**Careers for Recent College Graduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**A Review of the Financial, Professional and Psychological Perspectives**

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**Abstract**

Graduating college and transitioning into the workforce has always been a time of change and stress for students. As these students become full-time employees, they are faced with new responsibilities and requirements of the workforce, while simultaneously losing the guidance and counsel of their college advisors, professors, and peers. This year, the transition is all the starker and more ominous due to the omnipresent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed every facet of the way that people live. From casual interactions with friends to corporate communication with coworkers, the harsh reality of a deadly and widespread virus has altered the course of people’s lives both personally and professionally. In addition, the stress and uncertainty of these times have placed psychological hardship on recent college graduates as they fight to find careers in the shrinking job-market, to maintain stability in the volatile financial crisis, and to attain psychological well-being amidst global devastation.

*Keywords*: career, COVID-19 pandemic, job security, alternative career path, recent college graduate, mental health

**Introduction**

Traditionally, Americans have considered “successful careers” to include stable, 9-5, Monday-Friday jobs (Brown, 2016). However, our job market has changed dramatically in the past several years; so much so, in fact, that those “traditional” jobs described in the previous sentence are exceedingly hard to come by or do not provide a living wage against the backdrop of our current economic landscape. Whereas most college graduates in 1980 would graduate college, begin working with a company, and stay with that same company until retirement, today’s college graduates are experiencing much more mobility and much less security than previous generations of the workforce (Brown 2016, Poppick 2015). In addition to the aforementioned stresses, today’s recent college graduates are faced with the hurdles of a global pandemic, hereafter referred to as COVID-19. In other words, today’s graduates have to explore non-traditional options in order to earn competitive salaries. In light of our changing job market, both individual and societal views of success have changed. While maintaining a source of income for recent college undergraduates is a vital and necessary step toward living life in the “real world,” now it is imperative for students to understand and explore alternative ways to achieve financial stability, professional fulfillment and a state of well-being. While it

**Literature Review**

The literature on career alternatives for recent college graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic is new but far-reaching. During the time of the global pandemic, researchers have addressed various matters including traditional career paths, the impact of the pandemic on millennials, financial stability, professional fulfillment and mental health and well-being. All the data referenced in the review were produced during a time frame of the last five years, and additional resources found in the references section were from the last fifteen years. The data were found through scholarly databases such as the ones found on Marywood University website, and Google Scholar. Keyword searches such as career, COVID-19 pandemic, job security, alternative career path, recent college graduate, mental health were conducted.

The objective of this literature review is to provide clarity to researchers, educators and advisors attempting to educate students on their post-graduate paths when they are faced with the dilemma of where to turn next during these unprecedented times. Additionally, this literature review explores several subtopics including the COVID-19 Pandemic and its effect on millennials, how financial stability is affected, how professional fulfillment has been altered,  how mental health and well-being is impacted due to job insecurity and the benefits and hindrances for students who held part-time jobs throughout their educational journey. The existing literature is lacking in the sense that researchers and higher education professionals do not have the information needed to provide proper and effective guidance to their target audiences.

***Traditional Career Paths***

Traditionally, Americans have considered “successful careers” to include stable, 9-5, Monday-Friday jobs (Brown, 2016). However, our job market has changed dramatically in the past several years; so much so, in fact, that those “traditional” jobs described in the previous sentence are exceedingly hard to come by or do not provide a living wage against the backdrop of our current economic landscape. Whereas most college graduates in 1980 would graduate college, begin working with a company, and stay with that same company until retirement, today’s college graduates are experiencing much more mobility and much less security than previous generations of the workforce (Brown 2016, Poppick 2015). In other words, today’s graduates have to explore non-traditional options in order to earn competitive salaries. In light of our changing job market, both individual and societal views of success have changed. While maintaining a source of income for recent college undergraduates is a vital and necessary step toward living life in the “real world,” it is important for students to understand there are many ways to earn money and find both personal and professional success.

Typically, by their junior year of college, students from science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors have a good idea of the direction their career. This is an impressive feat in the sense that it offers improved job security, decreased pressure senior year, and fewer questions about career trajectory. However, students pursuing Arts or Humanities majors have a more difficult time determining how to use their degrees in a way that is both personally stimulating and financially sound (Brown, 2016).

