IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS:
THE INFLUENCE OF PERSPECTIVE ON HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS’ CAREER CHOICES, AND HOW THESE CHOICES AFFECT JOB SATISFACTION

By

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ABSTRACT

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This research examines the societal and parental perceptions of various career paths, and how these perceptions influence the educational decisions high-school students make upon graduating. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the consequences of these decisions by way of job satisfaction and resultant levels of parental satisfaction. Through an anonymous, online survey conducted on a Google Forms platform by way of the social media site Facebook, 50 participants with various backgrounds reported demographic, educational, and employment information. These responses were analyzed using a mixed methods approach that used statistical tests such as T-tests, Pearson Correlations and ANOVAS, as well as a qualitative examination of textual responses to look for patterns within the survey population. Several key findings include a lack of discrepancy in reported levels of job satisfaction between those who attended a four-year university and those who did not, a high level of parental influence over those who decided to attend college, and lower levels of parental satisfaction among those who did not attend a four-year university as compared to those who did attend. The results
implicate a need for a more diversified high school curriculum that supports the
development of non-college-based careers, as well as a reduction in the societal stigma
associated with blue-collar work.
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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a small town, at the end of a road with a big yard and lots of woods for play. The fall was my favorite time of year, when we made fresh applesauce from the trees and preserved apples and pears to eat for the rest of the year. We made homemade beef jerky and fruit-roll-ups, and spent afternoons snacking on peas right from the vine. Although my mother was an artist and an entrepreneur, she was also a stay-at-home mom for my sister and me for the majority of our childhoods. My father was a merchant marine, which meant that, although he would be gone for four months at a time, he would then come home for four straight months – meaning that for four months at a time I had two stay-at-home parents. I always knew I had someone to come home to, someone who would wake me up, pack my lunch and drive me to school everyday, and someone who would support me as I struggled through homework. When my father was home, I had two people I could count on for these things, and myriad opportunities for creative, fun experiences in our spare time. Although life took its toll on this idyllic childhood of mine, it always remained a standard of success in the back of my mind as the type of life I would like to provide for my children someday – staying at home, living the country life, and providing rich experiences and home-cooked meals for my family.

The irony here is that, although my mother had discontinued college to get married and be a parent, there was always an expectation that my sister and I would go to college after high school, and become professional women with full-time careers. In fact,
it took two degrees and an unwanted promotion for me to realize that this definition of success – the one that had been bestowed on me through the expectations of my parents and my community, and quite honestly the one I had convinced myself to believe as well – was not, in fact, my definition of success. When the opportunity for a large promotion came I realized that days and weeks behind a desk were the reality of the future I had imagined I was building, and that a job requiring this type of desk work would slowly but surely kill my soul. In addition, for the past five years I had been working on a project I believed in – one I thought would get me outside and allow me to teach and be creative. Soon it became obvious that this, too, was a rouse, as I found myself consumed with spending more time on the computer, and less time engaged with students or nature – all for $8.50 - $12.00 an hour. As I watched my professional aspirations dissolve, one thing in my life remained surprisingly consistent – the waitressing job I had held for nine years while going to school.

I started working at the restaurant at seventeen, bussing tables. As a busser, I averaged between $15 and $24 an hour with my wages and tips. It was hard work in a busy place, and some nights meant I was running for five hours straight, with an extra hour or two of additional side-work on top of the bussing job. It took six years for me to become a server, as the majority of the servers had been there since the restaurant opened in 1988. A few of them are still there today. Once I started serving, life at ‘The Grill’ improved as my hourly income significantly increased and the physical strain decreased. Although my professional aspirations began to disintegrate, my restaurant work continued to be an enjoyable and lucrative experience. I loved the fast pace of the
restaurant, the mental challenge of keeping the table requests organized and fulfilled in a timely fashion, the conversation with the customers, and the interactions with my coworkers, who had become like family after nine years. I began to observe my coworkers who had made careers out of waitressing. I realized that all of these women, these career waitresses, were happy. They had families, hobbies, interests, and a job that gave them the time, flexibility, and mental bandwidth to partake in their life interests. It was here that I started to redefine success for myself, and as a result became increasingly interested in how the people in my life – especially the happy ones – perceived success in their lives.

First Steps

When embarking on the journey to define success for myself, I became increasingly interested in how the rest of America defines success. I began by informally asking questions of the people around me. What was important to people as they pursued and evaluated their own professional lives? What did they see as signs of success? Was it money? Prestige? Serving their community? Paying the bills? Living out their passions? I wanted to know why people chose the work that they did, how they got there, and how satisfied they were once they reached their goals. Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) define success as “accomplishing those things that are valued by one’s culture, flourishing in terms of the goals set forth by one’s society” (p. 822). As I engaged in conversations about success, I became intrigued by the number of people who had gone to college solely out of the desire to fulfill societal goals. I met cooks, construction
workers, and secretaries who started college at 18 because it was “the next step,” only to find themselves out of school and deep in debt, with no desire to work in their fields of study. Conversely, others had found jobs as teachers, biologists, and engineers – but these individuals were not necessarily the majority. I also met people at the top of their respective fields, with no formal education beyond high school. These people worked their way up from entry-level positions, slowly gaining the knowledge and connections to create their own businesses, or to be recognized as highly qualified by existing organizations. While engaged in conversation with the people I had informally surveyed, I noticed three important points. First, most people defined success as being happy, and the definition and correlation of these two concepts is the central focus of this research. Second, there is a stigma attached to blue-collar work that deters many people from pursuing it, and causes many who do choose that path to feel the need to justify their choices. Third, as a result of this stigma and the increase of students going to college, the economy has seen an inundation of white-collar workers while at the same time facing a shortage of those qualified to work in blue-collar skilled trades such as welding, plumbing, etc. (Boggs, 2011; Kelderman, 2010).

This study takes a close look at the messages we communicate to our children and mentees, and considers whether college really is the right path to success for all high school graduates. Furthermore, it seeks to clarify the relationship between success and happiness in order to understand why people invest years of their lives and thousands of dollars in the pursuit of higher paying and/or more satisfying jobs.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread,
for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor;
in short for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.

- Studs Terkel

Introduction

As teachers, parents, and mentors we communicate myriad messages to our children regarding their futures and their best paths to success. As school faculty, staff, and administrators we offer various tracks in high school, ranging from vocational programs to college preparatory classes. This study addresses the influence of social norms on these messages and practices, and how these norms influence the future success and happiness of our students. This social and cultural phenomenon will be discussed through a review of the related literature, previous research, and current public dialogue. I begin this literature review by describing the most popular perspectives of success; define “blue-collar” and “white-collar” professions and the relationship between the two classes; outline the previous and current generations’ numbers of baccalaureate students and vocational students and their correlated expected incomes; address the link between blue-collar work and high school tracking and community college routes; and finally, explain
why the happiness of our fellow citizens should be of any concern and how we, as educators, mentors, parents, and administrators influence the choices our children make in their own pursuit of success.

**Success.** In reviewing the literature there are few, if any, sources that attempt to define success as a term in and of itself. Although many sources discuss how factors such as environment, positive affect (happiness), and education are linked to success, most leave the term undefined; presumably because success is a personal experience with an inherent shared understanding. If we apply the definition put forth by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), that success is achieving goals that are valued by one’s culture, then it would behoove us to look at the messages communicated by mainstream media. A large proportion of mainstream media functions to convince consumers that they need more material goods in order to be perceived as successful members of society. Advertising isn’t cheap, thus it makes sense that companies would choose to spend money on messages that will create a financial return in the form of consumer purchases. Regardless of the motivation, these messages imply that more money will bring higher levels of success and, ultimately, happiness. However, research indicates that once basic needs such as food and shelter have been met, there is only a small link between income and happiness (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). Correlated with material prosperity, the push for post-high school education implies that higher education is the only route to a higher salary. Slogans such as “Learn More. Earn More. Are you ready to get started?” (Central Arizona College) “Success Starts Here” (Columbia State Community College), and “Your Future Begins Here” (El Centro College) all contribute to the phenomenon
that “individuals routinely pursue degrees, promotions […] believing that more of each will result in greater happiness” (Schnittker, 2008, p. 234).

