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“What the Heck Are You Going to Do With That?” An Insight into the Affective Consequences  
of College-to-Career Comparisons

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a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Abstract

### “What the Heck Are You Going to Do With That?” An Insight into the Affective Consequences of College-to-Career Comparisons

By Ryan G. Kenneally

Although efforts to understand student culture around college-to-career issues at elite universities are growing, research on how these patterns translate to other types of university contexts is sorely lacking. The present study uses a social-psychological framework to demonstrate how student culture at a next-tier selective liberal arts university impacts status hierarchies and students' experiences of college. Relying on social comparison theory, the author examines 123 in-depth participant observations of Emory undergraduates to assess how groups of students discuss status beliefs, engage in social comparisons, and reflect on comparison-based affective consequences. Utilizing qualitative analyses, the author found that a majority of students, across all demographic groups and academic groups, described a common status belief system: a well-formed status hierarchy of majors and careers. Overall, three key themes of certainty, institutional resources, and intellectual prestige underly the status hierarchy at Emory and functioned as significant drivers of students' social comparisons. By drawing boundaries between “high-status” and “low-status” career clusters, students' status distinctions shape their social comparisons and their positive or negative affective outcomes. Ultimately, these results indicate the social-psychological impact of social comparisons, how they have a real-world impact on students, and their significance for researchers continuing to define and explore culture. Future research should continue to address the negative social-psychological consequences of status hierarchies on students to provide better-informed faculty when advising and educating students.

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## **“What the Heck Are You Going to do With That?” An Insight into the Affective Consequences of College-to-Career Comparisons**

Although people may choose to attend a selective university for a variety of reasons, higher education is often sought-after because it provides individuals an opportunity to generate higher earning potentials, grow personally and professionally, achieve greater job security, and explore diverse career options. Despite this apparent freedom in students’ ability to explore individually tailored career paths that correspond to their unique interests, several studies show that relatively few students take advantage of all the different courses and career avenues that universities offer (Gerber & Cheung, 2018; Davies & Zarifa, 2012).

Since universities are credited as critical launch points for the widest variety of meaningful careers, increasing attention has been paid to processes influencing student career formation. The current literature shows that youth’s career prospects are readily shaped by the powerful social context at university campuses (Binder et al., 2016; Binder & Abel, 2018). There are several mechanisms that may underlie the robust impact of university context on individual career trajectories. These include interpersonal forces, such as peer influence through social comparison, and structural forces, like the homologous discourse, work values, and opportunities within a particular cultural setting (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Li et al., 2001; Binder et al., 2016; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018).

Research conducted by Binder et al. (2016) at elite universities demonstrates how students actively construct shared meanings of career rank. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, students attending upper-tier universities, nested in their specific campus ecologies, develop peer prestige systems that delineate high-status jobs from “ordinary” careers.



Importantly, high-status careers are thought to reduce “fears of the future” by offering greater financial security and clearer pathways (Binder et al., 2016). The failure of students to carve out a stable career path, with certain and dependable trajectories, results in low perceived control over one’s life and breeds status-anxious students.

“Status anxiety: A worry, so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives, that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society and that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect; a worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one” (Alain De Botton 2004:1).

Binder and Abel (2018) argue that status anxiety, one of the most frequent problems experienced by students attending elite universities, seems to disproportionately affect top-tier institutions. Students in these elite environments, concerned with maintaining their status in more competitive education systems, are beset with constant fear of losing their reputational status through missteps in major or career pathway selection (Binder et al., 2016; Rivera 2015).

Emory University, a selective liberal arts university, represents a distinct university context in which students are provided the opportunity to pursue a particular unit of the university or a pre-professional track. To assess how the institutional context at Emory perpetuates status anxiety, it is necessary to clarify the organizational structure. There are three undergraduate units at Emory University – Goizueta Business School, Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, and Emory College of Arts and Sciences – that each represent different degree programs. Within the Emory College of Arts and Sciences, undergraduates can opt to pursue a pre-professional track in health, business, law, or nursing. After two years of general education prerequisites taken at Emory College, those who select a pre-professional track in Business or Nursing are seamlessly transferred into the Business or Nursing units respectively.

Students who choose to pursue pre-professional tracks, which constitute high-status career clusters, are provided with institutional resources that are separate from those provided to the 50+ academic departments in the Emory College of Arts and Sciences. Not only do these independent tracks confer different resources to enrolled students, but also a sense of institutional clarity around the path. Those pursuing pre-professional tracks at Emory have faculty support every step of the way, access to school-specific advisors and career centers, and guaranteed occupational outcomes by the end of graduation. Emory Goizueta Business School, for example, maintains ties to over 100 full-time hiring companies, including some of the highest-paying companies, like Bain & Company, Ernst & Young, and BlackRock. With 99% of its graduating class receiving and accepting offers for a full-time job after graduation, students in the Emory Goizueta Business School enjoy a large degree of occupational certainty.

At Emory University, it is precisely this sense of certainty that confers high status, prestige, and value to students in certain career clusters. The conspicuous status displays of prestige are those that demonstrate career certainty. Individuals in high-status career clusters may display their relative status through donning track-specific merchandise, posting LinkedIn job announcements, conversing about starting salaries, or other interpersonal methods that communicate a high degree of career certainty and prestige within their pre-professional track. At an institutional level, beyond status displays in interaction, consider the difference in language for each unit on Emory's undergraduate statistics site: "98% *employed* in the School of Nursing; 95% *with job offers* and a \$71,000 average starting salary in the Goizueta Business School; and 90% *with solid plans* in Emory College" (Emory University, 2020). For those not following a pre-professional track, this ambiguous language serves as testament to the anxiety-provoking uncertainty commonly experienced by undergraduates.

College campuses are central in career formation, and students actively construct shared meanings of career prestige, delineating ordinary jobs from high-status ones. Status beliefs, or “shared cultural understandings about the relative value of particular groups of actors” (Berger et al., 1977; Webster & Foschi, 1988) strongly influence how people classify others in hierarchies, including in rating systems (Sauder et al., 2012; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019). At Harvard and Stanford, students compare themselves, and their career paths, to students following different trajectories, drawing symbolic boundaries to separate people into higher or lower levels of prestige (Binder & Abel, 2018). Therefore, students create meanings, but do so on the basis of the “interpretive community” to which they belong (Fish, 1980; Milkie, 1999).

The relationship between university context and status beliefs on student career aspirations is well-documented (Binder et al., 2016; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018). Although Binder and colleagues (2016) outline how students create shared meanings of career prestige at elite universities, it remains unclear whether these patterns would translate to a next-tier, selective university such as Emory. Furthermore, the authors only briefly examine the role of peer influence. Despite extensive review of social cognition processes on educational and career trajectories (for comprehensive review see Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018), which focus broadly on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, the role of social comparison processes and comparison-based emotions remains largely unexamined. Understanding how students engage in these processes – a byproduct of institutional structure – is important because it shows how undergraduates use other people in their campus context to make sense of themselves, their career aspirations, and their feelings. This study aims to shed light on the emotional disparities experienced by career clusters of varying status. Not only might this status inequality perpetuate

negative emotional experiences for those in low-status career clusters, but it might also function to create more homogenous, rather than individualized, students entering the workforce.

By emphasizing social cognitions as they pertain to the individual, I am not discrediting the impact of organizational or group processes. I acknowledge that other factors, including faculty members and structural economic inequality, contribute to career decisions and unequal status outcomes among students. Yet, the study of how these factors influence the process of career formation has received ample attention. Therefore, I look to the individual, understanding that they represent members of their broader career clusters, as my primary unit of analysis. Extending social comparison insights into higher education, and looking at how students assign greater value to some career clusters over others, allows understanding of the dynamic interplay between status beliefs, social comparison processes, and affective consequences. To clarify how status beliefs can indirectly affect people's emotional responses, I draw on basic principles in social psychology that point to the key role of social comparisons.

First, I present a theoretical framework highlighting the importance of social comparisons among students, parsing out why, how, and with whom students compare. Next, I focus heavily on the affective consequences of social comparisons, developing specific predictions for patterns of emotional outcomes in individuals representing membership to different career clusters.

Specifically, my research addresses four interrelated questions:

1. How do Emory students talk about the status hierarchy among different career clusters?
2. Collectively, how do groups of Emory students affirm and attribute more or less value to students representing different career clusters?
3. To what extent does the status belief system among students shape social comparison processes within and between groups of career clusters?

4. What affective consequences do social comparisons have on high-prestige and low-prestige career clusters?

My analysis involves a two-pronged approach. I will begin with a description of how Emory students talk about, and display, the relative status of different career clusters. After outlining the status beliefs that portray students on pre-professional tracks as more prestigious than those pursuing a track in Liberal Arts, I will discuss the social comparison processes and affective consequences of those peer prestige systems.

## **Literature Review**

### **Status Beliefs**

Through qualitative interviews at two elite Ivy+ universities, Binder et al. (2016, 2018) illuminate important findings about status hierarchies related to career aspirations. 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 beliefs, and career funneling (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Warikoo 2016; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013).

To extend the work on status beliefs, and of Binder et al. (2016, 2018), Scott (2022) conducts an ethnographic exploration of student culture in a “next-tier” elite university to see how a different campus culture shapes career aspirations and status hierarchies among students. Through a series of qualitative interviews with Emory undergraduates, Scott (2022) found that a majority of interviewees, across all demographic and major groups, described a similar college-to-career culture among undergraduates at Emory University. Different students emphasized different elements of the culture, yet all the elements were clearly part of a common status belief

system: a well-formed status hierarchy of majors and careers that became clear from the analyses.

Thus, a status belief “associates greater social esteem and competence at the ‘things that count’ in society with people in one category of a social difference than another” (Ridgeway & Cornell 2006:431). Status beliefs result when individuals generalize about whole categories of people who share a salient, distinguishing attribute that acquires status value. Even if individuals do not personally endorse a particular belief, a status belief functions as an evaluative stereotype that “most people” consider everyone to accept (Ridgeway & Cornell, 2006). When members from different groups interact with one another in a local context, they link the categorical distinction between groups to esteem.

Since cultural values shape status beliefs, individuals’ statuses as group members will theoretically lead people to believe that individuals who belong to one social category are more esteemed than those who belong to another. Given the evaluative component of status, and the role of group interaction in creating and spreading status beliefs (Ridgeway & Cornell, 2006), it is crucial to examine how social comparison processes shape student interpretations of career prestige.

### **The Importance of Social Comparisons, Especially Among Students**

Imagine this: A student is nearing the end of the Sophomore year at college, the point at which most universities require students to declare their chosen major(s). Before settling on a career path, the student begins to narrow in on what majors and career paths might be of interest. According to Festinger (1954), fear of the unknown might motivate interest to engage in social comparisons. The decisions people encounter daily – from the most trivial to the most significant – become much more difficult in the absence of appropriate self-knowledge. Festinger’s theory

of social comparison processes (1954) is predicated on the idea that people have basic human needs for certainty, affiliation, and esteem. To satisfy these core needs, especially in situations of uncertainty, individuals seek information about others (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018).

Befriending the right people in the dorm, selecting courses of interest, and ultimately choosing the right career path all require knowledge of self-beliefs and capabilities. Social comparisons offer a way for students to obtain precious self-knowledge, reduce uncertainty, and form accurate judgements of their abilities or achievements.

### *The Why and How of Social Comparison*

In the absence of objective information, Festinger (1954) suggests that people will determine their own social and personal worth based on how they evaluate themselves against others. In the quest for self-knowledge, individuals compare certain aspects of themselves, including their behaviors, abilities, status, and success, to those of other people (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Given that comparison processes occur when people are confronted with another person's performance on a domain of high relevance to themselves (Smith, 2000), I presume that, in the college context, financial security and occupational certainty will play a significant role in undergraduate career comparison processes.

One crucial point in a student's academic experience, in which social comparisons may prove extremely useful, is during the process of selecting a major and forming occupational goals. Deciding what students value in a future job, and using others around them to compare prospective outcomes, is a pivotal moment in the formation of career aspirations. The university context also plays a major role. Due to the fact that students are embedded in the same community, sharing similar purposes and goals, the meanings constructed from their comparisons will likely be shared (Fish, 1980; Milkie, 1999). Understanding how students create

shared cultural understandings about the relative value of particular majors or career paths is central to my investigation of social comparison processes and subsequent affective consequences. Although these status beliefs strongly influence how people classify others in hierarchies, the directions and processes by which they influence students' social comparisons remains unclear.