The literature review revealed the importance of establishing self-worth in terms of contributions not only to personal growth and goals but, more importantly, to communal and societal efforts and projects. In order to celebrate the successes of both traditional and non-traditional students and careers, our society needs to place more value on the dignity of work and the pride of commitment rather than putting quite so much emphasis on monetary values or leadership trajectories. Of course, salary and rank are important aspects of professional success and, for better or for worse, personal satisfaction. Along that vein, it is important to elucidate which aspects of one’s satisfaction and success are tied to moving up the traditional ladder of a career path and which involve forging a new path or trying a different way (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015).

Overall, the literature lended to the hypothesis that “successful careers” which include stable, 9-5, Monday-Friday jobs, are not the only route for professional workers whether they are in college working part-time, or graduated working full-time (Brown, 2016). Balance and flexibility are important to mental satisfaction and workplace performance.

***COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Millennials***

The COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping and restructuring the way the world works, the jobs available, and the path forward. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that in the month of March 2020, the unemployment rate increased 4.4 percent which translates to 7.1 million people unemployed, the largest over-the-month increase in the unemployment rate since January 1975. According to the Wall Street Journal, economists predict that the April 2020 jobs report will show a 16.1% unemployment rate and the loss of 22 million nonfarm payroll jobs. The job losses sustained in one month are the equivalent of eliminating every job created in the past decade. Although employment in every field decreased, health care and social assistance including healthcare office workers and child day care services, leisure and hospitality including food services and drinking establishments, professional and business services including travel arrangement and reservation services, retail trade including clothing, furniture, sporting goods, hobbies, books, and music increased most significantly. These staggering numbers indicate jobs lost due to the effects of coronavirus and the mitigation measures used to contain it.

According to Data for Progress, 52% of millennials (people under the age of 45) have lost a job, been put on leave, or had their hours reduced due to the pandemic whereas 26% of people over the age of 45 have suffered similar setbacks. Additionally, nearly half of millennials reported that the economic stimulus checks sent by the United States government would only cover one to two weeks of expenses whereas only a third of older adults reported similar restrictions. Millennials are already in a more precarious earning position since they entered the workforce during the Great Recession. During the recession, half of recent graduates were unable to find work and the millennial unemployment rate ranged as high as 20-30 percent. Going into the 2008 financial crisis, Generation X members had twice the assets of Millennials; today, Generation X members have four times the assets and double the savings of Millennials.4 In sum, Millennials are experiencing the second “once-in-a-lifetime” economic recession of their lifetimes with fewer assets and safety nets than the generations before them in either scenario.

However, although millennials are less wealthy than their parents, they are largely more educated. According to the Pew Research Center, today’s young adults are much better educated than their grandparents, as the share of young adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher has steadily climbed since 1968. Among Millennials, around four-in-ten or 39% of those ages 25 to 37 have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with just 15% of the Silent Generation, roughly a quarter of Baby Boomers and about three-in-ten Gen Xers or 29% when they were the same age. Women have made especially large strides in educational advancement. Among women of the Silent Generation, only 11% had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree when they were young (ages 25 to 37 in 1968). Millennial women are about four times (43%) as likely as their Silent predecessors to have completed as much education at the same age. Millennial men are also better educated than their predecessors. About one-third of Millennial men (36%) have at least a bachelor’s degree, nearly double the share of Silent Generation men (19%) when they were ages 25 to 37.

