

THE VALUE OF A COLLEGE DEGREE
IN A RECESSION

A senior thesis presented

by

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- Abstract -

The Value of a College Degree in a Recession

Situated within the realm of a prestigious American university, I sought to examine how the “Great Recession” is experienced by current Duke seniors and recent graduates, and how it can be contextualized within a debate about the value of a college degree during the job search. I also wondered how these experiences compare to Duke alumni from past years of recession, as well as the expectations of high school seniors planning to enter college in the fall of 2011. After conducting personal, conversational interviews with Duke University alumni who graduated between 1973-1975, 1981-1982, and 1990-1991, current and recent seniors from the class of 2010 and 2011, and high school students in an accelerated magnet program, I discovered that every single participant believed that a college education is the best means of finding a “successful” work position in America. Alumni, college seniors, and college-bound high school seniors alike fell along a continuum of enthusiasm for their education that was almost entirely positive. Though the uncertainty of unemployment during a recession might call into question the viability of a degree, there is still a strong belief in education as a means of secure social mobility.

- Figures -

Figure 1: Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions by student level: Selected years, 1970 through 2007 (in thousands)

<i>Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by student level: Selected years, 1970 through 2007</i>													
<i>[In thousands]</i>													
Student characteristic	Institutions of higher education					Degree-granting institutions							
	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total	8,581	12,097	12,247	13,819	14,262	15,312	15,928	16,612	16,911	17,272	17,487	17,759	18,248
Undergraduate	7,369	10,475	10,597	11,959	12,232	13,155	13,716	14,257	14,480	14,781	14,964	15,184	15,604
Graduate	1,039	1,344	1,376	1,586	1,732	1,850	1,904	2,036	2,102	2,157	2,186	2,231	2,294
First-professional	173	278	274	273	298	307	309	319	329	335	337	343	351

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2009. National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2008 (NCES 2009-020), Table 188.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of students enrolled in degree-granting institutions, by race/ethnicity: Selected years, fall 1976 through fall 2007

<i>Percentage distribution of students enrolled in degree-granting institutions, by race/ethnicity: Selected years, fall 1976 through fall 2007</i>											
Race/ethnicity	Institutions of higher education			Degree-granting institutions							
	1976	1980	1990	2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
White	82.6	81.4	77.6	68.3	67.1	66.7	66.1	65.7	65.2	64.4	
Total minority	15.4	16.1	19.6	28.2	29.4	29.8	30.4	30.9	31.5	32.2	
Black	9.4	9.2	9.0	11.3	11.9	12.2	12.5	12.7	12.8	13.1	
Hispanic	3.5	3.9	5.7	9.5	10.0	10.1	10.5	10.8	11.1	11.4	
Asian or Pacific Islander	1.8	2.4	4.1	6.4	6.5	6.4	6.4	6.5	6.6	6.7	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.7	0.7	0.7	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	
Nonresident alien	2.0	2.5	2.8	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.3	3.4	3.4	

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2009. National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2008 (NCES 2009-020), Table 226.

Figure 3: Median Earnings for Workers Aged 25 and Over by Educational Attainment, Work Status, Sex, and Race and Hispanic Origin

Median Earnings for Workers Aged 25 and Over by Educational Attainment, Work Status, Sex, and Race and Hispanic Origin: 2007

(Earnings in dollars)

Characteristic	Total		Not a high school graduate		High school graduate		Some college or associate's degree		Bachelor's degree		Advanced degree	
	Earnings	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Earnings	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Earnings	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Earnings	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Earnings	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Earnings	Margin of error ¹ (±)
All workers	33,452	65	19,405	84	26,894	52	32,874	82	46,805	103	61,287	113
Sex												
Male	40,481	52	22,602	137	32,435	63	41,035	83	57,397	227	77,219	347
Female	27,276	46	14,202	116	21,219	54	27,046	68	38,628	156	50,937	133
Race and Hispanic Origin												
White alone	35,609	49	20,192	86	28,253	99	34,291	92	47,904	198	61,496	125
Non-Hispanic White alone	36,763	51	21,311	120	29,052	99	34,663	101	48,667	193	61,681	130
Black alone	28,071	180	16,163	197	23,322	225	30,034	193	41,972	290	54,527	912
Asian alone	37,940	510	19,640	447	24,539	347	32,160	277	46,857	463	70,280	777
Hispanic (any race)	24,602	123	18,804	125	23,836	197	30,801	162	40,068	346	52,268	561
Full-time, year-round workers	41,568	46	24,964	121	32,862	105	40,769	60	56,118	136	75,140	243
Sex												
Male	46,788	84	27,180	111	37,632	167	46,562	121	65,011	272	88,840	454
Female	35,759	61	20,341	110	27,477	90	34,745	122	47,333	137	61,228	180
Race and Hispanic Origin												
White alone	43,731	103	26,125	108	34,903	111	41,793	60	58,288	323	76,576	281
Non-Hispanic White alone	45,680	69	30,381	161	35,647	76	42,081	62	59,644	195	77,617	304
Black alone	34,671	202	23,446	382	28,690	273	35,236	212	47,153	410	61,174	466
Asian alone	47,336	393	24,220	551	30,105	347	39,800	700	55,279	688	82,200	707
Hispanic (any race)	29,749	213	22,040	100	27,838	288	36,218	217	45,396	401	61,395	624

¹ A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90-percent confidence interval.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007. Educational Attainment in the United States. U.S. Census Bureau: Economics and Statistics Administration. Issued January 2009. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p20-560.pdf> accessed November 27, 2010.

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- Preface -

Before I begin an account of the research, ethnography, and observations I have gathered over the past year, I would like to introduce some of the limitations and potential expansions of this project. I studied the value of a college degree during the job search in a recession, but specifically, I studied the value of a *Duke* degree to *Duke* students. When I began my fieldwork, I understood that the Duke community was specific and that their answers would not reflect the experience of American college students as a whole. What I came to realize in the end, however, was that these differences were so much more complicated than going to an “elite” private institution versus a public one. I would like to introduce some of these in order to frame what will follow in the coming chapters, and suggest what I (or another researcher) could do in the ethnographic process to address some of these limitations.

As I just mentioned, this is a study of Duke students. They attend a “top tier” college, invest a considerable amount of money in their education, and in many cases are fully supported by their parents. Therefore, this is a group of subjects that have been brought up to believe in the value of higher education, if not the necessity for it. This is certainly a limitation, and I would have very much liked to open up my field site to other colleges, community colleges, and skills training programs if time had permitted. For this project, however, I want to frame my findings within the realm of higher education, specifically with a selection of young Americans that are privileged in many ways among their peers within the United States.

What I discovered initially in my conversations with the participants was that their socioeconomic background was a common thread or a basis for comparison. This

was the first indication of “privilege,” but what I failed to explore further was race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. I recognized that these aspects were missing from the interviews and analysis, but I was not sure they were essential for answering the research question. It was not until I considered what it meant to have an “edge” in college applications, why people had hyper-awareness about “prestige,” or why certain Americans have historically had access to education while others do not, that I realized I was missing a larger part of the story. Incorporating these conditions would make for a more fully nuanced and comprehensive study of the state of our higher education system.

As my project comes to an end, I have become more aware of how I am implicated in this question of privilege and how it influenced my initial approach to the topic. Instead of looking at it solely as a limitation, however, I think that my particular background yielded a unique set of questions and answers, and what I discovered was missing from my observations is equally as telling as what was included. I am leaving with more complex questions than I came with, and I imagine their answers are more revealing about the nature of the American education system and the conditions of access.

I.

- Introduction -

October 27, 2010

Barefoot, in oversized pajamas, I ran outside of my college dormitory to pick up the bags of Chinese takeout. Three of my hall mates and I decided to take a study break late that night, watching television in our common room and treating ourselves to wontons and dumplings. All four of us are seniors in the process of applying for work after college—or at least in the process of figuring it out.

Some other students are also in the common room, and have the television set to *Comedy Central*. It is just after 11pm, so *The Daily Show* is on. Jon Stewart's friendly face fills the screen.

“Are you planning a surprise party for us? Filled with jobs and healthcare?!” he quips at President Barack Obama, his guest that night. These sarcastic questions followed Obama's claim that the government in Washington has “done things that some folks don't even know about” to respond to a series of current national crises, including healthcare, financial regulation, and widespread unemployment.

The interview continues, as Obama offers a snippet of optimism: “I'm feeling great about where the American people are, considering what we've gone through. I mean, we've gone through the two toughest years of any time since the Great Depression.”

Most of us sit there silently and watch. One student remarks (something along the lines of), “*What does that even mean?*” Obama is saying something about resiliency, and how we are rebounding from tough times.

“When you've got 9.6 percent unemployment, when folks are seeing their homes underwater, when the economy is growing—but is still not growing as fast as it needs to to make up for the 8 million jobs that were lost? Yup, folks are going to be frustrated” (Obama 2010).

I look over to my friends, on the brink of graduating into the “real world,” nibbling on their chow mein. What does 2011 hold for us?

The growth of unemployment amidst the current recession in the United States has led to a rise in fear and uncertainty for current and potential members of the workforce. Recent college graduates are among this group, and their struggle to find work has spurred mainstream debates about the viability of a college degree in the American economy. Is education a valuable commodity in the context of a financial crisis? Has the recession led to a change in how people regard a college education? Is the economy really to blame for the struggle to find employment after college, or is it the failed expectation for what a prestigious degree *should* afford a graduate?

The “Great Recession”

Since December of 2007, the United States has experienced one of its most drastic economic contractions since the Great Depression in 1929. While many conservative economists want to name this contraction a “recession,” others feel that the term is not powerful enough. This has spurred its “punny” nickname, the “Great Recession.” (Sherman 2009:5). More Americans have lost their jobs, more businesses have gone bankrupt, and more homes have been foreclosed than in any other recession since the

'20s. Though the current financial crisis shares some of the same statistical effects of the Great Depression, it has been labeled a "recession" in order to suggest that the crisis is temporary. Still, the numbers might indicate otherwise. 2.6 million Americans lost their jobs in 2008. Unemployment went up by half a million per month in 2009, as major industries collapsed and fear continued to spread among corporations after the bail-outs (2009:5-6). Widespread unemployment and its frequent discussion in the media have created a pessimistic atmosphere in the American economy, as citizens worry for the future of their families and experience employment insecurity.

Because the recession followed the economic expansion of 2001 to 2007, Americans are reluctant to go back to the old practices of consumer capitalism. According to the "Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission" of the United States, the recession was caused by "a combination of excessive borrowing, risky investments, and lack of transparency in our financial system" (2011). Americans sense the ongoing instability of our economy, which comes up almost daily on national news programs, and consumer-confidence has plummeted in response. While the 2008 presidential campaign had originally focused on the War in Iraq, it quickly changed to stimulus packages and cures for the recession as families became centrally concerned with employment stability (Newman 2008). Whether the actual risks of unemployment match the perceived risks is up for debate, but the political and social impact of these real/imagined events has instilled a sense of uncertainty that is experienced by upper, middle, and lower income Americans alike.

The student experience

As a senior at Duke University who is in the process of applying for work during a recession, I am a central figure in this debate about the value of a degree. My interest and emotional involvement in the topic was unavoidable, as I began researching in the fall of my senior year without knowing where my life was headed. I decided to study cultural anthropology in the spring of my junior year of high school when I read its description in one of my brother's college manuals: "Cultural Anthropology is the study of how humans find meaning in their lives." Whether or not that description is accurate, I was intrigued, and I was sure it was the sort of topic I wanted to pursue when I became a college student.

I never questioned my decision in the slightest until my brother Michael graduated from a private liberal arts college in 2009. He had degrees in art history and history, and had not been able find a job. I had always looked up to Michael, essentially following in his footsteps through accelerated programs, sports, and school activities—up to attending an out-of-state four-year university that was exceptionally expensive for our family. If he could do it, I figured I could too. However, when he could not find a job after graduation, he decided to come back home and work for my father's car detailing business.

Michael's job is very respectable and something which requires an immense amount of knowledge and technical skill, but he claims he honed these skills through summer jobs with my father—not through his liberal arts education. He seemed bitter throughout his first-year in the "real world," frustrated with student loans and his complete disconnection with the life he had in college. He had wanted to teach, but was

denied employment by every program he applied for. Over the phone one day, Michael told me that he regretted leaving the state and going to a private university. He felt as though it did nothing for him, and was a waste of money and time given that he would probably always be involved with the family business.

He works alongside men whose education ranges anywhere from partial high school to vocational school and community college—many whom are not bogged down by loan payments and tuition debt.¹ Later in our conversation, we discussed whether the recession was the blame, his choice of major, or possibly, his reluctance to seek other avenues of employment in light of the stability of a job in the family business. We wondered whether things would change in America, whether there would be a decrease in college attendance or increase in vocational school, or whether employers would stop valuing a college bachelor's degree in favor of more specialized or professional degrees. This discussion led to a newfound fascination for me, as I entered my own senior year at a private four-year university.

Though this example is specific to my own family, it is a popular discussion throughout our nation that spans across sectors of the economy, fields of study, social classes, genders, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. The idea of unemployment, whether or not it is experienced on the individual level, is a pervasive topic in the media that has led to a rise in fear for many Americans. In some ways, this fear can be contextualized in what Stanley Cohen refers to as “moral panic.” Cohen purports that moral panic occurs when a “condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.” Those who start the panic are

¹ This is not to suggest, however, that his coworkers do not also suffer financial strains in this economy, but are less affected (if at all) by tuition debt.

called “moral entrepreneurs,” and in many ways, popular American media fills this role. Headlines like “Disaster and Denial” in the New York Times (Krugman 2009) and news programs titled “Recession Over? That’s a Pretty Tough Sell” on Fox News (Willis 2010) only further ignite the anxiety of the American moral panic over the threat of a bad economy. Fear of retirement, fear of the government, fear of bankruptcy, and a general sense of uncertainty inhibit many people’s ability to move forward in a capitalist economy.

As a student in anthropology, I was interested in this problem that my brother was experiencing, especially given its pervasive presence in the popular media. I decided to explore the issue more in the field through ethnographic research, as a means of determining whether Michael’s experience was common or unique, particularly among a selection of Duke students. I wanted to know whether they were bitter about the expense of their college experience compared to the value of their degree, but was surprised to find that most fell along a continuum of enthusiasm that was almost entirely positive. While I anticipated a few disheartened or frustrated students, what I found instead was that each and every person believed a college education was the best means of finding a “successful” work position in America.

Does this challenge the idea that Americans are worried about employment security or finding a job? I would say it does not, but contrary to the ways in which the value of a degree is brought into question during times of anxiety (like a recession), I will argue that there is still a great belief in education as a means of secure social mobility. To say the “American Dream” is still “alive” might be an oversimplification, but the reason many Americans still consider postsecondary education to be the most favorable path is

because of the way a college education has become inextricably imbued with notions of success and the myths of meritocracy.² We still pursue higher education, at the best school possible, despite fears of the recession. Education is a form of security, and we understand it as preparation for a stable future. These are messages we receive when we are very young, hold with us while we go through school, and value in retrospect.

Therefore, the existence of this debate about college's "worth" must be about something else which is not as apparent. Perhaps, it is a question of control (or a lack thereof) during a time of crisis. If education is a secure means of gaining control over our future, when that future is threatened, it forces us to question the viability of these "stable" structures. This questioning, however, does not seem to have an impact on the desires and actions of those who seek out a college education today.³

Duke as a field site

Because I am a Duke student, I became interested in how the aftermath of the "Great Recession" has been experienced by current seniors and recent graduates. I began working in the university Career Center in the fall of my junior year, and was intrigued by the frenzy of seniors coming in to have their resumes reviewed on the day of application deadlines, begging their advisors to meet with them at the last minute, or simply interested in coming to vent to someone about a recent rejection. I began to feel nervous around them, but was still ambivalent about finding a job until this year. I did not

² Meritocracy is a term that will be discussed in further detail in Chapter II. In a meritocracy, what people earn is equal to the amount of work they put in (McNamee and Miller 2009).

³ This conclusion was brought to light through many discussions with my supervisor, Laurie McIntosh, throughout the course of this research project.

understand just how daunting it could be to have *no* concrete plans, especially given that they were laid out so clearly for my education by my parents and societal expectations.

Another intriguing aspect of Duke is the sense of prestige, which leads many graduates to believe they will attain an ideal vocation directly after they finish their degree. According to the US News National College Rankings, Duke is currently number nine in the country, tied with Dartmouth College and the University of Chicago (US News & World Report 2010). It's location in the Durham-Raleigh Triangle area also brings on comparisons with other North Carolina state colleges, such as UNC Chapel Hill, NC State, and NCCU, which are as close as fifteen miles away. According to the Duke Career Center website, the top five employers over the past five years at Duke have been Teach for America, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Bank of America, and Google (Duke University Career Center 2010)—all major corporations that have a powerful name and are well-known among the American public.

On its current admissions website under the “Who We Are Looking For” link, the Duke admissions office asks, “Our 6,200 undergraduates are among the most engaged, brilliant, passionate, and funny students in the world. Are you?” The Duke Mission statement promises “...to prepare future members of the learned professions for lives of skilled and ethical service by providing excellent graduate and professional education...” Though it does not promise in any way that students will be hired automatically with a Duke diploma, these sorts of statements do instill the impression that Duke students are distinct among the American public. This makes the risk of unemployment after graduation a discouraging ordeal that could potentially lead to bitterness or self-defeat.

But how is this being experienced on the individual level? What are people's frustrations? These questions have grown into larger ones about how society values education, and what role it plays in the future "success" of any American. How do Duke students understand failure and success after graduating from college, based on the work that they find? Besides its convenience, I thought Duke would be an interesting place to study these phenomena given its reputation among other American universities. I made Duke the focus of my research, venturing outside of it when necessary.

Methodologically, most of my research centered on interviews, as I felt that personal conversations were the best way to understand the emotional concerns and personal motivations for each subject.

It is important to keep in consideration that these subjects are unique in their experience with schooling. They all had access to education, and were socialized to understand college as a necessary stepping-stone in life. Additionally, they have received or are receiving their education at a (perceived) "top tier" American college, which gives them a particular educational experience in America.

Methods

Within the Duke community, I decided I would like to speak with individuals about their experience in the framework of a recession. I contacted graduates from past years of recession, including 1973-1975, 1981-1982, and 2001, who live in the Raleigh-Durham area. I wanted to know if this "Great Recession" was so different from economic downturns of the past, and whether current experiences are comparable to those of the Duke alumni. I used the "DukeConnect" online alumni network to contact potential

subjects, and through a series of thirty minute to one-hour interviews, asked about their personal history, path after high school, experience with a past recession, and experience with the current recession. I analyzed the way in which they reflected on the tribulations of the economy in the late twentieth century, whether Duke has afforded them the life they always hoped for, or if those dreams have changed since they were college students.

For my interviews with current and recent college graduates, I had originally intended to recruit seniors. I came to realize, however, that many of us had not experienced the difficulties of the job search yet. When I began my research in September of 2010, many of my classmates were either putting off job applications or were waiting for their sector to begin recruiting on campus. Several of my friends had already suffered rejections, and some had been offered positions through summer internships, but most were like me—waiting for an opportunity to arise. I decided instead to seek graduates from the class of 2010, since those students had been through the difficulty of the job search and were possibly still in the thick of it. Originally, I had contacted graduates through the DukeConnect network, but most of the students listed had completed a Duke graduate program rather than undergraduate. Instead, I sent recruitment emails to personal contacts from past academic courses or social groups, and set up phone and video interviews for locations outside of Raleigh-Durham. These interviews also ranged from thirty minutes to an hour and involved similar questions to the alumni interviews, only their reflections were framed within the immediacy of the current recession.

While I felt it was important to conduct individual interviews with the class of 2010, I was still very interested in how current seniors felt about their looming futures. In

an effort to obtain a general census on the plans or uncertainties of the class of 2011, I decided to record a conversation between seniors at a poker game, bringing up questions to facilitate the discussion as we threw around chips and playing cards. I saw this as a means of participant observation, where I sat alongside my peers and shared many of the same concerns they had about the possibility of unemployment or an undesired position in the workforce.

Through my connections with the Career Center faculty, I came to realize that the observations and experiences of the Career Center director would be informative for my research. William Wright-Swadel joined the “Duke family” as the Director of Career Services in 2008, and quickly made changes to Career Center policy in order to adjust to a period of economic recession. I chose to interview him in much the same way I did with the alumni and recent graduates, by sitting down for an hour and having an open-ended discussion about what led him to Duke, how students deal the pessimism of the economy, and how the Career Center has responded to their needs.

Due to the size and content limitations of my research, I knew it would be important to focus on the Duke community, but I also felt that it was essential to get outside opinions in order for my arguments to be more relevant to the “American” experience. I wanted to speak with high school seniors who were making decisions about next year. Connecting with a high school also proved to be a difficult task, as many administrators were not willing to give up instructional time for a stranger performing undergraduate research. My plan was to connect with a high school instructor and come to their class for a thirty to forty-five minute open discussion with a classroom of seniors. I had the idea because I remembered former students coming to talk and offer advice

frequently throughout my senior year, but many of the local Durham high schools were unresponsive. I realized I would need better connections that led directly to a teacher instead of working through the administrators, so I decided to contact my former high school.

Performing research there raised some issues of familiarity and bias, but it was the best way to speak with many high school seniors at once without extensive persuasion. I emailed one of my former teachers, and together we designed a plan that would work most conveniently for him. If the students decided to participate, they joined me toward the end of their class session, and all others continued with the lesson plan as usual. My methods in this case needed to be outlined carefully, but I did not want to lead the discussion down any certain road. I informed the participants that I would not offer advice, but rather talk through some of their thoughts surrounding graduation and their life after high school.

While each group of participants raised new, more pressing questions about education and employment in America, my goal was to study how past, present, and future groups of adult citizens experience a recession at different points in their lives, and how that crisis affects the way they think about the security of a college degree. Most of the participants found work after college in peculiar, unexpected forms, whether it was through personal connections, random opportunities, or the flexibility to apply for things they had never considered before. Being on the brink of the “real world” can really change the way people think about success, failure, and circumstance. This is not to say that people give up on their dreams—in fact, these personal transformations can be effective impetuses for increased opportunity in the American workforce. For this reason,

all of the subjects of my fieldwork believed fully that college was the most advantageous path for young Americans today, despite the conversations circulating around the popular media and the hardships of a recession.

Chapters to come

The remainder of this paper will be organized as four chapters and a conclusion. The next chapter will explore some notions of “success” and “failure” in America, and what these terms mean to college students. This section will begin with a brief explanation of the growth of postsecondary education in America throughout the twentieth century, leading up to the “Great Recession” of today. The discussion will continue with a more theoretical interpretation of why people go to college, including an examination of meritocracy and the “American Dream.” Then, the chapter will move into the presentation of statistics and trends in the American workforce. This includes the percentage of the population that attends college, unemployment statistics, and the value (in numbers) of a college degree.

