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Student Transition: Common Challenges Facing Recent Graduates

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STUDENT TRANSITION: COMMON CHALLENGES FACING RECENT GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Jeffery Arnett (2000a) first used the phrase “emerging adult” to describe the unique transitional experiences of 18-27 year-old men and women. Since then, more research on emerging adults has indicated that the challenges and opportunities facing the young men and women of today are different from those experienced a single generation ago. This study was a qualitative inquiry directed at the experiences of emerging adults after they graduate from a private Christian liberal arts college. The goal of this study was to identify the challenges and experiences of emerging adults in this time of transition and to describe the essence of the transition from college to adulthood for graduates of a Christian liberal arts institution. In this study participants revealed that: (a) adulthood is a combination of responsibilities and personal characteristics, (b) the first few years after graduation usually entail a high level of uncertainty and job dissatisfaction, and (c) emerging adults from the studied university believed they were prepared to face the challenges of adulthood.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The period of life between adolescence and full adulthood is a difficult time for many (Arnett, 2000a). Some students might see graduation from college as an entry into full-fledged adulthood, but others may not believe they are ready to make that transition (Molgat, 2007). Obtaining a degree may represent a milestone in one's life, but for many it marks the threshold between familiarity and uncertainty. In an increasingly competitive job market, the college degree has gone from distinguished to common place and many students graduate unsure of how to apply their skills (Lunney, Gardner, & Williams, 1996). Also, graduation itself provides a transition that some find stressful (Dreilinger & Kurtz, 1976).

In addition to transitioning from school and searching for a job, young adults also have to deal with unprecedented levels of depression and anxiety. Twenge (2006) has done extensive research on the topic of mental health as it relates to the larger picture of generational trends in today's youth and young adults. She states that anxiety has increased to such an extent that in the 1990s, the average college student was more anxious than 85% of students in the 1950s and 71% of students in the 1970s. In 1995 the number of college freshmen who claimed to be "frequently overwhelmed" more than doubled, while the number of students who claimed that "life is a strain" quadrupled between 1950 and 1989 (p. 107).

The natural challenges of transitioning to a new life are compounded by challenges unique to emerging adults. This is a time in life in which identity exploration and development are at a high point, but economic and geographic stability and social support are at a low (Arnett, 2000a; Larson, 1990). As a result, young men and women are often without the social and economic resources they need at a time when they would be the most useful. An unclear self-perception is an additional difficulty in transitioning from college. The line between adolescence and adulthood is becoming increasingly blurred, which leaves many college students unsure of whether or not to define themselves as adults (Blinn-Pike, Lokken, Jonkman, & Smith, 2008).

It was Arnett (2000a) who first coined the term "emerging adult" to describe this stage consisting of young men and women within the 18-27 year-old age range. Since that initial introduction of the term, emerging adulthood has come to be viewed as a distinct age group with unique challenges and opportunities. Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) report the three challenges now facing students after graduation are making career connections, clarifying their new identity, and developing a lifespan perspective. Essentially, this means that students who have learned who they are and how to succeed in school must now learn who they are and how to succeed in a world with far less linearity and fewer clear, short-term goals.

To prepare students to successfully navigate the transition to life after college, it is first necessary to understand the challenges they will face. Guided by phenomenological theory, the researcher in this study utilized in-depth, qualitative interviews to gain a rich, thick description of the essence of this student transition, as well as how graduates from a specific institution are experiencing it. The research questions are based on factors that have emerged in the current research literature as being of primary importance during the phase known as emerging adulthood.

Though much research has been done on emerging adults in general, currently there is no research specifically regarding Christian students and how they experience the transition from graduation to life after college. The current study thus focuses on recent graduates from a private, Christian liberal arts institution located in the Midwest and will seek to answer the following questions.

Research Questions

1. What were the greatest challenges to graduates emotionally, spiritually, and relationally?
2. What are common feelings experienced by recent Christian liberal arts graduates?
3. What are ways in which recent Christian liberal arts graduates wish they had been better prepared for the challenges of adulthood, and could their college have helped with that preparation?

An understanding of students' experiences after graduation will undoubtedly support the importance and relevance of this study, and underscores the necessity of learning more about student transition. The following research will describe in greater detail the groundwork of transition theory, the issue of emerging adulthood as a stage, the feelings and effects of depression and anxiety among emerging adults, and difficulties and disappointments in transitioning to work.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition Theory

The basics of modern transition theory were first defined by Nancy K. Schlossberg in 1981. The present study utilizes Schlossberg's model to provide a framework for understanding college seniors and recent graduates as people in transition, and the psychological challenges those transitions entail.

In her seminal work, Schlossberg (1981) defined transition as "any event or non-event [which] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and that requires a corresponding change in one's behaviors and relationships" (p. 6). The goal of a person undergoing transition is to successfully integrate the transition into daily life to the point that one is no longer concerned with the transition itself. Schlossberg goes on to state that there are three major factors that determine one's ability to respond positively to a life transition: the characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of the individual, and the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments.

Characteristics about the nature of the transition are described in dichotomous pairs. Changes can be a gain or a loss, positive or negative, caused by internal or external forces, on-schedule or off-schedule, gradual or sudden, and permanent or temporary (or uncertain). Transitions that lead to an easier adaptation and less stress include ones characterized by gain,

positive results, internal control, being on-schedule, and gradual changes. The advantage of the permanent or temporary transition depends on whether the transition is regarded as positive or negative. In contrast to the characteristics of less stressful transitions, graduation from college is largely dictated by external factors, occurs suddenly, and can be considered by some as a loss. Graduating from college can thus be a difficult transition for which adjustment may not come easily.

Personal characteristics that affect one's ability to successfully navigate transition include psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race, values and beliefs, and previous experiences with similar transitions. Schlossberg, Goodman, and Waters (1995) summarized these findings as the 4 S's of transition: situation, self, strategies, and stock. Of particular importance, the final "S" in this description refers to taking stock of the situation and using a variety of methods to adapt to the transition.

While graduating students are not necessarily at a disadvantage in regards to personal characteristics, environmental characteristics are more likely to pose a challenge. Significant characteristics Schlossberg described concerning the pre- and post-transition environments were social support, institutional support, and physical environment. The changes in physical environment after graduation are not discussed in detail in the present study, but research shows a dramatic drop in social and institutional support for emerging adults upon graduation (Arentt, 2000a; Larson, 1990). This lack of support serves to even further undermine a graduate's ability to move peacefully through a time of transition.

Emerging Adulthood

The transition to adulthood once seemed straightforward and irrevocable. Moving away from one's parents, getting a job, getting married, and having children used to be viewed as

thresholds, or rites of passage, that signified one's arrival at adulthood. Now the line is not so distinct, as young adults are increasingly likely to delay or reverse these rites of passage by returning to a lifestyle more closely aligned with adolescence (Molgat, 2007).

