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Not making the transition to college: School, work, and opportunities in the lives of American youth

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ABSTRACT

Unlike traditional research on educational stratification that focuses on the pursuit of higher education, our study examines why young adults do not make the transition to college, using a nationally representative sample of college non-enrollees ($N = 2640$). In applying latent class analysis techniques, we identified multiple types of students who do not pursue college. One group of non-enrollees (27.6%) reports forgoing college because the economic barriers are too high – either because of college affordability or family financial responsibility. These youth had both low math test scores and low family income, and thus closely align with regression-based analyses on college enrollment that emphasize academic and economic constraints as the central barriers to educational progress. However, we also identified a second, often overlooked group of youth who had the academic preparation and family income support to enroll in higher education, but decided to forgo college because they preferred to work and to make money (18.3%). The heterogeneous motives of these youth suggest that postsecondary decisions are not always guided by academic and economic barriers, but sometimes driven by previous work experience and perceptions of local opportunities for school and work.

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1. Introduction

In 2008, individuals holding a bachelor's degree earned 53% more on average than those with only a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Additionally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that between 2008 and 2018, jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will increase by 17% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). From a purely economic perspective, the financial pay-off alone should induce a near universal drive to attend college (Morgan, 2005). It is no surprise then that enrolling in college has become the modal experience for high school graduates in the United States over recent decades. In 2008, about 16 million youths were enrolled in college, up from 12 million in 1990 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), with about 60% immediately enrolling following high school graduation (Bozick and Lauff, 2007). Some have expressed concern that the high economic value placed on postsecondary degrees along with the expansion of nonselective schools has created a “college for all” ethos whereby poorly prepared students are encouraged to at least “try college” regardless of objectively low probabilities of degree completion (Rosenbaum, 2001; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999).

Despite the economic incentives and the pervasive “college for all” mentality, not all youth attend college. In general, research in the educational attainment literature assumes that such youth cannot attend college because of financial constraints or low academic preparation, barriers that are often grounded in socioeconomic origins. However, some young

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people do not attend college because they have other plans, namely working right after high school, pursuing a career that does not require college, starting a family, or joining the military. At present, we know very little about the decision-making processes of these young people, how many there are, and how their previous experiences and social contexts affect their decisions. Given the increasing importance of acquiring a postsecondary degree in the current economy, as well as the growth in postsecondary opportunities, why do some youth decide not to further their education beyond high school? Despite its centrality in both academic discussions of the role of schooling in the reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities and policy discussions on improving college access and human capital, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence brought to bear on this question.

The present study attempts to answer this question by making use of longitudinal survey data that specifically asks non-enrollees why they did not attend college. To our knowledge, this type of question has never been asked of a nationally representative sample and as such, our analysis provides new and unique information on postsecondary decision-making in the United States. In order to provide context to our study, we first briefly review the sociological literature on college enrollment, and highlight tensions between previous research that emphasizes academic and economic resource constraints and previous research that emphasizes individual perceptions of school and work opportunities. We then empirically explore the extent to which both sets of factors contribute to the decisions of non-enrollees. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings both for social scientists studying educational attainment as well as for policy makers grappling with how to best prepare youth for school and work in a changing economy.

2. Background

Within American sociology, decades of innovations in longitudinal data collection and analysis have produced a large body of research on educational attainment documenting *who* attends college. Race, ethnicity, family socioeconomic background, and gender have historically been and continue to be, the immediate dimensions that frame issues of college access. In general, Black and Latino youth are less likely to attend college than their Asian and White counterparts, youth whose parents are college-educated enroll in college at higher rates than their peers whose parents did not attend college, and young women hold an enrollment advantage over young men (Bozick and Lauff, 2007; Buchmann and DiPrete, 2006).¹ The identification of these disadvantaged groups has enhanced our understanding of how schools maintain and contribute to socioeconomic disparities over the life course, and helped direct resources to improve the educational prospects of those most in need.

Despite having a firm empirical grasp on *who* does and does not attend college, sociologists have been far less successful at understanding *why* youths make the postsecondary decisions that they do. Regression-based analyses of survey data – arguably the dominant methodological approach in sociological studies of educational attainment – have historically emphasized the central role that academic preparation and economic resources play in modulating enrollment probabilities.² Implicit in this approach is the idea that all youth *prima facie* want a college degree, and that those who do not attain one are somehow thwarted by low academic preparation, limited economic resources, or a combination of both. In other words, all youth are assumed to hold the same life goals, with academic and economic resources “deficits” as the central obstacles hindering their success.

More recent extensions of this approach among rational choice sociologists relax the “same life goals” assumption to parse out enrollment differences that remain when academic and economic resources are equal or held constant (Boudon, 2003). This “relative risk aversion” model posits that families from different social classes develop strategies to minimize the risk of downward mobility, wherein more advantaged families are motivated to send their kids to college to maintain their class position while disadvantaged have less incentive to do so (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Breen and Yaish, 2006). This approach maintains a reliance on regression-based methods that is empirically reductive, and criticized for ignoring individual orientations to immediate social and cultural environments – core elements of traditional sociological explanations.³

These approaches – founded on multivariate analyses of survey data – rarely probe the insights and motives of the individuals themselves navigating this transition. For example, do youth with limited academic and economic resources actually perceive these factors as precluding college enrollment? How do youth situated in varying neighborhood contexts account for the decisions they made? Answering these more nuanced questions has mostly been the task of qualitative researchers, but even there the evidence base is surprisingly thin. Notable exceptions include Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977) and Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Making It* (1987) – two ethnographies that explore the micro-processes that undergird educational and occupational attainment among disadvantaged adolescent males.⁴ These two classic studies find that while cognizant of financial constraints,

¹ Though Black youth on average are less likely to enroll in college than White youth, controlling for other socioeconomic factors Black youth are more likely to enroll than White youth. For a discussion of this “net advantage” see Bennett and Xie (2003).

² For a more elaborate discussion of sociological approaches to the study of college enrollment, see Bozick (2008) and Deil-Amen and Turley (2007).

³ Though leveraged as criticisms of the rational choice tradition, its proponents formally acknowledge this approach. For example, in Breen and Goldthorpe's (1997) articulation of the theory as it pertains to educational attainment, they state: “. . . what we seek to dispense with is any assumption that these actors will also be subject to systematic influences of a (sub)cultural kind, whether operating through class differences in values, norms or beliefs regarding education or through more obscure ‘subintentional’ processes.”

⁴ Another notable exception within sociology is McDonough's case study of the college preparation processes of females in California high schools (1997). However, in focusing on the college-bound, her study does not explicitly investigate the motives of non-enrollees.

their respondents rarely attribute their educational decisions to a lack of academic preparation. Instead, the youth they study largely forgo college because they see school as less relevant to their future and less likely to pay-off for them.

