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Abigail Haugan   April 5, 2022

Oh, What Can you do with That? Assessing the Influence of Undergraduate Culture on Major and Career Choice at Emory University

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Abstract

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This study examines how undergraduate culture at Emory University influences choice of major and career path amongst undergraduate students majoring in the liberal arts. I use theory based on previous research of career funneling, status hierarchies, and decision-making processes, moving to the empirical data that supports these theories and provides evidence for possible patterns. I conducted 18 in depth interviews with Emory University undergraduate liberal arts majors regarding their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on the culture at Emory. The findings indicate that there is an overall culture of collaboration with some underlying competition, stress, and preprofessionalism. Additionally, the findings suggest a status hierarchy among majors and careers that manifests in ways such as peer comparisons, stress and anxiety. There is evidence to suggest that first generation status creates differences in the ways the culture is experienced. Although this study only assesses liberal arts majors, my findings add to previous research by helping to better understand why students understand certain majors as prestigious and how college to career culture can be unique to its university.

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I.   Introduction

Young, emerging adults are expected to choose their career paths by the end of their four years at college, if not before. While juggling their academic workload, social life, and newfound adulthood, college students must also choose what they are going to do for the rest of their life. Some students have access to parents who have been exactly where they are now, who can offer sage advice and guide them through their college career. However, other students do not, and must rely on their own devices to navigate their collegiate experiences and the pressures that ensue.

College students deal with daily pressure to have their lives figured out. They are constantly being bombarded with questions and decisions pertaining to their future. It adds to the pressure when their peers confidently and collectedly share their plans for post college as though they all know what they are doing. Yet, when you ask almost any student, they will tell you it feels like everyone *but* them knows what they are doing.

This presumption that everyone knows what they are doing in conjunction with the pressure to know what you are doing creates an interesting atmosphere of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty regarding college to career culture on a college campus. That is why in this thesis I am examining the college to career culture at Emory, experiences with it, and how it is experienced differentially between social classes on campus. I start by analyzing the literature and empirical data before moving into the methodology used for data collection and analysis and an explanation for the selection of undergraduates at Emory University. I then provide the findings of the study before concluding with a discussion and conclusions, with limitations of the study followed by suggestions for future research.

II.   Theoretical Framework

Undergraduate Culture and Work Values

Emory's undergraduate culture influences and affects experiences with and views about one's career path among undergraduates. Given Emory's standing as a top tier institution, Binder's (2016) theory regarding how students come to understand particular jobs as prestigious may be evident in our participants' experiences with their own career paths.

A large proportion of students at elite universities follow a narrow selection of career paths: investment banking, consulting, and technology. These careers are considered amongst the most prestigious and the positions are largely filled by students from top tier universities. Binder assesses the "universities' role in students' status construction" (2016:89) to determine how the students come to understand these careers as elite and how institutions funnel them into those careers. While each university has its own local differences, given the relatively stable culture across elite universities, it is expected that regardless of institution, students would perceive the same careers as prestigious. The way that universities steer students into these careers is what Binder (2016) calls career funneling. While she discusses general career funneling of elite universities, she also notes that there are local differences unique to different universities. We look at that the specific culture of a next tier university to understand the mechanism to understanding the careers as prestigious.

Binder chose two elite, top tier universities, that vary immensely yet share a good deal of similarities. She found that both universities shared four factors that led to this career funneling effect: (1) Lack of information upon entry to college left students more malleable to campus culture surrounding jobs (2) The presence of recruitment on campus led students to quickly learn

about certain careers and their competitiveness surrounding highly sought-after jobs. (3) From recruitment, students internalized these notions of high-status careers and then reinforced them on campus. (4) The competition produced from recruitment led to students creating "status boundaries that divided worthy jobs from "ordinary" careers" (Binder 2016: 89), limiting what was considered an adequate job prospect.

These four factors combined led to a career funneling effect where students from elite universities are directed into a small range of careers. The campus structure lends itself to the status hierarchy of careers and the students themselves reinforce that hierarchy by distinguishing between prestigious and ordinary jobs. I believe that the campus structure at Emory may lends itself to similar patterns.

Status Hierarchies

According to Rivera and Tilcsik, status beliefs are "how people classify others in hierarchies" (2019:252) using shared understandings of the worth of a specific thing, citing the example of women being understood as less valuable than men, and the subsequent negative impact on the women's evaluations. A similar status hierarchy may be in place amongst the Emory Undergraduates regarding majors and career paths leading to positive or negative views of the major/career path based on status beliefs of certain majors. Similarly, to the women being evaluated poorly due to status beliefs about women, certain majors/careers may be viewed negatively because of status beliefs about them shared by undergraduates.

Decision Making Processes

Although Kalin's (2014) research seeks to find gender's influence on college seniors' work aspirations, it is relevant because it gauges the decision-making process regarding careers,

and work values, an important aspect of career funneling. Work aspirations arise out of an individual's interests, values, and perceived societal constraints and must be considered in the greater context of the person's life (Kahl 1953). The decision-making process acts in concert with fear of consequences for going against societal expectations, causing individuals to make decisions based on expectations, not personal aspirations (Goffman 1959). Thus, if the occupations associated with career funneling are the "norm" on campus, that may also influence student's decision-making process when choosing a major and career, with students taking into consideration stereotypes that may be associated with choosing a major lower in the status hierarchy.

Kalin's (2014) findings regarding thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of career paths and work values for Emory Undergraduate students can offer insights into those potentials in my own participants. The competitive culture at Emory led to most students wanting to work in high status jobs post-graduation. This competitive culture around acquiring jobs may lead to an additional layer in the creation of a funneling effect for Emory students. However, in addition to a job that was prestigious, they also wanted the job to be fulfilling and enjoyable. There is an array of career paths that Emory University undergraduate students may consider acceptable to pursue after graduation based on these two characteristics. This work value may lead to Emory students experiencing career funneling in a unique way.

Elizabeth Days compares how first-generation status impacts college students entering the workforce, noting Weber's belief that status groups are "determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor" (1958:187) because they share ideas and values. She says, "people in the same status group see a commonality among themselves and use this commonality to exclude others in an effort to secure their position in society and maintain prestige." (2016:2).

Therefore, because of their socioeconomic status differences, the career funneling effect may be experienced differently across different groups on Emory's campus. For instance, the first-generation college students may experience it differently than the non-first-generation students.

Specifically, this research looks at career aspirations and work values through the lenses of Bourdieu and DiMaggio's theories, assessing cultural capital levels through participants' parents' level of education (higher education, higher cultural capital). Ultimately, seeking to find how parent's education levels relate to Emory Undergraduates' career aspirations and work values. Then, she notes the inhibitors to social mobility for lower class students (debts) and the motivation for money that influenced their career choices (Huppatz 2009). Socioeconomic status of participants may influence first generation students' movement into higher paying, more prestigious careers that are usually synonymous with career funneling occupations.

Using Bourdieu and DiMaggio's theories of cultural capital, Days assessed how parents' cultural capital or lack thereof impacted students work values and career aspirations. The students shared similar work values despite their parents having different levels of education. Both groups valued enjoyment, making an impact, and financial stability. However, their reasoning behind these values and aspirations were different. "For example, first-generation college students desire economic stability to provide a better life for their families who have struggled financially; non-first-generation college students desire economic stability because they hope to maintain the lifestyle provided by their parents' lucrative careers" (42). I expect to find a difference in the reasoning for participants reasoning in their work values although they may share the same work values. Ultimately, it is not a matter of if they differ, but how work values/career aspirations differ.