Millennials have long had the reputation of being “job-hoppers,” bouncing from job to job in search of one that checks all of their boxes, both personally and professionally. Society has scorned millennials, accordingly, believing them to be coddled and indulged. However, Millennials are just as likely to stay with their employers as their Generation X counterparts were when they were young adults. Millennials even have longer track records with their employer, 22% staying with their same employer for 5 years or more as compared with 21.8% of Generation X workers. The societal misconception about millennials work ethic actually comes from, ironically, millennials working even harder than the older generations. Millennials often juggle several jobs in the “gig economy,” task-based labor popularized during the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Gig jobs are often considered “side-hustle” jobs, supplemental occupations to offset the cost of living that one’s regular job is not quite able to cover. However, some Millennials have turned these stopgaps designed employments into careers that are able to support their livelihoods. Although many workers pick up temporary engagements wherever they can, for example, waitressing a random party, photographing a single wedding, or driving an occasional Uber or Lyft, some millennials have turned these gig jobs into consistent employment. According to a study by Intuit, the gig economy was estimated to be about 43% of the workforce. However, with the collapse of our service-based economy, Millennials who relied on gig jobs for their paychecks are in even greater peril than their traditionally employed counterparts. The people participating in the gig economy often do not have health insurance coverage, a particularly scary realization in a world ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gig workers also are not able to collect unemployment when they are not working because they do not log traditional 9-5 hours and are often not considered “full-time.” Although the gig economy affords workers personal freedom and accountability, it also leaves workers abandoned and alone in times of crisis.

***Financial Perspectives on Recent College Graduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

In a recent survey of over 9000 Americans, younger Americans are reporting that the COVID-19 pandemic has “negatively impacted, or even wrecked, their financial stability at rates almost twice as high as their Baby Boomer parents” (Leonhardt 2020).  The survey was completed from the Age Wave and Edward Jones foundation and found that about one third of Millennials, Americans ages 24 to 39, and Gen Z, Americans ages 18 to 23, have experienced extremely or very negative impact on their financial security due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, only 16% of Baby Boomers, Americans ages 56 to 74, and 6% of the Silent Generation, Americans ages 75 and up, reported a similar impact (Leonhardt 2020). This survey speaks to both the immediate, tangible financial devastation that the pandemic has wreaked on recent college graduates and their peers, as well as the long-term implications this will have on their ability to accumulate wealth, plan for their futures, and achieve financial stability. Because members of the older generations have had more time to develop safety nets, they are able to withstand the devastation and turbulence that the volatile financial markets. Since the pandemic, as many as 45% of millennials have reported that they are not able to put any of their earnings into savings (Bracken 2020). Additionally, older Americans also benefit from access to fixed income sources such as Medicare benefits and Social Security benefits, which have not yet been impacted by the pandemic.

In a deeper exploration of the negative financial effects that the pandemic has had on Millennials, Morning Consult researchers have determined through a survey of 4400 American adults that as many as 3 in 10 employed Millennials suffered a pay cut during the economic recession (Bracken 2020). As many as 1 in 5 millennials were even less fortunate and lost their jobs due to the pandemic-induced economic recession (Bracken 2020). Economists from Morning Consult reported that although “many millennials were scrappy enough to figure out how to supplement their incomes with nontraditional work arrangements, particularly through the gig economy and other forms of self-employment” (Bracken 2020). However, these jobs were often contract work which were largely cut or pared back during the pandemic since “from a legal and operational perspective,” that is one of the easier budgets cuts a business can make (Bracken 2020).

In addition to facing the second “once-in-a-lifetime” financial setback of their lifetimes, Millennials are also saddled with crippling student loan debt. Since the pandemic, 26% of millennials who have student loans say that their college degrees “definitely were not worth” their student loan debt (Williams 2020). The feelings of pessimism and regret have increased among Millennials since the onset of the pandemic; 10% more Millennials report being dissatisfied with their college experience in relation to its cost since the pandemic as compared to responses for a similar question in a survey completed prior to the pandemic.

***Professional Perspectives on Recent College Graduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immediate impact on the professional trajectories of recent college graduates. A study exploring how people choose careers and places of work when searching for their first post-graduate employment showed that factors like physical location, office environment, mentorship opportunities and organization culture are weighed heavily (Hall et al. 2020). Over 350 respondents confirmed that these factors are most influential in their job hunt. Unfortunately for current employees, the pandemic has hindered every single one of these facets.

