a social problem or mission and generally require a college degree. For instance, TFA is an AmeriCorps-funded program that seeks high-achieving recent college graduates for two-year placements in low-income schools (Teach for America 2018b), and the Peace Corps is an international government program that places participants for two-year commitments in countries around the world to help with different social projects (Peace Corps 2018). There are also a wide number of smaller scale programs that do not have the same level of name recognition or prestige, such as small evangelical religious programs. Service programs are by definition low paying though vary in amount received: TFA participants receive the typical first year teacher salary, Peace Corps participants receive a cost-of-living-based stipend for their placement country, while smaller programs often require their participants to fundraise their own stipends. Within this study, the fundraising obligations ranged from \$15,000 for a one-year program to more than \$75,000 for a three-year program. Certainly, some young adults are blocked from participating due to the financial costs. Nevertheless, this study shows that within an elite college, students from a variety of class backgrounds aspire to participate.

College students considering service programs, regardless of class background, are all on the cusp of entry into the middle class (if they are not there already) thanks to the credential they are about to receive (Dale and Krueger 2002; Hout 2012). However, students' socioeconomic backgrounds may influence how they perceive service programs among their choice set after graduation. This study seeks to understand whether students from disparate backgrounds have different orientations towards participating in service programs after graduation. Differing orientations to participation would indicate how college students' aspirations diverge in substance and in the extent to which students feel their aspirations can be actualized (as shown in this study). However, these differing aspirations would also have consequences for the public service sectors they are temporarily entering. For instance, previous research on TFA demonstrates that orientations upon entering the program strongly shape the likelihood people will remain teaching in a low-income school after their two-year commitment is complete (Donaldson and Johnson 2011; Heineke et al. 2014); considering teacher attrition is negatively associated with student outcomes, high turnover in public service sectors can have implications far beyond the young adult's individual career trajectory and mobility.

Currently, the dominant explanation for the rise of short-term work experiences of people in their early twenties is emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004). This theory argues that emerging adults seek short-term work experiences to explore their identity prior to settling down into adulthood and careers. Previous sociological research demonstrates that emerging adulthood is not an adequate explanation for the work patterns of young adults who do not attend college (Benson and Furstenberg 2006; Furstenberg 2016; Nelson and Padilla-Walker 2013). However, fewer studies have critically examined whether emerging adulthood sufficiently explains the short-term work behaviors of recent college graduates. In this study, I ask the following research question: Are soon-to-be college graduates aspiring to participate in a service program in order to engage in identity exploration or, by analyzing differences by social class, do we see various other forces at play? If social class differences do result in varied orientations, I

examine two possible alternative explanations for service program aspirations: work values and labor market constraints.

In order to answer this question, I conducted 30 in-depth interviews with college juniors and seniors at an elite public university in the Southeast. I inductively created a typology of the orientations students have toward participation in service programs. I find that social class background, current financial security, and work orientations for the short- and long term shape the orientation each student has for aspiring to participate in a service program. My findings show that even though all college graduates are generally considered middle-class, students' social class backgrounds continue to influence how they approach work and their first jobs during this transition. Arnett (2016a) consistently claims that emerging adulthood is a universally experienced developmental phase across social classes, despite sociological evidence to the contrary (Benson and Furstenberg 2006; Furstenberg 2016; Nelson and Padilla-Walker 2013).

This study extends previous criticisms to demonstrate that even among students at an elite residential college—the type of people most consistently claimed to best fit emerging adulthood (Arnett 2016b)—social class disadvantages and labor market constraints prevent some students from desiring and feeling able to participate in identity exploration during the transition out of college. Social class background shapes the work values that students draw on in making career decisions (Johnson and Mortimer 2011) and constrains the material resources they have available during this transition out of college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton et al. 2018). Several labor market constraints shape student interest in service programs after graduation: the rising risk of underemployment with a college degree (Horowitz 2018), the (perceived) inability to find careers that fit student identities, and the desire to enter careers through nontraditional paths. In all, I contribute even more compelling evidence against the universal nature of emerging adulthood and instead present evidence that social class shapes different work values and labor market constraints that may lead recent college graduates toward short-term work experiences.

I now turn to a review of the relevant literature on emerging adulthood and on the possible alternative explanations of work values and labor market constraints. I then describe how I collected and analyzed my interviews and follow it with a description of the findings of the typology of orientations toward service programs. Finally, I discuss how these findings relate to previous research and discuss limitations and implications for future research.

## **Dominant Explanation: Emerging Adulthood**

Compared to past decades, the transition to adulthood has been delayed, as many youth postpone full-time employment, marriage, and children until after they complete their education, especially if they are enrolled full time in college (Oesterle et al. 2010; Eliason et al. 2015; Ryberg 2018; Shanahan 2000). In response to this delayed transition to adulthood, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2004) proposed that a new life course stage exists between adolescence and young adulthood, a stage he calls emerging adulthood, for ages 18 to 25. He characterized this stage of life as being concerned with identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and feeling it is the age of possibilities. Some research supports that youth in this period want to explore different possibilities in their lives before settling down into a career and marriage/family (Arnett 2004; Settersten and Ray 2010). For instance, Arnett (2004) argues that emerging adults are more likely to choose jobs that they think are fun or

may develop their identity, rather than immediately pursuing their long-term career aspirations. Settersten and Ray (2010) refer to this post-college period for advantaged youth as “job shopping,” as youth try out a number of different jobs in their twenties for short periods of time to try to find ones that best fit their identity and work aspirations. Many middle- to upper-class parents not only pay for their children’s college education, but also continue to support them financially after college graduation (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Mortimer et al. 2016; Schoeni and Ross 2005). This financial support may help privileged students feel able to engage in identity exploration in their first job out of college. Arnett argues that social class differences in these traits, including identity exploration, during this time period are minimal (Arnett 2016a, 2016b).

However, many sociologists have challenged the concept of emerging adulthood and the twenties as a time of identity exploration. First, sociologists reject that this is a universal developmental stage for all youth, as youth from poor backgrounds who do not attend college tend to move rapidly into adult transitions of full-time work, cohabitation, and childbearing (Côté 2014; Deluca et al. 2016; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2016). Youth from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds feel like adults sooner and are treated as such by their parents and family members (Benson and Furstenberg 2006; Lareau 2011). Second, even youth who attend college do not necessarily have the financial resources to explore their identities or seek fun jobs. Students are graduating with record levels of student loan debt (Houle 2014), which may influence their job selection (Rothstein and Rouse 2011). A number of other college students must become financially self-supporting during college or upon graduation (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Tevington et al. 2017). While institutional and other social factors may shape the extent to which college students are focused on identity exploration (Fosse and Toyokawa 2016; Nelson and Padilla-Walker 2013), the evidence suggests that social class significantly shapes the experience of the transition to adulthood and challenges the universal nature of emerging adulthood (Furstenberg 2016; Ryberg 2018).

