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“The Funnel Effect:  
How Elite College Culture Narrows Students’ Perceptions of Post-Collegiate Career  
Opportunities”

by

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Summary of Comments on “The Funnel Effect”

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## **Abstract**

Today, the process of choosing a career for young adults is not a linear path, but instead a complex process influenced by a myriad of internal and external factors. At elite colleges, high prestige jobs are most appealing as students strive to occupy a position of power and resources and live up to their institution's reputation. In the current environment of high or uncertain unemployment, increased competition for jobs and increasingly rising college costs, the steps young adults take to determine goals and means can become confused. All too frequently, ambient university culture emphasizes the importance of finding a certain kind of job rather than thinking through where passions lie and which jobs might be most meaningful and well fitting over the long haul.

In this study, we explore the issues of career choice among a small group of Harvard seniors, identifying the factors that have the most significant influence on the decision-making process. Specifically, we interviewed 40 Harvard seniors about their college experiences, formative influences, and decision-making processes regarding career choices. Twenty-two females and 18 males participated, coming from a range of concentrations, though the most prevalent majors were English, History, and Social Studies. Students were recruited using list serves at residential houses and the Office of Career Services. Our primary focus was to identify why and how students make decisions about the careers they pursue. We also focused on why some students seem driven to take jobs in finance and consulting, while others pursue paths of public service.

Our findings suggest the presence of a "funnel effect." Though students enter college with a diverse set of interests, by senior year, most of them seem to focus on a narrow set of jobs. The culture at Harvard seems to be dominated by the pursuit of high earning, prestigious jobs, especially in the finance and consulting industries. Interestingly, there is a notable disconnect between students' proclaimed passions and interests and the jobs they pursue. According to the Office of Career Services at Harvard, only 22% of the student body accepts jobs in these industries (2011 OCS Student Report). Nonetheless, seniors feel pressured to enter into the fall recruiting cycle in order to procure a job that "lives up to their Harvard degree." Those who express interest in public service jobs appear to forge this path without the help of university structures, often networking and researching online to find out about potential opportunities. Many students feel that finding public service careers is a challenge at Harvard. Unlike the finance, consulting, technology and marketing sectors, few recruiters for public service jobs come to campus. Students appear to be "risk averse," a stance that ultimately seems to impact career choice upon graduation. Our results pinpoint factors that support and explain those students who make choices counter to the prevailing trends—namely extracurricular activities, study abroad programs, and students' longstanding passions and beliefs.

## **I. Introduction**

The trajectory of careers has changed drastically over the past several decades in America. The days of seeking a long-term profession post-college has now shifted to a time of looking for the “next step.” In recent years, graduates choose jobs with the mindset that they will switch career paths several times. Finance, consulting, and more recently, technology and startup jobs, have become the desired path for many young people. These jobs offer financial security, a sense of achievement, a competitive edge, and the promise of engagement with like-minded peers of similar backgrounds. Although a traditional goal of elite liberal arts campuses is to allow students to explore their passions, take a variety of subjects, get a broad education, and ultimately widen their set of experiences and passions, several factors can keep this mission from becoming a reality. Students face significant academic and social pressures, combined with financial pressures particularly prevalent since the 2008 economic meltdown. As a result, many students to begin to focus on future jobs as early as their freshman year.

Students struggle with whether to follow their interests, despite the risks that may present themselves, or to follow the well-known and well-trusted route of university-sponsored recruiting to finance, consulting, technology and start up jobs. Students seeking to work in jobs that are less easy to find, such as nonprofit or government work, must often forge their own paths in finding these roles, making the choice more challenging and less safe. Despite these factors, many students graduate with the goal of giving back through their work, through working for a service organization (Peace Corps, Teach for America) or a socially-minded organization (Center for American Progress, Ashoka).

To understand how these decisions are made, Net Impact, a nonprofit organization that works to help students think about how they might be change makers in their future careers, conducts yearly surveys of its members. In 2011, the organization reported that over 90% of undergraduates and recent graduates feel that having a career that enables positive change is important and 75% want to find a cause that they can believe in. For the most part, despite these beliefs, Net Impact members do not pursue careers that incorporated these ideals. While many members participate in volunteer activities outside of their work (Net Impact Member Survey, 2010), only 35% seek work that specifically engages in a focus on public interest (2011).

In the present study we explore the issues of career choice among Harvard seniors, in an effort to understand which factors influence the shift from wanting to do “good” in their work to finding jobs that are in the corporate world. We are curious about how students who enter school with a diverse array of passions and interests end up, through the pressures of school, society, parents, peers, in competition for the same set of coveted jobs. Specifically, we explore the factors that are most influential in their decision-making process. We investigate how university culture, institutional structures, and student beliefs and behaviors impact career choice.

## II. Methods

### *Selection Criteria, Sample, and Data Collection*

Forty Harvard seniors were asked to reflect on their time at Harvard, key influences in their lives and in decision-making, and considerations about careers post-college (see Appendix B for the interview questionnaire). Every individual participated in a one-on-one in-depth interview with a researcher. The interviews were conducted between October 2012 and March 2013. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted about one hour. This method allowed for a deep investigation into each research subject, including life story and what brought him/her to Harvard. Subjects were able to speak at length about their college experiences, how they chose their majors and minors, and what was most significant to them about their time in college. They could reflect on the important factors in their decision making to date and how they thought about next steps throughout college. Students then discussed their career process to that point. Those subjects who had accepted jobs spoke in depth about the decision-making process and anticipated excitement and anxieties about the positions they had accepted. Subjects who were not yet sure of their next steps reflected on their current thoughts on future jobs and about the process of their job search. Students had the opportunity to delve into the culture of the university and how that shaped their views on careers. As seniors, subjects also looked back on their four years, highlighting the best and worst parts of their college experiences and what surprised them about their four years in Cambridge.