Many emerging adults seem to have difficulty deciding whether to define themselves as adolescents or adults. In one study involving both college students and their parents, only 16% of students (ages 18-25) considered themselves adults. Parents were slightly more likely to view their students as having achieved adulthood, but they arrived at this decision based on largely different criteria (Nelson, Carol, Walker, Madsen, & Carolyn, 2007). This confusion may stem from the fact that it is becoming increasingly unclear as to what exactly marks the transition to adulthood as officially complete.

Arnett (1998) believes that emerging adults no longer consider themselves to have arrived at adulthood based on milestones or life events, but rather as a function of self-perceived qualities such as level of financial independence or a general sense of responsibility and independence. Although participants in Arnett's study did not define any particular events as marking an entrance into adulthood, certain events such as marriage or the birth of a child were regularly mentioned in conjunction with the growth of "adult-making" personal qualities such as independence and responsibility. More recent research has taken this to mean that both life events and internal qualities are important factors in the transition to adulthood (Molgat, 2007).

Some young adults view the transition to adulthood as a choice that can be put off or taken up when it is convenient for them and others to accept it (Molgat, 2007). Such a mentality underscores the difference between a "developmental individuation" and a "default individuation" style of identity achievement (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005). Young adults with an agentic personality are more likely to create and capitalize on opportunities for

development, whereas those with non-agentic personalities take a passive role in forging their identities and default to an identity shaped by convenience, circumstance, and impulse. Non-minority students from affluent and well-educated families are likely to take longer to reach adulthood than minorities and those from economically challenged families (Blinn-Pike et al., 2008). Along similar lines, students who do not pay for their own college education are more likely than their peers to fall into the pattern of default individualization (Schwartz et al., 2005). Schwartz et al. demonstrated that young adults who are committed to a set of goals, values, or beliefs are more likely to follow the path of developmental individualization, which is highly preferable. It is perhaps by helping to promote these vital components in young adults that something can thus be done to aid individuals during this difficult developmental period.

There are significant benefits to crossing the threshold of adulthood. Among students still in college, those who consider themselves to have arrived at adulthood have a better sense of their overall identity, have a better idea of what they are looking for in a romantic partner, and have lower levels of depression (Nelson & Barry, 2005). Prolonging the transitional period of emerging adulthood can itself be hazardous, given that it is a developmental stage particularly associated with risk-taking behaviors. Men and women who do not yet consider themselves adults are more likely than those who do to engage in gambling, problem drinking, smoking, sensation-seeking and other risk-taking behaviors (Blinn-Pike et al., 2008).

Emerging adulthood is categorized by change and uncertainty. Men and women in this age group have the highest rate of residential changes of any age bracket (Arnett, 2000a). While many emerging adults place a high importance on exploration and change, these frequent transitions can be negative if they are not voluntary. A number of graduates strike out on their own, only to be forced to move back into a parent's home for financial reasons. This type of

move back into "semi-autonomy" has become increasingly common and can be very difficult for an emerging adult who is trying to establish independence (Goldschieder & Davenzo, 1999).

Uncertainty is also a concern for the growing number of students who graduate unsure of what to do next. The optimism of childhood can quickly evaporate upon the realization that options are more limited than expected and that available opportunities are less than perfect. Graduating students might also be discouraged by the seemingly random and chaotic nature of events that greet them in the adult world. Today's young adults enjoy an unprecedented amount of control over all the small options that make up daily life and the structured environment of school. Unfortunately, in the long run this simply creates an expectation of increased control over major life events. When circumstances do prove beyond their control, young adults may become stressed by their apparent failure to create desired outcomes (Schwartz, 2000).

At first glance, it appears that the growing number of opportunities available to young people has the potential to make them optimistic, but the opposite is actually true. Young adults grow up being told that they can be anything they want to be, but this learned feeling of freedom and entitlement may actually end up paralyzing them once they finally reach the moment of independence. Research has shown that upon being presented with a large number of choices, a participant will experience a decrease in motivation to choose and a decrease in satisfaction with the choice (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). The idea that the "perfect job" should be available serves to discourage young graduates who despair of ever finding it.

This is especially difficult because emerging adults are often no longer satisfied with simply obtaining a job. It is now considered necessary to find the dream job that is fulfilling, lucrative, and flexible. The growing desire to take control of one's future and guide it towards one of the allegedly innumerable opportunities available results in disillusioned young people

filled with anxiety, guilt, and the feeling of being entirely out of control (Schwartz, 2000). Indeed, many young adults view significant life events as out of their control, yet blame themselves for their circumstances (Abramson & Sackhiem, 1977). Psychologists define this phenomenon as "learned helplessness," which is linked with a number of mental complications including anxiety and clinical depression (Alloy & Abramson, 1982).

Mental Health

Graduating college and beginning the job search is inherently stressful. The average college senior is likely to encounter enough life stressors to put them at medium to high risk of developing a stress-related illness (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In 2007, Arnett showed that emerging adults are more anxious than persons from the same age range in years past. Twenge's (2000) research with birth cohorts indicates that anxiety levels have risen by an entire standard deviation over the past fifty years. Multiple variables have likely contributed to this increased level of anxiety, but the two most strongly identified in Twenge's research are a feeling of environmental threat and a lack of social connectedness.

Though emerging adults tend to see themselves as individually removed from negative trends, they do believe that the world is not a friendly place for young adults in general. This feeling of "environmental threat" is on the rise and shows no signs of tapering. Research suggests that today's emerging adults believe that their generation is cynical and pessimistic, that it will be increasingly difficult to find jobs, and that crime and other societal problems are only likely to increase (Arnett, 2000b).

While young adults' sense of environmental threat continues to climb, perceived social support is on the decline (Arnett, 2000a; Larson, 1990). Perceived social support is the hypothetical network or resources that one can fall back on if necessary (Calsyn, Winter, &

Burger, 2005), and it has been identified as a critical component for adjustment and psychological well-being. Stress or anxiety often triggers the response of seeking out additional social support, which helps with the process of overcoming difficulties or reaching healthy psychological adjustment. In fact, researchers discovered that social support is the number one protective variable against negative psychological adjustment, particularly among females (Asberg, Bowers, Renk, & McKiney, 2008). Studies also suggest that young adults are not getting enough of the social support they need. Specifically, Larson (1990) found that individuals within the age range of 21-29 years spend more time alone than any other age group except for the elderly.

Anxiety is on the rise to such an extent that it is now being diagnosed among college students in several new forms. Recent research suggests that college freshmen with previously unexplained symptoms might be suffering from Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder, quite similar to the separation anxiety most commonly associated with infants and young children (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007). Current studies are also beginning to support the idea that perceived parental attachment directly contributes to emerging adults' feelings of self-worth. Poor connection with parents often times leads to low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Kenny & Sirin, 2006). In a world of instant communication, it is a common misconception that today's emerging adults have a higher rate of secure attachment than in past generations. As Kenny and Sirin have demonstrated, however, attachment is not related to frequency of communication or financial support.