An additional difference was the activeness of the parents in the students' decision-making process. For Non-First Generation, their parents were a highly utilized resource, whereas First Generation used predominantly campus resources mirroring Lareau's argument that parents of different class parent differently (natural growth v concerted cultivation). But "Emory University exposes its first-generation college students to different people and cultures, which aids their career discovery and job attainment process." (Days 2016:44), providing evidence of social mobility. The first-generation reliance on campus structures for information on potential careers suits the career funneling model and may allow it to thrive at Emory.

Day's (2016) research provides expectations for differences in work values and career aspirations for first generation and non-first-generation college students at Emory University. My research will either further prove her own points or contradict them by looking at how the culture of Emory influences work values and the decision-making process.

III. Empirical Work

Although not robust, there are works regarding career funneling and differences between first generation and non-first-generation college students. Although most works do not focus directly on career funneling, they examine the process of how college students choose their majors and their career paths. In addition, there are similar works regarding the differences between first generation and non-first-generation college students regarding their majors, career paths, and why they choose them.

Career funneling

Career funneling at elite institutions is integral to what this study seeks to understand about college to career culture at Emory University. Ultimately, career funneling is intertwined

with the decision-making process. Moss-Pech (2021) uncovered what he described as "The Career Conveyor Belt". Essentially, he found that business and engineering majors more reliably had internships that transitioned directly into jobs, whereas communications and English majors did not have this direct transition. Interestingly, the internships the participants secured were discovered differently, as "business students usually procured internships through on-campus recruiting at their colleges' career fairs – career fairs that are closed to students outside these disciplines", leaving the other majors to find their own employment without institutional resources. This created two very different dynamics in the employment seeking process because the non-business "students sought out, rather than responded to, potential employment opportunities". Higher education uses programs within the institution to stratify the students, providing unequal resources and creating a hierarchy (Stich 2018).

Davis, Daniel, and Binder (2019) found a pattern of career funneling through analyzing the top 25 private and 25 public institutions via LinkedIn. Both private and public institutions had the same six industries indicated as the top employers upon graduation. However, they found that "elite private graduates enter high-status industries in greater proportion than their public university counterparts. They also tend to get jobs at more prestigious and higher paying firms and to attain more prestigious job titles", supporting the theory that elite institutions are funneling a disproportionate number of students into the most elite jobs. Thus, the effect of the institution should not be discounted regarding student's perceptions of majors and career paths. Monaghan and Jang (2017) found "strong institutional effects on major choice"

Given the chaos associated with registering for classes in college, most students only consider an average of 9 courses when enrolling in their first semester and typically these courses can predict the major students choose their sophomore year. Thus, classes chosen during

the first semester of college greatly influence the academic track and subsequent careers of students. But Chaturapruek (2021) found that when making these decisions, "students rely on whatever information sources they have to hand, and apply heuristics to simplify the selection problem". Therefore, if the institution has a heavy recruitment/business presence on campus it will lead to more students going into that field. Corroborating Chaturapruek's (2021) findings, Beggs (2008) also found that most students do not change their majors and do not do much information searching in the process of choosing their majors. Rather, they focus primarily on whether the major/job associated is a match with their interests, the corresponding financial success, and job stability.

Like Binder's (2016) findings of her student participants learning the difference between high status versus "ordinary" careers, Mancenido (2021) found that high achievers learn "through explicit and implicit signals that teaching is not appropriate for someone like them". Furthermore, Fenner's (2011) study revealed that English majors understood that it would be challenging to find job opportunities. Other students made comments to English majors about their unfavorable job prospects, noting "that social perceptions of English and its employability had been a part of their university experience" (Fenner 2011:54), furthering the learning of high status versus "ordinary" careers and confirming that college majors have prestige as occupations do (Pitt and Zhu 2019).

Similarly, Hampton (2017) found that students believe they acquire a higher status by attending elite colleges that provide them with better opportunities relative to less-selective universities that will lead to better educational returns. Attending a high-status university coupled with the high-status job students believe they will acquire confirms their impressions of themselves as elite.

Differences between first generation and non-first generation

Much recent research shows that although they share one campus, first-generation low-income students and non-first-generation students experience college very differently. For example, work from Tough (2019), Jack, (2019), Goldstein (1974), Wright (2021), Silver (2020), and many others. Particularly important to examine for my study is the empirical research about differences regarding major outcomes, career aspirations, and cultural experiences at college. The following studies have findings that are relevant to my study.

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience college differently than other students at the university in four main ways: "a) students' consciousness of material differences, (b) the minimized salience of social class to students' identity, (c) students' attitudes toward hard work, and (d) students' attitudes toward financial resources." (Martin 2015). Quadlin (2017) found that students with more loans are more likely to major in fields like business or nursing and not be undeclared. Students paying for college with family funding and less loans are more likely to be undeclared and less likely to major in fields like business or nursing. Wright's (2021) findings support the previous, stating that first-generation students are more likely to choose applied majors, which are "characterized by occupationally specific training with clearer links to the labor market" (2) than non-first-generation students.

For example, Goldstein (1974) found that at an elite college, social class had little to no effect on the academic and career choices of the students because the students assimilated to the culture and acquired cultural capital that led to social mobility. Individuals with more education have a greater consensus surrounding what is a more prestigious occupation, showing that "participation in the educational system does indeed have a homogenizing effect" (Lynn and

Ellerbach 2017). Despite parents' educational background, students leave college with similar goals for post-graduation (Silver 2020).

For instance, using parent's education level as a proxy for first generation status, Days (2016) found that participants, regardless of parent's education levels, cared more about meeting work values than working in a specific profession post-graduation. The work values participants noted were being interested in and enjoying what they do and having an impactful and helpful career. Most participants (16/20) were significantly motivated by having an interest in and enjoying their career, with the only students not significantly motivated by having an interesting and enjoyable career being first generation college students. However, the reasons for these work values differed between the two groups. For example, although many participants were motivated by helping others, first generation students related their reasons for wanting to give back to their own experiences whereas "non first-generation college students mentioned Emory courses, internship opportunities, and previous volunteer positions as reasons for why they valued helping others." (2016:24).

A similar trend appeared regarding the desire for financial stability. Both groups desired it, but again, the reasons differed. First generation students wanted financial stability because they wanted to financially support their parents and future family and "did not want to continue to live with the financial hardship with which they had grown up" (Days 2016:26). Divergently, non-first-generation students desired financial stability, but to maintain the lifestyles they had grown up with. Students from a more advantaged background are concerned with maintaining and emulating their social background (Mullen 2014). Ultimately, the two groups had the same work values, but why they had them differed.

Moreover, there were also differences regarding who each group referred to during the decision-making process while at college. Non-first-generation students referenced their parents in the career decision making process much more often than first generation students did. Non-first-generation students had very accomplished and successful parents who the students aspired to be like. First generation students felt pressure from their parents to have "a lucrative career" (2016:32), to succeed, but also said their parents relayed pride for their child's attendance at college.

Schick (2020) replicated Binder's (2016) study of career funneling, finding essentially the same results, with the additional finding of "an inverse relationship between income levels and high levels of pressure to become successful to maintain or generate more than a student's parents" (2020:82), complementing Days (2016) finding that first-generation college student's felt pressure from their parents to have a lucrative career and to succeed. Lending itself to these Goyette and Mullen (2006) found that high socioeconomic status college students are more likely to choose majors in the arts and sciences whereas low socioeconomic status college students are more likely to choose vocational majors. Vocational majors are more likely to be employed and earn slightly more than arts and sciences majors who are more likely to go to graduate school.