We focused on recruiting Harvard seniors who majored in the humanities (non-hard science or math or arts) in order to avoid a potential predisposition for certain careers. We did not specify beyond the request for seniors with a liberal arts focus. In order to secure a group able to discuss formative and college experiences, and a variety of professional goals, we sought a diverse sample of students from Harvard College with different concentrations, backgrounds, and career ambitions.

In addition to the 40 students, we spoke with 7 “informants.” Informants included dorm advisors, professors and career experts on campus, a former TFA recruiter and a former high school counselor. Informants were selected based on their expertise in the areas of career choice, proximity and interactions with college students, specifically seniors, and their knowledge of Harvard culture.

The sample of participants consists of 40 individuals (18 males, 22 females) ranging in age from 20 to 22 years. Participants are all seniors at Harvard, drawn from dorm list serves and from the Office of Career Services weekly emails. It should be noted that the bulk of participants (30 of the 40) were recruited from the Resources in Job Hunting list serve emails; this source indicated that they were thinking about next steps already as this list serve sends out “job blasts” and information on career fairs on campus. To participate in the study, students had to fill out a consent form and were given a \$25.00 gift card to Amazon for the hour-long interview.

Participants were pursuing many different majors, with the most popular being psychology, history and English. Of the 40 participants, 10 had accepted jobs in consulting, banking, and management, 4 were planning a year with Teach for America, 3 were working in technology start ups or web based companies (Dropbox, Venmo, and Google), 2 were going to law school, 2 were pursuing journalism careers, 2 were going into science fields (one medical school, one research), 2 were going into teaching (non TFA), 1 student was going to the government, 12 had fellowships, 2 were going into graduate studies, 1 was pursuing his own education start up, inspired by his senior thesis, 1 was pursuing the arts, and 4 were as yet unsure of their plans but wanted to work in a nonprofit of some sort, 2 were unsure with no idea about what they may want to do. 10 participants were first or second generation immigrants. The above proportions are fairly well aligned with the 2011 OCS report on student choices: in our study, 25% chose business, finance or consulting compared to 33% in 2011 at Harvard; 15% chose education compared to 12% in 2011 at Harvard; 10% chose communication, media or the arts, compared to 9% in 2011 at Harvard; 5% chose science or medicine, compared to 8% in 2011 at Harvard; 2.5% chose government, compared to 3% in 2011 at Harvard; and 5% chose nonprofits, compared to 7% in 2011 at Harvard (2011 OCS Student Report).

### ***Data Analysis***

The interviews for this study were audio recorded and detailed notes were also taken during each meeting. After each interview, in line with standard procedure in qualitative research in the social sciences, field notes were converted into a memo that summarized the content of the interview, highlighted key quotes from participants, and extracted the major themes discussed. In each memo, detailed notes were organized into four main sections: background, formative influences, beliefs and goals, and career decisions. Once the memos were complete, notes were analyzed line by line. A list of trends was then developed and checked against audio recordings of interviews to seek out supportive evidence and ensure that memos included all significant data.

From this detailed overview, several themes and preliminary findings emerged. In consultation with the research team, a set of draft codes was developed. The notes were analyzed two more times, yielding a set of finalized codes, drawn from the themes that emerged initially. These codes were applied to the third analysis of the notes, with closer attention to repeated patterns and entailing a detailed count of subject responses.

It is important to note that this study is based on a limited set of participants and a select population. Nonetheless, the depth of responses and data collected provides valuable insight into the minds of these Harvard seniors. We believe these findings may be relevant well beyond the Harvard campus, especially to other elite campuses.

### III. Results

We find a strong presence of a "funnel effect" at Harvard: students enter freshman year with a diverse set of passions and interests, interests that inevitably become narrowed by senior year. Several trends help to explain this shift, the most important is the overwhelming influence of a competitive job market, with a perceived understanding of jobs in just a few sectors, and the perception that *only* these jobs "live up to the degree." Furthermore, it seems that the lack of university structures, processes, and messages to counter these beliefs, reinforce these perceptions. The participants in this study reveal a focus on achievement and measurable goals in considering jobs. We find that these beliefs are reinforced by students' risk aversion—unwillingness to take a chance on something new or untried. Interestingly, some students appear less influenced by these factors. These individuals talk about the importance of opportunities that are outside of the academic program, for example, internships, extracurricular activities, and experiences abroad, each of which help students to realize there is more to life than a job in finance. Furthermore, some of these individuals talk about preexisting values or passions that did not waver in spite of the culture and peers they found at Harvard. In what follows, we provide more details about this overall picture.

#### *1. The Narrowing Effect: The Role of University Culture and its Structures*

In general, throughout our interviews, we find an "overwhelming" and powerful perception among students that Harvard values finance and consulting jobs above other career choices. As students describe, this culture pervades the campus and defines success for students in their job searches, contributing to the "funneling" or "narrowing" of student interests for future careers and pursuits. In our speaking with students, we find three important ways that the University culture and structures contribute to this "funnel effect,"--- namely fall recruitment, competitive environment to achieve quick success, and lack of guidance from key areas and departments within the University.

