



# RESEARCH BRIEFS

## A Comprehensive View of the Post-University Transition: A Longitudinal Study

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### Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates and their perspectives on the transition from college to post-university life. The research aim was to illuminate the complexity of transition and make recommendations for institutions wishing to better prepare and support their students for life-after-study. Through this qualitative study, monthly interviews were conducted with twenty recent college graduates. The findings illuminated four primary themes of transition – searching, shifting identities, unmet expectations, and stabilizers, and indicated that institutions can play a role in offsetting aspects of difficulty in the transition through career preparation, emotional support, and practical life skills training.

### Background

Awareness of and preparation for the demands of the 21st century workplace are essential priorities and a growing concern of students pursuing postsecondary degrees and the faculty/administrators responsible for educating them (Perry, 2012). For institutions of higher education, priorities such as graduate employability, work readiness, life preparedness, and emotional stability are consistently becoming more complex to identify and support (Gardner & Perry, 2011). The post-university transition can be a difficult time in which graduates shed their student status and adopt an emerging adult identity (Allen & Taylor, 2006; Lane et al., 2017). College graduates are expected to be psychologically, physically, financially, emotionally, and socially capable of navigating life's challenges and societal expectations (Fox, 2011; Perry, 2012). This period can be wrought with stress



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and anxiety as they engage in the job search process and address financial concerns while also planning for future endeavors, such as marriage or starting a family (Allen & Taylor, 2006; Fox, 2011; Guichard et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2017; Mehta et al., 2020). By understanding the complexity that recent graduates feel in the post-university transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995), higher education practitioners may be better informed on how to help prepare and support their students/graduates.

## Research Purpose and Study Design

To address questions about student transitions to post-college life, I designed a study that began with interviewing university graduates in 2009-2010, at the height of the economic recession. Following twenty young, recent graduates through their first year after college, the purpose of the original study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of graduates in this transition. Through this qualitative interview study, informed by narrativity (Hatch, 2002) and social interactionism (Blumer, 1969) (based on the understanding that narratives are not merely descriptive, but constitute social worlds and a way of knowing about the world, and it is through interaction with others that meaning is constructed), the research aim was to illuminate the complexity of this transition and make recommendations for institutions wishing to better prepare and support their students for life-after-study. Findings indicated four primary themes of this transition (searching, shifting identities, unmet expectations, and stabilizers) and made recommendations around career preparation, emotional support, and practical life skills.

Five years later, in 2015, the study was replicated with the original research participants to explore the ongoing transition of early career professionals. Findings indicated themes of job shift, career fulfillment, student loan repayment, and increased responsibility to self and others. Now a longitudinal study on transitions through education, career, and life, a third study with the participants (now in their early-mid thirties) was conducted in 2020, as the participants navigated a global pandemic. Findings from this study indicated themes of career commitment, caregiving, health, finances, settling, and navigating ongoing change.

## Research Findings

Key findings are presented across the three studies (data collected in 2010, 2015, and 2020) in chronological order.

### 2010 Findings: Searching, Identity, Expectations, and Stabilizers

The findings from the original study illuminated four primary themes of the post-university transition – shifting identities, searching, unmet expectations, and stabilizers (Perry, 2012). *Shifting identities* illustrated that life was different (in terms of comfort zones, relationships, interests,

perspectives, routines, and living situation) for the participants before they graduated and that their perceptions had shifted (or were shifting). For example, one recent university graduate said, “Since I didn’t have an environment defining me, I had to start answering questions...and that’s everything...My identity isn’t student anymore” (Perry, 2012, p. 133). Participants discussed notions of *searching*, which represented more emotional elements of transition—aspects of life that the participants did not have (e.g., certainty and direction) but were seeking (e.g., fulfillment, happiness, and meaningful relationships). Participants also discussed *unmet expectations* exemplified in their perceptions of themselves, their degree (entitlement), job searching, the workplace transition, earning potential, finances, the economy, and other challenges in the post-university transition. One participant said, “I think my expectations were a little high...like I would get a degree, graduate in four years, send out my resume, and have a high paying job” (Perry, 2012, p. 163). Although these findings illustrated that graduates were experiencing difficulties in their post-university transition, the data also indicated that participants found *stabilizers* that helped to support and balance their transition. These included support systems, groups/activities, faith, health, and accepting uncertainties by “living for the moment.” For example, a participant said, “I’ve continued to stay connected to family and friends. In terms of emotional stability, they’ve been a support, and my faith has naturally played a strong part in that as well” (Perry, 2012, p. 181). The original study findings indicated that institutions could play a role in offsetting aspects of difficulty in the transition. These recommendations provide practical strategies within three primary categories- career preparation, emotional support, and practical life skills. Specifically with career preparation and establishing early success in the workplace, implications included gaining experience early (e.g., internships), managing expectations about job searching and the workplace transition, and building professional relationships (e.g., networking) (Spencer & Perry, 2015).