Chapter III, “The Past,” will move through interviews with Duke alumni that contribute to the argument *in favor* of a college education. This includes alumni from the 1970’s and 1980’s who graduated during years of recession. The chapter will begin with a brief description of the recessions of the late twentieth century, and the Duke student profile for the years in question. Then, I will move through the most important interviews, our personal interactions during them, and what their life story said about their experience with college education.

In Chapter IV, “The Present,” I will discuss of how the “present” deals with the immediacy of the job search and the perceived difficulties of the recession, and how their understanding of “prestige” plays a role in future plans. This includes Duke graduates from the class of 2010, current Duke seniors of the class of 2011, interviews with the Duke Career Center director, and a self-reflective examination of my own experience as a Duke senior. I will present the information attained from the most important personal interviews with 2010 Dukies, including their experience, their thoughts on the topic, and the dynamics of the interview. I will then remark on the current senior class, including the results of a small group discussion, the operations behind the Duke Career Center, and where I fit in the equation.

In the following chapter, “The Future,” I examine the ways in which high school seniors are influenced by grade anxiety, competition with peers, and parental pressure. This chapter has very little to do with Duke and its affiliates, but examines the topic from the perspective of students in a public high school magnet program that prepares its members for further education. The main objective is to discover what this small sample suggests about the changing and/or ongoing opinions of college and the “American Dream,” and the unique qualities of this accelerated high school classroom. I will begin with a discussion of the methods, recount an interview with the program’s guidance counselor, and follow with a description of the two group discussions that took place. These discussions include questions of family background, outlooks on success/failure, opinions about the recession, and hopes for the future.

A “Conclusion” chapter will follow these four, and will serve as the major analytical link of the thesis. Each chapter includes some of its own analysis, but the

conclusion will work to tie the three ethnographic chapters together with the theoretical foundations presented in Chapter II. While it will wrap up the topic and provide a further discussion of the argument, it will also present some other questions, including the ways in which innovation could be the next step forward from the recession. The end will include a “coda,” accounting for how things have changed after just one year.

II.

- Social Mobility, Postsecondary Education, and The “Value” of a Degree -

In this chapter, I will start by briefly reviewing some of the historical trends that have led to a rise in university education over the past century. Then, I will examine how a university education fits into the principles of the “American Dream” and an imagined system of American meritocracy. Recent statistical data on the “value” of education will follow, as a departure from academic literature into the number-crunching world of popular media sources. Finally, I will discuss some pervasive notions of success and failure in the United States, and how this might affect the choices of American college students. In order to better understand how the “Great Recession” has impacted the young students who participated in this project and others across the United States, it is important to bring some general theories and related ideologies to the forefront of the discussion.

Capitalism, the American middle class, and the rise of the university

In very basic terms, the United States is referred to as a capitalist nation. Capitalism as an economic system can be defined as one in which “employers, using privately owned capital goods, hire wage labor to produce commodities for the purpose of making a profit” (Bowles 2005:4). Profit is the sole incentive in capitalist undertakings, wherein privately owned businesses or entrepreneurs aim to earn money and increase wealth. Government serves no role in the economy or means of production

under “pure” capitalism. This system does not exist in the United States, nor anywhere in the world, as the economic policies of each nation are far more complicated. However, since capitalism has become one of the most pervasive economic ideologies in the world, major changes have been made in its wake. Economists mark early indications of capitalism in the sixteenth century AD, so it has only existed for about one percent of human history. In these five centuries, however, the world has seen more profound transformations than any other time since humans have inhabited the earth (Bowles 2005:4-5).

In the United States, the evolution of capitalism has led to scientific innovations, technological developments, dramatic increases in the sharing of information, rising standards in health, fundamental realignments of power and wealth distribution, the abolition of archaic forms of labor, and for our purposes—dramatic changes to the American education system. Capitalism has also marked more extreme forms of inequality and unequal distribution of wealth, and many would argue that archaic forms of labor still exist as privately owned corporations exploit the working class. However, for theoretical purposes, capitalism in America has been the foundation for the “American Dream,” which purports that any citizen can be successful in the United States, regardless of their birth or upbringing (Shanaan 2010).

The idea of the “American Dream” has been marked by opportunities for upward mobility. These opportunities have changed drastically in the twentieth century, as the American economy has shifted from being an industrial manufacturing super-power to a more service-oriented, idea-based leader in a globalized society. With this notion of upward mobility, a “middle class” has emerged as the most populous—and at times, most

politically powerful—subsection of society. The middle class can be defined socio-economically as those who fall between the working class and the upper class, meaning they do not necessarily live paycheck to paycheck and can afford certain luxuries, but do not have a substantial amount of power as individuals in how things run or how resources are allocated (Newfield 2008).

There is a complicated and controversial history in the twentieth century regarding the rise of the middle class and equal opportunities for social mobility, addressing issues of race, gender, sexuality, health, and politics (to name a few). In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn outlines some of the most important points in our nation's history since its onset from the point of view of "the people." Zinn chooses this lens instead of those of economic and political elites, in order to give the power of knowledge to people rather than institutions.⁴ For the twentieth century in particular, he includes topics that are essential to the understanding of the American labor climate and the rise in postsecondary education. These topics include, but are not limited to, the employment boom after the first World War, labor strikes and the continued growth of worker's union, the Great Depression and widespread unemployment, the second World War and programs for returning soldiers, desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and '60s, national uncertainty in the Vietnam War, and globalization under presidents Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. (Zinn 2003). While each of these historical periods requires careful consideration and extensive explanation, what is relevant in this case is how events in the twentieth century have contributed to the

⁴ Zinn's historical framework is particularly useful, as I too attempt to assess the anxieties of the recession from the experience of individuals rather than the media.

emergence and growth of the middle class and, consequently, the rise of postsecondary education.

Social mobility refers to an individual's ability to change their position within a social hierarchy (Fernandez-Kelly and Portes 2008). By saying "upward mobility," I am referring to an individual's ability to have a better position in the workforce, a higher paying job, or a more powerful role in decision-making than their family members of previous generations. How this played out most prominently in the early twentieth century was through immigrant laborers. The influx of European immigrants was without land or trade skills to inherit, so if they were able to find work, it was usually within unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in manufacturing. At the turn of the century, education was not a path of mobility that was available to immigrants, and "success" came only by developing trade skills or attempting new economic initiatives. Upward mobility was rarely "rag to riches," but "rags to respectability" (CUNY 2007). Success was providing a better life for your descendants.

The working climate changed over the generations as labor unions were formed and worker's rights were better protected under the law (Zinn 2003). World War I brought a heightened sense of nationalism and shared identity, bringing second and third generation immigrants into the mix of the American culture. Economic boom in the '20s brought about more working class opportunities for social mobility, but this was quickly halted by the sudden onset of the "Great Depression." Starting with the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression brought about a real sense of fear among the American people as the unemployment rate rose to over 25 percent and industrial

production fell 46 percent (Zinn 2003:387). It was not until World War II that the United States recovered its losses, and upward mobility took a wholly new form.

Not only did World War II offer a significant increase in employment opportunities, but the G.I. Bill provided a means of true vertical class mobility for returning soldiers. Formerly referred to as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, President Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill in 1944. The bill promised to provide college or vocational education for WWII veterans, one year of unemployment compensation, and access to loans for purchasing homes or starting businesses (Mosch 1975). It was a breakthrough for the growth of education. Tuition was unaffordable for many working and middle class Americans, but the G.I. Bill provided a means for returning soldiers to enroll in colleges. Home ownership in the suburbs, which was previously dominated by upper and upper-middle class Americans, now became possible with zero down payment on home loans. The house was an investment they could borrow money against or refinance in order to send their children to college. The passing of the bill allowed veterans to increase their family's future opportunities in the American workforce, and it was utilized by more than 51 percent of WWII veterans (Mosch 1975).

Similar legislations passed throughout the next decades, including the Veterans' Adjustment Act of 1952 and Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966. Over 70 percent of Vietnam veterans throughout the 1970's took advantage of the opportunities, and with the national military draft, this included many of America's young men (Zinn 2003). In these cases, military involvement was a means of upward mobility for future generations of family members.

With these greater opportunities, college enrollment in America has increased drastically (and almost consistently) since 1970. To give a couple of examples, enrollment in higher education between 1970 and 1980 went up by more than 40 percent. Between 1987 and 1997, it increased 34 percent. These increases also reflect a population boom, but nevertheless indicate a rise in popularity for postsecondary education (See Figure 1, US Department of Education 2009).

Although the G.I. Bill began a new era for educational opportunity, one of the major problems associated with its development was that it helped mostly white Americans. As Ira Katznelson states in *When Affirmative Action Was White*:

“The differential treatment meted out to African Americans sharply curtailed the statute’s powerful egalitarian promise and significantly widened the country’s large racial gap (Katznelson 2005:141).”

While it did offer benefits to Black Americans, states and localities were responsible for implementing the bill, allowing local prejudices to affect its execution. Black Americans were denied loans, channeled into “black jobs,” and encouraged against participating in “skills training” programs. As for educational pursuits, all-white Southern colleges would not accept these veterans and their families, and historically Black colleges were not equipped to meet the demand of higher applicant pools (Johnson and Green 2009:11). This meant that the opportunities provided to Black Americans were limited, and the racial gap widened according to opportunity for social mobility, especially among the emerging American middle-class. To address this problem, many US institutions have implemented affirmative action processes in order to make up for past discrimination. Today, popular discussions about affirmative action have become imbued with a focus on race.

Affirmative action was a phrase first coined in federal law in the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, but was not directed at any group or called for “special consideration.” “Affirmative action” was to be used as protection for workers against unfair labor practice (Johnson and Green 2009:25). This general language of regulatory agency was more focused when President John F. Kennedy used the term in the 1961 Executive Order 10925, wherein he stated that federal contractors must “not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, creed, color, or national origin,” and take “affirmative action” to ensure they are treated equally under employment (quoted in Robinson 2001:79-80). This early definition of affirmative action meant it was applicable to all discriminated groups in America, which could include any minority race, gender, or socioeconomic class.

Under liberal justices William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall, the Supreme Court passed civil rights law permitting “special attention to blacks and women to make up for past discrimination” through national affirmative actions suits under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Zinn 2003:574). This followed ten years after the desegregation of public schools under *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954⁵, and is included among several decades of major strides in attempts towards equal opportunity. In regards to gender, institutions of higher learning like Duke began adjusting their policies to minimize male privilege, as evinced by the merging of the men’s and women’s colleges at Duke in 1972 (Duke Office of News and Communication 2011). Today over 50 percent of students on college campuses are female (Marklein 2005).

⁵ For more on *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, see Richard Kulger, 1975, *Brown, Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Justice*. *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a legal hearing that went to the Supreme Court, and its decision made state laws that segregate white and black students in public schools unconstitutional.

Affirmative action has become a particularly controversial topic in the contemporary education system, most frequently through an emphasis on “special” race consideration. Many White Americans worry over “race quotas” or reverse-discrimination, and believe that by this point in time, we have “made up” for the injustices keeping minorities from access to equal opportunity in twentieth century. I have known many peers to complain they did not have the “edge” of some other applicants, and fully believe that any student of a minority race and decent grade point average will be accepted over a white applicant with the same or better credentials, calling into question the merit of such a system.

Because this is a topic prevalent among Duke’s applicant pool, I decided to look at Duke University’s Equal Opportunity Policy. There is no mention of race:

“...Because a variety of social and historical barriers have limited access to employment and the advancement of certain groups in the past, we make special efforts to identify, recruit, hire, and promote qualified people who are traditionally under-represented... (Office for Institutional Equity 2004).”

“Traditionally under-represented” people could be from any racial minority, gender, culture, social class, or geographic area. In the “Affirmative Action Plan Executive Summary” for 2008, the Office for Institutional Equity states that it plans to adhere to a policy of equal opportunity for minorities and women “not solely because of a legal requirement, but because it is a basic element for human dignity” and allows for “multiple perspectives, different ideas and values on a university campus.” These statements reflect what Johnson and Green claim in the conclusion of their book *Affirmative Action*, that though these policies were initially intended to redress inequities of past discrimination, they are now grounded in social and educational theory about the benefits of increasing diversity on campuses. (Johnson and Green 2009:171).

Affirmative action is another very complex policy with a controversial history that requires a much more in depth examination than I have introduced here, but for the purposes of our discussion, it is important to know that in the latter part of the twentieth century, educational policies had *legally* expanded to offer opportunities for all Americans regardless of race or gender (Dobbin 2009). In terms of percentages, women have caught up to men, making up more than half of the student body on college campuses (Marklein 2005). As Figure 2 indicates, however, by 2007 only 32.2 percent of the college population has minority status, while 64.4 percent are white (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Has affirmative action been successful? It was implemented as an attempt to make the tenants of the United States Declaration of Independence true: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These are the conditions of the “American Dream,” and affirmative action has been a step in attempting to make this dream possible for more of our citizens by making higher education more widely available.

As the United States struggles out of the recession, though, I wonder whether the rising trend in education as a form of social mobility will continue? Small businesses are going bankrupt. Large businesses are going bankrupt. Faulty subprime mortgages have left more than one million Americans facing the loss of their homes or foreclosure (Sherman 2010:3). Without the money to use or borrow, and with college tuition prices rising faster than inflation (Virgin 2008), what is the future of postsecondary education?

Meritocracy for the twenty-first century student: why we go to college

The United States of America was (theoretically) built upon the principles of equal opportunity. Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller discuss the realities of the “American Dream” in *The Meritocracy Myth*, a book that considers the real and imagined practices of meritocracy in our country. The “American Dream” suggests that if you “work hard enough and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success. No matter where you start out in life, the sky is ostensibly the limit” (2009:1). The idea of meritocracy goes hand-in-hand with the “American Dream”, proposing that what a person gains from the “system” should be equal to the work they put in.

Within this ideology, many Duke students might believe they have followed the most “ideal” path of any young American by working hard throughout secondary school, getting accepted to a prestigious college, and attaining a diploma in a challenging academic program. They have contributed to the system and have the degree to prove it, and therefore have earned the opportunity to be hired at the job of their choice, in the sector of their choice, at a high salary.

This is certainly a generalization; not all Duke students want a high-paying, powerful position after college, and hardly any of them believe the meritocracy system runs flawlessly. Furthermore, I doubt many Duke student would outwardly claim that they deserve better positions than other college graduates across the country. Still, many think they will get these better positions. Many parents and students are willing to pay up to ten times the tuition of other universities. Why? It could be that they desire the education it provides, as money attracts more brilliant and innovative instructors. It could be due to the competitive nature instilled in us during our youth, which makes a highly

selective university more attractive due to its perceived reputation or the “mythology” of an elite university. Not all students attend Duke with their future career in mind, but it certainly does offer a chance of upward mobility not experienced at all other universities.

And why attend college at all? There is popularly held belief in America that a college degree will afford you a better life and better pay than it would if you stopped education after secondary school. According to a U.S. Census Bureau report in 2007, the median annual income for all full-time workers, twenty-five years or older, between high school and college is as follows:

“Bachelor’s Degree: \$56, 118
 Some College or Associate’s Degree: \$40, 769
 High School Graduate: \$32, 862
 Some High School, No Degree: \$24, 964”
 (See Figure 3; U.S. Census Bureau 2007)⁶

According to this average, there is frequently a direct correlation between level of education and level of salary. Education plays a significant role in selecting people for occupations, as it is the “accepted” path for America’s youth and indicates the mental capacity for certain endeavors when the proper experience has not been fulfilled. These ideas correlate with the notion of education as a form of security.

These sorts of salary-related statistics are taught to high school students across America today. Whether or not instructors believe that college is suitable for all of their students, they encourage them to pursue it regardless. And why? It seems the educational track has become the most commonly accepted means of upward mobility in America, and anyone who misses out will fall behind economically. They show students the

⁶ These averages, of course, do not reflect differences in race and gender as shown in Figure 3. The chart indicates that women of the same credentials frequently make more than \$10,000 less than their male counterparts, with this gap widening as the degrees are more advanced. By race, Black, Hispanic, and Asian workers tend to make thousands less per year, with this gap widening again among the more advanced degrees up to \$16,000 (with the exception of Asian workers).

numbers because it impresses the importance of college in monetary terms, providing a better standard of living for any student that earns a degree.

However, is education available to all, or does this system continue to reinforce class-based inheritance? Under the beliefs of meritocracy, “education identifies and selects talented individuals and provides educational training in direct proportion to individual merit” (McNamee and Miller 2009:107). McNamee and Miller argue that children begin educational careers that are equivalent to their class at an early age, and are groomed to fit the roles they will fill as an adult. Though individual cases can differ, this suggests that in general, education serves as an indicator for class and reproduces class inequalities from generation to generation. According to the phenomenon that Randall Collins calls “credentialism,” degree holders have more (or complete) access to higher paying, more rewarding vocations (1979). Access to education, therefore, can determine an individual’s potential for higher opportunity. If access to education is not equal for all Americans, then it does not follow the ideals of meritocracy or the “American Dream,” and the existence of policies like affirmative action are indicative of this.

McNamee and Miller quote George Carlin in the beginning of their book, who stated, “The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it” (Carlin 1998). Amidst the recession and a decline in federal school funding, this education-based stratification will continue and early “tracking” of young children in schools will become more evident. This practice has evolved greatly over the past century, as farming has become commercialized and the urban workforce has shifted from manufacturing to service-oriented. Upward mobility is no longer possible through

manual labor as it was in the industry boom. In addition, inheritance has taken a new form, as the deceased no longer pass down inheritable property in tangible forms of land or business, but instead liquidate their assets and split their estate among all predecessors through financial assets (McNamee and Miller 1998:207). In order to make sure that their children “inherit” a certain favorable lifestyle, parents with economic means can lead their children down the path of higher education by starting them early in “good schools” and accelerated programs. Modern American parents do not provide their children with a direct path to an inherited business or trade, but rather push them towards certain directions at crucial points in their youth.

Power in numbers: statistical evidence *for* college

Statistical studies abound have been released since the onset of the Great Recession that tie the value of education to economic stability in a time of crisis, either reinforcing the prowess of a degree or outlining the risks involved with investing such a large portion of middle-class America’s savings in expensive tuitions. The Economic Policy Institute in Washington, DC conducted a study in 2010 called “The Class of 2010: Economic Prospects for Young Adults in the Recession,” which claimed that 2010 would possibly be one of the worst years to graduate college or high school since 1945. When the study was published in May of 2010, unemployment rates had reached 9.9 percent—the highest it had been since the early 1980s. Looking specifically to college graduates, the employment rate rose from 5.4 percent in 2007 to 9.0 percent in 2010. As a group of young workers that have made large, recent investments in their education, they have strong attachments and hopes for the labor market. In 1993, less than 50 percent of

college students graduated with debt, but in 2008, this percentage rose to 65 percent for private universities and 56 percent for public. With this steady increase in debt, it is no wonder why many recent college graduates panic when they are rejected from job after job.

This drastic rise in unemployment rates hardly covers the problem to its full extent, the study adds, as employment rates “do not indicate whether they are employed in a job that matches their skill level” (Bivens 2010:3). Citing “The Long Term Labor Market Consequences of Graduating from College in a Bad Economy,” EPI considers Lisa B. Kahn’s assertion that by simply graduating during a recession, college students will reduce their average lifetime earnings. In deciding to take lower-level jobs for the sake of employment, college graduates make about the same as their high-school graduate counterparts, which is one of the most evident negative effects of the recession on the value of a college degree (Bivens 2010).

Even with these discouraging figures, the EPI study explains that college graduates are in better shape economically than non-graduates. The group of 16-24 year olds with the worst prospects in the recession are those who are not working and not enrolled in school, as many disconnect with formal institutions and are labeled “at risk.” This assertion corresponds with those made in the College Board’s statistical study “Education Pays,” also published in 2010. The central argument in the College Board’s study is stated in its opening sentence, which reads:

“Students who attend institutions of higher education obtain a wide range of personal, financial, and other lifelong benefits; likewise, taxpayers and society as a whole derive a multitude of direct and indirect benefits when citizens have access to postsecondary education (Baum 2010).”

As a not-for-profit corporation devoted to the growth of postsecondary education for all Americans, the College Board's mission is noble, but it should be expected that they are naturally inclined to argue positively for the case of a college degree. The researchers state that the median income for college graduates in 2008 was \$55,700, compared to \$33,800 for high school graduates. For citizens between the ages of 20 and 24, unemployment rates for high school graduates were 2.6 times higher than college graduates. Among these statistics, others "prove" that people with a college education have tended to experience better health, be more involved in society, receive better health and pension benefits, share educational experiences with their children, and require less income support from the government (Baum 2010). If you want to "make it" in America, the College Board *really* thinks you should get a degree.

Some criticism has surfaced regarding the College Board's methods, which is made up of data they "collect and report," complimented by "publicly available government statistics" and "less familiar academic research" (Baum 2010). Whatever this means, former chairman of the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education Charles Miller believes the study overestimated the value of a college degree (Supiano 2010). As mentioned before, the College Board is an organization that represents and coordinates with colleges, so they are certainly not in "in the business of turning people away from college" (Supiano 2010). While most of the direct criticisms relate to the treatment of non-graduating college students and GED recipients, the criticism that most relates to our discussion is the assertion that college graduates experience better health and lifestyle. Anthony P. Carnevale, the director of the Georgetown University Center on

Education and the Workforce, wonders whether better health is more directly correlated with social class, which is indirectly connected to college education.

Ultimately, both the EPI and College Board's statistical studies serve as an example of the benefits of higher education. While the recession has affected unemployment rates for college graduates, they are still favorable to the rates of high school graduates and other non-degree holders. It seems that education indeed *does* pay, and the numbers provided in statistical studies are often a preferred form of evidence compared with individual accounts or general "preaching." Money can be the most affective means of convincing uncertain youth to pursue postsecondary education. Still, the questions remain: how *much* money? What is *rewarding* work? What qualifies as a *successful* job, especially once you have graduated from a prestigious university? These are all questions that are too complicated for statistics to answer.

Success and failure for the American individual

I believe that current prevailing notions of "success" and "failure" in America are individualistic, and can be more appropriately explored through ethnography than they can through other means. However, it is important to recognize some of the theoretical framework associated with the American "culture of success," and what it has meant to "achieve" the "American Dream" over the centuries.

There are countless definitions for both success and failure, but some seem to stand out among others. One frequent theme is entrepreneurship and the respect for American innovators. In *The American Idea of Success*, Richard M. Huber presents the history of success since the onset of American independence, highlighting religious views

like the Puritan-Protestant belief that the amount of money someone makes is a reflection of their service to the community and how much God decides they should be rewarded. Benjamin Franklin, the “American Dream”-er Horatio Alger, Jr., Russell Conwell and Elbert Hubbard, Bruce Barton and B.C. Forbes are mentioned among the powerful men who influenced a middle-class American mindset for the intelligent manipulation of the system. In simple terms, we are encouraged to work as hard as you are possibly capable as an individual, using the “power of positive thinking” (Huber 1987).

