

# Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire “Prestigious” Jobs

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## Abstract

Elite universities are credited as launch points for the widest variety of meaningful careers. Yet, year after year at the most selective universities, nearly half the graduating seniors head to a surprisingly narrow band of professional options. Over the past few decades, this has largely been into the finance and consulting sectors, but increasingly it also includes high-tech firms. This study uses a cultural-organizational lens to show how student cultures and campus structures steer large portions of anxious and uncertain students into high-wealth, high-status occupational sectors. Interviewing 56 students and recent alumni at Harvard and Stanford Universities, we found that the majority of our respondents experienced confusion about career paths when first arriving at college but quickly learned what were considered to be the most prestigious options. On-campus corporate recruitment for finance, consulting, and high-tech jobs functioned as a significant driver of student perceptions of status; career prestige systems built up among peers exacerbated the funneling effect into these jobs. From these processes, students learned to draw boundaries between “high-status” and “ordinary” jobs. Our findings demonstrate how status processes on college campuses are central in generating preferences for the uppermost positions in the occupational structure and that elite campus environments have a large, independent role in the production and reproduction of social inequality.

## Keywords

career formation, culture, elite universities, higher education, institutionalism, organizations

Since the 1980s, finance and management consulting firms, such as Goldman Sachs and McKinsey and Co., have hired what many consider to be an inordinate share of elite universities’ graduating classes (Ho 2009; Rivera 2012). In 2007, before the Great Recession, 47 percent of Harvard’s seniors accepted two-year analyst positions in these sectors (Rampell 2011). These numbers dropped by half after the recession but have since rebounded. In 2014, the *Harvard Crimson*’s annual survey of seniors found that 31 percent of the senior class was headed to these sectors, far outpacing other professional destinations (Robbins 2014). Other elite universities—schools with very highly selective admissions and that are part of, or seen as equal to, the Ivy League—have similar, if not identical, patterns.

A new prestigious career path has recently joined investment banks and consulting firms atop students’ aspirational hierarchy: the technology sector. In the wake of the dot-com and social media booms, elite university students’ desire for high-tech jobs has increased sharply (Khan 2012). Entry into technology jobs has always been substantial at universities such as MIT and Stanford, which are known for their engineering

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programs, but students from other, more traditional elite schools have also begun to seek tech careers. For example, in 2014, nearly 15 percent of Harvard's graduating seniors pursued jobs in the tech industry as their first jobs (Robbins 2014). Combined, the three sectors of financial services, management consulting, and tech captured nearly 50 percent of graduates entering the workforce from Harvard's class of 2014. Among Stanford students entering the workforce, nearly a quarter of graduating seniors go into technology fields, and 22 percent are split between consulting and financial services (Svoboda 2014).

The concentration of large numbers of elite students in a fairly small number of occupational sectors is not new. Upper-tier private universities have always served as pipelines to a narrow band of elite sectors. In the 1950s and 1960s, the State Department and CIA were key destinations for "the best and the brightest" (Lemann 1999); in the 1970s and 1980s, medicine, law, and corporate business stood out as elite job pathways for Ivy League graduates (Granfield 1992; Schleeff 2000). As these trends reveal, the specific destinations out of elite universities may change over time, but the general process in which large numbers of graduates gravitate toward a narrow range of career choices has persisted.

Sociologists and other educational researchers have not adequately studied the mechanisms contributing to this phenomenon, which we call "career funneling." Researchers using a functionalist model assume a simple relationship between the supply of high wages/benefits in sectors of the job market and demand from job seekers. A strict stratification approach, in the vein of Blau and Duncan (1967), emphasizes the influence of students' background characteristics—such as class, race, gender, and parents' education—on individuals' job outcomes. Scholars adopting a conflict approach, most prominently Bowles and Gintis (1976), critique the tight coupling between schooling and the labor market, arguing that institutions effectively do all of the work to channel students to particular strata of the labor force.

These different approaches have many merits, but none can give insight into how students, in interaction with others in organizational settings, come to evaluate certain jobs as desirable and worth pursuing. Students are embedded in local campus contexts, where dominant discourses of action, as well as organizational features of their universities (e.g., student clubs, classes, career

counseling, and job recruitment), exert a strong influence on them (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008), including, presumably, on their job choices. Understanding how campus contexts shape career aspirations is particularly important on elite campuses. Graduates of elite universities assume an outsized proportion of the uppermost positions in the occupational structure, which is, itself, arguably the most salient construct underlying class hierarchies (Weeden and Grusky 2005). The position of elite universities within the field of global higher education means the jobs elite graduates choose are, by definition, the most prestigious ones (Bourdieu 1996). Thus, an examination of career-oriented status processes at elite universities brings clarity to both status-based and socioeconomic labor market stratification, by examining one primary site of elite career entry. To understand these status processes, we must look to interactions among students and uncover the mechanisms by which a large share of them comes to consider certain careers as prestigious, year after year.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars who study the top tier of colleges and universities generally prioritize the conditions of students' entry into these schools (Karabel 2005; Karen 1990; Stevens 2007) or students' experiences while in school (Mullen 2010; Stuber 2012), but they pay less attention to graduates' exit out of these institutions. Sociologists have not ignored the links between higher education and labor market outcomes; exemplary work shows the benefits of college education for job attainment and earnings (e.g., Hout 2012; Torche 2011). Katchadourian and Boli (1994), in a 10-year follow-up to their initial survey of careerist ideals among Stanford's class of 1981, confirm that members of the "educational elite" most often become members of the "occupational elite." But when researchers measure the effects of college on students' career trajectories after graduation (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), most look to person-level determinants of educational achievement (Brint 2013; Stevens 2008) and practice what Gaztambidé-Fernandez and Howard (2010) call "methodological individualism." Such an approach can reveal the number of students who take jobs in different parts of the labor force, but it cannot tell us how students collaboratively construct ideas about desirable jobs

or how universities serve as pipelines to a narrow band of professions.

Recent cultural approaches examining elite pathways out of college emphasize the role of employers by investigating their recruitment efforts at top schools. Rivera (2011, 2012) shows how finance, consulting, and corporate law firms use processes of “cultural matching” to hire students who possess very specific extracurricular and dispositional characteristics, and Ho (2009) and Rivera (2015) study the organizational juggernaut of on-campus structured recruitment. Other scholars examine college students’ internal assessments of whether they are good candidates for graduate school (Mullen, Goyette, and Soares 2003; Schlee 2000) or high-powered careers (Beasley 2011). Still others, such as Granfield (1992), analyze the cultural pressures that educational programs place on students to shift career goals while in school, leading even the most civic-minded first-year Harvard law school students to disproportionately pursue positions in corporate law firms.

