

The Adulting Project

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Introduction

The purpose of *The Adulthood Project* was to gain new knowledge about the current career landscape and the common fears and anxieties of Gen Z college students as they seek employment. This project also explored students' perceptions of the current job landscape, their opinions on the purpose of a college education, and their preparedness for the adult responsibilities that await them upon graduation.

Many students in the Taylor-Crocker's Honors Program at North Carolina Wesleyan College write scholarly essays for their senior Honors Project. I did not wish to take the same approach because I did not want to spend an entire year writing a lengthy research essay. Not only did I know I would soon burn out on the project if I took the traditional research essay approach, but I also know that very few people would ever read my essay. Therefore, I chose to film a documentary for my Honors Thesis because the medium would allow me creative freedom, and I knew I could reach a larger audience.

The medium of documentary film is much different than the medium of a written research essay, and both mediums have their own affordances and limitations. As I mentioned, the audience of a research essay is different than the audience of film. If I wrote a research essay, I believe my audience would be limited to my project directors, my reader, Dr. Bill, Dr. Sanborn, myself, and maybe a limited number of other Honors students who found interest in my research topic. With my documentary, however, I have the potential to reach a wider audience. Anyone who attends my Honors presentation will see the entirety of my documentary. I also feel that future Honor students may be compelled to view my documentary because the medium stands out from the typical research essay.

Although I chose the medium of documentary for my Honors Thesis, the Honors Program required me to have a research component to my project. I did not struggle with incorporating a research component into my documentary because documentaries aim to answer research questions. Ultimately, documentaries are a method of conducting research. However, I still conducted research outside of my documentary. I had to research background information on my research topic, and most of this background information came from print sources. Therefore, I witnessed the differences between conducting and expressing research in both a print and video medium, and I also had to learn how to bridge the gap between the two mediums.

Guiding Research Questions

1. How do Gen Z job seekers prepare for leaving college?
2. What are some shared fears and anxieties of Gen Z college students as they prepare for the workforce?
3. Thus far, what have been the experiences of Gen Z North Carolina Wesleyan College students and graduates as they begin to enter the workforce?
4. What is North Carolina Wesleyan College doing to help prepare Gen Z graduates for the workforce?

The Concept of Adulting

“Adulting.” The term is modern, popular, and catchy, but what does it mean? First introduced on Twitter between 2008 and 2009, *Merriam-Webster* notes that “to adult is to behave like an adult, specifically to do the [tasks]- often mundane- that an adult is expected to do” (“Adulting”). Although the term includes activities such as living independently and maintaining a job, it also describes tasks such as doing laundry, paying bills, making appointments, registering a car, doing yardwork, and shopping for groceries (“Adulting”).

Standard usage of the term “adulting” tends to refer to mundane tasks, but this project examines adulting from a different angle. For my research purposes, I use the term “adulting” to refer specifically to career preparation and employment-related topics as they apply to Gen Z because these are major life events that occur as individuals enter adulthood.

As was noted, individuals traditionally use the term “adulting” in a humorous way to describe their engagement in boring and mundane adult tasks and acknowledge, make fun of, or come to grips with their transition into adulthood. Perhaps individuals use this word in a comical way to recognize and mock the absurdity of the core actions that make one an adult. Author and linguist Ben Zimmer writes that the term “is very much attached to people coming of age, where they’re thrust into having to take [life] more seriously” and tends to be used by individuals “who find themselves doing adult [responsibilities] for the first time and feeling like an adult” (qtd. in Steinmetz). Zimmer’s explanation of “adulting” best applies to my intended use of the term in *The Adulting Project* as it relates to the young adults of Gen Z as they enter the workforce. Gen Z refers to those born between 1995 and 2012, and they range in age from 8 to 25 years of age. The older individuals in this generation are now graduating college and/or beginning to enter the workforce. For most of them, this is one of their first major milestones of preparing for adult responsibilities and life apart from their parents. Although some of these graduates may have had jobs while in school, my research focuses on how these individuals prepare for jobs in their desired career field. These positions are different from jobs Gen Z students held while in school because these positions are full-time and typically relate more directly to graduates’ career goals.

Social psychologist and generational scholar Jean Twenge, author of *IGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, states that

over the past decades, researchers have focused mainly on Millennials, and they have spent limited time researching Gen Z (also referred to as iGen'ers). iGen'ers currently make up the majority of traditional-age college graduates, and they will soon begin to dominate the pool of entry-level talent in the workforce (Twenge 180). Therefore, it is important to start understanding Gen Z's perspective on career-related topics, and no generation knows Gen Z better than they know themselves. It is limiting to rely only on research from older generations because these generations have their own biases toward Gen Z, so having Gen Z's perspectives on the topics helps give scholars a more accurate representation of the generation.

As I began to brainstorm potential research topics for my Honor's Thesis, I considered issues of personal importance. I was a senior in college, and I was lost when it came to knowing what was in store for me after graduation. I knew I needed a job, and I wanted a job I would enjoy, but what job would I have and how would I find it? I decided to use my Honors Thesis as a tool to help me combine scholarly research with creative endeavors. While personally reflecting on my own experiences, I decided to film a documentary that explored the experiences of my friends and classmates.

I knew that I was not the only college student anxious about joining the work force and scared about finding employment because I had heard similar commentary from many of my friends and classmates. I was scared of the future, and I knew many others shared my fears. As a result, I drafted *The Adulthood Project* as a way to further explore this common concern of students on North Carolina Wesleyan College's campus. Twenge, who describes Gen Z as iGen, writes "iGen'ner's . . . know they need to succeed to make it in an increasingly competitive world" (195) but they are "not sure they are going to succeed." Twenge found that Gen Z individuals have a strong work ethic but are uncertain about their prospects and ability to get a

job in their desired field. She notes that, “iGen'ers are running scared – they want security in an insecure world” (195). I suspect that many of us share some of the same fears when it comes to entering the workforce, and the aim of *The Adulthood Project* is to explore Gen Z’s anxieties and how the generation is engaging with the process of entering the workforce.

There seems to be conflicting research on the topic of Gen Z’s job priorities such as taking lower paying creative jobs versus jobs that provide security rather than happiness. Jed Kolko, the chief economist at *Indeed.com*, writes that Gen Z individuals are “increasingly pursuing creative passions and social service work over higher-paying, possibly lower-risk jobs. On *Indeed.com*, recent grads are more likely to click on jobs in the arts and entertainment, as well as social service, than they were a few years ago.” In contrast, Twenge writes that Gen Z-ers “don’t seem to care as much about where they will work; they just want . . . a job” (188). Maybe the limited amount of research on Gen Z suggests we do not know exactly what this generation wants. Perhaps it is also dangerous to make overt claims about Gen Z and their career preferences especially without additional research. Gen Z is a large population, and their individual preferences vary in ways that could create conflicting results in interview-based research. Furthermore, it may also be difficult to determine the career trajectory for anyone in an entry level position because most individuals do not discover available job opportunities until they explore careers and discover their own likes and dislikes.

In what follows, I first describe the contemporary job landscape that Gen Z is joining. Then, I review documentaries as a mode of conducting creative research. Finally, I review my study design, followed by my limitations, findings, and conclusions.

Literature Review

Contemporary Job Landscape

For *The Adulting Project*, I explored fears and anxieties of Gen Z graduates as they enter the workforce. My initial predictions were that some of the people I interviewed may fear a long period of unemployment after graduation. Many of the Gen Z individuals that I interviewed were Honor students enrolled in an undergraduate program. Of the non-Honor students I interviewed, several of these individuals had already obtained their bachelor's degree. According to Kolko, these individuals are at an advantage in the contemporary job market because individuals with a college degree have lower unemployment rates, higher earnings, and increased job security compared to those without a college degree.¹ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in March 2020, the non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for individuals over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher was 2.4% compared to 3.9% for those with some college or an associate degree, 4.8% for high school graduates with no college, and 8.1 % for those with less than a high school diploma (“Table A-4.”). I interviewed Gen Z students to see how their perceptions of the job market contrast with the data collected from other sources.

Although some Gen Z college graduates hold negative perceptions of the job market, the unemployment rate of 2.4% is not very high compared to the current U.S. unemployment rates for those with lower educational attainment. Another thing to keep in mind is what economists call “frictional unemployment rate” which refers to the portion of unemployment caused by individuals who are changing jobs. For example, they may be taking a few weeks to search for a better job, or they may have quit one job and be waiting to start a new one. The frictional

¹ The unemployment rate refers to the "percentage of persons in the civilian labor force (i.e., all civilians who are employed or seeking employment) who are not working and who made specific efforts to find employment sometime during the prior 4 weeks" (Employment and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment).

unemployment rate is estimated to fall between 2% and 2.5%. This is considered normal and not problematic. When considering frictional unemployment, the unemployment rate for college graduates is extraordinarily low (Dorfman). The unemployment rates are not at an all-time low, but the contemporary job market seems stable and promising for Gen Z college graduates (Kolko).

Preston Cooper, author of “New York Fed Highlights Underemployment Among College Graduates,” reports that 40 – 50% of college graduates between the ages of 22 and 27 work in a job that does not require a college degree. Although some of the underemployed graduates will advance from an entry-level job to a job that requires a college degree, this is not the case for all underemployed graduates. Cooper explains that 34% of the entry-level jobs filled by recent, underemployed graduates earn more than \$45,000 a year. However, fifteen years ago, 43% of recent graduates were earning more than \$45,000 annually.

Dorfman mentions the issue with the definition of underemployment. He says that the college graduate underemployment rate includes all graduates working in an occupation considered to not require a college degree. He contends that different employers may have different requirements for the same occupation. For example, some restaurants may not require a college degree for a management position while others may. Dorfman also says that just because an occupation does not require a college degree does not mean that employees do not benefit from their degrees.

Nevertheless, as more students pursue a college degree, the economic value of these degrees decreases because they do not help graduates stand out from other job candidates. Collectively, students take out loans worth billions of dollars per year to help pay for their

college educations, and interest rates on these degrees only add to the student loan debt crisis. If these degrees are not adding value to graduates in the workforce, why spend the money?

As noted by Zack Friedman in his article “Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2020: A Record \$1.6 Trillion,” student loan debt is the second highest consumer debt in the United States—exceeded only by mortgage debt. Currently in the United States, there are 44.7 million people who collectively owe about \$1.46 trillion in student loan debt. The average debt for graduates of 2018 was \$29,200. This is a 2% increase from 2017 (Friedman). The state of North Carolina ranks 10th highest for total student loan debt outstanding among residents with a state student loan balance of \$44.4 billion among 1.2 million borrowers (Friedman). More than half of U.S. student loan borrows (23.2 million of them) are under the age of 34 (Friedman). As of 2019, there were 8.2 million borrowers in the United States under the age of 24 who collectively had \$121.2 billion in student loan debt (Friedman). There were 15 million borrowers between the ages of 25 and 34 who collectively had \$501.5 billion in student loan debt (Friedman). There were 14.1 million borrowers between the ages of 35 and 49 who collectively had \$575.5 billion in student loan debt (Friedman). There were 6 million borrowers between the ages of 50 and 61 who collectively had \$241.2 billion in student loan debt (Friedman). Finally, there were 2.1 million borrowers age 62 or older who collectively had \$75.9 billion in student loan debt (Friedman). With the increasing severity of the student loan debt crisis, I, like other Gen Z-ers, wonder if the price of a college education is worth the financial trade-off.