Further, non-first-generation students utilized their parents (personal resources) to help them in obtaining career goals (reading resumes, answering questions, offering advice, etc.) in addition to Emory resources. On the contrary, first-generation students utilized campus resources more (career center, peers, faculty). (Days 2016)

IV.   Conceptualization and Research Questions

This body of empirical work offers important insights into career funneling and differences between first-generation low-income students and non-first-generation students. I am going to provide another case of evidence in a different social context to further elaborate this body of work. My study will build from this literature by assessing the differences in experiences of first-generation low-income students and non-first-generation students surrounding college to career culture. The previous literature provides evidence for the reality of the following theoretical concepts.

Concept of College to Career Culture

College to career culture pertains to the values, beliefs, and discourse around college to career issues among undergraduate students. The college to career culture is shaped by the unique environment of the university, which may be influenced by the undergraduates themselves or the institution relating to students' own experiences related to academic majors, desirable work outcomes and career paths. The culture assigns prestige to certain career paths, possibly affecting the perceptions of careers and majors.

Concept of Status Beliefs

The way that I am defining status beliefs are according to Rivera and Tilcsik. Status beliefs are "how people classify others in hierarchies" (2019:252) using shared understandings of the worth of a specific thing. Through notions of prestige about education, work, and jobs, students establish status hierarchies around careers that shape their career aspirations and experiences on campus.

First-Generation Low-Income v Non-First Generation

First generation low income is defined as a student whose parents did not attain more than a bachelor's degree. Non-first generation is defined as a student whose parents attained a bachelor's degree or higher. Context matters: how experiences differ depending on the social background of students being studied, and the smaller affinity groups or subcultural groups that students spend most of their time with.

Using the cases of first generation and non-first-generation liberal arts majors:

> ***RQ 1****: What is Emory's undergraduate culture around college to career?*

> ***RQ 2:*** *How is college to career culture viewed and valued by NFG and FG? Are there differences?*

> ***RQ 3:*** *What are the effects of the status hierarchy (college to career culture) on those who are not majoring in the highest status majors? Are there differences between NFG and FG?*

> ***DV****: Views of and effects of college to career culture*

> ***IV****: Socioeconomic Status/ First generation college student status (FG v NFG)*

>> *"First generation" (FG): those with parents who have less than a BA*

>> *"Non first generation" (NFG): those with parents who have BA or more*

V.   Methods

  a. *Research design*

I conducted in-depth, semi structured, qualitative interviews. This method allowed for the emergence of patterns to assess the influence of socioeconomic status on how a student experiences and views their career path. Additionally, interviews allowed flexibility and the opportunity to probe for further information to gain greater and deeper insights from the participants.

Because the goals of this research are deep understanding of group values and cultural processes, the research design is qualitative (in-depth interviews and observations) (Creswell 2008; Lofland, et. al. 2005). This approach allowed us to discover patterns about the discourse around college-to-career issues among undergraduates, as well as how social factors influence the discourse (Creswell 2008). Undergraduate students were asked to participate in in-depth interviews about college to career issues and student culture in college. I conducted 18 interviews with key undergraduates identified through snowball sampling and convenience sampling. The students selected were liberal arts majors enrolled in Emory College of Arts and Sciences. It was made clear (in recruitment materials) that participation was voluntary and choosing not to participate would not affect their grades or college performance in any way. Informed Consent was obtained. (Scott 2019)

b. *Operationalization*

The concepts of college to career culture, status hierarchies, and work values are operationalized through the questions on the interview guide. I asked respondents about their own perceptions and what they believed other students' perceptions of topics surrounding college to career culture are in order to elicit these concepts. I developed the interview guide based the concepts from my theory to explore interactions and dominant discourses around college-to-

career issues among undergraduate students as a way to understand: a) the mechanisms by which status is attached to particular career and career-paths; b) how the interactions and discourse around these issues (in turn) shape students' experiences of college life; c) whether (and how) students' experiences of this college-to-career culture varies by different student subcultures.

c. *Sample*

The study population is undergraduates at a small, elite, private university in the southeast (Emory University). The qualitative method of interviews is best executed with one college location. I chose a small, elite private university because of the emphasis these institutions place on long term career aspirations among their students. This social context is an ideal environment to explore career issues among young men and women.

Specifically, my sample is from the Emory University Undergraduate population. Within the Emory University Undergraduate population, I have chosen the subpopulation of liberal arts majors because they make up much of the student population at Emory. Within those cases approximately half are first generation college students and half are not. This could provide insight into how socioeconomic status can influence career paths of college students.

d. *Recruitment (and Participant issues)*

Potential participants were recruited via email at various times throughout the study. I made initial contact via email. The source of participants are all undergraduates at Emory College.

Potential participants were identified through personal contacts and snowball sampling. I identified initial interview subjects through personal knowledge as a member of Emory College. Identification of subjects was based on ensuring diversity of race and gender. Snowball

sampling: I asked the initial interview participants for names of other undergraduates in groups that we have not been able to identify through personal knowledge.

I sent a recruitment email to subjects who have been identified. The email described the interview and asked if the subject would be willing to participate, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation. If participants wished to end the interview they were allowed to do so. Of the 24 students contacted, 19 completed interviews resulting in a 79% response rate. Of the 19 respondents, 47% were first generation college students. I had a particularly challenging time recruiting first generation male liberal arts majors. Many that I contacted were majoring in a STEM related field.

e. *Data collection*

All interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Given that I am also a student it should minimize the possible researcher/observer effects on the data during the interview process because the participant most likely felt more comfortable talking to a peer of equal status than to someone of higher status (professor, administrator, etc.). I followed a semi structured, open ended interview guide that addressed majors, careers, and undergraduate culture.

f. *Data Analysis*

The interviews were recorded over zoom, then transcribed for qualitative analysis of textual data conducted using MAXqda, a qualitative software analysis program. The data was coded using a deductive and inductive coding process, coding for themes and patterns that relate back to theoretical concepts and propositions (Miles & Huberman 1994; Lofland et all 2005).

The data collection instrument was the interview guide. During the interview general topics covered were majors, careers, and undergraduate culture. The rationale for covering these topics was to garner a deeper understanding of Emory's culture around college to career and how Emory's undergraduate culture creates career funneling experiences for the students, ultimately to discover how it impacts those who are not going into those few careers.

The codes used for the initial data analysis were deductive based on the major concepts from the interview guide and the literature. These codes included: Structure (Admin) (what the structure shows/says about majors and careers), Perceptions of Majors/Careers, Own Plan/Views, and Undergraduate Culture/Subculture. After the initial analysis of the data, I shifted to an inductive analysis which helped to draw out the codes unique to Emory. It was an iterative process resulting in four main codes: undergraduate culture, emotions, work values, and career path. Additionally, I coded 27 subcategories within the main codes.

Using a multistep deductive and inductive analysis procedure when analyzing my data allowed me to find patterns consistent with the previous literature and discover emergent themes across interviews unique to the sample. Throughout the process new codes were developed, irrelevant codes were deleted, and other codes were modified to fit the data in order to not disregard important themes. Based on the relevance of first-generation status to my research question, I compared responses of first generation and non-first-generation students.

An added layer of validity for these emergent codes comes from another student doing an honors thesis. She also used MAXqda and the two-step procedure of deductive and inductive analysis to code her data to find very similar (if not identical) codes for the same population (Emory University Undergraduates). This is an affirmation of validity through two different

types of ethnographic data, interviews with and observations of Emory University

Undergraduates.