Therefore, much of the sociological literature that challenges emerging adulthood’s universality focuses on working-class youth who do not attend college and must enter the labor market with limited opportunities (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2016). However, other studies that do not explicitly engage in the emerging adulthood debate also provide evidence to question its universal nature. For instance, research at lower ranked institutions including for-profit (McMillian Cottom 2017) and regional colleges (Mullen 2010) demonstrates that students are largely focused on long-term career outcomes in choosing programs, majors, and career aspirations rather than identity exploration. However, research at elite institutions often portrays almost all students as seeking identity exploration (Mullen 2010), which might support Arnett’s (2016b) claims that emerging adulthood is particularly universal at residential colleges attended by traditional aged students: “Residential colleges and universities... represent a social island set off from the rest of society, a temporary safe haven where emerging adults can explore possibilities in love, work, and worldviews with many of the responsibilities of adult life kept at bay” even when they are forming post-college aspirations (219).

This study offers the opportunity to directly examine whether the universal claim about identity exploration is true when social class differences are considered. Service programs are an ideal case study to examine this question because they have many of the structural components that seem best aligned with the identity exploration framework: they are short-term commitments, there is no expectation that participants will stay in the job after the program is completed, and they are built to provide young adults with the opportunity to help social causes they see as important while traveling or living somewhere new. Emerging

adulthood theory would predict that all such students seek to participate as a form of identity exploration (Arnett 2004) or job shopping (Settersten and Ray 2010). However, critical research would suggest that identity development may not be universal. Two possible ways in which social class may result in differing orientations are through work values and labor market constraints, discussed next.

## Social Class Differences through Work Values and Labor Market

If students are not engaging in service programs in order to explore their identities, but instead social class differences reveal differing orientations, what sociological explanations may exist to explain the differences? One way that social class may shape differing orientations is through work values. An extensive literature investigates different work values and orientations (Johnson and Mortimer 2011; Kalleberg 1977; Kohn 1969). While authors vary in the number of values they study, these values are generally divided between intrinsic values—seeking work that allows for creativity and self-expression—and extrinsic values—job rewards such as salary and prestige (Johnson and Mortimer 2011). Other dimensions of work that people might value are influence, social rewards, altruism, and leisure (Johnson 2002). While some people may see intrinsic and extrinsic values as competing factors in deciding jobs, these are not opposites along one single continuum; instead they are different values that people have on varying levels: it is possible to be high on both intrinsic and extrinsic values, be low on both, or be higher on one than the other (Johnson and Mortimer 2011).

Research consistently finds that these work orientations are closely related to social class: parents from higher social class backgrounds teach their children to value intrinsic rewards more than parents from lower social class backgrounds, while parents from lower social class backgrounds tend to primarily emphasize extrinsic rewards (Johnson and Mortimer 2011; Kohn 1969). Current social class (e.g., represented by financial security), in addition to class origins, may influence work values. Even among college graduates, youth have different levels of financial security, which will impact what they see as their biggest challenges in the transition out of college (Aronson et al. 2015). Youth who graduate with much higher debt or who are no longer receiving financial support from their families may feel compelled to adjust their work values to their current situation and lower their intrinsic values (Johnson 2002), especially during the period of recovery from an economic recession (Koen et al. 2012). Based on this past research, we might expect that college students from lower social class backgrounds would pursue service programs for extrinsic reasons, while youth from higher social class backgrounds would pursue them for intrinsic reasons. Likewise, despite being socialized with middle-class intrinsic work values, youth from middle-class families who have less financial security during the transition out of college (i.e., more debt and no continued parental financial assistance) may be pushed toward extrinsic values in their job searches more than those with greater current financial security.

Looking specifically at the transition to adulthood, many scholars are interested in explaining stability or change during this period. In other words, do young adults consistently have the same work values or do they vary at different stages, such as temporarily prioritizing intrinsic work while later planning for more extrinsic work? Traditionally it was assumed that work values remained relatively stable after adolescence. However, research in the last few decades has found a few ways in which they change: work values narrow with age (Johnson and Monserud 2012), youth adjust to realistic expectations about work (Johnson 2002), and

young adults adjust their work values based on the jobs they find themselves doing (Johnson et al. 2012).

While this strand of research suggests that work-value changes occur in a linear fashion, life course literature suggests that people value different characteristics at different stages, so that work values during the transition to adulthood may intentionally diverge from those in adulthood (Arnett 2004). For instance, a high school student's first job may be chosen with different values than their full-time career after completing their education. The period after college could be another unique life course stage, especially given that young adults do not feel compelled to settle down as quickly into adult roles of career and family as they did in previous generations (Arnett 2004). Some young adults may look for different values in their work for the first few years out of college than they would for later careers. Thus, instead of work values during the transition to adulthood always developing in a linear way, it could be that some youth value different things in work for different stages of their life. Given the temporary nature of service programs, some youth may see this as a gap year for pursuing intrinsic values before pursuing different values for long-term careers (Arnett 2004; King 2011; Settersten and Ray 2010). For instance, previous research on service program participants assumes participation is an example of civically engaged students who are passionate about the work (Finlay et al. 2011; McAdam and Brandt 2009). In other words, if service program participation is not primarily about identity development as emerging adulthood would suggest, social class differences could emerge due to work values: students from working-class backgrounds may be participating because they see the programs as providing extrinsic rewards and students from middle-class backgrounds may be participating because they see the programs as providing intrinsic rewards.

A second way that social class could influence different orientations for participation in service programs is through labor market conditions. Specifically, as college degrees have become more common, the risk that college graduates will be underemployed has increased (Horowitz 2018). Recent college graduates may be forced into jobs that do not require a college degree and those most at risk are students from disadvantaged class backgrounds. Therefore, facing this risk of being unable to enter their desired careers, working-class students may turn to service programs as a way to build their human capital and try to improve their chance of being able to enter a stable middle-class career in the future.

Other labor market conditions may explain the rise of service programs for class-based reasons. For instance, middle-class students who seek jobs that will be intrinsically rewarding may not find such jobs easily. Given the economic structure of capitalism, most jobs are not designed to address social injustices. However, many college students build passionate identities around pursuing social justice or living out their religious beliefs (Gillis and Krull 2019). Thus, secular and religious service programs may have risen in popularity to fill this desire for jobs that allow students to enact such identities after college. Furthermore, labor market scholars have noted the rise of nontraditional paths into careers, especially for those from working-class backgrounds (McMillan Cottom 2017). Service programs could also be pursued as a means to enter careers in nonconventional ways.