Gen Z’s Perceptions Toward the Current Job Landscape

Today's unemployment rate is lower for individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher, particularly when compared to their unemployment rate during the 2010 recession which was 4.4-5.0% (“Unemployment Rate 2.1 Percent for College Grads, 4.3 Percent for High School

Grads in April 2018”). However, despite a more welcoming job market, Gen Z-ers still express anxiety toward employment, and that may be due to issues their parents faced as they were growing up. Since today’s graduates grew up during the recession between the late 2000s to early 2010s, their parents’ situations may have shaped their impression of college and the job market. For example, perhaps Gen Z witnessed their parents struggling to find employment and internalized the same fear. Perhaps Gen Z also watched their parents struggle to find jobs related to their college field of study, and maybe this impacted their understanding of the worth of their degrees. According to Twenge, “iGen'ers aren’t even convinced that their education will help them get good jobs or give them information they will need later” (170). Gen Z students fear that their education will not prepare them for the workforce, consequently decreasing their perceptions of the value of education. They may wonder: if not to prepare me for future employment, what is the purpose of an academic education?

Twenge provides more insight into Gen Z’s attitudes toward the job market and toward college and jobs in general. She notes that,

[c]ompared to previous generations, iGen'ers are more focused on getting a better job and less focused on getting a general education. iGen College students believe they are in class so that they can get a better job once they are out of class. . . . School and College are now a means to an end- and high school students aren’t even sure it is the right means anymore. (172)

Here, Twenge notes that members of this generation tie college educations directly to job outcomes, and her findings are not unique. Research from Richard Arum and Josipa Roska provide further support Twenge’s claims. In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Arum and Roska discuss how many of today’s college students consider the general

education curriculum a waste of time as it slows them down in getting their degree and doesn't seem to relate to any of their professional or personal goals. However, Arum and Roska also found that modern students graduate unable to satisfy employers with their writing and critical thinking skills—many of which are taught in general education courses. Arum and Roska note that college students enter college unprepared for rigorous academic tasks and with attitudes that are at odds with academic achievement. Despite this lack of academic focus, students are still able to achieve high grade point averages because their classes require minimal effort. As a result, students spend more time working and socializing which helps explain why Gen Z students tend to value their college experiences more than their college classes; they put more effort into their experiences than they do their classes.

Gen Z-ers may also perceive education as irrelevant to their educational goals because they grew up with more standardized testing than previous generations. This likely limited the way they experienced education as useful because students have varied learning styles, and many student's express dissatisfaction with standardized testing because they feel as if these tests do not help them engage with course material, remember content, or apply the subject's skills to the real world. Thus, when students feel as if they are not engaging with course content, they deem it irrelevant to their academic and professional pursuits. As a result, they focus their time on other activities and disengage with their classes (Arum and Roska 1-10).

The factors that I have discussed so far influence Gen Z-er's perceptions of college and the workforce. Specific factors that affect Gen Z-ers at my research site include the fact that North Carolina Wesleyan College students are often first-generation college students. In the article "North Carolina Wesleyan College," *U.S. News* reports that 47% of undergraduates enrolled at NCWC in 2018 were first-generation college students ("North Carolina Wesleyan

College”). Virginia Commonwealth University's Director of Program Development and Student Success in University College, Micol Hutchison, explains that many studies demonstrate the first-generation college students are less engaged in college on social, intellectual, and academic levels. First-generation college students engage with faculty less often than non-first-generation students. These students are also more often minorities, more likely to live at or near home, more likely to work while in college, have more financial stressors, and more likely to come from tight-knit families. First-generation college students are less prepared for college; less likely to have decided on a major prior to enrollment; more likely to face social, academic, cultural and financial challenges; and less likely to participate in volunteer work and extracurricular activities (Hutchison 2-5).

All of these challenges faced by first-generation college students help explain why these students may face a disconnect between their expectations of a college education and their experiences. If these students enter college with the expectation that college will prepare them for the workforce, yet they are not properly prepared for the academic rigors of a college education, they will not reap the full potential of the college experience.

For first-generation college students, ideas about the struggles of finding a job may have been discussed in their families, among their peers, and in the media. Twenge proposes that today's college students believe they have to get a college degree to achieve the same things that their parents got with only a high school degree or less (185). Elizabeth Bryan and Leigh Ann Simmons, authors of “Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students,” found that first-generation college students typically come from close-knit families and communities that do not have knowledge about the college experience. As a result, first-generation college students enter college without knowing

what to expect and unable to share their new experiences with empathetic family members. Furthermore, first-generation college students feel pressure from themselves and from their families to be successful. Families want their first-generation college student to have a better life than they had with a limited education, and the student does not want to let down their family (Bryan and Simmons 395-400). All of the above factors probably shaped Gen Z's perceptions of college and the workforce.

In the next section, I review existing documentaries that influenced my artistic and filming choices.

Documentary Influences

I will now discuss how my ideas for *The Adulthood Project* documentary compare with other documentary styles. I will specifically focus on three examples: *Most Likely to Succeed*, *Last Chance U*, and *College Conspiracy*.

The documentary *Most Likely to Succeed* explored the flaws of the modern education system and paid close attention to the limitations of the high-school education system. As I originally planned to replicate this theme, I looked into this documentary for a source of inspiration as to how to structure my own documentary. I structured *The Adulthood Project* into a single thirty-minute documentary. *Last Chance U* was structured like a television series into different episodes. I knew this was not the best option for my documentary because of the length of time generally expected for honors presentations. Although hour-long documentaries like *Most Likely to Succeed* and *College Conspiracy* are easy for viewers to watch in one sitting, I thought an hour-long documentary was too long for my own purposes. I expect or believe the 30-minute length of my documentary will increase the likelihood individuals watch the film in its entirety.

Like the creator of *Most Likely to Succeed*, I also have a personal connection with the subject of my documentary. As a senior, I have dedicated this past year to deciding how I want to continue to develop personally and professionally once I graduate. Over this past summer, I found myself very anxious over finding a job. I worried whether or not I would be able to find employment. More recently, I began to worry about finances and finding a place to live upon graduation. Throughout the duration of this project, I have found answers to my questions and eased my concerns. When I first began brainstorming *The Adulthood Project*, I planned to situate my experiences in relation to my project similarly to how *Most Likely to Succeed* first introduced its main problem and explained the narrator's connection with the issue.

The documentary began by focusing on a young girl who found herself disinterested in school and performing poorly as a result. This led to a parent-teacher conference in which the girl's parents emphasized the importance of education and how a good education would help her succeed. However, then the narrator started to consider that maybe what he was telling his daughter (the young girl at the beginning of the film) was no longer true. Maybe education, or at least the structure of the current education system, was no longer the key to a successful life. As the girl sat and listened to her Mother and teacher in the parent-teacher conference, the narrator commented on the girl's facial expression. The narrator said that from her expression, she thought everything that they were telling her was "complete bullshit."

Although I had intended to use a similar framing of personal experience and voice over in this project, I ended up not focusing on my own experiences as heavily as I originally assumed I would. In contrast, there are only a few mentions of my own experiences in *The Adulthood Project*. The example that stands out most is when Dr. Phoebe Lewis mentioned the similarities and differences between my situation and other students' situations. I did not overtly relate my

own experiences with my research topic, but I did include some implications that hint at my personal connection with my thesis.

For the opening scenes of *The Adulthood Project*, I created a montage of students giving their definition of “adulthood” as a way to help me frame my topic and terminology. The opening to my own documentary compares with the opening of *Last Chance U* because it opens with a montage of the football players. In both this documentary and my own documentary, the opening montage helps to introduce the main characters of the documentary. Montages are effective opening structures in documentaries because they engage audiences and provide movement by introducing multiple perspectives or ideas that will connect throughout the documentary. In a way, they serve a similar purpose as the thesis of a scholarly essay.

In contrast to my own montage, *Last Chance U* used voice-over narration of the coach yelling at the team to introduce conflict in the documentary. I did not use the montage in *The Adulthood Project* to introduce conflict. Instead, I used my montage to introduce my topic and main characters and engage my audience by providing a variety of Gen Z perspectives on the definition of adulthood.

Personally, I am not a fan of voice-over narration in documentary. Sometimes it is necessary, but I avoided using any sort of voice over narration in my own documentary. Instead, I juxtaposed talking head interviews in a way that created a dialogue between the interviews. This was different from the traditional structure of documentary that I usually see. For example, *Most Likely to Succeed* used voice-over narration to tell a story and provide summary, additional information, and direction for the viewer. I decided to not replicate this approach in my own documentary, and I instead provided direction and transitioned smoothly between topics by placing my interviewees in conversation with each other. As a result, I did not need to provide

narration to my viewers. Furthermore, because I edited my documentary to feel like a conversation, I did not want to interrupt my characters' dialogue with my own voice-over narration.

The documentary *College Conspiracy* explored issues surrounding student loans and student debt. This film relied heavily on charts, graphs, and still images to incorporate information from external sources, and I found myself bored by this method. In *The Adulthood Project*, I avoided the use of still-images wherever possible because I did want to replicate this aesthetic style. For my own documentary purposes, I incorporated information from external sources by using on-screen text.

The Adulthood Project is a series of talking head interviews organized so that my interviewees appear to be in conversation with each other. Initially, I planned to use b-roll footage and juxtapose b-roll footage with talking head interviews like *Most Likely to Succeed* and *Last Chance U* did. I appreciated this organization for these two documentaries because it provided aesthetic diversity. However, my choice to rely only on talking-head and group interviews worked well for me with *The Adulthood Project*. Furthermore, I much prefer the talking head interview more than the interview approach used in *College Conspiracy*. In this documentary, during interviews, the camera pans between the interviewee and the interviewer. I did not like this approach because I found it distracting, so I did not replicate this style in *The Adulthood Project*.

In what follows, I will discuss an overview of how I built my study, how I prepared for filming, the role of documentaries in creative scholarship, my editing process, and the limitations of my documentary research.

Methods

I began considering potential topics for my Honors Thesis during the Spring semester of my Junior year at North Carolina Wesleyan College. Although exploring the concept of adulting was not my original topic idea, I decided early on into the brainstorming process that I wanted to film a documentary for my thesis. Between July and August of 2019, I decided to explore my peer's anxieties surrounding the workforce. I also wanted to know how they were preparing for the job market and what preparation strategies they found most helpful. During this time, I found myself feeling anxious and unprepared for the workforce. I wondered what type of job I would have after graduation and how I would begin the process of looking for employment. I hoped to use *The Adulting Project* as a way to empathize and learn from my peers as they too entered the workforce.

