



# Exploring the Changing Meaning of Work for American High School Seniors from 1976 to 2005

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Abstract

Using data from the Monitoring the Future study, this paper presents descriptive trends showing historical changes in U.S. youth's work values across 30 years. The findings update several previous reports on the topic by extending the trends an additional 13 years (through 2005), and the findings suggest that adolescents' work values have changed substantially during this period. Specifically, results point to three main conclusions: (a) decreasing importance given to job stability suggests positive adaptations to labor market shifts; (b) increasing or stable extrinsic work values exist while intrinsic work values evince declines; and (c) work, in general, is becoming less central to the identities of youth. Trends for college versus non-college bound youth are examined to highlight different meanings placed on work that vary by educational aspirations. Results have implications for understanding the changing meaning of work for the future workforce and informing the policies geared towards young people.

Keywords: work values, adolescence, trends, Monitoring the Future, job stability, work skills, educational aspirations

## Exploring the Changing Meaning of Work for American High School Seniors from 1976 to 2005

The world of work has drastically changed over the past three decades. For example, economists and members of the workforce have recognized that job stability in the U.S. is becoming a thing of the past, as part-time (rather than full-time) contracts and workers' mobility across companies become the norm (Bardwick, 2008). How are youth adapting to these changes? We address this question by looking at trends in high school seniors' work values from the annual national survey Monitoring the Future (MTF, 1976 to 2005). Specifically, we examine trends in the importance of job stability, extrinsic work values and materialism, intrinsic work values, the importance of work, and the value of jobs that allow for leisure time. Further, we compare the work values of youth according to their educational aspirations, as the three groups of youth we examine – those planning to obtain a 4-year college degree, 2-year degree, or neither – have different future work trajectories.

### Past Trends in Youth Work Values

Work values are defined as the importance one places on various characteristics and rewards of employment (Johnson & Elder, 2002). Several studies have used the MTF dataset to examine work values in high school seniors across shorter periods of time. For example, Crimmins, Easterlin and Saito (1991) reported a decrease in valuing work as a central part of life from 1976 to 1986, as well as an increase in materialism during this 10-year period. Easterlin and Crimmins (1991) elaborated on the increased value youth placed on materialism across the 1970s and 1980s and highlighted increases in valuing work that provides status and money as opposed to opportunities to help others. Going further, Schulenberg, Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley (1994) examined youth's work values using MTF data from 1976 to 1992. They presented a trend of declining importance of work as central to life. They also documented trends of extrinsic

work values increasing through the 1980s but starting to show decline in the early 1990s. In sum, these studies depicted historical trends showing increases in adolescents' materialism and extrinsic career pursuits as well as decreases in the importance of work as a high priority for one's identity.

We extend previous research by observing how work values have changed across a period of three decades (1976-2005). There are two key reasons to re-examine youth's work values from 1976 to 2005: (1) Several key shifts in the economic context from the early 1990s to 2005 call for a reexamination of the meaning adolescents place on work over this time period, and (2) adolescents' educational aspirations, which guide their future work trajectories, are likely to illuminate important group differences in the meaning and value placed on work.

#### *The Changing Economic Context*

Several notable economic changes have occurred in the last 15 years. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was put into effect in 1994, accelerating the United States' shift towards a global market while also reducing the number of manufacturing jobs available in the U.S. Similarly, the proliferation of the Internet has changed the world economy. The "dot-com" era reigned from 1995 to 2001 and was accompanied by a rise in technology-oriented, higher-skilled jobs. Both of these changes signify a rapid shift in the type of jobs available in the U.S. during the 1990s as well as the amount of education needed to qualify for them (see also Settersten, 2005). Furthermore, increasing income inequality in the U.S. over this period has been well-documented (e.g., Danziger & Gottschalk, 2004; Piketty & Saez, 2003). For instance, economists Piketty and Saez (2003) illustrated that the proportion of earnings garnered by the top 1% of the U.S. population has been increasing steadily since 1970.

Changes in job stability are one concrete manifestation of these macro-economic trends. Evidence from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006a, 2006b) suggests that job stability in the U.S. has been decreasing since the 1980s. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth has documented that individuals born between 1957 and 1964 have held an average of 10.5 jobs from ages 18 to 40, suggesting very little job stability across early adulthood (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006a). Additional longitudinal studies are not available for later cohorts (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006a), yet declines in median years of occupational tenure also suggest that Americans are changing jobs with increasing frequency. For example, in 2006 median tenure with one's current employer was .87 years for individuals ages 16-24, down from 1.9 years in 1987, and individuals ages 25-34 declined in tenure from 5.6 years in 1987 to 2.8 years in 2006 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006b; Carey, 1988). Academic research on job stability further suggests that declines in job stability are felt disproportionately by Blacks, less educated, and younger workers (Danziger & Gottschalk, 2004; Hill & Yeung, 1999; Marcotte, 1999). Job instability is partly due to mergers, bankruptcies, and restructuring of companies which have been tied to the rise in technological innovations and market globalization (Bardwick, 2008; Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegritto, 2007; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003). Job loss and job transitions are substantially costly and anxiety-producing for some workers, even in good economic times – a fact noted by economists and government officials alike (Farber, 2005; Greenspan, 2004). Others have noted that the vagaries of the economy produce uncertainty and anxiety in young people (e.g., Flanagan, 2005). The realities of work have certainly changed for the adult workforce given these increases in job transitions and instabilities; this changing context may have also signaled a shift in the meaning of work for adolescents in recent years. If

work is increasingly less predictable and more episodic, then it would be psychologically adaptive for young people to make work less central to one's identity.