In all, two sociological forces provide plausible reasons why there may be different approaches to service program aspirations by social class. Emerging adulthood theory suggests that all students, regardless of class background, are in a distinct life course phase that leads them to prioritize identity development. Short-term work, like service programs, can provide opportunities for recent graduates to explore their identities prior to settling down into adulthood and careers. However, sociological research suggests that class differences in

orientations may exist. First, students may seek to participate in these programs as a means of pursuing work that aligns with their work values that have been socialized since childhood. Second, students may face varied labor market constraints based on their social class, and service programs may provide opportunities to pursue their various goals within these constraints.

## Data, Methods, and Analytical Strategy

In order to answer why students seek to participate in service programs—and whether this is consistent with the identity exploration explanation given by emerging adulthood theory—I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 juniors and seniors at a highly selective public university, who were considering participating in a service program after college graduation. The students were asked questions about their pre-college and college experiences, as well as their immediate and long-term goals after college in order to better understand the mechanisms that led to their service program interest and their aspirations for the future. I conducted in-depth interviews because they are the most effective method to analyze accounts of motivations, interpret meaning, and attempt to find common understandings or frameworks. The interviews lasted an average of one hour and 40 minutes. Data collection occurred between March 2015 and April 2016. During this period the economy had mostly recovered from the 2007–2009 Great Recession, but the students still believed there were limited opportunities—and the recession quickened the process of reducing the availability of good middle-class jobs (Horowitz 2018).

I inductively analyzed the interviews in an iterative manner. I began my analysis simultaneously with data collection. I used sequential interviewing with adjustments to the interview guide to focus on emergent themes (Charmaz 2014; Lofland et al. 2006). After each interview, I did freewriting exercises about important themes and personally transcribed each interview, writing memos about new analyses during and after the transcription process. After all interviews were completed and transcribed, I began an open coding process, going line by line, creating codes about anything that might be important. While coding, I wrote analytic memos on themes that began emerging from the data so that I could start generating hypotheses to see if they held true across the sample (Charmaz 2014). Additionally, I analyzed each individual's pathway during this stage. Then I reviewed all memos, pathways, and open codes to create a codebook based on the themes that were most important to the analysis and used the codebook to systematically code all interviews. Following that, I analyzed how the individual pathways and other codes varied in systematic ways to inductively create a typology based on the emergent results about the four primary orientations to service program participation. Finally, I analyzed how each of these orientations were related to social class background and sense of financial security.

The university at which this study occurred is a highly selective, four-year, residential, public research university in the Southeast. It was selected for two primary reasons. First, its students have high rates of participation in TFA, Peace Corps, and other service programs after graduation, enabling me to sample a greater diversity of students who aspired to participate in service programs. Second, given the claims that elite universities are the ideal setting for emerging adulthood and identity exploration (Arnett 2016a), this study design would allow me to test the theory in the setting in which it is most likely to be supported. If it is not supported in its ideal setting, then I would have

strong evidence that emerging adulthood is not a satisfactory explanation for the rise of these types of jobs.

I recruited via a referral-based recruitment method (Lofland et al. 2006), relying on multiple previous connections I already had—thus starting the sample in different student networks. This provided an advantage to see how students' aspirations were shaped by their friends, while still allowing me to interview a diverse group of students with different orientations and aspirations. My inductive analysis plan was more consistent with Small's (2009) goal of saturation through sequential interviewing rather than obtaining a representative sample (see also Charmaz 2014; Lofland et al. 2006). Students were eligible to participate if they self-identified as considering participating in a volunteer or service program after graduation—enabling me to also interview students who were participating in smaller, lesser known programs other than exclusively TFA and Peace Corps. I interviewed students at different stages of their decision-making process including those that had 1) not yet submitted applications, 2) submitted applications but had not heard back, and 3) heard back and were either accepted or rejected from the programs. This variety allowed students to emphasize different parts of the decision-making process, in such a way that reduced the retrospective bias of interviewing all students after they already decided what to do after graduation—who otherwise may have been more likely to tailor their narratives to fit one cohesive account. Given that I used strategies to ensure variability in my sample by starting my referrals in different networks and by interviewing juniors and seniors at different stages of their decision-making process, the findings, in this case the typology, should be analytically generalizable—the goal of inductive in-depth interview analysis (Small 2009).

Within my sample, many students also applied to other types of post-graduate opportunities aside from service programs, including jobs in their field, jobs outside of their field, and graduate/professional school programs—and for some students, service programs were backup plans, while for others the service programs were the top priority. The sample consisted of 70% women with a variety of racial/ethnic self-identifications and social class backgrounds. It was 70% White, 17% Black, and consisted of one each of Hispanic, multiethnic, Middle Eastern, and “other”/South Asian. Their social class backgrounds were 50% upper-middle- to upper-class, 27% lower-middle class, and 23% working-class or poor backgrounds. I followed a method similar to Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) and Hamilton (2014) in classifying the social class background of the college students: I primarily identified each student's social class background based on their parents' education level and occupation, but I allowed secondary factors to influence the placement in unusual circumstances. This occurred in two cases where students were classified as lower-middle-class instead of upper-middle-class. In one instance this was because multiple people in the immediate family had severe medical conditions that left the family far more financially precarious and resource depleted than other upper middle-class families, despite her parents' graduate degrees and solidly middle- to upper-middle-class income. The other student's parents also had graduate degrees and previously held professional occupations, but when they immigrated to the U.S. they were unable to work in those professions and have held low skilled occupations since the student was in elementary school. Students in the sample also varied in their current financial security, which while related, is not the same as social class background. In this paper, financial security was classified based on a holistic evaluation of student loan debt they will have to pay off, whether they will likely continue receiving parental financial assistance, and whether they subjectively feel like they are currently stressed about money or feel that they must take money into account in their post-graduation decisions. All names used in the findings are pseudonyms.



## Findings

Four orientations toward participation in service programs emerged from the interviews: Backup Planners who participate for extrinsic reasons, Delayed Careerists who participate as a short-term exciting opportunity at the right stage of their unsettled life course, Enthusiasts who participate because they have developed identity projects around social or religious issues, and Professionals who participate as an easy way to enter their chosen career field at an unusual time [Table 1].

### Backup Planners: Primary Orientation

Backup Planners are students who would prefer to be entering long-term careers immediately after college but are willing to engage in short-term, temporary work through a service program for strategic benefits. For instance, Michelle, a working-class exercise and sports science major, was nervous that her 3.3 GPA might keep her out of any of the five graduate programs she applied to in occupational therapy (OT). She applied to City Year, a service program, so that “I can use it as a backup if I don’t get into OT school.” Likewise, Mathilde, a working-class global studies major, explained that Peace Corps is her backup plan if graduate school doesn’t work out immediately after college, based on advice from a teaching assistant.

She talked about her experience, and it just seemed really interesting to me. And I thought, “Well, if I don’t get into grad school or anything like that, why not? Use that time to do something beneficial like Peace Corps.” Yeah. And there’s a lot of things about Peace Corps after you come back that are also really beneficial. Like, ... they give you readjustment help and they help you get into grad schools.