In *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, Claude S. Fischer asserts that this American individualism makes up what we might call the “American character.” It is not a sense of selfishness, but what he calls “voluntarism.” Americans believe and behave as if they are sovereign individuals: “unique, independent, self-reliant, self-governing, and ultimately self-responsible.” We do not isolate ourselves and often work as a collective, but each individual owns his or her responsibility within the group (Fischer 2010:11-13). Individuality is the key to being successful, and “voluntarism” encourages each person to work for a higher status.

Therefore, we can think of ourselves as always striving for more than we are in order to achieve “success.” This is part of what can make the job search so disheartening. If we understand that meritocracy does not always work, and in fact it typically does not, it can be rare to find work that someone believes is actually fitting or above their caliber. We do not live in a purely “voluntaristic” culture, because we do not always completely control our own fate. “Meritocrats” might believe that there are no “born losers” in America, but Scott A. Sandage wonders in his book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, whether there is anyone who has never thought, “Am I wasting my life?” At

some points, we all might consider whether we have followed the right path. We might fantasize about a better life, away from the “scramble,” but then criticize ourselves for lacking the drive or determination. Sandage claims, “Low ambition offends Americans more than low achievement” (2005:2). If this is true, consider three co-workers, making the same amount of money, performing the same labor. One of them graduated high school and worked up through entry-level positions to get where they are. The second is straight out of an expensive four-year university. The third was hired because they had family connections to the business. Who is more respected in America?

I do not believe there is any straight answer, though it would seem that the ambitions of each worker differ greatly. It might concern some Duke students that if they commit to whatever job they can attain, that commitment equates to settling, and the settling equates to failure. We live in a nation that “worships success” (Sandage 2005), and I would argue, a culture around education that does the same.

Relating these thoughts to the current recession, I would also argue that there is a difference between “doing well” and “doing good.” Considering “voluntarism” again, an individual strives to do well by making money and building their fortune, but ideally, it should be in a manner that “does good” for the collective community. Because of the subprime mortgage failures and crash of the stock market, many Americans blame greedy traders and bankers for the decline in the economy (Rothberg 2010). “Doing well” financially is not enough, and a liberal education through a top tier university should promote this thoughtful approach to “success” for its students.

The thread that connects these pieces of history, ideology, and numeric data is how each has an effect on the mindset of young Americans, both in and out of college, who are looking for work. The rise in enrollment and popularity of postsecondary education in the twentieth century has made it the most ideal avenue for social mobility, and they have the numbers to prove it. Though equal access to higher education is not available for all of our youth, general notions of success and the “American Dream” fit into this idealization of the university. But how does this glorification of education look on the individual level?

III.

- The Past: Duke Alumni, Recession, and the Late Twentieth Century -

“What’s clear to me in retrospect is how much smaller the world has gotten in these 35 some years.”

-Deana D., Duke Class of 1973

As I explained in the introductory chapter, I thought it would be interesting and illuminating to compare the current “Great Recession” with recessions of the past, especially according to student experience. I do not want to suggest that these recessions stand on their own and are not connected, but perhaps by the nature in which we separate and define them, they might manifest differently in the experience of individuals. For this reason, I chose to conduct interviews with Duke alumni who graduated during a recession.

In this chapter, I will begin with a brief account of some of the US recessions of the late twentieth century. I will then compare how Duke’s student applicant pool between the ‘70s and ‘90s differs from now. The main body of the chapter will follow, as I relate several interviews with Duke alumni who graduated during recessions in the 1970’s and 1980’s. I will conclude by examining some of the themes that emerge among the Duke alumni, as they reflect on the value of a degree in their youth and in the current recession.

Recessions of the late twentieth century

I contacted Duke alumni starting in the graduation year of 1973, so I will briefly outline the recessions that started then and followed for the next several decades. In 1973,

there was an oil crisis in the United States, when the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) as well as Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia instated an oil embargo on the United States in response to their military aid to the Israeli army. This embargo lasted until March of 1974, when the US was forced to adjust its diplomatic relations with the Middle East in order to avoid heightening oil prices, recession, and a rift with the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO) (Barsky & Killian 2004). At one point, the oil prices quadrupled in the United States (Knoop 2004). A large amount of government spending was also going toward the Vietnam War, and the country was experiencing high inflation coupled with low economic growth. The economic downturn took a further dive in the stock market crash of 1973-1974, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average in the New York Stock Exchange lost 45 percent of its value within less than 700 days (Davis 2003). During this recession, the US GDP fell 3.2 percent, and employment almost reached 9 percent in 1975 (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

The next major economic decline was in the early 1980's. The price of oil shot up again around the world during the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which led to the 1979 energy crisis. The new regime in Iran was sending out lower volumes of oil, bringing the prices up by heightened demand. In order to control inflation, the US government attempted a tight monetary policy, but this resulted in further recession. During this time, the unemployment rate went as high as 10.8 percent, and the GDP dropped 2.7 percent (Knoop 2004).

There was another brief recession from 1990-1991, but recovered relatively quickly, and the United States enjoyed its longest period of growth in American history. In the very early 2000s, a combination of (but not limited to) the collapse of the dot-com

bubble, a fall in business investments, and the September 11th attacks led to a rise in consumer pessimism. This recession was shallower than the others, as the GDP fell only 0.3 percent and unemployment stayed below 8 percent (Walsh 1993). What is most important to consider is how it might have influenced the coming of the Great Recession, and how all of these economic downturns are connected in many ways. Oil and the demand for certain commodities, coupled with troubled diplomatic relationships abroad, seem to be a common thread in economic downturn. The policies enacted to prevent the recession from deepening in the early 2000s might have led to the lack of government regulation for the housing bubble and stock market crash, resulting in the recession of 2007. The progression of the economy is connected, made distinct by certain peaks and troughs.

Duke's profile: then and now

After a few of the alumni interviews, I noticed that Duke's prestige and "brand name" was not something that frequently came up, especially compared to the conversations with current seniors.⁷ I decided to explore some of the archival information about class profiles of the late-twentieth century, to compare Duke's competitive entrance standards between then and now.

For the class of 1973, Duke was still separated between the Women's College and Trinity, in addition to the Engineering and Nursing Schools. For Trinity College, 2,955 men applied, 1,323 were accepted, and 650 attended. In percentages, this means Duke accepted almost 45 percent of its male applicants, and about 49 percent of those

⁷ This statement will be elaborated on further in Chapter IV, "The Present," wherein the seniors from the class of 2010 and 2011 spend good portions of their interviews talking about the Duke name and the perception of its prestige.

matriculated. It was more competitive for female applicants, as 1,729 applied, 641 were accepted, and 376 accepted the offer. Only 37 percent of the original applicant pool was accepted, indicating that the Women's College must have been much smaller (by nearly half). For the class of 1974, Trinity accepted almost 53 percent of its applicants, while the Women's College accepted nearly 48 percent. The Women's College must have grown significantly that year, as the class size increased by 164. For the class of 1975, the men's school accepted 46 percent, and the Women's selected 45 percent. The percentages evened out that year, but the real number ratios (1456 males to 801 females, nearly 2:1), make it clear that the difference between genders on campus must have been very pronounced (Bulletin of Duke University 1969, 1970, 1971).

Skipping ahead to the next period of recession I covered in the interviews, the class of 1980's profile was very different since all of the schools were merged (and the archives combined the Engineering and Nursing schools with the total population). In 1980, there were 6865 total applicants, and about 40 percent were accepted (Duke University Matriculant Profile 1976). In 1981, there were 7999 applicants, and selection rate dropped to 29 percent (Duke University Matriculant Profile 1977). This drastic rise in applications and fall in the acceptance rate might indicate that Duke's national prestige rose quickly in the 1980s (or that the basketball team drew more and more fans).

Unfortunately, the records for 2001 and 2002 were missing from the archives. When I found the entering class of 2014's profile online, however, I was amazed by the change in the number of applications over thirty years. There were a whopping 26,784 applicants; 4,207 were accepted, and 1,750 committed (Duke University Admissions 2011). This means the acceptance rate for the class of 2014 was between 15-16 percent.

Even more than the lower percentages of acceptance, I was surprised by how many students applied. It seems that throughout the past four decades, Duke's popularity has grown immensely, and it has increased its size to meet the demand of larger applicant pools.

The earliest national college rankings the archives had collected was a 1987 U.S. World & News Report of the nation's best colleges. Duke was number seven—two spots above its current position in the US News National College Rankings for 2010. It has held a position in (or close to) the top ten in the country for almost over twenty years now. This explains why its “brand name” is more important to Duke students today than it might have been for the alumni.

Interviews with Duke alumni

When I began recruiting participants, it was easier than I expected to contact the alumni. Duke has a networking tool called “DukeConnect,” which allows any Duke student to contact alumni who have offered their council to undergraduates. In the search field, I entered North Carolina as a location, followed by the graduating years of 1973, 1974, 1975, 1981, 1982, 2001. I found between 3-5 alumni from each class.

Within the next few days, I had four responses from the sixteen people I had emailed through DukeConnect. All were women, though I had emailed seven males. I was beginning to worry this would skew my data. Why were women more eager to participate? Would I have to venture outside of North Carolina, and conduct phone interviews instead? Luckily, two males responded by the end of the week, and our plans to meet were underway.

The responses to my emails were interesting. All said that they were happy to help, but some were apprehensive about the quality of their life story as it relates to my research. One woman replied, “Christen--I would be happy to participate. However, I am not certain how typical my experiences are, but would be happy to talk with you” (email, September 29, 2010). One of the men replied, “Hi Christen –Thanks for the email. I would be glad to be interviewed – the economy at the time did change my initial career path and led me to my current line of work” (email, October 5, 2010). Another woman wrote,

“Hello, Christen: thank you for your interest in my "story." I'd be glad to have a conversation with you about my path in the immediate months after my Duke graduation. Some of it could be described as blocked avenues; some of it serendipity and sheer stubborn persistence (email, October 3, 2010).”

Whether they felt their experience was relevant or not, each response indicated that they felt there was something unique about their story. Many of them worried they might not “answer” my intended research question. The fact that most of them believed their story was atypical was ironically a commonality between them, and also might be manifested examples of the ideal of American individualism.⁸

The following three interviews are among those which stood out the most, as each individual represents a different background, major of study, or experience with a recession that was exemplary of the others. As different as their experiences were, however, all ultimately agreed that college is the best means of being “successful” in America, or that it was a generally positive part of their life story.

⁸ As discussed in Chapter II, the American individual is “unique, independent, self-reliant, self-governing, and ultimately self-responsible” if they are “successful” members of society (Fischer 2010:11-13).

Deana D.

My interview with Deana D. was the first I conducted for the entire project. She graduated from the Duke School of Nursing in 1973, and has since received a PhD and holds a prominent position as a researcher in the School of Nursing. I was incredibly nervous while walking to her office. I was not sure whether to call her Deana or Dr. D. I tried on at least five different professional-looking outfits. When I entered her office, I did not know whether to reach across her desk and shake her hand, or just sit down.

Deana's office overlooked Duke's main clinic and the clinic parking garage at an angle. The office was somewhat small, with a rolling chair, a desk with large bookshelves, and a guest seat. Her desk was covered with papers, so much so that I had to lay my laptop down on top of one of her piles to record the interview. I noticed she did not have any pictures of family or posters among her things, but only papers and shelves of books.

Her hair is white, wavy, and falls just below her shoulders. She wore a very colorful blazer with criss-crossing designs, but I did not see the rest of the ensemble because she never stood up from her chair. As I walked in, I thanked her multiple times, a bit anxious about getting started. She was gracious and invited me to sit down, and I handed her my informed consent form. I was not sure if this was too abrupt—I wanted our conversation to be casual, and I wanted her to feel like a mentor more than a research subject. My emotional involvement in my topic was reinforced at this moment, where I found I was seeking advice in addition to research data.

To fill the silence as I set up my recorder and notepad, I began describing my project. She responded almost immediately. "College has never been a guarantee of

higher of employment,” she said, and went on to claim that nothing will be “handed to you” unless you work for it. When she entered college, she tried to take a more pragmatic approach to her education by choosing something that would land her a job down the road. At the time (1969), female students were placed in the Women’s College, and by the time she was a sophomore she was forced to choose a major. “The thing that interested me most was physical anthropology,” she explained, “but I couldn’t see getting a job in physical anthropology...that wasn’t highly available in those days.” Nursing, for her, was a more practical alternative for her future.

Deana was born in New Jersey, but move to Cincinatti, Ohio in time to attend high school. She was one of four children—all of which were brought up to be serious about their education. She said going to college was a “given” in her household, and that in her high school, 95-98 percent of the graduating class went to college. “And having to go to your safety school was not viewed positively,” she added. I had no idea at the time about enrollment rates in the late 1960’s, but had always just assumed that college was not an expectation for most young people. She added after a moment, however, that she lived in the most expensive suburb in Cincinatti, which could have had something to do with it. “Most of the people that were zoned for my high school were fairly wealthy, so their families could afford college,” she explained.

Though there was a popular trend to attend college for both men and women in her opinion, she laughed while leaning in to whisper slightly, “Now, girls were not supposed to go get graduates degrees. You were supposed to go to college and get a husband.” The “Mrs.” degree, we joked. I told her that this idea was not so foreign today, though almost none of my own friends take it seriously. In her experience, she recalled,

“they were beginning to joke about it but it was pretty much the standard upper-middle-class thing to do.” Many of the girls would wear dresses to class everyday, while she would see boys in bathing suit shorts and sandals. I asked if she had those intentions herself, and she laughed again for a bit. She said she flirted with the idea, but never intentionally pursued a husband in her time at Duke.

She did, however, meet her husband early in her undergraduate career. He was a member of the Duke Navy ROTC, and joined in order to get tuition support. He was an electrical engineer graduate, and they married her senior year so that she would be moved with him when the Navy sent him away after graduation. They moved all around the country, from California, to Idaho, to Washington, to Hawaii, and back to North Carolina. She does not recall ever having any trouble finding a job, and could get hired as a nurse in any area they were moved to without a whole lot of looking. When I asked her how the recession affected her, she thought for a moment, then said,

“I don’t remember there being any great economic recession...everyone was kind of in the same boat. The only time when we really noticed problems was in ’76 or so when they were having gas lines...there were periods when they didn’t have enough gas to meet the demand because of price and other issues.”

She was insulated from these problems, though, because she was living on a small island in Hawaii at the time, where the lack of gasoline was not as big of an issue or controversy.

Despite the constant traveling, Deana felt her job was becoming routine. She did not feel that she was growing, and had many questions she wanted to resolve in the field. She decided to pursue a master’s degree, and while in the program, began to consider a PhD.

Since moving back with her husband to North Carolina, Deana has received her

PhD in nursing and has worked in the area ever since. She worked with the University of North Carolina for twenty years, and has been with Duke for five. When I asked how nursing has been affected by the current recession, Deana related the experiences of a few recent students she has worked with. “There is an availability, but I think the issue for people I speak with now is that they cannot find a position in the area they want.” In this way, she explained, it is limited. She continued,

“What you actually see in recession is that you have a larger number of people in school...it’s a lot more of people who had jobs who lose them whose only path to getting a new job is to retool. We’ve just doubled the size of our baccalaureate degree in the school of nursing. And our baccalaureate program is only for people who already have a degree in another field.”

I found this statement astounding. The fact that the program has doubled might indicate that larger programs are being developed all around the country. Will fewer positions be available then? Deana also noted that in the past five years, the average age of nurses has gone up by five years. “I think it is because a lot of the people my age or older who were planning to retire have decided not to,” she speculated.

I asked if she had any advice for students who are graduating in the recession now, given her experience (however limited it was). She then told me that she has two children in their twenties who had a bit of a tough time in recent years, and what she tells them is just to be flexible. “Coming out of school, it took both of them about 6 months,” she said, adding, “Part of it is clearly what you major in.” Her 26-year old son graduated with a degree in creative writing, and now works for Geico writing mediation briefs. This does not relate directly to his education, but creative writing is not a field you can easily find work in. Resiliency and flexibility have been key for him in finding a job.

Towards the end of our conversation, one of the most fascinating statements she

made had to do with the difference between her life in the '70s and her life now. "What's clear to me in retrospect is how much smaller the world has gotten in these 35 some years," she said. She has travelled the world for her research and for conferences, and her husband now works for a Chinese computer company that purchased part of IBM. "Never in a million years" did she think she would be commuting back and forth to China. This, in part, is why she believes this recession is different. "It's just so worldwide. We're all connected in so many more ways now."

Deana was the person who replied to my email saying her experiences were atypical. I can see what she meant—between moving all around the country with her Navy husband to having a fairly set path directly after college in the job market. However, what is typical is that many of us experience a recession from the outside looking in. We might not be affected directly, and we might only be familiar with the fact that it is affecting others in our nation. Her experience with other young students and nurses today, as well, indicates that the current recession has had a different effect on this particular industry, if only for the fact that financial insecurity is forcing people to wait on retirement.

Jeremy

I met with Jeremy on a Tuesday around one o'clock for the tail end of his lunch hour. He was just throwing his food containers away as I walked in the door. Tall and thin, wearing a dark gray suit, Jeremy shook my hand after he put his small glasses on and squinted at me. His office was clean and fairly large, with dark wood furniture and a few books here and there. After all, the Duke library lies just feet away.

Jeremy is currently a librarian at Duke University. He graduated in the class of 1981 with a degree in history, and eventually went on to graduate school for library science in 1984 after working in the library as a cataloguer and assistant for several years. As a passionate history major, Jeremy had originally wanted to go to graduate school for the same subject. However, many of his advisors warned against it because the market for professions in history was “really really depressed at the time.” “I had been working as a student assistant in the library,” he explained, “and my boss said that they had a couple of job openings and that I should apply.” Therefore, he decided to wait a year or so before going to graduate school, and took a full time job cataloguing books with the Duke library. After a year or so, he became an assistant in the Rare Books room⁹, and became really interested in the historical aspect of it. “The history market was still really poor at the time,” he continued, “so someone sort of suggested that I would do really well with libraries and that I should stick with that.” He decided to get a master’s in library science instead.

Jeremy took a pause in his narrative at that point, recalling when I first contacted him for the interview:

“I thought, well, I don’t really have anything to say. Then when I really thought back to it I thought, wow, the recession really did guide me toward working in the library when grad school for history was no longer an option.”

He had never considered library science before then, and never realized how library science could feed into his interest in history. His advisors had told him to wait until colleges started hiring more for history PhDs, but there were not many options for applied history directly out of an undergraduate program.

⁹ The Rare Books room is in Duke’s main library, and includes old and original manuscripts of important rare and historical publications. For more information, see <http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/>.

He felt that there was a real difference between majors, as engineers (for example) have marketable skills for a certain niche but the “broader degrees” can make it challenging to think where they fit or what they can apply for.

“In the fall of my senior year is when I had my meltdown. I was talking to some official like, what am I gonna do? That date is coming up, I don’t have plans beyond May, and that can be a really scary time. The people coming into the Career Center didn’t really engage me or interest me, I didn’t want to work for a bank, I didn’t want to do finance. I sort of stumbled into talking to my supervisor in my library about what I was gonna do, and he was like, do this!”

For Jeremy, working in the library was a viable alternative, and eventually became his career.

When I asked about his family background, Jeremy told me he came from a line of Dukies, and was a third generation Duke graduate. “I could consider other schools,” he joked, “but I was so programmed from the get-go.” He was coming to campus as early as a year old, wearing the Duke t-shirt and all. His father was a Methodist minister, and had attended Duke for undergraduate and graduate school (in the Divinity School). His father’s love for Duke is something that Jeremy attributes to the class of 1949—an intense class of Duke fans who were “a bunch of post-World War II GI Bill guys.” I was delighted to hear him say this, since I was just beginning to read about the GI Bill affording returning veterans the opportunity to enroll in higher education.¹⁰ I asked if he had any siblings, to which he replied, “Two brothers, one older one younger. The younger went to UNC, so we don’t mention him,” laughing. Going to college was very much an expectation in his house, as it was something his father and grandfather instilled in him throughout childhood.

¹⁰ For more discussion of the GI Bill, see Chapter II. The GI Bill provided returning soldiers from WWII a means of upward class mobility through home loans and tuition support, leading to the emergence of the American middle class and a growth in postsecondary education (Mosch 1975).

I then asked how he would describe the nature of the recession in the early '80s, and he listed the "Cold-war, oil shortages from the mid-70s, international diplomacy issues—especially in Iran, and just a whole lot of outside conflicts that affected our economy." He felt that he made a great move by deciding to study library science at the time, since by his completion of the graduate program in '86, the job positions in libraries really opened up. He was a finalist for ten jobs. He does not really see this happening as much now, as library schools have become very popular and yield more graduates than there are jobs available. "These programs are producing twice the graduates they were a decade ago, and these people have nowhere to go," he said.

I asked whether he thought this was a result of the current recession, and he nodded. "In a recession, the economy does change and where the jobs are sort of shifts. I just got lucky." He, like Deana, also discussed the older population holding off retirement. People are holding on to their jobs and living longer, and this is making a difference for job availability. He thinks because the value of social security is going down, people will work harder to make more money.

Another important part of this particular recession is the 24/7 media. Jeremy thinks the recession is no better or worse than it was in the '80s on an individual level, but "its just so different because we talk about it constantly." Still, just as the economy has recovered in the past with innovation (as with the service industry or the technology bubble), he expects an industry like environment, energy, or healthcare to emerge and create new jobs and wealth.

I began to tell Jeremy a bit about my experience as a cultural anthropology major, unsure of where I was headed next year or what to look for. He smiled and told me he has

a daughter who graduated from Duke in 2007 with a degree in cultural anthropology, and that she currently works as a caterer for a cupcake company in D.C. With the difficulties of the economy, he has not really “pushed her” to do anything besides what makes her happy, since she is picking up skills she can use for a career later on. He also mentioned that it was very interesting for him to compare their experiences with the recession. She taught for a year in the Dominican Republic, and when she came back, she slept on the couches of other Duke alumni in D.C. before making enough money to afford an apartment. He continued,

“There is a sense of solidarity and they really help each other out, especially with communication being so much easier with Facebook and Twitter. There weren’t the same tools to stay connected in ‘81. Now, you don’t even need to change your cell phone numbers for your whole life.”

This is another way of looking at the world as a smaller place, where someone like his daughter could find a “Duke community” to support her anywhere.

Jeremy said that if he had any suggestions for new students coming into college, he would not advise against a humanities degree. “Facing the immediacy of finding a job can be difficult and scary,” he admitted, and at the time of graduation he might have regretted his degree. Now, he appreciates the humanities background profoundly. “It has set me up to be a life long learner and pick up new knowledge and skills as I move forward,” he added inspirationally. He now feels that his educational base at Duke has played a large role in his “success,” and he would advise any other humanities major to be open and flexible. They might need to gain some more credentials before starting their career, as opposed to an engineer, but being open to every opportunity is the only way to move forward.