### 2015 Findings: Career Fulfilment, Student Loan and Finances, and “Adulthood”

Six years after graduation, the conversation with research participants around career was less about obtaining a job and more career satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Participants indicated stability in job achievement but less so in job fulfillment, as if they were still searching for something more when it came to their career. The participants were also balancing individual career goals with other personal desires (e.g., relationships, financial stability). A few of the participants were married, had children, or had mortgages, but all of them had an increased sense of responsibility and overall “adulthood,” as one research participant described it. Two primary themes emerged from this study. The first was around student loan repayment, the severity of the role student loans played in their lives (six years post-graduation), and their desire for increased financial literacy from the institution when initially taking out the loans. One participant said, “I wish I would have known [about student loan literacy], because I didn’t have

anyone in my personal life to guide me. I wish the university would have done it, because I'm still paying so much on my student loans, and it's ridiculous. I have tons of loans that I didn't need to take that I'm still paying out" (Perry & Spencer, 2018, p. 13). The second primary finding was around the meaning and value of participating in a qualitative interview study, and particularly the benefits of having an outlet to process their transition, experiences, and perspectives with. This theme was further developed into an article around the notion of *research as therapy* (Perry & Bigelow, 2020).

## 2020 Findings: Career Commitment, Financial Planning, Health, and Caregiving

In 2020, the research participants (in their early-mid thirties), had made a clear shift in career development. Many demonstrated a notion of *leaning in* with regard to career commitment and advancement. From 2015 to 2020, many research participants had solidified career passions, pursued further education/certification, and overall seemed to have more job satisfaction. Many participants were navigating next steps around career advancement and more long-term future planning. A research participant shared, "There are less unknowns, and so it's more so about building that security moving forward. You have your goals in place and now just trying to slowly chip away at them...having more of a long-term outlook. I'm through all the rapid changes, and now can look more to the future...you can actually look decades ahead now instead of what you're doing in six months."

Research participants had also increased caregiving responsibilities (to children, elderly parents, etc.), and were navigating their own health complications and concerns, which had not been a theme before. Finances were still a major component of their lives, but it seemed to be less about loan repayment, and more about management and future planning. The global COVID-19 pandemic also affected many of them, some with decreased work, some with increased work, and many changing work schedules/environments. Another research participant said, "I have no more excuses. I should know how to do my life now, career wise and financially...I've had a retirement now for nearly 12 years. So, balance would be the biggest theme in this stage of life. I have to think about other people more, and I can't be as selfish." Furthermore, this is when participants really started to demonstrate the characteristics around identity, purpose, and confidence, as one indicated, "I've learned to give myself and others more grace. I'm getting to know myself [as a mother], and how to take care of myself better and cope when life throws you these crazy curve balls whether they are good or bad."

## Conclusion and Action

With a twelve-year comprehensive view of the post-university transition, this longitudinal study highlights the experiences of college graduates navigating life and early-career. Findings from each study illuminate student

success strategies and opportunities for institutions to better prepare and support students in and through this transition. Implications for practice center around career preparation, emotional support, and practical life skills, and may include, but are not limited to:

- Offering final-year seminars/courses (that encompass all three elements of support)
  - » An example may include an interdisciplinary transition course, like (but on the opposite continuum of) first-year experience courses, providing a bookend course to the college experience (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1999).
- Presenting students with rigorous internship programs
  - » The more opportunities students have for in-depth experiential learning and transferable skill development, the more likely they will be able to identify meaningful work after graduation (Spencer & Perry, 2015; Perry & Perry, 2015).
- Providing networking opportunities with professionals in their field
  - » Examples may include alumni social gatherings, mentor-matching, informational interviews, or shadowing opportunities.
- Offering career-skills development trainings
  - » This may include resume creating, mock-interviews, job searching strategies, and opportunities for developing transferable soft skills that employers desire regardless of industry (Gardner & Perry, 2011). This could be facilitated through the career center and/or an academic discipline.
- Providing ongoing career and counseling services for recent graduates
  - » Access to critical campus services for a period of time after graduation
- Facilitating support groups for recent graduates
  - » This could be organized through their academic discipline, campus affinity groups, or the alumni association.
- Implementing transition awareness education
  - » Campus professionals can help students manage their expectations about life-after-college. Conversations may include discussions with students about how a degree (albeit important and a great privilege) does not mean they will not navigate hardship post-graduation.
- Offering financial literacy training
  - » Such training could include more in-depth information about the long-term implications of student loans (Perry & Spencer, 2018).
- Providing life-skills trainings
  - » This may include information about personal financing, home mortgages, taxes, and insurance. It may also involve guest lectures from professionals, such as bankers and insurance agents.

There is need to guide students in managing their expectations (about transition and life after university) by helping them understand their shifting identities and the uncertainty that often accompanies the post-university transition. Based on the interpretation of the data, any strategy, program, or initiative that fosters the opportunity for such is likely to help prepare and support students in this transition.

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