The rising anxiety suffered by many students is a problem in and of itself, but it is also significantly related to other dangerous issues. Studies have shown that feelings of social anxiety are often linked to negative body image, fear of intimacy, and eating disorders in females (Cash,

Theriault, & Annis, 2004). Among college samples, anxiety was also demonstrated to be positively correlated with depression (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein & Hefner, 2007) and alcohol use disorders (Lewis et al., 2008), and is a motivating factor for drinking behaviors in general (Stewart, Morris, Mellings, & Komar, 2006).

These problems do not disappear at the end of the college years; they graduate with students and follow them into adulthood. Mental health in early adulthood holds implications for future alcohol and substance abuse, academic success, employment, and relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Furthermore, depression in emerging adulthood has been demonstrated to correlate with future episodes of depression in later years (Hart, Craighead, & Craighead, 2001). In sum, emerging adults are facing unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety which may increase the difficulty of making a healthy transition to adult life.

Transitioning to Work

College students spend several years and tens of thousands of dollars on their education in hopes of creating a successful life for themselves. Although there are many benefits associated with a college education, the most obvious goal of attending college is ultimately the attainment of a job. Unfortunately, obtaining a college degree is not a guaranteed fast track to one's dream career. For many college graduates, finding a job is seldom quick or easy. The transition from traditional undergraduate studies to the workforce creates a variety of difficulties that can cause distress among emerging adults. Overall, it appears that colleges are doing a good job of educating students but are not fully preparing them for the demands of work (Graham & McKenzie, 1995).

The sheer number of students with bachelor's degrees makes earning such degrees a more commonplace achievement and the actual degrees themselves less valuable. In addition,

finding a job directly related to one's field of study is becoming increasingly difficult (Montgomery & Cote, 2003). It is thus not surprising that graduates can become easily distressed when they are not able to find work. While attending college helps protect young adults from psychological problems associated with underemployment and labor market problems, it is not enough to protect against the negative psychological effects of complete unemployment (Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995).

Despite the fact that young men and women demonstrate a growing desire to find the "right" job that will satisfy them personally (Wood, 2004), it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a job that fits that criterion. Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz (2006) learned that students who looked harder for jobs and filled out more job applications generally obtained jobs that paid higher salaries than those of their peers, but that these same students still reported lower job satisfaction and were more likely to report that they wished they had looked harder before accepting an offer. Iyengar et al. called these students "maximizer personalities." In Iyengar et al.'s study, the likelihood of having a maximizer personality was negatively related to age and positively related to the prestigious quality of the school from which participants were recruited. In other words, top-tier schools producing intelligent and competitive graduates are more likely to also produce graduates who will be dissatisfied with their job placement.

Other research on the school-to-work transition reveals that there is an inherent challenge associated with leaving higher education and accepting a working role. Students leave a culture filled with same-aged peers for a new environment often populated by co-workers of a variety of different ages and responsibilities. Emerging adults might find it difficult to work in isolated spaces on individualized tasks with little or no feedback, and will often times be discouraged by their apparent lack of work-specific skills (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). The workplace is also

difficult because it supports styles of learning that may be drastically different from undergraduate experiences. Students who excelled at formal, directive learning might not do as well with the informal, sporadic learning that frequently characterizes a job site (Candy & Crebert, 1991). Liberal arts graduates in particular tend to struggle with the subtleties of the working environment, including office politics and ethics (Gardner, 1998). In general, many graduates thus experience an intense period of disappointment as they realize that the working world does not live up to their expectations (Graham & McKenzie, 1995).

This discussion of college graduates' initial disillusionment takes for granted that these students have gained the jobs they had long been envisioning. In reality, many emerging adults entering the workforce have to accept a job that falls short of their high expectations. Flexible jobs (e.g. part-time or temporary jobs) are often a gateway for young adults trying to make the transition from school to work. Such jobs are traditionally associated with poor working conditions, lower levels of pay, and no opportunity for advancement (Try, 2004).

When students graduate from college, they leave with a degree, a number of intellectual accomplishments, and evidence of significant personal growth in nearly every facet of life. No matter how much students may have matured, however, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that they may not be ready for the demands that lie ahead. Difficult transitions, unexpected challenges at work, an impersonal and anxious culture, and a quest for identity are all simultaneous obstacles that emerging adults may have to face completely on their own.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Research Design

The researcher employed qualitative research methods to investigate the experiences of emerging adults and their transition from a private Christian liberal arts college. The data collection methods and validity measures employed in this study have been informed and shaped by Creswell (2009). According to Creswell, the researcher is the key data-collecting instrument in qualitative research and must use inductive data analysis to create a holistic sense of the meaning of collected data.

A phenomenological approach guided the researcher in data collection and interpretation. Phenomenology is an attempt to take aspects of the human experience that are normally understood only implicitly and make them explicit (Atkinson, 1972). Essentially, it is an attempt to forgo existing biases and beliefs in order to explore the pure essence of a phenomenon or experience for what it truly "is" (Sanders, 1982). This particular approach was selected because the researcher wished to explore and describe that which had not been explicitly described previously. Moustakas (1994) explains that phenomenological research requires one to search for meanings and essences versus measurements and explanations. He also recommends the procedures outlined by Von eckartsberg's *Life World Experience: Existential-Phenomenological Research Approaches in Psychology* (as cited in Moustakas, 1994) as a guide for

phenomenological research. The procedures listed by Von eckartsberg include forming and stating the problem, identifying the phenomenon, creating a data-generating situation, forming and implementing the protocol, and analyzing the data. Utilizing this framework, the researcher in the present study defined the problems facing emerging adults, identified the phenomenon of emerging adults in transition, created a data-generating situation through interviews, implemented a research protocol, and analyzed the transcripts.

The research questions and protocol in this study are geared towards generating a rich description of the common feelings and experiences of recent college graduates while simultaneously attempting to grasp the core essence of these transitions. The broad, open questions utilized in the interviews were thus purposefully designed to allow participants to tell their stories in a largely unguided manner.

Participants

The university chosen for this study is a small, non-denominational Christian liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The student population of nearly 2,000 is comprised mostly of traditionally-aged residential students. The university is known for its strong community and residential life.

Using a random number generator, the researcher selected names from the university's alumni directory. Ideally, the researcher intended to recruit a male and female graduate from each class between the years 2004-2007 in order to collect responses from both genders and different age groups. When the generator selected an alumnus without a current e-mail address registered with the university, the researcher used the generator to pick another name. The selected sixteen participants (eight male, eight female) were then sent an e-mail soliciting their participation (see Appendix A).

The e-mail to the participants indicated that the researcher would like a response within five days of the e-mail being sent. This initial e-mail gained one response within the allotted time period. The researcher then sent out a follow-up e-mail to everyone who had received the first e-mail (see Appendix B). Three additional participants responded to the follow-up e-mail.

Eight new names were then randomly selected from the alumni directory and these individuals were sent an email requesting their participation. No one responded to this initial mailing. A follow-up e-mail was sent five days later. Two more alumni responded.

A final round of six e-mails was sent out to recruit the last two participants. No alumni responded to the initial e-mail. A follow-up e-mail sent five days later received two additional responses, completing the sample.