VI.   Findings

GENERAL UNDERGRADUATE CULTURE

Overall Impressions

When asked to describe Emory's general undergraduate culture, most students described

it in similar, if not identical terms. There was a divide in respondents in whether they believed

the culture was competitive or collaborative, but there was overall agreement among respondents

that Emory's undergraduate culture could be described as stressful/demanding/hard work, and

preprofessional. Additionally, respondents described a status hierarchy of majors and careers.

Competitive or Collaborative?

Respondents were split between describing Emory as competitive and collaborative.

Generally, when referring to the college, participants thought of the culture collaboratively.

Participants communicated the idea of Emory's campus being a place where they felt that they

could ask other students for help and that students were almost always willing to offer help.

Liam, a white first-generation college student, said that he had never felt as though Emory was

competitive:

> I think generally students are willing to help each other and I think it is a very welcoming
>
> atmosphere and it's not super competitive, it is collaborative in kind of every aspect.
>
> Especially academically there's not really a culture of like trying to get ahead of
>
> somebody else or trying to sabotage somebody else or something. (Liam, Pos. 52)

Contrastingly, students described certain settings as more competitive. Specifically, they said that the business school was competitive and repeatedly referred to the students enrolled as "snakes". It was commonly believed by the respondents that students enrolled in the business school were cutthroat and willing to put other students down to achieve success. Colin, an African American non-first-generation student, explained the business student stereotype at Emory, "Business school kids there's an archetype for them, it's like they're "snakes", they focus on stonks, and like you know, no class on Fridays, like always chilling." There is a perception of the business school students as willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead. A specific archetype has been constructed of them that the other students seem to have shared understanding of.

Stressful/demanding/hard work

While describing Emory's undergraduate culture, participants mentioned frequently that Emory was stressful, demanding and hard work. They described the pressure students felt to succeed and the stress that created around their academics. Multiple students stated they believed that Emory's undergraduate students were so stressed out about their academics that they would put their academics over their well-being. Amal, a middle eastern non-first-generation student relayed his thoughts:

> I think a lot of students don't realize that they just need to enjoy the ride, enjoy the experience, have fun, yes get good grades but balance it with mental health and doing things that are good for yourself. I feel like it's very easy for, not all of the students, but some of the students to fall into the pit where it's just like, work, work, work, work, work, I'll make time for my mental health later and they never do.

Similarly, participants stated they themselves or their friends had sacrificed sleep for studying during their time at Emory. It is common for students to get good grades at the expense of their well-being. Participants reported this manifesting in ways such as staying in the library overnight, not socializing with friends, skipping meals, and studying over sleeping. However, most students realize and attribute this to Emory's academic rigor and elite students. Several respondents compared their time at Emory to friends at state colleges, stating that this stressful academic environment is not prevalent at all universities.

Ultimately, almost every student when describing Emory's culture mentioned the levels of stress on campus to some extent. It is something felt by most students that affects their daily lives and well-being.

Preprofessional

Additionally, the participants described Emory's culture as "preprofessional". When asked to describe preprofessional, there was not a single definition, however there was general consensus on what it meant. Although Joan, a black non-first-generation student, gave the general idea that covered most participants' definitions:

> So, when I hear the word preprofessional I think of the preprofessional track. So, like the people who have chosen to go premed, prelaw, prebusiness, or stuff like that. So, it just means the people that have come in that are kind of set-in stone with exactly what they want to do. So, they are going on to take certain tracks or certain lanes to get them there faster, to a certain extent.

The preprofessional culture was described as omnipresent and pervasive at Emory. Despite a substantial number of the students interviewed not being on a preprofessional track, the

majority seemed to believe that most students at Emory were in fact adhering to the definition of preprofessional. It was considered a rare event to meet someone who was outside of a preprofessional track. Some respondents even stated that they felt as though they needed to be on a preprofessional track if they were not.

Status Hierarchy of Majors/Careers

In their responses, students revealed a status hierarchy of majors and careers amongst Emory University undergraduates. While some noted that certain careers and majors were viewed as prestigious both inside and outside of Emory, they also described a status hierarchy among majors marked by the prestige of the different majors.

The students learn this culture through interactions and conversations with other students. Most interviewees mentioned that Pre-Meds and students in the Business School (the top two categories in the hierarchy) talk a lot about their courses, their majors, and their intended careers. The focus of the talk tends to be around two major themes: 1) a clear path (set steps) to success (the outcome of: a high-paying, prestigious job/career), 2) the difficulty and/or selectivity of the major or track, and 3) institutional support/resources. The main indicators of prestige among undergraduate students were medicine or STEM majors, money, certainty, and difficulty. These are similar to Scott (2020) findings.

CERTAIN MAJORS ARE MORE PRESTIGIOUS

NFG and FG both discuss the status hierarchy, particularly the prestige elements, in similar ways but often with different rationales. The manifestation of the culture led to students viewing the same grouping of majors as prestigious, specifically majors that translate directly into careers upon graduation and that lead to good salaries. Participants relayed stories of friends

who specifically majored in things they consider more prestigious despite majoring in things they are truly interested in. Ashley, a white non-first-generation student described Emory's students' dedication to prestigious majors as driven by fear rather than passion. Students are afraid to major in something that will not lead them down a direct career path.

Prestige of Medicine/STEM

When participants were asked if some majors were more prestigious than others, there was typically a resounding yes, followed by premed, biology, or STEM fields. Commonly, the explanation of why medicine or STEM was seen as prestigious to pursue was because of how difficult it was to succeed in these fields/majors. Julia explained:

> I think that's a societal thing throughout. I think, like those are always just like, oh you're smart smart when you're a STEM major. And so, I think we just associate science and math and stuff with smarter brains.

So, while acknowledging that Emory students find these pathways prestigious, she also notes that they are viewed prestigious through society because of the intelligence required to succeed in these fields. Yet, there were a few students who believed that there was not a hierarchy of prestige among majors. They said that no majors were looked down upon and seen as equal. While only a few students said this, those who did believed that this was the common perception shared by all Emory students.

Careers and majors such as doctors, premed, STEM, business, and law were generally understood as the more prestigious paths by both groups. First generation students stated this plainly with little to no variance outside of these majors and careers. However, non-first-generation students responded differently when describing what they believed to be prestigious

paths. Specifically, the non-first-generation students took a more nuanced approach when responding by saying what was the most prestigious overall, but then listing what other populations/people/groups might believe to be the most prestigious. Ashley rationalized her plans as prestigious by describing its difficulty:

> But like I just said, I am sitting here, screaming at my keyboard, like it's not easy, it does take work, and there's quite a bit of money in it [laughs]. I know from my sister how much she used to make, it's not... I don't know.

Although the groups agreed on which majors and jobs were high status, non-first-generation students gave lengthier answers when asked. Their answers often included subtleties and rationalizations related to making their job or major fit into the ideas of prestige, as Ashley did by noting the difficulty and money associated with what she plans to do.

In a similar manner, when asked about low status jobs and majors, the first-generation students straight forwardly explained that things that are easy and do not lead to a definite career path are low status. Additionally, two out of the 3 first generation male participants named business students as low status because of their personal dislike for business.