Willis' ethnography studies the high school and early job experiences of a group of White working-class males termed "the Lads" in 1970s England to understand why they eschew education in favor of blue-collar jobs. Through in-depth interviews and observations, Willis finds that the Lads were enmeshed in an opportunity structure that did not reward academic persistence. Seeing their fathers, their brothers, and their neighbors work in blue-collar jobs which do not require "book smarts," they eventually doubt that staying the course and studying hard in school will make any difference in their own lives. With few immediate examples of "guys like them" who succeeded in school and with ample opportunities for jobs that have minimal educational requirements, these youth re-direct their own life goals accordingly.

Willis' ideas were echoed in Jay MacLeod's ethnography of two groups of adolescent males coming of age in Boston's housing projects in the early 1980's. The Hallway Hangers, the group with the lowest probabilities of educational success, disengage from school not because they consider themselves low achievers or unable to succeed, but because they do not see a long-term pay-off to working hard in school. Like Willis' Lads, the Hallway Hangers encounter few examples of educational success in their neighborhoods. Their parents, siblings, and friends work in menial jobs, if they work at all. In their view, investing in school is a waste of time, as they doubt that working hard will get them any further in life than they already are. Instead, it makes more sense for them to invest in paid work so that they acquire relevant experience for the types of jobs they will hold as adults, and in the more immediate term, to make money. For both Willis' Lads and MacLeod's Hallway Hangers, decisions about forgoing college (and in some cases high school) are not as much a deliberate stock taking of their academic preparation and their economic resources as they are about their assessment of the opportunity structure, communicated to them via their ongoing, immediate experiences in their families and within their neighborhoods. There was no evidence that maintenance of class position or risk aversion shaped their motives – calling into question the relevance of rational choice models when studying the decision to not attend college.

It should be noted that the Lads and the Hallway Hangers did, on average, lack adequate academic preparation and economic resources to make it to college. Hypothetically speaking, if they were included in samples used to quantitatively estimate the odds of college enrollment, the Lads and Hallway Hangers would likely contribute to the statistically significant coefficients associated with measures of academic preparation (e.g., test scores, grades, etc.) and economic resources (e.g., family income). However, Willis and MacLeod's analyses reveal that academic and economic resources are not the factors that dominate the educational decisions of disadvantaged youth. Instead, whether or not their sample members finished high school and continued onto college was largely guided by their perceptions of opportunities for school and work. Attributing postsecondary decisions largely (or in some cases, entirely) to academic and economic variables, as is often done unintentionally in regression models, oversimplifies how youth make sense of and react to their social worlds.

Since the publication of Willis and MacLeod, there have been few qualitative studies that revisit these issues and replicate their findings as they specifically relate to not attending college. One exception is a more recent study by Lindholm (2006) who interviewed 48 public high school graduates in Los Angeles to understand the factors that lead them to forgo college. Although the composition of her sample was quite different from Willis and MacLeod (e.g., it included females as well as males, and from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds), very similar themes emerged. On average, Lindholm's sample members reported that they generally liked school and that they were doing well academically. However, they were skeptical that acquiring a college degree would lead to improved job opportunities, as most were raised in families and in neighborhoods where college-going was not the norm. Like Willis' Lads and MacLeod's Hallway Hangers, they too questioned the opportunity structure, and doubted that investing in college would actually enhance their future prospects.

In a standard regression model predicting postsecondary enrollment, coefficients associated with measures of academic performance and economic resources are most often interpreted in terms of deficits – those who forgo college do so because they lack the academic wherewithal and money to pay for tuition. Qualitative studies also find evidence that youths' postsecondary choices are constrained by finances, but rarely are they *determined* by academic considerations. Instead, they find that youths' decisions are guided by their perceptions of the opportunity structure as conveyed to them in their immediate family and neighborhood environments. Seeing few examples of educational success and little value in working hard in school given the types of jobs available to them – i.e., blue-collar jobs that do not require a college degree – they instead invest their time and energies into work to gain practical experience to enhance their labor market prospects when they finish high school.

3. Research objectives

While these different methodological approaches uncover and emphasize different factors, there are no doubt multiple forces at play that shape the postsecondary decisions of youth in ways in which individuals are both aware and unaware. There is likely not a single reason driving these decisions, but multiple ones. For example, many youth who live in neighborhoods where few enroll in college also lack the academic preparation to handle the rigors of college. Similarly, many youth who do not see school as important to their futures also lack the requisite finances to pay for college. This has implications for research, as young people may report the reason or reasons that portray them in the best light (e.g., reporting that they already have good jobs rather than admitting they lacked the test scores to get accepted). With these real-life complexities and analytical challenges in mind, our three objectives for this study are modest. We discuss each in turn below.

3.1. Research objective 1: identify the reasons youth decide not to enroll in college

First, we will analyze the distribution of responses to a survey question that asks non-enrollees the reasons they decided to not attend college. To our knowledge, this question has not been posed to a nationally representative sample of non-college-bound youth, and as such, the distribution of responses will provide new insight into the motives that undergird this decision. While most research on postsecondary enrollment, (and accordingly, policy initiatives aimed at college access), focus on academic and economic constraints, there is no evidence to date that these are indeed the factors most salient to youth when planning for life after high school. Further, not only are there a wide range of postsecondary training options, work and family pathways during transition to adulthood are more diverse and fluid than ever (Shanahan, 2000). Therefore, identifying what factors shape higher education decisions – especially at a time when the financial returns to a bachelor's degree are at a historical high and the pressure to at least try college continues to mount – will provide a unique glimpse into the mindset of youth during this pivotal stage in the life course.

3.2. Research objective 2: identify types of non-enrollees

Second, we will investigate the patterning of responses to discern whether there are distinct types or “classes” of youth who forgo college. Sample members are allowed to choose more than one reason for forgoing college. This provides an analytic advantage as it permits us to study the multiple, contemporaneous factors that shape the transition out of high school. For example, it is possible that for some youth, both academic and family concerns influenced their decision to not enroll, while for others it may have been only one or the other. To analytically assess these complex relationships, we will use latent class analysis techniques that will allow us to identify classes of non-enrollees based on the patterning of reasons they gave for not enrolling in college. Latent class analysis is particularly useful for empirically identifying multiple clusters of individuals based on categorical measures of shared observable characteristics. This approach is becoming increasingly valuable to sociological analyses of the life course (see for example Amato et al., 2008; MacMillan and Eliason, 2003; Oesterle et al., 2010), and for our purposes it improves upon regression-based research that typically treats non-enrollees as a homogenous group. In identifying different types of non-enrollees, our latent class analysis will provide new information on the extent to which they vary in their postsecondary motives.