After agreeing to be a part of the current study, participants received another e-mail containing the protocol, informed consent, and list of potential aliases (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to sign and return the informed consent sheet, schedule a time for a phone interview with the researcher, and provide their telephone numbers. One male participant left the study after initially agreeing to participate. The participant was not available during the agreed-upon interview time and ceased communication with the researcher.

Procedure

The researcher called participants from a private office using a speaker phone. A microphone was placed next to the speaker and recorded the interviews onto the researcher's computer. At the start of each interview, the researcher greeted the participant and explained how the interview was to proceed. After explaining the interview process, the researcher began asking demographic questions (see Appendix D) followed by the interview protocol (see Appendix E). The researcher clarified the questions for participants and asked follow-up questions when

necessary. Only married participants were asked to answer question nine, which dealt with topics related to marriage. Two participants with children were asked to discuss if and how parenthood affected their views of adulthood.

Data Analysis

Using a coding method outlined by Creswell (2009), the initial round of coding consisted of reading through all of the responses, writing detailed notes in the margins, underlining or circling key words, and writing down questions or themes. After initially coding all seven interviews, the researcher prepared a list of major categories and subcategories that he believed best summarized the data as it related to the research questions.

Major categories were developed by organizing initial codes in a way that best pointed back to the research questions. Subcategories were specific examples of larger themes that appeared repeatedly throughout the interview process. During the second round of coding, each theme was assigned a two- or three-letter code. The researcher then reviewed each transcript, placed the initial codes into major and minor categories, and made additional notes.

After the second round of coding, the researcher went through all seven interviews question-by-question to condense the answers into a few main points. These key concepts were then typed into a separate document. The goal of the summaries was to distill the essence of each response into an abbreviated form that could best be interpreted by the researcher.

Validity

Before beginning the data collection, the researcher tested the interview protocol by conducting a pilot study with a peer reviewer. In the pilot study, the researcher called the participant via telephone at an appointed time to conduct the interview. The researcher explained the nature of the research and the interview process, and then began the interview using the

protocol. The participant did not have prior knowledge of the questions being asked, but did have prior knowledge of the research topic and nature of the study. The interview was recorded and lasted approximately 35 minutes.

The participant in the pilot interview experienced some difficulty with the protocol and recommended that future participants be provided with a copy of the protocol in advance to better prepare them for the interview. Participants in subsequent interviews were thus provided with a copy of the protocol per the pilot participant's recommendations.

A second peer researcher reviewed un-coded copies of the transcripts and made notes in the margins concerning possible themes and main ideas. This individual concluded that the researcher had successfully identified major themes in the data and had accurately represented the interviews as a whole. The researcher also sent a copy of the findings and conclusions to the participants for member checking. All participants indicated that they had no disagreements with the presentation of the data.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The data analysis generated four major themes: adulthood defined, feelings and challenges facing emerging adults, level of preparation to face the challenges of adulthood, and the role of marriage in becoming an adult. The results associated with these themes are presented below, and a careful exploration of the themes and their role in addressing this study's research questions is found in the discussion section that follows. In addition, the full essence of emerging adulthood is further discussed.

Adulthood Defined

Similar to Arnett's 1998 study, age was rarely mentioned by participants as a criterion for adulthood. Most individuals in this study did not give an exact answer for what they believed defined adulthood, but they were fairly consistent in listing traits and characteristics that they felt described adulthood. Participants predominantly believed that adulthood is about responsibility and independence from parents. Six out of seven participants mentioned responsibility (or accountability) in their description of adulthood. Personal characteristics were also sometimes described as playing a role in the transition to adulthood. Maturity was most commonly cited as a marker of adulthood, and humility was mentioned once. Five out of the seven participants were married, and all married participants agreed that marriage "forces" one into adulthood.

Feelings and Challenges Facing Emerging Adults

Nearly all participants responded that some level of uncertainty accompanied the transition following graduation. Five out of seven participants described fear and uncertainty as major aspects of their transition, and claimed that their feelings were likely to be common among their peers. Participants reported feelings of anxiety and stress when encountering situations that lacked structure, and many participants found the transition to work to be especially difficult. Female participants in particular struggled with relational challenges such as finding new peer groups, and men spoke about financial challenges. All participants either directly stated or strongly implied that balance is a key component of a healthy adult lifestyle. Spiritual challenges and loneliness were not significant sub-themes.

Level of Preparedness to Face the Challenges of Emerging Adulthood

In general, participants felt they were prepared for the challenges of adulthood. A small number of participants reported having some difficulties, but all expressed an overall confidence in their abilities to face the challenges of post-college life. Some participants mentioned that a lack of diversity in their undergraduate experience did not prepare them for diverse cultural encounters after graduation, and several individuals described their disappointment with their general experience in the working world.

The Role of Marriage

While not all participants agreed that marriage changed the way they *view* adulthood, they did all agree that getting married has significantly changed them as individuals. Specifically, some participants said that they have always viewed marriage as a part of adulthood, and thus getting married did not change their perceptions of what being an adult truly means.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Adulthood Defined

"Boston," a twenty-seven year-old male, said that adulthood was a "combination of factors." This fits with what Arnett (1998) and Molgat (2007) have found about the blurring distinction between adolescence and adulthood and summarizes the majority of participant responses. Molgat said that age and threshold experiences are becoming less of a factor in becoming an adult, and that the process is now a complex combination of factors including life circumstances and personal characteristics.

Responsibility and independence.

Some participants defined responsibility as being accountable to society or as having to face the consequences of their decisions. Most spoke of responsibility as related to being financially secure or being able to pay for one's bills or taxes. Responsibility is also linked to having a job. Engaging in full time employment is something described by most participants as being a part of adulthood, though only two listed it explicitly in their definition. Most often, going to one's job, paying bills, and being accountable to one's community are mentioned as aspects of being responsible and independent.

Participants usually define independence as living in an apartment or house separate from their parents and being able to pay their own bills without financial assistance, which are also the

markers Arnett (1998) described as being critical components of adulthood. By this definition, college may not be considered independent because parents often pay for college and students are not financially "on their own." Participants were generally excited and also intimidated by the new levels of independence they experienced after college.

Personal characteristics.

Most participants believed that personality also has a role to play in the transition to adulthood. Having maturity and wisdom are factors, and so is having a personal sense of responsibility. Two participants noted that responsibility comes to everyone. The willingness to accept that responsibility is a personality trait that is necessary in adults. A sense of responsibility as a personality trait is as important as actually having a number of things for which one is responsible. Life circumstances are an important part of becoming an adult, but participants also believe that character qualities are also important variables.

When you become an adult.

Only "Kirk," a single, twenty five year old male cited age as a factor, and even he was unable to identify a specific age. "I guess there's an age involved…I guess 18 or 21 is hitting the age of adulthood." "Kirk" was the closest to identifying a specific point or threshold that could classify all persons as either adults or non adults, but even his categorization allowed a three year window.