Moving away from messages that are rampant in mainstream media, we can consider success through the lens of simplicity. Johnson (2004) calls attention to the merit that has been placed on simplicity by religion and philosophy throughout history, citing texts from multiple authors as well as philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle. As a social movement, Voluntary Simplicity (VS), is believed to have been conceived as early as 1936 (Huneke, 2005). As it applies here, Voluntary Simplicity is characterized by life choices that revolve around minimizing material possessions, focusing less on generating monetary wealth, striving to engage in purposeful work, and cultivating meaningful relationships and experiences (Huneke, 2005; Johnson, 2004). One important caveat here is the emphasis on life choices vs. imposed simplicity through poverty. In this sense, VS is a luxury afforded to those who aren’t struggling just to get by in life. In addition to the references to simple living that are prevalent throughout history, numerous studies have been conducted on the social movement since the 1970s, offering evidence that a simpler, less income-focused lifestyle is one that offers worthwhile intrinsic rewards (Grigsby, 2004; Huneke, 2005; Johnson, 2004; Spina, 1998). Huneke (2005) offers an insightful perspective on this movement through the lens of Maslow’s theory of human motivation. This theory stipulates that humans prioritize needs in a hierarchical fashion, progressing with the basic physiological needs (food, shelter, sleep) to those that are less tangible, such as security, love, and ultimately self-realization. The hierarchical nature implies that one cannot focus on the higher-order needs without first having one’s
basic needs met. In essence, Huneke (2005) describes how VS allows many adults to embark on a search for self-actualization by searching for meaning and fulfillment through authentic experience and human connection, rather than through a pre-packaged type of identity that can be purchased in a store. Huneke (2005) explains the connection to career choice by stating: “Conscious living also can extend to how one chooses to support him- or herself, considering whether the job is fulfilling and whether it contributes to the human community as a whole” (p. 530). In the scope of VS, then, success is determined not by income or material possessions, but rather the level of fulfillment and depth of connection one feels in daily experiences.

For the purpose of this study, success will be defined as a compromise between the two perspectives outlined above. Shying away from both rampant materialism and monkish simplicity, in this study success will be discussed as it relates to happiness by way of job satisfaction. While it cannot be denied that there are a plethora of factors that either contribute to or detract from an individual’s happiness, it is equally undeniable that one’s job has an enormous amount of influence over the amount of stress or contentment one encounters on a daily basis. Thus, this study will use the definition of success in relation to job satisfaction as put forth by Mora, Garcia-Aracil, and Vila (2007), in which both monetary and non-monetary benefits are taken into consideration. While Mora et al. (2007), acknowledge that non-monetary benefits are “difficult to identify and measure because most of them are subjective, that is, they depend on personal preferences,” they also cite the need to take these benefits into consideration as they contribute to an individual’s overall well-being and quality of life (p. 29).
In terms of non-monetary job benefits, we will look to the definitions set forth by Mora, et al. (2007) and consider three variables, including fringe benefits, working conditions, and consumption benefits. According to Mora, et al. (2007),

*Fringe benefits* are defined as goods, services, or deferred money income received by the employee but paid for by the employer (e.g. medical insurance, pension plans, paid vacations and sick leave). The *working conditions* relate the job’s material working environment, such as health and safety characteristics of the job, the rigidity of the work schedule, and so on. The *consumption benefits* comprise the current positive flow of satisfaction provided by the work situation: helping others is a consumption benefit of some jobs, as are the interest of the tasks, challenge, and social relationships associated to jobs. Most consumption benefits represent subjective reactions of individuals to their situation. (p. 30).

In addition to these classifications, the authors provide a definition given by Locke (1976), which states that job satisfaction is “a pleasure or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (as cited in Mora, et al., 2007, p. 30).

In determining success through monetary measures, there arise some complications when trying to address the country as a whole. Given that cost of living and family size fluctuates so greatly between geographical areas and individuals, respectively, it seems nearly impossible to define monetary success by designating an annual income standard. Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) acknowledge this complication in their attempts to define the working class, noting that monetary “cut-offs” could vary
between $30,000 and $60,000. Addressing the parameters on a global scale, Wheary (2009) describes how the definition of middle class “shifts from place to place, from economy to economy” (p. 76). However, Wheary (2009) offers a solution in a definition that has the potential to hold true regardless of the local economy and cost of living, in which “being middle class generally means having enough income to meet the basic needs and afford a few extras” (p. 76, 2009). For the purpose of this study, monetary success will be viewed in light of participation in this middle class, and defined as an individual’s ability to not only meet basic needs, but also provide for a modest amount of “extras.”

The relationship between class and success goes far beyond simply defining the middle class, however, instead being inextricably tied to the values and norms that are held within and between the blue- and white-collar cultures of the United States. The relationship between blue- and white-collar cultures will be discussed in the following section.

**Colored Collars.** Some of the discrepancies between how success is defined can be traced back to class distinctions. America has long been a country composed of both aristocrats and laborers, and this foundation has manifested itself throughout history and into the present with the distinctions commonly known as blue- and white-collar professions. The most prevalent traits of each class are defined below.

**Blue-collar.** Blue-collar work has traditionally been composed of more difficult, physically taxing labor. For example, blue-collar generally refers to jobs such as factory workers, food service employees, mechanics, housekeepers, electricians, plumbers, etc.
However, the definition is not as clear as it may seem upon first impression. Alfred Lubrano (2004), the white-collar son of a blue-collar Brooklyn bricklayer, nominally addresses the difficulty in defining the distinction between the two classes. Lubrano explains the division provided by economists, in which white-collar workers are divided into the upper and lower categories of managers/professionals and clerks, respectively, and blue-collar workers are divided into skilled laborers, unskilled laborers, and farmers. Notwithstanding this seemingly logical distinction, he points out the difficulties that arise when a plumber is able to incur a higher annual income than that of a college professor – in this case, the plumber may be middle class financially, and yet of a lower class in the perceived intellectual sense. Lubrano (2004) settles on defining the white-collar middle class as those who work with their minds in professional occupations, as opposed to the blue-collar lower class who work with their hands doing manual labor. In a similar, yet contradictory position, Rose (2009) addresses a misconception held by popular culture in that blue-collar work is composed of mindless, unskilled labor. While he agrees that blue-collar work is composed of manual tasks that do not necessarily require a high level of formal education, he opposes the notion that those in blue-collar professions are lacking in cognitive abilities. He begins by stating that “Our cultural iconography promotes the muscled arm, sleeve rolled tight against biceps, but no brightness behind the eye, no image that links hand and brain” (Rose, 2009, para.10). Citing examples of carpenters, welders, and waitresses, Rose (2009) describes the levels of skill required in manipulating materials, solving problems, and multi-tasking in fast-paced environments. In a similar vein, self-designated “blue-collar prof” Rey Wodjat (2013) describes how the
skills and knowledge held by chefs and welders, for example, are hard-earned and run much deeper than what might be visible on the surface, even though these professions may not require a college education. Further exploration of this concept will be addressed through the lens of the trades.

**White-collar.** Building upon the characteristics bestowed upon blue-collar workers, it is imperative to look at the traits that have been deemed indicative of white-collar work. Bain and Price (1972) attempt to describe the term by using a consistent and theoretical basis, rather than a superficial categorization of lists of occupations. Although primarily referring to a European population, many of the points they make remain salient in American culture. Initially, they draw attention to the historical evolution of the brain vs. brawn concept by noting that

> The notion of a ‘white-collar employee’ first crystallized around clerical employment at a time when access to the minimum educational qualifications required for such work was restricted and when manual work typically involved a high level of direct physical exertion (p. 326).

The implication here is that white-collar work was, historically, difficult to attain and thus more of a privilege, distant from the physical toiling of blue-collar work. Inextricably tied to this concept of restricted access is that of wealthy privilege, which can be seen in the propensity of certain groups of children to follow certain paths. For example, while the children of the upper classes would often continue pursuing education through university, those of the lower classes would often work in factories or on farms in lieu of attending even elementary school (Gratton & Moen, 2004; Wallis & Webb,
Although many sources cite the prevalence of child labor in lower-class, high-poverty immigrant families as a necessary survival technique, Gratton and Moen (2004) refute this notion, arguing instead that in many cases child labor was the result of cultural norms, and an attempt to “establish an American standard of living” by bringing in extra wages (p. 363). Whether borne out of financial destitution or a desire for a slightly better life, immigrant parents saw child labor as a normal, expected occurrence (Gratton & Moen, 2004). Indeed, even the children seemed to prefer the factory over the schoolhouse, as evidenced in one child’s statement that “You never understand what they tells you in school, and you can learn right off to do things in a factory” (as cited in Gratton & Moen, 2004). In contrast, children of native parents were “shielded […] from work” and “encouraged […] to go to school” (Gratton & Moen 2004). A prestigious history magazine for children summarizes the class distinctions in early America succinctly, in an article that outlines the daily lives for children in different social classes in colonial Virginia (‘Growing Up’, 2013). The lives of the gentry children are filled with academic and social studies, as well as many extracurricular activities such as hunting, horseback riding, and dancing lessons (‘Growing Up’, 2013). Looking at the gentry sons in early modern England, even “those gentry sons who entered apprenticeships did so at the highest end of the market for training” (Wallis & Webb, 2011, p. 44). Indeed, Wallis and Webb (2001) found that “almost 90 per cent of gentry sons were bound to master in one of London’s ‘Great Twelve’ companies: the members of these twelve companies or guilds had a monopoly on high civic office and they tended also to be home to clusters of merchants” (p. 44). Thus, even those children of the upper class who pursued
apprenticeships rather than the university found themselves in clean, business-related fields, in contrast to their lower-class peers who would instead grow up working as farmers or in other industrial labor-based tasks.