3.3. Research objective 3: identify factors that differentiate types of non-enrollees

Last, we will explore whether the classes of non-enrollees that we identify are largely responding to: academic and economic resource constraints, as emphasized in structural models used in quantitative analyses; assessments of the opportunity structure, as emphasized in qualitative analyses; or to a combination of the two. To this end we will examine the extent to which the different classes of non-enrollees face academic and economic barriers, vary across family and neighborhood contexts, and possess strong or weak orientations toward school and work. As a first foray into differentiating different types of non-enrollees, our approach is descriptive and not causal. Our goal is not to untangle and determine the specific causal motivators of postsecondary decision-making, but rather to illuminate heterogeneity in the contexts of school and work and how they in turn contribute to choices during this pivotal time in the life course.

4. Data and methods

For this study, we use data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), conducted by RTI International for the National Center for Education Statistics. ELS:2002 tracks the educational and developmental experiences of a nationally representative sample of 15,360 students who were first interviewed about their school and home experiences when they were 10th graders in 2002.⁵ In the spring of 2004, when most were seniors, 14,710 of the originally selected sample members participated in the first follow-up interview in which they were re-interviewed about their educational experiences and their plans for the future. These students were again re-interviewed in 2006 for the second follow-up interview, when most sample members were out of high school for approximately 2 years.

From the full data set, we extract two analytic samples to answer our research questions. The first analytic sample ($N = 2640$) includes all sample members who participated in the base-year and second follow-up interview but had not enrolled in college by the time of the second follow-up interview. The second analytic sample ($N = 13,060$) includes all sample members who participated in the base-year and second follow-up interview, regardless of whether or not they enrolled in college.

For this analysis, we explore four groups of variables that are thought to shape postsecondary enrollment: (1) academic and economic barriers; (2) family and neighborhood context; (3) orientations toward school; and (4) and orientations toward work. The first group includes factors that dominate most quantitative analyses of college enrollment, while the

⁵ The sample sizes are approximate because restricted-use data are used. In accordance with National Center for Education standards, exact sample sizes from restricted-use data files cannot be published unless the data are perturbed in some way. The perturbation approach taken here was to round the exact sample sizes.

second, third, and fourth groups include factors that have emerged in the qualitative analyses of postsecondary transitions reviewed earlier. Though they are not central to the goals of this study, we also explore demographic differences in postsecondary decision-making.

4.1. Academic and economic barriers

We use math achievement scores to measure academic barriers and family income to measure economic barriers.⁶ Math achievement scores are a continuous, standardized variable with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 10 based on a math assessment administered alongside the base-year survey in the 10th grade. Family income is based on parent-reported income for the year 2001.⁷ We use quartiles to divide the distribution into a series of four binary variables to facilitate straightforward comparisons between high- and low-income students: Income Q1 (low), Income Q2, Income Q3, and Income Q4 (high). Those in Q1, the lowest income quartile, serve as the reference category in all multivariate analyses.

4.2. Family and neighborhood context

Opportunities for school and work are communicated through immediate experiences in the home and in the neighborhood. Accordingly, we use three measures that gauge the most proximal role models and signals youth encounter in these contexts during the time in which they are making postsecondary decisions: their parents' level of education, indicating the degree of college-going support and knowledge within their immediate family; the ratio of 18- to 24-years-olds in the student's neighborhood who are enrolled in school (herein referred to as the local college-going ratio for ease of expression), indicating college-going norms among one's older peers and the general "college-going ethos" in the neighborhood; and the percentage of local jobs that require a bachelor's degree, indicating the level of training needed for the types of jobs most common in one's neighborhood. The latter two measures make use of geocodes contained within ELS:2002 that allow us to determine students' residential zip code in 2004.⁸ We use zip codes as a proxy for neighborhoods.

Parental education is the highest level of education reported by either the father or the mother and is represented by a series of binary variables: high school diploma or less, some college, a bachelor's degree, and a graduate/professional degree. Those whose parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma or less serve as the reference category in all multivariate analyses.

The local college-going ratio was constructed by appending school enrollment information from the 2000 Census. A ratio of 1 indicates that within the student's neighborhood, there are equal numbers of 18- to 24-years-olds who were enrolled in college and not enrolled in college. We focus on those between the ages of 18 and 24, as it is the category in the Census data that most closely aligns with the prime college-going ages. Values greater than 1 indicate that there are more 18- to 24-years-olds enrolled in school than not enrolled. Conversely, values less than 1 indicate that there are fewer 18- to 24-years-olds enrolled in school than not enrolled in school. For our first analytic sample (non-enrollees), the average ratio is .70, and for our second analytic sample (enrollees and non-enrollees), the average ratio is .94.

The percentage of local jobs that require a bachelor's degree was constructed using information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Projections and Training Data, which classifies occupations according to their educational requirements as reflected in educational attainment data from the Current Population Survey at the national, state, and metropolitan area levels. Using the distribution of occupations at the metropolitan area level in May 2004, we calculated the percentage of workers employed in jobs that required a bachelor's degree. Approximately 27% of the analytic sample did not live in a metropolitan area. For those students, we calculated the educational requirements at the state level and included a control in all multivariate models indicating whether this information was taken from the metropolitan area level or the state level. Because of the differences in geographic level used in the construction of this measure, we use the general term "area" when interpreting the results. For our first analytic sample (non-enrollees), on average 9.9% of workers in the area were employed in jobs that required a bachelor's degree; and for our second analytic sample (enrollees and non-enrollees), on average 10.3% of workers in the area were employed in jobs that required a bachelor's degree. We use this measure to gauge labor market opportunities instead of the more commonly used local unemployment rate as it is more indicative of the local job market culture, particularly as it relates to schooling, and is therefore better aligned with the theoretical predictions that stem from the work of Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1987).

⁶ There is a range of variables we could have chosen to measure these two constructs. We settled on math achievement and family income for two reasons. First, we aimed for parsimony given the large number of comparisons that would be made in the multivariate analyses. Second, special efforts were undertaken by RTI International in developing the study to ensure that these two variables had solid measurement properties (see Ingels et al., 2004, for detailed methodological information on base-year data collection and variable construction).

⁷ Unlike test scores, which were designed to be a continuous variable, family income was collected using pre-categorized ranges (e.g., \$1001–\$5000; \$5001–\$10,000; etc.). Therefore, there is not a true continuous variable analogous to math test scores to measure financial barriers.