### *The Direction of Social Comparison*

The direction of social comparison can be generally described as upward or downward. When people engage in upward social comparison, they compare themselves to someone who is perceived to be better off than they are (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). For students, this upward drive could lead to self-improvement, inspiring undergraduates to learn more about their weaknesses and strive toward new achievements because people in their network have accomplished similar goals (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). In a university context, this could represent comparing oneself to another student performing well in a course, acquiring an internship, or graduating with a full-time job. On the other hand, upward comparisons could also lead to feelings of inferiority by reminding students that others are outperforming them in self-relevant academic or occupational domains.

When people engage in downward social comparison, they compare themselves to people who are perceived to be worse off than they are. In threatening situations, this downward comparison is often thought to satisfy the self-enhancement motive by boosting self-esteem and serving as a reminder that things could easily be worse (Wills, 1981; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). For example, students might acknowledge that they don't have a job, but at least they are not failing their courses. Conversely, downward comparisons may also remind people that their



situations can deteriorate and result in similar misfortunes experienced by their comparison target.

Importantly, the direction of comparison does not guarantee the direction of the outcome. Both types of comparisons can result in either positive or negative affect (Buunk et al., 1990). The type of comparison that people engage in largely depends on who they compare themselves with, their local context, level of perceived control, underlying comparison motives, and level of similarity-dissimilarity to the comparison target (Smith, 2000).

### *Comparison Others*

Festinger (1954) emphasized the interpersonal consequences of social comparison, proposing that people choose to compare with similar others, attempt to change others to become more similar to themselves, or even change themselves to become more similar to others (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Although a large body of evidence supports this deliberate selection process, more recent work suggests that social comparisons are fairly automatic and highly efficient processes (Mussweiler & Ruter, 2003; Mussweiler et al., 2006). Thus, people tend to act as cognitive misers (Fiske & Taylor, 2020), relying on routine standards, such as peers, to evaluate themselves on important social dimensions.

Although much of the social comparison literature focuses on individuals' comparisons to other individuals (for comprehensive review see Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Suls & Wheeler, 2000), group membership is also recognized as a fundamental and pervasive feature of social comparison (Hyman, 1942; Pettigrew, 1967; Thye et al., 2019). Scholars argue that what is felt during individual-level comparison can be translated to similar comparisons and affective outcomes when comparing oneself as a group member (Smith & Leach, 2004; Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018). On campus, when students recognize that membership in a specific career

cluster affords them more or less prestige, the associated social identities may be more salient than personal identities in career-based comparisons, and have affective consequences.

### **Affective Consequences of Social Comparison**

In order to elicit strong emotions that impact the self, social comparisons must be directly relevant to one's important goals and involve others who are similar on related attributes (Smith, 2000). Although people rely on automatic, routine standards for comparison, when individuals are confronted with another's performance on a domain of high self-relevance and personal significance, the affective consequences from social comparisons are amplified. Importantly, one's social identity in relation to these domains is also a strong predictor for comparison-based emotions. As Ortony and colleagues (1988) contend, affective reactions are especially likely when the relatively advantaged or disadvantaged person is a member of one's own social group. Although the direction of comparison is one familiar distinction to make among types of social comparison-based emotions, whether the comparison is contrastive or assimilative in nature helps clarify the different processes underlying various comparison-based emotions.

#### *Contrast vs. Assimilation*

Collins (1996) provides greater nuance to the relatively simple upward-downward comparison distinction through the introduction of contrastive and assimilative outcomes. Her basic idea is that comparison can either lead to assimilation or contrast, depending on whether individuals see themselves as similar to, or different from, the comparison other (Collins, 1996; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Assimilation occurs when individuals view the comparison target as more similar to themselves in a particular domain. In this case, the target acts as an anchor toward which judgments shift closer. When the self is assimilated toward a given target, more positive reactions result from comparisons with high rather than low standards. The opposite

outcome of contrast can also occur when individuals perceive a difference between themselves and the target. When the self is seen in contrast to the target, more negative evaluations result from comparisons with high rather than low standards.

Smith (2000) further expands Collins' (1996) argument by linking specific emotions to contrastive and assimilative outcomes. His general analytic structure allows specific predictions regarding the types of social comparison-based emotions that may emerge from people's dialogues and interactions. Smith (2000) highlights four dimensions and their roles in generating affect: upward or downward comparison, focus of attention, assimilative or contrastive outcome, and perception of control (see Figure 1).

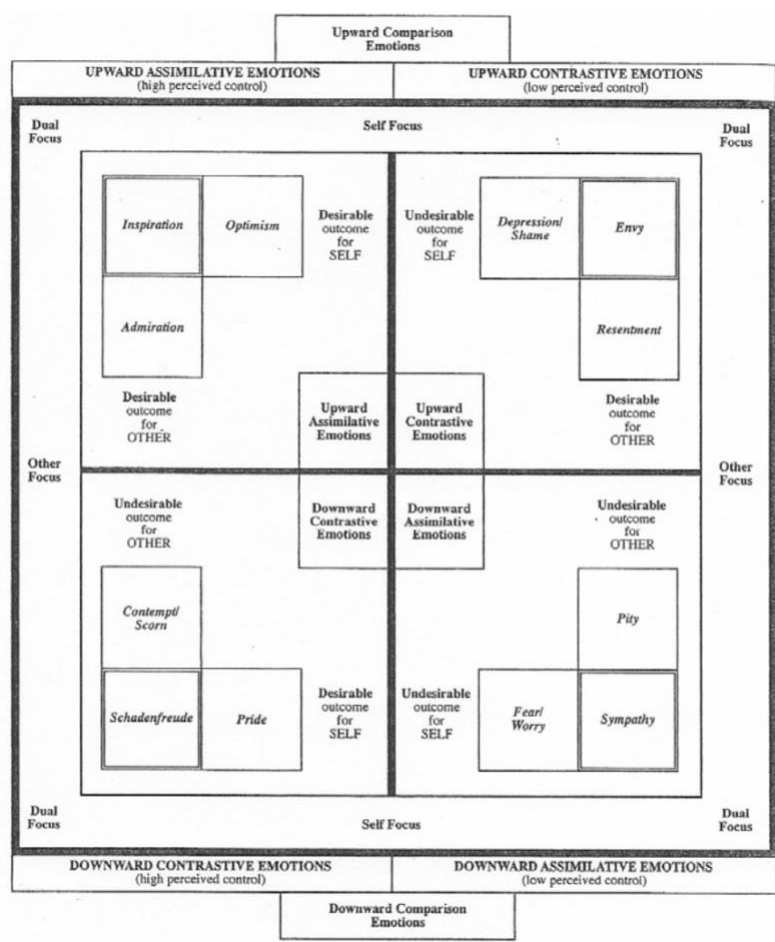


Figure 1. Four types of social-comparison-based emotions (Smith, 2000, p. 176).

The emotions that result from contrastive and assimilative outcomes can be directed inward toward the self, or outward to the comparison other. Broadly speaking, contrast with an upward target and assimilation to a downward target, produce negative affective reactions. In part, these outcomes result because individual perceptions of control are low. When opposite occurs with upward assimilation and downward contrast, in which individual perceptions of control are high, positive affective reactions emerge.

Regarding students' pursuits, the distinguishing feature between prestigious and non-prestigious career clusters is the sense of certainty, stemming from institutional clarity around a path and resulting occupational certainty. Given that certainty is commonly valued across all types of students, individuals who are members of career clusters in any pre-professional track are awarded high status.

Limiting my analysis to this structural difference in rank order, I will broadly define the students in a pre-professional track as higher in rank order than students not pursuing a pre-professional track. From this framework, I will distinguish students as similar or dissimilar on the basis of their career clusters. Contrastive comparisons will be made between undergraduates pursuing different career paths, or in different units at Emory University. Assimilative comparisons will be made between undergraduates pursuing similar career paths in the same schools.

I hypothesize more upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotions among students in low-prestige career clusters. These two types of comparisons involve a lower sense of control over one's outcomes, and result in emotional outcomes such as envy, resentment, worry, and fear (Smith, 2000). Among students in high-prestige career clusters, which provide a wide range of career certainty and stability, I expect to find more upward assimilative and downward

contrastive comparisons. I predict the elevated perceptions of control and prestige to manifest in a higher degree of positive affective reactions, including inspiration, admiration, optimistic feelings, and pride (Smith, 2000).

## **Methods**

### *Research Design*

In order to understand the depth and complexity of the college-to-career culture among undergraduates, I chose to conduct an ethnography of undergraduate students at Emory University. This research is part of a much larger study on college-to-career culture among students at a selective liberal arts university, in which a team of undergraduate researchers at Emory collected over 100 participant observations and 90 interviews (Scott, 2022). Using a social psychological framework, the current study places an emphasis on students' status belief systems, social comparison processes, and associated affective consequences. To explore the dynamic ways in which students discuss shared meanings of career prestige, engage in social comparison processes, and reflect on the affective consequences of such processes, I opted to analyze the participant observations. Observations allowed us to collect data in an efficient and cost-effective manner from a wide array of undergraduates representing diverse majors and career paths. In contrast to in-depth interviews, examining participant observations granted more natural access to the complex and unfiltered experiences of undergraduate students in individual and group settings. Because I am interested in individual-level processes as they relate to career cluster membership, observations of students in formal and informal group settings was the most appropriate research method.

### *Site and Sample*

I have selected Emory University, a top-ranked institution that is recognized and respected on a global scale, as my research site. Emory University is renowned for its competitive admissions process, diverse academics, “liberal arts colleges, graduate and professional schools, and one of the world’s leading healthcare systems” (Emory University, 2022). Consequently, the university is viewed as extremely selective, academically rigorous, and prestigious. As such, most students who opt to attend Emory are likely to be highly motivated, driven individuals interested in pursuing some sort of professional career. Furthermore, prior research has focused on the “career funneling” of students attending elite universities (Binder et al., 2016). Through this research, I hope to determine whether the patterns found by Binder et al. (2016) replicate or differ at Emory University, a next-tier, selective liberal arts institution.

The unit of analysis for the present study is Emory University undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. I opted to examine 123 participant observations collected by myself and a team of 22 other undergraduate researchers over the span of Fall 2019 to Spring 2021. Consequently, these observations span the periods before the Covid-19 pandemic, and during the virtual/hybrid learning periods. There are 48 in-person observations from Fall 2019 to Spring 2020, and 75 hybrid (in-person and virtual) observations from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021.

The Principal Investigator, Dr. Tracy Scott, purposefully recruited undergraduate researchers to include a variety of demographic characteristics. Student researchers interacted in different arenas of undergraduate life, and comprised a broad mix of class years, majors, genders, race and ethnicities, and sexualities. Dr. Scott asked her team of researchers to observe their settings for instances of college-to-career discussions that the researchers found representative of their daily lives at Emory. These observations occurred in either informal group conversations,

or in formal groups and events. Undergraduate researchers were also instructed to provide in-depth impressions of their written observations. Accordingly, these observations are illustrative of the important factors and influences in students' career trajectories, social comparisons, and related emotions.

This study seeks to assess the impact of students' status belief systems on social comparison processes and affective consequences. Status beliefs, which constitute evaluative standings of social groups in society, become evident through interactions and conversations with other students. For the purpose of this study, status beliefs are operationalized according to three major themes that underlie the status hierarchy of majors/tracks: perceived career certainty (a clear path to success), intellect of students (difficulty of their academic course load), and institutional support/resources (e.g., professional development, separate academic advising).

Due to the variety of undergraduate researcher reporting styles and to the sensitive, confidential information inherent in the observations, limited demographic information regarding the large sample of students observed is provided. Although specific demographic information is not included in the present study, my primary focus was not on making comparisons within ethnic, racial, sex, or social class groups. While I did not exclude participants on the basis of such factors, my sample is not representative enough to speak on differences in these demographics.

### *Data Analysis*

The majority of our observations were recorded, transcribed, and downloaded for review. If the observations were not transcribed using precise language, the researchers wrote down as many details of the interaction that they could recollect promptly after it occurred. I used a qualitative software analysis program, MAXQDA, to analyze the information collected from

observations. Data was coded using a two-part process. The first phase consisted of deductive analysis, which involved using an initial “start list” of codes modified primarily from my conceptual framework and code list created by a team of 4 researchers (Scott, 2022). My code system originally consisted of the following major topics: Majors / Tracks, High-Status vs. Low-Status, Academic Class Year, Jobs / Careers, Social Comparisons, and Emotions / Affective Consequences. After completing the initial coding, I proceeded to the second phase, which involved inductive analysis techniques. The inductive nature allowed key patterns and themes to present themselves from the data over time. I was then able to draw on past research and prominent patterns to revise my code system and narrow my focus to a few topics.