Adulthood was never described as an all-or-nothing stage transition, but was often described with words such as "continuum," or "process." To the participants, adulthood seems to be something that comes gradually with the accumulation of responsibilities and characteristics. Like in Molgat's studies (2007), some participants viewed adulthood as a choice, and others described it as a set of circumstances and attributes.

Similar to what Nelson et al. (2007) found in their research, participants in this study did not think of themselves as adults while they were in college. Though it was only explicitly stated a few times, all participants suggested that college students are not adults. It is clear from their descriptions of adulthood that participants did not meet the criteria of adulthood until after graduation. Now, after graduating from college, every participant in this study did identify him or herself as an adult when asked. The participants from this research were more ready to identify themselves as adults than is typically expected in this age range (Blinn-Pike et al., 2008).

The researcher believes this is because most of the participants in this study are married, and because the community from which these participants graduated encourages accountability and interpersonal responsibility as well as stewardship of resources. These are examples of social and financial responsibility, which the participants believe are significant parts of becoming an adult. The faith element of this institution may also equip graduates with a set of values and beliefs that make students more likely to follow the path of developmental individualization (Schwartz et al., 2005). Collectively, adulthood was defined by participants as having the personality characteristics to accept responsibility for one's self financially, professionally, and relationally.

Feelings and Challenges Facing Emerging Adults

Uncertainty.

Most graduates had neither a job, nor a spouse, and felt very unsure of what to do next or for how long. Uncertainty, however, was not always strongly negative. Most participants expressed an equal mixture of excitement and fear as a part of their uncertainty. Excitement usually came in conjunction with opportunity or the ability to do whatever one wanted. However, having such a wide array of opportunities can also intimidate and demotivate (Iyengar & Lepper,

2000; Schwartz, 2000). Fear of the unknown or anxiety also accompanied uncertainty because participants were not used to being directionless.

Participants believed these feelings were common because they either said that they had spoken to others and confirmed this, or assumed that feelings of uncertainty or anxiety were universal facets of life after graduation. Two participants stated that they believed their transition was not very common, and they reported low levels of anxiety or uncertainty. On some occasions anxiety or fear were less generalized and were, instead, related to specific challenges. One participant became anxious about needing to provide for his family, and another participant claimed she had "tons of anxiety about finding a job and financial stuff." However, there is no indication that any one particular factor, besides general uncertainty, was able to create anxiety or fear in all participants.

As stated above, uncertainty is not always negative but can act as an intensifier of either positive or negative feelings (Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009). Graduates who have much to look forward to and are excited about the future will find uncertainty thrilling. Graduates who are experiencing negative feelings regarding the transition will only feel worse in the presence of uncertainty. To put this in terms of Schlossberg's work (1981), graduates experiencing a positive gain of their own choosing may enjoy feelings of uncertainty. But students suffering a negative loss on a time table not their own are likely to feel threatened by uncertainty.

The benefits of structure.

"Joie" started a job immediately after graduation. It was a position she secured earlier in the academic year because she had previously worked for the company as a part of an internship for school. She said "I was blessed to know what I was doing." Likewise, "Boston" claimed that he had a "hybrid transition" because he married soon after graduation and enrolled in graduate

school. He felt that the transition was not difficult because all the responsibilities of adulthood did not come at him at once. This sounds similar to Goldschieder, and Davanzo's idea of semi-autonomy (1999). However, instead of living with his parents and seeking full time employment, this participant lived independently of his parents but enrolled full time in graduate school. These types of gradual transitions provide some stability and structure and may provide emerging adults with an in-between state that eases that transition to full independence.

Relative to life after graduation, between the times that students enter kindergarten until the time they graduate from college, students are in a highly structured environment with clear goals and a linear progression. Adulthood is much less linear and does not have clear goals and objectives. Transitioning to adulthood is difficult because it requires one to have a life-span perspective that reaches beyond short term goals (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1998). In general, participants in this study navigated this transition much better when they were married, in graduate school, or employed. Each of these institutions provides a sense of stability, which is generally lacking in the life of the emerging adult (Arnett, 2000a). They answer the questions "where will I go, what will I do, who will I be with?" The answers to these questions reduce the uncertainty that can be stressful to emerging adults, and having a long term commitment after college can help graduates develop the life-span view of adulthood.

Job search and job satisfaction.

Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) identified making career connections as one of the major challenges facing seniors in college, and Arnett (1998) said that financial responsibility was one of the markers of adulthood. The most common challenges facing the adults in this study were finding a job and becoming financially responsible. Three separate participants identified finding a job as the single biggest challenge following college graduation. This does

not necessarily mean that participants did not feel equipped or able to engage in the job search process, but only that finding a job is a major challenge that adults must face.

Some were surprised at how difficult the job search was, and others found a lack of job satisfaction once they had found jobs. Wood, (2004) says that finding the "right" job is increasingly important among emerging adults. It is also common for emerging adults to struggle with dissatisfaction and disappointment towards the beginning of their career (Graham & McKenzie, 1995). Maria described her disappointment with her job as a receptionist:

> …I mean when you're at [X University] everyone tells you you're smart and that you're gonna do great things, which is true, but I just kind of didn't understand that that wasn't going to happen right away…all I had to do was answer the phone and sort the mail, which seems really really meaningless.

This is in keeping with the frustrations Lunney et al. (1996) described. It is not uncommon for new graduates to find it difficult to acquire jobs that make use of the skills they learned in college. "Maria's" statements about being special and doing great things stem from attending an academically prestigious institution. Iyenger et al. (2006) have shown that more elite schools produce graduates who are more disappointed with jobs acquired directly after graduation.

Finding a good job appeared to be a watershed issue for the participants. "Kirk" referred to people who graduated with a specific job in mind as people who "had it figured out." In this study the participants who either had a job or who immediately entered graduate school did not have as difficult of a transition and did not struggle with fear and uncertainty as much as those who were not employed or were not enrolled in graduate school.

Financial stability.

Besides making money, another big challenge is learning how to responsibly budget that money. Most participants believed that they were prepared to pay bills and set a budget for themselves but still thought that learning to do so was a major challenge for recent graduates. Two male participants claimed that financial competency was the most important challenge related to adulthood and one participant, "Moses," went so far as to say "I think money is kinda the big thing that complicated growing up…so if you can get a handle on that I think that you're doing ok."

Relational challenges: Searching for peers.

"Alyce" and "Joie" found it difficult to make friends or find a community that could offer what they enjoyed in college and "Layla," who went for her M.A. at a large public school, thought it was difficult to fit in and make friends in a setting that included so much diversity, especially diversity of age.

Diversity of age is a significant factor because it is entirely new for those recently graduating from college. Emerging adults often spend much of their time at work, and unlike "summer jobs" they are used to experiencing, their work may now be in a location where they do not benefit from the close company of the peers from high school or college. At work, most recent graduates are surrounded by older people in different stages of life, which can create social difficulties (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Work is already very different from college (Candy & Crebert, 1991; Gardner, 1998), but new employees may struggle in a working environment with older peers because they will have different learning styles (Wircenski, Walker, Allen, & West, 1999).