#### Fall Recruiting

Of the 40 students interviewed, 36 describe a pressure to participate in the fall recruiting cycle, a massive presence on campus. During this time, students' inboxes are inundated with reminder emails, the bulk of students begin to be interviewed, and if students do not participate, they feel excluded. Interestingly, many of the students with whom we spoke are surprised by how many seniors participate in fall recruiting, even if they have no expressed interest in the job offerings. For example, more than half of the participants mention that either they themselves or a peer entered recruiting without any previous interest or particular goals in mind. In a particularly dramatic example, one student recalls making a pact with his girlfriend that neither of them would apply to consulting and finance jobs; they promised each other that they would provide support for each other if they were tempted to succumb. He knows this sounded ridiculous, but because of the pressure on campus, it was necessary. Furthermore, as he explains, recruiting for



nonprofit work often does not start until the spring, which makes students anxious as their peers compete for high paying, big name positions. Some of these students begin to consider options in finance and consulting that they might not have thought about before. Even though, according to OCS, only 20% of the student body goes into finance and consulting (which is on par with other Ivy League schools), all but four students talked about the interview process for these jobs.

In an interesting counterpoint (or echo) of the Circean lure of finance or consultancy jobs, those students who want to pursue careers that entail “giving back,” tend to only focus on Teach for America (TFA). These students often apply to TFA because it the organization recruits heavily in the fall. About 18% of the 2012 senior class applied to TFA, 70 students were accepted (Office of Career Services data, 2011-2012 school year). One student said she has noticed two extremes at Harvard, the desire to do finance or the desire to do TFA or work in Africa with a fellowship. There is not much in between. He commented, “I thought it would be obvious who would pursue these jobs and it is not.” He wishes that less traditional organizations could also recruit in the fall.

#### Pressure to Achieve Quick “Success”

Some of the students talk about the competitive culture at Harvard, not only in terms of its focus on academic achievement, but also in terms of finding jobs and careers quickly and securing those that are valued in society for monetary success. In other words, the idea that money defines success is prevalent, a mantra that adds to the pressure to participate in the finance and consulting recruitment, rather than on fields that focus on social service. One student states, “in general, I find the culture at Harvard repulsive.” He believes the emphasis on certain careers (such as finance) is discouraging and is reminded of a friend’s comment, “Harvard takes people with different interests and turns them into investment bankers.” He noted people are more concerned with sheer achievement of certain outcomes, whatever the route to achieve these outcomes.

Some students describe this pressure to find a job that “lives up to the Harvard degree.” For example, several students who had been interested in teaching at some point during their four years had been asked why they were attending Harvard to “just” to become a teacher. One participant recalls this happening on a family vacation and feeling uncomfortable and awkward. Another participant recalls the decision about whether to take a job at a consulting firm, a prestigious online company, or to teach at a charter school. She loves teaching, but recalls feeling shame about pursuing this line of work as a Harvard graduate. She negotiates her interests with external expectations. The position she ultimately accepted is with an online company: she is excited by the company’s prestige, which signals something valuable and valued to her and her peers.

Dramatically and highly significantly, over half of the participants cite this environment that pervades campus. One student mentions that though she has enjoyed her time at Harvard, she has

found that the “pressure cooker culture makes it hard to distinguish what you want from [what you’re] expected to want because it is valued by the Harvard community.” This peer pressure led at least one student with whom we spoke to change her major from government to economics after she did not receive an internship in finance the summer before her sophomore year. She feels that now she is a “major” in economics, she will be able to compete with her peers more successfully for these jobs.

Career experts on campus believe that part of the culture is created by the type of students Harvard admits. As one professor notes, Harvard admits students who are “busy” (a descriptor shared by her friend on the admissions committee) and they like to do many things simultaneously. Consulting and finance recruiters emphasize that the day-to-day work will be dynamic and busy, which fits with this kind of personality, and also offers the opportunity to travel and work on varied projects. Some of the participants feel that Harvard students are on a “fast track,” and as a result, are resistant to working in large nonprofits or government agencies that move too slowly. In other words, Harvard students want to grab skills quickly, which will enable them to either start their own enterprise or to make a difference in the foreseeable future. Therefore some of the participants believe that many students accept jobs in finance and consulting believing that they will only stay with them for 2-3 years, and then they will go on and do what they *truly* passionate about. In sum, consulting and finance are “safe” jobs where individuals can learn skills that will position them well for any future career they may want to pursue.

#### Lack of guidance from University structures and departments

University structures designed to reinforce the university’s mission to broaden students’ experiences and passions could provide some counter influence to these pressures. However, structures designed to aid students in career pursuits in fact further reinforce the funnel effect. Most students report that resources in job hunting have not been particularly helpful in the career planning process. Twenty students feel it was not helpful, eighteen are apathetic, and only two of our participants mention it helping in some way. One student, for example, mentions that she worked with different job-hunting resources on campus and found them neither helpful nor insightful. In fact, despite her expressed interest in wanting to find a service-oriented position, career sources encouraged her not to “limit herself and maybe pursue consulting.” Another student recounts going to career services for advice on journalism as a potential career. He states, “They [only] had a broad definition of what journalism is and guided me toward jobs that are not relevant to my interests.” As a result, many students feel if they want to pursue a nontraditional path they are on their own, though some students mention the helpfulness of house tutors and professors for career advice.