Of particular interest was parceling out the status belief system: the status hierarchy of majors and careers that emerged from analysis. I relied on Berger and colleagues’ (1977) expectation states theory, Ridgeway & Cornell’s (2006) status construction theory, and the in-depth observations to conceptualize the student hierarchy and central status beliefs. Thus, I defined status beliefs as associating “greater social esteem and competence at the ‘things that count’ in society with people in one category of a social difference than another” (Ridgeway & Cornell 2006:431). By synthesizing the observations with the work of Ridgeway & Cornell (2006) and Berger et al. (1977), I was able to re-categorize “High Status vs. Low Status” into three major themes that underlie the status hierarchy: certainty (a clear path to success), intellectual prestige (difficulty of major/track), and institutional resources/support. Specifically, I coded perceived certainty, intellectual prestige (challenging major/track), and institutional resources/support as high-status social distinctions. I coded perceived uncertainty (no clear path to success), modest intellect (easy major/track), and minimal institutional resources/support as low-status distinctions.



In the end, the code system I implemented consisted of four large categories (Majors / Tracks, Undergraduate Culture, Social Comparisons, Emotions/Affective Consequences) and forty individual sub-codes (see Appendix I for full list of codes). Through utilizing both deductive and inductive coding processes, I was able to expand upon, and remain impartial to, the relationships and variables I originally predicted. Throughout the coding process, I strived to avoid making subjective inferences and instead aimed to rely on the explicit, objective data in the observations. Accordingly, I made a conscious effort to revisit and modify my initial codes to accurately reflect the patterns and findings that became clear through analysis. I specifically compared observations involving the four main tracks/majors (Pre-Medical track, Business track, Other Pre-Professional track [Law/Nursing], and Non-track, Liberal Arts majors) on each central topic once I completed all phases of coding.

## **Results**

### *The Role of Institutional Context in Shaping the Status Belief System*

Emory undergraduates, embedded in the same competitive, pre-professional context, maintain shared cultural understandings about the relative value of students' majors and career paths. Regardless of demographic group or academic interest, the majority of students recognize common features of the college-to-career culture at Emory. These salient nominal distinctions between groups of students acquire status value through interaction, creating a widely shared status belief system at Emory: a well-formed status hierarchy of majors and careers. In turn, the status belief system favors groups of students that have distinct, socially recognized, and valued status characteristics. Institutional context plays a key role in the construction and maintenance of students' status beliefs.

Annie, a senior recounting her academic journey at Emory, reflected on the ways in which she felt influenced by her local context:

**Annie (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** The [Seniors] expressed that they felt or experienced pressure from others around them, particularly from the Emory campus, about their major and career choice. I could relate to this. I also thought the Emory environment placed a great emphasis on being pre-professional, and that there were specific paths you had to take. Overall, I found the event [“Conversations with Seniors: Navigating Majors and Minors”] to be insightful. Reflecting on the topics discussed as a Senior made me somewhat regretful of how I spent my academic time at Emory. I was very focused on fulfilling pre-requisites. Apart from sociology, I didn't do much exploring into other departments or courses besides those of my major and Pre-Med. I also felt like I missed out on a lot of opportunities because I didn't seek them out.

Annie expresses feeling pressure from the undergraduates at Emory, but mainly from the institution itself, to pursue a pre-professional track. Through interactions and conversations with other students about major and career choice, Annie learned more about the status hierarchy and “emphasis on being pre-professional” at Emory. Although she specifies the source of pressure, she does not state why or how the pressure was felt. Nevertheless, it is clear that Annie regards “specific paths” as more status worthy than others. Annie accepts and shares these beliefs, regardless of whether she agrees with, or approves of, the categorical generalizations. Despite having these perceptions as an underclassman, Annie recognizes the power of exploration. She regrets being confined to medical school prerequisites and Sociology courses, wishing she had explored more of her passions and courses in other academic domains.

In addition to Annie, other undergraduates echo similar sentiments surrounding the pre-professional culture at Emory University:

**Jessica's Impression (Pre-Medical student, Junior):** I was grateful that I got to be a part of this interaction. It gave me different perspectives into how those older than me chose their career paths. It was reassuring to hear how they didn't always have a clear-cut career plan and that their plans changed as they went through life. The alumni brought up the Emory “pre-professional” atmosphere, which I felt throughout undergrad. Because I was mostly surrounded with peers who were focused on what they should do at Emory to

further their career plans, I felt pressure to do the same, which I think in retrospect contributed to me having this “one career path” mindset starting from freshman year.

Reiterating her conversation with six Emory alumni, Jessica stresses the importance of context and other students in shaping the trajectory of her academic studies. Since Freshman year, Jessica reveals that she placed undue emphasis on advancing her career plans. Although she feels reassured in knowing that other students at Emory experienced uncertainty, she mentions spending her entire undergraduate career trying to achieve certainty through a “one career path mindset” on the Pre-Medical medical route. When students talk about the culture at Emory, it is apparent that students believe those following a pre-professional track face less uncertainty about, and greater resources to prepare them for, a career after college.

The topics of certainty, pre-professional tracks, and institutional resources are often correlated with the local context and overall culture of Emory. Students who have a clear path, specifically those with a pre-professional track and institutional resources, are more likely to talk about their courses, majors, and intended careers in conversation. Consequently, the Pre-Medical and Business (BBA) tracks are the most commonly mentioned when undergraduates discuss college-to-career culture. Although students participating in these group conversations maintain a broad array of academic interests, the Pre-Medical and Business tracks appear to dominate the conversation during group interaction. This culture contributes to the mutually accepted belief that “most students” know what they would like to pursue prior to graduation. These associations are commonly recognized and discussed by both underclassmen and upperclassmen:

**Barbara (Undecided, Freshman):** How did you [to Lexie, a BBA Senior] decide to go to the Business school? I’m concerned about picking a major because I’m uncertain what I want to major in. How did you decide your majors? I think I want to go into Business. I was looking into the Film and Media management program and think I might like that. Everybody else seems to already know what they want to do. Honestly, when I first signed up for this [mentor-mentee program], I thought I would be assigned to like a Pre-Med student. Everybody I’ve ever come across were all Pre-Med, my friends, hallmates,

classmates... When I first saw your email, and you said you were a B-school student, I was first surprised that you weren't Pre-Med, but also worried that you would be very intimidating and uptight. I thought all B-school students would be very, umm how do you say it, like overly professional?

**Lexie's Impression (BBA student, Senior):** A lot of my mentee's [freshman, considering the pre-BBA track] questions expressed a feeling of uncertainty and worries that she had in terms of her future decisions. She wasn't sure what major would be right for her, and her feelings of uncertainty and urgency of finding a major was heightened when she believed that others seemed to have everything figured out. Even as a freshman, she seems to have already observed the different groups of students (Pre-Med or Business students), and have come up with her own opinions regarding them. When I was a freshman, I definitely had the same thoughts as this mentee. Everybody around me seemed to have an understanding of what they wanted to do. And, similar to her, most of these students were planning on pursuing the Pre-Med track. When I realized this, I was definitely even more worried and discouraged because I felt lost and unsure of what I really wanted to do.

From this dialogue, it becomes more apparent how the "pressures" from the institution, and from other undergraduates, influence students' status beliefs. Students encounter others who differ in their degree of certainty, a socially valued attribute, and form status beliefs about this social difference. The appearance of consensus in the relative importance of certainty at Emory induces undergraduates to form status beliefs regarding that social difference. This social pattern appears valid to students because it is supported by the institution, a legitimate authority, and appears to be consensually accepted and desired by others at Emory. In addition to context, undergraduates are actively comparing themselves to one another on the basis of such valued status characteristics. In the case of Barbara and Lexie, feeling uncertain amid a campus that promotes and celebrates certainty is quite discouraging, stress-inducing, and anxiety-provoking. The "salience of certainty," the perception that "everybody else seems to already know what they want to do," creates negative emotional responses in students who do not have such clarity. Even though Barbara has her entire college experience ahead of her, she seems to believe that she, like her peers, must have everything figured out now.

In addition to a desire for certainty and the institutional resources that come with pursuing a pre-professional track at Emory, students aspire to acquire intellectual prestige. Course difficulty and track intelligence correspond to how the majority of undergraduates perceive the intellect of students on a particular track. If most students assume they would have a difficult time succeeding in a particular track's coursework, they subsequently attribute more prestige to the students in that track. Abby, a Senior on the Pre-Medical track discusses why she thinks there is a heavy Pre-Med oriented culture at Emory:

**Lucy (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** Did you feel any sense of prestige, or respect from friends while on the Pre-Med track?

**Abby (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** For most people, I think that's the case of why they fall into Pre-Med. Even when I talk to my nursing friends, they say that there's such a hierarchy of superiority in the field. So, when I started telling people I was doing dentistry – for me, it wasn't about which is easier, because to me, they're equal – but, I could definitely see how when I tell people I'm Dental over Med, most just assume I wasn't doing as well, or that it was just an easier path. I never let that bug me just because it's an equal amount of school and challenging path. But, I think for a lot of people, that's how. Like, they just fall into that path. And I think it's big at Emory, because I think other schools push different things. Like at engineering schools, engineering kids have more clout [superiority] than the Pre-Med students. But at Emory, because we only really have like Business and Med, I think it really funnels people into those two professions.

Abby acknowledges how the culture and context of Emory, compared to that of other colleges, shapes students' academic trajectories. She suspects that most undergraduates may come into Emory on the Pre-Medical track in an effort to gain prestige and respect from others on campus. Abby also explains how the “challenging path” and lengthy schooling process contribute to the intellectual esteem of the Pre-Medical track. Despite holding strong beliefs that pursuing dental school and medical school are equitable in terms of workload and prestige, Abby acknowledges the widely accepted hierarchy in the field. By acknowledging the hierarchy, Abby shares what she believes “most” students would perceive when switching from the Pre-Med to the Pre-Dental path: that they couldn't handle the difficulty.

When students discuss career-path hierarchy, the majority of them often discuss three central themes/elements that underline the status belief system: certainty, institutional resources, and academic intellect/perceived difficulty of courses. Although students are unaware that these four factors represent a system of shared status beliefs, they nonetheless use these status beliefs to establish hierarchies, make social comparisons, and assign more or less value to different career clusters.

### **The Status Belief System: Status Hierarchy**

#### *The Status Hierarchy*

Given the culture and organizational structure of Emory University, it is not surprising to find that most students express similar pressures and related desires to attain prestigious, financially secure, stable, and successful careers in the future. Therefore, regardless of class year or academic interest area, all Emory undergraduates acknowledge the importance of graduating with some form of career plan, favoring certainty over uncertainty:

**Skylar (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** Do you think students are more attracted to Pre-Med and B-school tracks because they have set paths after college?

**Chloe (BBA student, Junior):** Yes. But B-school is easier than Pre-Med, so people go from Pre-Med to B-school.

**Brandon (BBA student, Senior):** Yes. Like, I could've majored in Philosophy. But, like, there's such an open-ended question about what to do with that.

**Lily (BBA student, Junior):** Yes, that's so true.

**Brandon:** So, unless you know what you wanna do – like [to Skylar] you probably know what you wanna do with Psych and Soc, then it totally makes sense for you to do it. Also, in Business school, the courses are pretty standard: you learn for two weeks, take a quiz, learn for one week, take an exam, learn for two weeks, take your midterm.

**Skylar:** What's good about that though?

**Lily:** There's no unknown.

**Brandon:** Yeah, like, you know what's gonna come.

**Lily:** I think that's why I'm so stressed out right now. Because this recruiting is like my first unknown.

Here, a group of students allude to the status hierarchy at Emory. When students address why people in pre-professional tracks have greater occupational certainty and prestige on campus in

conversation, the role of certainty, institutional resources, and the perception of course difficulty become apparent. Accordingly, the BBA students appear to place the Pre-Medical track at the top of the hierarchy, acknowledging the academic rigor and certainty associated with the track. Regarding the inordinate certainty bestowed to students in the B-school, the BBA students seem to rank themselves a close second. Although other pre-professional tracks, such as Pre-Law, are not specifically mentioned in this specific interaction, they would likely be next on the rung based on the status belief system criteria. Finally, with minimal certainty – “there’s such an open-ended question of what to do with [it]” – and a lack of institutional resources, lie the “everything else” non-track, Liberal Arts students.

#### *A Clear and Certain Path to Success*

The mere existence of a structured, pre-professional track helps students attain certainty throughout their undergraduate experience. Furthermore, these pre-professional tracks, namely Pre-Medical and Business tracks, are afforded separate institutional resources to help them obtain post-graduate careers or secure acceptance into medical or graduate school. Therefore, institutional resources represent a legitimized form of inequality between track and non-track students. Many underclassmen voice concerns over post-graduate uncertainty, looking towards upperclassmen for advice when considering which academic areas of interest to pursue:

**Jess (Sophomore, Undecided):** Alexa I need your help. I don’t know what I want to do with my life. I am stressed about choosing classes because I don’t know if I want to be Pre-Law or a psychology major.