We build on these studies by using cultural and organizational theories of higher education to better appreciate universities’ role in students’ status construction. Bourdieu’s earlier work, especially with Passeron, focuses on the “objective conditions [that] determine both [student] aspirations and the degree to which [those aspirations] can be satisfied” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:207), with a strong emphasis on family and primary schooling. However, Bourdieu’s later work moves beyond initial structures that form students’ habitus to the fields of power that students encounter later in life, such as on university campuses. The fields of power found in college are constructed through the organizational realities in place there—such as the specific firms with which a university engages—which rank-order various careers and inform students about the professions that are most appropriate for people like them (Bourdieu 1996). Using Bourdieu’s logic, we would expect that college students arrive on elite campuses with a well-honed habitus, cultivated in similar upper-end socioeconomic status backgrounds, and then encounter new—but largely homologous—opportunities and discourses that trigger them to “want” the jobs being offered. One might expect this influence to be especially powerful at elite universities, which take on paternalistic roles and offer most students their first opportunity to live apart from their families (Arum and Roksa 2011).

Scholars using a new institutional approach build partially on Bourdieu, but they also give a broader and distinctly American perspective to the process of organizational, and especially educational, influence on individual identities and aspirations (Meyer 1977). These studies suggest that college campuses should be viewed as generative systems of meaning and action that have the power to transform students’ orientations in the world (Kaufman and Feldman 2004)—not just reflect and reproduce students’ earlier dispositions. Whether transforming students’ overall sense of self and merit (Khan 2011); their academic, extracurricular, and social activities (Grigsby 2009; Stuber 2012); their political styles of engagement (Binder and Wood 2013; Dodson 2014); or their racial identities (Willie 2003), educational settings may substantially change students’ ideas, emotions, and practices as they move through college. Of course, individual students enter college with differential access to economic, cultural, and social capital—all of which play a role in students’ openness and sense of ease in realizing different career plans (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Streib 2013). But an institutional approach pushes us beyond these background characteristics to consider the power that campuses have to charter new types of identities and create new preferences in their student bodies (Cookson and Persell 1985).

Despite the subtle, yet important, shadings between these two approaches, scholars working in the vein of both Bourdieu and Meyer would argue that, overall, students enrolled in the uppermost tier of elite universities will likely hold the same cultural preferences for all manner of activities (Bourdieu 1996; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2014). This is because prestigious universities in the United States attract more or less the same types of students (Massey et al. 2002), have a high degree of isomorphism in organizational norms and practices (Karabel 2005), and play a similar role in the social reproduction of domestic and international elites (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Whether attributed mainly to the social class composition of the student bodies (Bourdieu) or to the cultural logics pervading elite institutions (Meyer’s and others’ new institutionalism), students who attend campuses within the same stratum will likely define the same set of jobs as prestigious. In other words, if finance and consulting are hot at Princeton, then they should also be sought after at Yale.

Yet, according to other scholars working at the intersection of cultural, educational, and organizational sociology, this may not be the whole story. Despite their broad institutional similarities, individual campuses also have distinctive “organizational sagas” (Clark 1972) and unique clusters of small group interactions and styles (Nunn 2014) that could lead students at different elite universities to favor careers in somewhat different proportions or to describe the same prestigious careers in slightly different ways. Rather than viewing all upper-tier universities as essentially the same, some scholars view individual campuses—even those that closely resemble each other—as unique ecologies nested in broader fields (e.g., Stevens 2015). Following critics who argue that both Bourdieu and new institutional scholars fail to fully appreciate the effects of local meanings on members’ ideas and practices (Hallett 2010; Hallett and Ventresca 2006), we expect students in specific local ecologies will divide jobs differently as worthy or unworthy, at least to some degree.

To sum up, scholars in each of these cultural approaches would argue against viewing students’ career preferences and outcomes to be merely the result of individual-level backgrounds and choices or structural opportunities. Bourdieu’s insights help us explore how members of an elite student body, drawn largely from the upper middle class, respond in similar ways to the fields of power they enter—fields that present them with a familiar, yet narrow, hierarchy of career options. The new institutional approach goes further to emphasize the power of the university to pave career pathways apart from family backgrounds, as the elite prestige of the campus bestows new identities on students from all backgrounds. Inhabited institutional theory and other cultural-organizational educational approaches help us understand how students on any given campus are situated in unique interactional settings, which leads to at least some variation in how students assess different career choices from site to site. In the sections that follow, we use these theories to reveal how and why so many elite students are funneled into first jobs in so few professional fields.

## METHODS AND DATA

### *Case Selection*

To study the dynamics leading to high-status career choices, we use a case study methodology

and compare and contrast two of the most distinguished universities in the United States: Harvard and Stanford. We selected these two schools to see how the processes of elite career construction operate at the top of elite higher education.

On the one hand, differences between the two universities might lead students to construct distinct systems of career prestige. The two schools adjoin different labor market hubs—Harvard is on the East Coast near the financial core of New York City, whereas Stanford is at the ideological and geological center of high-tech firms. These differences in sector proximity (Saxenian 1994) could shape how career aspirations and evaluations develop. In addition, the two universities differ in what might be called their institutional ethos, or organizational sagas (Clark 1972). Harvard is known for its position at the top of global rankings and has sent its alumni to the halls of political and economic power for centuries. Stanford, a young elite institution at 130 years old, couples a stellar international standing with a reputation for quirkiness and innovation. The two universities also differ by more quantifiable characteristics in their subenvironments, or the formal and informal organizational features of each campus (Kaufman and Feldman 2004). Some organizational differences that most directly influence career formation include the number of undergraduates majoring in humanities, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and social science disciplines on each campus; the types of policies encouraging student entrepreneurship; the assortment of preprofessional student organizations; and how career advising is delivered.

On the other hand, the two schools share many features, which could result in highly similar career prestige systems. Both universities are RU/VH universities—the Carnegie Classification indicating that they offer PhD programs and have very high research activity. They are the top two most selective universities in the United States, with class-of-2019 acceptance rates of 5.05 percent at Stanford (Nguyen-Phuc 2015) and 5.03 percent at Harvard (Thompson 2015). Both schools boast extensive alumni networks, require students to fulfill liberal arts requirements, are residential colleges, and more recently, have implemented generous financial aid for middle- and working-class students, leaving graduates with minimal loan debt upon graduation (leading, potentially, to a sense of financial security to explore a large range of job options). Neither

**Table 1.** Career Considerations by Demographics and Majors.

Variable	Consulting	Finance	Impact	Traditional professional	Tech	Unsure	<i>n</i>
Socioeconomic status <sup>a</sup>							
Working class	22.2%	0%	55.6%	0%	22.2%	0%	8
Middle class	28.1%	18.8%	21.9%	15.6%	12.5%	3.1%	21
Upper middle class and above	20.0%	26.7%	16.7%	0%	30.0%	6.7%	27
University							
Harvard	24.2%	3.3%	15.2%	9.1%	15.2%	6.1%	27
Stanford	23.7%	1.5%	31.6%	5.3%	26.3%	2.6%	29
Gender							
Female	22.2%	11.1%	25.0%	11.1%	30.6%	0%	29
Male	25.7%	28.6%	22.9%	2.9%	11.4%	8.6%	27
Race <sup>b</sup>							
Asian	33.3%	22.2%	14.8%	11.1%	18.5%	0%	18
Black or Hispanic	11.1%	22.2%	44.4%	11.1%	11.1%	0%	7
Mixed race	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	0%	50.0%	12.5%	6
White	22.2%	18.5%	29.6%	3.7%	18.5%	7.4%	25
Major, by divisions <sup>c</sup>							
Humanities	33.3%	0%	55.6%	0%	11.1%	0%	9
Social Science	27.0%	24.3%	18.9%	8.1%	16.2%	5.4%	37
STEM	19.4%	22.2%	16.7%	5.6%	33.3%	2.8%	36

<sup>a</sup>We asked students to self-rate their family's socioeconomic status using quintiles, but we collapsed these categories to just three on the table and in the text for ease of interpretation.