Both students have concrete career plans they hope to pursue through graduate school, but they recognize that they need a backup plan in case they are not accepted and see a service program as the best opportunity. Students considering graduate educations as diverse as medical school, law school, an MA in occupational therapy, and a PhD in archeology all argued that their service programs could be a “résumé builder” that facilitates future acceptances.

Unlike some other students in the sample, Backup Planners know what they want to do for their long-term careers and would prefer to be immediately entering those careers after college.

**Table 1** Orientation to Service Program by Social Class Origins and Current Financial Security

Type	N	Primary Orientation to Participation	Class Background*			Current Financial Security*		
			P/WC	LMC	UMC/UC	Low	Medium	High
<i>Backup Planners</i>	6	Extrinsic reasons	33%	50%	17%	50%	50%	0%
<i>Delayed Careerists</i>	6	Unsettled life stage	17%	33%	50%	0%	67%	33%
<i>Enthusiasts</i>	16	Intrinsic reasons	25%	13%	63%	6%	44%	50%
<i>Professionals</i>	2	Direct career entry	0%	50%	50%	0%	50%	50%
Total N	30		7	8	15	4	15	11

\*Notes: Social class abbreviations: P/WC is poor/working class, LMC is lower middle class, and UMC/UC is upper middle/upper class. Financial security measure based on student loan debt they will have to pay off, whether they will likely continue receiving parental financial assistance, and whether they subjectively feel like they are currently stressed about money

For instance, Erica, a lower-middle-class journalism and global studies major, began her nonprofit job search hoping to immediately start her career, not wanting short-term work. Discussing the roughly 80 applications she considered submitting, she explained:

Some were actual jobs. I applied to some internships too that were short-term, but I was really focusing my efforts on long-term stuff or organizations that I could have progressed in. Like, started as one position and then moved up, moved up the totem pole.

However, Erica realized that almost all positions she was interested in required, she explained, “two or three years of experience, which I don’t have—full-time experience. I have part-time experience.” Realizing it was unlikely for her to successfully get offered a job that could kickstart a long-term career, she decided to pursue a service program through an international nonprofit that would give her a year of full-time experience but requires her to fundraise \$15,000 to participate and has no room for advancement. She now sees the benefits, as she explains, of an “international experience to be somewhere between a year and two years, just to kind of re-solidify Spanish, get me some really good experience, and then I could come back and look for something here”—before she pursues her long-term career in the U.S., but this was not her original goal when she began her job search during her senior year. She would have preferred to immediately begin a position that could be part of a long-term career instead of a one-year program that required massive fundraising. Nevertheless, she sees this as an acceptable backup plan because she can use the service program to add experience to her résumé so that she may become qualified for the long-term career she hopes to pursue in the very competitive labor market. Thus, Backup Planners tend to seek service programs for extrinsic reasons if they are unable or fear being unable to immediately enter their long-term careers. While most Backup Planners do make a point of saying that they appreciate that service programs will enable them to address a social need or help others, this is not their primary orientation to participation.

### **Backup Planners: Social Class Background and Financial Security**

Backup Planners generally come from more disadvantaged social class backgrounds—either working-class or lower-middle-class—and many must make their post-college decisions at least partly dependent on finances. For instance, the two students who said that service programs could be backup plans to their graduate school aspirations are both financially constrained and cannot afford to *not* take money into account. Due to a difficult family situation, Michelle knew that “I just needed something to do after graduation” if she was not accepted to OT school because “I don’t have an option to go back home,” after her father made it clear she was not welcome to live with him during college breaks or after graduation. Mathilde has been financially supporting her family throughout her four years in college, generally working 35–40 hours per week while being a full-time student (despite having a full need-based scholarship that covers all of her tuition and living expenses). Neither woman can risk not having a job to pay the bills after graduation and so they must be proactive in forming backup plans. Neither has the opportunity to redshirt, or stay out of the labor market while they await the perfect job or graduate program (Carr and Kefalas 2018), because they do not have families who can or will economically support them.

While not all Backup Planners are as financially insecure as these two, most express a similar need to ensure strategic backup plans due to finances. For instance, Corey is a lower-

middle-class biology and French major. When asked if he will be paying off his student loan debt or his parents will, he responded:

My parents are going to be taking it on. My brother ended up not finishing school. He's two years younger than me... originally it was going to be me, but since they don't have two kids doing it now, it's mostly just me; mostly them [paying back the loans]. I do [pay for] all food and stuff [during college].

However, while he explains that his parents will pay his loans, he cannot rely on them for financial help after graduation with his day-to-day bills: "I feel like, see my thing, my parents aren't supporting me afterwards, so that'd be an issue [if he was not paid enough to live on]. I mean, if things got really bad, they would help me, but I'd probably also have to come home." Because of this, he is worried about his ability to participate in the AmeriCorps funded program he was accepted to but only pays \$14,400 to live in New York City—and he explicitly calls this program "my backup" to a job working in a research lab. Thus, students from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds are financially disadvantaged compared to their upper-middle-class peers because they have lower financial security after college graduation; they must be strategic about securing backup plans because they cannot afford to not have work lined up after graduation if their top priority aspiration does not come to fruition, though they worry service programs may not pay enough either.

Thus, Backup Planners can be best understood as students from disadvantaged class backgrounds or those who are more economically insecure at graduation, who feel forced to seek work for primarily extrinsic reasons. They seek jobs that can serve as the first steps on the ladder toward long-term careers, but they discover or worry that they are not sufficiently prepared for the increasingly competitive labor market that in recent years is leaving many recent college graduates underemployed (Horowitz 2018; Kalleberg 2018). As a reaction to this structural barrier, and lacking the kinds of networks and connections that could help privileged students in their situation (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Carr and Kefalas 2018), Backup Planners turn to service programs as skill-building opportunities: the programs require a college degree, even if they do not immediately facilitate career entry, and thus are better than being underemployed in fields such as retail (Carr and Kefalas 2018). Despite previous accounts, Backup Planners do not necessarily need service programs because they underachieved in college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), or because they seek to explore their identities (Arnett 2004). Instead, their backup plans are a reaction to the labor market having more college graduates than full-time career positions requiring college degrees. Backup Planners have high ambitions for middle-class or professional careers and want to be realistic about their mobility pathway aspirations, as they may not get accepted the first time they apply to graduate school or full-time work. Pursuing a service program as a backup is a rational plan that will allow them to build up work experience and financially support themselves—even if the low-paid position will make it difficult to cover all their expenses.