Given the history of the United States, it should come as no surprise that the class characteristics of England and other European countries remained salient in the developing new America. As families emigrated from Europe, they carried with them their ideals, their families, and in some cases, their fortunes. Those that came to America with money further perpetuated the class discrepancies, as they relied on either slaves or the children of poor immigrants to complete labor-intensive tasks while educating their own children through the employment of private tutors (Gratton & Moen, 2004; ‘Growing Up’, 2013; Wallis & Webb, 2011). These upper-class children, then, continued to pursue more aristocratic, educational, white-collar type careers and lifestyles, while their less-fortunate counterparts remained in the toils of manual labor. Lubrano (2004) cites several examples of modern students at Ivy League universities able to trace their families’ successes back several generations, while first generation students such as himself were the first to leave their own close-knit, often ethnically homogenous neighborhoods and corresponding ways of labor-based life. The historical implication of European aristocracies can be seen in the current attributes of white-collar workers. In contrast to their blue-collar peers who pride themselves on being blunt in their opinions and believe that hard work is the only way to achieve professional success, white-collar workers are skilled in diplomacy and social nuances, and recognize the role of tact and nepotism in climbing the professional ladder (Lubrano, 2004). Furthermore, children of
the upper and middle classes are instilled with a sense of self-advocacy not inherent in those of the lower classes, who are taught to respect authority rather than challenge it (Lubrano, 2004). While the cultural differences between white- and blue-collar groups are extensive and far-reaching, it is beyond the scope of this research to discuss all ramifications of these. One important implication of the cultural differences, however, can be seen in the attitudes each group holds in regards to the other, which will be discussed in the following section.

**Mutual disrespect.** While the focus of this research is directed primarily towards the stigma attached to blue-collar and vocational occupations, one interesting finding has been that both blue- and white-collar members of society hold each other in contempt. In cataloguing the experiences of over 100 people whom he categorizes as “Straddlers,” or first-generation college students with blue-collar roots, Lubrano (2004) returns repeatedly to feelings of resentment held by those who perceive their white-collar peers as entitled, manipulative employees who get where they are by way of family ties and money, rather than based on their own merit and competence. Lubrano (2004) also draws attention to the rift created within blue-collar communities when children leave their neighborhoods to pursue higher education. The majority of “Straddlers” he interviewed described experiences of being ostracized by friends and even families for trying to be “better” than those in their home communities (2004). In contrast, Wodjat (2013) cites the Senate testimony given by Mike Rowe of the Discovery Channel’s series Dirty Jobs, in which he eloquently stated:
We’ve elevated the importance of ‘higher education’ to such a lofty perch that all other forms of knowledge are now labeled ‘alternative.’ Millions of parents and kids see apprenticeships and on-the-job training opportunities as ‘vocational consolation prizes,’ best suited for those not cut out for a four-year degree. And we still talk about millions of ‘shovel ready’ jobs for a society that doesn’t encourage people to pick up a shovel (para. 4).

The message carried in his statement reflects the sentiment that for many, vocational work is a last resort for those who aren’t able to succeed in the world of academia, which, as implied here, is the most desired route. The irony inherent in the cross-cultural perceptions between white- and blue-collar workers is captured beautifully in Wodjat’s (2013) argument that “while intellectual pursuits are valuable and necessary, nothing physical gets built without physical labor. Balance is key; mutual respect for intellectual and physical labor is essential for us to prosper and advance as a society.” (para. 9)

Unfortunately, mutual respect is a sentiment that is largely lacking between class cultures, and white-collar careers remain on a pedestal as the most desired career paths. Moving forward from this belief that a college education and a white-collar career is the surest path to success, this review will now explore how this belief has affected the demographics of colleges throughout the last two generations.

**Education and Income.** Given the messages that are endorsed by society in regards to the dignity or lack thereof associated with white- and blue-collar careers, respectively, and the desire of most parents for their children to go to college, it seems appropriate to assess the changes in college attendance in the previous and current generations. In doing
so, we see a marked increase in the numbers of students who have matriculated with four-year degrees from the previous generation (those graduating college in 1975) to the current generation (those graduating college in 2010) (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Based on the population of those 25 year and older, in 1975, 16,244,000 students, or 14%, had completed four or more years of college in comparison to the 59,840,000, or 30%, in 2010 (US Census Bureau, n.d.). This number continues to grow, becoming 32% in 2013 (US Census Bureau, n.d.). In looking at more detailed data that tracks the specifics types of post-high school degrees attained, the percent of students pursuing all degrees have continued to grow for the past 13 years for which this type data is available (US Census Bureau, n.d.). These findings contribute to the belief that has begun to surface among recent college graduates and economists that in modern-day America, a Bachelor’s degree is no longer sufficient to “get ahead of the pack,” and that college graduates can no longer be sure that their investment will be worthwhile (Adams, 2013; ‘Are Recent College Graduates Finding Good Jobs?’, 2014; Vedder, Denhart, Denhart, Matgouranis, & Robe, 2010). However, this theory is not a new one. In his 1976 book *The Overeducated American*, Harvard economist Richard Freeman argues that a large cohort of baby boomers will find themselves flooding the market with college degrees, resulting in lower wage returns from investments in education (Smith & Welch, 1978). In regards to wages, his theories were proven unfounded by time as college graduates became the only demographic to see an increase in wages as those of high school graduates remained relatively stagnant (Carey, 2011). It should come as no surprise that college graduates working in their related professions do enjoy higher wages than their less-educated peers.
They are, after all, more highly trained in their fields and hold a specialized knowledge for which they have paid good money. However, some researchers argue that college graduates may earn more than their high-school educated peers in jobs that do not require college degrees, such as those in retail and secretarial positions, due to the “advanced intellectual skills” acquired in college (Doyle, 2011, p. 57). While this argument may hold true for those working in certain white-collar professions, this is not necessarily the case for those working in careers such as food service. A waitress with a baccalaureate is highly unlikely to earn a higher hourly wage than her high school educated peers, although one could argue that interpersonal skills learned through the college experience could assist movement into a managerial position. In considering whether college graduates working in unrelated fields earn more or less than their less-educated peers, it becomes imperative to address the question of why college graduates would be working in fields such as food service, which returns us to the previous suggestion of too many graduates for too few jobs. Several studies cite statistics showing that almost half of college graduates are not working or are underemployed, numbers that have grown in the past decade (Adams, 2013; ‘Are Recent College Graduates Finding Good Jobs?’; 2014; Vedder et al., 2010). Reasons for underemployment vary, including the inability to find a career-focused job, a preference for less stressful work, or a desire to focus on less lucrative interests. But while these underemployment numbers tend to level out from around 50% to 30% by the time college graduates reach their thirties, which suggest that it may simply be a matter of time in finding a suitable job, the fact remains that higher education may not be the golden ticket.
to a better life. Furthermore, many who initially pursue a college education fail to see it through to graduation, the perils of which will be discussed below.

**College Dropouts.** While the exact numbers vary, it is estimated that between 45 and 70 percent of students who begin college never matriculate (Carey, 2011; Korn, 2014; Vedder, Denhart, Robe, & Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP), 2013). Some leave because they decide to pursue a different path, some become bored with the coursework, and some are simply unable to complete the coursework (Carey, 2011; Korn, 2014). Carey (2011) notes that of students enrolling in four-year colleges, approximately one-third are required to take remedial courses, a proportion that doubles in two-year schools. Given this initial deficiency in basic skills, perhaps it shouldn’t be alarming that so many students fail to complete their college careers.

Regardless of the reasons for early departures, these students find themselves disadvantaged on multiple accounts when they enter the workforce (Korn, 2014). First, they are often behind their age cohort in work experience, lagging behind those who sought out employment immediately after completing high school. Second, they are also at a disadvantage in regards to those who complete college, lacking the necessary educational credentials. Third, these students are often saddled with student debt, which in some cases can be quite high. Finally, these students suffer from an employer bias, in which potential employers perceive college dropouts as less competent and reliable as their matriculated peers (Korn, 2014). Given these alarming quantities of students who fail to complete college, it seems as though the university path may not be the best option for all students upon leaving high school. In addition, although education itself is not
detrimental, it would seem as though the financial ramifications and implications for future employment when one fails to complete a course of study are worth considering when appraising post-high school decisions. In addition to the theories previously considered regarding a job market flooding of baccalaureate students and the high cost of failing to complete a course of study, this review will now address a vocational arena that has recently lamented a lack of qualified applicants.

