



Navigating the Transition to the Working World

by Ted Alper, Ph.D.

According to a report published by the Department of Education in 1993, more than half of the U.S. population in 1940 did not attend school beyond eighth grade, and only 6% of males and 4% of females completed four years of college. The common trajectory was to obtain full-time employment during your teen years, followed quickly by marriage and parenthood. After World War II, the more common path was to earn a college degree, obtain a job, and move out of the family home by the age of 22.

Since that time, college students are spending more time in college and living at home. In 1960, approximately 30% of young adults (ages 19-24) were still living at home; in 1980, the percentage increased to 47%. Earlier this year, Jeffrey Selingo reported in the New York Times that a major factor in this increase was the loss of manufacturing jobs, once the foundation of our economy, and transitioning to a more high-tech business world that requires more specialized education and a greater demand for advanced degrees. Selingo noted that a report published by the National Center for Education Statistics at Georgetown University found that in the 1980s, college graduates had achieved “financial independence” by the time they were 26 years old; in 2014, the average age was 30.



The Modern Career Trajectory

It is safe to say that most youth will face a very complex career path. In the 1960s, we used to think people would change their careers two or three times, and it was not unusual to work for one employer during your entire professional career. Today, individuals are likely to have even more career paths. In 2015, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that people born between 1957 and 1964 held an average of 11.7 jobs between the ages of 18 and 48 years. Based on this data, college graduates in today’s world will need to work and prepare for their future jobs simultaneously.

The path to a career can start at an early age, and takes on greater importance in high school and as students prepare for college. In 2000, a psychologist at the University of Missouri, Jeffrey Arnett, coined the term “emerging adulthood” as a distinct stage, different from adolescence and young adulthood.

From Sprinters to Stragglers

In an interview with Selingo, Dr. Arnett stated that earning a college degree is not the only factor that predicts success; how students navigate their college years is also important. Selingo argues that students can be divided into three groups based on how they approach their college years:

“Sprinters” are students who have known their major since entering college, earn impressive internships every summer, and have little or no debt when they graduate. They are more likely to job hop because of their affinity to work at startups or new, cutting-edge tech companies.

“Wanderers” are students who have a strong and impressive academic record, but are on an uncertain path. They have likely applied for a number of jobs in a variety of fields without success, or are underemployed. At times, these students decide to attend graduate school to help them determine what they should do. Selingo argues that these students would have benefited from a gap year to explore interests and career options before enrolling in college. He added that the longer these students wander, the harder it is to catch up.

“Stragglers” tend to drift in and out of school during their 20s, perhaps reaching their 30s without a degree and a clear plan for the future. For them, a college education does not create many job opportunities.

There is no clear predictor for where a student will eventually fall in this classification system, but it's likely a combination of personality/emotional factors, temperament, environmental factors, and availability of opportunities.