### **Delayed Careerists: Primary Orientation**

A second orientation to service programs are Delayed Careerists. These students prioritize participating in a service program in the short term after college to take advantage of this perceived unsettled stage of life before they start different long-term careers in the future. Unlike any of the other students in this study, Delayed Careerists have explicitly different work

orientations for short- and long-term work. In the short term, they prioritize work that they find meaningful, fits with their identity, and will be an exciting opportunity. In the long term, they prioritize careers that will be stable and well-paid, allowing for conventionally settled careers. For example, Hope, a lower-middle-class linguistics major, is certain that she wants a career in federal law enforcement because she “ha[s] a lot of family in law enforcement.” However, based on her new interest in international service work during college, she may want to participate in the Peace Corps before she starts her law enforcement career: “Things get messy when you start a career, and it feels like you can’t really get out of that. So before I start a career, if I want to do the Peace Corps, that’s the time to do it.” Thus, Hope explains that she sees the time before starting career as unsettled, and that trying to participate in a program like Peace Corps once she already started her career would be too hard because of her obligations at that stage of her life course. She sees immediately after graduation as the right timing to participate in a program like this.

Delayed Careerists want their programs to be short-term because they anticipate transitioning to stable, long-term, and extrinsically motivated jobs later. For example, Jackson, an upper-middle-class business major, intends to work in the financial industry where he expects to work his way up the ladder in positions he does not find rewarding:

I do want to do some kind of economic development in the Middle East, and the best way to do that, from what I understand ... is to get a big name on your résumé basically, and get that sort of experience with a large company. So that’s what I’m hoping to do with [big financial company] ... So, learn the intricacies and sort of develop my skills, and then hopefully transfer to a branch in the Middle East or work for a company doing that kind of work in the Middle East.

While he imagines eventually being able to do work in this career path that is intrinsically meaningful—the economic development in the Middle East—he expects it will take years to reach the career level when he is not simply working for extrinsic rewards. Thus, before he starts that career climb, he hopes to participate in the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant program to be a “cultural ambassador” in the Middle East. His father is from the Middle East, but Jackson has had limited opportunities to spend time there. He hopes to use this time after college, as he says, to “get back to my roots and my heritage” before he gets stuck in entry level jobs in the United States. Jackson got permission from the prestigious financial company that hired him to defer his career start for a year if he is accepted to the service program. The employer said “I can push it back for a year” if accepted. Thus, Jackson, like other Delayed Careerists, is delaying well-formed career aspirations because he wants to seek a meaningful experience in the short-term before seeking a long-term career based in extrinsic rewards.

### **Delayed Careerists: Social Class Background and Financial Security**

Delayed Careerists tend to not be as concerned about money as Backup Planners because they see it as a short-term program before beginning their careers as full adults. For instance, despite Hope—the student aspiring to participate in the Peace Corps before a law enforcement career—paying for college herself through attending community college and then transferring to the four-year college to minimize costs, she is not worried about participating in a low-paid program because it is only a two years long and is worth the experience:

Remember, are you living to work or working to live? And it's like, I always saved all my money, and that's a really good habit to have, but what are you saving it for anyway? Like, save it and use it to live and have experiences... And I do want to always be financially secure, but every now and then to spend that money for experience. I think that's worth it.

Viewing the program as a meaningful, temporary detour before well-planned out careers enables the students to not feel nervous about the fact that service programs are low-paid. Delayed Careerists come from a mix of class backgrounds, but all have medium to high current financial security. Unlike Backup Planners who feel financially compelled to try to enter careers immediately, this moderate level of financial security allows Delayed Careerists to feel capable of temporarily pursuing a meaningful opportunity and prevents them from feeling fully adult. This orientation in some ways fits with emerging adulthood theory (Arnett 2004) in that they see the period immediately after college as a distinct time in their life course to do something different and more meaningful before they transition into fully adult roles for career, though they are not exploring their identity so much as they are following their already strong identities. I discuss this distinction and how it challenges emerging adulthood theory in the discussion.

### **Enthusiasts: Primary Orientation**

Enthusiasts prioritize participating in a service program immediately after college as an end in itself, hoping it will be a meaningful experience and clarify their long-term career aspirations that are currently unknown or vague. Enthusiasts participate in service programs because they seek to engage in meaningful work that fits with their identities—but unlike Delayed Careerists, they also hope to pursue long-term careers that are highly intrinsically rewarding based on their passions. For instance, Riley, an upper-middle-class environmental studies major, is unsure what she wants to do for her career, but she hopes that participating in a service program will help clarify her aspirations:

Hopefully out of my time doing the [small service] program and/or Peace Corps, I would find—specifically, either a job would come out of that, and I would just do that job and be able to progress from that job, like, my career or whatever, or I would find something to go to graduate school for. But I'm hoping to find specifically what I want to focus on, because right now it's just like, animals, wildlife, environment, apex predators, things like that, but there's not really a specific focus because I just want to do everything. So I'm hoping out of my time doing this, I either figure out, like, no, I don't wanna be doing this, or yes, I do want to be doing this. So I hope not only to get research, and experience, and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities travel wise, but actually have a more concrete idea of what I want to do in my career, in my professional life.

Riley explains that she is passionate about the work she will do with either of the service programs and hopes that it will help her figure out how to follow those passions into a long-term career.

For Enthusiasts, service programs are not simply intrinsically rewarding. The programs fit the identities they constructed before or during college around social issues. For instance,

Steven, a working-class global studies major, entered college neither planning to get involved in a religious organization nor with a strong religious identity:

We just happen to go by an ice cream social that they were putting on. And I was with the other guys, and we stopped in and got free ice cream and ended up talking to some people and from there got invited to a couple other events. ...

Interviewer: Were you looking to join a religious organization at [college]?

Steven: ...I don't even think I knew the scope of student organizations at that, or what do they even look like. And so, it was more so just, I think, we were looking for friends. ... this organization just happened to be a Christian organization. And so we were like, "Well, we'll just get plugged in." I mean, we went paintballing and stuff like that for a semester. And so it was just more so a group of guys or group of people to hang out with, that we felt like we belonged somewhere.

Despite not intending to join a religious organization, as Steven became heavily involved in it, he formed a strong religious identity that became important for him to draw on when deciding about post-graduation jobs. He initially planned to apply to jobs that would be steps up the ladder to a career in nonprofit work, but instead he is pursuing a religious service program because he feels called by God to do so. He explains he did an internship with a nonprofit the summer after his junior year, intending to have that experience launch his career:

I was able to partner with [local nonprofit], a nonprofit in [nearby city] and so I was a research assistant for them, for those four weeks. And I thought that that was going to be kind of a launch pad into a career either with them or with another nonprofit in [nearby city], so that was my goal, going into the summer. And then coming out of the summer, and I was asking the question everybody else was asking going into senior year, "What am I going to do?" And I prayed about it, thought about it, and felt like God was leading me to go overseas. And so I started just taking practical steps to do that.