As I continued developing my project, I also developed personally and began finding answers to some of my personal questions. I reached out to Dr. Lewis who manages career services at North Carolina Wesleyan College, and she put me in contact with my current employer. I completed an interview process, and in late August, I began creating a website for an insurance agency in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Upon first contact with Dr. Lewis and my current boss, I expressed interest in an internship for the Spring semester. My class schedule was full for the Fall and I lacked my own transportation to travel off campus, but due to the urgent need of the insurance agency, I began working for them during the Fall semester. In January of 2020, I officially started my paid and credited internship with the intention of becoming a full-time employee after graduation. Initially, I considered incorporating my own experiences into my thesis, but I instead decided to focus on the experiences of my peers because I did not want my own experiences to overshadow my research and documentary film.

Before I could begin filming for my documentary, I first had to seek IRB approval by completing the necessary paperwork. I had to ensure I was ethical in the way I conducted my research because I planned to work with human subjects. I did not see how interviewing individuals about topics that might easily arise during casual conversation could have ethical considerations, but I was informed by the IRB chair at NCWC that my interviewees could face later repercussions in the workforce if they said anything negative about North Carolina Wesleyan College or their current employer. Additionally, since I interviewed my participants about a subject that could cause anxiety, I risked the potential of causing mental anguish to participants. I became responsible for protecting my subjects so they would not be negatively impacted by participating in my project. This led me to carefully construct my interview questions so that I did not encourage any of my participants to speak negatively about the college or their employer.

During the October of 2019, I worked on an outline of all the major components for the final draft of *The Adulthood Project*. This outline included the purpose of, scope of, and first-person and background research for my project. I also included a conclusion that explained how *The Adulthood Project* adds to the body of conducting knowledge in this field.

I started recruiting interviewees and scheduled interviews. I recruited interviewees based on convenience. I recruited people I knew and who I believed would feel comfortable discussing the topics of my project with me. I also recruited people based on whether or not our schedules aligned enough for us to find time to meet and film the interview. I considered interviewing at least two other individuals, but conflicting schedules prevented these interviews from occurring. In my sample, I interviewed six individual Gen Z students, one panel of Gen Z students, the NCWC faculty member who oversees career services at the college, and two NCWC professors.

This is by no means a representative sample of Gen Z, but it is a small portion of Gen Z that demonstrates some of the concerns that may be affecting members of this population.

During the month of November, I began filming interviews. I chose filming locations based on convenience. All of my filming locations were on North Carolina Wesleyan College's campus. These locations provided appropriate backgrounds that paralleled nicely with the topics and demographics of my project. I chose locations that I hoped would provide comfort to my interviewees because they were all students or alumni of North Carolina Wesleyan College. I also chose locations based on availability and noise considerations. For example, I interviewed Brianna in an empty classroom after dark because the library was too loud during the time she was available to meet with me. I did conduct my interview with her in the Honors Lounge because she was not a student enrolled in the Taylor-Crocker Honors Program.

I continued filming until February. I began the editing process while I was still filming, so some of my interview questions developed, narrowed, and broadened as a result of the themes I noticed throughout my interview footage. I will discuss this in more detail in a later section. During the filming process, I considered conducting a short survey among North Carolina Wesleyan College students. I intended to include the results of the survey as graphs and charts in my documentary, but I decided to exclude this survey from my project. I created the survey, and I have included the survey questions in the Appendix section of this document. Before I could conduct my survey, I had to submit an amendment to my IRB paperwork. I planned to email a link to my survey to my current and former classmates asking that they complete it. I also planned to post a link to the survey on North Carolina Wesleyan College's mobile app. However, I decided to omit the survey from my project before I submitted an IRB amendment. Thus, I never completed the amendment, and I never shared the link to the survey with other students.

The Purpose of Documentary

When I first began to conceptualize *The Adulthood Project*, I knew I wanted to take a creative approach to the project. Research papers may be the most traditional way to convey research findings and they have their place in academia, but they are not the only forms of writing found in academia (Ball and Moeller 8-9). I find them difficult to read, tedious to write, and I know that if I delivered my research findings in essay format, I would reach a very limited audience. In the article, "Gains and Losses: New Forms of Texts, Knowledge, and Learning," Gunter Kress states that "writing . . . is being displaced by image in many instances of communication where previously it held sway" (5). In *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction*, authors Rodney Jones and Christoph Hafner note that one of the limitations of books is that the author can only connect with readers in isolation because reading a book is mainly a solitary task. The internet allows for more participation and interactivity. For example, viewers can comment on a YouTube video and interact with others who have also commented on the video. Furthermore, the internet also allows individuals to publish their ideas to millions of people rather than just a select few (6-7). I strive to appeal to a larger audience and, with the younger generations of society made up of people who are more engaged by visuals than by large bodies of text, I decided to share my research findings through the visual medium of documentary. I also decided to publish my documentary publicly on YouTube, so more people had the opportunity to view my documentary.

Editing

In my documentary for *The Adulthood Project*, I used film interview footage, background music, and text sources. I filmed all of the interview footage. The song I used as background music was available on Go Pro's *Quik* app. I cited the sources from which I gathered the

statistics I used in the documentary in the credits section of the film. I composed my documentary from footage of filmed participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations with my research participants. I aimed to create a 30- to 60-minute documentary that presented my analysis and interpretations of my research findings in a clear, polished manner that engaged my audience and enlightened viewers to the importance of my research topic.

As many video editors may know, the story of a film, documentary, or video develops over time through the editing process. An editor may plan to tell a specific story through his or her footage, but the plans hardly ever work out exactly as expected. As an editor begins the editing process, he or she realizes that he or she can arrange the footage in an infinite number of ways, and every way will tell a unique story.

Before I started the editing process, I had an idea about the story I wanted to tell through my documentary, but I knew that the story would develop over time; No matter what predictions I made about the story I would tell through my documentary, I knew the story would change as I reviewed my footage and experimented with different video sequences.

At first, I thought I would need to utilize outside video sources to make some of my main points. I worried I would struggle to connect main ideas that I found throughout my scholarly research with themes that developed through my interviews. In the early stages of brainstorming my documentary outline, I compiled a list of YouTube videos as potential resources. I planned to pull clips from this list of videos and include the clips into my final documentary. I intended for these clips to situate my interviews in context with existing research on Gen Z and their fears surrounding the process of adulting. This process, as I refer to it in my research and

documentary, includes graduating college, finding employment, becoming self-sufficient individuals, and losing parental safety-nets.

I began my documentary with a montage of Gen Z-ers' definition of adulting. This montage addressed my topic, introduced my characters, engaged my viewers, and defined relevant vocabulary as it applied to my project. I smoothly transitioned between footage by placing my characters in conversation with each other based on the themes and common through lines I recognized in my documentary footage. These themes included the fact that adulting requires being alone; adulting involves the loss of safety nets, and this loss is what many students seem to fear most about life after college; some students feel excited and prepared for life after college; many students describe life after college as “real life” as if there are stages of “fake life”; and many different factors (such as biological, developmental, societal, economic, and physiological factors) influence a student’s experience in college and how prepared they tend to feel about their ability to survive without their safety nets. As these themes developed through my editing, I decided to organize my documentary into sections. Each of these sections helped to develop (a) theme(s) of its own. For example, one section of my documentary explores how my interview subjects define “adulting.” Another section explores the importance of networking. One section explains what participants perceive the purpose of a college education to be, and another section develops the idea that students seem prepared for the job market while fearing the lack of societal safety nets.

I thought I would need to use b-roll footage throughout my documentary because I feared audiences would be bored by a documentary consisting of only talking-head interviews. I assumed I would need to do some voice over in my documentary so I could tell viewers some of the key points I wanted them to take away from the film. However, Dr. Perino and Dr. Buel told

me that they were interested by the way I structured my documentary around talking heads. They told me that the talking heads seemed to be in conversation with each other, and this strategy would help keep the interest of my audience. I also structured my documentary so I alternated between round-table discussion-style footage and single participant talking head interview style. I believe that this strategy helped me create aesthetic diversity so as not to bore those who view the documentary.

One challenge I faced while completing this project was how to express research that I found in journal articles and other print sources in my documentary. I found many interesting themes, patterns, and statistics arise from the print source research I conducted, but I wondered how to express these findings in my documentary. I did not want to rely too heavily on on-screen text because I feared that would distract my audience from the personal story focus that I wanted in my film. I also worried that expressing my findings through voice over narration would bore my audience. During my weekly meetings with my project directors, I discovered a way to express the findings from my background research in a video medium. I realized that during these weekly meetings, Dr. Buel, Dr. Perino, and I discussed how my background research both supported and challenged the research from my print sources. I wondered how I could share the connections we made with my audience in an engaging way. Ultimately, I decided to record one of our weekly meetings. During this meeting, we watched my documentary and compared and contrasted my subjects' stories with my print sources. I then included clips from our recorded meeting in my documentary so that I could share the connections with my documentary audience. I found this method more in-keeping with my visual aesthetic and goals for the documentary than voice-over. I also found that a conversation-style documentary was much more interesting to me than I originally anticipated.

I structured my documentary in a way that I believed would effectively portray the themes I found throughout my research and express the key points I wanted viewers to take away from the film. Through editing, I placed my interviewees in conversation with each other, and this strategy helped to both express my research findings and create aesthetic diversity.

Presentation

For the final version of my documentary, I created a 30-minute documentary. I then showcased *The Adulthood Project* for the Honors Program by recording a presentation-style introduction and conclusion to accompany my documentary. I intended to hold a public screening for my documentary, but due to the coronavirus outbreak and North Carolina Wesleyan College's decision to convert to online instruction starting in March and extending until the end of the semester, I had to make other arrangements. On April 10, 2020, I participated in a Q&A session with my project committee and the directors of the Taylor-Crocker Honors Program. Dr. Bill conducted this meeting virtually using Zoom. In this session, my committee members and the honors program directors asked me questions regarding my project. I am currently unable to visit campus, but once the quarantine is lifted, I will provide the honors program with permanent access to a flash drive with my documentary and presentation stored on it.

Limitations

Due to the scope of my project, we cannot draw any overarching or general claims about all of Gen Z. In *The Adulthood Project*, I focused only on a few individual's personal stories and experiences. These individuals were students at North Carolina Wesleyan College, a small liberal arts school in the eastern part of the United States. Furthermore, many of these students were Honors students, and this likely shaped their experiences and the way that they answered my

interview questions. I also carefully constructed some of my interview questions for ethical considerations. I did not want any of my participants to get in trouble for talking negatively about North Carolina Wesleyan College or their current employers. With all of this mind, scholars cannot draw conclusions about the majority of Gen Z from my project. However, this project does point to some of the gaps in current research. For example, more quantitative research needs to be conducted about the opinions and experiences of Gen Z students.

Additionally, scholars and researchers could also benefit from exploring how various factors (economic, psychological, biological, and societal) influence individuals' experiences. Perhaps more members of Gen Z should also conduct research on their generation. As a member of the generation, Gen Z-ers likely have less preconceived assumptions and biases toward their own generation compared to researchers from older generations. As part of the generation, Gen Z-ers may also find it easier than older researchers to connect with and build trust among their research participants, and this trust factor may help uncover a deeper understanding of Gen Z.