Then, the Non-first-generation students again, gave lengthier answers that were less direct. They would state things such as English, classics, social sciences as being low status, but then list redeeming qualities or rationalization for why it was not truly low status. Their rationalizations ranged from personal abilities, unthought of difficulties, and respect. For instance, Amanda said that she wants to work for a nongovernmental organization, and although she knows it does not make a lot of money and therefore has a low status, she rationalizes that there are people who respect the job.

Prestige of Money

Another indicator of prestige among undergraduates was the potential earnings associated with certain career paths and majors. When asked why a major or career was more prestigious than another, money was often a contributing factor. In fact, despite having the general distaste for business, respondents admitted that the salary associated with a career in business is what makes them think of it as prestigious. It was also pointed out that while medicine is prestigious because of its difficulty, the salary also adds to its prestige.

While both first generation and non-first-generation students noted that money was an indicator of a prestigious career path, they differed in their personal beliefs about it. First generation students mentioned money as denoting prestige but then went on to say that despite the prestige associated with money, it was not a motivating factor for them when selecting a career path. Conversely, when non-first-generation students referred to money, it was a personal motivator for them when selecting a job.

Prestige of Certainty

Another factor that students contributed to prestige was certainty. This certainty is regarding finding a job or having a clear career path to follow post-graduation. In fact, students repeatedly named job security as an alluring aspect of a preprofessional track. A specific example often cited were business majors. Austin, a white non-first-generation student, explained:

Like even specifically within the BBA, like if you are majoring in accounting there's not a lot of, you don't have to make a ton of decisions of what direction you are going to go

in. And I think a lot of people like that and take comfort in that and that's what draws a lot of people.

Contrarily, majors without obvious career paths and uncertain futures were viewed as less prestigious and lower in the status hierarchy than others. Joan referred to them as "more abstract jobs", stating that people are apprehensive to choose those majors precisely because of their uncertainty regarding a career path. Uncertainty surrounding one's career path creates stress, anxiety, and feelings of unhappiness.

Prestige of Difficulty

A common theme that arose was students attributing high status to majors that were difficult. 12 out of 18 respondents directly stated that they believed the reason for specific majors (STEM, math, law, etc.) being more prestigious was that they were more difficult. A white, first-generation male, Liam, puts it plainly:

I wouldn't say it's like a class system, but sometimes people act like their major is, not necessarily more important, but harder than yours so it is more prestigious to be pursuing.

Perceptions of what was a difficult major were consistent across participants, with the reasoning also remaining consistent for prestige. Students with majors that fell outside of the conventionally prestigious paths sometimes justified their own paths by rationalizing it as difficult.

EFFECT OF STATUS HIERARCHY

Students strongly felt the need to find a job and seem to share a common belief that certain majors lead to jobs, specifically the previously mentioned high status majors. The

students I interviewed said that it seems like everyone at Emory was in three of the main majors, STEM, premed, or business, and people do not really consider majors outside of that. Joan explains:

> what Emory represents, you are either here for the STEM, being the premed student, or you're here for the business school. So, I think a lot of people do feel pressured on having to choose between one of those and not even look at the other departments and consider things. Like they will take that little art and humanities class and really enjoy it, but then think that's not an option for me to be that type of major.

Students felt as though these three majors were the only choices if they wanted to be able to have certainty regarding getting a job. This transitioned into feelings of stress around finding a job. Most participants relayed feelings of stress around the job search process and even if they themselves did not feel stress, they believed their peers probably did feel stress. Brad, a white non-first-generation student, relayed the pressure that he and his peers felt to not only get a job after graduation, but a job that "sounds good", meaning working for a well-known company or making high salary.

The stress around the topic of finding a job actually led some participants to avoid speaking about the topic and avoid attending certain events pertaining to careers. Austin relayed that he and his friends do not really speak about career plans or plans for post-graduation because they know the topic is a stress inducing one. Participants described a substantial amount of angst and stress concerning careers.

Peer Comparisons

Peer comparisons were common among students, especially when they were in a position where they were uncertain. They compared themselves to their peers regarding major choices (or lack thereof), internships, job offers, and even academic achievement. This created an environment where students said they always needed to be doing something productive because it seemed as though everyone else was. Amal described all the ways he compares himself to others:

> We are trying to figure out who we are, what we want to do. So, we are looking at other people and saying well are they doing it? Have they done it yet? What do they like? Oh, maybe I like that. And I think it's just a very common part of it is the academic side of comparison and comparing ourselves to others and looking at all the people in their majors, doing their work. You know "thriving".

Also, just focusing on classes was not enough. They felt as though they must constantly be pursuing new opportunities, academically and otherwise. Aiyla, a southwest Asian and North African non-first-generation student, described it as, "That if you don't, you are kind of behind everybody else in some way".

Most respondents said that they had heard the phrase "Everyone knows what they are doing", from themselves or other students throughout their time at Emory. However, they recalled hearing it usually at times where a student felt very strongly that they did not know what they were doing. Students also said that they would act as if they knew what they were doing when asked, putting up a "front", when in reality they were struggling and did not know what they were doing. Despite saying they and their peers felt this way, respondents also recounted that they know that everyone does not know what they are doing, even when they felt that way.

Stress and Anxiety/Fear of the Future

Both first generation and non-first-generation students felt stress and anxiety around academics and the job search process. An effect of the status hierarchy on the students is elevated levels of stress and anxiety about their decision to choose a not traditionally prestigious major. Talking about uncertainty surrounding career paths for their majors causes negative emotions, including fear and sadness, in addition to stress. Asley, a white non-first-generation student, describes how she feels thinking about her future:

They have definitely scared me a lot. I have experienced anxiety about my future a lot and I have for the past few years. Like I have heard, if it's in person or on the internet, people bashing liberal arts majors and talking about what non useful things they are going to do with their futures. Like, it does make me sad, that does scare me, but I think ultimately, my passion for it outweighs the fear of what other people think about it.

Many respondents described a fear of the future because of their uncertainty regarding their career path. Albeit, both groups felt this fear, first generation students only described feeling this way 9 times throughout their interviews, whereas all but one non-first-generation participant mentioned feeling this way. Ashley, who has no clear path for her future, said:

But I am so lost right now I don't really know what that is. But I just kind of dove right into sociology and I am trying to look into internships in government, which hasn't been working out because of Covid but I tried[laughs]. And I am also doing the honors program next year to do research, so, you know that's what it is for now and I am happy with it. There's still a little thing in the back of my head that's like what are you going to do after college.

She explained how she felt lost while searching for her for what she wanted to do for her future and despite settling on temporary plans, she is still worried about what is going to happen post-graduation. The uncertainty has created some anxiety.

OTHER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FIRST GENERATION AND NON-FIRST GENERATION

Helping

First generation students mentioned that they valued helping people with their job 20 times, whereas non-first-generation students mentioned it 14 times. While they both noted that they valued a career that would help people, first-generation students say they want a job with the purpose of helping people and non-first-generation students describe how they want jobs that happen to people. For example, the Hispanic/Latinx first-generation student, Arturo's main priority when choosing a career is to be of service to a community and help the people who live in it. Whereas Amal describes stability as the motivation factor when choosing a career, with the added benefit of helping people:

> So, I thought being a doctor makes sense, it's a stable job if I can get into med school and actually do it, and I'd be able to help people, something I want to do.

These two patterns were consistent across the two groups. So, while both valued helping people, they described their desire to do so differently.

Enjoy

For non-first-generation students, they prioritized money, and noted that happiness would be an added benefit. For first generation students, they prioritized happiness when selecting a job

over money, but noted that money would be a benefit. Isabel, a first-generation Latina, explicitly stated:

> Those people have encouraged me to do it and made me realize yeah, maybe they don't get paid as much but they overall seem a lot happier in their day-to-day life and that's what is more important to me than anything.