**Alexa (Senior, Liberal Arts student):** I will help you. Think about what you like.

**Jess:** I like philosophy and women’s gender studies, but I don’t know if I should major in that. I don’t think I can get a job with that.

**Abby (Senior, BBA student):** Yo, just apply to B-school! You can find out what you like there.

**Alexa:** Don’t listen to her. Do what you want.

**Abby:** Listen, B-school is easy to get into, but it is really about job security. You may not like what you’re doing, but you need to go into fields that provide financial security.

**Tia (Senior, Nursing student):** That's why I am doing nursing, but I actually like it as well.

**Abby:** Yeah, that's why my brother is doing nursing at UAlbany because it provides job security. You know that you are going to get a job. That's a good field. I'm going to keep telling people to go to B-school because they will get an internship and job for sure.

Although Jess is a sophomore, she is already worried about achieving occupational certainty.

Jess voices concerns over choosing classes for the upcoming semester, deciding on her major(s), and ultimately forging a long-term career path. She seems to believe that pursuing her genuine interests in philosophy and women's gender studies will not provide stable or linear career prospects. When Abby and Alexa provide guidance to Jess, it is clear that the two upperclassmen have conflicting views, values, and priorities when it comes to selecting academic courses. While Alexa is primarily concerned with encouraging Jess to pursue her passions, Abby persuades Jess to consider the stability and certainty that comes after enrolling in the B-school. Although Tia is not a student in the B-school, she nonetheless celebrates the idea of seeking post-grad certainty and security.

The pressure to attain certainty, and limit the stress and anxiety that accompany feelings of uncertainty, is a common pattern found across many conversations, contexts, academic backgrounds, and class years. Although underclassmen tend to experience uncertainty when selecting courses and academic focus areas, they still have ample time and high perceptions of control over their educational trajectories. On the other hand, upperclassmen, who are nearing the end of their university experience, perceive lower control and stringent timelines when trying to forge career plans prior to commencement. Although feeling uncertain is normal throughout college, uncertainty tends to breed unusually high feelings of anxiety in undergraduates at

Emory:

**Mary (Pre-Law student, Senior):** I cannot believe I am graduating college next month. That is literally insane.



**Natalie (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** I am so happy for you. We have to celebrate.

**Mary:** No. We definitely do not. It is so strange because it is so anticlimactic. It does not feel real and I have no idea what I am doing with my life, so it is more stressful than exciting right now. This is adulthood and I literally don't know if I will have a job or get into school.

**Ava's Impression (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** There is definitely fright in her [Natalie's] tone of voice. Being scared of uncertainty is predominate in her emotions. I too am graduating early. While I am extremely excited about this achievement, I am overwhelmingly stressed about the daunting future and it's unfortunate uncertainty. As the months have gone on, and more and more peers have changed their LinkedIn bios from "Emory University Class of 2021 seeking a job in the [blank] field" to "Incoming Associate at [blank]" the stress has increased exponentially. But, as I take a step back, I feel at ease with the fact that not everyone has their life figured out and others are able to be vulnerable too, expressing their own anxiety about this pivotal leap in life.

Here, students discuss the positives and negatives of graduating with a degree from Emory University. For some, commencement is an educational achievement that signifies an important milestone; graduation is not a feat all can accomplish. For others, including this Pre-Law student, graduation seems to be undermined by the stress of uncertainty. Mary appears to place greater emphasis on securing dependable, post-graduation opportunities than on celebrating the success of her commencement from Emory. Although Mary is on the Pre-Law track, she does not feel secure. Mary appears to remain anxious because a law degree and stable income are not immediately guaranteed.

While Ava is more optimistic about graduating, she sympathizes with and reiterates Mary's feelings of stress and anxiety over the looming uncertainty. Ava also indicates that comparing her post-graduate plans with others on LinkedIn heightens these negative affective consequences. As an undergraduate researcher gathering observations for this project, however, Ava is able to see that the perception of "salient certainty" is a façade. But, even after recognizing and hearing that several people are actually uncertain about their future plans, Ava still falls victim to this commonly shared perception. This dialogue reveals that certainty, in this

case having a clear path and set steps to success after graduation, is a categorical distinction consistently linked to signs of status, competence, and emotional well-being.

*Institutional Resources as Legitimate Authority & The Role of Intellectual Prestige*

In addition to certainty, the other major element that reinforces the status hierarchy is the perceived institutional resources for Business and Pre-Medical students. Students often discuss these distinct pre-professional tracks together when referencing clear paths and institutional support:

**Rachel (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** Feels like everyone is either Pre-Med or B-school because they both have insane resources and firm plans. But with one, it's like, 'Okay, you're smart and successful,' and the other it's like, 'Wow, congrats on the job and the income.'

**Cooper (BBA student, Senior):** I think you're right about the whole Med-school vs. B-school thing. For me, Med-school was never in the cards and obviously if you're in the Business school, there's a higher chance of you getting a job. So, that's definitely something that I've considered. Like I said, med-school was never an option for me, and I think Business school was."

Although the Pre-Med track resides within the College of Arts and Sciences, the Business school is separated into a distinct unit. Nonetheless, these tracks are perceived similarly in terms of programmatic elements such as highly organized curriculum and academic advising. Despite their similarities, students often make two key distinctions between the tracks. Rachel and Cooper subtly highlight the perceived intellect and success of those on the Pre-Medical track. To students, being Pre-Med is seen as exclusive because not everyone could succeed or excel on the track. In contrast, when Rachel and Cooper discuss Business school students, they emphasize the perception that those on the track will acquire a high-paying, prestigious job or career through their institutional resources and structured curriculum. Students in the Business school often mention these appeals when reflecting on their initial decision to pursue the track:

**Ashley (BBA student, Senior):** There was a stat that I read when I was applying to the Business school saying like, '98% of Business school students graduated with a job,' and

that is huge. So, I think the job stability is a major perk. You can actually do so much with business. If you're interested in pursuing sociology, or health sciences, there's a way to combine your interests with Business school. I think the Business school does a great job of bridging those potential programs with the college too. You get the best of both worlds.

**Tim (English & BBA Double-Major, Senior):** My older brother actually did a consulting project for the Emory College about 'How do we prepare kids for the professional world in the way that the B-school does?' He was asking me what the difference was. And, I've met kids [in Emory College] who don't know what should go on a resume, and don't know what a cover letter is, and don't really see value in LinkedIn. And I agree, I've never been taught that in any college class. Whereas it's not really the point of college classes, I would argue that it's pretty necessary for a post-college plan. So, I think the Business school is best in just preparing you for the first few years out of college – not necessarily life after college – but, how you transition from college into a working job.

While the Business track is coveted for its institutional resources and extreme certainty in receiving an offer to a high-paying, prestigious job directly after graduation, the Pre-Medical track is praised for its perceived difficulty, certainty, and resources. Similar to Rachel and Cooper, most undergraduates widely accept this perception of Pre-Medical students, as it remains stable across undergraduate interactions:

**Julia (Liberal Arts student, Senior):** I liked getting an insight into the minds of newly-arrived Emory Pre-Meds. It reminded me quite vividly of the conversations and stereotypes I had heard and experienced myself coming into Emory - "everyone is Pre-Med when they come in, but so many people end up dropping after the first semester or year because of the weed-out classes like Chem and Bio". Even before someone steps foot on Emory's campus, no matter what field they intend to pursue, and especially once they get into the college routine, it's evident that Pre-Med talk is everywhere and it can feel a bit intimidating. I like the club's concept of learning about medicine if that's something you have an interest in, but I do not like the concept of major-hierarchy and career-path-hierarchy, where students feel pressured to be Pre-Med because they are at Emory and everyone else seems to be doing that same thing.

As a Liberal Arts student, Julia speaks to the rigor involved when on the Pre-Medical track. Although she is not on the track herself, she is aware of its prominence in Emory culture, the "weed-out" phenomena, and the difficult courses that an average student would not be capable of successfully completing. The "weed-out" phenomena represents a common pattern found across

many instances of Emory undergraduate conversation regarding the Pre-Medical track. The purpose of “weeding” introductory Pre-Medical courses is to “weed” out students who would likely drop the track when faced with extreme pressure and difficult course material. Despite general awareness of these academic challenges as Freshman, Pre-Medical students seem to cling to the top rung of the status hierarchy and repeat the pattern.

*What About Pursuing Passion?*

For students who are not following a pre-professional track, the notions of passion and purpose are introduced into conversation. Although these non-track students understand the value of certainty, structured paths, and institutional resources, they also recognize a desire to pursue their genuine academic interests. Maia, an alumna at Emory, encourages students to explore and discover their true ambitions. After following an uncertain and nonlinear path at Emory for four years, she acknowledges the external pressures, but also warns students not to ignore their purpose:

**Maia (Alumni, Entrepreneur):** Purpose is so much bigger than popularity. What I mean by this is that a lot of your peers choose to go to the B-school, or Law school, or Pre-Med route because it’s popular, because it’s what everyone else wants to do. Wrong. That’s the worst reason to dive yourself into something. Because after you get in, you still have to ask yourself why you’re there.

**Cindy’s Impression (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** I thought that the message Maia shared was definitely in-line with what we often hear as students – i.e. follow your passion, do what you love and care about, etc. – but then we also hear the message that we need to find a job and only certain career paths are prestigious or emphasized.

Maia, an accomplished entrepreneur, serves as a prime example of how non-track undergraduates can achieve post-graduate success. For those who are concerned about occupational prospects with a Liberal Arts major, she encourages them to pave their own paths. Despite reassuring students that they can couple passion with profession, many Emory undergraduates remain unconvinced. Not everyone feels as though they can pursue what they

love because it often conflicts with the culture at Emory, the status belief system students adopt, and their desires for a clear and stable path. Striving for passion in career paths is admired because it is almost seen as idealistic, brave, and unrealistic. If, and only if, people are able to forge successful career paths by following their purpose, their unconventional achievements are esteemed.

### **Social Comparisons**

Students discuss perceived differences available to various career clusters, outlining the common status belief system among undergraduates at Emory. The resulting, established status hierarchy of majors and careers shapes social comparison processes within and between groups of students. Although the Pre-Medical and Business tracks represent the top two categories in the hierarchy, they still succumb to making social comparisons.

#### *Pre-Medical Track Comparisons*

Pre-Medical students have a structured path, institutional support, and intellectual prestige on their track. Despite being high-status, the path of a Pre-Medical student is still less certain than that of a Business student. When the topics of gap years and medical school interviews arise, Pre-Medical students do not hesitate to voice their stress and upward, contrastive comparisons:

**Harper (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** This is awful. I still have so many secondaries to write. Two weeks have definitely passed.

**Liam (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** I know. Most of mine are in but I literally had to work all day for weeks. I haven't heard a single thing from any schools yet either, and I think people are starting to hear back

**Harper:** At least you turned in the secondaries fast. It's also tough because I know so many of the B-School kids have jobs already. That would have been way easier. I don't even know why I'm doing this anymore. It is so early in the year and I feel like I'm behind.

**Liam:** I'm trying not to stress. I feel like we will be fine. I just hate not knowing. I would rather just be rejected.

Pre-Medical students often make upward, contrastive comparisons with Business and other Pre-Medical students surrounding the topic of certainty. Harper and Liam compare themselves in the medical school application process. They also contrast their experiences of stress and uncertainty to the relief and occupational security experienced by students on the Business track. Through social comparison, the anxiety experienced by students who have less dependable outcomes is evident. When Liam states he would “rather just be rejected,” the power of uncertainty and social comparison in producing students’ emotions becomes undeniable.

In addition to comparing their degree of certainty to that of Business students, Pre-Medical students often make within-group social comparisons. Despite students belonging to the same track, these within-group comparisons are often contrastive and deal heavily with the perceived intellect of others. When asked to reflect on some of the greatest challenges encountered throughout the college experience, one student responded:

**Jacob (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** I failed my first Orgo [Organic Chemistry] exam. At first I thought I couldn’t be Pre-Med after. There’s this feeling of imposter syndrome. Emory has such a successful student population. If you weren’t doing well, you feel out of place. We’re graduating seniors, but it’s like we’re supposed to know what we want to do for the rest of our lives. Every university is different. At Emory, people tend to lean towards healthcare fields, and it seems like everyone is doing it.

**Julia’s Impression (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** I thought it was interesting that the [Pre-Medical seniors] talked about imposter syndrome and the high-achieving culture at Emory. I related to what they said; in my lows during college, it felt like everyone around me was smarter and more capable than me.