### *Work Values and College Plans*

Several key economic changes in the past 15 years point to a changing dynamic between the jobs available and the skills required for them (Drucker, 1999). More education is required for more jobs, even when the skills required for these jobs are not learned in college. The educational and occupational ambitions of high school students have increased in recent years, a likely response to labor market shifts (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006; Schneider, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Using MTF data, Reynolds and colleagues demonstrated that high school seniors' expectations for educational attainment (including 2-year and 4-year degrees) increased dramatically from 1976 to 2000, and the desire for professional occupations also increased during this period. With recent increases in youth's educational aspirations, youth's work values may have also changed. For example, youth may increasingly value extrinsic rewards such as status and prestige and a high standard of living, which are associated with professional occupations and higher education. Moreover, differences in work values by adolescents' educational aspirations may suggest variations in perceived opportunities or concerns about adapting to these new realities of the work world.

There has been little attention to differences between the work values of college versus non-college bound youth. A notable exception lies in the work of Johnson and Elder (2002), who used the longitudinal panel data of MTF to examine work values over time for those who attended college as well as those who did not. Important among their findings was that high school students who highly valued job security at age 18 were less likely to continue their education compared to those who did not value job security. They also found that the importance

of job security increased as the non-college bound transitioned into young adulthood. These longitudinal findings have much bearing on the understanding of work values and educational attainment through young adulthood, and for the purposes of the current study, demonstrate the usefulness of examining trends in work values separately by educational aspirations.

Using many of the same variables as Johnson and Elder (2002), our emphasis lies in time trends across 30 years for high school seniors' work values rather than individual-level changes over time. We examine group differences in work values trends by educational aspirations, distinguishing between youth with aspirations to graduate from a 4-year college, a 2-year college, or neither. Though no one has previously described the work values of adolescents aspiring to complete 2-year degrees, these youth serve as an important comparison to youth with 4-year college ambitions and those not planning to enroll in higher education. Choosing to attend a 2-year college may be an adaptive response to market trends, as community colleges and other 2-year education institutions offer practical vocational training for service-oriented and skilled manual labor jobs that are needed in the local labor market (Settersten, 2005).

#### Developmental Perspectives on Youth and Work

Social scientists from a variety of disciplines recognize the developmental importance of youth's perceptions of work, and we briefly review the extant literature below. Taken together, previous findings suggest that work is an important developmental domain for adolescents making the transition to adulthood, and that youth's work values have both current meaning for their lives along and predictive power for future behaviors.

#### *Work as a Developmental Domain*

Developmentalists often talk about the process of identity development as if it takes place entirely within the self. Yet, research suggests that active exploration of potential careers, work

values, and work competences figure importantly in the processes of identity development (Erikson, 1968; Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, & Shanahan, 2002; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003). The domain of work is not only central to youth's identity exploration, but is also on the forefront of youth's minds in late adolescence when youth start planning for the future (Eccles, Templeton, Barber & Stone, 2003; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003). However, researchers have documented that identity exploration has become protracted for American youth, leaving plans, values, and attitudes in flux for youth until their mid-to-late 20s (Arnett, 2000a). Given this phenomenon of emerging adulthood, the work values youth report as high school seniors may be increasingly idealistic, as they have several more years of exploration before their work identities are solidified.

The transition to adulthood is not an experience of protracted exploration for all youth, however (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). Youth who enter the full-time workforce directly after high school often must take on more responsibilities and experience fewer freedoms compared to youth in college (Eccles et al., 2003). Moreover, non-college bound youth are likely to experience several more years of job instability compared to youth who attend college (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003). Evidence suggests that completing a 2-year degree improves one's economic trajectory – in terms of employment rates, earnings, and goal attainment – compared to not attending college (Gracie, 1998). Differences in educational aspirations of youth point to diverging pathways in how youth experience work, and may also illustrate differences in how youth define work as part of their identities.

#### *Development of Youth's Work Values*

Value development takes place primarily during adolescence (Flanagan, 2003a; Kelloway & Harvey, 1999), when adolescents also begin to think more deeply about the world of work.

Values are integral to identities and help youth define the self, make sense of experiences, and develop expectations for interactions with other people and institutions (Flanagan, 2003b).