<sup>b</sup>Respondents self-identified their race. We had one student who identified as Black and six students who identified as Hispanic; we collapsed these two categories in the table to make percentages of historically underrepresented students more interpretable. In addition, six students identified as mixed race; most of these would have identified as black or Hispanic if we had not given them the option of choosing *mixed race*.

<sup>c</sup>Totals for majors do not add up to 56 because many of our respondents had double majors across divisional lines.

school offers a business degree to undergraduates. Convergence in these factors may overshadow the schools' differences for the processes of constructing career prestige.

### Data Collection

To study how students make sense of elite career paths, and whether these paths operate similarly or are specific to individual schools, we conducted semistructured interviews with current students and recent graduates at Harvard and Stanford. During 2013 and 2014, we conducted a total of 56 in-depth interviews, 29 at Stanford and 27 at Harvard. Of these, 39 interviewees were students, ranging from freshman to senior year, and 17 were graduates who had been out of school no more than three years. This spectrum gave us coverage of students at all points in the job search process, from initially learning about professions, to seeking junior summer internships and hiring, to

experiencing and moving beyond first jobs. Our sample features a near equal number of men and women, racial and ethnic diversity, and diversity in social class backgrounds and majors. The last column in Table 1 shows the breakdown of interviews by background characteristics and divisional majors.

Because we were interested in hearing about plans for the types of jobs that attract the largest number of graduates from elite campuses, we read journalistic accounts of job trajectories and studied recent social science research. These sources indicated a strong pull in the past few decades toward finance, consulting, and legal sectors. To recruit interviewees, we first contacted students who were involved in preprofessional organizations associated with these professions, such as Women in Business chapters on both campuses, the Veritas Financial Group at Harvard, Stanford Consulting, and the Harvard College Law Society. We asked officers to send recruitment flyers to

their e-mail listservs, and we interviewed as many students and alumni from these student organizations as consented. We also asked our interviewees and organization officers for referrals to students and recent graduates associated with these professional paths.

While conducting interviews related to finance, consulting, and law, many respondents told us that high tech had become a strong competitor as a high-status job destination on their campus and that law had receded in prestige. Our interviewees' impressions aligned with recent campus surveys of graduating seniors (e.g., those published by the *Harvard Crimson* each year) that list entry into first jobs. Following these leads, we spent the next phase of data collection interviewing students and recent alumni involved in organizations focused on technology and entrepreneurship.

Because we wanted to broaden our sample beyond students and graduates planning for these three sectors, we recruited interviewees from pre-professional organizations in a wide variety of areas—including medicine, education, research, academia, philanthropy, and international development—and we asked our interviewees for additional referrals.<sup>1</sup> Our efforts to expand the sample were successful; by the end of data collection, we had found respondents who expressed interest in several professional areas, which we categorize as follows:

1. Finance or consulting (31 interviewees: 18 at Harvard, 13 at Stanford [55 percent of our sample]).
2. High-tech fields, from social media to biotech to new energy (15 interviewees: 5 at Harvard, 10 at Stanford [27 percent of our sample]).
3. Other preprofessional directions, such as pre-med, pre-law, or traditional corporate management (five interviewees: three at Harvard, two at Stanford [9 percent of our sample]).
4. "Impact careers" (Aspen Institute 2013; e.g., education, public service, nonprofits, and philanthropy) and "creative-class" careers, such as academia and journalism (17 interviewees: 5 at Harvard, 12 at Stanford [30 percent of our sample]).
5. "Unsure" (three interviewees: two at Harvard, one at Stanford [5 percent of

our sample]); these students could not yet name a potential career path.

Our sample does not exactly mirror rates of entry into first jobs at either university, but it showcases a diversity of career plans. Table 1 shows the probability that a respondent with certain background characteristics will select a particular profession as a first job. We use probabilities to reflect the multiple sectors that many individual respondents said they were considering.<sup>2</sup>

Our semistructured interviews lasted from one to two hours and were conducted either in person or via Skype. We asked interviewees a series of questions regarding their background, their course of study while in school, their career ambitions now and in the long term, any shifts in these desires that they had experienced during college, and the careers they perceived to be high, medium, and low status. We asked them about parent and peer influences on their career ideas and how they first learned about various professions. Additionally, we included questions about our interviewees' experiences with career centers, job fairs, interview sessions, internships and summer jobs, and their perceptions of how faculty and administrators rank different occupations. To maximize transparency, we reminded students of the confidentiality of their responses, and we underscored our interest in their unvarnished opinions; all respondents showed a general willingness to speak frankly. Our semistructured interview instrument is available as an online appendix.

We digitally recorded all interviews and had them professionally transcribed, after which we read them several times to identify themes and categories. We then developed a codebook with nearly 150 distinct codes within a code hierarchy. We coded all transcripts using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software to identify trends and generate concrete empirical claims about our findings. Throughout data collection and coding, our method of analysis was grounded and inductive (Glaser and Strauss 1967), allowing for iterations of development. For example, once we learned that high tech had significantly eclipsed law in prestige and appeal, we adapted our interview protocols to capture this shift. A grounded and inductive method remains open to such salient discoveries as data accumulates.

In keeping with our institutional review board (IRB) agreement, we informed our interviewees

that we would protect their privacy by providing them with pseudonyms, masking some of their personal and academic characteristics, and allowing them to go off the record or skip any questions at any stage of the interview. This was particularly important because we also informed them that we would use the real name of their university in any written or presented work. Although our decision not to mask the names of our case study campuses is less common (but for precedents, see Clark 1972; Granfield 1992; Khan 2011; Mullen 2010), we believe it is justified. First, each institution has a highly distinctive profile, which in many ways is impossible to hide. For example, although MIT and University of California, Berkeley, share some key characteristics with Stanford (one substantively, one geographically), the way that Silicon Valley figures in the lives of Stanford students is not the same elsewhere.

Related, in a study of how universities' cultural and organizational features may shape students' assessments of different careers, we feared that blending or masking specific features would dilute the power of our analysis (see also Schrag 2014). In the present study, we sought IRB approval through our home institution—the University of California, San Diego—and with that approval, we sought approval from the IRBs at Harvard and Stanford—both of whose IRB officers informed us they did not require us to get approval for a study of this type. Buoyed by these IRB decisions, we believe that in a study that explores the power of dominant discourses and practices on campus to shape career plans, it is preferable to be clear about the dynamics of particular universities.