Social difficulties may also arise. It is difficult for emerging adults to establish connections or find peers with common interests because for the first time since entering grade school, activities and social interactions are no longer systematically controlled by age group. It is difficult for emerging adults to strike out on their own in search of peer relationships. "Alyce" said:

> How do you find common interests with people? I think that the stereotypical idea is that twenty-somethings go out to bars and that's kinda the social scene. If that's not something you want to participate in or if that's not something you enjoy, it's hard to find people to connect with. Do you do it through common interests, clubs, and stuff like that? But it's still risky to go out on your own and try to do that.

"Alyce's" comments reveal the added social difficulty caused by her faith and upbringing. She is predisposed to exclude herself from certain social activities because they are not a part of the culture she experienced growing up or at X University. In other instances, faith has helped participants make social connections. Participants speak positively about church involvement and the community that can be found in a fellowship of believers.

Balance and time management.

Participants defined balance as needing to meet the demands of multiple priorities such as family, employment, church, and self-health. In light of that, it is surprising that only one participant mentioned lack of time, or the need to be disciplined with time, as a challenge of adulthood. This participant was 27, married, and had a child. He also repeatedly emphasized the importance of being involved in local community and church. It is unclear why more participants

did not mention time management as a challenge because it can be inferred from their other responses that they consider it important.

Spiritual challenges.

Spiritual challenges were not a significant factor in this research. Participants either did not mention their spiritual lives or mentioned them positively. Most participants said that being involved in a church or faith community was an important part of a healthy adult lifestyle and several mentioned that X University prepared them with a good "foundation" for their faith. Whether this means that participants did not encounter challenges of spirituality or that they were able to overcome these challenges without undue stress is unclear. What is certain is that spiritual challenges did not stand out to these participants as an extremely significant part of their transition experience.

Loneliness.

The researcher expected to find more reports of loneliness, as social and institutional supports are often left behind as students graduate from college (Arentt, 2000a; Larson, 1990). The changing nature of relationships and the difficulty in making friends did emerge as challenges, but few participants talked at any length about experiencing feelings of loneliness. One participant identified it as a major aspect of her time following graduation, and another mentioned it in passing. Overall, it is not a major theme. This difference is likely due to the confidence participants had in their relational skills. Several participants mentioned their experiences at X University prepared them with strong relational skills and the ability to make friends.

Differences between genders.

Male participants and female participants focused on different issues. Participants were likely to *mention* similar challenges and surprises regardless of gender but the *focus* of the conversation was different between males and females. Male participants tended to talk longer about finding a job and about the importance of budgeting and finance. Female participants spoke more about the difficulties of replacing college friends or forming new relationships. It is possible that men and women do not experience the transition from graduation to life after college in the same way, possibly because social support is such an important factor in females' psychological health (Asberg et al., 2008).

Level of Preparedness to Face Challenges of Adulthood

Challenges for which participants were prepared.

Overall, most participants felt generally prepared for the challenges of adulthood. Most said that they were prepared to pay their own bills and to search for a job. Two participants said that they were very prepared to handle their own money, so the transition was very easy for them. One participant said she easily found a job. They were prepared to engage in the job search process, but did not take this to mean that it was easy to do. Four participants also said that they were prepared to take on the social challenges of adulthood. "Boston," "Joie," and "Maria" all said they were ready to defend their faith or become involved in a church. "Layla" said she was ready to make friends and meet people.

These individuals believed that their college had a part to play in their level of preparedness. Three individuals stated that they believed college developed them spiritually to be able to stand on their own once they left the university. Two more said that X University encouraged the type of lifestyle they wanted to live and it helped them to carry on that lifestyle

after graduation. The other two participants said that it helped them develop relational skills and that their experience in a strong community helped them to create relationships in the outside world. All participants spoke positively about their experience at X University and felt that it did a good job of preparing them for the future.

Challenges for which participants were not prepared.

Participants acknowledged several challenges following graduation, but they believed that they were able to take them in stride for the most part. Two participants went so far as to say that there was nothing for which they were unprepared.

Some participants did struggle, however. One surprise to a few participants was their dissatisfaction with work. This is consistent with Graham & McKenzie, (1995) who noted that school and work are entirely different environments and being successful at one does not guarantee a smooth transition to the other, and that recent college grads often experience intense dissatisfaction in the beginning stages of their first job.

The participants in this study were upset when they realized that their job did not provide as much enjoyment or fulfillment as they had expected. Others also mentioned that transitioning to full-time employment was difficult in and of itself because it is such a change from college and because there was such a wide array of different kinds of people and people of different ages at work. Those used to the homogeneousness of college were at first unsure of how they were to make friends or relate to others that were different from themselves. Two participants said it was hard to make friends and only one said that she was unprepared to deal with finances.

Overall, respondents were positive about their X University experience and said that it had done a good job to prepare them for life after graduation. They felt this so strongly that two individuals were not even able to think of any examples in which attending a private Christian

liberal arts institution was detrimental to their transition experience. The other five participants focused exclusively on the sheltered homogeneity of life at X University. Words used to describe X University included “too comfortable,” “too sheltered” and “too homogeneous.” They said that encountering persons with different opinions and politics, or who had had very different undergraduate experiences could be “a wake-up call” or “a shock.” “Alyce” described it best,

> ...There was a set way to live your faith that there was an accepted way to be a Christian. There was a sort of a social way to interact with people and the things we say and the language we choose to use and I think… I struggled with that personally when I left school and some of my ideas about faith and some things changed…[and I wondered] will I still be accepted?

Participants did not speak negatively about X University for failing them, and seemed to accept these difficulties as inevitable. The adjustment to a more diverse environment was difficult for some but it was manageable for all. The only other criticism came from “Kirk,” who mentioned that a lack of competition on campus [academically or professionally] was not reflective of business in the real world and may not prepare students very well to face the challenges of full-time work where the environment is much more competitive.

When speaking about how well their university prepared them, most participants focused on distinctives of a private Christian liberal arts school. For example, nobody mentioned academic proficiency because that is not distinctive of a Christian liberal arts education. Comments about faith preparation and about the homogeneity of ideas are unique to the culture of X University and to other schools like it.

Role of Marriage

Arnett (1998) found that marriage was often an element associated with adulthood, though he did not say why. The over-arching theme in all the interviews in the present study is that adulthood is strongly associated with responsibility. Marriage adds an extra layer or element of responsibility, and thus, helps to transition people into adulthood. Having a child adds yet another layer of responsibility (Blinn-Pike et al., 2008). More than anything else, participants listed marriage as something that makes one more responsible and selfless. Multiple persons mentioned the difference between spending "my money" and spending "our money," and also noted the difficulty in making any decision because two people are affected by every choice. Four participants said that being married causes one to know oneself more and that it is a learning, growing experience. "Joie" says that society expects more out of married people, and you become more responsible as you strive to meet those societal expectations.