Many first-generation students shared this sentiment of happiness above else, stating that money would be nice, but not at the cost of their happiness. On the contrary, some non-first-generation students stated that while happiness was important, money was nonnegotiable. Often, they said that when thinking about career paths, they sought something that would make them happy and fulfilled but where pay was assured. Although, there was one non-first-generation participant who said that he would take a high paying job, even if it made him extremely unhappy.

VII.   Implications and Discussions

My findings suggest that undergraduate students share particular beliefs about college to career culture and that there are impacts on the students that result from this culture. Based on the sample, there is evidence to support that undergraduate students have a shared status hierarchy regarding majors and careers that manifests in peer comparisons, stress/anxiety about finding a job, and sometimes a fear of the future. Predominantly, the first-generation students communicated the same beliefs as non-first-generation students about college to culture and its impact on their experiences.

I found support for Binder et al. (2016) findings around college to career culture. There were particular career paths that students perceived as more prestigious than others or higher in

the status hierarchy. In addition to their findings of business and STEM being prestigious, my study suggests that students may also find people on the premed track to be prestigious. Overall, there were many similarities in our findings, but also differences in the culture that are unique to the institution.

Additionally, some participants were contemplating career paths based on others' expectations, not individual desires, providing evidence for Goffman's (1959) theory of acting based on fear of consequences for going against expectations. Interestingly, findings reveal that students were cognizant of occupations associated with career funneling as the "norm" on campus and often felt negative feelings regarding their choice if it was not the "norm." This is worth noting how norms on campus can influence career/major choices and the emotions of students who went against the norm.

My findings support Day's (2016) research that although first generation students and non-first-generation students may share the same values and opinions, their reasoning for holding these values differed. However, Day's looked at work values, whereas I went beyond work values, assessing what majors and careers participants thought of as prestigious as well as opinions on other topics surrounding college to career culture. Additionally, even when sharing opinions, like a negative view of the business school, the first generation gave their view bluntly, whereas the non-first-generation students replied with a more nuanced explanation. Unlike Day's (2016) findings, in my study first generation students reported that they cared more about doing something they enjoyed than making a lot of money. Whereas the only participants in Days study who did not care about enjoying what they did were first generation students. A possibility for this difference is that my population was solely liberal arts majors, while Day's population included majors that were not liberal arts majors.

Like Fenner's (2011) study, my participants also saw certain majors as having unfavorable job prospects. My study furthers his findings by uncovering what other major's students view as having low prospects of employability. In addition, my respondents reported a correlation that majors viewed as easy (often liberal arts majors) are viewed less favorably and that majors with unfavorable job prospects are often viewed as less prestigious generally. Overall, helping to better understand what factors lead to student's perceptions of prestige surrounding majors.

Supporting Silver's (2020) findings, despite parents' educational background, the students in my study had similar goals for post-graduation. Specifically, my study adds that the aspirations typically overlap regarding prestigious plans, as the most frequent overlap between first generation and non-first generation was becoming a lawyer and pursuing graduate school, specifically. This may be evidence of career funneling effects on Emory students.

The limitations of this particular study are the small sample size (n=18). This population was not randomly selected and therefore may not be representative of Emory University's undergraduate population as a whole. Additionally, the population consisted of only liberal arts students, so the opinions cannot be generalized to the rest of the student body (business students, STEM majors, etc.). Also, I had a difficult time recruiting first generation male liberal arts students and interviewed fewer of them, thus their thoughts were possibly less represented.

However, given the selection of in-depth interviews as my research method, I was aware of the limitations of this small and specific sample. The other limitations associated with the selection of in-depth interviews are the small sample size, as noted above, because of the time and resources necessary. Also, because of the open-ended questions, respondents may have

answered in a biased way. Finally, the rapport may not have been as firmly established as believed, which could have led to respondents not relaying their beliefs and opinions accurately.

Respondent's ideas may have been influenced by perceptions of majors because my major was sociology, so they may have answered in a way that was trying not to be offensive to a certain major in general or offend me specifically. Also, the overall perception may have been colored by the fact that every participant was a liberal arts major, so they may have views particular to liberal arts majors that the rest of the undergraduate population may not possess.

These findings suggest that for future research we should assess why first-generation students do or do not go into the liberal arts. Specifically, the lack of first-generation males in the liberal arts is something worth assessing to see if it is structural, cultural, or unique to Emory University. Furthermore, it is vastly important to continue the study of career funneling in universities across the country to assess its impact on major and career choice by undergraduate students. Further research on career funneling may help us better understand if different universities funnel students into different careers based on the cultures unique to their institutions.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: T.L. Scott College to Career Project Summary

College-to-Career Culture among Undergraduates at a Liberal Arts University

Principal Investigator: Tracy L. Scott, PhD

Department: Sociology Department, Emory University

Emory University IRB Study ID: IRB00116236

<u>**Research Goals**</u>

The purpose of this research is an exploration of student culture (values, beliefs, discourse) around college-to-career issues at a selective liberal arts university. Using ethnographic methods, we will explore students' own experiences related to academic majors, desirable work outcomes and career paths. We will also investigate how students talk about these issues among themselves and what they hear about these issues from faculty and administrators on campus.

<u>**Background and Rationale**</u>

Research shows that the link between college degree and work outcomes (pay, occupational prestige, career trajectory, worker satisfaction) is largely a function of the particular educational institution attended (see Aug 2017; Tough 2019). The value of a degree from an "elite" university is vastly different than one from a for-profit university (Binder et al 2016; Rivera 2016; Cottom 2019; Deming 2017). Context matters, as do the actual education and experiences of students in these different contexts (Tough 2019; Rivera 2016; Liu and Grusky 2013; Deming 2017; Aug 2017).

Recent empirical research shows how students' experiences of college are shaped in complex ways by the particular institution they attend (their particular social context), as well as by the smaller subgroups that they belong to within the larger college context (Jack 2019; Ray and Rosow 2012; McCabe 2016; Stuber 2012; Grigsby 2009; Nathan 2006). These studies look at various issues of student experiences of college and show how context matters: how experiences differ depending on the particular type of college or university, the social background of students being studied, and the smaller affinity groups or subcultural groups that students spend most of their time with.

Delving into the cultural processes at play in particular college contexts, Amy Binder and her colleagues illuminate important findings about status hierarchies related to career aspirations (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Binder and Abel 2018). Through qualitative interviews with students at two elite Ivy+ universities (Stanford and Harvard), they show how students develop

notions of prestige about education, work, and jobs; how they establish status hierarchies around careers, and how these status hierarchies shape their career aspirations and experiences on campus. Other recent research provides broader empirical evidence about the larger cultural landscape that contributes to notions of prestige, status, and career funneling (see Espeland and Sauder 2016; Warikoo 2016; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

Using theoretical frameworks from Bordieu (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), Lamont (Lamont 2012; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014) and Fine (2012), we seek to extend the work of Binder et al (2016; 2018) through an ethnographic exploration of student culture in another type of university context: a "next-tier" elite university[1], to see how a different campus culture shapes career aspirations and status hierarchies among students.

Research Questions

This study will focus on three broad, interrelated questions:

1. What is the undergraduate culture around college-to-career issues at this liberal arts university?

- How do students talk about college-to-career issues, particularly career aspirations, career paths, and the purpose of college?
- What are the students' notions of the status and prestige of particular career paths and aspirations? What are the students' notions of the status of particular majors?
- What is the "prevailing student culture" regarding major and career status hierarchies (the "peer prestige system" as per Binder et al 2016)?