## FINDINGS

Cultural signaling about careers comes from many sources, from popular media depictions to the pressure parents place on their children to go into particular fields. However, we discovered that cultural discourses and practices on campus had considerable power to shape students' career desires. In this article, we focus on four campus-wide mechanisms that heavily influenced students' career aspirations.

The first mechanism concerns how little information undergraduates had about the labor market upon entry to college—this initial naiveté left them especially pliable to campus influences as early as freshman year. This was true of students

from families across all social class backgrounds. Second, such quick learning was fueled by the two universities' annual recruitment season—a frenzy that triggered a competitive drive among students with histories of excelling in structured competitions. The prizes—certain types of jobs at a short list of specific firms—quickly became recognized across the student body. Third, students who observed this process internalized, and then reinforced for others, expectations about career prestige, which elicited widespread insecurities. Students felt social pressure to do important things worthy of their elite degree, a burden that intensified as graduation drew nearer. Fourth, the career prestige system built around competition for high-prestige jobs led students to draw status boundaries that divided worthy jobs from “ordinary” careers. This boundary drawing triggered a further narrowing of acceptable career pathways. Together, these mechanisms led to a career funneling effect, whereby elite universities, rather than opening up unlimited job prospects to their students, actually restricted them. We analyze these primary mechanisms in turn.

### *Mechanism 1: Initial Naiveté Triggers Pliability*

Most of our interviewees entered college with high ambitions but little concrete information about the world of work—a finding that resonates with Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) description of U.S. high school students as “motivated but directionless.” This left students receptive to the influence of others on campus—peers in classes, student-run organizations, and opportunities offered through career planning offices and departments. We found similar processes at work for finance, consulting, and high-tech sectors.

*Discovering finance and consulting.* Students' lack of knowledge or early planning for specific careers was especially true of the finance and consulting sectors. Our respondents said they knew virtually nothing about these professions when they were admitted to college, but they became deeply familiar with them over time, as they watched well over half of their classmates apply for internships and full-time jobs in these sectors.

Aiden—a white, upper-middle-class student concentrating in a basic social science

discipline—was typical in this regard.<sup>3</sup> (At Harvard, majors are called concentrations.) Aiden reported that he had no knowledge of these two professions upon entering college:

Growing up, before coming to college, I didn't know there were consulting firms like McKinsey or Bain. I didn't know that there's big investment banks like J.P. Morgan. I didn't know that those really existed or what they did, and that wasn't a thing for me, like, something I aspired to be. . . . If you told me five years ago that [you were a managing director at Goldman Sachs], I would've said, "Cool, I don't know what that means." But if you said you were a CEO of a company, I would think that's probably cooler.

Having subsequently spent three years at Harvard, however, Aiden said he was now far more familiar with finance and consulting jobs than he was with corporate management jobs. Although he reported that "there's definitely a lot of things about both [professions] I don't really like"—particularly, lifestyle concerns, such as long hours and a sense that these jobs did not offer much personal meaning—he would likely apply for consulting jobs during senior year, "since you learn some very valuable skills, it would be a great experience, and there's a lot to gain from it."

Louis, a Latino, upper-middle-class senior at Harvard concentrating in computer science, told a similar story:

I thought careers in finance were like being a bank teller, being an accountant, or something. And all of a sudden people are talking about investment banking and sales and trading, and I have no idea what any of these things are! So I was kind of interested to see what this was all about.

Initially unaware, Louis became interested enough in finance to become an officer in one of Harvard's main investment clubs, "where all of a sudden you're like networking with [bankers] and having people who work there coming to talk to you. And having these relationships with these organizations is pretty cool."

Students at Stanford were no different in first learning about finance and consulting jobs through campus networks. Nirat, an East Asian American

student who grew up in an upper-middle-class family, found out about consulting internships through a friend his freshman year:

After I got [to Stanford], my friend was like, "All right." [We] went to the consulting info session, and we're like, "Yeah, we'll apply. Not many freshmen get it, but it's worth a shot." And I applied, I prepared for the interview, and I got [an internship]. And I got interested in consulting.

An engineering major, Nirat went on to say, "So it's not like I planned it, *per se*." Since then, he reported being interested in "tech, finance, consulting. Maybe the combination of finance and tech, maybe portfolio management software, high-frequency trading, those type of things could be interesting."

The experience of first learning about these sectors once students got to campus was near universal. Of our 56 interviewees, only two respondents—the children of parents who worked on Wall Street—had any basic knowledge of the world of finance as they entered college, and none had any prior knowledge of consulting. Furthermore, of the two students who did have some familiarity with finance through a parent, one of them—Katherine, a white junior from an upper-class family with a concentration in the humanities—said she learned most of what she knew about these careers only after getting heavily involved in her campus's Women in Business chapter. Upon joining the club, "I was totally wholeheartedly undecided" about a first job, she said, but after her experiences in the organization, she planned to go through recruitment the following year for a position at a consulting firm.

A junior at Stanford named Brianna, who grew up in an upper-middle-class family outside the United States, had a different reaction to being introduced to these professions. This student, who hoped to go into a creative-class career, said she was "shocked" when "I was in an English class and there were English majors who were going into finance and consulting!" Although Brianna was not pulled into pursuing these professions, her classmates' discussions gave her more information than she had ever expected to have about these jobs. Omar, a Latino senior from a working-class family, had an even darker view of the dominance of these careers at Stanford:



Before I came here, I didn't know what consulting even was, or like investment banking. Those are two things I only learned exist when I came here. . . . I didn't know what I wanted to do at all . . . and I figured I could figure things out once I got here. [But as for] other things, [the university] just doesn't really show you what career possibilities are open to you.

Brianna and Omar outright rejected these professions, but many of our interviewees said the sheer amount of information they obtained about these fields led them to at least consider finance or consulting as first jobs. This was true of students from all social-class backgrounds, all races and ethnicities, and men and women, although as Table 1 shows, working-class students and women were less likely to consider finance. Fiona—a white, middle-class student with a concentration in a social science discipline—summed it up when she said that as junior year rolled around,

I really had to decide. Like my *best friend* is doing it, and my *boyfriend* is doing it, and so many people in my social network are going through this process. So . . . I had to be like, "Actually, I'm not going to do it."

In recounting the primacy of finance and consulting on their campuses, these interviewees' accounts were typical of Harvard and Stanford students' familiarity with these sectors. Nevertheless, we discovered an additional well-known pathway for students on these campuses: pursuing high tech.

**The draw of high tech.** High tech, especially established social media firms, loomed large as a career aspiration among our interviewees, in part because these jobs seemed more exciting than Wall Street and consulting jobs. Although our respondents reported initially knowing more about tech than about finance and consulting (they had, after all, grown up with mobile devices and Facebook), most students' knowledge of high tech came from a user's standpoint, and they did not know what these jobs actually entailed or whether and how they could land such jobs. Widespread campus discourses helped create excitement for seeking employment in this sector.