⁸ There are three zip codes available: the student's residential zip code in 2004, the student's residential zip code in 2002, and the zip code of the student's school in 2002. We used the residential zip code in 2004 since it geographically locates students at the end of their senior year of high school when they are making postsecondary decisions. If this was missing, we then used either their residential or school zip code in 2002, with preference given to the former. 90.2% of zip codes were taken from students' residence in 2004, 8.7% of zip codes were taken from students' residence in 2002, and 1.1% of zip codes were taken from students' high schools in 2002.

4.3. Orientations toward school

We use two variables to measure youths' orientations toward school: educational expectations and educational values. The first is the classic variable used to measure beliefs about future education in models of status attainment, and the second gauges whether youth consider education to be important. Educational expectations are based on a question that asked sophomores "How far in school do you expect to get?" We created a series of binary variables to correspond to their responses: high school or less, some college, 4-year degree, and don't know.⁹ High school or less serves as the reference category in our multivariate analyses. Educational values are measured by a question that asked sophomores "How important to you is getting a good education?" with the following response options: very important, somewhat important, and not important. Due to very few students responding not important (approximately 1% of the full sample), we combined those students with those who responded "somewhat important." From there, we created a single binary variable coded '1' if the sample member felt that education is very important, and '0' if the sample member felt that education was not very important.

4.4. Orientations toward work

Orientations toward work are measured by two variables: employment experience in the 10th grade and the type of occupation the respondent expected to have at age 30. The former indicates a behavioral investment in paid work while the latter indicates an affective investment in paid work. Employment during the school year is a continuous variable that indicates average weekly number of hours worked during the school year.¹⁰ Occupational expectations are measured by classifying the types of jobs youth expected to have at age 30, as reported when they were in the 10th grade: white-collar jobs, blue-collar jobs, other jobs, and don't know.¹¹ These responses were converted into binary indicators, with white-collar jobs serving as the reference category in our multivariate analyses.

4.5. Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics in our analysis include sex and race/ethnicity. Sex is a binary variable coded '1' if the student is male and '0' if the student is female. Race/ethnicity is represented by a series of binary variables: Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, White, and Other. White students serve as the reference category in all multivariate analyses.

4.6. Analytic issues

The ELS:2002 sample is drawn using a stratified cluster design, in which students are nested in schools (the primary sampling unit) and schools are nested within strata. Because this sampling approach violates the assumption of independent observations, we used survey (*svy*) commands in STATA which use Taylor-series linearization methods to produce correct standard errors for samples that were drawn using a stratified cluster design (StatCorp, 2005). All point estimates are weighted so that the results presented here generalize to students who were sophomores in the spring of 2002. Due to item non-response on different components of the survey, not all sample members have complete information on the independent variables. To preserve the variance-covariance structure of the analytic sample, we use multiple imputation to fill in missing values and include binary variables to control for missing data in our multivariate analyses.

5. Analysis

5.1. Identifying the reasons youth did not attend college

In the second follow-up interview, when sample members were approximately 2 years out of high school, non-enrollees were asked: "Which of the following are reasons why you have not continued your education after high school?" They were allowed to check any of 12 possible responses that might apply and they were also given the option of checking "other" and then writing in a reason.¹² The distribution of these responses is shown in Table 1, ordered from most frequently given to least

⁹ Levels of expectations were based upon a set of response options. Less than high school includes 'less than high school graduation' and 'high school graduation or GED only.' Some college includes 'attend or complete at two-year college' and 'attend college, 4-year degree incomplete.' Four-year degree includes 'graduate from college,' 'obtain master's degree or equivalent,' and 'Ph.D., M.D., or other professional degree.'

¹⁰ Since previous studies find non-linear relationships between hours worked and educational outcomes, we tested for non-linearities using different specifications (e.g., squared and quadratic terms, dummy variables for different levels of intensity). These had little bearing on our substantive findings, so we use the single continuous measure for ease of interpretation.

¹¹ White- and blue-collar distinctions were based on a set of job category options. Blue-collar occupations include clerical, craftsperson, farmer, homemaker, laborer, operative, protective service, service, and technical. White-collar occupations include professional jobs and school teachers. In preliminary analyses not shown, Wald tests confirmed that using the blue-collar/white-collar classification was just as useful in differentiating sample members as the full set of occupational categories. For ease of interpretation, we use the simpler blue-collar/white-collar distinction.

¹² RTI analyzed these written in responses and classified those that were given frequently. The one response given most often was "pregnancy/childcare/marriage." Because of its important role during the transition to adulthood and because of its prevalence in the data, we classified these responses as their own category apart from "other."

Table 1
Reasons for not attending college.

	Weighted %
Rather work and make money	50.7
Can't afford to go to college	49.4
Has a good job	43.1
Help support family	41.0
Career does not require more education	16.7
Other	15.4
Grades/admission scores not high enough	14.6
Does not like school	14.4
Personal health/traumatic experience	12.5
Pregnancy/childcare/marriage	8.1
Feels going to school is not important	6.9
Not accepted at desired schools	6.8
Military	3.5
<i>N</i> = 2640	

frequently given. Before assessing the individual reasons, it is worth noting that no single reason was given by more than half of the sample. Instead, youth are deflected from higher education for an array of reasons.

Previous research focusing on resource constraints emphasizes the role that academic preparation and finances play in determining postsecondary destinations. From the viewpoint of the non-enrollees themselves, however, we find evidence only of the latter: nearly half of non-enrollees reported that they could not afford to attend college (49.4%), but few reported that their grades or test scores were too low (14.6%). This finding echoes Willis' Lads and MacLeod's Hallway Hangers, who rarely attribute their life choices to personal failures (such as low grades), as well as with the experiences of Lindholm's sample members who on average reported doing well in school.

Two of the three most common reasons that youth give for not attending college involve employment considerations: 50.7% said they would rather work and make money and 43.1% said that they already had a good job. While this supports previous qualitative research showing that many *economically disadvantaged* youth perceived greater opportunities in the work place instead of school and expressed a need for immediate income, we see that even on a national level, employment considerations are quite prevalent across all youth.