This process was repeated for all five students participating in religious service programs in this study in that they entered college not intending to pursue a career path that was religiously oriented, but as their religious identity increased in college, they came to prioritize finding a service program that would enable them to enact that identity.<sup>1</sup> Although Steven is unsure what his later career will be, he is open to continuing to follow God's calling down this path of intrinsically rewarding work. Thus, Enthusiasts do not see temporary service programs as a phase of their life distinct from adulthood like Delayed Careerists do—Enthusiasts plan to explore meaningful jobs now in order to find meaningful careers.

Non-religious Enthusiasts also sought to use their service program participation to enact constructed identities and passions during college. For instance, Emily, an upper-class environmental studies major, entered college participating in a varsity sport that took up much of her time. However, after being forced to medically retire, she constructed an identity of being passionate about agriculture. She plans to participate in a Peace Corp agricultural position to pursue this passion while she figures out her vague career aspirations somehow involving organic farming.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gillis and Krull (2019) for more information about this accidental conversion process.

I like meeting people, new people, and interacting with them. And I knew I wanted help people [*laughs*]. I didn't know what I wanted to do [*long-term*]. Um, but that's one of the reasons that I got so into agriculture, is because I can be outside, doing things that I love doing while helping people towards good, better food, a cleaner future, whatever it may be. But that's one of the reasons why I *loved* [*agricultural volunteering*] was because I got to interact with people and I got to do what I loved.

When I asked Emily how long she wanted to work in this type of agriculture and farming, she responded, “The rest of my life,” though she is uncertain about the details of that career plan. As Steven and Emily show, Enthusiasts are not simply pursuing work that they find interesting, they are pursuing work that they see as fundamentally linked to their identities, and which they hope will relate to their long-term careers—passions Deluca et al. (2016) refer to as “identity projects.” Because these students created identity projects around helping people or solving social issues—through religion, through agriculture, or through international service, for example—service programs become ideal post-college options for Enthusiasts. Service programs serve social needs and provide short-term opportunities for students who are unsure about their long-term careers.

### **Enthusiasts: Social Class Background and Financial Security**

Enthusiasts generally, though not exclusively, come from privileged backgrounds and do not see the low pay of the programs as a particularly negative aspect of participation, as they tend to have the highest current financial security of all groups in the study. For instance, Mark, an upper-middle-class history and political science major, explained that his family paid for all his college expenses and will continue helping him financially after college: “I'm extremely lucky that I'm graduating without any debt and that my parents will be willing to subsidize me for a few years if I need their help.” Many of the Enthusiasts never discussed the pay of the programs until explicitly asked about it and they generally assumed that the program would provide enough for them to live on because they have few to no adult expenses yet. For instance, Emma, an upper-middle-class economics and public policy major, explained, “What I'm told about the Peace Corps is they give you a stipend that you can live to the same standards as the people in the community you're serving,” and so she is not concerned about money. Some Enthusiasts were so financially secure and came from class backgrounds with such extensive resources that they were able to participate in programs that required massive amounts of fundraising. For example, one woman had to fundraise \$25,000 for her one-year program even though only \$15,000 of it would be paid back as her salary for the year. Another man had to fundraise \$40,000 to participate in his one-year program and a third student had to fundraise \$75,000 for her three-year program (all of which had to be pledged before she could begin the position a few months after college graduation). This level of fundraising is only possible for students who come from social backgrounds of extensive privilege whereby not only their parents, but also their parents' friends, church members, and neighbors are willing and able to donate to support them during their service programs.

The few Enthusiasts from lower-class backgrounds did have to consider finances before deciding to participate, but they came from families with low enough incomes that they qualified for the university's generous need-based financial aid, which allowed them to graduate debt-free and thus be more financially secure than other disadvantaged students in the study. As long as the program provided enough to live on during that one- or two-year commitment, they felt financially secure enough to sacrifice making more money to pursue

their passions. For instance, Steven—the working-class student participating in the religious service program—explained that his family was confused about why he would want to do this program instead of pursuing a well-paid middle-class job:

To go to a university was a big deal, so I think their mindset was just, “Oh you’re going to have such a solid career. And MONEY.” Like, it all boiled down to “You’re going to be making money and you’re going to be financially stable” ... And so, I think that was their problem with [his service program participation]. It wasn’t—it wasn’t a direct dividend from my investment into college, in their eyes... I definitely questioned myself sometimes, but it ultimately just came down to, like, okay, if this is what I believe about God and this is what I believe He’s calling me into, then this is what I have to do.

Steven’s family believed he should choose work for primarily extrinsic reasons, but his new passion for Christianity led him to instead choose work for intrinsic reasons, making the low pay acceptable.

Overall, Enthusiasts are consistent with what the work values literature would suggest for students from privileged backgrounds: they were socialized to believe they should choose work that is intrinsically rewarding, which they intend to do now and for the rest of their lives. While a few students from disadvantaged class backgrounds were also Enthusiasts, they were only able to have this approach because their college financial aid packages allowed them to graduate from college debt-free. Nevertheless, this orientation is largely dominated by students who come from upper-middle-class families and who feel financially secure enough to pursue any job, as they know their parents will help support them if they need it. They seek to find work opportunities that allow them to enact identities that they built during college.

### **Professionals: Primary Orientation**

The final orientation toward service program participation are students I call Professionals. They prioritize participating in a service program immediately after college as an easy way to enter careers that they decided on too late to pursue as vocational degrees during college. For instance, Jayla, a lower-middle-class psychology and sociology major, explains that she realized she was passionate about becoming a teacher, even if her parents wanted her to pursue a career that paid more:

I feel like I had been running from teaching for a very long time because my parents have always been like, “Oh no, don’t teach. Don’t teach.” But it’s like I couldn’t run from it anymore. From the experiences and interactions that I’ve had with all of my kids to, like, any volunteer opportunity that I take is revolving around kids... Like, everything I do is revolved around teaching in some way, shape, or form. And so at that moment, like I said, this lightbulb just went off and it was like, “Jayla, you have to be a teacher.”

However, she realized this her junior year, when it was too late to change her field of study to education: “I’m really sad that I’m not [an education major]. I didn’t come to this realization until January of last year, and so by that time I wouldn’t have been able to declare [an] education major and still graduate on time.” While the alternative certification process to becoming a teacher is challenging, Jayla used TFA to simplify the process:

It was a new idea for me to teach. I didn’t know when I should apply, or who should I talk to, or what should I do. ... And so TFA just was really appealing because I applied to



[it] and then [they told] me what to do... it was a new process for me and I had noooo idea what I was doing, it was really nice to have something that had a little structure for me so that ... I know exactly what I need to do.

Likewise, Robert, an upper-middle-class political science major, explained that TFA walked him through every step of the alternative certification process, so that by the end of his senior year, he had already taken the PRAXIS exam necessary to become certified, as well as other steps that made him ready to become a teacher in his midwestern placement state. Thus, through TFA, Jayla and Robert can immediately enter their chosen careers of teaching after being too late to enter the profession in the typical way.