Jeremy’s experience is specific to humanities majors, but says a lot about

resiliency among all areas of study and sectors of industry. Being open to new routes after college is an essential part of finding a job. His experience after graduation is a compelling contrast to that of his daughter, as new technologies have resulted in a more tightly-knit group of Duke alumni who are willing to support their fellow Blue Devils, especially in times of economic decline. And like Deana, his family's background in education was an important part of why he believes that college is imperative, which he impressed upon his own children.

Helen

After one failed meeting at a restaurant in Durham, I was able to go to Helen's office on a very sunny day in October. The building had a small parking lot and was covered in bright green vines. Her office was hard to find at first—down the steps in a basement level. The small bell rang as I opened the door and stepped into a large room with several desks, an enormous red couch and brown loveseat, and incense lit on a coffee table. Helen came out of a smaller room, which I presume is her personal office, only a few moments later. She has short, straight brown hair, and wore a blouse with a long flowing skirt and sandals. She had some clay jewelry on her wrist and neck and grabbed both of my hands as she greeted me.

We sat down on the couches as I reintroduced my project. I had conducted several interviews by then, so I had a kind of recurring set of opening lines by that point. She, like so many of the others I interviewed, started up before I could hardly touch the record button. Her entire interview was more like a narrative, as she told me her life story at its most important points.

“At the age of fourteen,” she started, “I was determined that I was going to get out of Louisiana.” Her parents divorced at the time, and she witnessed her mother being unable to get a credit card in her own name. She knew then that she wanted to be independent. Her parents had “no money,” so she knew she had to work her way out of the state. From then on, she did everything she could to earn scholarships for college. “I took four years of Latin, I volunteered for everything you can imagine, just to look like a great candidate.” She went to a public school, but was “fortunate” to be zoned for what we might call a “magnet” school today, as it was the closest thing a public school could be to a preparatory school.

After her “juvenile delinquent” older brother enlisted in the army, her father began to treat her as his “favorite son.” He wanted and expected her to go to college. Her mother, on the other hand, did not approve of her intellectual practices and feared she would become a spinster, “like my Aunt,” she said. Helen’s efforts to leave the state were a repudiation of her mother’s values, so she was very unhappy when Helen decided to attend Duke in 1971.

She had spent so much time preparing to get accepted and pay for college that she decided to stop thinking long-term and follow her interests, pursuing a double-major in history and religion. At the time, she entered the Women’s College of Duke, which merged with Trinity College a year later (Duke Office of News & Communications 2011). She described her first year at Duke:

“Initially, was very disappointed. There were three men to every woman, and it was the Women’s College back then, it was a meat market, demoralizing beyond belief. I was devastated. It was less focused intellectually than I had hoped for. I had idealistically imagined a smaller school environment with more emphasis on intellectual engagement than frat parties.”

She was in school at around the same time as Deana, and it is interesting to consider Deana's comments on the "Mrs." degree with Helen's here. "Wearing dresses everyday" was like a "meat market" to Helen, who thought that college would be a chance for her to develop her independence rather than flaunt her femininity.

She was planning to drop out of Duke until her high school sweetheart enrolled the next year. They formed their own small, intellectual clique, and she quickly found herself feeling content. Her boyfriend's parents were very conservative Southern Baptists, however, and disowned him for going to a "liberal" school like Duke. To save money for their finances, he and Helen decided to take a semester off in the spring of her sophomore year and worked full time in the Duke dining hall. Summer tuition was much lower than the regular semester, so Helen figured she could save herself from some of the debt she was accruing. After five months of cleaning out the orange juice machine every morning at 7am, she realized that she was ready to go back to her class work, and was much more motivated. "It was a very positive experience," she said.

By the time her senior year arrived, she panicked, realizing she would have to start earning to her own living on top of the student loan debt. "Here I am, the fall of my senior year, this kid that started at fourteen, and now I'm twenty, twenty-one, and holy gosh, how am I gonna earn a living next year?" She considered going to graduate school for history and religion, which she "would have loved," but was warned that there were hardly any jobs available for PhD's in those areas. Additionally, she was already \$10,000 in debt, and would have to take on more for grad school. Therefore, she decided to act on her "fall-back", which was a Master's in the Arts of Teaching at Duke, and started in the fall of 1975. She spent all of her graduation money on the program, but realized within

months that she hated it. She dropped out, and began looking for work while living with friends and waiting for her boyfriend to return to Durham from working on an offshore oilrig.

She was soon offered an “ideal” position teaching a women’s history class. She would create the curriculum herself, and develop the class over several years. The only problem—they could not pay her. She took a part-time job as a secretary with the Duke University Press thinking she could earn enough money to support herself in the teaching position, but soon discovered it would not be enough. Helen decided instead to take on the secretary position full-time. “I had vowed to never be a secretary. I had deliberately never learned to type,” she joked. But when she could not longer afford her shared apartment and even food, she had to take the job. “The guy at the press told me later that he hired me because I was so thin. I was living on very little. So, I devoted every night to learning how to type.” This is the job that led to the rest of her career.

Helen made her way up the ranks after only nine months, becoming a production assistant for one of the publishers. She and her boyfriend broke up that year, and she devoted more and more of her time and energy to the world of publishing. After many years with the university, she began working with a start-up company whose manager was located in Alabama, so Helen needed to take over most of the planning in Durham. She describes the job as very stressful and painful, but that it taught her more than she could have ever imagined.

Now, almost twenty-five years later, Helen has her own publishing company. It started when she was working freelance out of her home several years after getting married, and as her reputation built, she began to take on more employees for help. They

have opened two offices, and offer services to regular publishers and independent organizations that do not have a publishing division. Universities like Yale, Duke, Johns Hopkins, Kentucky, and Oklahoma have been a big part of their clientele, but with the current recession, most of their discretionary spending was cut and the business truly suffered:

“In October of ‘08, everything just stopped. At the time, there were four of us full-time, and we had no revenue connected work for two solid weeks. That has never happened. We had things to do, but none of it was generating revenue. ‘09 was a really tough year. Everyone I know connected to publishing lost money in ‘09. I was getting pretty scared and had to reach out much more with cold-calls. These didn’t really help though, they were all rabbits that saw the fox and were just frozen.”

The normal recessionary trend for publishing companies like Helen’s, she says, is to take on *more* clients because institutions will reduce the number of employees and need to outsource the extra work. It was not until April of 2010 that this normal trend kicked back in. “It was like someone had turned on the spigot,” she said.

Her experience in the ‘70s was nothing like the current recession. “My memory is that it really hurt upper-middle management. My friend’s fathers were getting laid off.” She also remembered hearing rumors in the publishing world while working at the Duke University Press, when one day in 1977, Palgrave Macmillan laid off 30 percent of their employees in one day. There was a lot of cost pressure at the time, but Duke was fairly insulated. The recession itself did not affect her in any great way, except that it kept her from going to graduate school.

Now, Helen is excited by where her business is heading. One of the biggest new challenges is the electronic book. They have just finished their first one, and feel that it could be the kick-start they need to recover the industry. This is another example of how

innovation could help move the economy out of recession. Additionally, Helen has been to Italy twice in the last year for book releases, and would never believe that she would end up here when she graduated:

“I was terrified, but it helped so much to gain experience and learn down the road how to develop things with a small company that is starting out. The larger the group you work for, the more pigeonholed you become. With a small company, you can volunteer for the things you are interested in and really learn.”

Though her road to “success” was long, Helen has wound up with her own company—a warm place with comfortable couches and fragrant incense that seems to suit her personality well.

I considered Helen a real inspiration. In retrospect, her interview was one of the most influential, and guided some small decisions I made through the end of the semester. Though she gushed about her classes at Duke, I do not think Helen would necessarily say that her Duke degree itself has afforded her these opportunities. It was those small connections she made while in school and after graduation that kept her in Durham, led her to the Duke University Press, and brought her into the publishing world.

Personal reflection and our *modus vivendi*

What do these stories have in common? Helen’s story seems to fit nicely with the narrative of the “American Dream,” since she saved her own money, worked her way out of her “unfavorable” position, and despite the odds, was able to start her own company years down the line. Both Deana and Jeremy were financially supported by their families and despite some of the road bumps of the recession, were able to keep steady jobs before pursuing further education and levels of professionalism down the line. Though their stories are different, education was either a form of stability or social mobility. College

was the only way Helen knew how to get out of Louisiana and be “independent,” and college was the only way to be “successful” for Deana and Jeremy.

All of the subjects felt that their major was an important factor in the job search. Because their mentors had advised against graduate school in history, Jeremy and Helen had to be flexible and consider different routes they never thought they would pursue. Deana, on the other hand, was trained directly for nursing after graduation and kept along those lines for her graduate work. Despite the difficulties they faced, Helen and Jeremy reflected positively on their humanities studies. They enjoyed them so much that they wished they could continue them. The recession was one of probably many reasons they decided to take another path.

Gender was a relevant issue for both Deana and Helen, who attended the Women’s College right before the men’s and women’s undergraduate colleges merged. The way they described gender on campus differed in tone, but the differences between men and women were noticeable and pronounced for both. This was taken even further in Helen’s discussion of her mother’s inability to create accounts under her own name, or Helen’s reluctance to be a secretary. Why Jeremy chose not to mention it (nor was it mentioned in any other of the alumni interviews) is up for debate, but gender does not seem to define campus life quite as much as it did when the colleges merged. Even the current Duke seniors, as we will see in the next chapter, failed to mention anything related to gender when describing their Duke experience¹¹. Therefore, maybe gender was another factor at the time of Deana and Helen’s graduation that affected their ability to

¹¹ Gender is still a very important issue on campus, and I do not intend to diminish that fact. I only mean to suggest that it was not brought up in interviews with current seniors and recent graduates, while it was with the alumni. Rosanne Jones wrote a very comprehensive undergraduate thesis called “Gender at Duke” in 2007. To read more, visit <http://hdl.handle.net/10161/358>.

achieve the “American Dream,” or at least have access to equal opportunity and consideration in the job market. Helen seemed to resent it as a barrier to her success and enjoyment of intellectual life, at least at first.

The way each of these individuals reflects on their path from adolescence, through college, and into adulthood can be considered through Margaret Archer’s view of reflexivity in *Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*. In it, she asserts that all of our actions take place within preexisting social structures and cultural properties that developed before us throughout history.¹² Within this framework, reflexivity “mediates deliberately between the objective structural opportunities confronted by different groups and the nature of people’s subjectively defined concerns” (2007:61). Often, this reflexivity intends to mediate or explain patterns of social immobility, mobility, or volatility. We can internalize these reflections or externalize them in conversations with others, but in all senses, we reinforce the existing *modus vivendi* (“way of living”).

In these alumni conversations, the way they speak about and reflect on their own social mobility or social stability lies within the ideals of the “American Dream” and meritocracy. As Deana stated in the beginning of the interview, college is not a guarantee, and we must continue to work to earn what we deserve. As Helen’s narrative indicates, college was an ideal form of social mobility to get her “out of Louisiana.” They all reflect on their individuality and means of achieving “success” through this American *modus vivendi*, where each individual should strive for great things, be flexible when faced with road blocks, and assume responsibility for their own prosperity. To all of

¹² See also the literature and theories of Bourdieu’s *habitus* in *The Outline of a Theory of Practice*. We exist within a set of limits and structured cultural norms, and any agency we possess is related to how we move within these limits (Bourdieu 1977).

them, despite the recession, the “American Dream” is alive for those who can navigate the obstacles.

While I call this group the “past,” they might really be my future. I could become something like them one day, as I carry certain personal and societal expectations from my college experience into my young adulthood. In the next chapter, I will move into the “present,” as I recount interviews from the class of 2010 and 2011. Their experience with graduating in the “Great Recession” makes a difference both in terms of the severity of its influence, and the massive influx of information from the 24-hour media.

IV.

- The Present: Graduating in the “Great Recession” -

“If in thirty years students that graduated in 2010 blame their lack of success on the fact that they graduated during a recession, well, they’re probably right. But if they carry that line with them for so long, what help is that baggage? It’s an anchor. The only thing it can do is absolve them of responsibility, but ultimately, it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

-William Wright-Swadel, Director of Career Services at Duke University

In this chapter, I will start by describing Duke’s campus, my place there as a senior, and my experience working with the Duke Career Center for two years. I will then move into an account of some of the conversations I shared with “present” affiliates of Duke, including interviews with the Duke Career Center Director, individuals from the class of 2010, and a group interview with members of the class of 2011. Finally, I will end by exploring some of the themes that emerge with those who are experiencing the job search during the “Great Recession” and how it has influenced the way they reflect on their recent college experiences.

To be a senior at Duke

Located in Durham, North Carolina, Duke University stretches over almost 9,000 acres of land and enrolled nearly 15,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students in the fall of 2010. The campus is incredibly picturesque, with its most iconic locations modeled after gothic-style architecture and built with rare “Hillsborough” stones. Upon their discovery in the early 1900s, the stones were described as “the kind of find that delights a construction man’s heart,” and include seven primary colors and

seventeen different shades that give “an older, more attractive antique effect” (King 1999). The Duke Chapel lies in the center of the main campus and is the symbol of the university, with a 210-foot central tower with a 50-bell clarion (Duke News & Communications 2010). The rest of the most visible parts of campus radiate out from the Chapel in a large crucifix shape, housing classrooms, offices, dining halls, and dorm rooms.



Source: (<http://www.law.duke.edu/news/gallery?id=84&pil=1>)

The very first time I came to visit Duke, I had just been accepted two weeks before. I was dropped off on “East,” which is a campus that houses only the freshmen students, and is an eight to ten minute bus ride from “West” (the main campus). East Campus is also very aesthetically pleasing, with a more Georgian-style architecture of red and white brick buildings encircling a large grassy quad. While I was impressed, I was admittedly disappointed that the campus was not as beautiful as I had been told. Once I hopped on a bus and headed to West Campus, however, I was completely blown away. Campus Drive takes you down a narrow road lined with tall trees, with the Chapel being the only central endpoint in sight. The rest of the campus slowly opens up as you reach the end of the road, with swarms of students cutting through the grass and some studying on outstretched blankets in the sun. What I remember loving more than anything was the way that some of the towers looked like castle tops, with little square ridges every foot or

so and flags flying atop the center. After touring the campus, I visited the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, and knew as soon as I sat down to look up at levels of tulips and a flower-covered gazebo that I was in love with the school.



Source:

(http://www.gardenvisit.com/assets/madge/sarah_p_duke Terraces/600x/sarah_p_duke Terraces_600x.jpg)

I place this emphasis on the beauty of the campus because I believe it can be a large part of one's decision to attend Duke. For me personally, it was the most prestigious school I was accepted to, but I had not yet committed to anything before my visit. It was these incredible locations that made me feel secure in my decision. Duke must benefit from its reputation for beauty, as it spends a considerable amount of time and resources on campus landscaping (Duke Office of the University Architect 2010) and holds a special series of visiting days called "Blue Devil Days" in the height of spring to show the campus at its best.

After living on campus for four years, however, the things we notice most can change immensely. It is not until I have friends and family visit from home when I really lift my head and look around again at the vastness of it all. The things I appreciate now are an empty study room, a clean bathroom, or a working DVD player in the common room. Everyone's experience is different, but for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the senior living experience.

Whether they choose to remain closely involved with campus organizations, venture off campus to local internships, mentor younger classmates, or begin their life of independence from school, the senior experience can vary greatly among Duke's students and affect how close they feel to the Duke community. The Duke social and educational network can be very tightly knit, as many of the seniors have lived on the same campuses together throughout their undergraduate career and continue to take courses with the same peers in their majors. In regards to living space, a senior has the freedom to move off campus, live in a single or double room on campus, or live in a campus apartment. These are the only students at the university who are not forced one way or the other. Freshman students must live on East Campus. Sophomores must live on the main (West) campus. Juniors may live on West or Central campuses, but they cannot move off campus without permission. For a senior, their home is their choice.

I live on campus, in a hall with twelve senior females. Eight of the twelve live in single rooms, while the other four are coupled into double rooms. The fact that we are all seniors is coincidence, but has something to do with the resident lottery system giving favor to seniors and sophomores. We are not in one of the best dorms (air-conditioned), but we do live in a prime location of West Campus where it allows us to roll out of bed ten minutes before the start of class. I chose to live on campus because I love the social aspects of dorm life—a place where you can find anyone at any hour of the day to watch a movie, share some food, or gossip about relationships with you. However, by the end of my junior year I was tired of sharing a small room with another person. Duke is unique in that it does not (yet) offer suite-style living situations on its main campuses, but has one-room spaces with a common hall bathroom. It is my impression that by senior year, many

students opt for a small place of solitude over a larger, louder habitat, either by living off campus in an apartment or by registering for a single room.

Aesthetically, the inside of some of the older Duke dorms is not as ornate as the outside, which looks like it could house a royal family. The floor is covered in mock-pebble tile that leaves the hallways feeling cold and unwelcoming. Space is limited and air circulation is minimal. The walls are mostly eggshell white and look freshly painted, coat after coat as each year the walls become stained with the presence of a thousand passerbys. Some places are carpeted, but overall, there is still an institutional feel to it all.

Off-campus apartments have a completely different feel. The most popular ones are usually found in buildings of practical structure and the aesthetics of a 1990's suburbia project—pleasing to the eye but typical for those who grew up in the past few decades. That is to say—these buildings are newer than anything you would find on Duke's campus. After climbing the enclosed, outdoor staircase, you enter a room with cool air and a multi-colored thread couch or futon picked up from a used furniture store. It feels like something like adulthood, if only for the fact that they have traded minifridges for full-sized.

Despite these differences, once a senior is on campus going about their daily routine, things become a bit more analogous. There are only so many places to buy food on the main campus, with some being more popular than others at certain mealtimes. The upperclassman might grab a morning bagel from “Alpine,” where the other customers become restless if you do not have your order mentally prepared upon your turn. For lunch on-the-go, they might grab a Pauly Dog or prepackaged sandwich from a café in one of the academic buildings. Depending on their area of study, they could be confined

to one area of campus, always seeing the same peers at the same time each day of the week. The environment is familiar, because everyone is on a schedule.

This daily routine is, however, typical of sophomores and juniors in the same respect. What is different for seniors is the feeling—the already oncoming nostalgia—of buying the same “Good Morning Camper” bagel that they have ordered for the past three years. Or finding the couch in the corner of the stacks of the library that always gave them good luck during exam week. They may establish new traditions in their final year of college, but for the most part, they are repeating old habits each and every day.

The common experiences of some Duke seniors can give an indication of what this place is like, in the present, as a fieldsite. There is a sense of shared community, albeit “imagined,” that Duke students carry with them even outside of Duke’s physical boundaries (Anderson 1983). I have found through my interviews that this socially constructed idea of a “Duke network” can be even more prevalent after college, and it is our shared experiences from freshman to senior year that give us such a strong sense of community after four short years.

Working with the Duke Career Center

While these shared campus intimacies are important to establish, it was my involvement with a particular organization at Duke that impacted this project directly. The recent experience of my older brother influenced my particular fascination with the perceived value of education among recent graduates, but in terms of the broader topic of the job search, I have been around anxious seniors looking for work through Duke University’s Career Center for the past two years. Situated between West Campus and

East Campus, the Career Center finds its home in a gutted old Durham tobacco warehouse. Duke has recently refurbished this large brick building to hold many of its offices, giving it a swanky-modern look with high open ceilings and colorful interior. I find myself in there at least three times a week to spend an hour in the “resource room,” where student advisors—also known as the Career Ambassador Team (CATs)—review resumes and cover letters for walk-in students. These review sessions are more casual than scheduled counselor meetings, but as CATs we are trained extensively to tell students what works, and what will get their resumes cast aside in any given industry.

When I started two years ago, mostly seniors would come in. The biggest influx is in the fall, when consulting and finance companies recruit directly on Duke’s campus. During these early months of the academic year, we have lines rolling out of the resource room, making the procrastinating students a bit distressed. In these cases, I liked to build their confidence by complimenting their resumes as much as possible, but some seemed to dismiss me because I was a sophomore. I cannot really blame them. When you have waited until the last minute to edit your resume, and you have no other choice but to be reviewed by someone two years younger than you, I can understand the apprehension. What does a sophomore know about the job search? Finding work is important, and as I came to discover, finding a job in finance and consulting is one of the most overtly competitive between Duke students.¹³

I was not fully aware of it then, but according to the Career Center director, the students looking for finance positions in 2008-2009 were hit the hardest by the recession. There were fewer positions available that year, as many companies feared going under.

¹³ I believe this is the case because they are high-paying, prestigious positions, and companies are willing to hire people directly out of college.

By 2009's graduation, 32 percent of the student body had accepted a job offer, 32 percent were planned to attend graduate school, and 31 percent were either seeking employment or unsure of their plans (Duke Career Center 2009). Just three years before, the class of 2006 had 44.4 percent of the student body with an accepted job offer, 23.9 percent attending graduate school, and only 20 percent seeking employment or unsure (Duke Career Center 2006).¹⁴

Things are relatively better for the class of 2011. During the fall semester, I saw men and women in suits lounging around the waiting room almost every day preparing for interviews. Coming slowly out of the recession, companies have felt more confident in hiring for new positions. We still had an influx of seniors in the early fall, but their demeanor was slightly different. They were less anxious; they had more options.

The trend since the fall, however, has been many more underclassmen preparing to apply for internships. In truth, there is nothing I love more than a freshman who comes in without a clue about resumes so that we can build it from scratch. Freshmen and sophomores are much more accepting of help, but that does not mean they are any less anxious, or do not procrastinate. These students are highly aware of the competitive world of summer internships, and it seems the Career Center is reaching out to students earlier than it used to.

Outside of the resource room, the CATs offer resume writing workshops and introductory slideshows to greek organizations, clubs, and classes throughout the school year. I have led a few of these workshops, which are typically attended by underclassmen. We also hold several career fairs, starting with the large general fair,

¹⁴ The remaining percentage of the class of 2009 and the class of 2006 planned to enter the military, take a gap year, volunteer, or indicated "other activity" (Duke Career Center 2006, 2009).

followed by the engineering fair, government and non-profit fair, and internship fair. These are my favorite events, when we dress up in business attire and lead potential employers around the student union. The large general fair was in the middle of the fall semester, and as a senior, I should have used the opportunity to help the employers that I was interested in working for in the future. With the way a Duke career fair is set up, each employer has their own table, and students walk up to them with resume in hand, prepared to have a short conversation. About a hundred tables cover three levels of the student union. When the day came, I felt so intimidated by the process that I left with all of my resumes lying safely in their Duke folder. Even though I have worked around these events several times, the process can be daunting for anyone.

This range of events, coupled with the close-knit atmosphere of the Career Center, has undeniably been an influence on my interest in the topic of the job search. Almost every counselor who I have been close with over the past two years has offered to help with my research. One of these in particular is William Wright-Swadel. He is the Director of Career Services at Duke, and has been a constant source of personal support as I apply for work positions (and frequently change my mind while doing so). Because he is the leader of the center, I asked if he would agree to an interview with me. His insight provided a necessary general overview of the recession, and how it has been experienced by seniors for the past four years.