One concern I had during my project was how I would establish research credibility through my documentary. Traditionally, print sources cite other print sources, and the author establishes his or her credibility through prestige. It seems as if authors are frequently either reputable authors or reporters or researchers with a Ph. D. However, I sometimes felt as if I lacked credibility because I am simply a student filmmaker. Of course, I still found ways to establish credibility despite my lack of perceived prestige. For example, I cited print sources in my annotated bibliography. I also made connections between print sources and my documentary in my annotated bibliography. However, I do not expect many individuals to read my annotated bibliography. I also attempted to establish credibility by including clips of my discussion with Dr. Buel and Dr. Perino. Not only did we discuss some of my print research sources, but I also

thought these clips would help establish credibility because Dr. Buel and Dr. Perino are Ph.D. professors. Professors are traditionally viewed as reputable and trusted individuals.

I established credibility in my documentary because of the requirement of a research component in this project. However, I at first attempted to establish credibility in my documentary similar to the way one might establish credibility in a traditional research essay; For example, I considered integrating many wordy quotes and complex research statistics from journal articles into my film. This is problematic because the medium expectations for establishing credibility with a documentary film are much different than the expectations for establishing credibility in print sources. For example, print sources such as journal articles and news articles often focus on quantitative research by focusing on societal patterns or statistics from extensive research studies. On the other hand, documentaries traditionally focus on qualitative research by deeply exploring a few individuals' personal attitudes, experiences, and behaviors. Additionally, whereas print sources often include statistics and numbers, documentaries encourage honest life stories. For my own documentary, I tried to take advantage of the affordances of both the scholarly print medium and the medium of documentary. I did this by highlighting the patterns I found while interviewing my research participants in my final documentary while also focusing on the personal experiences of my research participants.

Throughout this project, I also worried how my own personal bias would influence the overall message of my documentary. When it comes to writing print sources, one can reread and revise his or her writing to exclude phrases that indicate the writer's bias. However, documentary film is inevitably subject to the editor's and the filmmaker's bias. The documentary is subject to bias based on the questions that are asked to interview subjects. Depending on the message and

themes that the filmmaker wants to highlight in the documentary, he or she may ask questions that probe interviewees to answer accordingly.

Going into this project, I expected Gen Z-ers to feel anxious about the current job market. As a result, I may have structured my project based around this assumption. Although I did find that some students were anxious about their future, I should have begun this project by asking if Gen Z-ers have anxieties rather than assuming that they do. In my research, I found that many of my participants felt confident about the current job market, and their anxieties stemmed from their impending loss of safety nets. Perhaps with additional research or alternative question framing, I would have found some individuals did not feel anxious over any aspect of adulting. Although not included in the film, one of my participants expressed that he felt relatively confident about his ability to successfully adult. This points to an additional limitation of my project. As a film editor, I had to make the decisions of what footage to include in my documentary and what footage to exclude from my documentary. If I had included a clip depicting Adam's lack of anxiety, my documentary would depict a broader (and perhaps a more accurate) view of Gen Z's feelings toward adulthood. For example, factors such as maintained safety nets, financial security, adequate planning, or a confident personality may influence an individual's level of anxiety (or lack thereof) over the future. As an area of further study, I would advise scholars to explore and represent a wider variety of perspectives held by Gen Z-ers than I did in my documentary.

Documentaries are subject to bias based on how the editor arranges the video footage. The same video clips could tell many different stories based on how they are sequenced because the order of the film helps the viewer to derive meaning from the film. For example, imagine a video editor has the following clips to work with: a clip of a young, attractive female on a

subway; a clip of a young Navy man in uniform; a clip of the lights going out in the subway car followed by the sound of a kiss and a slap; and a clip of an old woman who appears to be the young woman's grandmother. The editor of this film could choose to arrange the previous clips in a number of ways, and each way could encourage the viewer to interpret a different meaning from the film. If the editor arranges the clips as they are described above, the viewer may conclude that the young man kissed the young woman when the lights went out, and the grandmother slapped the man for kissing her granddaughter. Now, let us assume the clips are arranged like this: the clip of the grandmother, the clip of the young man, the clip of the lights going out in the subway train followed by the sound of a kiss and a slap, and a clip of the young female. In this scenario, the viewer may conclude that the young man kissed the grandmother, and the granddaughter slapped him.

The film editor also affects the message of the film by deciding which clips to include in the film and which clips to exclude. For example, assume that we have the same clips in the example above, but the editor decides to leave out the clip of the grandmother. This choice would change the message of the film. If the clips were ordered so that the clip of the man came first, the clip of the lights going out followed by the sound of a kiss and a slap came next, and the clip of the woman came last, the viewer would conclude that the man kissed the woman when the lights went out, and then the woman slapped him. This example reflects how an editor's decisions contributes to the meaning of the documentary or film.

Reflecting on the editing process, I wonder what editing decisions I made that portrayed my personal biases. How will the order of my footage influence the meaning that my audience derives from the film? Did I leave out any important clips from my film that would have painted a more complete picture of my topic if I had chosen to include them in my documentary? Did I

choose to include footage that highlighted and supported my own opinions while ignoring other important information from my interviews? I do not currently have a way to answer these questions, but they do exemplify the affordances and limitations of documentary.

Discussion

Adulting is associated with the word “adult,” but what does it mean to be an adult and survive in “the adult world”? Stan said adulting is “the process of parenting yourself.” By this, he likely means that individuals must assume responsibility for what they previously relied on their parents for. For examples, adulting individuals must pay their own bills, provide their own food and shelter, do their own chores, and make decisions for themselves. My interviewees state that, as an adult, individuals have responsibilities that include getting a job, living independently and supporting oneself, grocery shopping, meal preparation, laundry, paying bills, and taxes. According to Dr. Lewis, “adulting” involves handling these responsibilities without the support of parents. Adulting requires one to depend on his or herself financially to the best of their ability, and adulting is making one’s own way in the world. These definitions closely align with *Merriam-Webster* and Ben Zimmer’s definition of adulting.

How do Gen Z job seekers prepare for leaving college?

Life after college comes with a lot of responsibilities that students must learn to handle. Often, students believe they must handle these responsibilities on their own. Ashley understands that living on her own right out of college is not the most practical idea, so she is getting an apartment with a friend. Her and her friend have already begun preparing for this next step together by buying furniture and finding an apartment. Harun of IMPACT-Wesleyan Business

Society is preparing his mindset around college so that he can prepare for “being out in the world alone.”

When discussing how they feel about life after college and how they are preparing for life after graduation, many of my participants mention that adulting necessitates being alone. This common opinion developed the theme that adulting is the loss of life’s safety nets. This perception of adulting is interesting because humans are social creatures who rely on others to take care of them throughout their entire existence. Humans are supposed to be a part of a community and help build communities. Humans require other humans to survive and thrive, but the definition of adulting among Generation Z students seem to disregard this fact.

It is also interesting to consider that many of my interviewees refer to life after college as “real” life as if real life has not yet started. Stan states that he is “just as excited as the next guy to get out in the *real* world.” Harun says that after college is when one’s *real* life starts. Dr. Buel raises an interesting point in the sense that students are referring to life after college as *real* as if the life they are living now is fake. As Dr. Perino mentions, the participants I interviewed are preparing for life after college while disregarding the notion that some of the responsibilities (such as student debt) that students are putting off until after college are the result of college.

Many students discuss the importance of networking as a way to prepare for life after college and increase the likelihood of finding employment opportunities. They mention that they are preparing for life after graduation by leveraging the networks they formed while in college. My interviewees advise students to take advantage of all possible opportunities including talking with industry professionals, building relationships with people who can open doors for additional opportunities, and seeking help and advice from professors and other people one meets during their college experience. Chase of IMPACT-Wesleyan Business Society mentions that he is

pursuing several employment opportunities with organizations he has contacted. Lexi realizes that she has met individuals who will help her with references when she seeks employment.

Thus far, what have been the experiences of Gen Z North Carolina Wesleyan College students and graduates as they begin to enter the workforce?

According to Dr. Phoebe Lewis, the current job market is an excellent one. Those who network and possess high talent should have no difficulty finding a job. However, she also states that individuals who are not the top talent may have more difficulty finding a job. Also, getting a job in today's market usually requires students to have more than just a degree. Many jobs require some field experience: soft skills such professionalism, time management, good written and verbal communication, and sometimes certifications. Furthermore, many jobs require a clean criminal background, so those that do not have a clean criminal background are at a disadvantage. Some students, such as Adam, got lucky and found a job quickly whereas others are still searching for a job in their desired field. Also, depending on the field, some students will have an easier time finding employment than others. For example, Lemar wants to be a filmmaker, and the market for filmmakers is not very large in Rocky Mount or the East Coast. However, the market for filmmakers in Los Angeles is oversaturated. He does not like either of these situations.

I found that many factors impact an individual's opportunities and the intensity of the repercussions he or she will face if he or she cannot find employment immediately after graduation. For example, some students have the luxury of living with family following graduation whereas some students must make other living arrangements. Some individuals must face the impending financial repercussions of student loans whereas others are not burdened with this debt. Additionally, some students had the opportunity to take advantage of internships and degree-related work experience during college whereas others did not have this opportunity

available for them. International students, individuals without a car, and individuals who must work to pay their way through college may find it extremely difficult (if not almost impossible) to find the time to intern or network with those in their desired career field.

What is North Carolina Wesleyan College doing to help prepare Gen Z graduates for the workforce?

This research question expanded from exploring what NCWC is doing to help prepare Gen Z graduates for the workforce to exploring the perceived purpose of a college education. As an unintentional comedic relief, Adam states that the purpose of a college education is “to differentiate you from the common idiot.” A student in IMPACT-Wesleyan Business Society believes that college is a “better version of life.” Chase defines college life as “a falsified reality.” He says aspects of college are much different than how we will experience than in society. For example, our housing and the cost of housing is structured differently in college. Adam explains that in college, students are given much more instruction and direction than when they enter the workforce. Dr. Lewis states that she does not believe a college degree is valuable on its own. Instead, it is one tool in a toolbox. Many students agree that the purpose of a college education is to prepare them for the workforce, but it is also much more than that. A college experience is about exploration, the opportunity to succeed or fail on an individual level, collaboration and teamwork, hands-on experience, and personal development.

Arum and Roska found that most college students think the first two years of college, which are usually the general education requirements, are a waste of time because general education courses do not directly relate to students’ desired field of study and long-term professional goals. However, college helps students to develop the soft skills that many employers value, and many soft skills are taught in general education curriculum courses. It is

interesting that, because students are so job-oriented, they often ignore the values of the general education courses which are, in fact, helping them prepare for the workforce.

Many studies demonstrate the first-generation college students are less engaged in college on social, intellectual, and academic levels. First-generation college students engage with faculty less often than non-first-generation students. These students are also more often minorities, more likely to live at or near home, more likely to work while in college, have more financial stressors, and more likely to come from tight-knit families. First generation college students are less prepared for college; less likely to have decided on a major prior to enrollment; more likely to face social, academic, cultural and financial challenges; and less likely to participate in volunteer work and extracurricular activities.