In most instances participants have talked about adulthood as a choice or something that is a by-product of certain responsibilities. However, when discussing marriage, participants used words like "forced" to describe the way marriage has changed them. Marriage may "force" you to deal with issues within yourself you have never dealt with before or it might "force" you to consider how your actions affect others. Although participants choose to get married there is a sense that they lose control, to some extent, of their own developmental process once they actually become married.

This may be because it is impossible to prepare for marriage on every level. "Boston" said, in reference to many of the challenges of adulthood (including marriage) "…you can have all the education and some of the practical experience on a smaller scale in the world that you can get, however none of that can fully prepare you." Emerging adults may choose marriage

without fully understanding all the implications and challenges associated with that decision. As Boston points out, this is the nature of marriage, not a sign of immaturity. The unanticipated challenges of marriage are unavoidable, so successfully meeting these challenges "forces" one into maturity, selflessness, and personality characteristics associated with adulthood.

Research Questions

Research question 1.

What were the greatest challenges to graduates emotionally, spiritually, and relationally?

The greatest challenges facing graduates seem to be focused primarily around finding a job (especially a fulfilling one), learning how to navigate a more diverse setting, and, to a lesser extent, learning how to make friends without the infrastructure and comfort of the small, undergraduate setting. For those who struggled with the transition, much of the anxiety and fear centered on the uncertainty of the future and the feeling of being directionless.

Several female participants also struggled emotionally with the changing social environments. Transitioning from a homogenous environment of school to a heterogeneous environment like work can be difficult. Emerging adults need to form new social scripts in order to learn how to form relationships with persons of different age or who hold different views.

Spirituality did not appear in this research as a major challenge for the participants. Most identified a faith element as an important part of a healthy adult life-style but none of the participants discussed major challenges regarding their faith or spiritual issues. This is likely to be the strong foundation and spiritual instruction participants spoke about receiving at X University.

Above all, participants spoke either directly or indirectly about responsibility. Becoming an adult means establishing financial, social, and emotional responsibility. Marriage transitions people into adulthood because it comes with a great set of responsibilities. Personal characteristics required for adulthood include a sense of responsibility and maturity, and most challenges participants faced were challenges that involved taking on new responsibilities. Marriage often times helps speed the transition to adulthood by increasing responsibility and bringing out the mature characteristics participants associated with adulthood.

Research question 2.

What are common feelings experienced by recent Christian liberal arts graduates?

The most common feelings experienced by the participants in this research were uncertainty and excitement due to the unknown. Participants were hopeful for opportunities but were also intimidated by the new challenges and lack of direction before them. Participants who had a job, a spouse, or were enrolled in graduate school seemed to have lower levels of anxiety and to experience the transition more positively.

As opposed to what one might anticipate, loneliness was not a bigger part of the lives of the participants. Only two participants mentioned loneliness and only one spoke of it at significant length. While Larson (1990) shows that emerging adults spend much of their time alone, most of the participants in this research did not report that feelings of loneliness were a major part of their transition following college.

Research question 3.

What are ways that recent Christian liberal arts graduates wish they had been better prepared for the challenges of adulthood and could their college have helped with that?

Participants believe that X University did a very good job of preparing them for life after college. Of course there were difficulties for which they were unprepared but all participants agreed that this was not the fault of the university. The most consistent finding regarding preparedness focuses around the idea of X University as a homogenous group and X University as a "bubble" separated from the outside world. However, participants generally thought of this as either a good or neutral thing that inevitably brings challenges with it, not a disservice performed by the University. That does not necessarily mean that X University could not be forward thinking enough to better equip students for the challenges of adulthood, but at least in this sample, graduates do not view the University at fault.

Implications for Practice

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to students to better prepare them for the world that awaits them after graduation. Any mission guided institution will want to graduate students who are ready to be change agents and leaders in the world, not students who are too preoccupied with personal difficulties to be civically minded or others-focused. It is important then to find new and better practices that equip students to assume responsibility for themselves and to master the professional and social challenges that face them.

Career development services should change some of its focus toward helping students understand the difference between school and work, the level of dissatisfaction new employees generally face, and the emotional difficulty of being unemployed (Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995).

Senior seminar, capstone courses, or residence life programming can focus on the emotional difficulties often facing students in regards to living a less structured life and encountering greater diversity. A particular emphasis should be creating structure or short term goals that help students reduce uncertainty immediately following graduation. Students should be

made aware of the resources they will have to draw on, or healthy coping strategies they should employ in difficult times. These venues would also be ideal opportunities to create programs to increase financial competence.

Greater emphasis should be placed on programs that encourage students to spend time with older adults. Because a major shock after graduation is the diversity of age and the difficulties thereof, students should be prepared to interact with and befriend those who are in different stages of life. Colleges and universities could form partnerships with local organizations such as churches or interest clubs to help students spend more time with a more chronologically diverse crowd.

Programming for recent alumni may be of value as well. This could take the form of information via the internet or the mail, more frequent reunions, small regional reunions, or simply a resource center available on campus or online. Undergraduates who did not take advantage of similar resources before graduation may appreciate the opportunity to learn about emerging adulthood and the "quarter-life crisis" after experiencing some of the challenges of adulthood.

Academic or co-curricular programming requiring students to take greater responsibility for themselves will ease the transition to adulthood. Internships and living off campus were mentioned by participants as beneficial experiences in the transition to adulthood. More outside of the classroom experiences, student leadership experiences with increased responsibility, cooperation with local businesses for educational work opportunities, and higher expectations for students beyond the academic realm will increase their levels of responsibility and train them to think like adults.

Finally, thinking of ways to encourage students to view themselves as adults while in college may make the transition easier for them, and it may help curb problematic behavior on campus (Blinn-Pike et al., 2008). Practitioners concerned with drinking and other risk taking behaviors may want to consider fostering a sense of adulthood on their campuses as an indirect way to address the issue.

Limitations

All data collected in this research is self-reported data from volunteer participants. Alumni with a favorable view of their experience at X University may have been more likely to participate in the research, and/or may have wanted their responses to portray their experience in a positive light. The faith-based institution used in this study does have a relatively homogenous population. Repeating this study at other institutions will yield important data for comparison. The researcher is an alumnus from the studied institution, which creates an opportunity for bias (see Appendix F). A greater age range in participants may yield valuable data. Older participants may view their experiences differently in hind-sight or value their educational experiences in different ways. Quantitative research should follow this groundwork to explore and clarify the themes identified in this study

Future Research

Further research on the role of structure or short-term goals will be beneficial in helping emerging adults to make a stable environment for themselves and will likely aid in the transition process. Future studies could also establish a greater understanding of the role marriage plays in achieving adulthood. Is marriage in-and-of itself a catalyst transitioning emerging adults into full adulthood, or does it act as a mediating variable? Because participants described marriage in terms of responsibility, it stands to reason that other forms of responsibility can recreate some of

the positive aspects of marriage in a different context. That way, emerging adults who are not married can still grow in maturity. Finally, learning how males and females experience the challenges of adulthood differently would provide a beginning for developing better coping strategies for individuals of either gender.