Another informant shares her view that there is a dichotomy in liberal arts colleges, particularly at Harvard. Specifically, students are encouraged to study everything and take courses for which they have a passion; yet at the same time, the college does not encourage these fields as future

careers. Because of this divide, students worry because they feel no support for pursuing these interests in the future, “What will I do with an English degree? How can it help me get a good job?” As a result, students focus on what seems like the more viable options for the long-term. One student suggests that Harvard students would benefit from more time for reflection about passions and interests along with suggestions about how to help pursue these in future careers. He also believes that offices on campus help to connect current students with alumni who have made courageous choices that are “off the beaten track.” Other participants remark that the “funnel effect” is created by the speakers and events offered on campus. Interestingly, while career support services at Harvard feels that a space for students to reflect on their futures is necessary, this does not fall under their jurisdiction. Instead, other structures such as houses, freshman seminars, and campus programming focus on this area. Indeed, the Freshman Dean’s Office has backed a program of sessions called “Reflecting on Your Life,” which asks freshman to ponder questions about what they want to accomplish during their time on campus and think forward about what they might want to achieve upon graduation. In 2013, in half of the undergraduate houses, this program catalyzed a sophomore class initiative, dubbed “Reflections on Transitions.”

## ***2. Student Risk Aversion***

While university culture and structures inculcate the funnel effect, it is also further reinforced by “risk averse” students. Students with whom we spoke exemplify many of the findings in current literature about risk aversion in today’s youth-- basically a fear of the unknown with respect to their life choices. One professor reflects that “fear of the unknown and uncomfortable” leads students to “safe” jobs such as finance, consulting, and even TFA, because these fields and organizations offer training and support that is familiar to students. In other words, students know how to perform well within these structures and see these jobs as a natural next step. Furthermore, current students observe alumni taking these routes, an example that leads them to believe that success is possible and likely. This professor expresses concern that this attitude causes students to lose confidence in their own voices and decision-making abilities.

Several informants, familiar with Harvard and the career choice process at the university, explain that there is a new model of job-hunting in recent years that entails students focusing on the short-term “next steps,” rather than a long-term career. In other words, trends show that students view the few years post college as a “figuring out time.” Students seem to fear committing to one job and becoming bored. A recent graduate, for example, who had been working in the White House for a year and half after Harvard, decided to leave because “she had learned all she could there.” As one of our informants explains, students have been on a “fast moving roller coaster” for four years and want more of the same after they graduate.

Harvard students are also risk averse to “going against the grain” of Harvard culture. Many participants tell stories about decisions they face to pursue personal interests or the fields that Harvard seems to encourage. For example, one student describes her passion for education. Her

mother and godmother were both teachers, which inspired her to want to follow the same path. While at Harvard, this student taught at low-income schools through the Philips Brooks House Association (a student-run organization advocating for social change) and led the Harvard Education Society. Despite her love for teaching, she decided to enter into fall recruiting to see “what else was out there,” and possibly to see what she might be missing. She decided to take a job at an education-consulting firm that specializes in curriculum advising. She will do rotations including finance, sales, marketing, and product development, which to her feels more aligned with the kinds of work that many of her peers choose to do. She still hopes to stay in education in the future, though many people in the company go on to business school.

Another student, fascinated by rare objects, and writing her thesis on national treasures from World War II, worked part time at the Houghton Library, in its rare books section. However, not surprisingly based on our findings, she accepted a job working at a medical software company. For this student, choosing the job came down to its benefits and financial security. She comments that in this market you would be “dumb” not to accept a job with this kind of security and safety. She is not expecting to “love her job” but hopes to “like it enough not to be miserable.”

In our interviews, students describe discomfort experienced by those who do decide to take risks because of the uncertainty from peers and parents, who are still influential in their decisions. We rarely heard from the student who made a decision about the future and did not take into account the expectations and perceptions of family and friends for the kinds of work that Harvard students “should” do. However, one student told us how she turned down the opportunity for law school because she decided to pursue her passion in music. She has always wanted to pursue law school and took several law internships during the summer months. However, after working at a music company in Nashville one summer she realized what it meant to be “totally happy.” Though her parents and peers are worried about her change in direction, she said “what the hell” and decides to give it a shot. She realizes that, in order to stay interested for the long run, she needs to feel passionate and happy doing her work. Her happiness trumped her aversion to risk, despite her parents’ continual pressure to pursue a more traditional path such as Stanford Law School, to which she had also applied.

A few other students speak of similar choices. One student who loves theatre knows he would not be happy in a field that did not include theatre and the arts in some way and decided to pursue these opportunities for next year. He is not anxious about the uncertainty that he may face. He attributes his attitude to a feeling that with a Harvard degree, “anything is possible.” Another student from New Orleans who has been passionate about education since she worked at a nonprofit during high school (she taught in low income schools) chose teaching over working at an education consulting firm because for a future in education, she needs to have experience teaching and understanding how a school works. In our study, these examples are the exception, not the rule.

Another small group of students also stand out for their willingness to take risks and commit to fields of work other than finance, consulting, and business. A professor with whom we spoke notes that her religion majors (there are 9 seniors this year) do not fit in to the Harvard mold. Their interest in serving people and contributing to the social good outweighs the traditional career paths chosen by most Harvard students. One student in this group remarks that because he has led a life of privilege and wants to give back to those who do not have the same opportunities, he has made an intentional effort not to apply to fall recruiting jobs. He has accepted a job with Teach for America for the fall. Another student in this group says the culture at Harvard “puzzles” her because she now feels that she *can* take risks with her Harvard degree. She often wonders why her peers are pursuing jobs that are so safe and money-oriented. One of her friends argued, in response, that his banking job is risky in a sense, as the markets are always changing.