Wisdom from the Director

William Wright-Swadel has been the Director of Career Services at Duke since the fall of 2008. Called “Bill” by most of his students, he is incredibly approachable

given his place in the Career Center hierarchy. Before coming to Duke, he worked as the Director of Career Services at Harvard University from 1995-2007. Before that, he was the director at Dartmouth (1992-1995) and the University of Rhode Island (1988-1992) (Duke University Office of News and Communication 2008). Therefore, Bill has been leading the career services departments of several elite colleges since the year I was born. While we do not see Bill all that frequently around CAT events, when we do, he lights up the room. He remembers everything that each of the CATs has going on personally, and maintains continuous eye contact whenever he talks with anyone, giving them his full attention. When I asked if he would be willing to sit down for a short interview, he immediately agreed.

Bill greeted me at the front desk of the Career Center on the day of our interview, a smile stretched across his face, nodding at some other students who were waiting for appointments. After walking through the maze of modern-looking glass cubicles, we arrived at his office. It is a cozy space, with large bookshelves, a tall desk, two purple Victorian armchairs, and a narrow window showing the parking lot below. The back wall is made entirely of brick, with a small section of cement showing a messy inscription: “Bull 2009.” This must have been something he wrote in the wet cement while they were renovating.

Our conversation started up so quickly that I hardly had time to hit the record button. Bill went straight into why he thought this recession was unlike any other:

“If you look at most time periods, there may have been challenges in the technology sector, engineering, teaching, or accounting...but rarely, and I’ve been in this business since 1974, and rarely have I seen a time period in which virtually every domain was affected... It’s really been a much broader recession, and a very deep one.”

Recessions of the past, such as the dot-com bubble or the lines at the gas pumps in '74, “were history two years later.” Bill believes that although we are coming out of the “Great Recession,” it is going to have an effect on hiring patterns and the economy in general for a significant period of time. It is certainly not only a problem for the students coming out of colleges, but their families have also been affected by home foreclosures and job loss. The effects of the recession stress across all facets of society—blue and white collar, young and old, rich and poor.

He went on to explain that even the domains that are usually in high demand, such as nursing, have been negatively affected because hospitals cannot afford to take on more employees. More and more people are going to graduate school to put off the job search, but there are more PhD's than there are positions to fill. Even those students who went on to get jobs two to three years ago have gone through losing them already, some even let go within months. At its most volatile, the “Great Recession” was dangerous for new and veteran employees alike.

Speaking more about graduate school, Bill said that at universities like Duke and Harvard, about 70-75 percent of the student body will typically go on to more schooling. This number has stayed consistent throughout the past ten years, but the time in which these students decide to attend graduate school has changed fairly drastically. Going back to the class of 2006, about 25-26 percent of the graduating class went straight to grad school, which is normal in a good economy. In 2009 and 2010, these numbers shot up to about 30-31 percent.¹⁵ This 5-6 percent is a dramatic increase over only a few years, and with approximately 1500 students in each graduating class, that is 75-90 more students

¹⁵ After double-checking, these claims are supported by the Duke senior exit surveys (Duke Career Center 2006, 2009, 2010).

opting out of the job search. These numbers indicate that there are either fewer positions available in the workforce, or that students have the perception that there are fewer positions and believe graduate school is the best way to continue after graduation.

I asked Bill what he has done differently for the Career Center since he was hired three years ago. Honestly, I was surprised he had only been there for less than three years, given that I consider him the face of career services at Duke. He was hired right before I was chosen as a CAT, but at the time, I would not have a clue that he was new to the department. Bill smiled as he reminisced on his first term at Duke, saying, “I arrived at Duke in August of 2008, and the market went in the toilet around December of 2008. As I said to the president [Richard Broadhead], ‘it wasn’t me!’” He could tell it was a different recession by the way corporate representatives were acting. Usually, he described, they had a sense of bravado when marketing themselves, but that marketing turned quickly to an image of careful consideration, or “we’re doing fine...considering...” approaches. This might reflect the fact that the popular public perception of corporate finance has been one of negligence and greed, forcing these companies to change their image.

Bill had to make changes fast. One of the most important of these was to get the Career Center faculty out on the road by hiring an Employer Ambassador Team. Instead of waiting for recruiters to come to Duke, Duke was going to them. Additionally, the Career Center made its mission to reach out to freshmen and sophomores and better prepare them for internship experiences (a phenomenon, as mentioned earlier, that I have seen come to fruition in the past two years). They have attempted to diversify who comes to the career fairs, going from 75 to 100 employers in the past year alone. They also have

reached out more to minority and international students, who previously had sought guidance with places like Duke's International House or the Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture. These changes, Bill believes, have at the very least made the Career Center's presence more pronounced on campus.

When we began talking about Duke students, Bill felt that though every different campus has its own unique character, the experience with students in the career services sector has been similar among the elite schools he has worked for. In his eyes, these students are great at collecting things, but miserable with reflecting on them. He calls them "twelve year old boys at a buffet"—they eat as much as they can until they cannot eat anymore. Then, they do not remember what anything tasted like. They often cannot describe what they learned, and how it helped them make different decisions later. "Show me the transformation!" he exclaimed. It might be internal, but we have trouble "reflecting forward," wherein we change things based on what we learned. When we "stay the course," is it because we decided to? Are these experiences (internships, fellowships, summer jobs, clubs, hobbies) a waste? Are they just meant to look good on paper?

This difficulty in "reflecting forward" arises during a recession, and when bitterness enters the equation, it can be a real anchor. As Bill very inspirationally stated,

"The reality is, people get jobs in a bad economy. Great jobs. Not everyone. It isn't always the top of the class or the ones with the best resume, but it's the ones who can reflect forward and alter their perceptions. Some are risk takers, some cope better than others, while others are blamers. Others think we operate under meritocracy and only know their potential without acting on it. Opportunity is born out of every crisis. This is the reality that you're in now, how are you going to operate?"

The seniors from several years ago might have witnessed their upperclassmen have a certain set of opportunities, and when the recession hit, recognized that they would not have the same. They might feel bitter because they graduated in an unfavorable year, but holding on to that only leads to more blame and less action.

We can say we are not bitter, we can try to move forward, but what does that really mean? In the thick of things, I am not sure I completely understand what it would mean for me to “reflect forward” in practice. Bill sympathizes with students who experience feelings of failure after several rejections. “Everyone that does not get what they want will believe that things are unfair,” he said. “In no way are we disavowing the significance of those realities, but we have to move forward.” This encourages a sense of resiliency among the students, as well as an active pursuit of the future without being weighed down by blame or uncertainty.

Bill predicts that in the near future, a trend will emerge among major corporations in finance and consulting with contract labor. This means they will hire people only for limited periods of time. From the business perspective, this would be very beneficial for the individual corporation, as they hold less responsibility (benefits, insurance, etc.) and fits in the sort of “American ideology of a quick fix.” Bill thinks that students will be willing to gain experience with contract labor, and are attracted to a short-term commitment out of college. Whether this trend will come to fruition will indicate the sort of major changes to be expected with the aftermath of the “Great Recession.”

We ran over our allotted time, as Bill offered me personal advice and relayed stories of his own job search. Once the phone rang several times for his next appointment, I thanked Bill and left with some knowledge to inform my next set of

interviews. These would be with the recent graduates of the class of 2010—a set of students recently introduced to the “wonders” of the “real world.”

The class of 2010: a set of interviews

When I first began my research, I had originally planned to speak with current seniors from the class of 2011. What I soon discovered, however, was that starting in the fall of 2010 would be problematic for this subject pool. Many of the current seniors had not found jobs yet, or were in the midst of applying. While their anxieties were interesting, not all of them had any real rejection/acceptance experiences to reflect on. Therefore, I conducted the individual, personal interviews with the class of 2010. Graduation was still fresh in their minds, while some were experiencing their first year in the workforce. What I discovered from this set of participants surprised me, as hardly any of them displayed a sense of bitterness toward their college education, and in fact found the Duke degree to be very useful in this economic climate. Additionally, many fell into the 75 percent that Bill argued would go on to further schooling. The following three interviews are the ones I found most representative of different experiences in the job search, and depict in different ways how these students found their Duke education or degree useful.

Samantha

Samantha graduated with a degree in Mechanical Engineering from Duke in May 2010. She currently works in New York City for a financial services consulting firm.

Samantha and I met when I was a sophomore through a group of mutual friends, but had

never really spent anytime alone together. She always came across as incredibly nice, but fairly shy. She had a serious boyfriend from the time she was a freshman, and from what I saw, they had kept mostly to themselves. When I emailed her about a phone interview, I was surprised when she quickly agreed, and we set about our somewhat awkward conversation over “Skype.”

It was around nine o’clock at night on a Tuesday when we spoke, and I could tell from her voice that she was tired. We began by discussing why she decided to go to Duke, which for her, seemed like a viable option among many prestigious universities. She “just sort of randomly” picked six schools to apply to, including Duke, Northwestern, Stanford, Cornell, Vanderbilt, and a sixth place she could not remember. After visiting Duke, she was sure it was where she wanted to be. She said it was a combination of Duke’s reputation and the availability of the engineering major, which she knew she wanted to commit to coming out of high school.

Samantha admitted that her parents played an important role in encouraging her to go to college. She does not have any siblings, but her parents both have doctorates in education, so school has always been an essential part of her life. Going to college was “definitely expected,” and although she never felt forced, their legacy has made her very driven and ambitious. Her family’s economic background was also a factor, since their financial stability allowed her to choose whatever school she liked best. She describes her family as “middle-class,” but interestingly enough, she did not receive any financial aid or take out student loans. She said she probably would have applied to less expensive schools, likely in her home state, if her parents did not value education so much to spend a large amount of their income on her tuition.

When I noted the fact that her “random” list of universities were all, in my opinion, very prestigious, she described her mindset at the time:

“When I was applying, I don’t think I knew much about the benefits of going to a “name brand” university versus a state school or whatever. It’s definitely far more expensive, but I really do think it’s worth it. The firm that I work at now really only recruits at certain select schools. The bulk of people I work with now are from schools like Penn, Harvard, MIT, Cornell, and those tier. So the fact that there are firms like that, that only target these name brand universities, I think makes a big difference in the job world. I didn’t know that when I was picking schools, but going through the recruitment process, it was something that really stood out for me.”

Essentially, this indicates that the value of a degree really can depend on the prestige of the school in certain industries. This important insight led us into a discussion of her current position in the consulting firm.

She began by explaining what she does in basic terms. “My focus is on checking accounts, and what you sort of think of when you think of personal banking, loans, credit, that sort of stuff,” working mainly with retail and commercial banks. I was not sure what that meant, or how she used her engineering degree to get a job of that sort, but these things quickly emerged throughout the conversation. As she explained:

“I was beginning to realize that engineering wasn’t solely preparation for engineering careers, and that I could sort of sell myself as having a slightly more generic degree routed in problem solving and analytical skills that made me more widely applicable than I originally realized. So I sort of took that route, and took an econ¹⁶ minor, and ended up in a career with financial consulting.”

Thinking back to my work in the resource room, this was not all uncommon. Many students with engineering degrees found themselves applying for consulting positions in the fall of their senior year.

The process of finding this job was probably the most standard that we understand from the standpoint of the Career Center. This company recruited on campus through

¹⁶ “Econ minor” is short for Economics.

Duke eRecruiting, the online Duke-affiliated job search database. She applied in October, had one interview on campus, a second interview in New York City, and was offered the job about two weeks later. She had to decide by Thanksgiving whether to commit—a very short time line for such a large decision. “Its sort of a nerve-wrecking process, but doing it early on was nice, since I sort of had it under my belt the second semester,” she said, which is a comfort that I can imagine would be assuring, and that I envied. Her final decision, she admitted, was based on her boyfriend. He was offered a job in New York City after a summer internship, so she was attracted to this job at the onset.

When I asked about her experience with Duke’s career services, she had some general things to say about the financial recruiting on campus that fit well with my own perceptions of the early fall applicants. Her impression is that Duke is one of the target schools for finance and consulting, and for that reason, the student body falls into different populations throughout the job search period. For the finance/consulting eRecruiting jobs, she would see the same people at every information session, almost every night of the week, and run into them on interview days. Other sectors, like the engineering or arts recruiting, happen later in the semester and are not as demanding with constant information meetings. There is a sense that Duke focuses on and supports these finance/consulting hopefuls, but really, it is the companies that have a very rigid structure for hiring new employees which leads to this emphasis on a particular industry. Still, based on the Duke “Senior Exit Surveys” from the past three years, finance and banking always lead the percentage of top hiring industries for graduates, with consulting in a close second (Duke Career Center 2008, 2009, 2010). This makes the emphasis clear.

Since Samantha's experience with the job search seemed relatively comfortable, I asked whether any of her friends had a difficult time finding work. For the most part, she felt that the unemployed people she knew were just undecided. Either they wanted to go to grad school or apply for fellowships, but it was "a combination of indecision and the recession minimizing the available jobs." While there was a sense two years before that the eRecruiting jobs were harder to come by, she was under the impression that for her class, they were in a slightly better position. Instead of really blaming things on the recession, she felt that most of her unemployed friends regretted their major. "There are certain majors that are geared toward certain career path and some that are more difficult to apply for," she explained. "I feel like that would be bigger regret than 'oh I graduated in a bad year.'"

This regret is something that could occur any year, expansion or recession. It is still a very important issue, however, and one people spoke about differently during other interviews. What I understood after talking with Samantha was that, at least for her, the recession played little to no role in her job search experience. She was a full believer in education as a means of achieving success, and a prestigious form of education at that. She was the first I spoke to, and I wondered whether the other from the class of 2010 would follow suit.

Mike

My next interview was with Mike, who graduated from Duke with a degree in Civil Engineering and a minor in Economics. We were able to have our conversation on campus because he is a graduate student in Duke's Master Engineering Management Program. I met Mike when I was a junior and he was a senior, because he was dating one

of my roommates. He was a member of one of the big fraternities on campus, but often came by our parties on special occasions. He had always been a gentleman, and even though he and my close friend had broken up, he agreed to an early-morning interview with me in one of Duke's coffee shops.

Mike's father and older brother had both attended Duke, so he became fascinated with it early on. Upon graduating high school, it came down to Duke or the University of Chicago. The memories of visiting his brother and watching Duke basketball since his adolescence made it an easy choice. His family had the financial means to support him fully, but even if they had not, Mike thinks that he would have taken out student loans to be able to attend Duke. Both of his parents went to college, and he said it was absolutely expected for him to go as well. As a side comment, however, he said that the only way he could have done something else is if he "had a start-up or something." This comment struck me as an example of Huber's *The American Ideal of Success* in action, where Mike believed that the only way he could navigate around college was to create his own business and be an entrepreneur—another respected path for the American individual.

He entered Duke intending to be an electric engineer, but found it was more difficult than he expected. Through a few economics classes, he discovered he had a passion for finance. Because Duke has the Pratt School for Engineering and Trinity College distinction between its undergraduates, it is difficult to transfer over after committing to one—a commitment that occurs when applying to Duke from the onset. Therefore, Mike switched his major to Civil Engineering, thinking it would be easier, so that he could focus on other subjects. As it turned out, he really liked civil engineering and spent one of his most enjoyable summers working with a general contractor.

I knew from the beginning of the interview that Mike was in a master's program for engineering, but I wondered whether he tried applying for work as well. He did, and ran into some difficulties in the process:

“My biggest regret as a senior was spending too much time on my grades and not enough time job searching. I only applied to two jobs my entire senior year. The company I really wanted to work for was called Illinois Tool Works and I put all of my eggs in that basket... My final round interview took place in late March and I unfortunately found out I didn't get the position until after I had graduated.”

“Luckily,” he said, he had already applied to the masters program “as a backup.” He thought he would probably return for more schooling anyway, but that he wanted to work with Illinois Tool Works for the experience. He had not realized that his peers were applying to upward of “thirty jobs,” and if he could go back, he would have spent more time on eRecruiting.

As someone who claimed to really love Duke and returned here for a post-graduate degree, I asked Mike (the clumsily broad question) what he thought was the value of his degree in America. He answered that he was not sure yet. “It's hard to tell at this point,” he explained, “but I definitely would not be applying to the jobs I am now without my degree.” Being a year behind his peers in the job search process did not seem to daunt him much, and did nothing to break his confidence in Duke as an institution.

He thinks it has been harder to find work because there are less jobs, less money, and companies do not want to lay-off the experienced workers to start over with new ones. Mike is an interesting subject because he was not offered the job he wanted, but attributed it to his own doing rather than the recession itself. Because his masters program is only one year long, however, he is dedicated to spending more time on applications, and is confident about finding a job for 2011.

Miah

Miah graduated Duke with a bachelor's degree in Political Science. He and I had a very close friendship when I was a freshman because we came from the same high school (and same International Baccalaureate program¹⁷). In fact, Miah was the reason I applied to Duke. I had never considered it before and believed there was no chance I would be accepted, but he claimed he would write to the school's president on my behalf. To this day, I cannot help but wonder if there was any truth to that joke. This was Miah's style—always joking and often sarcastic. We lost touch over the years, but when I emailed him to ask whether he could participate and how his year was going, he answered saying he was happy to be out of school because he could not take anymore “drug, sex, and rock ‘n roll” (email, November 1, 2010).

Miah moved back to our hometown after graduation, where he now works as a paralegal and was preparing for the December LSAT when we spoke. We had to conduct the interview over the phone, but I could imagine the look on his face as he answered every question concisely. I started, per usual, by asking why he decided to go to Duke. “Prestige,” he answered. I waited a moment to see if he would elaborate, but eventually had to urge him on. He explained that it was also the only “top tier” school he was accepted to, and that they offered him the best financial aid package. He chose to major in political science without thinking of his post-graduate plans, only what would suit him best. If I did not already know him, I would wonder what that meant. Miah was extremely opinionated and loved to debate, tending more toward theoretical courses.

¹⁷ This high school program will be discussed in detail in Chapter V: The Future. “IB” stands for International Baccalaureate, and has been introduced in American schools as a magnet program

His family was very proud when he was accepted at Duke. “They wanted me to go to college, but I don’t think there were any expectations.” His older brother did not attend college, nor did his mother. His father attended a seminary to study to become a pastor, but otherwise, he was the first to ever attend college in the family. He described them as “lower-middle class,” adding that he could not apply to a school or accept any school's offer if most of his expenses were not covered. He depended on Duke’s financial aid. “My parents were very appreciative of the opportunity I was afforded,” he stated rather formally.

When I asked what he valued most from his time at Duke, he answered concisely again, saying, “the Duke brand.” While this answer was perfectly adequate, what I was most curious about was what experiences he valued most. He caught me off guard when he continued:

“I enjoyed a few of the friendships, a few of the sports, and a few of the events, but after graduating I realize that the Duke brand is what will stick with me in the job field and after law school.”

I appreciated his honesty, but it truly surprised me. It seemed the conversation had taken a negative turn. There was a sense of bitterness in his voice, but not at all directed toward Duke as an institution (as I might have expected in these interviews). Instead, it was toward the personal experience, which he felt would be easy to leave behind.

I asked whether he had any trouble finding work, and he said that once he found his “niche” (law, I presume), he did find it difficult to find a paralegal position. He attributes this to the area he wanted to find the job in, however, rather than his resume. Though he is happy now, he wishes he had spent more time “going through the motions” earlier in his Duke career “like everyone else.” He elaborated, saying, “I so badly wanted

to be different from the typical Dukie that my actions were somewhat detrimental to my success finding a job.” The “typical Dukie,” according to Miah, has an internship every summer and plays into the game of “social climbing.” Again, this bitterness emerged and clarified the previous comment further. He felt different from Duke students in general, which could explain why he did not enjoy the social aspects of college as much as the “brand name” it attaches.

Although Miah values the “Duke” name on top of the diploma, he does not think education has much bearing on who does and does not get hired. As he explains:

“There is nothing that sets graduates apart from people that have been working for years except for experience. I think graduates give too much weight to a degree and don't realize that a job is just like going to college. If you go through the motions, you eventually figure out a system or routine that works best and can perform at or above where you need to. Companies that are faced with the decision to choose among middle of the road college students with degrees from University X and Y and people with years of experience in a particular field are usually going to pick the latter.”

This was quite a statement, especially since it seems to contradict what he said earlier about the value of prestige. Instead, he is saying here that no matter what kind of degree you attain, someone with more experience in the field will get the better job. I think what he meant in relation to his larger argument was that experience does win over a degree, but if you are competing with people your own age or with no experience, prestige wins out. It is a complicated game, and though he is very critical of it, Miah is a player.

After we finished the interview, he asked about how my job search was going, and when I had little to say, he offered: “Just suck it up and take an entry-level position. It's all you can do.” Considering his answers as a whole, I would have to say that Miah is a believer in the system, but a doubter in education on its own. Because a degree carries a certain value that can set you apart in the job search, it is useful, but the value of college

itself is a social construct. Because of this complicated (but probably popular) interpretation of the “value” of a degree, I am not sure how to think of Miah other than “jaded.”

I was surprised, overall, that there was a general sense of appreciation for the Duke degree in not only these three, but all of the interviews I conducted with the class of 2010. I wondered whether their ability to find a job or be accepted to a graduate program, in all cases, attributed to that fact. In the beginning of my senior spring semester, I decided it would be useful to speak to a selection of current seniors. There was still a large portion of them who did not have concrete plans yet, and I thought the anxiety might be heightened by the fact that graduation was not far away.

Every Wednesday, I play poker with a group of 8-15 seniors (depending on the week) in a house off campus. They agreed to have me record a conversation between us one night over the card game—a conversation that took so many turns that it went on for over two hours. Below is the account of this group interview, and how an eclectic group of ‘11ers navigates the meanings and controversies around the value of a college degree.

The class of 2011: a conversation over poker

M’s house is just a five-minute walk from the East Campus bus stop, in one of the small surrounding neighbors where many seniors rent homes for the year. The house is fairly large on the inside, with three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. The floor has been damaged over the years, as evinced by the slants and waves of wood you walk over from one room to another. The living room walls are covered in (frequently vulgar)

magic market writing, filling up more and more at every party. M has us come over at around 9 o'clock every Wednesday to play "Texas Hold 'Em" poker, which many of us will admit is the only version of poker we know. We are not skilled, and most weeks, the same two people leave with the most winnings.

The players all come from the same freshman dorm, and have kept in touch over the past few years through these games and other parties. In my opinion, it is a group of people who would never be friends if we had not bonded so early in our college experience. Some are into sports, others obsessed with film; many come from wealthy families while others are struggling with student loans. Most grew up in a strict household, and did not start drinking until college. A couple are international students, while two others grew up less than twenty minutes from campus. Some are in sororities, a few live in selected living groups. Of the eleven who came to the game that Wednesday, three are engineering majors, two are economics, two are pre-law, two are pre-med, and two study in the humanities. Because of the range of background and major of study, I believed this group could give some representative insight to the current senior experience.