The Trades. Before discussing the economic situation regarding the trades, it is important to define the term, as well as look at the trades through a historical perspective. Earlier in this review, blue-collar work was defined through two different lenses – that of Lubrano (2004) in which blue-collar workers use their hands, as opposed to white-collar workers who use their minds, and that of Rose (2009) who laments the fact that the perception of blue-collar work has often neglected to consider the amount of cognitive effort that is required in these so-called “mindless” manual tasks. Matthew Crawford (2009) provides some valuable insight into the origins and validity of both of these perceptions, in his book Shop Class as Soulcraft. To provide a brief summary, he describes the efforts of Frederick Winslow Taylor, who developed the scientific management theory in the early 1900’s (Crawford, 2009). Through this practice, Taylor sought to interview experts in their fields, often over the course of several months, to develop a detailed account of all the steps required when creating a product or a process (Crawford, 2009). The ultimate goal in this effort was to concentrate all of the expert knowledge required in a field into the hands of a few managers who would then dole out minute tasks to less-skilled employees. Because the tasks no longer required a complete
understanding and working knowledge of the entire process, it was possible to hire less skilled and ultimately less expensive employees. One prime example that Crawford gives is that of the Ford assembly line, introduced in 1913 (2009). Rather than requiring an employee to understand how the cars operated and functioned as a cohesive unit, the employee only needed to understand the single, disconnected step that he was required to perform repeatedly throughout the workday. Crawford goes on to explain how this process of dissecting jobs to reduce the cost of employees has continued to seep into the majority of professions, both blue- and white-collar, thus creating work environments in both fields that are composed primarily of mindless, repetitive tasks (2009). Furthermore, this systematic dissection of myriad professions has led to the proliferation of jobs becoming either automated or sent overseas, where labor is even cheaper (2009). The exception to this risk, Crawford states, lies in certain place-based trades, or in those fields that cannot be automated or dissected due to the experiential and/or intuitive knowledge required by the practitioner (2009). Some examples he provides are that of physicians, auto mechanics, and plumbers, just to name a few. In each of these professions, it becomes imperative that the practitioner be on-site, working with the patient – whether that patient is a person, a car, or a sink. In addition, because these tasks are often comprised of diagnosing and addressing a problem, it becomes necessary that the practitioner also have a working knowledge of the system at hand so as to be able to understand and troubleshoot the system in the most efficient way. Crawford, as a motorcycle mechanic himself, noted that in most cases textbook knowledge is insufficient for this process. Rather, because systems, prior use, materials, and manufacturers vary so
greatly, a comprehensive understanding and intuitive knowledge are the most important tools in a tradesmen’s workbench (2009). Even in the case of carpentry, where one is building from the ground up, individual conditions such as slope, climate, and architecture contribute to the need for a greater understanding than can be provided by a rote set of rules (2009). In light of all of this, Crawford argues that these jobs – those that are based on skill, prior experience, and place – are those that are the least likely to be subjected to the scientific management practice of dissection and dissemination, thus maintaining more cognitive satisfaction and job security. In addition, he notes the financial and personally fulfilling aspects of working in the trades. As a doctor of Philosophy who once held a position as director of a prestigious think tank in Washington DC, he describes the vast difference in his feelings of daily accomplishment between his prior career and that of his current one, in which he wrenches on motorcycles all day. As director of the think tank, he notes how he often felt unproductive, as though he couldn’t ever really articulate what it was that he had actually accomplished on any given day. In contrast, his current profession provides tangible results and an inherent satisfaction that comes with seeing a previously lifeless bike go roaring out onto the road (on a personal note as someone who has spent hours wrenching on my own truck, covered in grease and sweat, uttering words that some may believe should not come out of a lady’s mouth, I can attest to the indescribable satisfaction that comes with successfully fixing something for yourself). On a more pragmatic basis, Crawford acknowledges the financial aspect of working in a skilled trade. He considers fields such as plumbing, auto repair, and carpentry, noting average hourly wages from $40 - $80 (2009). These numbers fluctuate
depending on experience, skill, and profession, but it can be argued that these are most certainly living wages. Moving on from Crawford, George Boggs (2010) and Anton Troianovski (2008) both speak to the need for more employees that are skilled in the trades. While Boggs is the President and CEO emeritus of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), which may bias his argument for an increase of enrollment in community college vocational programs, Troianovski is a presumably unbiased journalist for the Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition (Boggs, 2010; Troianovski, 2008). In Troianovski’s article, he outlines the employment struggle that many manufacturing and construction companies are facing as their current employees begin to reach retirement age (2008). He notes a shortage of “welders, pipe fitters, and other high-demand workers,” which he attributes to young people’s “perception that blue-collar trades offer less status, money, and chance for advancement than white-collar jobs, and that college is the best investment for everyone” (2008, para. 2). He notes that although the slumping economy may have affected people who did similar jobs for residential markets, the industrial market is continuing to grow, and facing a growing disparity between the number of jobs needing to be filled and the number of skilled employees available to fill those positions (2008). Furthermore, he notes that skilled entry-level employees often earn more than their similarly-aged peers who go to college, in addition to the financial benefits of earning wages while learning on the job, rather than racking up student debt and working a part-time job while completing school (2008). Ultimately, it seems as though vocational work may, in fact, be a cognitively and financially rewarding career path for those who choose it. This review will now turn to
addressing how perceptions of blue- and white-collar careers have affected the options available to high school students as they begin thinking about their futures.

**High School Paths.** Written into law with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which mandated federal funding for vocational education, the concept of tracking students reaches back more than a century, and contains elements of Taylorism and the desire to cater education to the needs of industry (Graubard, 2004; Lewis & Cheng, 2006). Essentially, tracking is the process by which students are put into various classes based upon their academic competencies (Argys, Brewer, & Rees 1996). In some instances, this equates to a difference in the level of academic material being learned – for example studying Shakespeare vs. remedial English – however, it also extends to the type of curriculum that is being learned, such as the difference between academic and vocational classes (Fletcher Jr., 2012; Graubard, 2004). It is outside the scope of this review to discuss the debate surrounding the academic aspect of tracking, the results have which have been both condemned and praised by various groups (Argys, Reed, & Brewer 1996; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Fletcher Jr. 2012; Graubard 2004; Lewis & Cheng, 2006). Rather, the vocational aspect of tracking will be addressed here. In this manifestation of tracking, students are placed into classes that will help prepare them for their likely vocational outcomes (Graubard, 2004). It is with this goal in mind that high schools introduced curricula that included shop class and home economics, so as to produce young adults who could not only read and write, but who would also be prepared for employment or home life. Fletcher Jr. (2012) notes that this practice of segregating students based on their perceived interests and talents results in a wide variance of
learning opportunities for students who attend the same school. In addition, he argues that these experiences strongly influence how students perceive the options that may be available to them upon graduating (2012). In this regard, Fletcher Jr. considers the outcomes for students participating in the various tracks (2012). He states that students who pursue career and technical education (CTE) in high school are less likely to advance to college; however, these students are more likely to earn more than their peers in either general or college preparatory tracks (Fletcher Jr., 2012). But while tracking has historically been conceptualized as an either/or phenomenon, in which students must choose to pursue practical skills or academics, the last decade has seen a merging of the two paths into a recent curriculum known as the new vocationalism.