Values serve to guide present and future behaviors (Rokeach, 1973), and they are resources that underlie youth's choices as they transition into adulthood (Eccles et al., 2003). Of special relevance to the present paper, the values of young people are a barometer of social change. The impressionable years model argues that the values and attitudes of adolescents and young adults are malleable and not yet crystallized. Thus, young people are more influenced by historical events, and these effects tend to be sustained over time (i.e., cohort effects; Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Jennings, 1989; Ryder, 1965). Indeed, cohort differences are evident in values such as individualism and materialism (Arnett, 2000b; Bengtson, Bilbarz, & Roberts, 2002). Furthermore, the occupational aspirations of today's young people are higher than any previous U.S. cohort, and young people are more likely than ever to aspire to graduate from a 4-year college (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Social change is also likely to be reflected in changes in work values of young people over historical time.

Findings on work values may in part reflect the idealism of youth. In a 2002 cross-sectional survey of high school seniors from various ethnic backgrounds, Chang, Chen, Greenberger, Dooley, and Heckhausen (2006) found that all youth, regardless of gender or ethnic background, reported high long-term educational aspirations (i.e., 4-year degree) and expectations for high occupational prestige. Other work has also noted a lack of realism that accompanies adolescent reports of work values (Johnson, 2002; Marini, Fan, Finley, & Beutel, 1996), and as they get older, young people adjust these values downward to be more realistic (Johnson, 2002). Even if they are idealistic and change in adulthood (see Johnson, 2001a), adolescents' work values have important implications for future development (Johnson & Elder,

2002; Kelloway & Harvey, 1999). For instance, Johnson (2001b) found that work values in adolescence were strong predictors of work values up to 14 years later, demonstrating at least some stability from adolescence to adulthood.

### Aims of Current Study

We examine trends in adolescents' work values across 30 years with several aims in mind. First, we look at changes in the value youth place on job stability, particularly in light of labor market trends showing declining economic stability. Our second focus is to examine changes over time in a variety of job characteristics that youth may value. Specifically, we compare trends in extrinsic work values for money, success, and achievement to intrinsic values such as having a job that is interesting and that utilizes skills. Finally, we extend previous research on these topics by paying particular attention to change across the last 13 years of survey data (Easterlin & Crimmins, 1991; Schulenberg et al., 1994). For each trend, we estimate differences between youth who aspire to graduate from a 4-year college, 2-year college, or neither. As noted, this distinction represents a major difference in future job trajectories with regard to income, opportunities, and life chances that have diverged for the groups over the past three decades (Eccles et al., 2003; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003).

### Method

Data come from Monitoring the Future (MTF), a project surveying national samples of American high school students regarding their attitudes, values, and lifestyles (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2006). In this ongoing study, a nationally representative sample of high school seniors has been surveyed each year since 1976, selected by a multi-stage sampling procedure from public and private high schools across the nation. Our study focuses on the publicly available data on cohorts each year from 1976 to 2005. The nature of the study design

enables us to shed light on social change by describing changes in the meaning youth place on work over time. Age is held relatively constant as there is low variability in ages of high school seniors, and thus changes cannot be attributed to age differences. Furthermore, as samples are nationally representative, changes over time are not likely due to a certain type of youth being overrepresented in any given year. Thus, any trends in work values across time can be attributed to the milieu (i.e., economic, social, historical) in which the adolescents experienced childhood and/or experiences of historical events during adolescence (i.e., cohort or period effects).

The MTF surveys consist of six different forms, with separate samples of around 3,000 youth answering each form yearly. Data presented here come primarily from Form 4, with a few items included from Forms 1, 3, and 5. All analyses use the sample weights provided with the data, which are designed to make the results representative of the national population of high school seniors (Bachman, Johnston, O'Malley, & Schulenberg, 2006). Statistical significance of time trends and group differences were estimated by item with logistic models using the generalized linear model framework. Our sample size of nearly 100,000 provides sufficient statistical power so that even weak relationships often reach significance, so we will place greater emphasis on the magnitude of time trends than their statistical significance. Indeed, time trends for all value measures were statistically significant in models controlling for race, sex, parents' education, and college plans (all  $\chi^2$  values exceeded 128,  $df = 29$ ,  $p$ 's < .001). The differences by educational aspirations we report come from analyses that control for race, sex, and parents' education.

### *Measures*

All items were dichotomized (0, 1) for ease of interpretation and to allow for direct comparisons across measures. Unless otherwise noted, items were recoded from a 4-point scale

so that 0 corresponds to *not important* or *a little important* and 1 to *pretty important* or *very important*. We combine many of the value items into scales, based on similarity in conceptual meaning and similarity in patterns of trends over time (i.e., time trend correlations of around .7 or higher). Most of our scales also follow the operationalization of work values in previous research using MTF data (e.g., Johnson & Elder, 2002). Cronbach's alpha coefficients are reported for scales that come from the same form (i.e., were answered by the same individuals).<sup>1</sup>

*Job stability.* A single item tapped the value that youth place on job stability, asking the importance of having a job "that offers a reasonably predictable and secure future."<sup>2</sup> A second item asked about students' expectations for job stability, namely whether they think they will have the same job for most of their life. This item was coded so that the lower score reflected less expected stability (i.e., 0 = *disagree, mostly disagree, or neither disagree or agree*) and the higher score reflected more expected stability (i.e., 1 = *agree or mostly agree*).