Jacob makes upward, contrastive comparisons between himself and others on the Pre-Medical track. These social comparisons ultimately led him to feelings of imposter syndrome. He doubted his pre-professional track and his abilities, and he felt like a fraud. Jacob brings up the institutional culture and the pressures experienced by high-achieving students. While on the Pre-Medical track, Jacob had an internal experience of believing he was not as competent as others perceived him to be. This sentiment is commonly acknowledged by individuals on the track,

regardless of class year. In Julia's impression of the interaction, she reiterates this feeling of imposter syndrome, noting the affective consequences of holding such perceptions. In addition to this deep-seated self-doubt, Jacob also mentions the pressure to "know what we want to do for the rest of our lives." He comments specifically on the college-to-career culture at Emory, which he believes specifically encourages students to become healthcare professionals.

Although students on the Pre-Medical track may question their skills and self-confidence, they are holistically regarded by others as brilliant, astute individuals. Accordingly, many younger students who are following the track, or who have recently dropped the track, tend to make upward, assimilative comparisons:

**Paige (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** When I was Pre-Med I never felt pressured to portray my intelligence, or explain what my plans for the future were. That title implies the answer for both. Regardless of whether I knew what I wanted to do in terms of a career on the Pre-Med track, I never felt the need to map out exactly what it would look like.

Despite being a Liberal Arts student, Paige speaks about her experience on the Pre-Medical track favorably. According to her, the Pre-Medical track comes with prestige in the form of certainty, intelligence, and post-graduate success. Paige does not mention why she dropped the Pre-Medical track, but she acknowledges not feeling any external pressure to determine her long-term career goals prematurely while on it. She argues against the common perception that being on the Pre-Medical track is linear, with guaranteed outcomes. Although she has lost the security that comes with being on a pre-professional track, she remains as uncertain as before. Now, she feels the need to justify and defend her transition from a prestigious career path to a more uncertain and lower status path. Paige also makes a downward, assimilative comparison with Liberal Arts students. Like other Liberal Arts students, she now believes that her intelligence and post-graduate plans are constantly being questioned.

By and large, upward social comparisons tend to constitute the majority of social comparisons that students at Emory make. However, students on the Pre-Medical route, at the top of the status hierarchy, also tend to make downward social comparisons. Natalie, a Pre-Medical student, contrasts her post-graduate plans with those of two friends. In doing so, she also lucidly summarizes her assumptions regarding the status hierarchy:

**Natalie's Impression (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** Gabriella's path of possibly taking a few years off and going to grad school serves the purpose of sounding like she has a path, when in reality she has no idea what she's doing. The gap year(s) to grad school path is accepted in the college-to-career culture, so by placing herself on that path, I think that she is trying to avoid judgement or insecurity about not really knowing what exactly she wants to do. Daniella's law school path is fairly high status among undergraduates, but it is also seen as a fallback for students who don't know what they're doing, or didn't make it in the Pre-Med or B-school worlds. This is the case for Daniella, who came to college hoping to be Pre-Med, but didn't do well in chemistry. She chose environmental sciences as a major because she enjoys the subject, and decided to go to law school partially because of interest, but also because her parents told her that she needed to go to grad school to be successful.

After speaking with Gabriella and Daniella about their majors and career plans, Natalie offers her impressions and downward social comparisons. In line with the status belief system, Natalie views students planning to attend graduate or law school as beneath the Pre-Medical and Business students. Although she acknowledges that Daniella is following a relatively prestigious pre-professional Law school track, she insists that it is just a backup track for failing on the higher-status Pre-Medical track. Despite Gabriella's desires to pursue graduate school, Natalie claims that she uses this "path" as an excuse for being uncertain. Although she considers Pre-Medical and Business students to be relatively secure in their structured paths, Natalie points out the insecurity and judgment that uncertain students commonly face. Natalie acknowledges the barriers to being successful in her track; however, she remains judgmental in her appraisal of Gabriella and Daniella's career plans.



Although students in the Pre-Medical track are embedded in the College of Arts and Sciences along with non-track and other pre-professional students, they are given separate Pre-Health Advising (PPA) and access to Pre-health events, workshops, one-on-one and group advising sessions, and preparation for medical school interviews. Despite having these institutional resources, Pre-Medical students perceive their alumni and academic support system to be inferior to those available to students in Goizueta:

**Dr. Brown** [Hosting the Pre-Health Sponsored Interview Tips Meeting]: Please raise your hand if you have ever had a medical school interview.

**Jenna's Note:** About 10% of students raised their hands. EVERYONE looked around.

**Dr. Brown:** Please raise your hand if you have a medical school interview scheduled.

**Jenna's Note:** About 20% of people raised their hand and everyone looked around again. Dr. Brown gave a short presentation on when med-school interviews were, a few basic questions, and then gave each group an interview prompt. Groups were instructed to test each other on the prompt. At the end, Dr. Brown asked if anyone had any questions.

**Jenna's Impression (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** All of the students were talking about being Pre-Med. Many students mentioned whether they were taking a gap year or not. If a student said they were not taking a gap year, the response was always something along the lines of, 'Wow that's impressive.' Pre-health students have much fewer tools for interviewing than B-school students. I have already had an interview, but interview prep was just starting now and the information given was so incredibly basic that a single google search would have saved a lot of time.

Jenna provides her impressions on a Pre-health sponsored event designed to help students prepare for medical school interviews. Although this event represents one of many institutional resources offered to Pre-Medical undergraduates, it is still viewed as lesser than those allotted to Business students. All undergraduates, including those in the Business school, maintain a shared perception that there are a disproportionate number of resources provided to BBA track students. As such, those who are not on the Business track often make upward, contrastive comparisons with BBA students regarding such resources. In this case, Jenna also appears to be making a downward, assimilative social comparison with her Pre-Medical counterparts. Given that all Pre-

Medical students at this event seem unprepared for interviews, there appears to be a common feeling of sympathy.

### *Business Track Comparisons*

Unlike students in any other career cluster, students on the Business track have an overwhelming degree of certainty and institutional resources available to them. With the exception of Pre-Med, other career clusters do not feel even remotely close to matching these apparent disparities in valued status characteristics. Accordingly, rather than making upward, contrastive comparisons to students in different career clusters, most of the upward, contrastive social comparisons BBA students make are with students in their track:

**Michael (BBA student, Senior):** You'd be lying if you said that you didn't get jealous or compare when you see other people get jobs. Obviously, you wanna get a job. I think everyone's in that same position.

**Grace (BBA student, Junior):** I'm definitely struggling. Everyone here [in Goizueta] is doing consulting. Like everyone. And I just don't want to do it, but I feel weird about it. I keep going back and forth about whether or not I should try, but like I know I won't love it. I want marketing, but they don't recruit until later. But I also can't sit here while everyone else is recruiting so here I am applying to jobs and going to career fairs and taking phone calls.

The Business school, which is graded on a curve, seems to not only promote competition in the classroom, but also in the acquisition of post-graduate employment opportunities. Michael, who is in the process of seeking employment, emphasizes feelings of envy in relation to other BBA students accepting offers to corporate companies. This uncertainty and the pressure to secure high-paying, prestigious careers appears to affect students when they learn about the success of other students on their track. Grace, on the other hand, makes a comparison between herself and students in different area depths of Business. In Goizueta, there are five primary area depth topics, including accounting, finance, information systems and operations management, marketing, and strategy and management consulting. Despite this, Grace perceives all her

Business counterparts to be in consulting, and she contrasts her degree of certainty with those recruiting early. Although marketing appears to be her passion, and she has no real interest in consulting, she applies to consulting jobs and participates in consulting events. She mentions feeling uncomfortable doing nothing to further her career goals, especially with the current occupational uncertainty in marketing. The comparisons she draws between herself and students already seeking employment, and the emotions such comparisons produce, propel her to pursue careers she otherwise has no affinity for.

Aside from engaging in upward, contrastive social comparisons, BBA students also make upward, assimilative comparisons to students in other career clusters. These tend to focus on their track's institutional resources:

**Lily (BBA student, Senior):** There is definitely a difference in interview styles from when you are a first year compared to senior year. I have seen this often when interviewing first years for clubs/organizations where they fail to structure their answers and tend to ramble on and on. It is also common to see Business students have a better understanding on how to conduct interviews compared to other majors because of the specific workshops they attend or the Business classes that teach them these tips. I learned a lot of practical tips and advice on how to have a good virtual interview that I would not have learned if it wasn't for this class. I also learned the STAR method [interviewing tool] from the Business school. This made me realize that, as this is a seminar course offered by the Business school to the "B-school" kids, some of these resources and advice becomes almost "exclusive" to Business students.

Lily clearly sees her Business track as being the most advantageous in terms of building professional skills to secure future post-graduate job opportunities. In making this comparison, Lily does not attribute her leverage to personal ability, but rather to the differential provision of institutional resources. The resources provided to her, and to other students in Goizueta, are perceived to be "exclusive" to Business students. This widely shared perception causes the majority of students to believe the university values Business student more than other majors. Although Goizueta is a separate academic unit from the Emory College of Arts and Sciences,

with separate budgets, faculty, and donations, students nonetheless interpret the BBA track's prestige to be supported by a single, overarching bureaucracy.

The downward, contrastive comparisons BBA students tend to make revolve around the uncertainty other career clusters face. They contrast their certain outcomes with the uncertain outcomes of students in other career clusters. In group conversations about different career clusters at Emory, BBA students tend to simultaneously make upward, assimilative and downward, contrastive comparisons:

**Alice (BBA student, Junior):** I feel like a lot of people that we know though, like in Greek life, are in the Business or Pre-Med track.

**Olivia (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** Do you feel like we all influence each other?

**Sophia (BBA student, Junior):** Yes.

**Alice:** One hundred percent.

**Andrew (BBA student, Senior):** Absolutely.

**Alice:** Because I hated my life during psychology [it was too difficult], and JF was like 'maybe try Business,' and I was like 'okay!'

**Andrew:** People are influenced because of the outcomes. Because you see an older kid, that you're friends with, have a job set from his junior year on. And you're like 'Oh, easy I'm just gonna do that, and that's gonna happen.'

**Alice:** Yeah. Also B-school is so easy, like if I wanted to do psych – I wanted to do psychiatry – which means I'd have to go to med school. Which I could *never*, I would never [too many years of school and too academically challenging]. And then, psychology, what was I gonna do with that fuckin' major?

**Amanda (BBA student, Senior):** As the date for graduation approaches, there is definitely an increased level of stress and pressure that is felt from graduating students who do not have any concrete post-grad plans. I enjoyed talking to my friends about their post-grad plans. There is definitely some level of pressure placed on students to have some sort of post-grad plans. Especially when there are some students who have no plans or (while not in this case) if they were rejected from different offers. I think some students become more careful about the way they talk about their post-grad plans. Of course, the students congratulate them, but it sometimes becomes a sensitive topic. Students in different disciplines have unique problems associated with going into their careers, and it made me reflect on how different my college to career path looked and the different resources that were made available to me to help me compared to others.

In the first conversation, undergraduates discuss the effects of peer influence on selecting academic interest areas. Although they agree that the Business track might be easier than other

majors, they appeal to the guaranteed outcomes that Goizueta provides its students. As Andrew indicates, students learn and adopt this perception through interactions and conversations with other students. Alice makes an upward, contrastive comparison with Pre-Medical students, acknowledging the difficult workload and extended career-path that many students, herself included, would likely fail on. She also makes a downward, contrastive comparison with Liberal Arts students. Across all group observations, the most commonly asked question with regard to a Liberal Arts student is some variation of, “What are you going to do with that?”

The most widely accepted perception of Liberal Arts students is that they have the most uncertain college-to-career trajectories. This is often viewed unfavorably, especially since the correlation between resources and status distinctions creates widely shared status beliefs favoring certainty and linear paths. Given that there is no guaranteed outcome for these students, and that they have very general and limited resources available to them, most students are unaware of what people can accomplish in lieu of a pre-professional track. As Amanda states, this uncertainty perpetuates feelings of stress and anxiety, and students remain cautious when engaging in career-oriented conversations. She also recognizes the distinct resources available to Business students. In relation to other career clusters, she believes this institutional support was instrumental in helping her establish a career path.

Despite benefitting from these advantages, Business students still make downward, assimilative comparisons:

**Conner (BBA student, Senior):** Here’s a con of the Business school – it is like fully expected, and basically if you don’t you get shunned, to have a job lined up before you graduate. Meanwhile, 95% of college students graduating across the U.S. don’t have a job after they graduate. It’s just super expected.