**The New Vocationalism.** Although tracking in the past has been highly segmented with students primarily studying vocational or academic subjects, the last decade has seen a paradigm shift in which these two paths begin to merge (Fletcher Jr., 2012; Gewertz, 2011). One exemplary model for this is the Linked Learning Initiative, which originated in the Central Valley of California (Gewertz, 2011). In this program, students pursue hands-on learning activities that are integrated with applied academics. The examples given by Gewertz are composed primarily around technical skills that involve concepts such as computer and sound engineering, which do not seem to cater to more blue-collar careers, yet one particular theory behind this model is one that remains salient when applied to more rugged trades, which is that of integration with the local community and business owners (2011). In this partnership, students and faculty maintain contact with the leaders of local industries as a way of not only knowing what it is that
employers are seeking in new hires, but also to create a network of opportunities for high school students to demonstrate and practice their developing skills (Gewertz, 2011). The pedagogical impetus behind the new vocationalism is that rather than students being funneled into classes that dictate their futures, whether academic or vocational, they will have the opportunity to engage in activities that pique their interests and prepare them for a career, while simultaneously giving them a skill set that will prepare them for college, should they choose to attend (Fletcher Jr., 2012; Gewertz, 2011; Lewis & Sheng, 2006). In addition, the program seeks to better inform students about the various paths that are available to them after high school, in many cases affording an integration with programs such as those seen in technological prep courses at community colleges (Lewis & Sheng, 2006). Unfortunately, although vocational training has received a revival and reconstruction in recent history, the fact remains “that to be deemed a ‘vocational’ student [is] to be assigned an unequal rank in the schools and to be the object of lowered expectations” (Lewis & Cheng, 2006, para. 6). Thus, both students and parents continue to shun this path, maintaining the view that college is the only route to real success and disregarding the notion that career happiness depends on more than simply monetary measures, as well as the fact that the trades may, in fact, ensure long-term lucrative employment better than traditional white-collar work. The challenge now lies in dispelling the stigma surrounding these vocational pursuits, and enabling young people to pursue paths that not only draw on their strengths and allow them to provide for their families, but to be proud of the work that they do.
Conclusion. Given the wealth of data concerning the financial and cognitive rewards of working in the skilled trades and the risks associated with student debt and the failure to complete a college degree, it seems as though we are doing high school students a disservice by insinuating that college is the only way to achieve success. Returning to the definition of success put forth at the beginning of this review, in which both monetary and non-monetary aspects are accounted for, it seems as though the trades provide an adequate route by which to achieve monetary success. This research seeks, in part, to discover if there is a significant difference between the non-monetary benefits accrued in vocational vs. academic careers, as prior research about this topic is lacking. As an extension of this concept of success, this research also seeks to determine the role that careers play in individual happiness, for as Fletcher Jr. states, “[e]mployment is considered to be at the center of our lives, and helps to define our identities, personalities, and lifestyles.” And “[i]n fact, statistics have indicated that individuals tend to be even more committed to their work than they are to their partners” (2012, para. 3). If these statements from Fletcher Jr. about employment are indeed the case, it would behoove us both as mentors and citizens to encourage students to pursue career paths that will, ultimately, provide happiness and job satisfaction. On an intuitive level, this is a practical goal in that we want our children to be happy. And, as related to work, an environment composed of happy people is much more enjoyable than one in which co-workers are miserable on a daily basis. Encouraging young people to pursue careers that cultivate happiness is beneficial on a societal level as well (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Lyubomirsky et. al found that “happy people appear to be more successful than their less
happy peers in the three primary life domains” of work, relationships, and health (2005, p. 23). A British report on the benefits of happy employees notes that “happy employees are likely to be more motivated, engaged, committed, and loyal to their employers” (‘Benefits to make staff HAPPY’, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, Frey (2011) cites studies that show that happiness is a contributing factor to both longevity and physiological health. Because happiness is such a desired goal, in practical, societal, and emotive terms, this research looks to determine the effect of blue-collar stigma on high school students’ career choices, so as to uncover whether or not the stigma is a factor that prevents some students from pursuing career paths that may have the best chance of bringing happiness.
METHODS

This research was conducted during the second year of study for a Master’s degree in the field of education at Humboldt State University. Under the guidance of university faculty, research methods were designed that would provide reliable, valid data from the selected participants. Human research subjects protocol was followed via the approval of the university’s Institutional Review Board. These methods and the participants are described here.

Participants

Humboldt County is a unique area with an employment demographic that, in many ways, is quite unlike other towns of similar size in the country. Furthermore, this difference is the most pronounced in the age bracket of recent graduates that this research sought to study, thus the researcher and supporting faculty agreed that it would be best to expand the participant pool to those living outside of Humboldt County. Participants were sought who met the criteria of being adults who had graduated with a degree in one of the following four fields in the years of 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010. The eligible fields were 1) High school degree or equivalent, 2) A vocational/trade school degree, 3) A BA or BS, or 4) A teaching credential. If employed, participants must hold a legal, documented position, though it was not a requirement that they be currently employed. Because of the desire to reach those living outside of Humboldt County, it was determined that an online survey instrument would be the most
effective tool in conducting research, the specifics of which will be discussed later in this section. In regards to participant recruitment, the initial strategy considered entailed the use of alumni lists obtained from universities. However, several issues prompted the researcher to abandon this approach. First of all, due to confidentiality issues, it would not be possible for any university to release personal information about their alumni such as phone numbers or email addresses. Thus, survey distribution would depend on the alumni association’s willingness to send out the survey. While this may not have presented an issue on a singular mailing, Total Design Method dictates that in order to receive a response rate that is high enough to validate results (50% or higher), several contact attempts should be made in a specific time sequence to encourage potential participants to respond. The second, and related issue with this approach is the lack of overall response by alumni to emails from universities. In the researcher’s personal experience, emails from the alumni associations are often immediately discarded or ignored due to a lack of interest or the presumption of monetary solicitation. Therefore, in addition to the issues inherent in implementing the Total Design Method, the researcher predicted especially low response rates associated with the survey being distributed under the umbrella of the universities. Third, this approach would only target those who had completed a degree at a university and due to the nature of the research question, it was thought that additional input from those who had not attended a university would lend more insight into the issue. Thus, the researcher decided to look for a way in which people from multiple locations and educational backgrounds would be able to complete the survey. This solution came from the use of social media, via an online distribution
through Facebook. Because of the researcher’s personal background of coming from a small, rural, “blue-collar” town, and her years spent attending college, her immediate Facebook network consists of ideal candidates from multiple walks of life. In addition to her own immediate network, she saw the potential for the survey link to be distributed among the networks of others, thus creating a widening pool of potential participants. Ultimately, this was the approach taken. The survey was posted on the researcher’s Facebook page, and included the following invitation to participate:

Please help! I’m looking for participants for my research on the decisions high school students make about going or not going to college, and the effects of “blue-collar stigma” on these decisions. I am also looking to see how these decisions affect happiness by way of job satisfaction. If you meet the qualifications listed below, please take the time (20 minutes or so) to complete this online survey by using the link below. If you don’t meet the qualifications or don’t want to participate, please share this post! Thank you!

The participants must be adults who have graduated with a degree in one of the following four fields in the years of 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010. The eligible fields are 1) High school degree or equivalent, 2) A vocational/trade school degree, 3) A BA or BS, or 4) A teaching credential. If employed, participants must hold a legal, documented position.
The survey was initially posted on a Saturday morning, and several reminder “posts” were made throughout the week. This pattern continued, with the survey link being posted a total of three times, and closing on the 4th Saturday. Throughout this time, a total of 50 people responded, and the survey was shared by several of these participants. It is important to note here some distinguishing characteristics of those who responded to the survey. Primarily, it must be acknowledged that respondents were ultimately self-selected, and as such are not representative of this population as a whole. Many respondents were those who know the researcher personally or at the very least through mutual associations, thus it is likely that many share the same life experiences or perspectives of the researcher. However, this is not known empirically as the survey responses were anonymous. Second, due to the nature of the self-selection, those who responded were either interested in the research topic (either in agreement or disagreement), seeking to fulfill a perceived role as a “friend” to the researcher, or were simply altruistic. The motivations for participation were not asked directly on the survey, although some respondents noted in the final comments section that they felt as though this is an important, valid topic. Finally, there has been some indication that, although the requirements were clearly stated on the survey solicitation, some of those who participated may not have fit the criteria exactly by way of still currently being enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate school. While some of the responses clearly indicate this predicament, they have not been excluded from the analysis as it is unclear whether these that are explicitly outside of the parameters are the only ones and thus, it would still be necessary to provide this acknowledgement of potential discrepancy. Furthermore,
even those that don’t meet the requirements exactly provide some insight into society’s perceptions on various types of work, and therefore still contributed to the research question.

**Instrument**

The survey was designed to examine participants’ experiences with education in regards to familial and societal expectations and to look for correlations between these expectations, the educational and vocational paths the participants chose, and their resulting levels of job satisfaction. The majority of the survey was designed by the researcher and consists of four distinct sections and a total of 74 questions, though the online format, via GoogleForms, was designed to present respondents only with questions that related to them directly. Thus, answering “yes” or “no” to one question would dictate the next question that would present itself on the screen. Therefore, although there were 74 total questions on the text version of the survey, not all respondents completed every question. The first section of the survey consisted of participant demographics and history, and contained questions regarding the general attitudes and occupations of those closest to the participants growing up. These questions included information about parental education, participants’ general perceptions of the importance of a formal, academic education during their formative years, their ultimate educational decisions following high school graduation, and the influence of parents, mentors, and others on these decisions. The second portion of the survey looked into current employment status, and the connection between this and each participant’s field
of study. The third section of the survey was composed of two Likert scales aimed at measuring both the importance placed on and the satisfaction felt by each participant in 21 aspects of work. Examples would be benefits, communication between employees and senior management, job security, etc. All participants completed this portion of the survey in its entirety, regardless of educational choices. This was also the portion of the survey that was not composed by the researcher, rather being excerpted from the 2013 Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement Survey, which is a research report by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Not all of the measures used by the SHRM were included in this research, however the majority were. The fourth and final section of the survey consists of a reflection on choices made by the participants, including self-reports of levels of overall personal satisfaction with educational and vocational choices, as well as perceived levels of parental satisfaction with these choices and a reflection on whether participants would make the same choices given where they are now. The survey’s final question provided participants with a text box in which they were able to add any comments or concerns that they did not feel were adequately addressed in the survey. While the majority of the survey was composed of binary “yes/no” responses and Likert scales, there were also several opportunities for respondents to elaborate on these selections through the use of text boxes provided at appropriate locations. The reliability and validity of the survey were proven through the use of verbal protocols, conducted with qualified participants before the distribution of the final survey.
Analysis