Recent graduates who are interested in a position because of its geographical location no longer have the option to explore their surroundings to the fullest or experience the local community. Social distancing guidelines make it difficult for people to meet new people outside of their “COVID-19 pods” or even enjoy indoor experiences that would have been previously available to them. Recent graduates who are interested in an office environment have been stripped of the opportunity to utilize company technical equipment and office space because of the initial stay-at-home orders. Additionally, new employees are missing out on quality time with colleagues acting as mentors. While many people thrive in a remote working environment, some require in-person interaction with supervisors and coworkers to perform at their best. While many companies have pivoted to offer virtual networking and office culture events, this format does not always offer the same benefits as an in-person meeting or gathering.

Many recent graduates working under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions are unable to move up the career ladder in the same way that had initially been projected for them. Employees have spent time learning how to work virtually instead of learning new job responsibilities. They have had to wear other hats to accommodate shifting teams due to budget cuts and position elimination. They have learned that without in-person benefits like culture and coworkers they do not like their daily tasks in isolation. As the end of the pandemic has yet to be clarified, all of these elements impact recent graduates’ ability to find fulfillment in their professional roles not just now but in the future.

***Psychological Perspectives on Recent College Graduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

In any discussion of job insecurity and financial woes, mental health cannot be forgotten. Menendez-Espina et al describe job insecurity as a growing phenomenon, typical of an employment context characterized by high rates of temporary work and unemployment (Menendez-Espina, 2019). The term was originally coined in the eighties by Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt with the description of “the perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation.” In other words, job insecurity is defined both as a job that is part of the “flexible labor market” and is therefore more unstable; and as the stress felt by workers of flexible jobs that their jobs are transient and therefore could be lost at any time. Multiple research studies have shown a direct relationship between job insecurity and impaired mental health.  When a worker perceives their working situation to be unstable or precarious, their fear of job loss rises. Since job insecurity is a generator of stress, there is evidence of many negative effects of workers’ well-being and mental health.

***Job Insecurity***

Traditionally, workers might cope with the stress of job insecurity through social-support systems. Often these systems are associated with one’s job or work community. However, in the flexible, non-traditional job market, these work communities are often not available to workers. Additionally, the American value system that emphasizes individualism and self-sufficiency over interdependence and collectivism. This value system often places blame and guilt on the individual rather than the system, leading to worsened feelings of anxiety and depression in those who are involved in the non-traditional workforce (Vander Elst et al, 2014). As college students enter the workforce, they are likely to experience even higher rates of confusion, loneliness, and fear than their older counterparts because they are transitioning to a setting in which they are isolated and confused. Job insecurity can be particularly trying to these individuals during their time of transition.

COVID-19 has created unexpected periods of transition, and therefore job insecurity, for workers who did not expect their roles, responsibilities and environments to change.

***Part-Time Jobs for College Students***

Furthermore, the literature revealed that students who held part-time jobs and worked fewer than ten hours each week, showed higher satisfaction mentally, and higher overall GPAs. Students who worked part-time jobs for longer than ten hours a week, showed a decline in mental satisfaction and overall GPA (Mussie, 2014). Campus departments and local establishments looking to hire student workers can take these findings into consideration. Students who are mentally and physically able will prove to be more effective workers while in college and after graduation.

The literature revealed that there are some recent graduates, as there are some current students, who are better prepared academically and have greater confidence in their ability to succeed. These qualities, which are nurtured on and offcampus, will affect the activities in which they engage, the company they keep, the professions they choose to pursue, and the goals they choose to set and to achieve (Richardson, Evans & Gbadamosi, 2014). Students who are hired for part-time jobs are encouraged to better manage their time in order to keep a healthy work/life/course load balance. Term time is a particular testament to a students’ ability to simultaneously manage their responsibilities. Students working an on-campus part-time job work under supervisors and bosses who understand the need to lighten the shift demands or responsibilities during these stressful times. Off-campus part-time jobs, on the other hand, do not prioritize the college calendar.

Of course, these discussions are even more relevant and urgent during the unprecedented times in which we find ourselves at present. During a global pandemic that has put more Americans out of work than any other national crisis in history, concerns about job insecurity are understandably high (Kocchar 2020). Particularly for those who work in the flexible job market or the gig economy, both the perception and the reality of job insecurity is well-founded and unfortunately appropriate.