**Matthew (BBA student, Senior):** The [Business school] environment is absolutely toxic.

**Madelyn (BBA student, Senior):** Okay, not all the time.

**Matthew (BBA student, Senior):** I think it's terrible. Everyone [in the Business school] cheats, and if you don't cheat, then you're behind everyone else. So, you do it.

When prompted to discuss their negative perceptions of the track, BBA students frequently mention one of two things: the intense pressure to secure a job prior to graduation, or the cheating culture within Goizueta. Given all the resources and assets provided to those on the Business track, it is presumed that all BBA students should be more than equipped to acquire occupational success. Although graduating with a job is one of the most appealing features of the Business school, it also represents one of the biggest pressures they face. In addition, Matthew speaks directly to his perceptions of the culture within the Business school. He acknowledges the ubiquitous cheating in the Business school; a common fact known by most Emory students. It is clearly something he does not agree with, but rather, something he feels obligated to do in order to restore equal conditions and fair competition.

#### *Other Pre-Professional Tracks & Everything Else Comparisons*

In contrast to the omnipresent discourse surrounding the Pre-Medical and Business tracks, the Liberal Arts majors and other pre-professional tracks are mentioned far less often. Despite being discussed in group interactions less often, other pre-professional and Liberal Arts students tend to make strikingly similar social comparisons. They voice similar concerns and opinions regarding college-to-career culture. Therefore, I have grouped the comparisons made by Liberal Arts and other pre-professional track students together. These students often make upward, contrastive comparisons with regard to their lack of post-graduate certainty:

**Linda (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** Congrats Amy (BBA student, Junior) on securing that internship. Must be nice not stressing about figuring out what to do post-grad.

**Delilah (Pre-Law student, Senior):** Tyler [a Liberal arts student, Senior] already knows what he's doing. He has a plan and he's probably going to move to New York and go to a good grad school and have the time of his life. I definitely made the wrong decision. I might just apply to grad school at this point.

**Nina (Liberal Arts student, Senior):** \*expresses shock\* I know you said you regretted it, but are you sure? Grad school?

**Delilah:** Yeah I wasn't joking when I said I regret my plans for my gap year. It's too stressful to find work. Things aren't going the way I need them to.

**Nina's Impression:** Tyler seems sure of his plans. I think his confidence scared Delilah in comparison to her lack of confidence. She thought his confidence had to do with the decisions he had made, but I think it's just part of his personality. He also expressed confidence in Delilah's future, so it's clear that he's just a positive person. Regardless, Delilah seems to be giving up hope. It sounds like she would rather incur more student debt than go into an uncertain future.

Students who do not belong to the Pre-Med or Business tracks tend to compare their level of certainty to those who are. Linda presumes that Amy must feel a lot more relieved because she has removed any post-graduate uncertainty. Although Linda does not directly compare herself to Amy in this comment, she does hint at the stress and anxiety she feels with regard to post-graduate uncertainty. Similarly, Delilah compares her uncertain plans with those of Tyler's, whom she perceives "already knows what he's doing." Delilah feels like she made a mistake by taking a gap year because she hasn't secured a job to fill that gap year with. As a result, she tells Nina that she may abandon her law school plans to pursue graduate school. Nina's impression reveals how uncomfortable Delilah feels with being uncertain. It appears as though she would be willing to change her career aspirations to avoid the emotions that coincide with being uncertain.

Despite the widespread anxiety, stress, and frustration that is created by uncertainty, students have access to "success stories" told by upperclassmen and alumni who pursued similar academic trajectories. These people give advice to students currently dealing with the affective consequences that social comparison breeds:

**Caroline (Liberal Arts student, Senior):** Changing your mind is okay, and if the plan you set out on when you walked in Emory's doors freshman year changes, that's totally okay too. So, if anyone could share an overall piece of advice for people who are undecided, but not sure how to navigate that situation.

**Maggie (Liberal Arts student, Alumni):** There's not like one right way to get there. I think I was around a bunch of people that were like following a prescribed path. And I was kind of like, that's not my path, or like it's not as simple as XYZ to me, or I'm just not on a track.

And so, I just think, don't get stuck in like 'I have to do this,' or 'If I do this, I'll be successful.' You know, you can get there later. So, I think it's just being open-minded.

**Lyla's Impression (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** It was very reassuring to be reminded that, sometimes, it is okay to be uncertain. At Emory, it is easy to fall into the trap of feeling as though every student has their life completely figured out; a very overwhelming feeling that can lead to a tremendous amount of pressure on oneself. However, knowing that each of these alumni members have personally struggled with career uncertainty and occupational path transitions provides so much (necessary) relief. Seeing how successful these women have become, despite several ups and downs along the way, really gives you confidence in pursuing what truly makes you happy. It's easy to tell people they should pursue whatever career they find passion in, but it's another to show a group of people your successes after following that advice themselves. Despite knowing most of these speakers on a personal level, I had no idea that many of them were in the same position of confusion and uncertainty I currently find myself in. There is so much optimism and hope for the students at Emory, we just have to believe in ourselves and our abilities.

By reflecting on their academic journeys at Emory, Caroline and Maggie offer reassurance to students who are unsure about their career paths. For Lyla, this conversation provides a profound sense of inspiration and motivation to pursue what she loves. To her, the solace of this dialogue really lies in seeing the tangible successes of these women. Although she mentions that words of encouragement are helpful, her main source of relief comes from seeing her peers forge their own career plans and actually watching these plans come to fruition. Lyla leaves this conversation feeling empowered, with a renewed confidence that passion and success don't have to be mutually exclusive.

In line with pursuing one's passion, Liberal Arts and other pre-professional tracks tend to make downward, contrastive comparisons with others who they view as being too single-minded about career preparation:

**Molly (Liberal Arts student):** I think that the acceptance rate for the B-school should be cut 20%. There are a lot of people in the B-school who just want a job. Not like a job in marketing or a job in operations management, but a job. I don't think people should choose their major based on their desire to be employed after graduation.

**Sarah (Pre-Professional student, Senior):** I see how the Business school student perceived success as a job. She insists that "*we will all have jobs soon*" because she is on a track where a job is the next step. She perceives college more so as a means to an end: a



job offer. This correlates to her summer spent taking an intense Business school requirement just to get it over with instead of learning and growing from the curriculum. The Business school student is so confident that she will get some kind of offer and is not questioning what it is at all. Maybe this is what Emory's Business school specifically ensures its students. But, the Pre-Law student not only has thoughts about the type of gap year she wants to do (international) but also knows that total rejection is a complete possibility. Certainty is not fostered within these students at all. There is a huge gap in time between now and these students gaining the degree they need to practice law or medicine. These years will not be static, calm, or easy for them. On the other hand, the Business school student has a utopian illustration of her first job and does not seem to think of a meaningful career in the long term. The pre-professional students in the conversation are much more open-minded. To them, their career has a meaning which correlates to their summer investing time in themselves (by studying for a standardized test), their communities (by interning at non-profits), and overall their long-term goals. I think it is interesting that the pre-professional students know that their long-term career takes more schooling and clearly, they have to really want to be a part of that career if they are willing to put in so much more effort.

Molly and Sarah condemn students in the Business school for being too narrowly focused on securing a post-graduate job. They argue that BBA students only show concern for employment, ignoring opportunities to learn and grow from their college experience. Sarah furthers this claim by asserting that exploration, passion, and at least some degree of uncertainty are in fact necessary for long-term growth and career success. Although Sarah acknowledges the various challenges that these pre-professional students will face, she praises their endurance in the face of adversity.

Despite holding some relatively optimistic views, these pre-professional and Liberal Arts students are not immune to making downward, assimilative comparisons. These comparisons often center around what these students lack in comparison to the more certain and structured tracks of Pre-Med and Business students:

**Christina (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** The psych program just assumes we're going to do research and doesn't really prepare us for anything else.

**Lena (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** The only person I know that is just majoring in psych, that has an internship already, got it through connections and her parents.

**Christina:** They need to realize the students need to make money.

**Lena:** Emory does a terrible job with Liberal Arts. Like I know nothing about LinkedIn. Can you guys [to BBA students] teach me and do a crash course with me? Like I'm serious. You guys have amazing jobs.

**Christina:** We're paying so much and like we objectively need money when we're older and we have no guidance.

**Lincoln (BBA student, Junior):** Yeah, it's so confusing why it's only the Business school that helps us with that. I learned how to network just from the Business school. I can help you if you want.

**Christina:** Guys, I'm going to be working for a nonprofit making no money, so please pay for all my stuff. Like maybe I will go to law school, but what if that doesn't work out and I lose money.

The two Liberal Arts students sympathize with one another. They share similarly low levels of prestige, and therefore have a common understanding of each other's emotions. Christina believes that the institution does not adequately prepare students for post-graduate careers. Lena agrees, adding that she lacks most of the pre-professional skills necessary to secure high-paying, prestigious job opportunities. The Business students are perceived to be the only undergraduates who receive satisfactory post-graduation guidance. Christina engages in self-deprecating humor to lighten the stressful dialogue.

### *Affective Consequences*

There is a clear link between students' status belief system, social comparisons, and resulting affective responses. As several of the aforementioned social comparisons indicate, stress and anxiety represent the most common affective consequences. This holds true for all types of comparisons, including upward, downward, contrastive, and assimilative. In addition to these two frequently observed emotions, seven other equally apparent but less commonly discussed affective responses to social comparisons include envy, depressive feelings/shame, contempt-scorn, pride, worry/fear, pity, sympathy, and optimistic feelings/ inspiration. Some of these reactions represent combinations of two or more affective responses.

Envy is a frequent emotional reaction that results from students making upward, contrastive social comparisons. From group conversations, these comparisons are regularly made by students who perceive less certain post-graduate outcomes and fewer institutional resources than students in different academic tracks receive:

**Charlie's Observation Summary:** A Pre-Med student went on a rant about how annoying it is that the Business school kids get a lot of opportunities that nobody else does. They have so many connections, and the school does so much for them, but anyone in ECAS [Emory College of Arts and Sciences] has to "*fend for themselves.*" A Business school student agreed with her, saying it is super unfair, and without the crazy B-school alumni network, he would not have gotten his last two internships or return offer.

Here, a student on the Pre-Medical track perceives the Business school students to have access to more institutional support, including the provision of resources and post-graduate opportunities. From this comparison, it becomes clear that this Pre-Medical student is envious of her Business school peers. Across several group interactions, envy appears to be a more common affective response among students who perceive a low level of control over their unfavorable circumstances:

**Charlotte (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** You know how I started studying for the MCATs over the summer right? Well, I've hit a plateau. My score just isn't improving anymore and it's making me so stressed.

**Elijah (Pre-Law student, Senior):** I'm studying for LSATs now and my scores aren't so great. Logic games are just so hard. I just don't get it.

**Charlotte:** And classes are starting to pick up so now I'm swamped with school work and trying to study for the MCAT. Now I'm just like why did I even choose this path. I seriously am jealous of you [BBA student] for having post grad plans set.

Here, two pre-professional students express their stress over medical and law school entrance/admissions exams. Moreover, Charlotte reveals feeling jealous after contrasting her challenging and uncertain career path to the Business student's secure and clear post-graduate trajectory.

Affective consequences do not always yield singular, straightforward emotions.

Reactions such as envy often coincide with other emotional responses, making affective consequences difficult to comprehend/untangle/parse apart:

**Corina (Liberal Arts student, Senior):** It seems like most of the jobs [in the Emory Virtual Fall 2020 Career & Internship Fair] are geared towards the Business students.

**Natasha (Pre-Law student, Senior):** Because they are [laughs sarcastically]. I guess I should have networked more, but when was I going to do that? I was always at work. My mom was right. I should never have taken a gap year

**Corina:** Your mom?

**Natasha:** I originally wanted to take 3 years, but she said I would be miserable and that it would be a waste of time. I changed it to one year, but now I'm even regretting that. I have no job. I'm going to be unemployed. No one is hiring me.

**Corina's Impression:** The B-school provides many opportunities for its students.

Natasha mentions this pretty often since she has had classes with many of these students. She usually mentions it to juxtapose how she's feeling about her future: uncertain and scared.

Corina and Natasha discuss their perceptions regarding unequal career opportunities available to Liberal Arts and Business students. They compare their limited number of job prospects with the multitude available to Business students. Consequently, the two illuminate their complex, simultaneous feelings of envy, stress, anxiety, and fear. Natasha also introduces feelings of regret toward taking a gap year. That is because she is currently facing unemployment, experiencing negative affect, and feels more uncertain about her career path than initially anticipated.

Although Corina and Natasha speak about their concerns with sarcasm, Corina reveals Natasha's true feelings about her current situation.