5.2. Identifying types of non-enrollees

Since respondents could check all that apply (rather than a forced choice), we are able to utilize all of their responses to identify specific "types of non-enrollees" based on the patterning in the motives that drive their decisions. To do so, we use latent class analysis, which identifies groups or "latent classes" based on the distribution of their responses to the 13-reason checklist. This technique is akin to factor analysis when the variables of interest are categorical. Because of its unique status as a clearly defined transition, apart from college or the labor force, we do not use the response to the military option in the latent class analysis and instead maintain those in the military as their own unique class. To identify the other classes, we estimated the following model:

$$P(y) = \sum_{t=1}^T \pi_t P_{a|t} P_{b|t} P_{c|t} P_{d|t} P_{e|t} P_{f|t} P_{g|t} P_{h|t} P_{i|t} P_{j|t} P_{k|t} P_{l|t} = \sum_{t=1}^T \pi_{\substack{ABCDEFGHIJKL \\ abcdefghijkl}}$$

The capital letters *A* through *L* represent the observed 12 reasons for not going to college. In this model, $P(y)$ is the probability of responses for the 12 observed variables; π_t is the proportion in latent class t ; $P_{a|t}$ is the probability of response a to observed variable *A*, $P_{b|t}$ is the probability of response b to observed variable *B*, ..., $P_{l|t}$ is the probability of response l to observed variable *L*, all conditional on membership in latent class $X = t$. When this approach is exploratory with no predefined sense of the number of classes (as is the case here), the model is repeatedly estimated to obtain the best fit to the data (i.e. a two class model where $T = 2$, a three-class model where $T = 3$, etc.). Using Raftery's (1995) Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), we determined that a three-class model was the best fit to the data.¹³

Analogous to creating factor scores from a factor analysis, we used the three-class model to estimate three latent class probability scores. These scores indicate the probability that the individual belongs to latent class $X = t$ based on their responses to the 12 observed reasons. We assigned individuals to one of the three classes based on whichever of the three scores is highest. For example, if the probability that the sample member belonged to classes I–III was .31, .04, and .58,

¹³ Since gender norms and inequalities pervade the institutions of the education system, the economy, and the family, we presumed that the motivations underlying this transition might be different for men and women. As such, we estimated the model for females and males separately. Both yielded a three-class model where the properties of the classes were similar. Therefore, we combine them and do not explicitly consider gender as a determinant of class membership.

Table 2

Latent class analysis of the reasons for not attending college.

	Class 1 Work-driven	Class 2 Economic constraint	Class 3 Multiple disadvantage	Class 4 Other	Class 5 Military
Rather work and make money	91.7	11.0	93.2	53.4	30.2
Can't afford to go to college	7.6	84.3	69.3	43.5	24.6
Has a good job	96.6	4.6	58.8	42.9	37.8
Help support family	32.0	47.0	60.9	39.9	13.2
Career doesn't require more education	37.8	2.5	57.3	10.6	11.1
Other	6.4	12.3	11.4	23.0	0.0
Grades/admission scores not high enough	0.0	12.1	80.9	12.5	3.0
Does not like school	18.8	2.4	69.7	11.4	12.1
Personal health/traumatic experience	2.3	18.0	25.4	12.2	0.8
Pregnancy/childcare/marriage	2.9	11.5	3.7	9.4	0.0
Feels going to school is not important	10.8	0.4	34.3	5.3	2.7
Not accepted at desired schools	2.2	7.4	19.5	6.7	2.3
Military	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	100.0
N = 2640	480	740	185	1140	95
Weighted %	18.3	27.6	7.1	43.5	3.5

respectively, they would be assigned to class III. To ensure that the classes were comprised of individuals who best reflect the properties of the latent class, we removed cases from their assigned class if their probability of membership was less than .75 and assigned them to a fourth “residual” class.¹⁴ Therefore, in the aforementioned example, the individual who only had .58 chance of belonging in class III would have been reassigned to the residual category. In total, we ended up with five classes: the three determined by the model, the residual “other” category, and military members who were excluded from the model by design.

Table 2 shows the distribution of responses by the five classes. Class 1 is defined predominantly by their orientation toward the labor force: 96.6% of this class reported that they did not go to college because they have a good job, and 91.7% would rather work than make money. A substantial minority (37.8%) reported that their career would not require further education. There is almost no evidence of economic constraint in this group as only 7.6% could not afford college, by far the lowest percentage among the five classes. None of these youth reported that their grades or test scores were not high enough, and only 2.2% reported that they could not get into the school they wanted to attend. Therefore, focusing wholly on academic and economic resources does not accurately depict the postsecondary motives of these youth, which comprise 18.3% of those forgoing college. Given their motivation for work, with little acknowledgment of academic or economic constraints, we consider Class 1 youth to be “work-driven non-enrollees.” The reasons given by this group most closely resemble those of Willis' Lads and MacLeod's Hallway Hangers.

At 27.6%, those in Class 2 comprise the largest identifiable group of non-enrollees. The modal reason given by these youth is the affordability of college: 84.3% said that they could not afford to attend college. Also reflecting financial issues, the second most frequent reason given by this class is that they needed to help support their family (47.0%). Compared with the other groups, very few reported not liking school (2.4%) and less than 1% felt that going to school was unimportant – the lowest entries for both of those reasons across all groups. Moreover, work does not appear to be the driving motivation for these youth: only 11.1% of those in Class 2 reported they would rather work and make money and only 4.6% reporting that they had a good job. Taken together, these youth seem deterred predominantly by finances, and as such, we consider them “economically-constrained non-enrollees.” The reasons given by this group most closely align with quantitative analyses that largely point to resource constraints as impediments to college. For these youth, though, we find acknowledgment of limited economic resources, not academic ones.

Like Class 1, the majority of those in Class 3 attribute their choice to wanting to make money rather than go to school (93.2%). However, unlike Class 1, these youth also identify financial and academic hurdles: 69.3% said they could not afford college and 80.9% reported that their grades and/or admission test scores were not high enough. Moreover, while disliking school was not particularly common in the full sample of non-enrollees (14.4%), nearly 70% of those in Class 3 did so. Their considerations span both resource constraints as well as motivations to work and make money. Thus, we designate Class 3 youth “multiple disadvantage non-enrollees,” who make up only 7.1% of the sample.

Reflecting their weak probability of membership in any of the classes defined by the model, those in Class 4, the “other” category, report a range of reasons for their decisions, with a desire to work and make money and affordability being the predominant motives with 53.4% and 43.5% reporting, respectively. By design, all of those in Class 5 report military service as a reason for not attending college, followed up by having a good job (37.8%). Though interesting in their own right (the heterogeneity of reasons within Classes 4 and 5 and the decision to enlist during a time of war for Class 6), we focus most of

¹⁴ To our knowledge, there is not a well-defined method for assigning class membership beyond ranking the different probability scores for each individual. In preliminary analyses, we used different thresholds above .75, and for the most part our overall findings remain consistent. When using thresholds lower than .75, the group composition becomes considerably more heterogeneous and the distinctions among classes become less clear.

our analytical attention on work-driven non-enrollees and economically-constrained non-enrollees as they are our most substantively identifiable groups.

5.3. Factors that differentiate types of non-enrollees

In this section, we use both descriptive statistics and multivariate regression to examine the factors that differentiate classes of youth who forgo college for varying reasons. In Table 3 we show the means of our key measures across all five classes of non-enrollees, as well as their peers who enrolled in 4-year and 2-year colleges for comparative purposes.