TFA is the only service program in the study that facilitates direct career entry. All other service programs are structured as short-term opportunities with no room for advancement into careers. For instance, participating in the Peace Corps cannot lead directly to a career in nonprofits, as the participants would have to apply for jobs after they return from abroad. However, local school districts hire TFA participants and TFA ensures that the participant becomes certified through the state's alternative certification program. Therefore, by the end of the two-year program, TFA participants can stay at that same school and continue teaching, even when they are no longer part of TFA. TFA is a unique service program that allows direct career entry while all other programs, by nature, are only temporary programs with no opportunity for advancement—making the Professional orientation to service programs unusual. For this reason, I do not draw conclusions about how social class influences this approach with only two students, though based on its extrinsic focus it is likely more common for students from lower social class backgrounds. That being said, most TFA participants do not stay in the same school after they complete the two-year program and many do not remain in the teaching profession at all (Donaldson and Johnson 2011; Heineke et al. 2014). In this study, only two of the seven students who applied for TFA intend to stay in teaching in the long term (the Professionals), supporting prior research that even among TFA participants, the Professional orientation to service program participation is unusual.

Professionals share some similarities with Enthusiasts in that they prioritize intrinsically rewarding work in the short and long term. However, Professionals differ from Enthusiasts because Professionals already have an alignment between their career aspiration and their identity, while Enthusiasts have strongly built identities but have unclear career aspirations to match them. Furthermore, Professionals use service programs to enter their chosen career and gain the necessary credentials—an extrinsic reward for participation that Enthusiasts see as unnecessary at this life stage due to their class privilege. Thus, Professionals are not using this period after college to try out new experiences like emerging adulthood theory would predict. Instead, they already see themselves as full adults entering their long-term careers.

## Discussion

This study identified four types of orientations toward service programs: 1) Backup Planners participate for extrinsic reasons, generally to gain experience necessary to begin long-term careers they would prefer to be pursuing immediately, but are unable or fear being unable to do so; 2) Delayed Careerists participate because they see the period immediately after graduation as the right time in their life course to pursue temporary work for intrinsic reasons before they pursue long-term careers that will be more extrinsically oriented; 3) Enthusiasts participate for

intrinsic reasons, generally because they have formed an identity project relating to religion or solving a social problem and seek to explore work opportunities that will allow them to follow their passions; and 4) Professionals participate in order to directly enter their long-term careers. Each of these orientations is based in part on the student's social class background and their current financial security/assistance and how these come together to shape their work values during this transition out of college: Backup Planners tend to be from the lowest social class backgrounds and feel the least financial security, Delayed Careerists tend to have moderate financial security from a variety of class backgrounds, and Enthusiasts tend to be from the highest social class backgrounds and feel the most financially secure.

These findings critically challenge emerging adulthood theory in several ways. First, in line with previous sociological literature, I find evidence that emerging adulthood is not a universally experienced development stage across social classes (Côté 2014; Deluca et al. 2016; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg 2016). This study goes beyond previous findings to show that even among students who will soon graduate from an elite university, a situation typically assumed to be most consistent with emerging adulthood (Arnett 2016b), the period is not experienced universally as a time for untethered identity exploration. Backup Planners feel constrained by their financial resources and as a result do not see the period after college graduation as time for self-exploration. They already feel like adults (Benson and Furstenberg 2006) who should ambitiously pursue their professional careers and must have responsible backup plans in place in case those initial applications are not successful. Likewise, Professionals also feel like full adults who are pursuing their long-term careers, despite being from more advantaged class backgrounds than the typical Backup Planner.

However, this study also brings a new challenge to emerging adulthood: pursuing intrinsic work because of its alignment with identity is not the same as identity exploration. At first glance, Enthusiasts and Delayed Careerists seem to align well with Arnett's (2004) emerging adulthood framework: Enthusiasts seek fulfilling experiences immediately after college in order to try out potentially rewarding career fields, and Delayed Careerists explicitly talk about the period after college as being distinct from their later careers and as an opportunity to try something exciting and different before beginning more profitable careers. However, neither group fully aligns with his argument about identity exploration. Young adults who do not know their future careers are assumed to be engaging in identity development when they try out different jobs. However, Delayed Careerists and Enthusiasts already had clear identities that they developed during college. Delayed Careerists lack the structural opportunities to pursue long-term careers that matched their identities and instead compromised by allowing themselves to engage in meaningful work short-term that aligned well with their passions. Enthusiasts assume that career opportunities that match their identities exist, but they lack the knowledge of what those careers might be. Given that students from privileged backgrounds at elite colleges often do not consider career when choosing a major (Mullen 2010), it is not surprising that some students do not know how to transfer their newly acquired passions into careers. Thus, when middle-class recent college graduates engage in short-term work, it should not necessarily be assumed that they are engaging in identity development, as they may already have strong identity but may be unsure what jobs correspond to those identities.

The findings of this study suggest that rather than seeing the rise of recent college graduates participating in service programs as a product of their developmental phase, we should understand this trend to be the reaction to conditions that vary based on the student's social class background and financial security. For instance, various labor market constraints seem to be at play in shaping their decisions. Students from more disadvantaged class backgrounds

recognize that they are at risk of underemployment after college and have no financial safety net to rely on, and turn to service programs as backup plans for building human capital for future careers and making money in the meantime. Students from more advantaged class backgrounds have been raised to seek intrinsically rewarding work and have developed strong identities in college but, in the case of Delayed Careerists, do not perceive any long-term career opportunities in the labor market to pursue these passions, and so they turn to short-term opportunities to do so. In the case of Enthusiasts, these privileged students believe that intrinsically rewarding jobs that fit their identities do exist, but they are not yet sure what those opportunities are. Finally, Professionals are taking advantage of the changed labor market that allows more people to follow nontraditional pathways into some occupations, in this case teaching. Thus, each group faces a different problem associated with the labor market, based in part on their social class differences in work values, and the successful rise of service programs may be evidence that young adults see these programs as at least partially solving the problems they face.

Therefore, the major contribution of this study is that the findings challenge the core of emerging adulthood. The theory argues that the new developmental phase is responsible for the new actions we see regarding work (and other dimensions of life) among people in their early twenties. Emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004) and other similar work (Settersten and Ray 2010) groups all young adults (or at least those graduating from college) as engaging in the same primary goal of identity development. Instead, the findings of this study suggest that young adults graduating from college face different labor market constraints and opportunities, and it is the intersection of these constraints and their social class positioning that explains changes we have observed in recent decades regarding the rise of job shopping (Settersten and Ray 2010) and the growth of service programs and short-term work experiences prior to careers.

