

## Living with Maybes: The Upside of Hard Times for College Students

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### Abstract

The economic recession has had major impacts on career aspirations and lifestyles of many college students today. Only a few years ago, jobs out of college were plentiful and lucrative. The affluence of the late 1990s and early 2000s ushered in a period of prosperity, opportunity, and even indulgence for numerous college students. Until the recent economic crisis, many students saw themselves heading on the fast track to platinum careers in fields such as finance, law, medicine, and consulting. They looked forward to taking advantage of the promised “good life,” which guaranteed high starting salaries and other financial rewards.

Today, job options are much more limited and salaries considerably lower for college graduates. Often students are faced with prospects of only “maybes” or uncertainties that have shaken their confidence and required them to reconsider their personal futures and career plans, often forcing them to undertake significant lifestyle adjustments. While the impact of the economic recession has had negative consequences, its influence has also revealed possibilities and options that some college students may not have considered earlier. In this article the authors examine the “upside” of the financial downturn for college students and explore whether the hard times that confront students today may have some unexpected positive benefits, not only for college students but also for higher education.

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College students are feeling the full impact of the economic recession as new graduates compete for scarce jobs and college freshmen face declining financial aid, rising tuition, and tougher admissions standards. Students returning to school this fall will likely face higher costs, reduced financial aid, fewer part-time jobs, and a reduction in student services, internships, and career opportunities. More students are likely to take fewer hours in order to defray college costs, drop classes to work more hours, drop out more frequently, postpone study abroad, and skip or downsize spring break trips. The current recession is not only constraining the financial circumstances of college students; there is evidence that it may also have some transforming effects upon values, beliefs, and behaviors of college students in some important ways.

*USA Today* (Jayson, 2009) reports that the current recession “has shattered” the world of today’s youth in a manner similar to the impact of the Great Depression on youth growing up in the 1930s. Today’s dismal economic circumstances are causing students to do less shopping, consume less, work more, reduce credit card debt, and adopt a new frugality in their lifestyles. Students’ “downsized” lifestyles are also being accompanied by more modest expectations about the future and personal aspirations. Materialistic millennials may be undergoing a fundamental shift in values and attitudes that will reshape their beliefs and behaviors in significant ways.

“Instead of getting a jump on the boundless futures that parents and colleges always promised them,” reported Alex Williams in a recent *New York Times* article, “students this year

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are receiving a reality check” (Williams, 2009, p. 1). Williams noted that many college students are heading somewhere they least expected: back home!

Evidence of hard economic times for college students is reflected in the fact that unemployment for college age youth is now over 20%, and the number of internships available to college students has fallen 21% over the last year (Williams, 2009, p. 7). A recent survey (Longmire & Co., 2009) of prospective college students indicated that students will likely alter their plans for the upcoming school year, sometimes in drastic ways. Over half reported they may attend a less expensive school, and almost half indicated they planned to work as freshmen and to borrow more heavily. Previous economic hard times in our society often resulted in a reorientation of priorities, possibilities, and perspectives for the young, and it appears that the current economic recession is also causing many changes in the aspirations and life choices of college students.

College students are not only worried about themselves. The AP-mtvU Poll (Webster, 2008) reported that students are anxious about the financial pressures facing their parents. Nearly 1 in 5 students polled reported that at least one parent lost a job last year. Thus, concern about family circumstances will likely influence students to try to help out wherever they can by reducing credit card debt, working more, and depending less on their parents for financial assistance. Concern about financial pressures on their families will no doubt also add a new element of stress to the growing pressures upon college students.

### **Impact of Past Recessions on College Students’ Beliefs and Behaviors**

There are some interesting historical precedents in the radical shift in economic circumstances that college students are confronting today. These precedents may offer some insights in understanding the effects of the current recession on today’s college students’ values, beliefs, and behaviors.

One does not have to search very far to find a precedent for economic hard times for college students. Levine (1980) studied the attitudes and values of college students in the late 1970s in a time of economic decline and bleak future prospects. Unemployment was high, there was a scarcity of jobs, concern about finances was threatening to overwhelm students, and the prospects of a diminishing future loomed ahead. Levine argued that college students of that period had adopted a “Titanic ethic,” a belief that they were aboard a doomed ship of state in which future prospects looked bleak. For the first time in decades, college students reported that they did not expect to live better lives than their parents and that they would have to work much harder to compete for shrinking opportunities. College students of the 1970s responded to those hard times by turning increasingly inward and becoming more conservative. Financial aid and consumer concerns increased among students, and they became more vocationally oriented and focused on their own personal survival and wellbeing. Students protested more often about college costs and loss of services and benefits.