Work-driven youth express a relatively weak orientation toward school and a strong orientation toward work when they are in the 10th grade. With the exception of non-enrollees facing multiple disadvantages, work-driven youth have the lowest expectations for future education and place the least value on education: Less than half expect to receive a bachelor's degree (45.9%) and almost a third did not feel that education was very important (30.3%). Conversely, of all the groups, work-driven non-enrollees expressed the strongest orientation toward work in the 10th grade: they worked on average 11.5 h a week at paid jobs and 26.1% held blue-collar career aspirations. This supports the contention from Willis and MacLeod's analyses that youth who view education as less relevant to their futures often disinvest from school and focus their energies toward paid work. Work-driven non-enrollees are overwhelming male (72.6%) and White (67.4%).

Table 3
Descriptive statistics by type of non-enrollee and enrollee.

	Non-enrollees					College enrollees	
	Work-driven	Economic constraint	Multiple disadvantage	Other	Military	Two-year college	Four-year college
<i>Academic and economic barriers</i>							
Math achievement scores	45.9	45.3	40.5	45.2	51.5	48.4	56.1
<i>Family income quartiles</i>							
Q1 – low	40.0	50.9	54.0	50.1	30.8	36.2	20.5
Q2	44.5	40.6	35.4	38.0	43.5	43.0	39.3
Q3	10.1	5.9	4.8	8.2	18.4	11.9	18.1
Q4 – high	5.4	2.6	5.8	3.7	7.3	8.9	22.1
<i>Family and neighborhood context</i>							
<i>Parental education</i>							
High school diploma or less	39.0	45.0	49.7	40.6	24.0	29.5	14.6
Some college	42.9	38.9	30.9	37.8	51.0	38.9	28.9
Bachelor's degree	14.2	11.4	13.4	13.1	18.0	20.3	29.5
Graduate/professional degree	3.9	4.7	6.0	8.5	7.0	11.3	27.0
Local college-going ratio	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.9	1.0
Local percentage of BA degree jobs	9.9	10.0	9.9	10.0	9.8	10.2	10.4
<i>Orientations toward school</i>							
<i>Educational expectations</i>							
High school or less	20.7	16.6	31.4	15.0	12.9	5.3	1.1
Some college	20.5	17.0	19.3	17.7	7.6	12.3	3.1
Four-year degree	45.9	50.9	33.4	52.9	62.4	71.7	90.6
Do not know	12.9	15.5	15.9	14.4	17.1	10.7	5.2
<i>Educational values</i>							
Education is very important	69.7	75.2	64.3	73.7	73.6	80.6	88.6
Education is not very important	30.3	24.8	35.7	26.3	26.4	19.4	11.4
<i>Orientations toward work</i>							
Weekly hours worked in 10th grade	11.5	9.3	9.3	11.1	11.0	8.8	7.9
<i>Occupational expectations at age 30</i>							
White-collar jobs	25.0	40.1	24.0	34.3	45.5	45.9	57.6
Blue-collar jobs	26.1	16.0	18.8	17.1	26.3	13.5	7.2
Other	7.2	4.7	6.4	6.3	9.9	6.3	5.4
Do not know	41.7	39.2	50.8	42.3	18.3	34.3	29.8
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>							
<i>Sex</i>							
Female	27.4	46.3	29.2	45.6	15.3	52.9	54.0
Male	72.6	53.7	70.8	54.4	84.7	47.1	46.0
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>							
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.8	2.3	2.4	2.3	1.8	3.9	5.6
Black	13.1	18.1	18.7	18.3	11.6	14.3	11.7
Hispanic	11.4	23.8	24.1	20.4	16.2	19.5	8.9
White	67.4	47.5	49.2	51.9	65.3	57.8	68.9
Other	6.3	8.3	5.6	7.1	5.1	4.5	4.9
N	480	740	185	1140	95	3975	6445

Youth who attribute their non-enrollment to economic reasons do in fact come from families with limited financial resources. Almost all of these youth (91.5%) are from families in the lowest two income quartiles. They expressed a moderate orientation toward school, with half expecting a 4-year college degree and three quarters reporting that education is very important to them while in the 10th grade. Economically-constrained non-enrollees had the weakest orientation toward paid work. Compared with the other classes of non-enrollees, the economically-constrained have the highest aspirations for white-collar jobs (40.1%). With a moderate orientation toward school, aspirations for white-collar jobs, but a lack of family income, it appears that these youth may have been on the path toward college but were impeded by a lack of finances. Economically-constrained non-enrollees are one of only two groups (the other being non-enrollees facing multiple disadvantages) that are predominantly non-White (52.5%).

Youth reporting multiple reasons for not making the transition to college evidence signs of limited academic and economic resources, and are concentrated in family and neighborhood contexts that are less supportive of college attendance. Of all groups, multiple disadvantage non-enrollees have the lowest math achievement scores and are the most heavily concentrated in the lowest family income quartile. These youth live in areas with the lowest college-going ratio and have the least educated parents, suggesting they have limited support and resources in their families and in their neighborhoods for postsecondary planning.

Given the heterogeneity in their reasons for not enrolling, those classified as “other” – the largest group of non-enrollees – are not distinctively different from the other classes. On the other hand, military enlistees – the smallest group of non-enrollees – evidence a few patterns of note. Among non-enrollees, these youth had the highest math test scores. With the ASVAB (the basic entrance examination used by the military) serving as a gateway to this specialized career, it is not too surprising to see higher test scores among these youth. Military enlistees came from the most affluent families in the non-enrolled sample, with 25.7% concentrated in the top two family income quartiles. Moreover, only 18.3% of military enlistees expressed uncertainty when asked about their occupational aspirations at age 30 – by far the lowest entry among non-enrollees and enrollees alike. Though comprising only a small proportion of non-enrollees, these findings highlight a distinct subset of youth who are not impeded by academic or economic barriers, but instead have very clear visions of postsecondary careers that do not necessarily require college, at least not immediately after high school.

