



# 'Adulthood' Is Hard:

Understanding the College-to-Career Transition and Supporting Young Adults' Emotional Wellbeing

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## Introduction

The transition from college to career includes many challenges, such as adjusting to a professional environment, the high costs of student loan repayment and independent living, and changes in social support networks. Many of these challenges affect a young person's emotional wellbeing; however, limited attention has been paid in the literature or at the practice level to the emotional wellbeing of college graduates as they transition from college to career. To address this underrecognized issue, investigators from The Jed Foundation (JED), a leading nonprofit organization with a mission to protect the emotional health and prevent suicide among teens and young adults, and the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research (Transitions ACR)

at the University of Massachusetts Medical School collaborated on a study to better understand the experiences of young adults during the college-to-career transition and how these experiences effect emotional wellbeing.

This study began with an extensive review of the available academic and "grey" literature (literature not published in sources such as books or journal articles; e.g., online periodicals, graduate dissertations, white papers).<sup>1,2</sup> Relevant information was found in education, business, psychology and sociology publications. Knowledge gained from the literature review informed a national survey conducted online by The Harris Poll among 1,929 college seniors, recent college graduates, and employers that explored specific challenges involved in the college-to-career transition, as well

as existing strategies to support young professionals and their emotional wellbeing.

## Survey

- The survey was conducted online within the United States by Harris Poll between April and July 2017. Averaging 20 minutes in length, a total of 1,929 interviews were conducted among college seniors, recent college graduates, and employers who met the following criteria: **College Seniors (n=421):** U.S. resident, age 20-26, currently in their final year at a 2- or 4-year college in the U.S. and attends all/most classes in person.
- **Recent college graduates (n=1,008):** U.S. resident, age 19-27, graduated from a 2- or 4-year college between 2013

## Key Findings

- » **Mental health conditions are not uncommon** during the college-to-career transition. Three (3) out of 10 young adults self-reported a diagnosis of anxiety (college seniors 32%; recent grads 27%) and 2 of 10 young adults self-reported a diagnosis of depression (college seniors 22%; recent grads 23%).
- » **There is anticipatory anxiety** among college seniors regarding the transition to the workforce. The transition to the workforce is often less difficult than imagined.
- » **Young adults are not using on-campus services** such as mental health and career counseling to a large extent. Recent graduates advise seniors to take advantage of all the resources (including post-graduation resources) provided by their colleges to prepare for the transition from college to the workforce.
- » **Finances are a central point of stress** for many young adults during the college-to-career transition. Seventy-one percent (71%) of surveyed college seniors' top priority is finding a job that pays a good salary and 69% of recent graduates reported making enough money as a top challenge.
- » **Most grads don't see a long-term future** with their current employers.
- » **Workplace mentoring and supports are not seen as available** by college grads compared to employers.
- » **Most employers feel they foster working environments that are supportive** of recent graduates with emotional health challenges.

and 2016, are currently employed or have been employed since graduation.

- **Employers (n=500):** U.S. resident, age 18+, employed full or part time, and manage at least one employee who graduated from a 2- or 4-year college and has been working for 0-4 years.

Data are weighted where necessary to bring each audience in line with their actual proportions in the population.

## Findings

### *The “Real World” vs. the Anticipated*

Sixty-five percent (65%) of college seniors reported that they believed that the college-to-career transition would be difficult. This is a higher percentage than the recent graduates (45%) who reported experiencing a difficult transition. Similarly, 41% of employers reported that many young adult new hires had a difficult college-to-career transition. Thus, it seems the anticipated difficulty of the transition can exceed the amount of difficulty experienced during the transition itself.

### *Preparing for Life after College*

Approximately two-thirds of the young adults (67% college seniors; 62% recent graduates) reported they wished they had more help preparing to transition from college to work. Slightly less than one-third (31%) of recent graduates reported that they didn't feel they had the support and resources needed to help them deal with the transition out of college. Interestingly, 8 out of 10 young adults (recent grads and college seniors) reported that their schools did have many offerings to prepare for the workforce such as internships, resume help, and career counseling, but less than 2 out of 5 young adults then utilized these services. Lack of time was the most commonly reported reason why young adults (54% college seniors and 49% recent graduates) did not use available career resources. In terms of emotional health, about one-third of college seniors (34%) reported that they sought out advice or counseling to support their emotional support during their final year of college. Among the college seniors who sought out emotional support, contacting a therapist or psychiatrist (57%) was almost as common as turning to friends or

family (59%).

### *Entering the Workforce*

College seniors were interviewed between late April and end of May of their senior year in 2017. At this time thirty-three percent (33%) of college seniors had a job lined-up for after graduation; while 43% of recent graduates reported they had jobs lined up before they graduated. About half of the young people surveyed who had a job lined up before their college graduation reported that it was easy to find their job (55% college seniors; 52% recent graduates). If a student had a job lined up before graduation, it was usually a full-time position with benefits, and in their field of interest. Having a job lined up was more common for recent graduates from private colleges than those who attended public universities (51% vs. 40%).

### *Adjustment Challenges*

While 72% of college seniors reported feeling prepared for post-graduation life; only 60% of employers agreed that most recent graduates are prepared for post-graduation life. It is important to note that this difficulty does

not seem to be skills-based because 64% of employers reported that they felt that the majority of recent graduates came to them with all the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.