*Extrinsic work values.* Extrinsic work values was measured by a 4-item scale including the importance of having a job "that has high status and prestige," "which provides you with a chance to earn a good deal of money," "where the chances of advancement and promotion are good", and "that most people look up to and respect." The average correlation among the time trends for these items was .66, and the average Cronbach's alpha (across years) was .72 (range .68 to .76).

*Materialism.* A 3-item scale measured the value of materialism. Items included: the importance of having lots of money, expecting to own more than one's parents, and only being happy with owning more than one's parents. The latter two items were recoded so that participants who indicated that they expected to have *much less than my parents, somewhat less than my parents, or about as much as my parents* were coded as 0 and those who expected to

have *somewhat more than my parents* or *much more than my parents* were coded as 1. The average time trend correlation among these items was .92. Reliability cannot be computed as items came from different forms.

*Intrinsic work values.* Trends in intrinsic work values were measured by a 5-item scale, including a job that “is interesting to do,” “uses your skills and abilities – lets you do things you can do best,” and a job where “you can see the results of what you do,” “the skills you learn will not go out of date,” and “you can learn new things, new skills.” The average time trend correlation was .87, and the average Cronbach’s alpha was .59 across years (range .52 to .68).

*Importance of work.* Several items, examined separately, measured whether work was a priority for youth, and we analyzed them separately. One item asked youth the extent to which they agreed with the statement “I expect work to be a central part of my life.” A second dichotomous item asked youth if they would want to work even if they had enough money to live comfortably. Response options were: *I would not want to work* (0), *I would want to work* (1). A third item, tapping youth’s willingness to work extra hours, read: “I want to do my best in my job, even if this sometimes means working overtime.” The first and third items were recoded so that 0 = *disagree, mostly disagree, or neither disagree or agree* and 1 = *agree and mostly agree*.

*Value of leisure.* The value for work that allows time for leisure was measured by a 2-item scale: the importance of a job “where you can have more than two weeks vacation” and the importance of a job “which leaves a lot of time for other things in life.” The time trend correlation was .85, and the average Cronbach’s alpha across years was .61 (range .56 to .64).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

*Educational aspirations.* The sample was split into three groups based on college plans. Items asked youth their intent to graduate from a 2- and/or 4-year college. Mutually exclusive

groups consisted of: (a) youth with no plans to graduate from college, (b) youth who intended to graduate from a 2-year college, and (c) youth who intended to graduate from a 4-year college. Youth who intended to graduate from both a 2-year and 4-year college were put into the latter category. As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of young people with aspirations to graduate from a 4-year college has risen dramatically over the past three decades (from less than 55% to over 80%), while the proportion intending to graduate from a 2-year institution declined slightly (from about 15% to about 10%) and the percentage of youth with no college plans declined. Demographic characteristics of youth have shown that those who attend college are more likely to be white, while African American and Latino youth are disproportionately less likely to attend college. Changing demographics in educational attainment in recent years suggest that males are lagging behind females in obtaining college degrees, and while the percentage of those with some college training has increased across ethnic groups, Latino youth have become least likely to obtain a higher degree and most likely to have less than a high school diploma (Lopez & Marcelo, 2006).

## Results

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### *Value of Job Stability*

The value youth place on job stability has declined in recent years, with youth becoming somewhat less likely to value a predictable and secure job (see Figure 2). Extending the Schulenberg et al. (1994) report, the trend showed that having a stable job has become less important for youth through the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was for youth in the 1980s. High school seniors in the late 1970s also were less likely to desire predictable and secure jobs, suggesting that youth's expectations for job stability may shift with changes in the economy.

Although the percentages of youth endorsing this value has remained high (at an average of 92% across all years), the decline is noteworthy and may represent an adaptive feature of youth's work values. Perhaps youth since the 1990s have become more realistic about the episodic nature of work. This trend was consistent for all youth regardless of college plans, although youth with no college plans reported lower values of job stability than youth with 2-year plans ( $\beta = -.561$ ) and 4-year plans ( $\beta = -.196, p's < .001$ ).