Fortunately, with the prosperity and affluence of the 1990s, new millennium college students quickly left behind the hard times of the previous decades. But like college students of the 1970s, the dreams of many college students today are dying, and economic forecasts suggest the present hard times are not likely to dissipate anytime soon.

Another interesting historical parallel can be made between the current Great Recession and students’ struggles with hard times in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Robert Angell (Tobin, 2009) studied the impact of the tumultuous Great Depression on college students at the University of Michigan. Angell tracked the attitudes and beliefs of UM students to see how they responded to the economic calamity taking place around them. He surveyed students in 1928 and then again in 1932-33 to identify changes in students beliefs, values, and behaviors.

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When Angell surveyed students in the 1920s, he found that they were “materialistic, hedonistic, intellectually incurious and immature” (Quoted in Tobin, 2009, p. 1). When Angell surveyed students four years later, he found that students of the Great Depression took a more serious interest in academic work by studying harder, cutting fewer classes, and doing more reading. There was a decline in dating, and men and women placed less emphasis on status symbols such as clothes, family status, and fraternity/sorority memberships. Students were more inclined to develop a philosophy of life, and their values shifted to more inward virtues such as character, intelligence, and sincerity. Angell wrote,

The depression, however calamitous in its other effects, does seem to have put college students into a more serious frame of mind and led them to points of view and values considerably more mature than those which they held in 1929. (Quoted in Tobin, 2009, p. 1)

Angell’s description of college students in the 1920s bears many resemblances to college students of the new millennium. Some of the most important life objectives of today’s college students are to gain status, make money, and have a good life (HERI, 2007). Millennials have been described as one of the most pampered, pushed, and accommodated generations ever (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Like college students of the 1920s, many of today’s college students are also materialistic, hedonistic, and immature. They are, as a cohort, ambitious, competitive, and academically able and highly oriented to personal success and achievement. They have been taught to believe that the future is open and that they can aspire to and achieve their dreams. But the values and ambitions of today’s college students are colliding unexpectedly with some grinding economic circumstances that may likely reshape the world they had once expected and for which they had prepared.

In yet another hard time for college students, much earlier in our history, William James, the famous philosopher and psychologist, posed the question to college students, “Is Life Worth Living?” James, (1895/1956), spoke to young men at the Harvard YMCA at a time when the world was shaken by both an intellectual and economic crisis. On one hand, young people struggled with the dominance of deterministic and nihilistic beliefs of a reductionist scientific world view that stressed the importance of believing only those ideas that could be scientifically verified. On the other hand, young people of the 1890s also struggled with a period of severe economic recession. The depression of 1893 was one of the worst economic calamities in American history (Whitten, 2009). Unemployment exceeded 10% for half a decade and brought violent strikes and far reaching social and political developments. The contentious intellectual and economic conflicts of that time made young adults doubtful of themselves and the world they were facing.

In his address to the Harvard students, James lectured on the importance of hope in hard times and sought to prepare the students for a future that appeared full of doubt and uncertainty. James was especially critical of those who argued that one should not act on anything that lacked conclusive evidence of its truth. He accused many scientific thinkers of his day for believing that “to escape error” was the most crucial thing one should consider in embarking on any endeavor. He argued that to refrain from acting until we know, without doubt, what the outcome will be is folly. James urged students to learn to live with “maybes” and to pursue a “significant life” in spite of the challenges they faced. The advice that James offered to young people over 100 years ago seems relevant for college students today:

Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment

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or textbook, that may be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. (James, 1885/1956, p. 59)

James told his Harvard student audience that the pursuit of “lost causes” often succeeds if one possesses resilient hope. He exhorted the young men to pursue their goals, mustering up their strength and grit—which they may not have discovered before—to overcome hard times that lay ahead. Moreover, they were to endure these harsh conditions in the face of uncertainty because *there would be no guarantee that their labors would lead to accomplishment.*

James posed the question “Is Life Worth Living?” in hard times, and he answered it with an emphatic “yes.” But he added that individuals must exert will power to act in the face of uncertainty to reach the highest ideals they can set for themselves. Today we know that some young people do not come to the college campus with the coping habits they need to be resilient when they encounter hard times. Students often define “having freedom” as simply being able to do what they want to do at the moment—without thoughts of the consequences and with only minimum restraints. In turn they may view a college education as simply a means to land a lucrative job so that after they graduate they can eventually do and have whatever they “want.”