2. How do undergraduates experience the prevailing college-to-career student culture? How do prevailing notions affect students' own experiences in college?

3. How do various student subcultures (ideo-cultures) mediate – or exacerbate – the perceptions and experience of the prevailing student culture of college-to-career issues?

Research Method

In order to understand the depth and complexity of the college-to-career culture among undergraduates in their particular context, we will conduct an ethnography of undergraduate students in Emory College. (For background to our ethnographic methods see: Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2019; Maxwell 2013; Lofland et al 2005; Weiss 1994.)

Update

During 2019-2020, we conducted approximately 80 observations and 90 interviews. We are expanding data collection due to the pandemic, in order to investigate how the pandemic may be shaping student culture this year, as well as more broadly, particularly around our topics of majors and careers. Thus, we are continuing data collection through Spring 2021.

Observations (undergraduate college students will be the researchers)

<u>Types of Ethnographic Observations</u>

Participant Observation of Sponsored Events. Sponsored Events are public events (in-person and virtual) for undergraduates sponsored by an administrative unit of the college or university, including student organizations recognized by Campus Life. Student-Researchers will attend events with a focus on some aspect of majors; careers; graduate school; professional development (networking, resumes, etc.). They will observe using formal ethnographic methods, noting group context and structure, formal interactions, informal interactions, and, particularly, the discourse about college to career issues and student culture.

Participant Observation of Undergraduate Public and Semi-Public Spaces. Student Researchers will observe various undergraduate public spaces, at various times, using formal ethnographic methods, noting group contexts and structure, formal interactions, informal interactions, and, particularly, the discourse about college to career issues and student culture. They will also conduct a variety of observations of informal conversations in semi-public spaces (no expected right to confidentiality/privacy), particularly noting the discourse around college-to-career issues.

Interviews (undergraduate college students will participate as both researchers and subjects)

In-Depth Interviews: Undergraduate students will be asked to participate in in-depth interviews about college to career issues and student culture in the College. Dr. Scott will conduct interviews with key informants. In addition to interviews conducted by the faculty PI, Student Researchers (Co-Investigators) will conduct in-depth interviews with students from particular subgroups (Black students; First Generation students; current first-year students: class of 2024) about college to career issues and student culture in the College. Key undergraduates will be identified through student contacts and snowball sampling.

Supplemental Data Collection from selected Interview Participants

Written Narrative Accounts. A sub-sample of undergraduate students will be invited to provide Narrative Accounts: individual self-reflections about the subject's experiences of student life at Emory. Subjects will write narrative accounts about a variety of experiences, including: their academic and career decision-making, their interactions with different groups in daily life (particularly as it pertains to college-to-career issues), as well as their perceptions of the cultural norms they experience in larger student life and their particular subgroups.

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[1] We define Emory as a "next-tier" elite university for three main reasons: 1) it is not included in common classifications of the Ivy-Plus schools and is not as highly selective as these schools; 2) it falls within the next group of highly selective, liberal arts focused, residential-based, financial aid-offering universities in common classification schemes; 3) it offers an undergraduate business degree, which is seen as less prestigious by the top-tier. (See Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016, pages 20, 23-24).

Appendix 2: Recruitment email

Hello [NAME],

I hope this finds you well! I am conducting a research project with Dr. Tracy Scott (faculty member in the Sociology Department) about undergraduate life at Emory, and **I would like to ask you to participate**.

We are interviewing undergraduate students to better understand your experiences of student life, particularly your thoughts and experiences about college-to-career issues on campus; this includes your thoughts about your own path (major and/or career plans) as well as your experiences with the way these issues are presented and talked about on campus. We are **seeking volunteers from a wide variety of majors and with various involvement (or not) in different student groups**. Your participation is completely voluntary and will not affect your studies at Emory in any way.

Your participation would involve an in-person interview that will last about one to one and a half hours. The interview will be conducted by me, via Zoom, at a time of your choosing. All information will be kept confidential and we will protect your identity in any published work.

It would really help us a lot if you would agree to be interviewed. This is also an excellent opportunity to share your overall thoughts about "life at Emory" to a sympathetic, interested listener!

If you are interested please email me at: ahaugan@emory.edu

If you are unsure and have questions, please contact Dr. Scott: tscott@emory.edu.

Thank you for your consideration!

Abby Haugan

Emory College Class of 2022

Sociology

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

<u>*College to Career Culture* – **Interview Guide**</u>

Informed Consent – Instructions for Interviewers

- Because your research includes the use of "human subjects" (e.g., interviewing people), you will need to do an Informed Consent in order to protect your participants' autonomy and rights.
- Please send (electronically) the ***IRB-approved Informed Consent*** document to your participant before the interview.
- Then, at the beginning of the interview remind them that you sent the document and show them the document on your screen (screenshare in Zoom).
- Briefly explain the main sections, then give them time to read.
- Finally, ask them for verbal consent on the recording.

Interview GUIDE

NOTE to Interviewers: Try to take the stance of an "outsider" as much as possible despite the fact that you are students too. One way to do this, to help your participants feel more comfortable, is to use these framing statements, and to repeat these as necessary:

FRAMING STATEMENTS

- "*I am really interested in finding out about these things because I don't know much about what other students are thinking.*"
- "*I'm very interested to hear other people's stories because I'm not certain about any of these issues myself.*"

COMMON PROBES (for examples/stories):

Also, try to get as many concrete examples and stories as you can. Common probes to use:

- "*Could you tell me more about that*?"

- "*Can you think of a specific time when that happened?*"
- "*Can you think of a story that illustrates that point?*"

Background (also send Demographic Survey before interview and have them fill out)

Before we start, I'm going to first ask you about your background, your experience at Emory, and your career plans. I know that things likely have changed for you in the past few months. I have allocated time during this interview to address the changes to your life, your college experience, and your career path in the world of COVID-19.

First, I'd like to get some background information [additional questions to Demo Survey):

- Where did you grow up?
- What kind of household – e.g., parents?
- What is your parent(s) occupation(s)?

I would also like to hear about **how you decided to come to Emory**. Tell me about that process.

How did you hear about Emory? Why did you decide on Emory?

Emory Academic Story

Now, what I would like you to do is **tell me the story of your time at Emory, focusing on your academic/career story [***OR use whatever wording works better here].***

- There are no right or wrong answers or ways to do this. This is your story, and I want to hear **what has been most important to you in helping shape your path along the college-to-career pipeline**.
- I'll follow up and ask you more questions as we go along.

1.1. Choosing Your Major

So, **tell me about how you chose your major**. Start at the beginning: WHAT did you **think when you started Emory**? HOW did those ideas change?

Alternative Questions/Probes

- o **What were you thinking college life would be like** when you started? **How has it been different?**

o   What were you **thinking about majors and how has the reality been different**?

Have you chosen a major(s)? If yes, which one(s)?

IF YES: Tell me about how you chose your major. When did you decide? How did you decide?

- What were **key factors/reasons** that went into your decision?
- Were there any **key people** who influenced your decision (parents, faculty, other students, other staff at Emory)? Who and how?
- Any **key classes or events/programs** that influenced your decision? What and how?

IF NO: How you are going about choosing a major? What steps are you taking in this process?

- Do you have any ideas about what you might like to pursue? What are they?
- What issues are you having with choosing a major?

Did/Do you ever feel pressure to make a decision about a Major?