Due to the use of both binary/scaled responses and text boxes, a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods was implemented. Initially, data was coded in an Excel spreadsheet to give numeric values to responses that were selected from a set of specific options. From here, data was transferred to a Minitab program, and a series of statistical tests were run between quantitative variables to look for patterns between participants’ background demographics, educational choices, current employment situations, and their levels of job satisfaction. In some areas, data was manipulated prior to running the tests in order to provide a clearer picture of the results. For example, the 21 measures of job satisfaction were collapsed into 4 distinct categories based on similar attributes. These can be seen in Table 1:
Table 1: Collapsed Categories of Job Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Group</th>
<th>Measures Included</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Relationship with immediate supervisor; Relationship with co-workers; Diversity of the workplace; Management’s recognition of employee performance; Communication between employees and senior management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
<td>The work itself; Opportunities to use skills/abilities; Meaningfulness of the job; Autonomy and independence; Variety of work; Contribution to organization’s business goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Benefits; Compensation/pay; Career development opportunities; Career advancement opportunities; Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes of</td>
<td>Organization’s financial stability; Organization’s commitment to corporate social responsibility; Job security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded from</td>
<td>Feeling safe in the work environment; Job specific training; Paid training and tuition reimbursement programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While not all of the 21 measures were included in the collapsed categories, those that were excluded (see bottom row) were so due to the lack of congruence with other measures in the categories in which they seemed to fit best, as indicated by a p-value above .05 when Pearson correlations were run. All three of these excluded measures were
included in the “Pragmatic” category, yet demonstrated a lack of relationship with the other measures in the category. The other way in which data was manipulated was in the exclusion of “N/A” responses when correlations were run. Because these responses were coded as the number three when the data was converted from text responses to numerical figures, the inclusion of this additional variable in the corresponding questions would have provided skewed data and inaccurate correlations. Thus, for any responses that originally included an “N/A” option, a subset worksheet was created that excluded these numbers before the Pearson correlations were run. In addition to the Pearson correlations, a series of two-sample t-tests, ANOVAS, and descriptive statistics were run, where applicable, to glean as much information as possible from the data. In all statistical analysis, a p-value of .05 was used to denote statistically significant results. Finally, text responses were analyzed using a qualitative approach in order to further clarify the information provided by the statistical analysis.
RESULTS

Pearson correlations run between the various measures of job satisfaction as they were grouped in Table 1 showed congruence between all related variables, demonstrated by a p-value of less than .05 in all relationships. These groups were also used to examine satisfaction scores for those who completed a degree at four-year university (n = 37) as opposed to those who did not (n = 13). As demonstrated by a series of two-sample t-tests, and shown in Table 2, across all four subgroups of satisfaction scores there was no statistically significant difference in the average satisfaction of the two subpopulations. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant difference in the average importance each of the two subgroups placed on the various facets of employment, as shown in Table 3. In addition to the Likert scales in which participants rated individual components of job satisfaction, they were also asked to select a cumulative measure of satisfaction in regards to their current employment situation. In support of the previous measure, this, as well, showed no statistical significance between those who completed a four-year degree and those who did not. For all satisfaction and importance scores, the numbers correspond to the following scale in which 1=Very Unsatisfied/Unimportant, 2=Unsatisfied/Unimportant, 3=Neutral, 4=Satisfied/Important, and 5=Very Satisfied/Important.
Table 2: Mean Scores of 4-year vs. No 4-year Degree on Levels of Job Satisfaction Divided by 4 Collapsed Categories. T-Values and P-Values are also included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Year Degree (Yes = 1, No = 2)</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
<th>T-Value</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Fulfillment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Pragmatic Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Attributes of Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Mean Scores of 4-year vs. No 4-year Degree on Levels of Importance Placed of Various Aspects of Employment, Divided by 4 Collapsed Categories. T-Values and P-Values are also included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Year Degree (Yes = 1, No = 2)</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
<th>T-Value</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Fulfillment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Pragmatic Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Attributes of Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although there were no significant differences between the average levels of job satisfaction each subpopulation reported, there were some striking differences between two other important measures. The first of these is the level of satisfaction each participant noted in regards to the educational choices each had made since graduating high school. For those who completed a four-year degree, the overall mean satisfaction rating was 3.97, which, as explained previously, corresponds roughly to a response of “Satisfied.” In contrast, those who did not complete a four-year degree had a mean score of 3.08, which falls closer to the rating of “Neutral,” and shows a gap of .89 between the
two scores. These results were statistically significant with a T-Value of 2.59, and a corresponding P-Value of 0.02. Perhaps the most intriguing result, however, comes from a measure of the perceived satisfaction of parents/guardians in regards to the participants’ career/educational choices since graduating high school. Those who completed a four-year degree reported an average parental satisfaction score of 4.49, versus those who did not complete a four-year degree, and rated their parental satisfaction at 3.46. While these scores fall almost exactly in between each of the textual descriptions, the distance between the scores of 1.03 points provides an adequate frame of reference. Once again, these results are statistically significant with a T-Value of 3.49 and a P-Value of 0.00. Surprisingly, there was no statistically significant correlation between the parental educational levels or occupations and whether or not participants chose to attend a four-year university. However, participants did differ significantly in their scores of how important they felt a formal, academic education was as they were growing up. Using a Likert scale in which 1=Not at all, 2=A little bit, 3=Mostly, and 4=Entirely, those who completed a four-year degree reported an average rating of 3.60 as opposed to those who did not and reported an average rating of 2.69, for a difference of .91. Using a Two-Sample T-Test, these results were significant with a T-Value of 3.19 and a corresponding P-Value of 0.01. However, there was no difference between how greatly all participants were influenced by immediate family members versus other adults, with average scores of 2.94 and 2.82, respectively. In regards to student loans, there was a slight correlation between those who took them out and their feelings as to whether or not they felt as though the college experience was worth the debt, with a P-Value of 0.045, showing that
of those who accumulated debt, all felt as though it was justified. In addition, all of those who expressed cost as a factor in their decision not to attend college felt they would have attended were cost not a factor. This conclusion is also supported by the comments made by participants, which will be explored more in the discussion section. In the same vein, of those who answered the question as to whether or not they would change their past actions if a deficiency in interest or grades had been a factor in their decision not to attend college, 77% expressed that they wish they had been more interested or worked harder. However, of this 77% (n = 10), only six had not completed a four-year degree, while the remaining four had. This may be due to a misinterpretation of the question, or it may be that the four-year graduates are speaking in regards to their college experience and/or in light of a desire to attend graduate school. Finally, Pearson correlations were run to determine whether those with four-year or vocational degrees were more or less likely to be working in fields related to their fields of study, resulting in no statistically significant results. However, proportional reports were also run on the reasons why those with vocational and four-year degrees are not working in their related fields, and the results provided some interesting insight. The choices offered to participants included 1) Other; 2) N/A; 3) Found something better; 4) Insufficient pay; and 5) No jobs available. The corresponding responses are shown in Table 4. Those responses marked N/A have been excluded from the analysis.
Table 4: Reasons Reported for Participants not Working in the Fields of Study, and Numbers and Percentages of those Reporting Each Reason

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Count (n = 22)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Found something better</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Insufficient pay</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) No jobs available</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is especially interesting in these results lies in the textual responses given by those that selected “Other” as their reasons for working in a field other than that which they studied for. The overwhelming sentiment expressed by these participants was that the degree that they acquired through a four-year university was not sufficient preparation for their work. A collection of responses are given below:

*With a BA in History, there aren't many jobs and related jobs require more school.*

*Degree is too broad for one specific job title and I do not feel that I have the experience necessary to get an entry-level career*

*I need to become credentialed.*

*BA in Liberal Studies. Pretty vague degree.*

The other pattern seen was that the careers chosen were either unfulfilling or impractical, shown in the following responses:

*My BA was not in a field I wanted to pursue as a career*

*Need to pay back my student loans! Also, benefits available through this position that I wouldn’t have doing what I want to do- making art and being self-employed.*
My degree is in psychology. I worked in social work/case management, but needed a spiritual break from it.