The economic hard times that confront college students today will require motivation, hardiness, and optimism if they are to achieve their highest and best goals. In light of this fact it might be argued that the most effective education for college students is one that guides them in the cultivation of worthy habits. James challenged the young men of the Harvard YMCA to “Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact” (James, 1885/1956, p. 62). It is an important responsibility of colleges and universities to offer the resources and guidance that help students to believe that the lives they lead are significant by helping them to choose and act on high ideals and hopes. They need to encourage them not to give up hope when times are hard. Students may fail in the end, but James reminded students that attitudes often can make a world of difference.

### **The Upside of Hard Times**

One of the possible upsides of these hard times is students’ willingness to consider wider job options including public service. The PBS Newshour (2009) reported recently that the #1 job choice of Duke graduates this year is Teach for America teaching positions. Teach for America received 35,000 applications this year—42% more than last year (CBS News, 2009). At AmeriCorps, a national community service network, applications more than tripled to about 48,500 between November 2008 and March 2009, compared to the same time period a year earlier (YSA Wire Service, 2009). With college students facing a 70% reduction in jobs with banks and consulting firms, some of the nation’s brightest undergraduates are now looking at other job options, and many of them are turning to social justice work. Moreover, many of these young people seem almost relieved that they have the chance to do service and non-profit work now that platinum jobs right out of college are drying up.

Previous hard times for college students suggest that we are likely to see some of the following changes in college students’ values and behaviors:

- A simpler, more frugal lifestyle
  - A downsizing of expectations
  - Fewer materialistic values
  - More concern about quality of life and relationships
  - More social activism
  - Wider career options
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- More concern and efforts to help family defray costs of college

The upside of these changes may be more emphasis on financial responsibility, independence, personal accountability, and quality of life. Moreover, learning to negotiate college life with less emphasis on entertainment and customer services may encourage more resourcefulness and accountability on the part of college students. Students may gain a greater appreciation of their own strengths and abilities and develop more practical skills through self-management. Williams (2009) noted that the economic recession may result in less pressure, more time for contemplation and self-evaluation, as well as more opportunities to get in touch with parents. These developments, if they occur, could bring some welcome changes to the achievement driven, pressure-filled lifestyles of many contemporary college students and help to reorient the educational milieu for students in higher education.

### **Hoping in Hard Times**

Hope is the one indispensable attribute for surviving hard times. Hope may be the most important attribute college students can develop during the college years, especially when the future seems to be closing in. Hope enables one to tap into inner strength and to persevere when dreams fade and disappointments come. Levine (1980) concluded from his study of hard times in the 1980s that one of the most important things colleges and universities can do for undergraduates is to help them cultivate a sense of hope. *Transformational* hope is a combination of *believing* and *doing*; it is the process of aspiring to worthy goals while persevering through disturbances and disappointments along the way. Transformational hope can be cultivated through learning, inspiration, role models, self-awareness, and responsibility: all attributes that can be fostered in the crucible of higher education environments. Hope depends upon conditions of challenge, support, responsibility, and initiative, conditions that college students will face in more direct ways in the current economic recession.

Colleges and universities can help students to respond to these hard times by encouraging them to develop a greater sense of transformational hope and personal agency. Learning to persevere, to be responsible, to transform difficult personal circumstances into successes are not gifts to be given to students; they are the hard work of student learning and development. Unfortunately, the customer culture of many colleges and universities has often served to insulate students from many of the experiences that can be transformative for them.

Learning to live with “maybes” may be the biggest challenge facing college students today, and it does not have to be an experience with only negative consequences. William James admonished Harvard students to aspire to a significant life in spite of uncertainties, a life that made a difference, that changed things for the better. He urged them not to be afraid to tackle what the world calls “lost causes” because some of the most powerful changes in the world are the results of efforts devoted to those causes. There may be no better advice for college students today as they struggle to respond to the present hard times.

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