### ***3. Alternative Influences: Internships, extracurricular activities, travel abroad experiences and pre-existing beliefs***

Some students, however, describe a very different experience than what is described above. What explains these outliers? Experiences outside of the academic life of Harvard—internships, extracurricular activities, and travels abroad— help for some students in thinking “outside the box.” In fact, more than half of the students with whom we spoke (n=26) comment on the power of these extracurriculars and internships in focusing their career hunt and many note that these experiences were more important than their academic experiences. Summer internships at law firms and extra-curricular activities help students to discover new passions and interests. In fact, one student’s internship at the Harvard radio station led him to create his own path within his English concentration, with a special emphasis on journalism, since Harvard does not have journalism major. Another student, a talented musician, managed the Harvard Radcliffe Orchestra his junior and senior year, and became interested in management. He is looking for managerial and administrative positions at nonprofits. Many other students who join business-orientated extracurricular clubs, report feeling more prepared to pursue business jobs as a result.

Traveling abroad also seems to influence students’ job choices. For example, one student who went to Chile became interested in immigration labor, ultimately the subject of her thesis. Other students remark that their experience abroad gives them confidence and a sense of independence, as they have to fend for themselves for the first time in their lives. This confidence may translate into the ability to make decisions that require some risk.

Some students also describe personal values as an important support to choosing future work. Staying true to one’s values and not compromising on the values they were taught from an early age may be difficult in such a competitive environment, but it is certainly a possibility. For example, one student, an immigrant to the United States, feels that his upbringing and experiences as an immigrant helps him to debunk the perception that “success” at Harvard is about finance and consulting. As he describes it, the immigrant experience - moving to a new

country with nothing – was far more frightening than any possible risks involving career choice. A few other students also mention their parents as models, inspiring them to do work they are passionate about. For example, one student’s parents, both doctors, love their jobs. Their passion and fulfillment has motivated this young woman to strive for the same sense of purpose in her future.

## Conclusions

Elite liberal arts campuses articulate a mission to allow students to broaden their passions by taking a variety of subjects, explore new experiences and acquire an education full of a robust set of choices and paths. However, university culture and structures, combined with risk aversion among students, frequently results in just the opposite: a “funnel effect” that narrows a broad set of passions into the pursuit of a limited set of job opportunities. At Harvard, an achievement-driven culture yields a state of affairs where students view potential careers after graduation through a narrow window. This institutional narrative is reinforced by institutional structures or the lack thereof. Furthermore, risk aversion in students of this generation further impacts decision-making, as fear of failure and boredom deters unconventional pursuits and pushes students further towards the road most travelled.

There are, however, a few counterinfluences that appear to work against this funnel effect. Students talk about high engagement and passion in extracurricular activities, a situation that confers confidence about choosing other lines of work. In addition, many students report discovery of passions and broadening of interests resulting from these extracurricular pursuits. Study abroad is also an important formative experience that broadens perspective and passion, and energizes students to unearth and pursue opportunities "outside the funnel." Finally, a few of the students who chose alternative career paths explain their decisions in the context of strong, pre-existing beliefs. In particular, family role models and experiences are major cited factors that appear to counter this ever-present pressure.

Our findings entail suggestions for "widening the funnel" and broadening, rather than limiting, the set of passions and opportunities students choose to pursue. One recommendation is to leverage existing programs demonstrated to counter the funnel effect. This includes extracurricular programs, and particularly those that promote non-traditional job pursuits, including programs that promote working for social good, for example in the fields of education, non-profit work, and government. In addition, strengthening or encouraging study abroad opportunities is also important. A college or university can possibly mandate “time off” for community service and/or study abroad programs to ensure all students receive experiences that counter prevailing pressures.

Universities might also consider programs and processes that counter, rather than reinforce, current trends, and that attempt to mediate or moderate risk aversion in students. These activities would assist in the pursuit of alternative paths, and give opportunities to tap into pre-existing passions and beliefs. One exemplary program is "project pathway" under implementation at John Hopkins University. This program engages students as freshman and follows them through post graduation decisions. By mapping courses of interest in areas of passion or prospective passion, as well as facilitating reflection, the program is designed to counter inherent risk aversion in students. Another possibility is to expand (or even market or advertise) programs such as Harvard’s “Reflecting on Your Life.”

Finally, our findings suggest universities consider convening formal and informal gatherings to share experiences and to generate innovative solutions to these pressures and concerns. Given the stated goal of liberal arts colleges to broaden experiences and passions of students through education, there should be strong and effective efforts to counter the funnel effect. Ultimately, such efforts may further enable the creative potential and passions of their students.



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## ***Appendix B: Career Choice Interview Protocol***

### **A. Introduction/ Background**

1. Tell me about your college (graduate school) experience?
  - a. What did you major in?
  - b. How did you decide on this major?
2. What did you enjoy most about college (graduate school?) Classes, activities, etc?
3. What extracurricular activities did you participate in?