**Analysis**

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework serves as the structure that supports the theory stating the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted careers of recent college graduates financially, professionally and psychologically. The framework further builds on the knowledge of this area of content and challenges stereotypes around it.

According to past studies, researchers have used the social cognitive theory, commonly referred to as SCT, to focus significantly on the construct of attachment. Similar studies have also focused on the influence of attachment on career-related variables. According to Stephen L. Wright and Kristin M. Perrone in an article entitled, “The Impact of Attachment on Career-Related Variables,” conclusions suggesting that attachment could be a crucial factor in career development were drawn (Wright, Perrone, 2008). The study also suggested that past research has not focused heavily enough on the fact that a lack of a theoretical framework explains the relationship between attachment constructs and career-related variables. The authors suggested career counseling practices and future research to make up for this limitation.

***Social Cognitive Career Theory***

Social Cognitive Career Theory is a theory of human behavior that emphasizes learning from the social environment (Ryan, 2019). It illustrates how academic interests and career interests develop. Recent college graduates entering or exploring the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic often chose their career path based on their academic interests. Students who majored in mathematics, economics or business are likely to pursue financial and actuarial roles. Students who majored in English or communications gravitate towards careers in marketing, media and entertainment. Social cognitive theory also shows how career choices are not set in stone and in fact evolve over time. Employees working through the COVID-10 pandemic are reevaluating their career choices based on the social environment at their workplace and human behavior of colleagues impacting their roles.

Social cognitive theory is largely based on motivation and therefore also demonstrates how career success is achieved (Schunk and DiBenedetto 2020). Professional success can be measured monetarily or through something psychological like public praise and awards. The many factors, including workplace environment, role and team will have different effects on different employees. Career counselors, mentors, educators and even future employers who understand their employees’ motivations can leverage that experience to support their company’s performance.

***Self Determination Theory***

Typically, when considering and discussing career choice and trajectory, self-determination theory would be a logical framework for understanding the motivation and success of both individuals and groups. However, given the overarching implications and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, this theory becomes less appropriate and less applicable. Self Determination Theory (SDT) focuses on the degree to which an individual’s behavior is self-motivated or self-determined based on their choices, tendencies, and needs. SDT evolved from the comparison of intrinsic motives, activities or choices that are initiated due to personal interest or satisfaction, versus extrinsic motives, activities or choices initiated to obtain an external goal or need (Ryan 2018). When choosing a job or career path, individuals must consider their intrinsic motivations by asking themselves questions such as, “What do I enjoy doing?” “What am I interested in?” “What do I want to work on or study or research every day?” Individuals must also consider their extrinsic motivations by considering what career paths will provide them with the most financial security, the most rewarding job satisfaction, or the most reliable additional benefits. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SDT theory is less applicable to how individuals or groups such as Millennials choose their career paths because people no longer have the same freedom to choose based on their intrinsic desires. Instead, people are now much more hampered by extrinsic factors and needs. People are in need of a reliable job with a steady income. This might mean taking a job in a field that is less palatable or desirable to the individual but provides a certain source of financial support with the additional benefit of health insurance coverage.

***Karl Marx Conflict Theory***

This study also leverages the conflict theory, created by Karl Marx, which states that all elements of society are based upon their economic structure. Society breaks into groups based on income and financial status. These labels cause inevitable competition between groups for scarce resources. This theory implies that wealthy members of society with access to resources will maintain their status by hoarding, and poor members of society will attempt in any way possible to attain the resources and wealth. The conflict remains in a state of constancy because, as the adage states, the rich get richer (Brown, 2013).

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in America, citizens and employees felt the strain of competition for scarce resources. Cleaning products like Lysol, Clorox and Purell were completely unavailable and out of stock after panicked consumers purchased them in bulk. Since March 2020, household cleaning product sales have increased by 52%. Grocery stores placed limitations on household supplies like toilet paper, canned goods, pasta and perishables so that communities were distributing their resources evenly. Celebrities experienced backlash from the public as they paid high prices to rush testing and ignored stay at home orders to flee crowded cities for spacious second homes or rented properties.