Compared to the trend in valuing job stability, the trend in youth's expectations that they will have the same job for most of their adult lives has been gradually increasing since the 1980s. Across all years, 57% to 65% of youth stated that they expect to keep the same job for most of their lives. Thus the trend in valuing job stability is different from the trend in expecting to remain in the same job in adulthood, although the proportion of youth who endorsed keeping the same job was nearly 30% less than the proportion valuing predictable and secure jobs in any given year. This difference suggests that while having the same job for most of life is not expected by most youth, the majority of youth do value a predictable and secure work life, although stability has become less valued in recent years. Youth with no college aspirations were least likely to want to keep the same job for most of their lives compared to youth with 2-year ( $\beta = -.045, p = .07$ ) and 4-year ( $\beta = -.057, p < .01$ ) college plans, although these differences were small.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

### *Extrinsic Work Values*

Across 30 years, youth's values of extrinsic work characteristics either increased or remained stable. Specifically, the trend in the extrinsic work values of status and prestige, advancement, respect, and earnings increased through the late 1970s and 1980s, reaching its

highest levels (84-85%) in the late 1980s (see Figure 3). This trend remained high and stable at around 80% through the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Similarly, the value of materialism for youth rose until the late 1980s and has since remained fairly stable (see Figure 3).

Extrinsic work values and materialism varied by college plans, but the specific relationship depended on the work value being examined. Youth with no college aspirations reported lower values for status and prestige as well as respect compared to youth with 2-year ( $\beta$  range = -.126 to -.184) and 4-year plans ( $\beta$  range = -.127 to -.254, all  $p$ 's < .001). Youth with 2-year college plans valued a job with chances for advancement and promotion more than youth with 4-year ( $\beta = .214$ ) and no plans ( $\beta = .268$ ,  $p$ 's < .001). Regarding the value for a high-earning job, youth with no college plans and 2-year plans reported higher values than youth with 4-year plans ( $\beta = .376$  and  $.475$ , respectively,  $p$ 's < .001). Finally, youth with aspirations of graduating from a 4-year college were higher across all years on two of the materialism items – desiring and expecting a higher standard of living than their parents – compared to youth with 2-year college plans ( $\beta$ 's = .103 and .398) and youth with no college plans ( $\beta$ 's = .143 and .617, all  $p$ 's < .001). There were no differences by college plans on the third indicator of materialism – desiring lots of money. Despite the varying group differences in extrinsic work values by college plans, the average high school senior over this 30-year period, and especially since the 1990s, reported a high level of desire to achieve a high standard of living and to earn the money that this type of lifestyle requires, as well as the extrinsic rewards of status, respect, and prestige on the job.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

### *Intrinsic Work Values*

Youths' intrinsic work values, which included the importance of acquiring and maintaining a useful set of skills, seeing the results of one's work, and having a job that is

interesting, have declined slightly over these 30 years (see Figure 4). Endorsement of intrinsic work values peaked at 89% in 1989, and reached a low of 85% in 2003 before a slight upturn in 2004-2005. The overall pattern of decline in intrinsic work values was modest yet significant, especially given that three of the items deal with updating one's skill set. The need for all workers to continually increase their skills is inevitable due to technological innovations across industries (Bills, 2005; Fernandez, 2001). Moreover, extrinsic and intrinsic work values have different and somewhat opposing patterns, such that as youth's extrinsic values increased through the late 1980s and then remain relatively stable, trends in intrinsic values have steadily declined (see Figure 4).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Differences by college plans in the three specific intrinsic values of having a job that is interesting, that produces visible results, and that showcases one's skills and abilities favored respondents with 4-year ( $\beta$  range = .374 to .859,  $p$ 's < .001) and 2-year college plans ( $\beta$  range = .17 to .485,  $p$ 's < .001) over those with no college plans. However, the trends in the values of both learning new skills and having a job where skills won't go out of date showed a different pattern by educational aspirations (see Figure 5). Although all three groups placed declining value on learning new and adaptable work skills, the decline was smallest among respondents with 2-year college plans, who appear to have remained most attuned to the need for a transferable skill set. As shown in Figure 5, trends in valuing work skills have diverged by educational aspirations since 1992. Patterns for the two work skills items were similar and are shown combined in Figure 5; we thus describe the specific results for only one item, the value of work skills that will not become outdated. Before 1992, there were no significant differences between 2-year and no-plan groups on this item, and only three years were significantly or

marginally different between 2-year and 4-year groups, with all differences favoring youth with 2-year plans. Since 1992, however, youth with 2-year plans were significantly or marginally higher on valuing work skills than youth with no-plans in 10 out of the 13 remaining years and higher than youth with 4-year plans in 9 out of these 13 years ( $p$ 's  $\leq .1$ ). Thus, in the last 13 years, differences have emerged in youth's values of work skills depending on college aspirations, such that youth planning to graduate from 2-year colleges held greater value for adaptive and useful work skills.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

### *Centrality of Work*

The value trends described above are perhaps best understood in the context of how central future work has been to the identities of youth. Since the early 1990s, youth have been less and less likely to view work as a central part of their lives (see Figure 6). Though work centrality has remained relatively high across time (at approximately 73%) and higher for youth with 4-year plans than for those with 2-year ( $\beta = .104$ ) or no college plans ( $\beta = .132$ ,  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ), endorsement of work centrality for all youth has steadily declined from its peak in 1990 (80%) until the most recent data in 2005 (71%). This result extends the declining trends in work centrality cited by Crimmins et al. (1991) and Schulenberg et al. (1994), who tracked these trends up to only examined trends up to 1992, and shows that the decline has continued throughout the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We also found a steadily declining trend in youths' willingness to work regardless of their need for money. Specifically, 78% of youth in 1976 said that they would want to work even if they had enough money to live comfortably without working compared to 70% in 2005. Youth with 2- and 4-year college plans ( $\beta = .138$  and  $.243$ , respectively,  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ) were more likely to

say they would continue working if money were not an issue compared to their peers with no college plans.