Similarly, the affective reaction of envy is not to be confused with irritation. The two affective consequences may be experienced simultaneously; however, they are distinct reactions to social comparisons. Irritation is a frequently discussed reaction to some upward, contrastive comparisons. The affective reaction of irritation is most prevalent with some combination of stress and envy:

**Henry (Pre-Law student, Senior):** Did you guys hear that Ben is taking the LSAT now too? Crazy. He didn't even study, but he called me freaking out last night about it.

**Michael (BBA student, Senior):** I feel like he's just trying everything now. He doesn't know what he's doing. I give it a week and he will be onto something else.

**Allison (Liberal Arts student, Senior):** Guys can we stop, this really stress me and [another girl in the room] out.

**Jameson (Liberal Arts student, Senior):** Yeah, like when [Alex, a BBA student who is not present in the room] talks about her job it's so annoying. We get it, you're making 70k next year. Literally who cares.

**Allison:** Yeah, it just sucks because all of you B-school people have already heard back. And I might not even get an interview until April because, for media jobs, you have to be ready to start literally the next day.

Uncertainty is distinctly linked to stress, anxiety, and irritation in this dialogue. For Allison, the mere discussion of their impending futures is a stressful and aversive topic. Although Jameson agrees, she also clearly voices feelings of irritation, especially when contrasting Alex's stable outcome to her and her peers' uncertain outcomes. According to Jameson, the irritation mainly stems from Alex constantly bringing up her secure and high-paying post-graduate employment. Although it is unclear whether Jameson's irritation stems from envy, Allison nonetheless links the two when she voices her jealousy over contrasting her uncertainty to the Business students' certainty.

In addition to envy, irritation, stress, and anxiety, another frequently mentioned emotion that results from students making upward, contrastive social comparisons is depressive feelings/shame. Like envy, depressive feelings/shame typically result when students perceive low levels of control over their perception of being low-status compared to others. It is not commonly communicated during interaction; however, it is evident through student's impressions to group conversations:

**Alana's Impression (Pre-Medical student, Senior):** I could not help but feel discouraged because they were all doing better in the [medical school applications and interviews] process than I am. I ended up engaging in the conversation for a singular comment because I did not want them to think I had nothing (why I cared? I am not sure).

One of them knew I had applied to medical school from a previous class and I did not want him to think that I was “failing” at the process.

Alana expresses feeling discouraged after speaking with four other students on the Pre-Medical track. Although Alana is on the same track, she nonetheless contrasts her accomplishments to those she perceives to be “doing better.” After comparing their accomplishments in the medical school application and interview processes to her own, Alana feels sad and ashamed. So much so that she felt inclined to contribute to the conversation to conceal her unsatisfactory progress and vulnerable emotions.

The same affective response of depressive feelings/shame also result under entirely different circumstances:

**Sabrina’s Observation Summary (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** Students spoke about their hesitation to pursue humanities majors, such as concentrations in Film and Media, because they knew it would not generate revenue or be “stable” like a Business or Pre-Med major. Students then explained their desire to double major or minor in humanities fields because they still wanted to pursue those interests; but not enough for it to be their sole academic discipline. This was advertised as a happy medium between practicality and passion. There were references to Emory’s “competitive environment” and its occasionally discouraging effects. Students frequently mentioned the student environment was not always conducive to pursuing passions. There is an emphasis on salary and profits over interests in different academic fields.

**Sabrina’s Impression:** I was most disappointed by the way that humanities majors were swept under the rug. My impression of the conversation was that in order to be successful at Emory, one must couple their humanities major with a more “practical” STEM major. As a Sociology major, I felt that there was no real representation or encouragement to solely pursue a non-STEM related field. I could also see this being discouraging to students who have no interest in STEM fields of any kind (such as myself).

In this case, Sabrina acknowledges how discouraging student discourse can feel for Liberal Arts students who do not want to pursue an institutionally supported pre-professional track. She references a dialogue in which students perceive they must couple their academic interests and passions with a more “prestigious” pre-professional track to ensure certain, high-paying career paths. Although she shares similar academic passions to these students in the humanities field,

she has no interest in coupling her studies with a “practical” and “profitable” track. Comparing her trajectory to this dialogue ultimately results in her feeling depressive and discouraged about her path.

Another frequent affective response to contrastive social comparisons is contempt-scorn and pride. These tend to occur when students engage in downward social comparisons. Although downward comparisons are less commonly discussed in interaction than upward comparisons, they tend to elicit feelings of contempt or pride. Contempt-scorn is a more frequent affective response among students from low-status majors:

**Evelyn (BBA student):** [To creative writing and film & media studies double major], what are you even going to do with a psychology major? It is so vague I feel.

**Amy (Liberal Arts student):** I don’t know. I could go the clinical route, do more writing, I do not know.

**Evelyn:** Yeah I feel like you can’t even know what to do with something like that. Like how you even know what to do.

**Taylor’s Impression (Liberal Arts student):** It was an encouraging and inspiring conversation about the future until hesitation was brought up by the Business school student. To her and her counterparts in Goizueta, you get a LinkedIn your Sophomore year, you get a summer internship your Junior year, and you get a concrete full-time offer your Senior year. There is no space to work on yourself and learn to learn. College is a means to an end; not an investment in your education or learning to enjoy learning. The Business school student is shocked by the possibility of uncertainty existing. On the other hand, the media studies and creative writing major was open to using her Liberal Arts degree in a multifaceted way. She has not confined herself to a career, industry or even company. Instead, she had developed skills to mirror the investment in knowledge to take her in many different directions. The same goes for her planned master’s degree. While the Business school student is concerned that she is going into an education program without a niche plan at the finish line, she is genuinely looking to learn the information that comes with a psychology degree and use it to her advantage, wherever she sees fit, in the future.

Taylor makes a downward, contrastive comparison with Evelyn. Although she understands the occupational certainty afforded to Business students, she argues that Amy is in a better long-term position for growth and success. She voices disdain for Evelyn’s constricted views of success and aversive response to potential uncertainty. In contrast, Taylor admires Amy for exploring her

passions and keeping an open-mind regarding career ventures. She believes that Amy, unlike Evelyn, will have a vast array of occupational opportunities that coincide with her genuine interests. Other Liberal Arts students make similar comparisons to Business students, which yield identical affective reactions of contempt-scorn:

**Dr. Smith (Emory Professor):** [Emory College of Arts and Sciences] undergrads critique undergrad B-school. B-school undergrads have views on people who take Sociology vs. Psychology vs. Biology. [Your major] expresses values and what you care about. Stereotypically, what values do B-school students care about? Don't filter yourself.

**Jack (Liberal Arts student):** Snakes.

\*Laughter from classroom.\*

**Dr. Smith:** Be more specific... Be ruthless.

**Jack:** Worse, makes snakes look bad.

**Dr. Smith:** [Reiterating what students have shared] Business is seen as "very competitive," whereas Soc major pretty chill. We think about big ideas; Don't have accounting; Think about other people and society and work from heart... About kind of person you want to be seen as, about identity.

In this interaction, Liberal Arts students are encouraged to compare their academic values to those of Business students. They are specifically prompted on which elements to focus their attention towards. As such, the Liberal Arts students contrast the positive elements they perceive in their majors with the negative components they perceive in the Business school. Specifically, they mention their pursuit of what they love and their regard for others. They condemn the "very competitive," ruthless nature they perceive in Business students.

Although the Business students are occasionally looked down upon for being overly competitive and career-focused, their institutional upper hand and clear paths to occupational success are desired by a majority of students. These superior conditions tend to result in a complex combination of pride and pity:

**James's Observation Note:** Patricia called me after I texted her surprised that I saw her on an information session for a Business role, as she jokes a lot about the B-school culture.



**Patricia (Liberal Arts student, Junior):** I know absolutely nothing. Corporate America is literally going to laugh at me and throw me out. It's honestly sad how little skills I have. The only thing I can offer is a [research skill] in psychology that I'm learning right now in research methods. So, good luck to me on interviews. This career fair was pretty terrible. Literally all they had was some random Business opportunities or like teaching. Literally nothing in between. Pretty sad. B-school kids literally know exactly what they want to do. I'm just sitting here like yeah, no idea. Is this worth it to be a snake [common reference for a B-school student] though? Maybe I'll just be unemployed.

**James's Impression (BBA student, Junior):** It is apparent that people not in a pre-professional path are not properly guided in terms of recruitment and career issues. While my friend that I faceted is more anxious than the average person and uses self-deprecation as a sense of coping, this is a typical thought that many non-Pre-Med or Pre-Law students have when thinking about jobs. In all honesty, this selfishly made me feel better because I am in a better position than students that are not in the Business school in terms of job recruitment. When I talk to people in the College about jobs, it makes me feel more confident than when I talk to some of my high achieving friends in the Business school that either already have jobs, have started recruiting/networking before me, or are better at time management to make time for recruiting/networking.

James feels a sense of "selfish" pride for being better-equipped than non-track, Liberal Arts students with regard to securing post-graduate career opportunities. He enjoys the positive affect that results from engaging in this downward, contrastive comparison. Further, he contrasts the positive emotions with the negative emotions that result from engaging in upward, contrastive comparisons with other BBA students. Despite recognizing their institutional benefits, Business students often express pity for students who have fewer resources:

**Carl (Junior, BBA student):** I felt bad for my friend [Isabella] who is not in the Business school. She wants to go into HR or marketing but does not know where to start. I think she sometimes wishes she majored in Business or at least started earlier in the recruitment process. She likes her classes but does not like how she pays so much to not have any sort of employment. It frustrates her and I definitely understand. As there was a chance that I was not going to major in Business, I would have regretted it for this very reason. This solidifies my thoughts about career issues and culture at Emory – students in the College need more career-related preparation.

Carl pities Isabella, acknowledging the frustration and anxiety she must feel concerning the achievement of occupational security as a Liberal Arts student. Although Carl is glad he entered the Business school on that account, he nonetheless understands how Isabella must be feeling

without occupational guidance on an uncertain path. He believes that Emory College of Arts and Sciences needs to provide students with more professional development and career-path preparation.

Despite the mostly negative affective responses seen above, students do make social comparisons that result in positive affective reactions. Feelings of optimism, admiration, and inspiration tend to occur more often among lowerclassmen, who have greater perceptions of control over their outcomes:

**Sarah's Impression (Liberal Arts student, Sophomore):** I resonate a lot with Julia's [Liberal Arts student, Alumna] journey. She was following the Pre-Med track. Her parents, family members, and friends all thought she would grow up to be a successful doctor, and ultimately she found a career that has brought her so much happiness. She put a lot of pressure on herself academically and career-wise, but only until she started pursuing things for herself did she find a stable path. Like Julia, I have always put a lot of pressure on myself for not knowing exactly what I want to do after graduating from Emory. It's especially difficult to feel a sense of uncertainty after being so certain you will pursue a particular path for so long. However, after hearing her journey, I have a renewed sense of faith and courage to follow my own path. Not knowing exactly what that journey looks like used to scare me, but now I feel driven and excited.

Here, Sarah is referencing Julia's withdrawal from the intellectually prestigious and stable path to success on the Pre-Medical track. Sarah mentions how she was initially fearful of dropping the Pre-Medical track because she was afraid of losing the certainty she once had. However, Sarah notes that, after listening to Natalie's success story as a Liberal Arts student, she now feels inspired by the uncertainty and limitless opportunities that come with it.

### **Discussion**

The findings presented above further emphasize the importance of status beliefs in understanding students' social comparison processes and consequent affective responses. From my sample, it is clear that the local context is influential in the creation, spread, and maintenance of status beliefs. This remains true across a broad range of demographic characteristics,

academic interest areas, and different arenas of undergraduate life. Although students may stress different elements of the college-to-career culture in group interactions, all elements are inextricably linked and fundamental to the status belief system. The shared pressure for certainty creates a common desire for pursuing pre-professional “tracks” that offer structured career paths, institutional resources, and prestige.

The power of institutional culture and status beliefs on student career aspirations corroborates the study of Binder et al. (2016), in which they discuss how institutional structure and campus culture generate “career prestige systems” at elite universities that funnel uncertain students into high-status occupations. Despite the impact of status processes in creating student preferences for career paths, my analysis adds to previous research by demonstrating the continuing importance of college-to-career culture at a next-tier, selective liberal arts university. Furthermore, my study looks at these processes through a social-psychological lens, analyzing the social comparisons students make due to the status belief system, and the affective consequences that result. In the present study, I find patterns that address and connect each of my interrelated research questions.