Recent college graduates working during the early and current stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were displaced from their apartments, rationing supplies and risking public transportation to quarantine with family. 52% of young adults have been reported to living at home with their parents as a direct result of the pandemic (Fry, 2020). This statistic proves that for the first time since the Great Depression, the majority of young adults have moved back in with their parents. This new environment is certain to affect work performance. The stress of uncertainty around their personal and professional lives coupled with a lack of newfound independence, new surroundings and “roommates” has caused decreased mental health in working millennials.

An example of another scenario displaying conflict theory can be seen in the United States government’s attempt to manage conflict by reallocating resources. Systems including progressive taxes, minimum wages, incentives, special programs, social assistance, and regulations will be put in place. In 2017, a study entitled “A Realistic Group Conflict Theory Approach to Racial Discrimination against Ex-Felons in Hiring” was conducted by the Academy of Management. It explored whether minorities with felony backgrounds have an even more difficult time being selected for employment than identically situated white applicants (Goldman et. al, 2017).

This theory is applicable because students who graduate college and pursue a traditional career path will continue on to climb the corporate ladder. Those who follow an untraditional career path will attempt to become successful in other ways.

Marx theory can be adapted to variables in this study using if-then logic by stating that if an alumnus pursues an untraditional career path, then the alumni degree of their mental and financial success will increase, and vice versa.

Karl Marx Conflict Theory shows how two groups of people are affected by the eternal competition to gain access to the limited resources. One group remains powerful and dominant while the larger group, or the consensus, continues to struggle.

**Ethical Implications**

There are many ethical implications of the career alternatives for recent college graduates of community college versus private liberal arts colleges. As we discussed, mental health can be greatly affected by both job insecurity and job loss or reduction. Many individuals derive not only their livelihoods but also their sense of self-worth and purpose from their career path. If individuals are not about to find a career path that is satisfactory to them, they are more likely to experience burn-out, anxiety, depression, and job insecurity. Therefore, the ethical implications of this study are far-reaching.

As reported earlier in the paper, Millennials and Gen Z Americans are facing higher rates of burn-out, regret, and career dissatisfaction due to the stress and repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many of these effects are beyond the scope of any one employer or business to address, there are aspects of these concerns which could be both addressed and alleviated by employers. For example, employers could work to ensure that individuals are able to take pride in their work and their careers, regardless of whether employers are forced to consider budget cuts or even workforce cuts. The federal government could work to subsidize jobs and career paths so that individuals who have already invested significant time, energy, and resources into achieving a desired career could continue to both pursue their dreams and maintain their livelihoods. Our society is experiencing unprecedented tragedy and fall-out from the global pandemic; it follows, then, that the response to this fall-out must also be unprecedented and all-encompassing. The response to the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic on recent college graduates career prospects and opportunities must be addressed urgently and decisively.

At the individual level, this study could improve the experience of each college graduate as they embark into their search for a career that is both feasible and stimulating. Additionally, this study could help to change the culture around the job market and opportunities available to those from non-traditional backgrounds and less prestigious schools.

At a societal level, this study also addresses the health and wellness of an entire generation of Americans. Since 2019, millennials report a 12% increase in depression, a 7% increase in alcohol use disorder, and a 5% increase in both tobacco use disorder and substance use disorder. Additionally, Millennials demonstrate a 43% increase in depression, a 17% increase in substance use disorders, and a 39% increase in individuals diagnosed with ADHD as compared to older generations over the past 5 years. Taken together, all of these numbers mean that the Millennial generation is less healthy than older American generations, and the Millennial generation is the first generation to have a lower life expectancy than previous generations. Nearly one in three Millennials suffers from a behavioral health condition. Of course, rather than helping this crisis, the pandemic has exacerbated it. Recent studies have explored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Millennials' mental health and have found the pandemic has resulted in increased alcohol consumption, increased smoking, increased vaping, and increased non-medical drug use. Although some of these descriptors might seem unrelated to careers or recent college graduation, mental health, job satisfaction, and financial security are all intrinsically linked and collectively interdependent (Miller 2020).