We set out the chips and began playing. I introduced my topic, some of them hearing it for the twentieth time, others for the first. My first prompt was to discuss the value of a college education. It was difficult to get a conversation going in the beginning, since everyone was so concentrated on choosing whether to call, raise, or fold their cards every other minute. L offered his opinion first, saying, "Education goes well beyond your classes, and I think the value has a lot to do with the school." L is an economics major,

and will be doing mortgage consulting next year in Charlotte with Wells Fargo. He continued,

“If you graduate from Duke, for example, you have a better chance in consulting and finance than you would from any state school. A lot of alum go into consulting and do well, so they continue to hire Duke students.”

A few others began commenting on the importance of a school’s reputation, including J, a pre-law student who was recently accepted to Georgetown Law. “Where you go to undergrad really matters for law school too, whether it’s the brand name or the preparedness for the LSAT.” She went on to explain that even though her GPA was a bit below Georgetown’s average, they take the undergraduate school into consideration. “For Duke students, the median is lower,” she said, “they *obviously* know that you do more work” (emphasis added). She also attributed her acceptance to connections with deans and alumni who were willing to “pull some strings.” Even when law schools sent recruitment letters, she would find small handwritten notes at the bottom that said, “We love Duke students!” This indicated to her that the Duke name truly does stand for something in a competitive applicant pool.

K, a pre-med student who has been hired as a medical consultant next year in DC, chimed in next. He agreed that there are certain members of the Duke staff, be them advisors or professors or deans, who make a greater difference in the job search or the graduate school application process than the education itself. He thought that the Duke name did not “matter *much*” (emphasis added) for acceptance to medical school, but that Duke is able to obtain and hire better advisors. Commenting on the quality of opportunities here, J agreed:

“My brother goes to a huge state school and is pre-med, and he’s been working his ass off just to get a research opportunity. Here, I’m like a chem¹⁸ minor, and I was basically handed an opportunity a couple summers ago because it was a part of the class I was taking here.”

Considering these statements, they do not necessarily think that the education itself is what sets them apart from other students across the country, but that the Duke name can provide more opportunities both during undergraduate study and after graduation.

The Duke alumni network was another important point of conversation. Q, an economics major who will work at Goldman Sachs in New York in the fall, attributes his “success” almost completely to alumni connections. Particularly on Wall Street, Q believes that Dukies go well out of their way to help recent graduates. “I think it has something to do with us not being an Ivy League school,” he noted, suggesting we are some kind of underdog when it comes to the upper tiers of prestige. “Last year,” Q said, “we were the second most represented school at Goldman behind Harvard.” K concurred; “That’s one of the reasons I came to Duke is that they have a really close network, everyone seems to love it when they’re here and that love lasts when they leave.” A few seconds later, he added, “At Columbia, students always complained that their alum don’t help as much.” “—Because everyone hates it there,” Q interjected, followed by some light laughter.

When I asked why they all decided to come to Duke, they answered one-by-one, and although some of the answers varied between “Duke basketball” and “awesome weather,” almost half of them said it was the best school they were accepted to, or that they did not get accepted at the school they wanted (“Stanford” and “Harvard” were the two frequent examples). Q, in particular, constantly compared Duke with other schools,

¹⁸ “Chem” is short for chemistry.

sometimes in a more positive light, and sometimes not. Compared to state schools, he said that schools like Duke have a major advantage in recruiting for finance. “If you have 20,000 students competing for the same spots as 6,000, its not even close,” he explained. Compared to other Ivy Leagues, however, Q was quick to knock Duke down a few notches. At one point, he reached for a book called *Damn It Feels Good to Be a Banker*, and read an excerpt for us:

“Okay, so this guy talks about school slogans according to tier. The top tier is Princeton and Harvard. Princeton: We’re Bringing Banker Back; Harvard: With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility. Second Tier: Stanford and MIT. Stanford: South Side for Life; MIT: Small, Yellow, Different. Third Tier: Cornell, Dartmouth, and Duke. Cornell: Mediocrity Delivered; Dartmouth: Keystone Light Meets Finance Light; Duke: Hey, Down Here Guys! Then he goes on to mention vocational schools, like NYU and shit.”

Laughter ensued. Of course, compared to most Ivy Leagues, we are not the highest in the rankings of prestige. What surprised me most was calling NYU a “vocational” school (however sarcastic the statement was). Only six out of over eight hundred students in my high school graduating class left the state, and from what I can guess, none of them would consider NYU a “vocational” school. The fact that we all found these slogans funny says something about what we have internalized about the value of prestige, and where we rank among other well-known schools throughout the U.S.

The most fascinating turn in the conversation followed, again led by Q, when he began to compare Duke students to Harvard students. At this point, the poker game was hardly still in play; people were too distracted and energized. There is literally thirty-seven minutes of tape devoted to the discussion of Harvard. M, the host of the game and an engineering major who was balancing job offers at the time, called Harvard “the ultimate prestige.” Q claimed that every time he meets someone from Harvard, he

automatically thinks, “Holy shit this dude goes to fucking Harvard.” Most people agreed this was a typical reaction. E, an international student studying International Comparative Studies, added, “Any person I talk to from home asks me where is Duke, they don’t know it abroad. They know Harvard.” J was one to disagree, arguing that Harvard students are no better than us, and that it is all in the politics of application acceptance. L aligned with everyone else, refuting J’s statement by claiming that the hype was backed up in his experience. “Harvard people that I’ve worked with in past summers really blew me away,” he said.

Whenever people back home ask where I go to school, I sometimes feel embarrassed. When I answer “Duke,” the typical response is something like “oooooh, fancy” or “you must be smart!” With this in mind, I asked whether their friends back home are impressed when they say they go to Duke as well, since at that moment in the conversation they seemed to think we were some lesser population. Continuing with the Harvard obsession, M answered, “People are impressed by the fact that we go to Duke, but not as much as if we went to Harvard.” Feeling a bit frustrated with where the conversation was going (and going and going), I interjected with a broader idea of what they were getting at, suggesting that maybe it really is all about the name. Q responded,

“As far as paying for the prestige, I don’t think it’s even a question anymore. You can get an education anywhere, that’s not really what you’re doing in college. You’re trying to make yourself a distinct candidate to get the job that you want. To get whatever degree at a very good school means more, even than GPA or work experience or whatever. If you get into Harvard, there is absolutely no reason not to go there.”

Going to the best school possible will garner the best opportunities possible, under this line of thinking. This is not to say that everyone at the table agreed. The humanities majors hardly chimed in at all. For the heavily recruited industries (finance, consulting,

banking), however, this competitive prestige was one of the most important factors to them.

We concluded the conversation by discussing how to “play the game,” while ironically continuing to ignore the presence of the poker game in front of us. In general, everyone agreed that for law school, you need to have a good GPA and good LSAT scores. Therefore, you should take on a major that is easier, since the major does not matter. For finance and consulting, you need a prestigious name and close connections to alumni. For medical school, you need a good GPA and great MCAT scores, which can be helped mostly through a rigorous program and the opportunities provided at a top tier school. For the humanities, however, we were not sure what would help us in the end. The two humanities majors there (and three including me) had not found a job yet. Others tried to comfort us in our uncertainty. L said, “Since so many jobs don’t even exist yet, your majors could cater to anything.” Just because we do not have as concrete a path as the others, there was a general sense that we would be fine with a Duke degree. But, we will probably have to go to graduate school to really “get anywhere.”

How to win “the game”

“Playing the game” is a common feature that connects all of these interviews, both with individuals and the group. It is specific to certain industries and majors of study, and there are ways we have learned to navigate these arenas. Samantha, for example, knew by the experiences of her peers that an engineering major had marketable skills for consulting, that she should go through the multitude of steps (information sessions, Duke eRecruiting) for consulting recruitment through the Career Center, and

that she could land a high-paying job with her boyfriend in New York if she followed these steps. Mike and Miah, on the other hand, felt that they had not played the game the right way during their time as an undergraduate. Miah felt that he should have tried to find internships during the summers between semesters, and Mike thought he should have applied for “thirty-plus” jobs like his friends. Q, L, K, and J all have set plans for next year because they spent years in summer internships, utilized close connections with Duke alumni and advisors, and used the “Duke brand” to their benefit.

“Playing the game” ties in closely with the constantly emerging notion of Duke’s prestige. While the alumni in the previous chapter did praise Duke, in no instance did I hear them say “prestige” or “Duke brand,” nor did they really cling onto the general idea throughout the interviews as these current and recent graduates did. This could very well be due of the time that has passed or the more competitive Duke applicant pool of the present, but the Duke name was certainly a recurring theme for this set of interviews.

Although she claimed she did not fully understand the idea of prestige, Samantha applied to six top schools after high school. After meeting her coworkers and hearing where they graduated, she realized that she would never have been considered for the job if she had not attended a top tier school. Mike was not hired right out of college, but claims that he could not even attempt to apply to the jobs he is now without having his degree. Miah thinks that the “Duke brand” is what will carry him through life, and at this point, values it above all else from his Duke experience. The class of 2011 interviewees *harped* on the idea of prestige, even downplaying Duke’s name by comparing it to more highly ranked Ivy Leagues like Harvard.

In a 2000 study by the US Department of Education, Robert Fitzgerald determined that the level of prestige associated with the name of the college on the degree does in fact have an impact on occupational earnings. For both men and women, obtaining a degree from a selective institution (and often those with a higher tuition) yielded an earnings increment of 11-16 percent. Although this information is probably vastly different after the bust of the recession, this data supports our interviewees claims. Does this support our belief in meritocracy, or completely contradict it? Does the prestige of the school indicate how hard you worked, or what resources were available to you?

Another important theme was major choice. This is a topic that stretches across both this chapter and the previous. It is still a notable issue, and though all of the participants agreed that there was value to a humanities/social science degree, it was interesting that the economics major (L) was the one to say so, as the humanities majors at the poker game sat quietly. Miah's degree in political science aligns with the social science side of the equation, though he too believed that part of finding a job in a field like that required some sort of credential building (through internships he did not pursue, graduate-level degrees he planned to attain in law school, or entry-level jobs he recommended I consider). Samantha, too, noted that her most frustrated friends had chosen broad majors that did not train for specific position or career path. Fitzgerald's study backs these claims as well, as he discovered that major choice contributed more to lifelong earnings than the prestige of the school, as did the level of education (those who attend graduate or professional school earn more). Perhaps Bill was right—many of us go on to graduate school because the bachelor's degree is no longer enough to achieve the kind of “success” we seem to be aiming for.

In terms of the “American Dream,” I think these participants would agree that it is still possible for any American to be successful regardless of their birth—as long as they know the rules of the game. You have to start early. You have to get into a good college. You have to build connections and use networking opportunities to gain entrance into your industry of choice. It is not a meritocracy in the pure sense, because the person who works hardest to get good grades is not going to be as successful as the person who works hardest to connect with Duke alumni on Wall Street. You have to be smart about navigating the complicated terrain of American opportunity, especially in times of economic downturn when options are limited.

But for these reasons, I cannot fail to emphasize the importance of upbringing and the influence of parents. Most of the participants said their parents did not force them to go to Duke, but that college was absolutely a necessity. Although Miah’s family did not have an extensive history with higher education, they supported his decision fully and with pride. Samantha and Mike’s family supported them fully with their tuition, and instilled the importance of education from their childhood. Some of the poker players said their parents wanted them to go to a cheaper school or stay in-state, but none questioned for a moment the idea that college was a necessity. Therefore, these students are all in a place of privilege in America. They worked hard to get to where they are, and while I believe that they deserve every accolade they attain, it is not an opportunity afforded to every eighteen-year-old American. We might be insulated from the recession and have a sense of stability with our college degrees *despite* not having concrete plans for our future, but this is not a representative experience. For Duke students, the moral

panic surrounding the Great Recession is not a reality, which might explain why I discovered that the belief in the viability of a college degree is still very much alive here.

In the next chapter, we will move away from the Duke community, as I bring us to a Southern high school classroom in a magnet program. Though these participants have little to no ties with Duke, they are in many ways representative of the type of students who pursue and attend prestigious universities.

V.

- The Future: College-Bound High School Seniors -

“If you were to take advantage of most things that college offers you, then you can undoubtedly be in a better situation, between apprenticeships, going to the right parties, meeting the right people, shaking the right hands, what have you, playing the game, playing the game of life....”

–“DD,” International Baccalaureate Student, 12th Grade

As I briefly described in the introduction chapter, I decided to speak with current high school seniors about their plans, fears, and hopes for after graduation. Though speaking with high school students did not fit the Duke affiliated-focus of my study, I felt that the “future” of our education system was an important part of the examination of the current national outlook on the importance of a college degree. In this chapter, I will start by carefully outlining the development of this part of the project, since many blocked avenues led to other exciting ones. I will then discuss some important aspects of the methods, since working with minors required a more conscientious ethnographic approach and the time limit forced a certain kind of fieldwork experience. The ethnographic material will follow, as I detail an interview with one of the school’s guidance counselors and move into the two class discussions I conducted in an International Baccalaureate classroom.

This subject pool is representative of the sort of students who pursue higher education after high school, particularly at “prestigious” institutions. Hyper-anxiety about grades, peer competitiveness, and the unique characteristics of a “gifted” classroom all emerged within just three short visits with these students, which says something about the continued focus on high achievement through education in America.

Obstacles and developments

The conversations I shared with my brother often led us to wonder whether secondary school students would stop pursuing a university education as the “ideal” path, and opt for more cost-efficient vocational training or associate-degree programs available at local community colleges. As a young person who could not find a job directly out of a private, \$40k/year university, Michael had come to admire (almost jealously) those working class Americans with steady, important jobs who trained directly for their vocation. I wondered if some high school-ers, especially those who started high school in the midst of the “Great Recession,” were not necessarily dedicated to the idea of the four-year, liberal education, and whether I would discover some indication of a diminishing belief in the viability of a college degree.

Gaining access to a population of high school students proved to be far more difficult than any other during my ethnographic research, and it has been a process that I feel is important to account for in this chapter. Not only are the guidelines more rigid when working with minors, but also the public school system is a well-oiled machine when it comes to protecting their students from outsiders. Since the high school portion of this study seemed somewhat out of place in my proposal, I had originally intended to conduct brief focus group discussions with high school students at local Durham public schools, thinking the location would provide some sort of continuity with the Duke-centered focus of the project. However, I quickly learned that without any connections to the school, it was very difficult to get any help or obtain approval for research on a high school campus.

I started my search by looking through the information on public Durham high schools and deciphering which would be the most diverse pool of participants based on socioeconomic area, school ranking/reviews, and ethnic diversity in the population. Ideally, I would have liked to be so selective. After emailing several schools and not hearing back within a week, I decided to visit three campuses during a school day in an attempt to speak with the administration. One of the problems was that I did not know whom I was looking for, and was often referred to speak with the principal, who was (understandably) busy at each location. After waiting half an hour in one of the front offices, I did speak with one principal. He told me he was uncomfortable taking away any instructional time, and that he could not allow me free access to the school during the day (at lunch, between classes, etc). He did refer me to some teachers who run after-school clubs, and told me that if I became a volunteer, I could probably form mentor-mentee relationships with some seniors. I emailed the two teachers he referred me to, but neither responded.

I was beginning to think I should move on to a different subject pool. Duke freshmen could provide some valuable insight into why they decided to attend college and what the educational atmosphere was like at their respective high schools, and because it would keep the main participants within the Duke community, this new approach was tempting for a while. However, as time passed and I conducted more interviews with Duke alumni and Duke seniors, I had this nagging feeling that I should take a step outside of this distinct community, made up mostly of people who were college “believers.” Brainstorming some different avenues for access, I remembered back

to my senior year in high school, when recent graduates would come visit teachers during the school day frequently. Why was it so easy for them?

The answer was a direct relationship with high school faculty. I went back to my old high school, where I spent four years cultivating several lasting relationships with my high school teachers, as I was lucky enough to have some amazing instructors who really cared about their students. In retrospect, I might have been considered a “suck-up” in my secondary school years—always coming to class early or leaving late to get a word in with a given teacher. Plus, I had my well-mannered, always reliable older brother to precede me the year before in all of the same classes. It made sense to go back there, and it was the easiest way to meet students in a short amount of time. I contacted two of my former teachers, and quickly heard back about visiting them in person over Thanksgiving break.

My high school is located in a low socioeconomic suburban neighborhood in a southern US state, and enrolls approximately 3200 students (XYZ High School 2010). Due to failing test scores and a low reputation in the school district, XYZ High School began offering two magnet programs—the International Baccalaureate Program (IB) and the Heath Academy—in order to draw a more diverse population from around the district. The school is currently amidst a five-year remodel, and has risen from a “D” school to an “A” school within several years. The ethnic distribution is 7 percent Asian, 26 percent Black, 14 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Multiracial, 47 percent White, and >1 percent Native American. Almost 40 percent of students are on free or reduced lunch (XYZ High School 2010).

While it might seem that this school would offer a great diversity of participants, there is one major factor that has complicated the research, and in many ways has limited it. I visited both teachers; one teaches in the school's International Baccalaureate program, and the other teaches senior courses in the traditional academic program. Because I go to a college in a different state, I am only home during the holidays, which has been a great detriment to my time at the high school. After finishing exams in December, I could drive home to make it in time for the last day of school before the holidays. No after-school clubs were meeting on the last day, and the traditional program teacher could not offer any instructional time. The IB teacher, however, was happy to have me come in, since they would already be finished with their examinations. Mr. E, one of my closest mentors, made plans with me throughout the following months for my visit in mid-December. I attempted to contact a few other teachers who I had casual relationships with (through sports, extra-curriculars, and elective courses), but none could offer me any class time. I was therefore limited to two periods (class meetings) with only IB senior students.

I was an IB student, and in fact had enrolled in "Pre-IB" at eleven years of age (6th grade). As described on the 2010-2011 School Profile pamphlet, the International Baccalaureate program is a "demanding pre-university course of study that leads to examinations and is designed for highly motivated secondary school students aged 16 to 19," and "has earned a reputation for rigorous assessment, helping IB diploma holders access the world's leading universities" (XYZ High School 2010). Essentially, it is geared toward college-bound students, providing a challenging program that offers private-school level opportunities in a public institution.

I joined the program because my brother did the year before me. The origin, however, lies with my parents. In my experience, this was the case for most students. Not many of us chose to commit seven years of our education to one of the most difficult public school programs at the impressionable young age of eleven (for “Pre-IB”). Students are tracked into the course sequence, and given that admittance is based on a first-come, first-serve application basis, it is not predicated on merit. Students must know at any early age that they want to attend college in the future, or their parents have to believe they are intellectually capable.

Even after reading each description and recruitment pamphlet, my experience in the program seemed different. It was certainly always known as a launching pad for college, and I was told throughout my high school years that IB was my only chance to get into a high-tier university from a public school, but there was a changing belief system regarding IB as I got older. In many ways, it is similar to the changing belief system pertaining to the university that I am discussing in this very research project. Though it was never printed in word, there was a common understanding that all IB graduates were admitted to a four-year college. Whether it was the lowest tier state school or most prestigious Ivy League, there was a 100 percent postsecondary acceptance rate for the first few years of the program. In the class of 2005, however, the first IB student was rejected from all four-years they applied to. They ended up at the local community college for two years, then transferred to the University of Central Florida. In 2006, three students attended community college. My class year was 2007, and there was an uproar with many of the students and parents during application time, as anxiety filtered through the program and students wondered whether the difficulty and time

commitment of IB was worth it. An IB diploma no longer guaranteed college acceptance, just like a college diploma does not guarantee immediate employment.

In order to clarify some of these memories and hear the official story for IB, I emailed the IB counselor, Mrs. C, to ask for an interview during my school visit. While I was excited about a day full of activities and interviews, I was mostly worried that my data would not mean much. Again, I was speaking with a limited population that was dedicated to education, and one that is separated from the majority of XYZ High's population throughout the school day. Still, this sample group does exemplify some of the tracking and skewed meritocracy that goes on in primary and secondary school discussed in Chapter II. It is a unique group, but sheds some light on the current college consideration and application experience nonetheless. It is also the sort of population that feeds into Duke.

While it was not what I had planned originally, going back to my own high school felt a bit like coming full circle. I am an important figure in the "present" of this study, and interviewed people in much the same situation as myself. The Duke alumni who I interviewed offer a glimpse into my "future." Perhaps, it is only fitting that for the "past," I go back to where I came from, and take a further look into how this path produces a particular type of student who views education in a unique way.

Methods

A large portion of the methods in this part of the research was formed out of necessity. I had one day to speak with two classes, and all students had to be treated as minors, requiring parental consent and child assent forms for each individual. I decided

the best way to attain a maximum amount of data, while still gaining the valuable qualitative information consistent with the previous chapters, was to have an open focus group-type interview. Each senior IB student in Mr. E's classes was introduced to the project and offered permission forms. If they chose to participate, they joined our conversation on the last day of classes. All other students proceeded with class as usual with Mr. E. Remembering my laziness with permission forms in high school, I figured many students would forget to have them signed if they had not decided against participating anyway. This ideally would yield a small-to-medium size group of students.

Walking onto XYZ High's campus for the first time in three years was astonishing for me. When I graduated, the school was three years underway a five-year reconstruction plan, and many of the old, yellow colored buildings had been torn down already. By the time I visited in 2010, the campus was completely redone, with all new two-story white buildings with block letter name labels like "Tribe Hall" or "Renegade Hall." When I was at XYZ, the buildings were only numbered. All IB classes were separated into "Building 5" towards the back of the school. Now, the IB classes are integrated into all of the buildings according to subject (such as history, math, etc).

I had an incredibly difficult time finding my way around at first, and did not find any of my former teachers' rooms until the bell had already released the students from school. The campus is enormous, and very much resembles that of a community college. I noticed that the outdoor areas were completely covered in concrete now, with a small grassy patch in the center of the courtyard. The new buildings are rectangular with large window frames in the middle that stretch up both floors. The inside floors are blue and

black tile, and the cool air conditioning felt great in the ninety-degree southern October weather.

I was informed by Mr. E the next day that walking on campus this way was not allowed, which I guessed by the new black gates that locked me in the school, away from the side parking lot where I left my car. These new safety measures were taken seriously, so I had to apply to be a volunteer for the school. It is called a “Dividend” in the state public school system, which was a simple online database where anyone could register.

When I returned in December, each class began with a brief lecture from Mr. E about one of the class’s upcoming writing assignments, and after he was finished, I stepped to the front of the classroom to give a further introduction and explanation for the project. I asked all participants with completed forms to meet me in the back corner of the classroom, as Mr. E gave the remaining students an assignment. After collecting the forms, we gathered around one long table in scattered chairs with the recorder in the center, jumping right into the conversation.