My findings indicate that there is a widespread emphasis, from the institution and other students, on pursuing a “pre-professional” track at Emory. According to students, “only certain paths are prestigious or emphasized” because they have institutional support and a clear path with set steps to achieving occupational success after graduation. The categorical distinctions and markers of status between different career clusters appear socially valid to students because they believe them to be structural conditions supported by the institution, a legitimate authority. Consequently, the local context creates seemingly authentic realities for students, forcing them to accept that “most people” would classify certain career clusters as higher-status than others

(Ridgeway & Cornell, 2006). When students across all demographic and major groups discuss the college-to-career culture at Emory, they often allude to elements of the status belief system. In doing so, they tend to focus on major themes that underlie the established status hierarchy and attribute more or less value to students representing different career clusters. These perceptions are further validated by the appearance of consensual agreement by other undergraduates at Emory.

Through my analysis, it is indisputable that students perceive at least four key differences between career clusters: certainty, institutional resources, intelligence, and passion. While there is a relatively universal desire for certainty through a structured path and institutional resources, group dialogues reveal that only the Pre-Medical and Business track students are believed to have both. Provided that institutional resources serve the purpose of promoting certainty and control over one's outcomes, the two are seen as complementary. When it comes to the perceived difficulty of, or the intelligence of students in, a career cluster, the Pre-Medical track ranks unequivocally highest. Because students on the Pre-Medical track are perceived to have the top three most important elements of the status belief system, it appears that "most students" often view them at the top of the status hierarchy. In some observations, this number one rank appears to be a topic of contention among students who view the Business track at the top. That disagreement may emerge because a large majority of social comparisons between career clusters revolve around certainty, or clear paths to dependable post-graduate outcomes, and institutional support. Although students on the Pre-Medical track benefit from these two structural conditions, students on the Business track are seen as receiving a markedly unequal distribution of institutional support and guaranteed trajectories. Regardless of whatever order the

two tracks may be on in the status hierarchy, the Pre-Medical and Business tracks are undeniably at the top.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly how the other pre-professional tracks, namely Pre-Law and Pre-Nursing, “stack up” against the Pre-Medical and Business tracks. That is because other pre-professional tracks are not as commonly discussed in group conversation regarding college-to-career culture. From the few instances in which these other pre-professional tracks are represented in discussion, they are thought to have less institutional support and more uncertain post-graduate outcomes than the Pre-Medical or Business tracks. Nevertheless, these other pre-professional tracks, with a more structured post-graduate plan, are perceived to be higher status than Liberal Arts students.

Most notably, at the bottom of the status hierarchy, are the Liberal Arts students. From the observations, it is clear that Liberal Arts students are thought to have the fewest institutional resources, the most uncertain post-graduate trajectories, and the least intellectual prestige. Despite lacking three of the most salient characteristics in the status belief system, they are commonly praised for pursuing their passions. Students seem to acknowledge the courage it takes to study what you love, while also accepting uncertainty. Given the anxiety-provoking effects of uncertainty, accepting it is not something that most students at Emory feel comfortable doing. There is reverence for students who are brazenly willing to challenge the status belief system by ignoring the status hierarchy, exploring different disciplines, and forging their own career paths. Despite this promising initiative, the status belief system nonetheless steers a large majority of status-anxious students into “prestigious” and secure career directions.

Prior research examining the relationship between university context and status beliefs on students’ career aspirations overlooks the role of social comparison processes (Binder et al.,

2016; Binder & Abel, 2018; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018). Despite the important role that group interaction plays in creating, maintaining, and spreading status beliefs (Ridgeway & Cornell, 2006), the current literature fails to examine how social comparison processes shape student interpretations of career prestige. The fact that students evaluate themselves against others when discussing college-to-career culture supports a key hypothesis of Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. When confronted with group dialogues surrounding career path issues, a topic of high relevance to Emory undergraduates, students compare their major or track's status to that of other majors/tracks.

In favor of the revision Mussweiler et al. (2006) make to Festinger's (1954) theory regarding who individuals use as comparison others, I find that students tend to act as cognitive misers. That is, a student will make fairly automatic comparisons between his and his peers' post-graduate trajectories on the three important social dimensions that underlie the status belief system. Even as underclassmen, with minimal exposure to college-to-career culture at Emory, students learn important status distinctions through interactions and conversations with other students.

As Buunk et al. (1990) suggest, the direction of social comparison that undergraduates engage in does not guarantee a particular affective consequence. Upward and downward social comparisons result in both positive and negative affective consequences. As Smith (2000) anticipated, for underclassmen, who have greater perceptions of control over their outcomes, upward comparisons often serve as sources of inspiration and motivation. For upperclassmen, who are nearing the end of their academic careers at Emory, upward comparisons often lead to more negative emotional responses. Affective consequences depend on where students stand relative to the overarching status hierarchy. These consequences are also determined by the types

of social comparisons students make. Furthermore, although students make individual-level social comparisons, they do so on the basis of their membership in a specific career cluster. As such, these individual-level comparisons depend entirely on the characteristics of their major or track. For instance, a Liberal Arts student contrasts her uncertainty and lack of institutional support with other peers who belong to career clusters that provide resources and clear paths to success.

In addition to a minimal research focus on the role of social comparisons, there is a dearth of research analyzing the affective consequences that social comparisons have on students. While there is some evidence to support the social comparison-based emotions identified by Smith (2000), my findings lead me to believe that these classifications are overly simplified. Although I found evidence of envy, depressive feelings/shame, contempt-scorn, pride, worry/fear, pity, sympathy, and optimistic feelings/ inspiration, the vast majority of affective consequences students discussed were stress and anxiety. Although Smith's (2000) account considers the dynamic interplay of identified emotions, it does not account for the combination of emotions excluded from his framework. Therefore, I contend that social comparisons may lead to affective consequences that Smith (2000) does not identify, such as irritation and stress.

In contrast to Smith's (2000) predictions regarding which types of comparison-based emotions will emerge on the basis of four dimensions, I found a greater nuance of outcomes in my sample. Specifically, Smith (2000) argued that contrast with an upward target and assimilation to a downward target produce negative affective reactions. He also proposed that assimilation with an upward target and contrast with a downward target have positive implications for the self. Although several of Smith's (2000) comparison-based emotion

predictions did align with my data, these predictions did not always reflect such simple affective outcomes.

For example, upward contrastive comparisons occasionally resulted in the affective reactions that were predicted to be caused by downward, assimilative comparisons. These affective consequences included worry and fear, rather than the anticipated emotions of resentment or envy. These conflicting findings may be due to the fact that it is more difficult to operationalize contrastive and assimilative comparisons through my observations. However, it may also be due to the fact that predicting these affective consequences requires a greater consideration and incorporation of social context than Smith (2000) originally considered.

Furthermore, regardless of rank in the status hierarchy, there was a relatively even split of each type of social comparison. Affective consequences were not straightforwardly related to membership in high-status or low-status career clusters. For instance, students on the high-status Business track made several upward, contrastive social comparisons to peers within their track. This finding directly contrasts my hypothesis that there would be more upward, assimilative and downward, contrastive comparisons made by students in high-status career clusters. While this outcome may be due to issues in Smith's (2000) formulation, it is more likely due to the fact that high-status career clusters contain further hierarchical distinctions, and therefore more elements to contrast, than initially expected. Business students were more likely to make within-group, upward, contrastive comparisons on the basis of their post-graduate outcomes because there was an additional, unanticipated status hierarchy in Goizueta. Undergraduates in Goizueta may choose to pursue one of five primary area depths, each with differing levels of prestige. Although my primary focus was to parse out the status hierarchy at Emory University as a whole, this additional hierarchy may account for some of the unanticipated findings.



Despite the expected high-status and low-status distinctions perceived among different career clusters, there were a few interesting deviations from my initial hypotheses. Although I initially predicted that students within the same career cluster would make similar social comparisons based on their cluster's high-status or low-status, students perceived greater within-track differences than expected. Despite sharing common group membership, several students contrasted their within-group outcomes. Even though students on the Business and Pre-Medical tracks benefit from institutional support and certainty, they nonetheless made several social comparisons that led to negative affective outcomes. Pre-Medical students indicated feelings of imposter syndrome and contrasted their processes applying to medical school with one another. Business students contrasted their interviewing processes and their occupational certainty with students in different primary area depths. Therefore, it is impractical to make specific predictions about students' social comparisons and affective reactions based solely on their membership to a high-status group.

The results of this study should be interpreted considering several limitations. First, Emory University represents one distinct institutional context located in Atlanta, Georgia. Since Emory constitutes one of many selective liberal arts institutions, the present findings may not generalize to universities with a different national rank, student body, or college-to-career culture. Despite this constraint, the purpose of conducting an ethnography at Emory was to ascertain how students discuss the college-to-career culture in their unique, local context. The college-to-career phenomenon, including patterns of group interaction and discourse, could not be sufficiently understood through an alternative research method (Angrosino, 2007). Thus, my study accomplishes the goal of analyzing how groups of students at Emory discuss their status beliefs, social comparisons, and affective reactions in a natural research environment.

Second, by utilizing an observational research design, I was unable to make causal inferences and control for every lifestyle and demographic factor that may impact the results. For example, among students who belong to low-socioeconomic status households, acquiring a guaranteed occupation prior to graduation may prove especially stressful for entirely different reasons. Although I obtained a diverse sample to account for such individual differences, my primary focus was not on making comparisons within ethnic, racial, sex, or social class groups.

Finally, it is also possible that various personal behaviors and emotions may not have been adequately observed. Given that emotions are highly personal, it is unclear whether individuals readily disclose all of their affective reactions to social comparisons during group interaction. Therefore, many of the observations might exclude the more personal affective consequences, such as shame and depressive feelings. Although the undergraduate researchers were required to provide personal impressions of their observations, including their highly personal emotional reactions, it is unclear whether these affective outcomes would be representative of the Emory community at large.

Although the present study looks specifically at the impact of status beliefs on students' social comparisons and affective consequences, all three variables are complex concepts that may be confounded by a variety of different factors. Interestingly, throughout several of the informal observations, many students discussed engaging in social comparisons that revolve around socioeconomic status. Given that Emory undergraduates come from diverse social classes, each with differing levels of familial income and support, this demographic characteristic should be included in future studies examining college-to-career culture. This finding also leads me to believe that, for certain groups of students at Emory, socioeconomic status may compound the pressure to attain a high degree of financial security and guaranteed

post-graduate occupations. I would predict some status beliefs, such as certainty and institutional resources, to play a more salient role in certain students' social comparison processes and affective reactions than others. Therefore, while this study emphasizes the power of local context in shaping widespread status beliefs, I do not intend to minimize the impact of individual-level demographic characteristics on dynamic social comparison processes and affective reactions.

Although the present study demonstrates that students are not passively shaped by their social class positions or racial-ethnic backgrounds, future researchers could acquire a more comprehensive understanding of how status beliefs, social comparisons, and affective consequences work for students with different background experiences. Moreover, I have shown the social-psychological impact of status beliefs, how they matter for culture and how we define things, and how they have a real-world influence on students. These findings suggest that a more equitable distribution of resources and career advising among academic departments may prove beneficial for a majority of students. This study can be used to help inform people when advising, educating, or providing advice to students. Researchers should continue to focus on how we can address the negative social-psychological consequences of status hierarchies on students. For the time being, however, I have replicated the work conducted by Binder et al. (2016) and demonstrated how students' status distinctions shape their social comparisons and affective consequences at Emory University.

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## Appendix I

### MAXQDA Code List

- I. Majors/Tracks
  - a. Pre-Medical track
  - b. Business track
  - c. Other Pre-Professional track
    - i. Pre-Law
    - ii. Pre-Nursing
  - d. Liberal Arts Major
- II. Undergraduate Culture
  - a. Class Year
    - i. Upperclassmen
    - ii. Lowerclassmen
  - b. High Status
    - i. Certainty (Clear Path to Success)
    - ii. Institutional Support
    - iii. Intellectual Prestige
  - c. Low Status
    - i. Uncertainty (No Clear Path)
    - ii. No Institutional Support
    - iii. Not Intellectually Prestigious
  - d. Jobs/Careers
    - i. Contribution/Passion
    - ii. Money
      - 1. Job That Pays Well
      - 2. Financial Security
- III. Affective Consequences/Emotions
  - a. Negative
    - i. Anxiety/Worry/Fear
    - ii. Stress
    - iii. Depressive Feelings/Shame
    - iv. Envy
    - v. Irritation
    - vi. Pity/Sympathy
  - b. Positive
    - i. Optimistic Feelings/Inspiration
    - ii. Admiration
    - iii. Pride
    - iv. Contempt-Scorn
  - c. Combination of Positive/Negative
- IV. Social Comparison
  - a. Upward
  - b. Downward
  - c. Assimilative
  - d. Contrastive
  - e. Sense of Control