Two additional minor contributions emerge from this study. First, is the implication that college can change work values for youth, particularly increasing the intrinsic value of work for some students. All of the Enthusiasts from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced confusion and pushback from their families because they chose to pursue their passions over making money and seeking stability after college. Recall that Steven, a working-class Enthusiast, explained tension with his family over his decision. He explained that they saw the purpose of college as “making money” and being “financially stable,” so that participating in a low-paid service program “wasn’t a direct dividend” from his “investment into college.” He intended to follow their advice about extrinsic rewards from work until he developed a strong passion for Christianity and felt that God was calling him to participate in a service program instead. Thus, he dramatically changed his work values. More research is needed to understand the mechanisms by which some students, especially those from lower social class backgrounds, change their work values during college. Liberal arts and elite universities typically have a culture and institutional support for pursuing majors that align with student passions and identities (Mullen 2010), and this norm of intrinsic major choices may similarly change students’ values about work if students have the opportunity to develop strong identities in college. More research on this topic could better address how these changes occur and who is most susceptible to them.

A second minor contribution from this study is a more nuanced understanding of how work values change during the transition to adulthood. Instead of a linear development of work values from adolescence to young adulthood, I find evidence that some young adults plan to prioritize different work values during different stages of their life course. In this case, the Delayed Careerists currently seek work for primarily intrinsic rewards, but they anticipate being less

intrinsically motivated and more extrinsically motivated in later careers. Likewise, the Professionals were untroubled with their low pay immediately after graduation due to their life course position of being single and in their twenties, yet they assume that extrinsic rewards will become more important in their later careers as their financial necessities increase with family obligations.

Nevertheless, this study relied on 30 in-depth interviews at one elite university. Thus, the findings here should be tested and extended. Future research should test the generalizability of this typology. The university in this study is exceptionally good at meeting full financial needs of low-income students and has low tuition fees relative to other elite universities. Thus, while I did find patterns by social class, some students were able to have moderate current financial security despite lower social class origins, potentially allowing more variability by economic position than would be available for students who graduate from less affordable colleges. Institutional effects across different kinds of universities should be examined in future research to see how they affect post-graduate aspirations, including for-service programs and other short-term work options. Women were slightly overrepresented in the Enthusiasts category and slightly underrepresented in the others, consistent with other research that suggests that especially upper-middle-class women at elite universities are likely to pursue work for almost exclusively intrinsic rewards (Mullen 2010, 2014). However, future research should unpack how gender shapes post-graduation aspirations, including whether differences are due to general patterns of gender differences in work values (Krahn and Galambos 2014) and post-graduate aspirations (Allison and Ralston 2017), or whether universities as institutions push women toward these lower-paid service programs and jobs. Finally, scholars should study how this growing service program trend in the U.S. differs from the well-established gap year phenomena in other Western countries, which is typically completed between high school and college (King 2011; Snee 2013). In the U.S. this trend seems to be most common after college as a way to transition to work or as a gap before graduate school (Settersten and Ray 2010). Thus, future research could study the educational implications of completing service programs or gap years before or after college.

## Conclusion

This study sought to answer why college students aspire to participate in service programs after graduation and whether the reasons are consistent with emerging adulthood. This theory would predict that all students would see the period after college graduation as a time for identity development (Arnett 2004). However, these results show that this perspective is limited in several ways. First, some college students, even at elite institutions, already see themselves as fully adult and prioritize pursuing their adult career aspirations immediately after college. They want jobs that will be stable and well-paid, or they want to enter graduate programs necessary to achieve those professional careers. Second, not all students can afford to explore their identity. Engaging in identity exploration implies a level of financial resources and security that is unavailable for college graduates from working-class backgrounds and even many lower-middle-class backgrounds. Parents have often exhausted their ability to financially support their children, and thus their children must provide for themselves. Furthermore, lower-class students have not been socialized to prioritize meaningful work over financial security (Johnson et al. 2012). These findings support previous studies that find a class gap in ability to partake in civic engagement (Schradié 2018)—due in part to different perceptions of volunteer work (Son and Wilson 2017)—and that the transition to adulthood is

heterogeneous (Ryberg 2018). The third and most novel challenge to emerging adulthood is that not all students who are unsure about their career aspirations should be conceptualized as engaging in identity development. Having a strong identity but being unsure what career best fits that identity is distinct from having a not yet fully formed identity—a distinction not previously explained in research on the transition to adulthood.

Service programs are unusual in that they almost exclusively allow no room for advancement, but they generally require a college degree and allow for young adults to pursue work they find interesting. Thus, while this study only examined college student orientations to participation in service programs, it seems possible that these findings can be extended to other kinds of work, especially other temporary work after graduation such as internships, yearlong fellowship programs, and other positions that fit this unusual work structure. Short-term work programs seem to be increasingly popular for recent college graduates, and my findings suggest that, like the rise of nonstandard work for people without college degrees (Kalleberg 2018), this may be a response to the structural conditions of the labor market and higher education, as experienced differently by students of different social class backgrounds and financial security. For disadvantaged students who pursue these programs, they are responding to an increasingly competitive labor market for college degrees holders (Horowitz 2018) and are trying to avoid the rising pattern of underemployment of recent college graduates in positions that do not require college degrees (Kalleberg 2018). For more financially secure or even privileged students, the orientation to participate seems to be a response to other structural conditions. For Delayed Careerists, they are responding to the fact that many professional or white-collar careers do not align with identities they constructed in college. They want to use the time after college as their opportunity to pursue more meaningful work than they anticipate in their future careers. For Enthusiasts, they are responding to an institutional norm in elite colleges to choose their majors independent of career (Mullen 2010). However, these institutions lack sufficient career counseling to help students understand what possible careers they can pursue based on their interests (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Thus, they see service programs as an opportunity to fill this gap and potentially give them insights into careers that align with the interests they spent their college years developing. For Professionals, they are taking advantage of the recent labor market changes that enables people to adopt more varied pathways into careers than was previously the case.

Overall, the widespread prevalence of emerging adulthood as the primary explanation for the work behaviors of recent college graduates is fundamentally flawed. By focusing on how these behaviors are due to their developmental phase of life, we risk ignoring the structural conditions that vary by social class and are responsible for the behaviors we seek to understand, and in turn, the policy interventions that may be necessary. For instance, the Backup Planners in this study are in a potentially perilous position in their transition out of college: they want to pursue their long-term career goals, they are rightly afraid they might not be successful, and they turn to service programs in hopes that they will offer human capital and temporary financial stability. However, research is not yet clear about whether they are right in their assumptions that service programs will help them avoid underemployment. If we assumed that their pursuit of these programs was simply due to identity exploration, we would miss this group of students' need for help in successfully transitioning into their career aspirations immediately out of college. Likewise, by interpreting Enthusiast behavior as simply engaging in identity development, we miss the critical need college students have for active career counseling to help them match their passions to careers that exist—especially for those who did not consider their career aspirations when choosing a major. In all, scholars need to

stop focusing on the early twenties as a distinct life stage shared by all young adults and instead critically examine the labor market constraints young adults face, especially how these constraints vary by social class background and other social positions.

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