### **B. Formative Background**

1. Reflecting on your formative years as a child or adolescent, what influences do you view as most salient to the way you approach your work or school?
  - a. How has your family background influenced the way you approach your work?
  - b. How did you spend your time as a child? / What would a person have seen if they shadowed you for a day when you were a child?
  - c. Were you involved in any volunteer organizations? Scouts? Active in a church or temple?
  - d. As a child, were you intensely involved in one or more activities?
2. Who has had the greatest influence on your approach to work and/or how you have made crucial decisions in your career thus far?
  - a. Were there any particular people who attracted you to your field of work?
  - b. Would you consider any of them mentors?  
How did they affect you? What did you learn from them?
  - c. Any “anti-mentors”? How did they affect you
  - d. An influential book, movie or someone you didn't know personally?
3. Would you say that there has been an experience, opportunity, or project, either in your youth or more recently that was transformative or has had an important effect on your life or career?
4. Can you recall instances of events in your youth that were early indications of your social awareness and/or entrepreneurial inclinations? Do you recall what motivated you to initiate each of those endeavors?

### **C. Goals and Responsibilities**

1. In your studies, to whom or what did you feel most responsible?

2. Who do you predict you will feel responsible to in your future job?
3. In your schooling, was there an overarching purpose or goal that gives meaning to what you do that is essential to making your work worthwhile? What is it? Will this remain the same in your future job? [If unclear, probe for: self vs. other orientation; universalism vs. particularism.]
  - a. Do you have a particular time frame in mind with respect to this goal? How quickly do you expect or hope for having an impact?
  - b. (if unclear) How does this connect to your day to day work?
  - c. Are there certain tactics or techniques that have helped you achieve your goals in your day to day experiences? [probe for strategies]
  - d. What experiences or influences were most important, in forming this goal?
  - e. How do you know whether you are on track / making progress toward this goal?
  - f. How would you describe an ideal culture within an organization? How would one go about creating this kind of culture?
5. Have your goals changed over your college or graduate school years? (If so), how have they changed? What caused them to change?
6. What direction do you see for the future of your own career?
  - a. How do you measure success?
  - b. How will you know when you've achieved it?
  - c. What, if anything, might make you decide to leave your field of work?
  - d. Do you have particular hopes or requirements about your income?

#### **D. The Work Process**

1. Do you have a particular philosophy, or perhaps rules or aphorisms, which guide your overall approach to your work?
  - a. If so, how did you come to acquire this philosophy?
  - b. What are some examples of how you have employed this philosophy in your school work or recent career ?
  - c. To what degree does this philosophy reflect your approach to life in general?
2. Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of?
  - a. To what do you attribute your success in this endeavor?
  - b. What strategies did you use to accomplish this achievement ?
  - c. How did you learn these strategies yourself?

#### **E. Opportunities and Supports**

1. What are some of the things that are helping you to pursue your goals in college or in recent work? Do you have ideas about what supports you will need in your future work? [probe for: most important opportunities or supports]

2. Are there specific qualities that have contributed to your achievements? (qualities = attributes: e.g., determination, persistence)
  - a. What about qualities that have held you back or made it harder to pursue your goals?
3. What keeps you going or sustains your commitment to your goals? Your work in school? Your work in your new position?

**F. Career Decisions**

1. Do you know what you will be doing after graduation?
2. What will you be doing (or what do you hope to be doing) in your new job/ program?
3. How did you decide on this specific job? Tell me about your thought process when you were deciding on this job?
  - a. What other jobs did you apply to?
  - b. Was the decision to accept this job hard?
  - c. What appealed to you about this job or field of work?
  - d. If you were not doing this, what might you be doing instead?
4. What, if any, would make you give up working at your organization? Would you give up your work all together? If so, what would you do?
5. What do you expect your work to be like? How may the day to day be?
6. What do you predict you will like about your work? Dislike?
7. What kinds of things do you hope to accomplish in your work in the future?
  - a. What are you hoping will be the greater impact of the work you are planning on doing?

**G. Beliefs and Values**

1. Would you say that there are any personal beliefs or core values that guide your studies and work?  
(beliefs = world view: e.g. belief in truth, justice, fairness)
  - a. What experiences or influences were most important, in forming these beliefs/values?
  - b. How do these personal values or beliefs determine the types of projects with which you get involved?
2. Do you predict these are these values the same or different than the values of colleagues and others in your field?
  - a. (if in conflict) What effect does this have, if any, on pursuit of your goals?

- b. Does this degree of consistency have any relation to the reasons that you chose to join your own organization?
- c. Might it [degree of consistency] be different if you were working in another industry?
- d. Do you predict tension between your beliefs and values and those of individuals in your organization? If yes, how will you deal with it?

3. What kinds of work, or leaders do you admire? Why do you admire them?

#### **H. Ethical Issues in the Area of Work**

- 1. Do you have ethical concerns about your area of work—things that you worry about?
- 2. Do you think there are a lot of opportunities today for young people to get involved in work that is responsible and ethical?

#### **I. Training the Next Generation**

- 1. Describe the training you've received: in what ways has it been adequate? In what ways has it been inadequate?
  - a. Do you imagine your undergraduate training adequately prepared you for your field of work?
- 2. In your opinion, is it necessary to attend a top graduate school - business or another -- in order to succeed in your field?
  - a. If so, what is it that one gets out of school that one would not get otherwise?
- 3. How would you advise someone who is thinking about starting their job search?
  - \*\*\*We are coming to the end of our interview, is there anything you would like to add?
    - a. Check notes for things left out.
    - b. May I follow up with you in the future?