This was especially true at Stanford, whose reputation for launching some of the most

successful tech businesses in the world inspired even students who had not come to Stanford planning to major in an engineering-related field to pursue that path. Ellie, a mixed-race, upper-class senior majoring in a basic social science discipline, described how she became interested in tech during her second year in college:

Just being in the dorm with . . . I remember, like, being in the dorm dining hall and hearing upperclassmen talking about their computer science projects. There was this vocabulary that I didn't understand. I was like, "I think they're speaking English, but I literally am getting no meaning from what they're saying." And . . . I was like, "Oh, I want to learn this, I want to understand."

As Ellie approached her senior year with her social science major in hand, she decided to pursue a coterminal master's degree in a computer science field so she could get a job in educational technology.

Another Stanford student, Beau, suggested that his school's proximity to Silicon Valley created widespread desire for jobs in social media firms, because "people will be working at Google down the street, or Facebook down the street—and there's just so much conversation [on campus] about what that's like." This student, an engineering major from a white, upper-class family, said that although "tech primarily draws from CS [computer science] and engineering, it extends beyond that by the nature of the fact that it's so close to here." Beau's classmate Amanda shared more disparaging thoughts on the subject. A white social science major who grew up in a working-class family, Amanda criticized her classmates for instrumentally positioning themselves for the tech labor market:

There's this ridiculous major called Science, Technology, and Society, where you can take very few tech classes and come out with a tech degree . . . and everyone does it because it lets them be a techie without being a techie! . . . [They major in it] so they can apply for jobs at Facebook and Google.

According to Beau and Amanda, being on a campus where high tech is discussed endlessly leads to

an expanded number of Stanford students wanting jobs in that sector.

Although 3,000 miles away from Silicon Valley, Harvard students were not immune to the lure of high tech, and just as at Stanford, the drive for these jobs was not limited to those with technical backgrounds. Noah, an Asian American senior from a middle-class family with a concentration in the life sciences, told us that Harvard students talked about wanting jobs at social media companies, not only in the technical areas of “software development roles or programming roles” but also on the nontech business side as “data scientists, [and in] corporate development and business strategy.” Whatever the position being sought, the rising status of high tech at Harvard was apparent in our interviews. According to Foster, a white, upper-middle-class junior with a concentration in an engineering field, “Google, Facebook, McKinsey, and Boston Consulting Group” competed for the greatest status on his campus. Kenny, an Asian American junior whose immigrant parents were now part of the U.S. upper class, agreed: “From what I see, like, definitely Google and Facebook have as much of a presence as Bain and Goldman.” Repeating these perspectives, but from a more negative slant, Imogene, an Asian American engineering student from a lower-class background said, “If you want respect by name on Harvard’s campus, you go to Facebook, Google, and Microsoft.”

Interviewees on both campuses provided compelling accounts that finance, consulting, and high-tech careers held central positions on their campuses. Although many in our sample chose not to go into one of these sectors (reflecting survey trends at their schools), not a single person we talked with remained unaware of these professions while in college. Furthermore, of the respondents who were not going into one of these fields, the majority were still influenced to at least entertain them at some point—something that cannot be said for other paths.

### ***Mechanism 2: Recruitment Frenzy Triggers Competitiveness***

In the previous section, respondents referred to a few types of organizational structures that had immersed them in conversations about finance, consulting, or high tech on their campuses, such as participation in a Women in Business chapter

at Harvard or choosing a major at Stanford designed to prepare “nontechies” for careers in high tech. But as we discovered, no campus structure—student organizations or course work—had the power that on-campus recruitment did to direct students toward this narrow range of fields. Kevin, a white, upper-middle-class Harvard alumnus, who was flown out “to New York like every other day” for banking job interviews, called it a “wild experience”; other students shook their heads in dismay as a small number of well-heeled firms successfully recruited their classmates.

Rivera (2015:280) found that investment banks and consulting firms spend “hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars per year” to recruit elite college students through receptions, presentations, and other posh events on or near campus, including tens of thousands of dollars that flow directly to career services centers to cover on-campus résumé drops and space for initial interviews, among other services. High-tech firms are newer to the game of formalized recruitment, but they have similar processes. At technology-focused campuses like Stanford, these firms forge closer relationships with engineering departments than with career centers. We will look at students’ experiences with each type of recruitment.<sup>4</sup>

***Finance and consulting: Similarities at Harvard and Stanford.*** Whether or not they had personally gone through the process, many of our interviewees were able to describe recruitment for finance and consulting jobs in vivid detail. According to Bastian, a white, upper-middle-class Harvard senior,

If you look at the Harvard Office of Career Services . . . they have an entire, I won’t call it “department,” but an entire section devoted to consulting. And then an entire section devoted to finance. And then they have not-for-profit as a general clump [laughs], and then they have “other” [laughs harder]. And that’s literally how they divide themselves!

Interviewees at Stanford made similar comments about on-campus recruitment. Beau pointed not just to the general divisions within the Stanford Career Development Center but also to the “gold, silver, and platinum” payment system the career center charged its well-resourced corporate

partners, allowing certain firms greater access to students than others. Billy, a mixed-race/Latino, middle-class student at Stanford majoring in social science, said simply that these firms used a “very sophisticated recruiting engine” run by the center.

At both universities, recruitment begins at the start of the school year. According to David, a white Stanford alumnus from an upper-class family,

Because Stanford starts so late . . . recruiting starts right when you arrive. The first day of classes, there was an information session for Bain. . . . Then there’s like a week or two of info sessions, and at the end of those two weeks, by the end of that time, for the Big Three at least—for Bain, BCG, and McKinsey—the applications are due. And then within a week you’re told whether you have an interview or not.

The flurry of recruitment season led many interviewees to describe simply falling into the finance and consulting track. Nathan, a Latino alumnus of Harvard who grew up in a middle-class family, said,

There was like this stampede to start applying, and it wasn’t [my] conscious decision to pursue banking. It was more, I guess, I mean, I hate to use the term “fear of missing out.” I didn’t know what I was missing by not applying, so I ended up doing my research and tossing my hat in, and secured an internship my sophomore year. There was less of a conscious effort to move from a public service government-oriented career to finance.

Similarly, a Harvard student named Blair reported that he “never really saw myself doing finance,” but his plans changed senior year when the recruitment season began. According to this upper-class, white student, who described himself as always having been “much more interested in creative thinking” than in a banking job,

You get really excited with all the spirit of recruiting when they come to campus. I’m a very competitive person. So when everybody’s talking about going to those; when they say, “Do you want to go to those recruiting events?” And when all of your smartest friends start applying for these

jobs, you sort of wonder if maybe *you* could do those jobs. So it’s sort of like something that just naturally takes its course and you get curious.

To sum up the story we heard many times, the vast presence of on-campus, structured recruitment every fall for finance and consulting gets students’ attention, plays on their competitiveness, and leads them to apply for jobs that, only a year or two earlier, they had never heard of.

### *Recruitment for high tech: Especially at Stanford.*

As seen in the earlier excerpts, both universities have an intensive recruitment process for finance and consulting, if somewhat more developed at Harvard. Conversely, both campuses had tech recruitment, but it was more elaborate at Stanford. We found that social media firms, in particular, were able to snap up students, even students who had not considered such careers before they arrived at college.