- If so, where does this come from? Parents? School administrators? Faculty? Other students?
- If not, do you think others do? Where does this come from?
- IF UNDECIDED: How does it feel to say you are "undecided"? What are the reactions you get [from various groups]?

1.2 Perceptions of Majors

What is the *general perception about majors among Emory students*?

OR What are the *main distinctions between "Major" groups* on campus? How are these groups viewed by students? What sets them apart from each other?

For example, are there certain *majors* that are more *popular* than others? Or more *desirable*?

- o   If YES, which ones? **Why** do you think these are more popular or more desirable?
- o   If NO, can you explain? E.g., Are all majors considered similarly desirable?
- AND/OR are there some *majors* that are considered more *prestigious* than others?
  - o   If YES, which ones? **Why** do you think these are more prestigious?
  - o   If NO, can you explain? E.g., Are all majors considered similarly prestigious?

Do you think some majors are considered *prestigious* by *people outside Emory*?

- For example: *Parents / Employers / The media*?
- *Which majors*? And *by which "outside Emory" groups*?
- *How/where have you heard this*?

[PROBE HERE for any/all of these categories/combinations!]

2.1 Career Plans / Ideas

Now, tell me about your ideas for a career or plans for after graduation. Do you have a particular career in mind or ideas about grad school?

IF YES: HOW did you come to these ideas/decisions about career and/or grad school?

- What are some of the **key factors/reasons** for your plans or your interest in this career?

  PROBES

- **Personal interests, values**: own values or purpose; own abilities, skills, interests?
- **Key people:** Friends? Family? Faculty or staff? External encouragement from parents, peers, professors, career center.
- **Turning points?** Classes? Events on campus? Conversations? Internships? Work experiences?

If UNDECIDED:

- Do you have any ideas about what you might like to pursue? What are they?
- What issues are you having with choosing a career path?

Do you ever feel pressure to make a decision about a career path?

- If so, where does this come from? Parents? School administrators? Faculty? Other students?
- If not, do you think others do? Where does this come from?

How does it feel to say you are "undecided"? What are the reactions you get [from various groups]?

2.2 Perceptions of Careers

What is the *general perception about jobs/careers among Emory students*? OR what is the *general "chatter" about jobs/careers* among students at Emory?

- For example, are there certain *career paths* that are more *popular* than others? Or more *desirable*?
  - o If YES, which ones? **Why** do you think these are more popular or more desirable?
  - o If NO, can you explain? E.g., Are all careers considered similarly desirable?
- AND/OR are there some *careers* that are considered more *prestigious* than others?
  - o If YES, which ones? **Why** do you think these are more prestigious?
  - o If NO, can you explain? E.g., Are all careers considered similarly prestigious?

Do you think some *jobs/careers* are considered *prestigious* by *people outside Emory*?

- For example: *Parents / Employers / The media*?
- *Which majors*? And *by which "outside Emory" groups*?
- *How/where have you heard this*?

[PROBE HERE for any/all of these categories/combinations!]

2.3 Own Career Perceptions

- How does your intended job/career fit in with these larger perceptions?
- How have these notions influenced your thinking about your own career plans?

3. Encounters with Career Topics/Conversations on Campus

Extending some of what we just talked about [IF THEY HAVE NOT ALREADY MENTIONED THESE POINTS] → I would like to know more about your experiences with the way that majors and careers are talked about at Emory.

Thinking about your daily life at college: Tell me about *informal conversations with other students* [that focus on issues around majors and/or careers and work after college.]

- Do these topics come up very often? How are these topics talked about?
- What are some common conversations around jobs/careers?
- How are the *desirable or prestigious careers* that you mentioned talked about?
- Does it vary by different groups on campus – e.g., Students? Faculty? Admin/Staff?

4. Emory Context

Now, I would like to know more about your general experiences of undergrad culture at Emory.

4.1 Undergrad Culture

What is the undergraduate culture like at Emory?

- AND/OR Can you think of three words to describe it?
  - o Now, tell me what you mean by these?
- AND/OR For example, if you have friends at other colleges/universities, how does their undergrad experience differ from yours at Emory?
- What is student life like? (E.g., you are trying to get at notions like: competitive, cooperative, stressful, social, academic, divisive, etc.)

What kinds of experiences have you had that illustrate this? Can *you give me a story or example*?

AND/OR, *if not one culture: Are there multiple cultures or subcultures*? Can you explain?

- Which ones are you a part of? What most characterizes the culture/subculture that you experience?
- Are there any that you avoid?
- Are there any that seem to "dominate" student life? Or that are "loudest" on campus?

4.2 Common phrases [IF THEY HAVE NOT MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY]

I've heard some students mention some words/phrases, and I want to see if these have any meaning to you.

Have you heard the word *"pre-professional"?*

IF YES: Can you tell me what pre-professional means to you? What does pre-professional include? Is this a common phrase? Where (and from whom) do you hear it?

"*Everyone knows what they are doing.*"

- Do you ever hear this? IF YES: Who says this? When do you hear it?
- Do you ever feel like this? IF YES: Tell me more. Why do you say this? Who is "everyone"?

5. COVID-19 Impact [OPTIONAL]

If you would like, let's talk a little bit about how COVID-19 has influenced your career plans.

- How, if at all, has COVID-19 affected your career trajectory, plans, or goals?
  - Probe about applications, summer jobs, etc.
- How has COVID-19 affected how you view certain career options?
- How has COVID-19 affected your academic goals? Have you thought about switching majors or taking different courses?

6. Wrap-up

- Finally, is there anything else about college-to-career issues that you think is important, but which I haven't asked? Anything about student culture?
- Is there anything that we talked about that you would like to go back to, talk more about?
- Finally, do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 4: Demographic Questionnaire

College to Career: Interviewee Demographic Questionnaire

Please answer the questions below, save the document, and email the completed document to: tscott@emory.edu

OR, if you prefer, we will ask you these questions at the beginning of the interview.

1) What is your age?

2) What is your year in college? (Or list graduation year)

3) What is your gender?

4) What is your race and/or ethnicity?

5) What is your nationality?

6) What type of high school did you attend? (e.g., private, public, charter):

   Location of HS: City, state, country:

During your high school years, who was/were your parent(s) or guardian(s)?

7) Parent/Guardian 1

   List relationship to you (e.g.: mother, father, legal guardian):

   What is their highest educational degree?

What is their occupation?

8) Parent/Guardian 2, if relevant

List relationship to you (e.g.: mother, father, legal guardian):

What is their highest educational degree?

What is their occupation?

9) How many siblings do you have?

Appendix 5: Demographic Attributes

Name	Class year	Race/Ethnicity	First Generation Status
Arielle	2022	Hispanic/Latino	First Generation
Rachel	2022	White	First Generation
Ally	2021	Latina	First Generation
Brittany	2022	White	First Generation
Isabel	2022	Latina	First Generation
Aubrey	2022	White	Non-First Generation
Aiyla	2022	SWANA (Southwest Asian and North Africa)	Non-First Generation
Julia	2022	White	Non-First Generation
Ashley	2022	White	Non-First Generation
Joan	2022	Black	Non-First Generation
Adam	2022	White	Non-First Generation
Brad	2021	White	Non-First Generation
Colin	2021	African American	Non-First Generation
Amal	2021	Middle Eastern	Non-First Generation
Austin	2022	White	Non-First Generation
Arturo	2022	Hispanic/Latinx	First Generation
Andre	2022	White/Hispanic	First Generation
Liam	2022	White	First Generation