When first-generation college students, who already face social and economic challenges, do not decide on a major and do not engage with the faculty and extracurricular activities that will help them build the networks they will later leverage to find employment opportunities, they will likely conclude their college education did not adequately prepare them for the workforce. After all, many of the individuals I interviewed in my documentary discussed the importance of leveraging networks, and many said their extracurricular activities helped prepare them the workforce more than their classroom activities did. However, it is important to consider how systemic factors that individuals have no control over shape students' abilities (and inabilities) to take advantage of the opportunities that make them more employable. For example, although students understand the importance of work experience, community involvement, and leveraging networks, not all students have access to these opportunities. While in college, some students must work entry-level retail jobs unrelated to their desired career field so they can afford to attend college or help their families. As such, these students do not have time to get involved in

extracurricular activities, and they may not be able to complete an internship in their desired field. North Carolina Wesleyan College also has many international students. These students are unable to get involved in the community, leverage networks, and work off campus because of governmental regulations and their lack of transportation. Although it is relatively easy to say what students need to do in order to be successful and make the most of their college experience, it is important to remember that many factors influence an individual's situation, and not everyone is afforded the equal privileges and opportunities.

What are some shared fears and anxieties of Gen Z college students as they prepare for the workforce?

During the initial planning stages of my documentary, I expected to discover that some of my participants were worried about the current job market while others felt prepared. Although I did discover this through my research, I found that the reason for this difference was not what I expected. I thought I would find that those who took effort to prepare for life after college by taking advantage of internships and networking opportunities would be successful and confident in finding employment in the current job market. I also expected that those who did not take these advantages and opportunities would be concerned about and struggle with finding employment in today's job market. However, through my research, I discovered that most of my participants felt a mix of feelings surrounding their future. Many felt both nervous and excited about entering the workforce. They felt confident, prepared, and excited to get a job and become independent individuals, but they were nervous about how they would handle some of their new responsibilities. For example, some worry about new financial obligations such as rent payments and grocery bills, maintaining a work-life balance, finding a place to live, budgeting, and beginning to pay off student loans. The loss of their parental and familial safety nets appears to

worry my participants more than finding employment. Overall, students believe that they will succeed, but they know that the stakes are dire if they do not.

Chase said that he is relieved because he is looking forward to working a 9-5 job and leaving work at work. Lemar is nervous about the possibility of settling for a lifestyle that does not fulfil his ambitions. He said he is scared of living a life consumed by work, especially in a job he does not want. One student said he feels that life after college is intriguing because he believes we are all capable of achieving our dreams, and we all have something to prove to ourselves. Gordon claims that he is looking forward to being scared. He says that we are all in a pattern of class and other responsibilities, but once we get out into the world and we have money, we can support ourselves and make a difference in the lives of others.

Brianna's main fear was not getting a job; she thought that would be easy. Instead, she was more worried about getting a house and acquiring a mortgage. Many students are not fearful about finding employment or the job market. Most students that I interviewed for this documentary seem to fear the loss of safety nets. Some students will even have to begin paying off their student loans after they graduate. Lemar states that he will face an immediate repercussion of student loans if he cannot find employment soon after graduate. He will not be able to defer student loans forever. He is also worried about not being able to stay with his father as long as he needs to after graduation.

My research findings concerning students' feelings toward the job market contradicts with Twenge's findings. Whereas Twenge found that Gen Z-ers were worried about finding a job and succeeding in the current job market, I found the students were relatively confident in their ability to find employment. However, I should note that Twenge studied Gen Z students while they were still in high school (or younger) whereas I studied Gen Z college students and recent

graduates. Although we studied the same generation, we studied them at different parts of their lives. This may help to explain some of the incongruities of our research because high school and college are often periods of extensive personal development for students.

As I previously mentioned, I began this project assuming Gen Z-ers felt anxious about the workforce. I asked what anxieties Gen Z-ers had rather than asking if Gen Z-ers felt anxious about the workforce or their life post-graduation. Although I did find that individuals felt anxious about their loss of safety nets, my initial assumption that Gen Z-ers had anxiety about life after college may have affected my results. For areas of future research, I would advise researchers to begin their studies by asking if Gen Z-ers feel anxious about the workforce of their impending adult responsibilities. Better yet, I would recommend scholars ask how Gen Z-ers feel about the workforce and their life post-graduation rather than initially assuming that individuals may feel anxious.

Additional Findings

Dr. Buel noticed that a common through line of this project points to a major problem surrounding current research. How does one disentangle societal factors, economic factors, psychological factors, and biological factors that all influence what Gen Z students seem to be experiencing in this state of their life as they finish college and prepare for the workforce? Furthermore, as mentioned by Dr. Perino, the human brain is not fully developed until age 25 (Johnson, et al.), so the personal growth that students describe from their college experience is only the beginning of the personal development they will continue to experience. I went into this project thinking college preparation depended solely on a student's personal effort, but through my research, I learned that many factors influence each other and a student's success.

Overall, this process and the decision to film and edit a documentary rather than write a research essay helped me reflect on the different affordances, limitations, and expectations of both mediums. Whereas research essays support statistics and patterns, documentaries encourage personal stories. Essays highlight quantitative research findings, and my documentary was a qualitative research tool. Essays establish author credibility through the use of academic sources. Although documentaries can utilize some academic sources, including some of the print sources preferred in research essays, I chose to find a creative and engaging way to incorporate the print sources into my film and bridge the gap between the two mediums.

Conclusion

There are a few key-takeaways that I believe students and college faculty can learn from my project. Although we cannot make any generalities about Gen Z as a generation, it is interesting to note that not all students are fearful of the job market. In contrast, many of the individuals I interviewed are rather confident in their abilities to find employment, and their fears revolve around the loss of safety nets as they begin to take responsibility for themselves.

When I began conducting research for *The Adulthood Project*, I thought I would find success was determined by personal factors. I wrongly assumed that if an individual worked hard and sought out opportunities, they would be adequately prepared for the job market. If an individual failed to take advantage of available opportunities, I suspected that students would feel unprepared for the workforce. I did not realize the variety of uncontrollable factors that impact a student's experiences and their available opportunities.

Upon conclusion of this project, I agree with the opinions of my peers on the purpose of a college education. Although I do believe that a college education should help students prepare

for the workforce and develop the necessary skills to be successful in their desired industry, I also believe that a higher education should also aid students in developing the soft skills that will benefit them in all aspects of life. Perhaps to better assist students, schools could inform students, faculty, and staff of available career services. During my conversation with Dr. Lewis, I began to wonder if students at North Carolina Wesleyan College know about the career services center and all the services offered by the center.

Dr. Lewis mentioned that students should visit the center at the beginning of their senior year so that they have a job lined up upon graduation. Although I agree with her advice, senior year is a busy time for students because they must complete their senior seminar(s). In addition, Honors students must complete their Honors Theses. As such, many students may wish to visit the career center, but they may prioritize their other responsibilities and fail to make time to visit the career center. To combat this issue, I would suggest that schools integrate a year-long workforce preparation program into degree programs. This would mean that students would receive course credit, perhaps 1-3 credit hours per semester for both the Fall and Spring semester of their senior year. This program would require them to seek assistance from career services and seek employment during their senior year of college. Although this program may help network students with their future employer, this ironically delays the process of adulting for them. Rather than taking responsibility for themselves, seniors would rely on the help of their institution to find employment.

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2018, [bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/unemployment-rate-2-1-percent-for-](https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/unemployment-rate-2-1-percent-for-college-grads-4-3-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-april-2018.htm?view_full)

[college-grads-4-3-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-april-2018.htm?view_full](https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/unemployment-rate-2-1-percent-for-college-grads-4-3-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-april-2018.htm?view_full)

Whiteley, Greg, and Adam Ridley, directors. *Last Chance U*. Conde Naste Entertainment,

Endgame Pictures, Boardwalk Pictures, and The RWC, 2016.

Appendix A

Project Overview

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



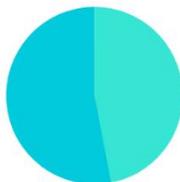
INTRODUCTION

The Adulting Project is the title of the documentary I filmed for my Senior Honors Thesis. It explores students' perceptions of the current job landscape, their opinions on the purpose of a college education, and their preparedness for the adult responsibilities that await them upon graduation.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Participants interviewed in *The Adulting Project* were North Carolina Wesleyan College students and alumni who were also part of Gen Z.*

Approx. 2,000 Enrolled
Undergraduate Students



47% First Generation
College Students

*Gen Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2012. They are currently between 8 and 25 years of age.

GEN Z: ADULTING IS

- Being an adult
- Parenting yourself
- Working
- Responsibilities
- Independence

THEMES

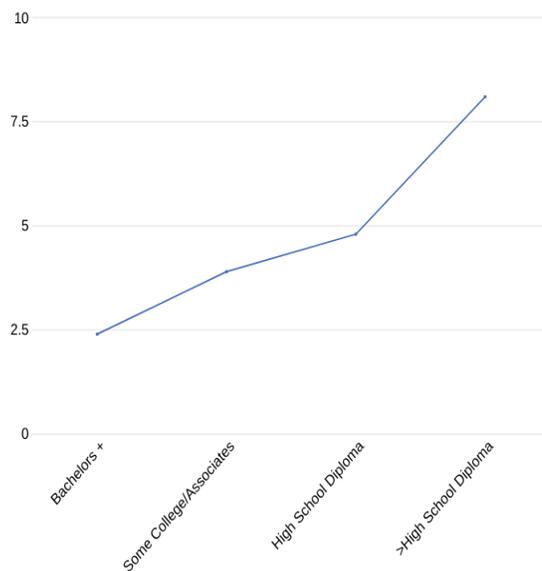
- Adulting is more than getting a job
- Life after college is scary, but exciting
- "Real life" has not started yet
- A value of a college *experience*
- The importance of networking and opportunities
- Individual versus societal factors that determine success
- Fear routed in lack of safety nets

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



UNEMPLOYMENT RATES*



As educational level increases, unemployment rates decrease. This difference is about 2.4 - 5.7%. Furthermore, this correlation does not mean that higher education levels cause lower unemployment rates- it simply means that there is a relationship between the two measures.

UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATES**

NOTE:

As more and more students pursue a higher education, the worth of a college degree decreases. The more common college degrees are, the less these degrees help differentiate graduates from other prospective job candidates.

UNDEREMPLOYED COLLEGE GRADUATES

AGES 22 - 27

40-50%

RECENT GRADUATES EARNING

\$45,000+ ANNUALLY

2002: **43%**

2017: **34%**

*Rates are based on information from March 2020 for individuals aged 25 and older

**The college graduate underemployment rate includes all graduates working in an occupation considered to not require a college degree

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



STUDENT LOAN DEBT STATISTICS

Student loan debt is the **second highest consumer debt** in the United States

44.7 Million

Number of people in the US who collectively owe

\$1.46 Trillion

NC is the **10th highest state** for total student loan debt

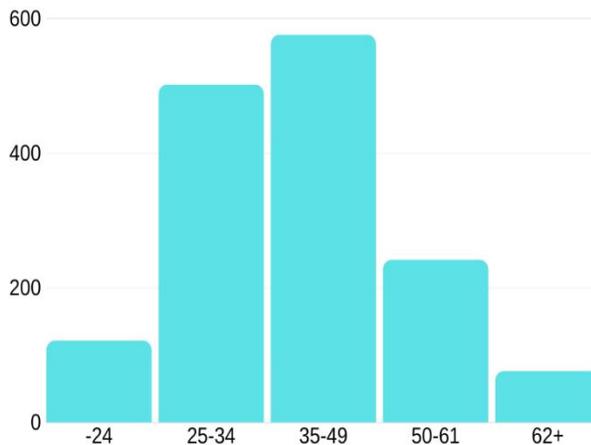
44.4 Billion

Number of people in NC who collectively owe

\$1.2 million

TOTAL STUDENT LOAN DEBT BY AGE (IN BILLIONS)

With the current student loan debt crisis, I am left to wonder if college degrees are worth the financial trade-off.