## *Appendix C: Summary of Comments on “The Funnel Effect”*

Prepared by Danny Mucinskas

A draft of “The Funnel Effect: How Elite College Culture Narrows Students’ Perceptions of Post-Collegiate Career Opportunities” by Margot Locker, Lynn Barendsen, and Wendy Fischman was sent to several educational leaders at the end of 2013. For their valuable feedback and insightful comments, we thank Derek Bok, Tom Dingman, Rakesh Khurana, Harry Lewis, Sean Palfrey, and Sanford Thatcher.

Of the respondents who reviewed the paper, all of them expressed agreement with the reality of the “funnel effect,” emphasizing the need to think about its causes, possible remedies, and larger implications for the university. One stated that his own day-to-day interactions with students, including those in science or economic concentrations, “support the findings” and agreed with the suggestions. Another noted that the study’s findings were interesting but unsurprising and that the term “funnel effect” has been used at the Harvard College for a decade to refer to the phenomenon described. Yet another said quite succinctly that the paper “nailed it.”

A variety of reasons for the existence of the “funnel effect” were proposed by the respondents. First, a change in cultural values, reflected in undergraduates’ view of college, may be responsible: whereas during the 1960’s the most important goal for entering college freshman was to discover a “philosophy of life,” the most frequently iterated goal in recent decades and today is to “make a lot of money.” A herd effect, combined with the lure of quick success and a prevailing sense of risk aversion, may also push large numbers of students to accept consulting/finance jobs. The attractiveness of a career in consulting/business for graduating seniors is high because of the business cycle in these industries. Firms recruit in the fall of senior year, which allows students to secure a position early with the prestige of a high-paying job. Large numbers of students thus choose jobs in these sectors (even if some of them may leave the profession after a year or two). Furthermore, firms enjoy coming to Harvard because they consider it “one-stop shopping”: Harvard has done the leg work for them by admitting the brightest students, so firms feel free to pursue seniors with extremely aggressive offers.

Other industries like social service (or even advertising) do not work within the same system or timeline or have access to the same resources. Parallels to a recent HLS study are apparent even if not offering any solution: of incoming law students who express their desire to work in public service law, the majority end up choosing to work in corporate law, even when HLS removed impediments that public service firms face (i.e. the cost of coming to Cambridge for interviews or interviewing too late).

From another perspective, a natural shift in the outlook of college students from idealism to pragmatism as graduation approaches may be partially responsible for the “funnel effect.”

Additionally, one respondent described what he terms the “Freedom Trap”: confronted with the freedoms that university allows and for which they are entirely unprepared after high school, students find new institutional structures to create new and narrow frameworks in which to work instead of embracing freedom. Some of the “funnel effect” is possibly attributable to faculty attitudes as well: consumed with their own academic scholarship, faculty do not strongly engage in guiding students toward a broader range of career options or reach out to less-advantaged students to stimulate their interest in liberal learning.

A small number of remedies that may help to diminish the funneling of students into consulting/business jobs were proposed. The “Reflecting on Your Life” program run by the Freshmen Dean’s Office, perhaps more needed now than ever, spurs inward reflection and assessment of values among participants. A respondent described an initiative he is spearheading that will involve discussions led by tutors concerning the meaning of liberal arts education and the purposes/priorities of the college experience. Another placed emphasis on the need for the undergraduate curriculum to include more material(s) on life reflection and on job satisfaction.

Mild criticisms were voiced. One respondent was convinced that the college does more to encourage interest in public service jobs than the paper mentioned. Two others thought that it would have been helpful (although impossible) to interview the students surveyed in the paper before or at the moment when they entered Harvard. In order to observe how student goals change over time, alumni interviews of applicants were mentioned as a useful source of information for any subsequent study. Social class was also raised as an issue: if one is the first in a family to go to college and has sacrificed to get to that point, that will influence career choices and make one more risk-averse. Furthermore, the dearth of interviews of students in science and technology effectively eliminated from the study those students who are least likely to feel financial pressures and who could act as a control group against which to test certain hypotheses about why the “funnel effect” occurs.

Additionally, the analysis of what creates a “Harvard culture” may have been too sketchy; a respondent questioned who (students, administrators, parents) is responsible for creating such a culture. Another wished that the paper was more neutral, delving more into “whether the business of America is business,” and moralizing less about the loss of choice and personal strain associated with the “funnel effect.”

Finally, the paper raised several questions for readers. Two individuals wondered why so many students went into high-paying consulting/finance positions at all when Harvard undergrads were fairly unique in being both debt-free and out of danger from unemployment. Students therefore do not go into these careers because of a need to pay student loans or a lack of other employment options. Relatedly, it may be worth investigating whether the “funnel effect” exists on other elite campuses, where students have access to similar opportunities, as well as whether there may be



an “admissions bias” at Harvard. For example, admissions may, purposefully or not, accept students that fit the profile of a typical Harvard undergrad who tends to be risk-averse and more likely to choose a consulting/finance career (a comparison of the backgrounds of applicants admitted to applicants denied could be illuminating). As one responder put it, even though “the time to risk everything is when you have nothing” (no responsibilities), most students remain puzzlingly risk-averse.

One individual even challenged the use of the funnel metaphor itself. The metaphor was praised for combatting the views of some faculty members who perceive that admissions is at fault for accepting career-oriented anti-intellectuals. However, he asked the question: who is doing the funneling? Who has the agency in this metaphor? The responses to this question may be different among constituencies.