Regardless of college plans, youth have become increasingly averse to the idea of working overtime in order to do a good job, particularly in the last 13 years (see Figure 6). High school seniors with 4-year college plans were more likely to say they would work overtime than their peers with no college plans ( $\beta = .245, p < .001$ ) or 2-year college aspirations ( $\beta = .114, p = .001$ ). Youth with no college plans were least likely, on average, to endorse the idea of working overtime, as they also reported lower value for overtime compared to youth with 2-year plans ( $\beta = -.131, p = .001$ ). We must note that the majority of youth on average have viewed work as important to their lives. However, given that work is a central domain of development on the minds of adolescents (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2003), it is noteworthy that the centrality of work and the value of working for its own sake have declined in recent years.

The reduced centrality of work is also apparent in a steady increase since 1976 in the value placed on having a job that provides opportunities for leisure time (see Figure 6). A job that provides time for other activities in life has been just as important for college- as non-college bound youth across time (all  $\beta$ 's n.s.). Together these trends suggest that youth may be shifting their focus toward life domains other than work.

### Discussion

Our results demonstrate shifts in American youth's work values across a changing social and economic context over the past 30 years. Taken together, the findings support three main conclusions: (a) some of the changes in youth's work values across time suggest positive adaptations to changes in the economy and job market; (b) contrasting trends in extrinsic and intrinsic work values may indicate that youth are placing decreasingly value on self-satisfying

aspects of work, and (c) work, in general, is becoming less central to the identities of youth, perhaps because of the uncertainties increasingly associated with the U.S. economy.

Furthermore, our results suggest that youth's work values are increasingly realistic, as youth with different educational aspirations value different aspects of work that seem to fit their expectations for future work experiences.

#### *Adaptations to Job Market Instability*

Job stability is not a realistic expectation in young adulthood, as young adults are changing jobs with increasing frequency in recent years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006a; 2006b). As noted above, globalization and technological advances have resulted in a labor market characterized by change and instability. Thus, the declining value youth have placed on job stability represents a positive adaptation to these changes in the labor market. It is possible that youth through the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century shifted their expectations after observing parents' shifting in job situations or media accounts of changing industry characteristics. This adaptability is present in youth regardless of their college ambitions, which suggests that this alteration in work values may be a universal response of American youth to the economic environment. However, high school seniors with higher educational aspirations may think they have a greater chance at job stability; they valued job stability more so than those with no college ambitions.

Youth with 2-year college aspirations have increasingly valued work skills since the 1990s, a trend that looks particularly adaptable for this group in terms of the current labor market context. The labor market has been changing radically since the 1990s, mirroring a shift in increasing values of work skills for youth with 2-year college plans. Community colleges are a viable point of intervention for providing better financial opportunities for the future as well as

practical work skills (Gracie, 1998; Settersten, 2005). Two-year institutions are said to be the fastest growing segment of higher education (Phillippe, 2005), yet in our national sample, the proportion of youth planning to graduate from 2-year institutions has not risen (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> In the case of valuing new and useful work skills, the trends for youth with plans to graduate from a 2-year institution suggest that their educational aspirations matched their values for work skills, as 2-year colleges place a high priority of on vocational skill development. Youth with 2-year aspirations held the highest values on advancement and promotion as well as earnings on the job compared to the other two groups of youth. These youth may hold hopes that the skills learned in their two-year degrees will propel them towards upward movement in their careers and high earnings. Unfortunately, all community colleges may not be equally equipped to meet young people's expectations for success.

#### *Contrasting Trends in Youth's Work Values*

Our evidence showed that since 1990, high school seniors have placed decreasing value on intrinsic aspects of work while remaining stable in their desire for extrinsic rewards of work. Though intrinsic work values have received more endorsement than extrinsic work values across the entire 30-year period, they appear to be converging. These converging trends may suggest another adaptive response of youth to the changing economic context. Specifically, decreasing trends in job stability suggest that young adults may be less able to choose jobs for their intrinsic benefits, while extrinsic rewards, and namely monetary benefits, are available regardless of the type of job one takes. Thus, increasing extrinsic and decreasing intrinsic work values may be changing based on the uncertainties about what types of jobs will be available. Meanwhile, there may be costs for society in terms of quality of services or products provided by companies as the workforce comes to place less value on the intrinsic rewards of work.