Student loan debt statistics displayed here are for 2020

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS



Students fear they will be unable to find employment after graduation.

The degree to which a student feels prepared for entering the workforce depends on how proactive that student has been in preparing for the workforce.



A college education will help students feel prepared for their field if they take advantage of their education, but experience is more important than education.

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



SOME INTERESTING POINTS

GEN Z FEELINGS ON LIFE AFTER COLLEGE

Many of my interviewees explained that they are both scared and excited for life after college. Blaise Gourley said he feels relieved at the idea of working a 9-5 job, Aaron Meade said he is excited to be scared and make a difference in the world.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Most of the individuals I interviewed described the time after college as the time to start taking responsibility for themselves. However, Dr. Julie Perino notes that by the time Gen Z students enter college, they have already agreed to decades of college debt. Some of the responsibilities students are putting off until after college are the result of college.

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



THE LOSS OF SAFETY NETS

Gen Z students connect adulting with being alone. Life after graduation is when they must learn to survive apart from their parents and without the safety nets they have previously relied on.

THE PURPOSE OF COLLEGE

Although some students see the purpose of a college education as helping them prepare for the workforce, many found more value in their outside-of-the-classroom college experiences.

OPPORTUNITIES

To be successful in the current job market, graduates need more than a degree. They need work experience and soft-skills. They also must leverage their networks. Not every graduate has the opportunity to gain experience and develop networks.

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel



"REAL" LIFE ACCORDING TO GEN Z

"I'm just as excited as the next guy to get out in the *real world* and get working."

➤ Stan, Gen Z

"What is going to happen after college is when your *real life* actually starts."

➤ Harun, Gen Z

"As though there is such a thing as pockets of *fake life* that exist."

➤ Dr. Jason Buel, Millinial

NOTE

The participants I interviewed refer to life after college as "real" life. This is interesting because it implies they are currently living a "fake" life. Obviously, this is not the case, but this theme developed throughout my interviews.

THE ADULTING PROJECT

Madison Keel

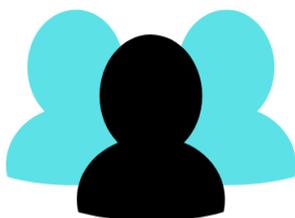


CURRENT BELIEFS



Although some students are nervous about finding employment and life after college, many are excited for adulting. Many students also believe they will be successful. More students fear the loss of safety nets more than the possibility of not finding employment.

Many factors, including personal factors, societal factors, environmental factors, economic factors, and behavioral factors affect a student's experience in preparing for the workforce. After all, not everyone is afforded the same opportunities or can take advantage of the opportunities they are given.



A college degree is less valuable than a college experience. Students seem to believe activities outside the classroom (i.e. networking and joining organizations) helped prepare them for their future more than their classes did.

Appendix B

Unused Survey Questions

1. What is your expected graduation date?

Answer choices included:

- a. Spring 2020 or Summer 2020
 - b. Fall 2020
 - c. Spring 2021 or Summer 2021
 - d. Fall 2021
 - e. Later than Fall 2021
2. How prepared do you feel for life after graduation?

Answer choices were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all prepared) to 10 (very prepared).

3. How prepared do you feel for the workforce?

Answer choices were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all prepared) to 10 (very prepared).

4. Compared to your classmates, how prepared do you believe you are for entering the workforce and life after graduation?

Answer choices were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (much less prepared) to 10 (much more prepared).

5. How do you believe your generation is perceived by employers?

Answer choices were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very negatively) to 10 (very positively).

Appendix C

Annotated Bibliography

“Adulthood.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 2019,

[merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/adulthood](https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/adulthood).

Merriam-Webster writes, “to adulthood is to behave like an adult, specifically to do the things—often mundane—that an adult is expected to do.” Although the term includes things such as living independently and maintaining a job, it also describes tasks such as doing laundry, paying bills, making appointments, registering a car, doing yardwork, and shopping for groceries.

Contemporary use of the word first appeared on Twitter in 2008 and 2009. In 2013, journalist Kelly Williams Brown published a book titled *Adulthood: How to Become a Grown-Up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps*. The book was a how-to guide for millennials detailing how to function as an autonomous adult. It was derived from her 2011 blog called *Adulthood*. In 2014, Mignon Fogarty, also known as Grammar Girl, named “adulthood” her Word of the Year.

This source provides readers with a solid understanding of the contemporary definition of “adulthood.” *Merriam-Webster* also provides examples of activities classified as “adulthood” and introduces readers to the history of the term and the emergence of the word on social media in 2008 and 2009. It mentions Kelly Williams Brown and her *Adulthood* book and blog. This source is useful for defining “adulthood” as it relates to my own research project. My research focus is on employment and career preparation rather than the other responsibilities included under the umbrella of “adulthood.” I will also focus on Generation-Z instead of Millennials. This source is helpful in writing my proposal and introducing my readers to the definition of adulthood and comparing my use of the term with the contemporary uses of the term. I may wish to conduct

further research into Kelly Williams Brown blog and book that *Merriam-Webster* mentions on this webpage.

Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roska. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2011.

In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Arum and Roska discuss how many of today's college students graduate unable to satisfying employers with their writing and critical thinking skills. College students enter college unprepared for rigorous academic tasks and with attitudes that are at odds with academic achievement. Despite this lack of academic focus, students still achieve high grade point averages because their classes require minimal effort. As a result, students spend more time working and socializing which helps explain why Gen Z students tend to value their college experiences more than their college classes; they put more effort into their experiences than they do their classes.

When students feel as if they are not engaging with course content, they deem it irrelevant to their academic and professional pursuits. As a result, they focus their time on other activities and disengage with their classes. It makes sense that if students do not enjoy school and the education system, they will not devote much effort to their classes. Also, if they do not enjoy it and feel as if they do not retain course concepts because of the way the classes are taught and tested, no wonder they do feel as if schooling is irrelevant to their academic pursuits. This helps to explain why many of my interviewees felt that a college experience was more valuable to their pursuits than their classes. Perhaps, like Arum and Roska found, these students also devote more effort into the socializing and extracurricular activities because they perceive these activities as a more rewarding and beneficial investment of their time.

Ball, Cheryl E., and Ryan M. Moeller. "Converging the ASS[umptions] between U and ME; or, How New Media Can Bridge a Scholarly/Creative Split in English Studies." *Computers and Composition Online*, 2008, pp. 1-15. <http://cconlinejournal.org/convergence/>

In "Converging the ASS[umptions] between U and ME," Cheryl E. Ball and Ryan M. Moeller argue in favor of bridging the gap between scholarly and creative genres. They suggest that new media and multimodal media can help bridge this gap. They believe that media can be both scholarly and creative. Ball and Moeller also encourage the integration of creative scholarly works in schools. They believe students and faculty could both benefit from an updated form of the traditional scholarly essay. Perhaps "students should approach learning academic literacies through ways of composing with which they are already familiar." Ball and Moeller give examples such as a Facebook page or YouTube video that employ both persuasive and scholarly appeals as well as emotional and creative appeals.

The most common form of scholarly work is an academic essay. However, as a student who desires creativity, I have always found myself bored and unengaged when reading and/or composing traditional scholarly essays. Therefore, I decided to complete a project beyond the scopes of a traditional essay for this project. I used the Ball and Moeller article as an academic source to support my opinion that traditional essays are not necessarily the only (or best) way to share scholarly content with others. Furthermore, essays only reach a specific audience whereas a more creative project might be more engaging to and appeal to a wider audience. I agree with Ball and Moeller in the sense that creative projects should not be disregarded as scholarly simply because they take a form other than a traditional article or essay. Therefore, for my Honor's Thesis, I decided to share "scholarly research" in the form of a documentary.

Bryan, Elizabeth, and Leigh Ann Simmons. "Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students." *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2009, pp. 391-406. Project Muse, doi:10.1353/csd.0.0081

Elizabeth Bryan and Leigh Ann Simmons, authors of "Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students" found that first-generation college students typically come from close-knit families and communities that do not have knowledge about the college experience. As a result, first-generation college students enter college without knowing what to expect and unable to share their new experiences with empathetic family members. Furthermore, first-generation college students feel pressured from themselves and from their families to be successful. Families want their first-generation college student to have a better life than they had with a limited education, and the student does not want to let down his or her family.

A large percentage of NCWC's student body is first-generation college students, so it is important to understand the special circumstances of these students. Although they may feel close with their families, they also experience unique challenges such as their family not understanding their experiences and feeling pressured to succeed. As such, they may have a high expectation that college is their key to success. However, these students also tend to enter college less prepared and knowledgeable than their non-first-generation peers. Many of the individuals did not discuss their family life or whether or not they were first-generation college students, so I cannot conclude a general consensus of my finding on this topic. However, Brianna did discuss that people who did not attend college seemed to think that a college education would have

helped them get better jobs. Therefore, she was likely exposed to people who did not fully understand the college experience and whose opinions on college may have made her feel pressured to succeed. If college is the key to success, as a college graduate, she should be successful. Brianna, however, has realized through her experiences that getting a good job is not guaranteed just because she now has a degree.

Cooper, Preston. "New York Fed Highlights Underemployment Among College Graduates."

Forbes, Forbes, 13 July, 2017,

forbes.com/sites/prestoncooper2/2017/07/13/new-york-fed-highlights-underemployment-among-college-graduates/#75f701bc40d8.

Although Preston Cooper recognizes that college graduates have lower unemployment rates than those without a college degree, he claims that graduates do not use the skills they learned in college in their career. He reports that 40 – 50% of college graduates between the ages of 22 and 27 work in a job that does not require a college degree. Although some of the underemployed graduates will advance from an entry-level job to a job that requires a college degree, this is not the case for all underemployed graduates. Cooper explains that 34% of the entry-level jobs filled by recent, underemployed graduates pay more than \$45,000 a year. However, fifteen years ago, 43% of recent graduates were earning more than \$45,000 annually. Society spends billions of dollars per year to support college educations, but if these degrees are not adding value to graduates in the workforce, why spend the money? Also, as more students pursue a college degree, the value of these degrees decrease because they do not help graduates stand out from other job candidates.