Of the two other respondents not included in the above collections, one is a union journeyman carpenter, who notes that there are “So many people to fill the slot they will get rid of you for the cheaper apprentice.” The last of the nine who selected “Other” notes that he/she is currently disabled. Moving forward from the reasons participants were not working in their fields of study, the survey asked about the usefulness of participants’ degrees (either vocational or four-year) in their current occupations. The measures included 1) Unnecessary; 2) Helped get the job; 3) Some of the skills carry over; and 4) The skills and experience are extremely beneficial. The results were highly mixed, as shown in Table 5. It should also be noted here that although the question was directed at those who are not currently working in their corresponding fields of study, all 50 participants answered. Thus, it cannot be determined how helpful those who are not working in their fields perceive the skills they acquired through school. Qualitative analysis of these results executed by looking at job titles and corresponding usefulness scores shows that of those that rated the skills learned through study as either three or four, about 50% are working in fields assumed by the researcher to require a specific course of study (teaching, nursing, etc.), whereas the other 50% do not provide a clear expectation of a specific course of study (managers, advertising/marketing directors, etc.).
Table 5: Reasons Selected by Participants for Relevance of Skills Acquired Through Study, and Numbers and Percentages of those Reporting Each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Count (n = 50)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Unnecessary</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Helped get the job</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Some of the skills carry over</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) The skills and experience are extremely beneficial</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

This research sought to understand the effect of blue-collar stigma on high school students’ career choices, and whether this stigma is a factor that prevents some students from pursuing career paths that may have the best chance of bringing happiness, as measured through job satisfaction. By looking at the education levels, attitudes, and occupations of the participants’ parents the research looked to determine the social and academic climate in which the participants were raised, thus providing some insight as to whether or not they had been instilled with a sense that college was the only respectable choice and alternatively, that blue-collar work was undesirable.

**Direct parental influence**

Interestingly, the occupations and education levels of the parents did not predict, statistically, whether or not participants went on to pursue a four-year degree. However, the qualitative analysis shows that although not all respondents were influenced by parental and societal expectations, those that did cite these influences note them as the primary reason for college attendance. Of the 30 participants who utilized the available text boxes in the survey, nine cited parental and societal expectations as major factors in their educational decisions. While this is not a majority of participants, the responses still demonstrate a strong enough correlation to warrant attention and further study.

*My mom pushed us to experience a four year university and live in the dorms. She went to nursing school, but never got to experience "college," so it was important to her that we did.*
My grandparents set up a college fund for me when I was born. It was always assumed that I would go to college, though there was never any undue pressure for me to go. I just didn’t see another option.

High School teacher of Ecology was more of a friend than instructor. He made it apparent that life is more than about working to get paid to pay bills, but should be about doing something you are interested in and enjoy, and that college significantly improved those opportunities.

My parents told me they would disown me if I didn't go to college. They supported me through the registration process and next thing I knew I was in college courses.

I was told my whole life that I was expected to go to college. No other option was layed [sic] out for me.

I always just knew I would go to college. My parents went to college, my older siblings went to college, all my cousins went to college. It was just something that you did. […]

My parents forced my brother and I to go to college. They paid for it, so there were stipulations about where we could go. […]

I was told I had to go to college my whole life. I went and got my 2-year degree but not because I wanted to.

[…] Also, going to college was not an optional thing for me. It was "the next step" and my parents were fully committed to paying for the next 4 years of my college education. This was the norm at my high school and it wasn't until I attended college that I even realized several people's parents didn't help them through school.

However, it should be noted that of those who cited parental influence as a major factor in their decision to attend school (either a four-year or a community college), five also noted that their decision was influenced by a personal choice or desire to do something specific, such as teach. In addition to those five participants who noted being influenced by their parents in addition to their own goals or passions, seven described experiences or
desires that pushed them to pursue higher education, devoid of parental or societal pressure. Although the majority of responses that addressed parental influence describe it as an overarching expectation for college attendance, one participant described a unique experience that is reminiscent of Lubrano’s (2004) tale of blue-collar “Straddlers,” in that he/she notes

*I feel my situation and decisions to attend college were different than most. My parents never really showed any interest whether I went to college or not, which as a teenager really pissed me off. I was self motivated and driven to be more successful than my parents ever cared to be and I was willing to experience as much as possible to achieve my goals.*

In this person’s account, it would seem as though college attendance and educational motivation came from a desire to achieve more than his/her parents had, rather than an expectation to meet their standards. Through the lens the research question, it would seem as though this participant’s blue-collar roots were what led him/her to strive to be more successful. Indeed, both parents of this participant are reported to have held skilled labor jobs while raising the participant, with one parent being a high school graduate and the other having completed some college. What is interesting is that although the participant reports feeling as though his/her parents were ambivalent about higher education, he/she still reports feeling entirely as though a formal, academic education was important growing up – although he/she also notes that family and other adults only influenced a little bit. The final piece of interest in this participant’s response is the main reason cited for college attendance, which he/she notes as acquiring a higher paying job. Thus, the question remains of how fulfilling the participant views the work done by
his/her parents, especially in light of the work he/she is now engaging in. In addition, the participant seems to view “success” as the acquisition of a higher paying job which, as Crawford (2004) points out in his own account of leaving a prestigious career to open a motorcycle repair shop, may not necessarily mean higher levels of job satisfaction. In this particular case, the participant reported being “somewhat satisfied” with his/her current employment situation. Unfortunately, in the scope of this research this participant is alone in his/her experience, and thus it is not possible to draw conclusions or highlight patterns among others who had similarly ambivalent parents. From the comments and correlations seen in this portion of the analysis, it seems as though both parents and personal interests were major influences on whether or not participants chose to attend college. With similar numbers of participants citing each influence (parental and personal), it seems difficult to point to one or the other as being the main cause of college attendance. However, it should not be disregarded that many students attended college as a result of parental influence. While five of the nine who cited parental influence also spoke to having personal interests that they wanted to pursue, the question arises of whether these students were attending high school and considering future occupations through the lens of an impending college education, and thus focusing their studies on college-focused careers and excluding those that may have been more trades-based. Unfortunately, this is a question that cannot be answered with the data from this current study however, once again, the data suggests that further research in this area would be a valuable contribution to the field. In considering the influence of parents, though, it is worth restating here that
overall, there were no statistically significant correlations between the occupations or educational levels of either parent and the participants.

Motivations for attendance and current employment status

In contrast to this lack of correlation between parental occupation/education and participants’ educational choices, there does seem to be some sort of a relationship between parental influence and whether participants are currently employed in fields connected to their areas of study. For example, of the nine participants that noted parental expectations of college attendance as quoted above, six (66%) are currently in positions that clearly require a four-year degree, such as teaching, biology, and psychiatry. In contrast, of the 28 participants that either did not specify a specific experience or person that pushed them to attend college, or who cited the decision as one springing from a personal passion or desire, only 10 (36%) are working in a related field. Among those who are not, several note that their degrees are not useful or relevant to what they really want to do, or that they need more education in the form of a Master’s degree or a credential in order to be able to utilize their degrees. In addition, seven participants explain that they enjoyed their college experiences, yet don’t feel as though these experiences were the “Golden Ticket” to success:

I have a college degree but I can't do much with it. If I want to utilize it, I have to go back to school. Going to college was great, and I would love to continue to further my education. The cost of education is where I run into problems. I am in debt from attending college before. I have barely paid off interest that has accumulated since graduating in 2008. I can’t afford to go back to school because I have a family to take care of. At my rate of pay, I will not be able to pay off my loan anytime soon.
I got a useless BA in a fun and interesting subject and then went back to school after being unemployed to get a masters [sic] and acquire the skills I need to be employable

I have a lot of interests and have been lucky to be able to pursue many in my life but looking back at my time in college I wish I had realized that I should try to get on a career path. My time in college did a lot to help me grow up and learn about myself, but it did not do a lot to get me a great job after graduation.

Great experience, bad decade to go to college.

I went to college right out of high school having no idea, as an 18 year old child (NOT an adult yet by any means), what I wanted to do for a career. I ended up graduating at 22 years old just starting to figure out some major interests, but by the time I graduated it was too late to focus my major on those interests. I feel that my college BA degree hasn't done any justice for the time put in and it is questionable to have a young 18 year old choose their college degree at that age.

I'm currently in Grad school Pursuing a Masters in the art of teaching in order to change careers; hopefully this next degree will be more relevant to my career choices.