**Policy Recommendations**

The implications of this paper are multifactorial. As such, the policy recommendations vary widely. We recommend that flexible jobs be structured in a way to provide support to the individual while also placing ultimate culpability and responsibility on a higher corporation or collective group. This would take the stress off the individual while also providing a safer working environment for them (Henseke 2018). Additionally, we suggest that both traditional and flexible job opportunities be made more universally available to students graduating from community colleges. Each path to employment may be different and unique and will therefore bring various skills and strengths to the job market. Both encouraging employers to cherish these myriads of talents and empowering individuals to showcase their personal skillsets will improve the diversity of the workforce and the overall satisfaction and success of both individuals and employers.

Finally, given our current economic and healthcare climate, we suggest implementing policies and practices that protect individuals during the global pandemic. This could involve providing safety nets that foster job security, maintaining safe and appropriate work-environments, whether at home or in the office, and encouraging mental and physical well-being in the interest of both individual health and overall workforce safety.

**Summary Reflection**

In conclusion, the goals of this project are broad, and the implications are far-reaching. In exploring the attitudes of recent college graduates regarding the traditionally structured career path, the opportunities in the current job market that are available to college degree holders, and the potential for changing the way careers are understood, and, ultimately, the way success is defined, the author has the opportunity both to analyze and to improve public and personal perception of careers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the lessons that might be gleaned from this study is the importance of establishing self-worth in terms of contributions not only to personal growth and goals but, more importantly, to communal and societal efforts and projects. In order to celebrate the successes of both traditional and non-traditional students and careers, our society needs to place more value on the dignity of work and the pride of commitment rather than putting quite so much emphasis on monetary values or leadership trajectories. Of course, salary and rank are important aspects of professional success and, for better or for worse, personal satisfaction. Along that vein, one of the intents of this study is to elucidate which aspects of one’s satisfaction and success are tied to moving up the traditional ladder of a career path and which involve forging a new path or trying a different way.

As demonstrated throughout this paper, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, those in traditional majors and career paths feel more support and respect from their peers and their communities, those in non-traditional majors and career paths feel more personal satisfaction and stimulation. However, since the pandemic has changed every aspect of daily life, understanding of careers, job satisfaction, financial security, and mental health have all been altered. Although this change is overwhelming and, as demonstrated throughout the paper, often negative for recent college graduates who are either Millennials or Gen Z, the change is also hopeful and could lead to future improvements in the way that our nation works and the way that our nation’s treats its workers.

Additional research on the subject of personal and professional satisfaction, confidence, and conviction can follow this particular study. Other independent variables can be analyzed such as field of work, amount of vacation days, and leadership positions or status in the community and their effects on either traditional or non-traditional career success and satisfaction.

Future research of this topic could include implementation of programs or classes that focus on encouraging personal satisfaction regardless of societal input or pressure. Students in nontraditional careers or alternative paths could be provided with networking and guidance opportunities so that they could build their connections and improve their chances of both finding and maintaining successful and satisfying jobs.

Future advocacy in this area could include focus on providing educational incentives or debt relief to those hoping to pursue non-traditional majors or careers.  Alternative careers could ideally become more protected in the traditional workforce structure so that, in the case of the ongoing instability of our economy and jobs market, people in nontraditional careers could feel more secure and safe. Protection could come in the form of laws and policies protecting various types of jobs and careers as well as financial support and incentives making non-traditional careers more palatable and even preferable, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for the future wealth acquisition of the entire Millennial generation.

Statistics show that the COVID-19 pandemic has created more cases, hospitalizations and deaths in locations where racial and ethnic minority populations live and work (CDC 2020). Further research can look into these populations to identify how recent college graduates from these communities and populations experienced a shift in financial stability, professional fulfillment and states of well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The additional layer of complications and stress brought upon these communities will further impact their professional journeys. The ethical implications of this future research are important as well. Recent research has identified that minorities are more likely to suffer from behavioral health conditions and that their communities often suffer from underdiagnosis. Since mental health is intimately linked with both personal fulfilment and job satisfaction, it will be crucial for future research to explore the relationship between minority mental health, personal success, and career satisfaction.

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