This article supports Jeffrey Dorfman's claim in "Dispelling The Myth of Underemployed College Graduates" that the media loves stories of underemployed college graduates. However, Cooper mentions that many underemployed college graduates make more than \$45,000 a year. Dorfman mentions the issue with the definition of underemployment. He says that the college graduate underemployment rate includes all graduates working in an occupation considered to not require a college degree. He contends that different employers may have different requirements for the same occupation. For example, some restaurants may not require a college degree for a management position while others may. Dorfman also says that just because an occupation does not require a college degree does not mean that employers do not benefit from their degrees. Cooper describes how the worth of a college education has decreased over the years. The percentage of recent graduates in entry-level positions earning more than \$45,000 has decreased over the past 15 years, and employers seem to value college degrees less than they did previously. This is because more individuals are pursuing higher education, so a college degree does not help a job candidate stand out among other applicants as much as it previously did. Many of the individuals I interviewed in my documentary seem to agree that a college degree is not very valuable on its own. Instead, these individuals discussed that a college degree needs to be accompanied by experience and soft skills such as time management, communication, and professionalism. Also, some mentioned that they found college experiences such as community involvement, leadership roles, and networking opportunities more valuable in preparing them for the workforce than the information they learned in their college classes.

Dorfman, Jeffrey, contributor. "Dispelling The Myth Of Underemployed College Graduates."

Forbes, Forbes, 23 Jan. 2017,

forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2017/01/23/dispelling-the-myth-of-underemployed-college-graduates/#57cce63c502c.

According to Jeffrey Dorfman, the media reports of a 40% underemployed college graduates is not the reality. He claims that with a college degree, the chances of being unemployed or underemployed are relatively low. He says that people should keep in mind what economists call frictional unemployment rate. This refers to the portion of unemployment caused by individuals who are changing jobs. For example, they may be taking a few weeks to search for a better job or they may have quit one job and are waiting to start a new one. The frictional unemployment rate is estimated to fall between 2% and 2.5%. This is considered normal and not problematic. When considering frictional unemployment, the unemployment rate for college graduates is extraordinarily low because the unemployment rate for college graduates is about 2.5%.

It is promising for college graduates that the unemployment rates for college graduates are as low as they are. In fact, according to Dorfman, it seems that the unemployment rate of college graduates can be explained by individuals who are changing jobs. If Dorfman is correct, which several of my other sources seem to verify that the unemployment rate among college graduates is very low, this means the current job landscape seems promising for recent graduates. Perhaps they have little reason to worry about not finding jobs. Nevertheless, Dorfman also claims that the media showcases stories about unemployed and underemployed college graduates. If college students are fearful about being unemployed or underemployed, perhaps their fear is rooted in these stories that they see in the media. Therefore, their perceptions of the

current job market would be skewed, and they may then believe that unemployment rates are higher than they actually are.

"Employment and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment," *The Condition of Education 2018*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, May 2019, nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cbc.asp.

In this source, the unemployment rate refers to the "percentage of persons in the civilian labor force (i.e., all civilians who are employed or seeking employment) who are not working and who made specific efforts to find employment sometime during the prior 4 weeks." This source focuses on young adults (aged 25-34) and examines trends in employment rate and unemployment rate. In 2018, employment rate was highest for those with a Bachelor's degree or higher. In 2018, the unemployment rate was also lowest for those with a Bachelor's degree or higher. As education level decreased, employment rate tended to decrease, and unemployment rate tended to increase.

This source provides a good definition of what is meant by "unemployment rate" and explains the relationship between educational attainment and unemployment rates. Although correlation does not indicate causation, as education level increases, unemployment rates decrease. This trend may not exist because a higher education level *causes* the lower unemployment rate; Instead, this trend may be influenced by external factors such as demographics, economic status, or available opportunity. Nevertheless, those who receive a bachelor's degree should be aware that they seem to be at an advantage. Their unemployment rate is low- the lowest for all educational attainment levels. This supports the idea that the current job market seems relatively promising for college graduates. In connection to my work

on “adulting,” this research is interesting because these findings connect bachelor's degree programs with higher rates of employment attainability, which is the goal for many college students. However, this article does not discuss the quality of employment that students find or the financial earnings they receive after gaining employment. This leads me to wonder if the employment rate is worth the trade off in students loan debt.

Friedman, Zack. “Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2020: A Record \$1.6 Trillion.”

Forbes, Forbes, 3 Feb. 2020,

forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2020/02/03/student-loan-debt-statistics/#482f9b92281f

Zack Friedman provides statistics for 2020 that illustrate the seriousness of the student loan debt crisis. Currently in the United States, there are 44.7 million people who collectively owe about \$1.46 trillion in student loan debt. This type of debt is the second highest consumer debt, and it is only exceeded by mortgage debt. Student loan debt is also increasing. The average debt for graduates of 2018 was \$29,200. This is a 2% increase from 2017. The state of North Carolina ranks 10th highest for total student loan debt outstanding among residents with a state student loan balance of \$44.4 billion among 1.2 million borrowers. More than half of U.S. student loan borrows (23.2 million of them) are under the age of 34. As of 2019, there were 8.2 million borrowers in the United States under the age of 24 who collectively had \$121.2 billion in student loan debt. There were 15 million borrowers between the ages of 25 and 34 who collectively had \$501.5 billion in student loan debt. There were 14.1 million borrowers between the ages of 35 and 49 who collectively had \$575.5 billion in student loan debt. There were 6 million borrowers between the ages of 50 and 61 who collectively had \$241.2 billion in student loan debt. Finally,

there were 2.1 million borrowers age 62 or older who collectively had \$75.9 billion in student loan debt.

With the increasing severity of the student loan debt crisis, I wonder if the price of a college education is worth the financial trade-off. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that unemployment rate is negatively correlated with unemployment rate. As of March 2020, the difference in unemployment between individuals with a 4-year degree or higher and individuals with less than a high school degree increased to 5.7%. The difference between those with a 4-year degree or higher and those with a high-school diploma is 2.4%. Friedman found that about 8.2 million iGen'ers have a combined \$121.2 billion in student loan debt. Additionally, Cooper reports on the decreasing worth of 4-year college degree because more individuals are obtaining a bachelor's degree, and thus, this credential is not helping graduates stand out among other job candidates to the extent a college degree would have helped them stand out in previous generation. Some of my participants seem to share similar beliefs about the worth of a college degree. For example, Dr. Lewis said that she believed a college degree in itself is not valuable.

Hutchison, Micol. "Influence of First Generation Status on Students' Perceptions of Faculty."

College Quarterly, vol. 20, no. 1, 2017, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1131151.pdf.

Virginia Commonwealth University's Director of Program Development and Student Success in University College, Micol Hutchison explains that many studies demonstrate the first-generation college students are less engaged in college on social, intellectual, and academic levels. First-generation college students engage with faculty less often than non-first-generation students. These students are also more often minorities, more likely to live at or near home, more likely to work while in college, have more financial stressors, and more likely to come from

tight-knit families. First generation college students are less prepared for college; less likely to have decided on a major prior to enrollment; more likely to face social, academic, cultural and financial challenges; and less likely to participate in volunteer work and extracurricular activities.

All of these challenges faced by first-generation college students help explain why these students may face a disconnect between their expectations of a college education and their experiences. If these students enter college with the expectation that college will prepare them for the workforce, yet they are not properly prepared for college, they will not reap the full potential of the college experience. When first-generation college students, who already face social and economic challenges, do not decide on a major and do not engage with the faculty and extracurricular activities that will help them build the networks they will later leverage to find employment opportunities, they will likely conclude their college education did not adequately prepare them for the workforce. After all, many of the individuals I interviewed in my documentary discussed the importance of leveraging networks, and many said their extracurricular activities helped prepare them for the workforce more than their classroom activities did.

However, it is important to consider how systemic factors that individuals have no control over shape students' abilities (and inabilities) to take advantage of the opportunities that make them more employable. For example, although students understand the importance of work experience, community involvement, and leveraging networks, not all students have access to these opportunities. While in college, some students must work entry-level retail jobs unrelated to their desired career field so they can afford to attend college or help their families. As such, these students do not have time to get involved in extracurricular activities, and they may not be able to complete an internship in their desired field. North Carolina Wesleyan College also has

many international students. These students are unable to get involved in the community, leverage networks, and work off campus because of governmental regulations and their lack of transportation. Although it is relatively easy to say what students *need* to do in order to be successful and make the most of their college experience, it is important to remember that many factors influence an individual's situation, and not everyone is afforded the equal privileges and opportunities.

Jones, Rodney H. and Christoph A. Hafner. "Mediated Me." *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 1-15.

In this chapter of *Understanding Digital Literacies*, Jones and Hafner discuss the affordances and constraints of different mediums. They note that one of the limitations of books and print sources is that the author can only connect with readers in isolation. After all, reading a book is a rather solitary task. Meanwhile, the internet allows for more participation and interactivity. For example, viewers can comment on a YouTube video and interact with others who have also commented on the video. Furthermore, the internet also allows individuals to publish their ideas to millions of people rather than just a select few. In other words, digital mediums and the affordances of the internet allow the author to reach a wider audience. The internet also allows for more interactivity from the audience.

This chapter helped support my claim that print mediums reach a limited audience, and I would not reach very many people if I only wrote a scholarly essay for this project. I strive to appeal to a larger audience and, with a society made up of people who are more engaged by visuals than by large bodies of text, I decided to share my research findings through the visual medium of documentary. I also decided to publish my documentary publicly on YouTube so

more people had the opportunity to view my documentary. These decisions should help me share my research findings with a larger and broader audience. Furthermore, I could use social media, email, and online networking to easily share the link to my documentary with others. The affordances of the internet will also allow those with whom I directly share my project with to also easily share my project with people they know.

Kolko, Jed. "What the Job Market Looks Like for Today's College Graduates."

Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business Review, 9 May 2019,

hbr.org/2019/05/what-the-job-market-looks-like-for-todays-college-graduates.

Jed Kolko provides his perspective on the topic of Gen Z's job priorities. He writes that they are pursuing jobs in the arts, entertainment, and social services more frequently than previous generations. He also implies that these fields are higher-risk and lower-paying than quant-focused jobs and positions related to the financial industry. Kolko says that individuals with a college degree have lower unemployment rates, higher earnings, and increased job security compared to those without a college degree. He also believes that the unemployment rates are not at an all-time low, but the contemporary job market seems stable and promising for Gen-Z college graduates.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and the US Department of Labor Statistics support Kolko's claims that college graduates have lower unemployment rates than those who did not graduate from college, and the contemporary job market seems stable. Based on my interviews, some of my subjects seem to believe the job market is stable and promising, especially for "top talent" or those who are willing to go an "extra half-mile" to stand out from other job applicants. However, some of my subjects also

perceive the current job market as terrible and depressing. It is interesting that the subject with this perspective is hoping to pursue a job in the arts and entertainment. Although Kolko states that the contemporary job market looks promising for Gen Z graduates, and students with a college degree have lower unemployment rates, higher earnings, and increased job security compared to those without a college degree, how might these factors be influenced by the types of jobs that graduates pursue? Kolko also mentioned that graduates are increasingly pursuing creative passions and social work over higher-paying and possibly lower-risk jobs. I am left to wonder how the contemporary job landscape differs by industry. Based on my interviews, Lemar's perception of the film industry hints that differences exist among industries. However, I did not explore this factor in my research as it was not a focus of my project.

Kress, Gunther. "Gains and Losses: New Forms of Texts, Knowledge, and Learning."