Next, we focus in on the factors that distinguish work-driven non-enrollees and economically-constrained non-enrollees apart from one another, as well as their peers who enrolled in college. We focus on these two groups as they are the largest substantively identifiable groups of non-enrollees, and their motivations for non-enrollment accord with different perspectives on postsecondary decision-making reviewed earlier: work-driven youth as guided by their assessments of the opportunity structure and economically-constrained youth as thwarted by a dearth of resources. We pay special attention to comparisons with those who enrolled in 2-year colleges, as these institutions are the most likely postsecondary alternative for non-enrollees. We estimated multinomial logistic regression models predicting seven postsecondary destinations (two types of postsecondary institutions and five classes of non-enrollees) as a function of academic and economic barriers, family and neighborhood context, orientations toward school, orientations toward work, demographic control variables, and missing data indicators.¹⁵ We then converted the coefficients into relative odds ratios (e^{β}) for ease of interpretation. Due to the large number of parameter estimates (25 independent variable parameters * six contrasts with the base category = 150 parameter estimates), we show only the comparisons among work-driven youth, economically-constrained youth, 4-year enrollees, and 2-year enrollees. All other relative odds ratios for the contrasts not shown are available from the authors upon request.

First, in Table 4, we focus our attention on the factors that distinguish work-driven non-enrollees from their peers. Though traditional quantitative analyses of postsecondary enrollment emphasize academic preparation and financial resources as barriers to success, this is not entirely the case for the 18.3% of non-enrollees who we identify as work-driven. While these work-driven non-enrollees had significantly lower math achievement scores and lower family income than their peers who went onto 4-year colleges, they had math achievement scores and levels of family income comparable to their peers who enrolled in 2-year colleges. In other words, they had the economic and academic resources to pursue postsecondary schooling at the 2-year level if they decided to do so.

Instead, the decision to forgo college for work-related reasons appears partly attributable to the signals they receive in their homes and neighborhoods. Work-driven non-enrollees were less likely than their peers in 2- and 4-year schools to have parents who earned a bachelor's degree, suggesting they had little support for college in their immediate home environment. When compared with their peers who went onto 2- and 4-year colleges, these youth were more likely to live in neighborhoods where fewer of their older peers went onto college. Moreover, work-driven non-enrollees were less likely than both their economically-constrained peers and their college-going peers to live in areas where higher percentages of jobs required bachelor's degrees, suggesting that they did not necessarily need to continue onto college to obtain local employment.

As indicators of the larger opportunity structure, the families and neighborhoods of work-driven youth provide a weaker scaffolding for college-going support, and these indicators correspond to the work orientations they develop while in high

¹⁵ We conducted a series of Wald tests to assess whether the seven destination categories were distinguishable from one another based on the set of predictor variables. All of the contrasts yielded test statistics that exceeded the $p < .01$ threshold, indicating that the influences on the destination categories are not homogeneous and thus, corroborating the distinctiveness of the classes as identified in the latent class analysis. Additionally, we conducted a Hausman test to assess whether the model met the independence of irrelevant alternatives assumption (Hausman and McFadden, 1984) that including or removing categories does not affect the odds among the remaining categories. The test indicated the seven-category outcome used in the models presented here meet this assumption.

Table 4
Relative odds ratios from multinomial logistic regression models predicting work-driven class membership.

	Work-driven vs. economic constraint	Work-driven vs. 2-year college	Work-driven vs. 4-year college
<i>Academic and economic barriers</i>			
Math achievement scores	0.99	0.98	0.89**
<i>Family income quartiles</i>			
Q1 – low (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Q2	1.12	0.92	0.84**
Q3	1.66*	0.94	0.67
Q4 – high	2.08**	0.80	0.46**
<i>Family and neighborhood context</i>			
<i>Parental education</i>			
High school diploma or less (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Some college	1.13	0.86	0.77**
Bachelor's degree	1.28	0.60	0.36**
Graduate/professional degree	0.69	0.32**	0.15
Local college-going ratio	1.17	0.90*	0.90*
Local percentage of BA degree jobs	0.16*	0.01**	0.01
<i>Orientations toward school</i>			
<i>Educational expectations</i>			
High school or less (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Some college	0.98	0.50**	0.63**
Four-year degree	0.96	0.30**	0.15
Do not know	0.72	0.40**	0.34**
<i>Educational values</i>			
Education is very important	1.11	0.90	0.54**
Education is not very important (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
<i>Orientations toward work</i>			
Weekly hours worked in 10th grade	1.01*	1.02*	1.01*
<i>Occupational expectations at age 30</i>			
White-collar jobs (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Blue-collar jobs	2.11**	2.03**	3.14**
Other	2.01*	1.34	1.73
Do not know	1.52*	1.53**	1.81**
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
<i>Sex</i>			
Female (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	2.72**	2.46**	2.65**
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.57**	0.43*	0.30**
Black	0.56**	0.71	0.44**
Hispanic	0.36**	0.40	0.50**
White (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Other	0.63*	1.30	1.00
Log likelihood			–13,948.69
N = 13,060			

Note. The model includes controls for missing data.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

school. Work-driven non-enrollees are more than twice as likely as their peers who are economically-constrained or attending 2-year colleges to have held blue-collar job aspirations when in the 10th grade, and more than three times as likely as their peers attending 4-year colleges. Additionally, work-driven non-enrollees exhibit greater time investments in paid work in the 10th grade than their economically-constrained peers and their peers who went onto enroll in college.

Next, in Table 5, we focus our attention on the factors that set apart those constrained by economic reasons, the largest constituency of non-enrollees in our sample. The contrasts between work-driven non-enrollees and economically-constrained non-enrollees shown in column 1 are identical to those in Table 4, but with different base categories used.

In evaluating these comparisons, there are two findings of note. First, as in the bivariate comparisons shown in Table 3, we find that non-enrolled youth who attribute their decisions to economic motives do in fact evidence fewer financial resources when compared with those who enrolled in college. However, these youth also had lower math achievement scores, lower educational expectations, and a weaker belief that school attendance is important for getting a job. Therefore, while economic constraints are real, they are likely not the only impediments to college enrollment for this group. In addition to lacking the money to finance college, they lack the academic preparation to handle the rigor of college and therefore may have shifted their values regarding the importance of schooling accordingly. We speculate that similar to the responses

Table 5

Relative odds ratios from multinomial logistic regression models predicting economic constraint class membership.