Sara, an upper-class, Asian American immigrant’s daughter who had just accepted an offer at a major social media company, described the high-tech recruitment process at Stanford:

The way that recruiting works for computer science is absolutely crazy. Basically, firms sign up with the group called the Computer Forum. They’re run by the CS [computer science] department, and [the firms] pay a lot of money in order to be able to attend the career fair and then do an info session. And so, fall quarter there are probably like 10 info sessions a week. . . . So you just go into all those info sessions and it’s kind of like a round of recruiting full-time. It’s a lot of pressure to be like, “I gotta just apply for everything now so I don’t miss out,” right?

As Sara’s description reveals, recruitment for tech jobs at Stanford—filled with numerous information sessions, tight time pressure, and a fear of missing out—closely resembles recruitment for finance and consulting, although it occurs in the computer science department rather than the office of career services. The annual fees paid by some industry partners at Stanford reach into the tens of thousands of dollars, much like recruitment for finance and consulting on both campuses.

Linda, a white, upper-middle-class alumna of Harvard, who had just received a master's degree at Stanford at the time of our interview, was able to compare recruitment for tech jobs on both campuses. Like Sara, she pointed to the intensity of recruiting for such jobs at Stanford:

It's just that [Stanford students] have been exposed to completely different things in terms of the whole ecosystem. Not necessarily in terms of what they learn in the classroom, but just in terms of how many people are recruiting them for technical jobs. . . . I don't think so many people do that at Harvard. It's just culturally different. At Harvard there's more of a finance recruiting machine.

Although underestimating the number of students who do apply for finance positions at Stanford, and the number of students at Harvard who express interest in working at Google or Facebook, Linda's account pointed to the intensity of recruitment for tech jobs at Stanford.

Other students spoke more negatively than Sara and Linda about the prevalence of tech recruitment in the Stanford "ecosystem." Lorenzo, a Latino Stanford alumnus from a working-class background, said that the university did too little for students in "fuzzy" majors while bombarding students with opportunities in tech fields. "The career fair," he said, "is really not great. Basically, tech companies are disproportionately represented in the career fairs."

These examples suggest that a small group of elite firms are well positioned to vie for college students on these campuses. Recruitment for high tech is not yet as developed at Harvard as it is at Stanford—an important local variant, leading to fewer first jobs in tech for Harvard graduates than for Stanford graduates. Harvard is strengthening its tech position, though, through the growth of computer science course offerings and its newly generous system (like Stanford's) of funding students who want to work on their own companies through "innovation labs, . . . workshops almost like 'Startup 101,' . . . and a venture incubation program" (Kenny, Harvard). Harvard's CS50: Introduction to Computer Science class is now the most popular class on campus (Mendez 2014). It may just be a matter of time before the pent-up desire for high-tech jobs at Harvard is matched with opportunities through on-campus recruitment.

### *Mechanism 3: Internalizing Career Prestige Triggers Insecurities*

A purely structuralist account of recruitment would emphasize how Harvard and Stanford—partnering closely with elite firms—organizationally push nearly half of their students into a narrow band of first jobs. Such an analysis is accurate to an extent; it is difficult to imagine that so many students would gravitate toward so few professions were it not for recruitment. Yet such an account is incomplete without using a cultural lens to explore how students actively make sense of recruitment processes on campus. The disproportionate number of students who take jobs in these sectors do not merely move from their elite positions in college to elite positions in the labor market just because the jobs are there. Rather, students must come to attribute prestige to these jobs once their university provides access to them. As we will describe, our interviewees learned to value these positions because they satisfied two major concerns. First, these jobs met expectations for greatness that they believed their university placed on them, including being able to signal their worth to their peers. The second, seemingly more prosaic, concern—yet one that created almost existential angst for some—was to shore up uncertainty. Of course, finding a first job that offered geographic desirability, came with great perks, and paid a high salary also figured into students' considerations. But these characteristics were strongly associated with meeting institutional expectations and finding a job with security.

*The importance of prestige.* Bastian, the student who earlier described his career center's heavy tilt toward finance and consulting, talked about the pressure to live up to the reputation of his university. As the first member of his upper-middle-class family to attend an elite college, he said he did not have strong guidance from home for what he might do with his Harvard degree. He felt anxious at the start of his senior year, in large part because he had been "very *not* involved" in preprofessional activities during his previous three years, and he had concentrated in two liberal arts disciplines without clear vocational application. To manage his apprehension, he decided to go through recruitment for a consulting job during his senior year. He explained,

I think a part of it actually has to do with going through an elite institution, because

I think there are certain expectations, or feeling an obligation, that other people . . . kind of place on you, right? . . . And you hear those expectations of, "You should be doing these big quote-unquote *important things*." And oh, by the way, the way to do those *big important things* is by making a lot of money and getting a job that is recognized as prestigious, as having that sort of social validation of something that is worthy of the education that is being invested in you.

When asked to identify the jobs that others at his university recognized as "important," "prestigious," and "socially validat[ed]," Bastian said,

I guess a good job means consulting or finance because, well, look, that's what the Office of Career Services has. When I talk to my peers, that's what my peers are talking about. For someone like me who had very limited professional experience, who didn't really have any baseline for what one could do, it was like, "Hey, I just see that these are the things that people from Harvard go do."

Nearing graduation from one of the top universities in the world, Bastian was unsure how to fulfill his promise as a graduate of such an institution. Like so many of his classmates, he reached for a position that came prevalidated: consulting.

In a similar vein, Olivia, a middle-class, Asian American engineering student at Stanford, described how she and her classmates learned to use the competitive recruitment system as a way to evaluate one another's success:

As soon as you enter the more senior courses, [consulting] is what everyone is talking about. And it sort of becomes this affirmation for how you rank with respect to your peers. . . . It sucks a lot of people in.

In the context of the highly competitive social bubbles they found themselves in, both Bastian and Olivia expressed doubt about whether they measured up to their peers, and they grabbed the clearest signals they could find—in their cases, consulting. Kris, an upper-class senior, clarified that the system works the same way for finance: "If you can get an investment banking job, . . . like that's an easy way to determine whether or

not you've had success in the job search process." Pressed to say why that was, he explained quite simply, "There's a certain glamour that's placed on investment banking and management consulting at Harvard." Many of our interviewees, including Bastian, were critical of these jobs' singular ability to signal worth, but all acknowledged that this means of assessment was a reality.

**Fear of the future.** In addition to finding a sense of importance, affirmation, and glamour in competitive first jobs, our interviewees said that prestigious jobs also promise safety and security. This sense of security may seem at odds with the current cultural reverence for entrepreneurship (and also the very real possibility of being "liquidated" from a job on Wall Street; Ho 2009), but many of our interviewees said that the safety and security of established, heavily recruited-for jobs was an important factor in their decision making.

Rahim, an international student whose family lives in East Asia and who identified as working class, spoke of the conservative turn he took as he neared graduation:

Everyone has this "change-the-world" mentality when they come to Stanford. . . . You come in wanting to change the world and then you leave wanting to work at McKinsey. So somewhere along the way what happens? You know? Something happens. You get scared. You worry about security. You realize you have a life that you have to build. You get more selfish.