Computers and Composition, vol. 22, no. 1, Dec. 2005, pp. 5-22. *Google Scholar*,
doi: 10.1016/j.compcom.2004.12.004.

In "Gains and Losses: New Forms of Text, Knowledge, and Learning," Gunther Kress discussed what may be gained and what may be lost as representation through writing moves to primarily representation through image. He writes, "it seems evident to many commentators that writing is giving way, is being displaced by image in many instances of communication where previously it had held sway" (5). He contends that the biggest difference between word-dominated representation and image-dominated representation is the way in which each structures narratives (by which he means the authors main idea) and the way in which the reader derives meaning from each. For example, when a screen is the contemporary canvas and the screen is dominated by the logic of image, meaning is dominated by readers' engagement with the images and the

meaning the reader associates with the images. In traditional written pages, the author has the power in portraying meaning to the reader. In image-based representation, meaning is derived in the interest of the reader.

As writing is displaced by image in communication, my medium for this project is reflective of this trend. Traditionally, for an Honors Thesis, many students compose essays. I, however, did not want to limit myself to the affordances of a traditionally word essay. Instead, I decided to create a documentary for this project. Although documentary has its own affordances and limitations that may have posed unique challenges in the completion of this project, I ultimately decided documentary was the most appealing medium for this project. One difference that Kress mentions is who controls the meaning of the narrative. As the filmmaker, I do have control over how I structure my documentary narrative, but the “meaning” and interpretation of my project is left to the viewer to discern. For this project, I think that is okay. I will present my argument in the documentary, but how one interprets the film and what he or she takes away from the film will be unique for each viewer.

“North Carolina Wesleyan College.” *U.S. News*, U.S. News,

[usnews.com/best-colleges/north-carolina-wesleyan-2951/student-life](https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/north-carolina-wesleyan-2951/student-life)

US News offers demographic information on North Carolina Wesleyan College students. The total undergraduate enrollment for NCWC is a little over 2,000 students. There are 2,008 undergraduate students enrolled, and there are 27 graduate students enrolled at the college. Of these students, 47% are first-generation college students. 71% of students live in on-campus housing while 29% of students live off-campus. Tuition and fees total to \$32,050 a year. The

average freshman retention rate is 58%. The student to faculty ration is 18:1. Classes at North Carolina Wesleyan College tend to be small with 78.1% of classes having less than 20 students.

North Carolina Wesleyan College students are often first-generation college students. If the parents of these students did not receive a college education, the struggles of finding a job may have still been discussed in their families, among their peers, and in the media. In other words, if students saw their parents struggle to find or keep a stable, high-paying job, they may hold negative views about the contemporary job landscape. Furthermore, parents who did not attend college may perceive the worth of a college education differently than those who attended college. For example, one subject that I interviewed said that she frequently hears from those around her who did not attend college that “things would be easier and better if only I went to college.” These people who did not attend college view a college education as very valuable and believe it would solve many, if not all, of their current career problems. However, is a college education really as valuable as non-graduates seem to think? The reports that answer this question tend to contradict. Whereas *Forbes*' Jed Kolko suggests that college degree holders have very few issues finding jobs, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that this only true for 1% of the populations

Steinmetz, Katy. “This Is What ‘Adulthood’ Means.” *Time*, Time USA LLC, 8 June. 2016, time.com/4361866/adulthood-definition-meaning/.

The verb “adult” means “to behave in an adult manner” and “engage in activities associated with adulthood.” The term “adulthood” is the noun form of the verb “adult.” The term is associated with millennials’ perceived delayed development and the fact that they experience life stages such as owning homes and starting families later than previous generations. Millennials

may humorously describe their engagement in adult behaviors as a way to acknowledge, make fun of, or come to grips with their (late) transition into adulthood. “To say you are ‘adulthood’ is to, on some level, create distance between you and what are implied to be *actual* adults who are adulthood 100% of the time and therefore have little reason to acknowledge it.” Some criticize the use of the word. Katy Steinmetz quotes author Ben Zimmer who writes that the term is attached to individuals who are coming of age. The term tends to be used by individuals as they begin to engage in adult activities for the first time.

This source provides me with a useful definition of “adulthood” as it is used in contemporary language. Although this source focuses on millennials and their delayed development, the definition of the term is still applicable with the definition of “adulthood” I am using in *The Adulthood Project*. As Ben Zimmer said, the term tends to be used by individuals “who find themselves doing adult things for the first time.” In *The Adulthood Project*, I am focusing on the young adults of Generation Z as they enter the workforce. My use of the term “adulthood” is in no way meant to imply that Generation-Z individuals experience the same assumed delays as Millennials. Before I compare and/or contrast the experiences of Millennials and Generation-Z adults in terms of their development and the average age they experience major life stages, I will need to conduct more research. Overall, this source is helpful in writing my proposal and introducing readers to the term “adulthood” and how my uses of the term compare and contrast with contemporary uses of the term.

“Table A-4. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 25 Years and Over by Educational Attainment.” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, Division of Labor Force Statistics, 03 Apr. 2020, [bls.gov/news.release/empstat.t04.htm](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.t04.htm).

This source reports the numbers, in thousands, of employment status of the civilian population 25 years and over by educational attainment. The rates are reported not seasonally adjusted in March 2019, February 2020, and March 2020. The rates are reported, for some months, seasonally adjusted from March 2019 to March 2020. This table is frequently updated. In March 2020, the non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for individuals over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher was 2.4% compared to 3.9% for those with some college or an associate degree, 4.8% for high school graduates with no college, and 8.1 % for those with less than a high school diploma. In March 2020, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for individuals over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher was 2.5% compares to 3.7% for those with some college or an associate degree, 4.4% for high school graduates with no college, and 6.8% for those with less than a high school diploma.

Again, another source supports that the unemployment rate for college graduates is low. It also supports that as educational level increases, unemployment rate decreases. However, it currently seems unclear whether or not these factors are causal or only correlated. As I mentioned before, factors such as economic status or available opportunity may influence both education level and unemployment rate. This is a good source for some statistics of unemployment rate by educational attainment. This source is frequently updated to only include certain months, so the records of previous months are not permanently available on this source. That is one limitation of this source. It does appear that college graduates are at an advantage in the contemporary job market. The difference in unemployment rate of individuals with a 4-year degree or higher and those with less than a high-school diploma is 5.7%. The difference between individuals with a 4-year degree or higher and individuals with only a high school diploma is 2.4%. As of 2019, 8.2 million borrowers in the United States under the age of 24 collectively had

\$121.2 billion in student loan debt. Exactly how much difference is 5.7 percent, and is this difference worth the cost of a degree?

Twenge, Jean M. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2017.

According to social psychologist and generational scholar Jean Twenge who titled Gen Z as iGen, iGen'ers are unsure whether or not they will succeed in this increasingly competitive world. Twenge found that iGen'ers have a strong work ethic but are uncertain about their prospects and ability to get a job in their desired field. They are "running scared" because they desire security in an insure world. Twenge writes that iGen'ers are less concerned about *where* they will work, and they are more concerned with finding a job. Twenge proposes that today's college students believe they have to get a college degree to achieve the same things that their parents got with only a high school degree or less. Twenge also states that over the past decades, researchers focused mainly on Millennials, and they have spent limited time understanding Generation Z. Generation Z currently makes up the majority of the traditional-age college graduates, and they will soon begin to dominate the pool of entry-level talent in the workforce. Jean Twenge writes that "iGen'ers aren't even convinced that their education will help them get good jobs or give them information they will need later" (170). In comparison to past generations, Generation Z students place a larger focus on getting a better job than getting a general education. These college students believe that the purpose of a college education is to get a better job than those who did not attend college upon graduation. School and college are

perceived as a means to an end, but some high school students are not sure that college is the best way to achieve their goal of getting a good job.

The current lack of focus on Generation Z makes the aims of my documentary valuable to the today's collection of research on the group. Although college graduates do face uncertainty, my subjects held a variety of opinions on the contemporary job market. Some believed they would succeed, some believed getting a job would be easy, some were confident in their abilities and the market, and others believed they lived in a dog-eat-dog world when it came to finding a job. One interesting connection between Twenge's research and my own research is that I did uncover some anxieties over whether or not graduates would succeed; However, these anxieties were less focused on finding a job and more so on affording bills and living expenses. This being said, perhaps students do need, or at least feel like they need, a college degree in order to achieve the same as their parents. However, these students will be at a disadvantage is they acquire student loan debt that their parents never had to pay.

Although, on some level, my own perspectives align with Twenge's claim that Generation Z students are in school to get a job and believe that they are in class so that they can get a better job, all my interview subjects did not seem to share the exact same opinion. Although to some extent, but more so before this project, I believed that college is a means to an end, I received a variety of opinions during my interviews. For example, many did say that the purpose of a college education is to prepare students for life after college. However, they believe that this preparation expands far beyond the lessons taught in a classroom. The college experience and what students make of their time in college (networking, opportunities, community and campus involvement, etc.) seems to be better preparation than simply attending classes. Furthermore, one participant said that a college education is not valuable on its own. Instead, she believes that a

college education is one tool in a toolbox, and students need much more than a degree to help them become successful. Furthermore, many of my participants believed that part of the purpose of a college education is to prepare students for their career, but they also said that the purpose of a college education is much more than simply preparing graduates for a job.

“Unemployment Rate 2.1 Percent for College Grads, 4.3 Percent for High School Grads in

April 2018.” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, Division of Labor Force Statistics, 10 May 2018, bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/unemployment-rate-2-1-percent-for-college-grads-4-3-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-april-2018.htm?view_full

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in April 2018 decreased to 3.9%, and remained stable at 4.1% for 6 months. Among individuals age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher, the unemployment rate was 2.1% in April 2018 and lower than the rate of 2.4% in 2017. This chart, titled “Unemployment Rate 2.1 Percent for College Grads, 4.3 Percent for High School Grads in April 2018”, lists the unemployment rate by educational attainment (less than a high school diploma; high school graduates, no college; some college or associate degree, and bachelor's degree and higher) for every month from April 1998 to April 2018. The unemployment rate in April 2018 was lower than the unemployment rate of individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher in 2010 (ranging from 4.4% to 5%) immediately after the recession.

Since the recession, the unemployment rate has decreased. However, today's graduates grew up during the recession between late 2000 to early 2010. Since today's graduates grew up during the recession between late 2000 to early 2010, their parents' situations may have shaped their impression of college and the job market. For example, perhaps iGen'ers witnessed their

parents struggling to find employment and feared they would also struggle to find employment. Perhaps Gen Z also watched their parents struggle to find jobs related to their college field of study, and maybe this impacted their understanding of the worth of their degrees. If their parents struggled to find employment without a college degree, maybe Generation Z students believed that a college degree would help them avoid, or at least lessen, these struggles. On the contrary, Gen Z students may fear that their education will not prepare them for the workforce consequently decreasing their perceptions of the value of education. They may wonder: if not to prepare me for the future, what is the purpose of an academic education? Of course, the current job market is not the same as the job market during the recession. Nevertheless, children are a product of their environment, and they may anticipate problems finding employment if that was their parents' situation. IGen'ers perceptions of the worth of a college degree is also likely influenced by whether or not their parents who struggled to find employment had a college degree.