I had originally wanted students to fill out a brief questionnaire along with their permission forms, but further delays in formal permission for the research itself made the time crunch even more difficult to handle. In the end, I added many of the survey questions to the actual interview. These included open-ended inquiries like, “Do you have any plans for after you graduate?,” “Are your hopes for the future different from what they were when you first started high school?,” and “Do your parents expect you to follow a certain path after you graduate?.” I also asked about their high school experience in order to learn more about their position at XYZ High, including, “Do you enjoy being

a student at XYZ?” and “Do you feel like you are separated from the general population?”

The ongoing questions changed in each of the interviews according to the natural path of the conversation, but I began with the same question every time, “What are your plans for next year?” I asked each student in the group to go around and give a simple answer, such as “school,” “work,” or other, explaining only when necessary. This way, I was able to collect one form of simple data across all of the classes. Otherwise, I would create new questions through topics that the students were most willing to talk about, having a list of back-up questions in case the group was quiet.

This method seemed to be the only way to talk to many students in such a short amount of time (ranging from twenty minutes in the first class to forty-five in the second). If I had had more time for research approval and the location of the school was more convenient, I would have liked to speak with them further—possibly on an individual basis. There were many students who never spoke up due to the limited space and limited time. But as the conversations went on, I could tell this was a pervasive topic in each and every one of their lives, from the louder participants to the silent ones.

As mentioned in the previous section, I also spoke with the International Baccalaureate counselor for more formal information on the program. This interview was fairly brief because of her busy schedule, but was a thirty-minute conversation not very different from the alumni interviews. The content, however, focused entirely on the development of the IB program and its current status. Most of the questions were prepared ahead of time, though some formed naturally through the open-ended conversation. The interview was a necessary compliment to the student interviews, as

Mrs. C provided valuable background regarding the administrative and institutional side of the student experience.

A counselor's perspective

Mrs. C has been the IB counselor at XYZ High since the onset of the program in 2001, but has worked as a school counselor since completing her graduate degree in 1991. I wondered if she would remember me after these few years of being away, but as soon as I emailed her, she replied kindly, “how’s Duke?” I walked into her office mid-morning on December 17, and as soon as I sat down, a flustered parent walked in to ask about a recent problem with one of the history teachers. She asked me to wait, and as I looked around her office, I noticed new pictures of her growing children, a plethora of “thank you” cards taped to the top of her desk cabinets, and framed degrees hanging about the wall. She has three rows on her bookshelf filled with thick books from the Princeton Review, College Board, etc.—all about majors, colleges, and alternative choices after high school.

I remember sitting in her office back in 2006, stressing over whether I should take AP/IB Chemistry. Her data indicated that only one student in the five years before me had been accepted to an Ivy League school without taking the chemistry course, which was notorious for being the most difficult class offered at XYZ. Thinking about it now, my concern seems so inconsequential, but she explained during our conversation that the same thing goes on every day. Students, especially juniors and seniors, are constantly requesting meetings based on word-of-mouth fears and anxieties for where their choices will lead them—especially the students who excel. “The biggest concern for seniors is

that they won't get in anywhere," Mrs. C explained. "It's cute from my end because I'm like, of course you're going to school somewhere,...the harder ones are the students who have mediocre grades, and I'm talkin' about Cs, and trying to counsel them about shooting for the stars but still being realistic."

One of my greatest interests since stepping out of the IB program has been how students decide to join it in the first place. Mrs. C said that the school does not recruit directly, but through the "Choices" school district program. "Choices" was implemented as part of the federal desegregative order for corrective action that sought to integrate Central Florida public schools. Today, "Choices" sends information to the parents of eighth graders, fifth graders, and kindergarteners about the magnet programs available for their children. There is an annual open house at XYZ High regarding their own magnet programs, and applications are due in December. Since the onset of the IB program, every single student who applies by December has been accepted, without grades or academic experience taken into account. All others who apply in the spring are chosen completely at random. Perhaps it works this way so that opportunities are available for all-caliber students, not just those who test well. However, this also means the decision is based solely on the parent and the student.

When I asked Mrs. C why most students enroll in IB, she answered that they want to get into college. I brought up a bit of popular gossip from back when I joined IB, when many people in the program claimed you would automatically be accepted to a Florida state university if you earned an IB diploma. Mrs. C laughed and nodded, clearly familiar with the claim, which she says is and always has been completely false. She holds a "Parent's Night" every spring for the students considering enrolling in the full IB

program, wherein she says she “make[s] a point in telling them that there is no guarantee that you will get into any school, there is no guarantee that you will get into ABC State College [the nearby community college]...you have to perform well.” This is no surprise, and just like a college student looking for a job, the degree is not automatic evidence of work capacity. And as students are becoming more successful in college, admissions become even more competitive. “...We’re not building any new colleges, then there’s reduced funding for the state schools, which just creates this crunch!” she explains about the dwindling acceptance rates at state colleges. This is just one example of how the recession has directly affected education through a decline in state funding.

Wondering how much the IB program has grown in recent years, Mrs. C broke down the data, explaining that while there has been a larger graduating class each year, the freshmen entrance totals have remained about the same. During the first year of IB, two-hundred students joined as freshmen and forty-seven graduated from the program. For the class of 2010, two-hundred and fifty joined while ninety-seven graduated. This is not to say that they all received an IB diploma, but they stayed with the courses through the end of high school.

“A lot of it has to do with encouraging, which is good, more students to go to college...but I also feel passionate about the fact that we don’t do enough career research and prep for students, um, because I feel like most students think the only way to be successful is to go to college...and I think we need to do a better job of showing students different types of careers, different paths to those careers.”

Back when I was in high school, I remember thinking there was no other choice than the one I made. “There’s a real image problem for routes other than the four-year university,” she later noted.

Vocational trends have been unpredictable in the twenty-first century, as some jobs are going extinct while others do not even exist yet (Clark 2006). Perhaps, there is an appeal to the four-year liberal education as a means of preparing future members of the workforce to think critically, problem solve, and analyze. However, Mrs. C does think things will change if the poor economy keeps up. “The pendulum will swing back the other way,” she predicts. Before coming to work at XYZ High, she worked at another school nearby with a vocational magnet program. She said:

“You would graduate with an AS degree, but then ‘No Child Left Behind’ and ‘academics academics,’ and now the pendulum has gone to the opposite extreme, and there doesn’t seem to be any moderation and philosophies about preparing kids for what’s next.”

Her frustration was evident throughout the interview, and some sort of innovation seems to be a topic that counselors around the county have been discussing for some time.

Before concluding the interview, I wanted to know more about the other programs at the high school—programs I knew little about since most of my days were spent with the same peers for four years. I asked Mrs. C if her job as an IB counselor was similar to the others at XYZ. The differences she described were vast, and seem to be an enormous problem for magnet schools. “I think they deal a lot more with the underperforming students. They need eight credits to graduate and they’re a senior; where are we gonna get these extra credits? That seems to be their focus. Passing XCAT [the X (State) Comprehensive Assessment Test for grade promotion], graduating... pretty much most of them go to ABC State College.” This statement led me to wonder about where the high-performing students in the traditional program are getting advice about their future.

I knew after this interview that my sample group was far different and more homogenous than the other students at XYZ High. I wish I could have spoken to a more

diverse group. However, understanding the complexities of this magnet program has brought a unique edge to the research, though I understand that the findings are not representative of the majority of American high school seniors. With this in mind, my interview with Mrs. C prepared me for some of the concerns that the IB seniors would bring up in the focus-group sessions throughout the day.

Where will “I B” next year? The student perspective

I remember the “hall of fame” sign that stretched the length of the front of Mrs. C’s door, with the title that read, “Where Will I B Next Year?” I wanted so badly to have my name glued under a great school, to impress everyone who walked through the guidance office. That sign still hangs there. Several students have been accepted at Florida State University, some at the University of Central Florida, many at the University of Florida, two at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), one at Duke University, and so on. I recognized more than ever that college, or your future, was the most important part of being an International Baccalaureate student.

The first day I encountered my subject pool was over Thanksgiving break. I went in to speak with Mr. E about our plans, catching his last class about five minutes before the final bell. His room is covered in strange art projects that I never remember our class doing, though he still teaches the same course. There is a giant papier-mâché head next to the podium, student-made maps across the walls, a Native American-esque spear, and a “Groucho Marx” moustache/nose-face taped to the white board.

Mr. E had some grading to finish up, so he asked me to stand in front of the class and take questions, just as returning college students had done when I was a senior in

high school. It was surreal. A couple of students told me they wanted to go to Duke, and asked what it was like. Attempting to be cool and nonchalant, I told them that I loved it, and joked that it was way easier than IB. They asked me about my major, basketball, my extracurriculars in high school, and dorm life. One student asked me if many people smoke on campus, which brought about a bunch of giggles and shoves his direction.

Two students stood out among the class. One was male, small with dark hair and wandering eyes, who was creating some sort of tissue-saliva construction with toothpicks. “DD” sat in the center of the front row, so Mr. E fussed at him to pay attention. He seemed distracted and almost distressed, but paid no attention to Mr. E’s comment. The other student was female, tall with long curly blonde hair and a mismatching outfit with knee high boots, blue eyeliner smeared across her eyes that almost reached the top of her cheeks. I noticed her after class, when she came to Mr. E’s desk to complain about an assignment he never collected. She stood with her hands on her hips, rolling her eyes, paying no mind to my being there at the desk just next to Mr. E. Eventually, “CC” mumbled “fine” under her breath, and left the room without saying anything more.

When I came back in December, things in Mr. E’s seventh period class seemed tenser. It was the day before the interviews, and I dropped in to pick up the forms and discuss the logistics, reacquainting with some of the characters I met in November. Mr. E was passing out essay exams that they had apparently completed a couple of days before, and called each student up individually to tell them their final grade for the two nine-weeks (like a semester), and whether they were exempt from his final exam. He was secretive and quiet with some students, but for the ones who received an “A” both nine-

weeks, he simply shouted it out to the class. This used to happen when I was a student, and it essentially destroys any semblance of privacy. We all knew that only the “A” students would be announced, like it was someone we should all strive to be more like. And for those “A” students, I imagine, it was a bit embarrassing.

When Mr. E called DD up, he was working on some contraption on his desk again. DD said he did not care, and told Mr. E to announce it. A “B” and a “C.” He would have to take the exam. After class was dismissed, CC came up to the teacher’s desk with tears rolling down her face, her eyeliner streaming down her cheeks when she did not wipe it away. She complained about her essay grade, aggressively accusing Mr. E of favoritism for other students. Her essay was about five pages long, which Mr. E explained “did not equate with a better grade” when the information was off-topic. Whether his grading was fair or not, CC was convinced. One of her friends stood behind her and grabbed her shoulder, telling her to calm down and talk about it tomorrow. She stormed out of the room, just as she had in November, crying more now.

Despite the scene, Mr. E remained calm. I thought back to my time as his student, and maybe I did receive a bit of favoritism, since I was a member of his club, “Odyssey of the Mind.”¹⁹ I recalled that I once got an “A” in the class after having a “B” and a “B-” for my nine-weeks grades. The thought that favoritism could determine what college these students got into is terrifying (since I am very much like them), and I wondered whether I “deserved” my grades. Nonetheless, Mr. E told me the conflict is all a part of teaching high school, and that he is accustomed to it. We settled our plans for the interviews, and I prepared for the next day.

¹⁹ “Odyssey of the Mind” is a creative problem-solving club that focuses on performance. To see their website, visit www.odysseyofthemind.com.

Second period

The first class I interviewed was during the second period of the day, so it was early in the morning. This group of students was different. They were smaller in size, and far quieter. Mr. E started class by addressing the fact that a parent had called the night before to complain about his grading methods, and by his description of the problem, I was almost sure I knew whose parents he was referring to. CC's. He was apologetic, but explained why he graded things the way he did, and offered no indication of changing. He continued the class by discussing an essay project that was due after the holiday, breaking it down into sections. This took a long while, and I was worried about how much time I would get with the students, since the class periods are only fifty minutes each. In the last twenty-five minutes of class, he introduced me. I told the students with permission forms to meet me in the back of the class.

I began by warning them against saying anything they would not want their peers to spread around throughout the day, but to be honest, ask questions, and feel open. Twelve students participated, which was a large portion of the class, and we hurried into a scattered clump of chairs. The first question I asked was for them to go around and individually say what they planned to do next year. All six said "college," some getting more specific with the "where". They were a bit quiet, until I asked them why they decided to join IB. One girl surprised me by answering, "I came from a private school so my mom thought it would be safer, to be honest." Another interjected, "I wanted to challenge myself." A tall, blushing boy stood up and said, "In IB you don't have to do PE [physical education] so that's one of the main reasons why I did it." His peers laughed,

and one said “Oh ‘JJ’.” Following suit, one boy joked, “I wanted to commit social suicide,” and his friend added, “yeah I don’t like people so much.”

When I asked why they wanted to go for more schooling after graduation, one stated bluntly, “I want to be somebody.” Most of them agreed that you needed “four years minimum, probably grad school,” and, “gotta at least get your masters.” It surprised me that they were thinking that far ahead for their education, but I guess I probably was as well. I inquired about the influence of their parents, and whether college was a hot topic at home. They quickly started nodding their heads, laughing slightly, “yeah”’s coming from all directions. “Definitely, that’s all we ever talk about, since I was like, four,” and, “it’s a cultural thing. Asian parents, its just a known fact that we will go to college.” This was the first and only time ethnicity or race was brought up in these interviews, and I do recall the reputation of IB being “mostly Asian” according to the other students at XYZ High.

I wondered if they felt IB would give them a better chance at getting into college, and whether they experienced a separation from the rest of the students at XYZ. “Yeah, [it prepares us], if it doesn’t then we just wasted four years of our life,” a girl nervously joked. Another added, rather maturely, “I think it prepares us for college more than gets us into college.” In reference to the separation on campus, one student described it through the lens of the lunchroom. “There’s an IB table for every single lunch, it’s like us in the corner and then everyone else is spread around.” Another student agreed, noting, “It started especially sophomore year, I feel like there was less of a separation when we were freshmen.” The student who had previously made the comment about PE quipped, with a sense of self-deprecation, “There’s some integration with certain people, but me

for example, (head shakes).” They said the students they had electives with were mostly concerned with finding a job, or getting into any college at all. “SCC [Seminole Community College],” one girl joked, receiving some negative backlash from her peers around her, as if it were a rude comment to suggest they can only make it to a two-year school. A male student countered, “I read an interesting article the other day about how its competitive to go to more vocational colleges and state colleges than private elite colleges, because employers are hiring more from special training courses, so it can vary.” Students like this one were aware of some of these issues coming out in the media, but even so, no one else commented further. Hearing about the value of vocational training appeared to do little in affecting their engrained beliefs about the “greater” value of a four-year degree.

Switching gears, we began talking about their futures again. The things they are most excited about for college include, “the chance to leave state,” “parties,” “the opportunity to gain much knowledge and enlighten myself,” “having more time,” “freedom,” “not asking permission to go out,” “finally starting to learn things you want to learn, not forced to,” and a lot about getting away from their parents. Their fears are “distractions,” “failing,” “roommates,” and “having too much fun.” Towards the end of the interview, I asked rather clumsily, “What are your ideas about failing, as an American?” One student took it literally, responding, “the communists take over.” Many laughs ensued. Asking instead what they thought success was, I got some interesting and mature answers. One student valued “the security of a job. If you have a safe job it’s much more rewarding over a long period of time.” Another thought success was “having a job you enjoy; you should be comfortable money-wise but you don’t necessarily have

to be making six figures.” While they did not seem to concentrate on the amount of money earned, every student mentioned something about their job equating with success, whether it was a job that makes them happy, or a job that provides security.

The bell rang in the middle of a response about their future occupations, so I ran to the front of the classroom and offered them small candy bars to take with them. They very politely thanked me, a few students staying back to ask me questions, like whether I thought college life was easier and what I tended to do with all my free time. They seemed obsessed with the idea that this was as hard as their education was going to get, and that life would open itself up after graduation. And maybe it does. Now, it is almost hard to remember how much time I spent on schoolwork, just four years ago. What I remember more clearly is how often people complained about it.

Seventh period

I was excited to get to seventh period, encountering the students I had come slightly familiar with through my two previous visits. Some of them said “Hey Duke girl” or “Hey Christy” as they walked into the room. The school was on an exam schedule that lengthened the seventh period block, so I knew I would have plenty of time to talk to them. Mr. E started the class the same way he did second period, acknowledging the parent phone call from the night before. Again, there was tension, but I began to think it could have been anyone’s parents. CC was simply looking down at her desk, like most of the students were.

After he went through the guidelines of their future essay project, he introduced me again. This time, he gave me a fuller description—one that I was not expecting. He told the class I was admitted to Duke based on my “stellar extra-curriculars” rather than

my grades. I was not sure whether to be offended or flattered, but I guess it made me more relatable. We gathered again at the back of the room in scattered chairs, a total of fourteen students this time. I was not expecting so many, and in fact had hoped there would be fewer. Still, I did not want to deny anyone. In the future, I thought, I should find ways to limit the size of focus groups. I was happy to see CC and DD sitting up front. Moving forward, I gave the same introduction to the project and its sensitivities as before, and started recording.

My first question was the same: “What are your plans for next year?” Thirteen of the fourteen students said college. The one student who said otherwise was CC.

“I’m taking a year off because we are robots here and I want a year where I don’t have to do anything that’s going to, um... I just want to find myself because I’ve lost myself in doing what everyone else tells me to do.”

As “taking a year off” suggests, however, she does plan to go to college eventually. She explained,

“I’ve never gotten to explore my art side in high school because of all the academics, so I want to be able to explore my artsy side before I have to become a regular intellectual again.”

Some students laughed slightly at the suggestion that art is not a real education. They might all think it, but the straightforward, political incorrectness of actually saying it was surprising.

When I asked them why they joined IB, they were quieter than the other class. Eventually, a girl with black curly hair past her shoulders and thick-framed glasses recalled, “I was bored with regular school I guess, and I didn’t really have to do much in class, I could just sit there and I still got straight A’s.” She continued, “...so I wanted to challenge myself. Then the summer before 9th grade I actually wanted to quit before

going in, but at that point my parents wouldn't let me." Some students laughed at this, nodding their heads. I asked whether their parents had something to do with their entrance in IB, and a boy in the back of the cluster raised his hand, saying,

"That was, like, an issue for me, 'cause, like, its not like they forced me to do it but they were, like, very encouraging of it 'cause, like, I was a lot younger and kind of listened to what my parents were saying...like I don't regret doing it, but I'm kind of a tough situation right now myself. I'm a fast learner and can think quickly off the top of my head, but like, I'm pretty lazy."

And being lazy can destroy you in IB, even though almost everyone is a self-proclaimed procrastinator.

Then, I inquired about why they want to go to college. The answers varied, and were far more intricate than the previous class. The girl with the thick-rimmed glasses responded again, saying honestly, "It seems like that's what you're supposed to do." To my surprise, DD then sat up straight in his chair, and went off on a long explanation:

"It's the easiest path, bar none. I believe that, like, any person, given the abilities of the human being, can be successful. Anyone is capable of working hard, everyone is capable of, like, comprehension, and so really and truly what education comes down to is how easily you want to get somewhere and be successful."

He paused for a moment, then continued,

"Say I didn't want to go to school, period. What would I have to do to become successful? I'd have to work harder... You get a foot in the door after education far easier...you'd have to have a cousin to get a job for you or bust your ass somewhere and work your way up otherwise."

His responses sparked a new thread of the conversation, and DD quickly went back to slumping in his chair and playing with his hands. Some of his peers suggested that it is not so easy to get into school, especially when you cannot afford the tuition. A blonde girl in the back of the cluster explained that scholarships were the only reason she

joined IB, since she knew her parents would not be able to afford it, adding, “it can set me up to save and get better money to use for grad school later.” Back when I graduated in 2007, the *Bright Futures Scholarship* in Florida offered 100 percent tuition to state schools for students who scored a certain amount on their standardized tests and performed over 200 hours of community service. For the class of 2011, however, it has gone down to 75 percent. Just as Mrs. C had said in our interview, Florida schools are losing money. However, 75 percent is still a great incentive, and IB students almost always fulfill the requirements with the service component of the diploma. It is no wonder that in the past four years, an average of 77 percent of IB graduates have attended Florida colleges and universities (XYZ High School 2010).

Their concerns and excitement for college life were much like second period’s answers, including roommates and freedom. What this lighter discussion led to was why they think it is a necessity to go to college, which everyone agreed on. Some students offered personal stories, as did one student who described the experience of his parents:

“Unless you have a degree, you’re not going to get anywhere. My dad, like, he got expelled from high school, and, um, but now he has 25 years of experience in his field, and even though he’s more experienced and he does his job really well, and he’s one of the most well-known guys in the company, because he doesn’t have the degree he can’t get the promotion he deserves.”

Another female student related, saying,

“My dad tells me now that it’s a necessity to go to college. He worries about getting laid off every day, with 22 and 23 year olds with degrees coming in every day willing to work for less, it doesn’t matter how long you’ve been there. His best friend just got laid off after over 25 years for some guy who was, like, 23 with a master’s.”

CC interjected after this, agreeing that they all need a degree, but also feeling frustrated by the constant pursuit of money when “my ideal job, like, I want to be a flight attendant

and talk to people and travel, but that's, like, unrealistic." I find it difficult to unpack that statement, and understand why that occupation is unrealistic. Is it because she has put in so much work for IB, that being a flight attendant is beneath her? Because it does not require a college degree, and a degree is the necessary "next step"?

It seems that despite the recession, these students feel like college is the only way they have any hope for finding good work. I expected that I would find some dissenters, but within the IB program, I should have known they would want to go to college, just like I did and still would. We can be critical about its viability, but that would not stop me, and is not stopping them, from believing in the value of a college degree.

What XYZ High reveals about our public education system

After discussing my experience at XYZ with my peers at Duke, they suggested that the students in Mr. E's IB class were not all that unique. One friend said that if anything, it was atypical at her high school *not* to plan to attend college. For this reason, XYZ must have some hyper-awareness about the "uniqueness" of IB students based on how they compare to the rest of the students in the school. Some of these peers recommended that I try to find the demographic information of IB students compared to the others, to determine whether most of them are bussed in from other cities in the district or come from higher income households. While I could not obtain the permission to view this data, what I decided to do was research XYZ County's demographic information in comparison to other counties in the district and the state.

The state's per capita income in 2009 was \$37,780 (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Two neighboring counties had a per capita income of \$31,094 and \$38,791. XYZ

county's per capita income was \$15, 219 (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). With many wealthy neighborhoods surrounding the borders of XYZ county, this must indicate that the income distribution is incredible uneven, and that surrounding towns experience something closer to the state average. XYZ High introduced the IB and Health Academy magnet programs in order to attract more students from outside XYZ County and improve its test scores and demographic statistics. This could very well be an exemplary depiction of a modern form of voluntary "desegregation busing," as XYZ has attempted to overcome the effects of residential segregation on local school demographics (Rossell 1990).