Kevin, the white, upper-class Harvard alumnus who earlier described his recruitment season as a "wild experience," gave a remarkably similar account of how concerns about future job security pushed him and other students to define finance and consulting as having high value:

The first week of freshman year, I don't think anyone ever says, "I want to work at McKinsey." But like it starts to be junior year, and you start to worry about what you're going to do after college. Because really, you don't have any skills! Like, maybe you studied English . . . I studied economics . . . but it just starts to scare people when you're like, "I need someone who's going to train me how to do, like, *real things*." And that's exactly what these

investment banks and these consulting firms are offering. They're like, "We know you're smart. But we also know that you didn't study finance. So come here, and we'll teach you." And that's really safe and appealing to a lot of people.

Nancine, a white, working-class classmate of Kevin's at Harvard who was about to enter her senior year, painted the same picture. Worried about what to do after graduation, she said,

One of the biggest draws is the financial security that it brings. And I have to admit, as a first-generation college student, the temptation is there to start out at a consulting firm, or a financial firm, and know that there's a great deal of security in that.

Although Nancine did not think she would enter recruitment, she could empathize with other first-generation students who did. That two low-income students and an upper-class alumnus—differentiated by university, gender, race, national origins, and social class background—would talk so similarly about the security of these jobs is indicative of a prevalent discourse about the safety of finance and consulting careers on elite campuses that cuts across demographic lines.

Although one might expect to hear less talk about job security among students seeking high-tech jobs—especially at Stanford, where there is a strong perception that students want to start their own companies—we found this was not universally the case. Thad, a mixed-race, upper-middle-class senior with a major in engineering and a minor in a humanities field, was one of several interviewees who readily dispelled that myth. According to Thad,

There's just, especially in tech, there's a lot of desire for stability. If you're in tech, you want to get paid a lot, and there's a desire to have that paycheck come in for longer. Working for a startup can just be so unpredictable, and you can be laid off in a month or two months. And I think job stability is—well, I know our generation is supposed to *not* care about that, and not worry as much as any generation previously. But I still think it . . . is a large concern to have a job that we know we can have for a few years at least.

Thad said that although a lot of people come to "Stanford starry-eyed—hav[ing] heard of how HP was started, and how Facebook was started, and that's what they're going to be [doing]—in a few years, with internships in the summer and through their friends, they realize that like startup life is indeed kind of crazy and kind of hectic." Just as with finance and consulting, established tech firms that were able to promise greater security were a bigger draw to students.

Clear signaling of high status and security were central concerns for students choosing their first jobs, but they used a different definition to describe their long-term goals. When we asked students what they would like to be doing 5 or 10 years out, they said they leaned toward "impact" careers in health care, public service, nonprofits, and education as well as careers that foster independent lifestyles, such as journalism, writing, art, or doing their own startup. Our data dovetail with findings from the *Harvard Crimson* survey of graduating seniors (Robbins 2014). In that survey, students were asked which field they were going into now and which field they planned to be in 10 years from now. The top three "now" fields were finance (16.76 percent), consulting (14.42 percent), and tech/engineering (14.81 percent); the top three "10-years-from-now" fields were health (15.92 percent), academia/research (10.61 percent), and entrepreneurship (10.07 percent). Finance and consulting, combined, constituted just 6.39 percent of jobs students said they wanted in 10 years. In our sample, the belief they could later get the career they really wanted undergirded interviewees' justifications for taking jobs they felt compelled toward now—jobs that shored up prestige and kept fears of the inscrutable job market at bay. As Harvard's Foster said, "More often than not . . . students say, 'I'm going to go work for McKinsey for two or three years so that I have more time to figure out what I'm ultimately going to be doing.'" Students' fears of the future led them to first jobs that pointed toward clearer pathways—pathways that were intentionally laid out by their universities and a short list of companies with the resources to do so.

#### *Mechanism 4: Status Boundaries Trigger Narrowing*

Harvard and Stanford provide easy shortcuts to ambitious students. They offer structured

recruitment for a handful of professions, leading students to quickly learn about the existence of these sectors. The intensive competition of this recruitment creates a pervasive career prestige system on campus that elevates the status of these types of jobs.

The flip side of this career prestige system is that students use it to measure the worth of all other jobs they might have considered right out of college. By asking our interviewees to distinguish between high-status and “ordinary” jobs—in much the same way that Lamont (2009) pressed professors to define “excellence” by inquiring about research projects that lacked quality or distinction—we found that our interviewees used the characteristics of high-visibility jobs to assess all other jobs, even jobs in fields they felt passionate about. We discovered that these assessments did not simply mean avoiding distasteful jobs, as our interviewees regularly reminded us that the jobs considered most elite often carry unsavory undersides—long hours, incessant Excel and PowerPoint work, exploitation, and feeling like a meaningless cog in the machine on Wall Street (see also Roose 2014). Rather, low-status jobs were those that students described as “traditional” or that did not necessarily require an elite education or, more to the point, that did not recruit on campuses such as their own. The boundary dividing high-status jobs from ordinary ones was “incubated” on these two elite campuses (Stevens et al. 2008); students were mostly unaware of the line separating them before they got to college.

Colin, a white, upper-class alumnus of Harvard who had recently begun graduate school in a social science field, said,

All right, I’m self-aware enough to know I sound like an asshole, but jobs that people did not look highly on was, like, my one friend who went and just got like a normal CPA [certified public accountant].

Colin also described “just being” a teacher or a social worker, or taking a job in a nondescript business for a no-name company, as being low status. Edward, a Harvard student from a working-class Latino family, put a similar spin on jobs considered beneath the level of his university, saying, “It seems like I’m not reaching my, sort of, capacity if I just go to, like, a more traditional job.”

Izzy, an upper-class, white woman who had just graduated from Stanford, reported what it

felt like to be on the receiving end of the prestige system that Colin and Edward invoked and in which she, too, reluctantly participated. As a student who majored in a nontech discipline and who was going into a nontech field, she felt overshadowed by her classmates:

I don’t bring anything to the table. I’m unqualified, I didn’t do CS, like I don’t have a skill like CS, or I’m not an engineer. Like, I’m useless.

Continuing this train of thought, Izzy described how the career status system at her university caused her to abandon earlier plans for what she would do after college. “I care deeply about education and education equality,” she said, “but I didn’t go into a [teacher] credentialing program [after graduation] because I feel that pressure as, like, ‘You can’t just be a teacher after graduating from Stanford.’” Despite not wanting a tech career, the co-construction of prestige on her campus created insecurities that led her to recraft her options. Her plan now is to get a master’s degree so she can work in a foundation or manage a charter network.

Another characteristic of ordinary jobs was, quite simply, that they did not recruit on elite campuses. Franklin, a white, upper-class rising senior who had not yet decided which career path he would follow, said, “To be honest, Harvard is inundated with so many top-tier consulting firms and stuff, I’m not even sure I’d know what a mediocre firm is.” He added that a “mediocre” firm

would probably be the ones that don’t come to Harvard. Like, just like your standard office job. Maybe even some boutique consulting firms I would say would be considered . . . a more mediocre position. To be honest, any firm that recruits at a state school I tend to be more skeptical of.