Summary: The Essence of Recent Christian Liberal Arts Graduates' Experiences

The transition from the private Christian liberal arts college to adulthood is full of challenges. Recent graduates struggle with finding a satisfactory job and developing financial and residential independence. They also face social challenges due to the necessity to develop relationships among peers in different stages of life and a sudden decrease in institutional and social support. Uncertainty and anxiety was common for graduates who did not have the stability that marriage has provided in this sample, or the stability of a job, but a feeling of excitement and hope was also not uncommon. Emerging adults are initially disappointed and discouraged with work because it is very different from college and feels mundane.

Graduates quickly learn that becoming an adult requires accepting responsibility for the financial, emotional, professional, and relational aspects of life. The acceptance of these responsibilities along with personal characteristics like maturity and humility provide what Christian liberal arts graduates need to believe they have become full adults. Marriage helps speed the transition into adulthood because it forces graduates to learn more about themselves and to make responsible decisions involving another person. Christian liberal arts graduates struggle at first reorienting from the homogeneous environment of their college but they believe they are capable of mastering the challenges and inherent difficulties of adulthood; they are equipped by their college experience with a strong faith and relational skills that ease their transition and prepare them for success.

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APPENDIX A: E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Hello

My name is Steve Conn, a 2008 graduate from Taylor University.

I'm now a graduate student at Taylor in the Masters of Arts in Higher Education program. I am currently working on my research thesis about emerging adulthood and the transitional years following graduation.

You and a small number of other alumni have been randomly selected from the Taylor alumni directory to participate in this research. The study is designed to *learn and describe* the experiences of Taylor students after graduation. I would be very appreciative of your participation as it would help to fulfill my requirements for the master's program and would equip Taylor to care for students as they graduate and transition from school.

The only requirement of you for this study is to participate in a phone interview with me scheduled at your convenience. The interview will consist of 7 non-invasive questions about your experience after graduation and your transition into adulthood. Anticipated length of the interview is 30 minutes. However, the time may vary depending upon the length of your responses. Although, 30 minutes may sound like a long commitment, it would be a significant contribution and investment in the lives of future Taylor students.

If you would like to participate in this study please reply to this e-mail by Wednesday, February 17th at steve_conn@tayloru.edu or call at 330.473.9445 and I can set up a time that works best for you to conduct the phone interview.

Attached is a copy of the informed consent form. Please read this prior to committing to the research. It details important specifics about the research including anticipated benefits, procedures, confidentiality, etc. It is important for you to read this short (1 page) document before we begin this study.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. If you have any questions about this study now or at any time in the future, please feel free to contact me or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Scott Gaier (scgaier@taylor.edu).

Thank you very much,

Steve Conn
MAHE Graduate Student
Taylor University

APPENDIX B: FOLLOW UP E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Hello

I sent you an E-mail earlier about participating in some research for my masters thesis at Taylor University. I could still use your help if you would be willing to be a part of a phone interview.

I would love to know if you had a chance to read my E-mail and if you would be willing to help in my research.

Thanks so much for your time

Steve Conn

APPENDIX C: INFORMATIONAL E-MAIL

Hello

Thanks so much for agreeing to be a part of this research. It will help me out so much, and it will also be helpful to future Taylor students.

Attached are three things

1) A copy of the questions I'm going to be asking you. If you look through these ahead of time it will help you generate thoughtful responses.

2) A list of names. For confidentiality I'm allowing you to pick a false name that will be used in the write up of this report. (If it would be more fun for you, you can make up your own name)

3) Another copy of the informed consent form. I need you to type your name on the bottom of it and e-mail it back to me before we do our interview.

Let me know what times are convenient for you to set up an interview. I want to work around your schedule.

Also, I'll need your phone number to call you.

Thank you so much for your time

Steve Conn

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Alias:

Age:

Gender:

Marital status:

Education:

Parental status

Geographic location

Ethnic minority status

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1) What do you think categorizes adulthood and where do you think you are on that continuum?

2) What feelings did you experience regarding transitioning from college and adulthood in the first few years after graduation and how long did they last?

3) What challenges related to graduation or transitioning to adult life were you prepared for, and for what were you unprepared?

4) To what level do you think these feelings or difficulties are common or uncommon for other people you graduated with?

5) What were the biggest surprises or challenges you experienced in the first few years after graduation in regard to transitioning from college to adult life? Jordan thought this was redundant)

6) How do you define a healthy adult life style?

7) In what (if any) ways do you think your experience at a Private Christian Liberal institution was helpful in making the transition from graduation to a healthy adult life-style?

8) In what (if any) ways do you think your experience at a Private Christian Liberal arts institution was detrimental in making the transition from graduation to a healthy adult life-style?

9) In what way(s) has marriage affected your views on adulthood and has being married provided any unique challenges or supports for you through this transition?

APPENDIX F: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In order to communicate clearly the assumptions and attitudes behind this study I find it necessary to define my own experience and interest in regards to this research. I have recently graduated college myself, and have experienced many of the difficulties described in the above report. I found myself disillusioned with work, lonely, without a definite direction or place to call home, and wondering if I was a failure. Anecdotally I became aware that these feelings were very common among my friends, but they were often not articulated very well. As I began to read more about the subject I found that researchers were beginning to recognize the issues with which my cohort was struggling, yet this was not made known to me and my peers as we graduated college.

The private Christian Liberal Arts school is often focused on whole person education and on addressing student needs in the emotional and spiritual realms as well as the cognitive. It occurred to me that a school such as the one from which I graduated may be very interested in the emotional state of recent graduates and how they perceived their experiences the first few years after graduating college.

APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT

Please read and consider the following information before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Purpose of the research: To explore experiences and feelings commonly shared by graduates of recent colleges and what universities can do to improve the graduation transition.

What you will do in this research: The interviewer will contact you over the phone and ask you a series of open ended non-invasive interview questions.

Time required: Participation will take approximately 40 minutes.

Risks: There is very little anticipated risk associated with this study. The effects of participating should be comparable to those you would experience discussing the last few years of your life with a friend. There is the slight chance that participants may experience emotional difficulties as a result of discussion their transition experience

Benefits: Research from this study will be used to further understanding among college administrators regarding the common experiences of young graduates and what can be better done to serve them.

Confidentiality: Your participation in this study will remain confidential, and your identity will not be stored with your data. Your responses will be assigned an alias of your choosing . Other researchers may help review the coding of the data but will not be able to identify the participants.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. To withdraw simply inform the investigator that you no longer desire to be a part of the research. No questions will be asked.

Contact: If you have questions about this research, please contact Steve Conn. (330-473-9445; steve_conn@tayloru.edu) or Dr. Scott Gaier (scgaier@tayloru.edu)

Publication: The results of this research may be published in an academic journal. Participants will have the opportunity to view their transcript and interpretation of their interview by request at any time leading up to publication.

Agreement:

> The nature of this research including risks and benefits has been explained to me in a satisfactory manner. I understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time with no penalty. I voluntarily give my informed consent to participate in this research.
>
> Signature: _____ Date: _____
>
> Name (print): _____