The types of extrinsic and intrinsic work values that youth value depend on their educational aspirations. Youth with 4-year aspirations have been most likely to value a higher standard of living than their parents enjoyed, and this group also highly valued many intrinsic aspects of work. Specifically, youth with aspirations to graduate from a 4-year college more highly valued a job that is interesting, that produces visible results, and that uses one's best skills and abilities compared to youth with no college aspirations. Youth with 4-year college aspirations were also most likely to endorse willingness to work overtime to do a good job at work and to say that work was going to be central to their lives. Thus, this group was most positive about their future careers and reported the highest intrinsic motivations for work. More youth each year are attending college, and the protracted transition to adulthood may mean that youth who transition to a 4-year college can take longer to solidify their career goals.

However, many youth do not go to college and not all college-bound youth actually graduate (Mortimer et al., 2002). Youth entering the work force earlier may adjust the importance placed on job characteristics based on the realities of their experiences (Johnson & Elder, 2002). Our results suggest that high school seniors with no college aspirations already look quite different from the other two groups and have a heavy dose of realism in their work values. These youth were least likely to value job stability, least likely to expect to keep the same job across adulthood, least likely to value extrinsic work rewards of respect, status, and prestige, and also least likely to value intrinsic work rewards of a job that is interesting, produces visible results, and uses one's skills and abilities. Furthermore, youth with no college plans were least likely to want to work regardless of the need for money and least likely to want to work overtime to do a good job. The only aspect of work we examined that these youth valued more than another group was earning money. Thus, the work values of youth with no college plans are

realistic insofar as they have low expectations across various dimensions of work and are likely to start or continue low-skill, entry-level jobs after high school. Unfortunately, however, these young people's values portray a bleak picture of the positives they hope to gain from the world of work.

Youth situated at the transition to adulthood are increasingly vulnerable to economic risks. Settersten (2005) argued that due to the economic uncertainties, the growing "sink-or-swim" mentality in the United States, and the inadequacies of safety nets, more young adults in the United States "seem to 'sink'" relative to other countries (p. 535). While these uncertainties even plague youth with 4-year degrees (Flanagan, 2005), youth with no educational aspirations may be particularly vulnerable to economic risk: In 2002, 3.8 million young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were left unaccounted for in connections to society – they were unemployed, had no degree beyond high school, and were not enrolled in school (KIDS COUNT, 2004). Some of this floundering may be due to a lack of knowledge about available resources to make connections between secondary educational experiences and the world of work (Johnson, 2002; Mortimer et al., 2002). Many scholars point to the failure of social institutions to intervene in the lives of young people who are not adequately prepared for the work world and adult life (e.g., Settersten, 2005).

#### *Decreasing Priority of Work for Youth*

The last 15 years of survey data (1991-2005) since the report from Schulenberg and colleagues (1994) have shown quite a decline in youth values of *many* work characteristics: interesting work, tangible results of work, adaptive work skills, willingness to work overtime, and a job with a predictable and secure future. Based on these trends as well as the declining trend in work centrality, it is very clear that youth since the 1990s have been placing less priority

on work as self-defining compared to youth in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, practically the only job characteristics we examined that did *not* decline in importance for young people since the 1990s were values of extrinsic job rewards, materialism, and a job that allows for more free time. Our results offer support for the idea that youth are increasingly “working to live” rather than “living to work.” In recent years, jobs have come to be valued by youth for their instrumental rewards – e.g., leisure time, compensation – and less so for the meaning or purpose they provide. This shift in youth’s work values may also be adaptive in an era of uncertainty about the jobs available and skills required.

### *Implications*

A revision of several social and institutional policies could offer support and meaning for youth given current economic uncertainties. Secondary schools may need to revert back to vocational training and practical skill-building rather than continuing to espouse an unrealistic and myopic college-for-all mentality (Rosenbaum & Person, 2003). Of course, schools will need governmental support and funding in order to make this shift. Moreover, the decreasing meaning youth place on work, and the adaptive nature of this shift in values, suggests the need for institutionalized alternatives to work to help youth redefine their possible selves (Flanagan, 2005). Civic engagement is one such alternative, offering social connections as well as public hope that engaging in democracy as a collective can improve the conditions of society (Flanagan, 2005). National service policies can encourage young people to explore civic engagement as an aspect of identity while giving them work skills and a sense of purpose and meaning in life. As a society, we should be taking tangible steps towards helping young people adapt to the uncertainties of the work world by redefining preparation for adulthood and reducing the inequalities that persist across groups.

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Each data point represents a different sample of individuals, so time-trend correlations should be interpreted as correlations of means across years and not as correlations for the same individuals over time.

<sup>2</sup>The majority of our measures come from the same set, MTF Form 4, items A08A-W. The introduction to these items is: “Different people may look for different things in their work. Below is a list of some of these things. Please read each one, then indicate how important this thing is for you.”