What is interesting here, is that it seems as though those who went to college to satisfy the desires of their parents would be more likely to “float” after college than those who went in with a specific passion or career in mind. However, it should be noted that many of these 28 participants did not provide information as to the specific motivations for attending college. Of those seven who did specify personal desires as the primary motivation, three (43%) are working in related fields. This leaves 21 participants who did not note a specific event or motivation for attending college, and it is not possible to draw conclusions as to whether they are working in the positions they had in mind when beginning college. Looking at the proportions of those who attended to satisfy parental expectations vs. those who attended for personal reasons, a question arises concerning the influence of parents on the perseverance of students in choosing a career path and
adhering to it. It has oft times been speculated that young adults of Generation Y have a tendency towards “flighty-ness” and the inability to commit to a long-term, traditional career path (Halama, 2013; Hartman, 2014; Pew, 2010). The theory is that our generation has been coddled into thinking that each and every one of us is unique and special, and should follow our dreams at the expense of locking in a long-term career in our early twenties. A full analysis of this phenomenon is outside the scope of this research, however it should be considered that perhaps those that attended college out of a desire to satisfy parental expectations are more likely to adhere to the traditional view that one should find a career early and stick with it for the sake of financial stability, as opposed to the current generation’s utopian view of living and working for the sake of fulfilling a passion. While the data is unable to either confirm or deny this theory based on more than mere speculation, it remains an intriguing concept for consideration.

**Overall satisfaction**

As noted in the results section, and arguably the most salient point in this study, is the undeniable conclusion that attending a four-year university has no bearing on current levels of job satisfaction among the participants of this study. While many of those who did not attend college express regret for this decision, the results beg the question of whether this arises from a “green-grass” syndrome, where those who did not attend college simply wish that they had had the experience, or hold the societal perception that life and work would be better if only they had acquired a higher degree. For in actuality, there is no difference in the satisfaction that each group feels in their daily work. In fact,
it could be argued that those who did not attend college are better off than their more educated peers as they are not tied down to student loans, although those that did acquire loans express no regrets in this regard. This conclusion was unexpected, as some of the initial conversations held by the researcher with colleagues suggested otherwise. As fellow waitresses, many felt as though their degrees had done nothing for them as they graduated and found that they preferred working in a more social, hands-on type of environment, and they felt burdened by the amounts of debt they had acquired. These perceptions were not voiced in the research, however, and thus cannot be analyzed any further than by mentioning that the results were unexpected by the researcher. One theory to consider here, however, is that of Buyer’s Stockholm Syndrome, in that those who invest a lot of time and energy into something are often likely to justify and validate the investment, even if they results aren’t what they expected. For example, those who spend large amount of money on a car that isn’t all that they had hoped it would be are likely to find other ways to validate their purchase, so as to avoid experiencing buyer’s remorse. Similarly, it could be that those that have spent large amounts of money on a college education find ways to validate the investment, even if it hasn’t served them in the ways they expected it to.

Just as telling as the lack of discrepancy between the levels of job satisfaction between those who are four-year graduates vs. those that are not, is the presence of a discrepancy between perceived parental satisfaction. Those that did not acquire four-year degrees report markedly lower levels of perceived parental satisfaction, a conclusion which contributes to the theory of interest that attending college is perceived to be the
more desired and prestigious occupational path. However, it is not simply attending a
four-year university that impacts parental satisfaction – whether or not participants are
working in fields related to their area of study holds some bearing as well. Among those
who graduated with a four-year degree, approximately half work in fields related to their
areas of study. Of those that are not, 41% report parental satisfaction levels as “very
satisfied.” In contrast, of those who are working in fields related to their areas of study,
68% report parental satisfaction levels as “very satisfied.” Interestingly, of those that are
not working in their fields of study, 29% report personal satisfaction levels of “very
satisfied,” vs. 26% of those who are working in their fields of study. While these two
groups are fairly comparable to each other in this regard, it is telling that although the
participants themselves are happy with their current employment situations, they do not
feel as though their parents are content with their choices. Ultimately, this shows that
while many participants chose to follow their own paths and show no disparities in
overall levels of job satisfaction, either by attending college or not, or by working in their
Corresponding field of study, those who attend college and work in their corresponding
fields ultimately achieve the highest perceived levels parental satisfaction.
CONCLUSION

After conducting a mixed methods approach which included both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the story told by the research is one containing both points of clarity as well as some ambiguous data. The most important conclusion that may be drawn is that parents do, in fact, hold tremendous sway over their children’s educational choices upon graduating high school, often times leading their children that there are no other options. In addition, those that decide not to attend a four-year university often feel as though their parents are less than fully satisfied with their alternative decisions. Furthermore, is it important to reiterate here that there is no reported difference between the levels of job satisfaction that each group feels several years after graduating from their most recent degree. Given this information, and the fact that many participants feel as though their degrees have not proven to be a guaranteed road to success, it seems as though it may be beneficial to at the very least, educate our children more comprehensively on alternative paths that may be taken after graduating high school.

This research also confirms the suspicion put forth in the literature review that even higher levels of education are necessary in our current generation to ensure an idyllic career by way of the multiple accounts of participants noting that their Bachelor’s degrees are essentially useless without further credentialing or the completion of a Master’s program. This should be taken into account when advising students on their educational plans beyond high school, to help them decide whether they are prepared and willing to continue their educational careers to the extent required. This is not to say that
all students need to continue on beyond a Bachelor’s degree, however the number of participants expressing this sentiment in the research speaks to the reality of the situation – a reality that should be shared with high school students as they make these major life decisions. Finally, it may behoove our society to consider some of the alternative routes to careers and higher education that are employed by other cultures. A step in this direction can be seen in the Linked Learning Initiative outlined by Gewertz (2011), which seeks to work within communities to simultaneously prepare students for both college and vocational careers. Similar programs and structures can be seen in countries such as Finland, where students’ specific skills are cultivated from a young age, and following one path doesn’t necessarily exclude another. Alternatively, it may be useful to implement a sort of “gap year” as seen in countries such as Australia, where students are expected to take a year off following high school to travel and explore the world and themselves, before being expected to come home and settle on a career path. At least one participant expressed this sentiment, of feeling pushed into a college track and having to decide on a career before having the opportunity to fully realize what he/she wanted to do in life. While it is true that oft times the general education requirements at community colleges and universities give students the opportunity to explore various disciplines before having to declare a major, many students never get to experience these courses if they are funneled into a “vocational track” in high school that conveys the message that they are not good enough for college. In the same light, many of these students who are barred from the college track find themselves lacking the motivation to apply themselves in high school – even to subjects they may have found interesting – because they have
been subtly informed that they are incompetent. In this regard, it seems as though high schools should strive more to instill equal value to various programs, and work with students to determine which paths best suit which students – without conveying a hierarchical ranking to various skill sets. Unfortunately, with more and more emphasis being placed on “college track” courses, those that don’t fit these descriptions, such as art, music, and woodshop, are rapidly being cut to make funds available for increasing college readiness. The unfortunate reality though, is that many students do not want the lives and careers that are offered through universities. For many, getting their hands dirty and working on-site is much more alluring than working behind a computer. We continue to do a disservice to future generations by assuming that everyone would rather be an engineer than a mechanic. The even greater disservice is discrediting those who would prefer the latter as being inferior to those who would prefer the former.

Areas for Further Research

**Blue-collar expansion.** During the analysis of the data, it became clear that in an attempt to avoid leading questions while designing the survey instrument, certain key concepts may not have been addressed by the participants as explicitly as the researcher had intended. While many concepts were still able to be addressed through an interpretation of the responses, further clarification would no doubt lend more insight into the research question. Future studies of this type may benefit from either a more exacting construction of questions and/or a follow-up of interviews conducted with a sub-sample
of participants. As outlined in the discussion, there were multiple responses that offered intriguing insight, yet not enough information to draw confirmative conclusions.

**Representative samples.** For the sake of this thesis, the research was conducted using a convenience sample of self-selected participants through a social media platform. While a robust sample was attained that lent ample insight into the research question, the fact remains that the nature of the sample prevents the researcher from being able to extrapolate the results to the larger population. A research method that drew a more representative population would allow a greater understanding of the current attitudes and realities of recent graduates, and the application of this understanding to this population as a whole.

**Psychology of choices.** Alluded to in the discussion was the possibility that those who felt pushed towards college from a young age were perhaps more likely to focus their high school academics on college-based careers, thus failing to consider those that would entail an alternative route. In addition, while no participants expressed regret at the acquisition of student loans, Buyer’s Stockholm Syndrome may explain why those who have accumulated large amounts of debt feel no remorse, even though their college degrees have failed to serve them as anticipated. Further research into the psychology behind these phenomena may prove insightful in understanding why students who attend college at the bidding of their parents are more likely to find themselves working in their related fields of study, and why those who experience no economic returns on their college investments express no regrets in this regard. Furthermore, a social psychological analysis of Generation Y and its refusal of the traditional career path espoused by
previous generations may help encourage a diversification of post high-school career paths, which may be better suited to the skills sets of different individuals in a changing economy.
REFERENCES


*Part of a Special Section: Diplomas Count 2011, 30(34), 10–13.*


Enrollments and Labor-Market Realities. Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