*Appendix D: An Exchange Between Michael Smith, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, and Howard Gardner, Principal Investigator of The Good Project*

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April 28, 2014

To: Howard Gardner  
From: Michael Smith

Hi Howard,

It's taken me a bit to find a few spare minutes to read this paper. Thank you for alerting me to it; I found it very interesting.

If you will indulge me, I have a few constructive criticisms beyond those I read in Appendix C:

1. I was confused by the phrase “university-sponsored recruiting to finance, consulting, technology and start-up jobs” in the second paragraph of the introduction. While it may be true that companies in these areas are the bulk of the early recruiters on campus, the university doesn't think of itself as sponsoring any companies or commercial sectors. It may also be true that the university doesn't work hard enough to attract companies/foundations outside these sectors, but this doesn't imply sponsorship of the ones it does attract.

2. From my discussions with many of our alumni, I suggest avoiding the implication that “finding jobs that are in the corporate world” is inconsistent with doing “good,” as stated at the start of the fourth paragraph of the introduction. The paper seems to mean something more precise (i.e., giving up on a desire to do good in the world by taking a job simply to make money). The “corporate” world is large, and there are many who think they're doing good in their “corporate” jobs and life. In general, the paper will probably have more impact if it doesn't paint the world with too broad a black-and-white brush.

3. Throughout the paper, there is mention of “the lack of university structures, processes, and messages to counter these beliefs” [p. 7] that seems to not be backed by any attempt to see what the university is actually doing. The issue in this paper is not new to the university's leadership, and many structures, processes, and messages have been attempted. I understand that the paper reports on student perceptions, but it sure seems that the paper expected the perception it found and it would have been helpful to ask the interviewees about some of the things the university has done/is doing (instead of just assuming nothing is being done).

Similarly, it would have been pretty easy to check on the comment, “Other participants remark that the ‘funnel effect’ is created by the speakers and events offered on campus.” What is distribution of corporate vs. non-corporate speakers on campus during a typical semester? I have a guess that the remark isn't backed by the facts. Unfortunately, the paper doesn't indicate whether the authors think this common (?) remark is true. Wouldn't it have been very interesting

to find out? If the remark has no basis in fact, I would have loved to see the paper explore why the participants are laying the blame there instead of elsewhere.

Overall, the paper seems to too quickly blame the university on all counts, instead on specific counts which are backed by facts and then question why other participant remarks that blame the university for the effect are not backed by reality.

4. Finally, in a few places, it felt like the paper argued both sides of the appropriateness of students exploring their options. Sometimes this is good (e.g., when students stick to their initial dreams and explore options that buck the trends), and sometimes this is bad (e.g., when students enter into fall recruiting to see “what else was out there”). I personally think that exploration is always good; the reasoning for one’s job choice after exploring options might, on the other hand, be bad. I’d hate students to think that only one kind of exploration is good.

I hope you find these comments helpful. Best,  
Mike

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May 6, 2014

To: Dean Michael Smith  
From: Howard Gardner

Dear Mike,

Greetings and thanks again for reading and commenting on the “funnel” essay. I’ve had a chance to consult with the authors and wanted to pass our (and my) thoughts on to you.

The paper is an effort to report, as accurately as we can, what we heard from the 40 students and the small number of other informants. In the jargon, this is an ‘emic’ report; and perhaps that should have been made clearer. And so, for example, when we refer to ‘university-sponsored recruiting,’ we are attempting to capture the view from students that a recruiter would not be on campus unless it had the approval of the university.

You are right in detecting our own view that the ‘funnel’ is not a positive force and that it would be better if students considered more options and did not feel pressures (internal and external) to go down the finance/corporate/management consultancy route. In conveying this view, explicitly or implicitly, we are being ‘etic’—and that point should also have been made clearly.

You are also right in pointing out that going into the corporate sector is not necessarily bad, and (conversely) that going into TFA or another non-profit for a spell may not be entirely selfless or praiseworthy. Human motivation is complicated! At the same time, however, it is all too easy to delude oneself that one’s involvement in the corporate world will be of high ethical standards and serve the public good and/or that the corporate immersion is brief, prior to a life devoted to ‘good work.’ Both our own observations and studies by others (e.g. Net Impact) suggest that one needs to be skeptical about the high-mindedness of succumbing to the funnel.

The issue of what causes the funnel, and how it might be countered (if one wants to counter it) is crucial. Unfortunately, other than the students' own perception that they feel pressured, we can't really answer that question. I suspect that, like most things in human affairs, there are multiple causes within and across students.

Which brings me to my own thoughts—and here I don't speak for my colleagues. I am confident that there are other 'non-funnel' messages at Harvard, and that Harvard makes a good-faith effort to encourage exploration of different occupational paths and different life trajectories. But I am equally confident that the current efforts are not enough—indeed, that we need a qualitative, and not merely a quantitative, change in strategy, offerings, signals, and follow-ups.

In expressing this view, I am drawing on my own studies of college students today and an implicit comparison with students from fifty years ago (my cohort), or twenty to twenty-five years ago (the time of my first students and when my children went to college). The messages in the larger society are powerful, loud, and increasingly univocal. (The same applies, by the way, to cheating). We can either accept this change in ambience and complain about it (as I am wont to do), or work actively to counteract it (as I am trying to do). I would like to help bring about a qualitative change (or Sea change or Copernican change) in the way that students at Harvard College think about their life options. As you know, if we succeed in 02138, it will engender reverberations around the country—very positive, in my view!

With all good wishes,

Howard

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