Given this racialized environment, it is surprising that race did not come up at all in our conversations, with the exception of the "Asian family" characterization. The IB students felt very separate from the rest of the school, but did not admit that race was a factor or that it established difference amongst them. I do remember that there were a plethora of jokes about Asian IB students when I went to XYZ, but most of them were related to the fact that Asian immigrants were incredibly successful and hard working in America, and pushed their children to do so as well. Black and white tensions, however, were so invisible in our conversations that if I had not attended XYZ High, I might not suspect there were any. Knowing XYZ County's demographic information, however, suggests that race is the "elephant" in the room—and this elephant is a big one. Many of these students would not be there, nor would the magnet program, if the county had not made efforts to desegregate and diversify the school.

The comment about Asian parents was, like I said, very common from what I remember. This parental pressure was not solely a characteristic of these households,

however, as many students experienced some sort influence from their parents to join IB and get into college. Whether they guide them into the middle school Pre-IB program (as in my case), refuse to let them drop-out of IB after struggling (as with curly-haired glasses girl), call to complain to a teacher about their grading methods (as with Mr. E's mystery parent), or barge in to a private conversation to complain the program's guidance counselor, many of these parents are very invested in getting their children into college and will do whatever it takes to make sure nothing gets in the way.

In Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education, Annete Lareau recounts her experience with teachers, students, and parents at the elementary school level, and how the intervention starts even that early. There is heavy pressure on the students to do well and excel in the classroom, and more frequently now, they compel teachers to accept their children into advanced courses they are not fit for (2000:151). They exert this effort out of a false anxiety that their child might not have an "edge" in the college application process unless they are at the top of the class in the most rigorous programs. If we can assume that CC's parents were the ones to call and complain to Mr. E, they are an example of this type of parent who worries over whether their child will get into college and do not recognize that the structures of privilege still benefit students like CC over those with an "edge" (like race or income, for example, which "appeals" to the tenants of affirmative action acceptances). CC believed that her treatment in Mr. E's classroom was "unfair," because in her eyes, she had done all of the work. It upset her to think that merit did not matter over favoritism or the perceived "edge" that other students (particularly minorities) had.

A mix of this parental pressure and peer competitiveness has resulted in hyper-anxiety concerning grades for IB students. I do not cast judgment on Mr. E's students, since I whine to my friends about getting "B" grades on essays (that I wrote the night before) all of the time. Grade inflation in both high school and college has been a result of this sense of American entitlement for an "A" on every complete assignment, and results again in this false anxiety over failure if the grades are not ideal. It is a bit like our justice system—innocent until proven guilty, "A" grade until proven it should be lower (instead of working our way up to an "A"). "Grade inflation compresses all grades at the top, making it difficult to discriminate the best from the very good, the very good from the good, and the good from the mediocre" (Johnson 2003). The A+ has even emerged from this trend of inflation as a legitimate grade. In *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in Higher Education*, Valen Johnson cites Duke as one of the schools to use the "A+" most frequently in the past decade (2003:4). Could this relate back to what Q said in Chapter IV—that we need to distinguish ourselves among Ivy graduates? Do we need an "edge" too?

Mr. E only reinforces this grade anxiety by calling up students for exam grades, and allowing the "A" students to remain in their seats. Every student knows who the "smartest" are in the class based on these grades, or at least the ones who are likely to get into the best schools. In this climate of inflation, students worry about the subjectivity of a teacher's grading, which is in part why CC's parents called to complain. It is almost as if the grade has nothing to do with merit, and that the teacher has the power to keep a student out of college by giving them "unsuccessful" grades.

This propensity to complain and act up in and out of class is another thing I find characteristic of the IB courses, and probably many “gifted” or “accelerated” programs. There is this constant claim and complaint about the rigor of IB, but from what I witnessed in the class and what I remember from my day-to-day experience at XYZ, the classes are not very disciplined. Students sat on their desks and chatted with their neighbor for a good portion of the time I spent in the class. It was only when Mr. E was lecturing about the upcoming essay assignment that they sat down and stayed quiet. Even during these quiet moments, though, DD was able to focus on his own saliva-stick contraption. In *Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children*, Leslie Margolin takes a critical look at how “gifted child experts” portray gifted children. Many of them emphasize the need for “liberation, self-actualization, and creative freedom” (1994:xiv) without really identifying who the agents are between teachers and students, and whether social control is operating at all. As child experts Colangelo and Davis say, “Children who produce and create well beyond our expectations invigorate us and show us the possibilities of human potential” (1991:4). There is a prevailing belief that gifted students should be offered creative indulgence in order to nurture their development, which extends to IB classrooms like this where students argue with the teacher and do not pay attention.

I expected that this group of students would be unique and worried they would not be representative of public high school seniors in general. However, I have found that the events and interactions I witnessed over those three visits to XYZ of are indicative of many characteristics of America’s current education system. XYZ is an example of continued attempts for desegregation, over five decades since the *Brown vs. Board of*

Education of Topeka ruling. The school board's desire to meet the successful statistics of other public high schools did not necessarily lead them to transform their teaching style or school structure, but to encourage high-scoring students to attend their school for an attractive, internationally recognized magnet program. Many of these students have parents who are actively involved in their academic career, potentially even guiding them towards programs that do not fit their educational abilities or needs. The IB students are treated as "gifted," allowed more "freedom" in the classroom under the notion that they need an open environment to explore their potential. The frankness and perceived agency they have developed with this "gifted" education leads them to "fight" for grades, making grade inflation a major problem in our country and distinction among the gifted and mediocre nearly impossible to recognize. Though they do not represent high school students across America, XYZ's IB pupils might be representative of those students focused on building an attractive resume for college admission.

Coming back to the context of the current recession, many of these students are fully aware of the struggles that their parents face. Rather than deter them, however, these struggles have solidified their desire to attend college and "be somebody." Despite the economic strains of college tuition, all of the parents appear to want their children to go on to higher education, though not necessarily at an expensive private university. Just like the recent Duke graduates and current seniors in the previous chapter, you have to "play the game" that is the "American Dream." The popular opinion seems to suggest that the first move in this game is to make every effort to get accepted at the best college possible.

VI.

- Conclusion: Modern Attitudes Toward Meritocracy and “Playing the Game” -

“Thus the castle of each feudal chieftain became a school of chivalry, into which any noble youth, whose parents were from poverty unable to educate him to the art of war, was readily received.”

-Horatio Alger, Jr., Nineteenth Century American author

Horatio Alger, Jr. wrote many tales of “rags to respectability” that influenced America’s “Gilded Age,” a time of prolific economic expansion and population growth following the Civil War and post-Reconstruction eras. This was when the modern industrial economy took shape, and many Americans and immigrants were able to improve their station by taking advantage of the economic growth in the industrial sector. Alger’s stories often started with boys of humble origin who achieved “respectable,” secure, middle-class lifestyles through “honesty, thrift, self-reliance, industry, a cheerful whistle and an open, manly face” (Weiss 1988). Horatio Alger, Jr. is the “American Dream”-er, and wrote as though meritocracy existed in its purest form during the turn of the century in the United States.

A later generation took on his stories as a nostalgic representation of how America used to be, during an ideal era that “spawned millionaires like salmon spawn roe” (Weiss 1988:49). This, of course, was far from true at the time. Alger was brought up in the rural parts of New England, and as Richard Weiss argues, was quite disconnected to the industrial society of his adulthood (1988:50). Still, his stories were

vastly influential for several decades, and the myth of meritocracy still exists today in popular discussions of the “American Dream.” But what is this new form of the “American Dream”? Do people still believe it exists at all?

We might not call it by name, but the interviews from the previous chapters indicate that we believe we should earn what we deserve. What we consider “hard work” now is inextricably tied with our education, and the level of education we attain should afford us a certain level of achievement in the future. My brother Michael’s experience after graduating from college challenged our deep-seated belief that higher education will yield “success,” but why? He was not by any means a “failure” after he graduated. His position was high in the business’ hierarchy, he was well respected by his coworkers, and he made a decent amount of money in his first year out of school. If it had not been in the family business, and therefore not a guaranteed position, he might have considered it an achievement. However, Michael did not feel that the work he put into his education for the first twenty-two years of his life “matched up” with managing the detail team at a car dealership. That, compounded with the rejections he faced from national teaching programs, made him think he was a “failure.” Michael considered his experience “unfair,” because under popular notions of what a prestigious education *should* afford a graduate, the results did not line up for him. In this sense, I think Michael had an internalized assumption about how a system of meritocracy surrounds education.

The “Great Recession” is something we can blame for rejection, as the 24-hour media has bombarded us with figures of rising unemployment and warnings about job security. In *The Atlantic*, for example, they published an article in March of 2010 titled, “How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America.” Don Peck, the journalist for this

article, predicted that the era of high unemployment is probably just beginning, despite the recession being “over.” He believes the “Great Recession” left an “indelible imprint” on our country that will “warp our politics, our culture, and the character of our society for years to come.” Statements like this constantly pop up on television programs, newspapers, and Internet blogs alike, and these constant reminders of the recession combined with experiences like my brothers led me here. Is there going to be a major shift in our approach to “success”? Will people stop going to college?

When I sought an answer with members of the Duke community, I found that their experiences were far more diverse than these generalized conversations in popular media and debate. My subject pool was very distinct and included some of the most privileged young people in the country today, but what their stories indicate is that the belief in the value of a college degree is still alive and well in America. If anything, trends toward graduate school and more prestigious avenues of education seem to be imminent for those who wish to find themselves among the upper echelons of American society.

Education is understood as a means of moving up the social ladder in the US, but we can see through some of these interviews that higher education opportunities are not available to all by any means. For the Duke alumni, a university education was the expected path according to each of their families. Even Helen, who had to work her way through school on her own and did not have the financial support of her family, was supported by her father and was “lucky” to be zoned for a high school with special academic programs. Though money might have been an obstacle, access to education was not. For the class of 2010 and 2011, every set of parents expected their child to attend

college and encouraged them along the way. The IB seniors were supported and even pushed by their parents to do well in high school in order to get accepted at a respectable university, with some form of higher education being an absolute expectation. These groups of students were taught throughout their youth to be devoted to education and had these ideals instilled in them from an early age, allowing them to prepare for the competitive nature of college admissions.

The obsession with gaining access to the most prestigious forms of education is evinced in both the class of 2011's group interview and XYZ High's classes, as an effort to climb to the top of the educational ladder has led to grade anxiety, grade inflation, and a fervent need to compare value with other schools and other programs. As we grew up, we were socialized to be anxious about our education. This anxiety, I believe, connects with the popular debate about the viability of a college degree. Recession is a time of uncertainty, so we call into question the things that are supposed to be certain under the fear that we have lost control.

But did we ever really have control? Our history not only precedes us, but also defines what is possible in our lives and has direct control over our potential. I, for example, am not the agent of my own success. I am a descendant of Italian immigrants who came to the United States in 1902 and accrued wealth throughout the industrial age. My grandfather, a veteran of the US Coast Guard, likely benefitted from the GI Bill and sent the first generation of Tricoli's to college. My father was an entrepreneur, and earned enough money to support my educational pursuits. These circumstances are often mystified in the public discourse, as we discuss issues of social mobility as though we are completely responsible for our own level of success. I move within a set of structures that

predate my existence, and because I am in a position of privilege, I have no long-term barriers to anguish over as I graduate in the aftermath of a debilitating national recession. The potential unemployment some of us face as we graduate college will not change the way people pursue education (at the best school possible) as preparation for a secure future, and as interviews like Mike's indicate, will probably only lead us to investing more in our education through graduate programs. I would argue that in general, those who are in the position to go to college in the first place will be less affected by the recession in the long-term.

If I could go back to the conversation I shared with my brother early last fall knowing what I do now, I imagine that my response would be quite different. I would tell Michael that his liberal arts education, though slow yield much in the short-term, is likely to provide him with an versatile skill set as time passes and the world economy changes and shifts. Though more professional and specialized degrees might make more money directly out of school, liberal arts degrees tend to even out within a short period of time. Additionally, with the imminent changes to our economy following the recession, liberal arts majors will be a in a good place for following the trends of innovation. This was an essential difference between how the alumni reflected on their education compared to recent seniors. Though many current and recent seniors understood that a liberal arts education would be valuable in the long-term, none articulated it quite like Jeremy when he said his liberal arts degree "has set me up to be a life long learner and pick up new knowledge and skills as I move forward."

Moving forward, or "reflecting forward" as Bill from the Career Center coined, is going to be the most important lesson we take away from our experience as students

graduating in the recession, while keeping a critical understanding of our privileged position as Duke graduates in a time when education is essential for social mobility in America. When I say critical, I mean that I hope to continue questioning why some people have access and others do not, and how we can make postsecondary education more available to those without equal access, instead of allowing privilege to replicate itself from generation to generation.

Ideas for Expansion

Something that has plagued my ability to articulate my argument to friends and peers is that I recognize the limited scope of researching only with Duke students. The fact that this particular community informed my findings makes me reluctant to say that they are applicable to the larger group of seniors graduating during the “Great Recession”. Given the time to expand my research, I would first and foremost seek out current seniors and alumni from nearby colleges, such as North Carolina Central University, University of North Carolina, and North Carolina State. Furthermore, I believe that speaking with students at community colleges, vocational schools, and skills training programs would provide variety and nuance to my argument. Some of the ideas I had in the beginning of the fall semester, from visiting an employment placement office to interviewing professionals without college degrees, would all be great contributions to a broader scope of participants.

Comparing America’s system of social mobility through education with other nations would also be incredibly interesting, and suggest some implications about the transformation of the workforce and the quality of life for Americans should education be

less ingrained in ideas of meritocracy. Additionally, looking at how similarly powerful nations deal with crises (like Japan, for example) would be incredibly informative, indicating something about national public sentiment and the influence of the popular media.

Something I did not account for appropriately is different experiences among race and gender. Though these topics were referenced at different points in the ethnography, I focused more on family background/parental experience with education and social class. With more time and more participants, I assume that these would be very important contributing factors in personal histories about the pursuit of education.

What I have found throughout this year of research is how pervasive this debate about higher education is in the media and (of course) academia. An article very similar to this thesis was published in March of 2011 called “A College Degree is Still Worth It” in *Business Week* (Farrell). In a recent edition of *The New York Review of Books*, such titles as *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* and *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* were reviewed (Brooks 2011). I think it would be interesting and informative to compare how this topic is being portrayed in the media and literature, as a sort of still-frame for popular debates about postsecondary education at this moment in time.

What each of these ideas for expansion would provide is a more wholly encompassing set of data to clarify the implications of the recession on national institutions like the education system. Who is experiencing what, to what extent, and at what time? What would it look like if a stable structure of social hierarchy were overturned by crisis? Additionally, and even more complex, are questions about access to

education, and how some young Americans come to understand the process of preparing themselves for college while others do not. These could not be completely answered in this study, but I imagine that in the future, I would enjoy pursuing these other outlets of information for comparison.

Coda: “Where are they now?”

As I prepare to submit the final copy of my research, many things have changed since the interviews first took place. These developments grant a happy ending to some of the characters we have come to know throughout the ethnographies.

In January of 2011, a “Facebook” status popped up on my “news feed” that made me pump my fist in the air. Mike had accepted a job offer with Velos, a healthcare software developer in California, and was set to move out to Fremont over the summer after finishing his master’s. I ran into him one night at a local bar, and he excitedly told me about several job offers he had considered. He was incredibly happy with the way things turned out.

The two poker players who were humanities majors have recently committed to jobs—one with Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) tutoring in D.C., and the other as an assistant in an antique trading business. The host of the game, M, accepted an offer with a civil engineering firm in Chicago. One of the pre-med students committed to doing research with Duke University hospital, deferring his acceptance to medical school for one year.

Most surprisingly, my brother Michael—the inspiration for my questions about the viability of a college education, the source of bitterness that I ignited my research,

and the person I look up to most in this world—is going back to school. He quit his job as a detailing manager in December, and began studying for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). He will attend a small law school in our home state, and plans to represent the family business in legal disputes over labor.

As for me, the things I learned while researching and writing this thesis have changed the way I approach the job search. Early in the fall semester, I applied to Teach For America (TFA), thinking it could be a rewarding experience that would set me up for more prestigious opportunities later on. I was accepted (probably due in large part to the fact that I was writing a thesis about education), and placed as a middle-school math teacher in Jacksonville, Florida. When the offer actually came, however, I could not help but feel like I had applied just because it was a path that many other Duke students were pursuing, and that the challenging application process and “prestige” of the organization appealed to my competitive sensibilities. Because of my research, I was immensely interested in education inequality²⁰, but I was not sure if I was passionate about teaching or that I would be any good at it in this point in my young adulthood. This might seem like a contradiction, since TFA might have been an outlet for addressing these concerns about privilege and equal access to education, but being critical of these problems also led to a critical exploration of TFA itself, and how the programs fits within these structures of our current public education system. Based on these uncertainties, I decided to decline the offer, and it was one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made about my future.

²⁰ TFA’s ultimate mission is to bridge the education gap in the United States. See teachforamerica.org for more information.

Once I really sat down to consider what I would like to do next year, I thought about what these stories have taught me. The inspirational stuff: Be flexible. Try not to freak out. Take on something unexpected. The reality: You are in a favorable position in America, and things will turn out fine. I was very lucky that my family supported my decision to decline the offer, and that declining something stable, worthwhile, and advantageous for my future was an option in the first place.

Since then, I have been applying for entry-level positions in the entertainment industry (as an office assistant, program researcher, and production assistant). Like so many others around the globe, I have always been obsessed with movies, so I decided this would be the best time to give it a try. My lack of experience in entertainment and business has made it difficult to land any offers, but I have no qualms about applying for entry-level positions or graduating without a job. Whenever I do get nervous, I think most about Helen, and how a random series of coincidences and roadblocks brought her to where she is today. I want these next couple of years to be a time of exploration, now that I am finally emerging from the rigid (though immensely enjoyable) path of education I have been following since childhood. If I do not stumble upon that mysterious new road, then who knows? Maybe I will return to my first love, anthropology, where this potentially foolish sense of security was born.

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- Appendix: Participant Documents of Consent -

Informed Consent Form

Title of research study: Working Post-Diploma: How College Graduates Face the Job Market

This consent form asks you to take part in a research study. The study is being conducted by Christen Tricoli, an undergraduate student in the Department of Cultural Anthropology, with oversight by her advisor, Professor William O'Barr.

Purpose of the Research: This research study seeks to examine how recent college graduates have approached the job search. My goal is to discover how this process affects their attitude toward a university education, and whether former graduating seniors experienced similar during economic downturns.

What you will be asked to do: Your participation in the study involves a conversation, ranging between thirty minutes and one hour, wherein you account your current or past experience with finding work after college graduation. You will be asked some personal questions about your college experience, economic background, family life, and aspirations. Our conversation will be recorded on an audio-recording device, unless you would prefer that I take notes by hand. The conversation will be an open-ended interview, but you can decline any questions that make you uncomfortable. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time for any reason. Should you choose to participate, it is possible that you will be asked follow-up questions by email or phone on a later date.

How your confidentiality will be maintained: If you choose to participate, your name will not be included in the study report. I will use a pseudonym instead, and any personal information about your vocation can be omitted upon request. All audio recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed. Contact information will be kept on file until the end of the research in case there is a need for follow-up questions or clarifications.

Benefits and Risks: This research will not benefit you directly. There are no risks associated with your participation.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact the researcher, Christen Tricoli, or the advisor, William O'Barr, at any time. Contact information is provided below. If you would like to participate, please fill in the lines below. You may request an extra copy of this form to keep so that you have a record of this information.

If you have any questions about your rights as a human subject in my research, please contact the Duke University IRB at 919-684-3030 or ors-info@duke.edu.

Name, printed: _____

Permission to Record Audio (please check one): YES NO

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:
Christen Tricoli, Duke University
Department of Cultural Anthropology
cmt26@duke.edu
Cell: 407-947-3086

Advisor:
William O'Barr, Duke University
Department of Cultural Anthropology
william.obarr@duke.edu

Parental Permission Form for Participation in Research

This consent form requests permission for your child, _____, to take part in a research study. The study is being conducted by Christen Tricoli, an undergraduate student at Duke University, with oversight by her advisor, Professor William O'Barr.

Purpose of the Research: I would like to speak with a class of Seminole High School seniors to discover what their dreams, aspirations, and hopes are for after they graduate high school. This information will contribute to an overall goal of understanding how students value their education.

What you will be asked to do: The student will be involved in an open discussion, ranging between thirty and forty-five minutes. They will be asked some personal questions about their high school experience, economic background, family life, and aspirations. The conversation will be open-ended, but they can decline any questions that make them uncomfortable or leave at any time during the discussion. Your permission is completely voluntary, and although you may offer permission, the student is free to decline or withdraw from the project. If they do not participate, the student will continue class as usual with the instructor.

How your confidentiality will be maintained: Participants' names will be collected through consent forms, but they will not be included in the study to ensure their anonymity. I will use a pseudonym instead. I intend to audio record the discussion session, but all recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed. If the student does not wish to be recorded, they will continue class as usual with their instructor.

Benefits and Risks: My research will pose no risk to you or your child. Similarly, it will not benefit you or your child directly.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact the researcher, Christen Tricoli, or the advisor, William O'Barr, at any time. Contact information is provided below. If you would like to grant permission for your child's participation, please fill in the lines below.

Guardian Name, printed: _____

Permission for Student to Participate (please check one): YES NO

Signature of Guardian: _____ Date: _____

Permission to Record Audio (please check one): YES NO

Researcher:
Christen Tricoli, Duke University
Cell #: 407-947-3086
cmt26@duke.edu

Advisor:
William O'Barr, Duke University
Department of Cultural Anthropology
william.obarr@duke.edu

Minor Assent Form

This consent form asks you to take part in a research study by Christen Tricoli, an undergraduate student at Duke University, with help from her advisor Professor William O'Barr.

Purpose of the Research: I would like to speak with a class of Seminole High School seniors to discover what their dreams, aspirations, and hopes are for after they graduate high school. This information will contribute to an overall goal of understanding how students value their education.

What you will be asked to do: You will be part of an open discussion, ranging between thirty and forty-five minutes. I will ask you some personal questions about your high school experience, economic background, family life, and hopes for your future. The conversation will be open-ended, but you can decline any questions that make you uncomfortable or leave at any time during the discussion. Your participation is voluntary. Even if your parent might provide permission, it is completely your choice. If you choose not to participate, you will resume class as usual with your instructor.

How your confidentiality will be maintained: Your name will be collected in the consent forms, but will not be included in the study. I will give you a fake name instead. I would like to audio record our discussion session, but all recordings will be destroyed after the project is complete. If you are not comfortable being recorded, you will continue class as usual with your instructor.

Benefits and Risks: This research will pose no risk to you. Similarly, it will not benefit you directly.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the researcher, Christen Tricoli, or the advisor, William O'Barr, at any time. Contact information is provided below.

If you would like to participate, please fill in the lines below.

Name, printed: _____

Would you like to participate? (please check one): YES NO

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Permission to Record Audio (please check one): YES NO

Researcher:
Christen Tricoli, Duke University
Department of Cultural Anthropology
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