According to Franklin’s candid assessment, prestigious firms were firms that competed in fall recruitment season; ordinary firms were those that did not. Before coming to college and observing his senior classmates, Franklin did not know about this difference.

In summary, students constructed some jobs as prestigious and others as beneath the level of their interest through a combination of four mechanisms. Students entered college with little career

knowledge but quickly picked up signals across campus about a few key industries and companies. This was amplified by the structured recruitment frenzy each fall term, during which younger students watched their older peers compete for coveted positions. Students' observations of others obtaining prestigious positions triggered their own insecurities about doing highly valued things, especially as graduation neared. Eventually, many students went through the structured recruitment process for these select industries, but even if they did not, all students learned the status boundaries between what is elite, what is acceptable, and what is simply too "ordinary"—effectively completing the process of career funneling that limits the options of many students from elite schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

The mechanisms we outlined here have several major implications. First, we found that student career aspirations are not simply the result of individual preferences but are heavily influenced by organizations and the actors inhabiting them. Second, this construction process takes place in large part *after* admission to college, which means universities are the organizations exerting key influence on specific job trajectories. Third, this is not simply a structural story of the effects of organizational "pushing" or job market "pulling." Rather, we argue that much like Willis's (1977) analysis of how young working-class men come to construct the meaning of factory work as desirable jobs, students in elite universities must actively construct the meaning of certain jobs as "prestigious" before they can pursue them in such large numbers. The essential insight in Willis's (1977:103–104) classic ethnographic study of low-status jobs in blue-collar towns, that "labouring—itsself meaningless—must therefore reflect aspects of the culture around [it], if it is to be valorised," pertains equally to locally constructed understandings of high-status jobs in elite universities. This cultural construction primarily manifests in the peer prestige system that develops on campuses, with its ranking of careers and companies as well as its drawing of the collectively understood lines that delineate ordinary from high-status jobs.

In short, college campuses are central in career formation, at least for initial forays into the labor market. We do not deny the influence of class

background on students' career aspirations. However, we think it is imperative to recognize that campus environments, or university fields of power, have a large, independent role in the production and reproduction of social inequality. We have shown that students on the same campus narrow their aspirations to a select few careers, even though these students come from diverse backgrounds. Ignoring or downplaying universities' influential capacity limits our ability to explain social inequality.

In particular, we show how institution-level similarities facilitate student chartering to similar-status-level career paths across our two campuses and across class lines. These institution-level similarities arise because Harvard and Stanford are situated in the same dominant stratum in the broader fields of occupations and higher education and share strong isomorphic tendencies. The insights of inhabited institutionalism and other cultural-organizational approaches to higher education underscore the centrality of these powerful institution-level forces, but they also point to the power of local contexts to alter meanings of prestigious pathways, even if only subtly. Harvard students still slightly favor finance and consulting careers over tech; the reverse is true at Stanford. But even this difference may erode in coming years, as the arms race toward tech continues to mount.

The jobs that particular cohorts view as the most valuable change over time—for instance, elite students no longer aspire to careers in law in as great numbers, and interest in finance has decreased postrecession. Yet the mechanisms we describe suggest that the few professions that students construct as the most prestigious are generally the same across campuses that share parallel positions in the higher education field, even if they vary somewhat from one site to the next.

We chose to focus our analysis on elites. This design limits our ability to say much about how colleges shape career paths at other types of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, this narrower focus on elites is important, because it shows how culture and organization combine to create definitions of worthy careers at one of the key sources of occupational stratification—elite campuses, where elite educations are leveraged into elite occupations.

In addition to providing an understanding of how students construct shared meanings of career prestige at elite universities, we also outline an



important component of how the reproduction of class inequality is sustained at the highest levels. Occupations function as the leading construct undergirding class divisions in the United States today (Weeden and Grusky 2005). Finance, consulting, and high-tech careers are well represented among the highest compensated individuals in society, including in the top 1 percent. The fact that a huge number of elite college undergraduates end up in these few powerful and highly compensated jobs reproduces patterns of power and privilege. Leaders of top firms in these fields often preferentially recruit alumni from their own alma maters because they value the signaling cachet—to clients and competitors—that comes from employing alumni associated with top campus brands. Placing their graduates with top corporate firms also benefits campuses—from both a marketing and a philanthropic position. Both sides benefit from a circular process of mutual brand status baptism. Companies that want to break into this cycle have to overcome the existing inertia.

The issue goes beyond industries and incomes. We find it problematic that a very small group of extremely well-resourced companies (e.g., Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Bain, McKinsey, Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn) can gain such outsized influence on the cognitive landscape of elite college students, precisely at the point when students are just shaping their career aspirations. This is particularly true at universities like Harvard and Stanford, which many students dream of attending their entire lives. Currently, Harvard and Stanford facilitate structures and environments that encourage students to enter sectors that have all-too-recently demonstrated their lack of concern for other people and for society itself. Moreover, emphasis on these careers systematically puts smaller companies and startups at a disadvantage on elite campuses, even within the same sectors. This crowding out may be stunting the innovation and growth of these fields by funneling some of the nation's top students elsewhere. The current system also pulls students away from other professions that may provide greater fulfillment—public service, arts, education, and traditional corporate management, to name a few.

There may be some change on the horizon. The director of the Career Development Center at Stanford, Farouk Dey, in a recent interview with a reporter from the *Stanford Daily* (Svoboda 2014), said that he recognizes the problems

created by structured recruitment for finance, consulting, and high tech:

Students tend to go into these sectors because of their interests . . . but also sometimes because those are the opportunities that come their way. We recognize at the career center that there are underrepresented fields in the career centers in terms of job postings and representation. . . . We are currently redesigning our program in order to meet these demands. Within a couple of years you should see different numbers.

Only time will tell if Dey's optimism will pan out. If it does not, elite private universities, such as Harvard and Stanford—which have been complicit, if not outright active, in funneling inordinate numbers of students to a narrow band of high-wealth jobs—will continue to curtail their own students' creativity, leech talent away from other sectors, and contribute to economic and social inequality.

## RESEARCH ETHICS

Our research protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of California, San Diego, Institutional Review Board. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

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## NOTES

1. Student self-selection into organizations does not create a substantive methodological bias in this case, as the vast majority of students at elite universities belong to organizations. Because these campuses do not offer business majors for undergraduates, students with business interests must use campus organizations to express and develop those interests.
2. For example, a respondent who is considering both tech and consulting would count for each career. Similarly, many respondents had double majors or coterminal master's degrees (at Stanford). Students

with majors in two separate areas (e.g., humanities as well as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) count for both percentages. Students with two majors/degrees in the same area are not double-counted for that area.

3. Aiden, like all other names of interviewees, is a pseudonym.
4. Unfortunately, a close historical account of how firms' recruitment activities evolved at Harvard and Stanford is beyond the scope of this article.

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The online appendix is available at [soe.sagepub.com/supplemental](http://soe.sagepub.com/supplemental).

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