College seniors, recent graduates and employers were asked to identify challenging aspects (either experienced or perceived), of recent graduates' transitions to the workforce. College seniors and recent graduates were most likely to indicate making enough money as a challenge. Making enough money was considered a challenge by 71% of college seniors and 69% of recent graduates with approximately 30% (27% college seniors; 31% recent graduates) listing this as the most challenging aspect. Meanwhile, employers did not believe making enough money was a challenge employees who have recently graduated from college experience (47%). Instead, employers were most likely to have perceived time management (56%) and understanding employer expectations (55%) as challenges among recent grads. Finding some common ground, employers, recent grads and college students did agree that work/life balance (69% college seniors; 61% recent graduates; 53% employers) and adjusting to a stricter schedule (59% college seniors; 43% recent graduates; 50% employers) are challenges.

### *Workplace Benefits and Supports*

Employers tend to report providing more benefits to recent graduates than recent graduates report receiving. For example, thirty-five percent (35%) of employers said they offer mentorship programs; however, only 15% of recent graduates

said they were offered this when they first started at their job. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of employers reported that information on employee emotional/mental health support benefits was offered, but only 14% of recent hires reported that this was the case when they were first hired.

It appears that organizations and companies could do more to train managers and supervisors in supporting the mental/emotional well-being of employees. At first glance survey results indicate that many employers felt confident in supporting the mental/emotional well-being of their employees, but when you break it down:

- Thirty-two percent (32%) of employers strongly agreed and 48% somewhat agreed to feeling confident on their ability to identify and employee's handle mental health issues.
- Only 31% of employers strongly agreed and 49% somewhat agreed that they have a clear idea of what to do if they believe an employee is struggling with their mental/emotional health.
- Thirty-three percent (33%) of employers strongly agreed and 54% somewhat agreed that if they thought an employee was struggling with a mental/emotional health issue they would adjust their management style.

Eighty-six percent (86%) of employers said that it is acceptable for new hires to share mental health struggles and 83% said that their company or organization tries to create an environment where it is safe to inform managers if one is struggling with a mental/emotional health issue. More than one-third of employers reported offering Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) (38%), one-on-one conversations (38%), and/or counseling (36%).

Additionally, around one-quarter of employers reported that their company/organization offers in-person programs to support emotional wellbeing (27%), online programs to support emotional wellbeing (23%), and/or emotional health seminars (23%).

### *Satisfaction with First Jobs among Recent Graduates*

Among the recent graduates who were employed at the time of the survey, 75% said they were satisfied with their current position and 80% said they are satisfied with their job in general. Approximately 80% of recent graduates said they were satisfied with these specific job elements as well:

- Relationship with their direct manager/boss (82%);
- Job security (82%);
- Social environment/culture (81%); and
- Work/life balance (78%).

At the same time, nearly 6 out of 10 recent graduates (58%) say their current job is not what they expected to be doing post-graduation. Nearly half of recent graduates (46%) reported frustration in the lack of advancement in their first few years with an employer. Fifty-four percent (54%) said that their current job did not match with their long-term goals. Employed recent graduates said that, on average, they would ideally stay at their current employer for 4 years and then transition to a new company or organization; 21% of them hoped to leave their current position in less than a year.

### *Finances and Student Loans*

Student loans and lack of financial literacy appeared to be a source of stress for many young adults surveyed. Thirty percent (30%) of college seniors and 22% of recent college graduates reported that they have no idea how to budget.

Almost three-quarters of college seniors (73%) said their current finances are stressful, compared to two-thirds of recent graduates (64%). Interestingly, while college seniors report more financial stress than recent graduates, they also report lower mean student loan totals than recent graduates; the mean student loan debt of recent graduates (\$30,931) is \$7,270 higher than the mean student loan debt of college seniors (\$23,661). Fifty-five (55%) of college seniors and 57% of recent graduates reported that they took out student loans to pay for college. Almost half of recent graduates (47%) feel like they do not know anything about their student loans and just pay them.

## Conclusions & Implications

The college to career transition includes changes in multiple life domains concurrently (one's home life, professional life, social life, etc.). Understandably, some young people face emotional hardships during this time of rapid evolution. Acknowledging emotional wellbeing as an integral part of one's overall health is imperative for those under-

going the college-to-career transition. There are several ways colleges and employers can go about this.

Colleges should find a way to increase on-campus service use. This includes career services, counseling services, and financial advising. This will help foster realistic expectations and preparedness for life after graduation among college seniors and help mitigate students' anxiety about the future. Colleges can be creative in exploring ways to make services more visible on campus, perhaps by having campus representatives visit popular and highly-trafficked areas on campus.

Meanwhile, employers should be highly communicative with recent college graduates they are considering hiring or have hired. It would be helpful if employers are explicit about job characteristics before hiring to prevent the onboarding of a recent graduate who will be disappointed by the reality of a position. Upon hiring, employers should provide new hires with straightforward directories of available benefits that are easily accessible. Lastly, employers should engage in an ongoing dialogue with recent graduates about

their career development and available career ladders. These actions will get recent college graduates and their employers on the same page to promote a long-lasting, mutually beneficial, and healthy working relationship.

**Download the full *College to Career: Supporting Mental Health* report**

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Cornell University Library. (2019). Public health: Defining grey literature. Retrieved from <https://guides.library.cornell.edu/public-health/what-gray-literature-is>
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