	Economic constraint vs. work-driven	Economic constraint vs. 2-year college	Economic constraint vs. 4-year college
Math achievement scores	1.01	0.99**	0.90**
<i>Academic and economic barriers</i>			
Math achievement scores	1.01	0.99**	0.90**
<i>Family income quartiles</i>			
Q1 – low (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Q2	0.89	0.81**	0.75**
Q3	0.60*	0.56**	0.40**
Q4 – high	0.48**	0.38**	0.22**
<i>Family and neighborhood context</i>			
<i>Parental education</i>			
High school diploma or less (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Some college	0.88	0.76**	0.68**
Bachelor's degree	0.89**	0.53**	0.32**
Graduate/professional degree	1.45**	0.46*	0.21**
Local college-going ratio	0.86	0.77	0.77
Local percentage of BA degree jobs	6.01*	0.09	0.50
<i>Orientations toward school</i>			
<i>Educational expectations</i>			
High school or less (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Some college	1.02	0.51	0.64
Four-year degree	1.04	0.31	0.16
Do not know	1.38	0.55	0.47
<i>Educational values</i>			
Education is very important	0.90	0.80*	0.49**
Education is not very important (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Log Likelihood			–13,948.69
<i>Orientations toward work</i>			
Weekly hours worked in 10th grade	0.99*	1.00	1.01
<i>Occupational expectations at age 30</i>			
White-collar jobs (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Blue-collar jobs	0.47**	0.96	1.49
Other	0.50*	0.67	0.86
Do not know	0.66*	1.01	1.19
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
<i>Sex</i>			
Female (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	0.37**	0.91*	0.98
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.75**	0.75	0.54**
Black	1.79**	1.27	0.78**
Hispanic	2.77**	1.11*	1.39
White (reference)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Other	1.57*	2.05**	1.56**
Log likelihood			–13,948.69
N = 13,060			

Note. The model includes controls for missing data.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$

provided in Willis, MacLeod, and Lindholm's qualitative interviews, youth are hesitant to ascribe their decisions to personal attributes that reflect unfavorably on them, such as a lack of academic preparedness.

Second, we find that four key measures that differentiate work-driven youth from college enrollees – the local college-going ratio, the percentage of local jobs that require a bachelor's degree, weekly hours worked, and occupational expectations – do *not* differentiate economically-constrained youth from their college-going peers. Instead, it appears these youth fit an accounting of educational transitions that emphasizes resource constraints – they hold similar orientations toward work, and live in similar neighborhoods and labor markets as their college-enrolled peers, however they lack the academic and economic resources to successfully navigate the transition to college.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis of the decision to forgo college immediately after high school graduation yields new insights into our understanding of postsecondary decision-making in the United States. While it is still largely the case that youth facing academic and economic barriers are those least likely to make the transition to college, we also find divergent pathways linked with

emerging orientations toward school and toward work as early as the 10th grade. The most prevalent pathways involve forgoing college in favor of employment (work-driven non-enrollees) and forgoing college owing to financial limitations (economically-constrained non-enrollees). Work-driven non-enrollees evidenced a desire for blue-collar work and time investments in paid work while in high school. These youth lived in areas where fewer young adults were enrolled in school and where the demand for college-educated individuals was lower. Economically-constrained non-enrollees, on the other hand, expressed a desire for white-collar jobs, and grew up in neighborhoods where their older siblings and peers were enrolled in school and where there were, on average, ample jobs requiring a bachelor's degree. However they also had low test scores and came from families with limited income. The work-driven group appears to be carving out post high school pathways that align with their appraisal of the opportunity structure while the economically-constrained group appears to have been limited by resource deficits.

While we were able to identify these two distinctive groups of non-enrollees, one of the more notable findings in our analysis is the substantial degree of heterogeneity in youths' reasons for not attending college. When directly asked why they did not attend college, no single reason was given by more than half of the sample. Further, in our latent class analysis, we found that 7.1% of non-enrollees reported multiple reasons for not making the transition to college and 43.5% of non-enrollees were not classifiable into any one group or class. Though much regression-based research on educational attainment is reductionist in its emphasis on academic and economic factors, the constellations of reasons among these youth, who account for approximately half of the sample of non-enrollees, do not follow any particular pattern. This suggests that college-going decisions are more heterogeneous than is typically regarded in the existing literature, belying a simple accounting of postsecondary transitions.

While our analysis has probed more deeply at the individual orientations and contexts that shape educational decision-making than typical models of college enrollment, the relative importance of different factors are difficult to piece together using contemporary data sets and statistical methods. A key limitation to our analysis is that the reasons for not attending college were reported by the respondents nearly 2 years after they left high school. Non-enrollees could retrospectively alter their responses to appear more favorable given their current situation – i.e., they really did not have the grades or motivation to make it into college (intrinsic reasons), but instead reported that they did not have the money (an extrinsic reason). In some cases, they may not accurately recall their frame of mind at the end of high school. Further, we are only able to trace the experiences of non-enrollees back to the 10th grade. Given what we know about the accumulation of developmental experiences across different stages of schooling (Alexander et al., 2001), the orientations that we measure in the 10th grade are likely seeded even further back. Without data that chronicles the decision-making process as it unfolds across a long period of time, a very tall order for large-scale survey data collection endeavors, we are only able to make use of retrospective reasoning and a truncated time frame such as those available in ELS:2002. That said, we feel this exploratory overview provides a useful foundation for future work that aims to better understand the range of factors that shape postsecondary decision-making.

On a more practical note, our findings suggest that policies or practices supporting youth during the transition out of high school need to account for heterogeneity in their decision-making, rather than assuming that all youth want to attend college. While we find that in fact many youth forgo college precisely because they cannot afford it, many youth also choose to work or to join the military instead. However, our current system of secondary and postsecondary schooling is largely built on the assumption that all students can and should expect to attend a 4-year college (Rosenbaum, 2001). While well intentioned, this system may harm the career prospects of some students by denying them information and preparation needed to succeed outside of a baccalaureate pathway (Deil-Amen and DeLuca, 2010). We find that there are many young people who are engaged in their jobs but not interested in college, which suggests that we should prepare these youth – who will likely never enter a college classroom – for the unique challenges they will face when they enter the work force.

Mortimer (2003) encourages counselors, teachers, and parents to think about supporting high-quality employment for youth so that they can learn to be more strategic while in high school, and struggle less when they try to find jobs later on. Other research suggests that when students do find work through school contacts, they get better jobs (Rosenbaum et al., 1999), further signaling the potential importance of maintaining or developing job placement and career preparation programs. Overall, we suggest that high schools strengthen the supports available for work-bound students as well as those who plan to attend college so that all students see the future relevance of their high school experiences and have a chance to transition successfully to early adulthood.

In closing, we contend that the motives guiding transitions out of high school are shaped by a range of factors that extend beyond academic and economic resource constraints, and therefore deserve further scrutiny. Though a broad characterization of academic and economic barriers holds in most research on college enrollment in the United States, these patterns are the result of aggregated individual decisions about young adulthood – decisions that we find, are relatively *heterogeneous*. In line with ethnographic work done in the 1970s and 1980s, we find that among a nationally representative sample of non-enrollees, academic and economic constraints were less relevant for postsecondary decisions than were immediate employment prospects and opportunities to make money. Though only a step in unpacking the black box of educational decision-making, our analyses highlight the importance of considering that youth differ in their desires and plans at the transition to adulthood – consequently requiring a range of methodological approaches to understand how these decisions are made and under what circumstances.

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