<sup>3</sup> A proportion of youth in our sample, which was too small to examine separately, expected to attend a 2-year college and then transfer to a 4-year program, and these youth are captured in our 4-year college trends.

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Figure 1

*Trends in Youth's College Plans over Time*

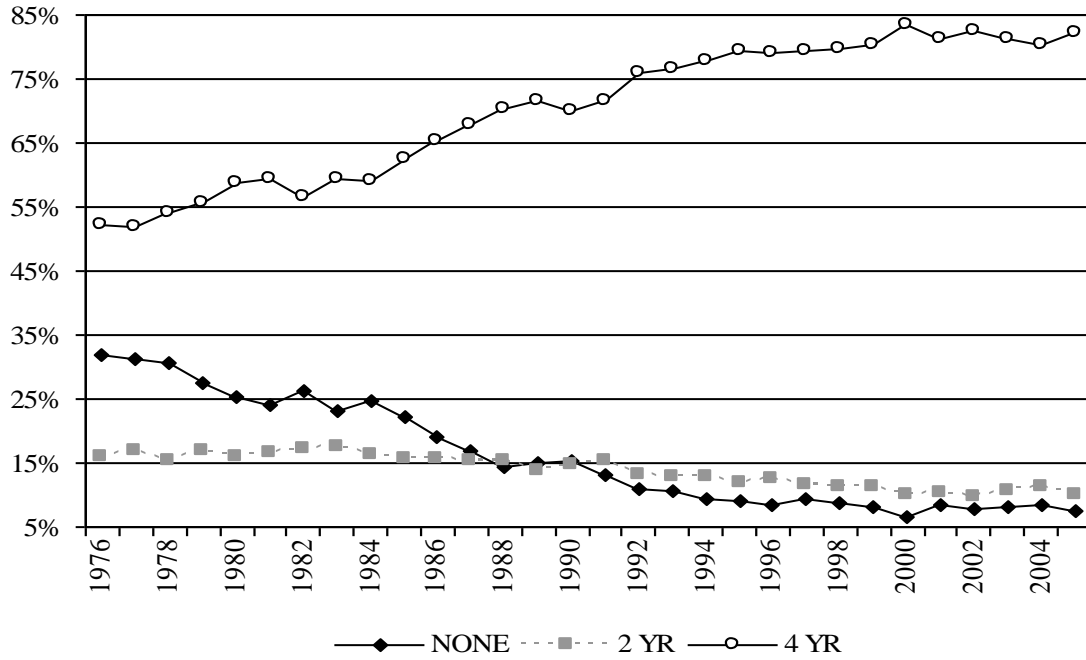


Figure 2

*Trends in Youth Values and Expectations of Job Stability*

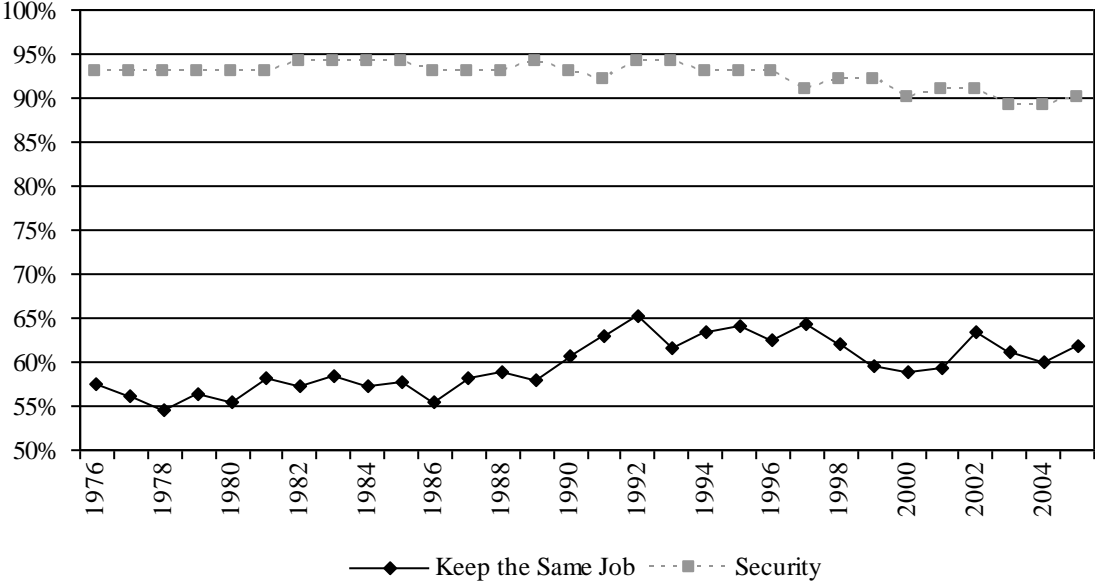


Figure 3

*Trends in Youth Values of Extrinsic Work Characteristics and Materialism*

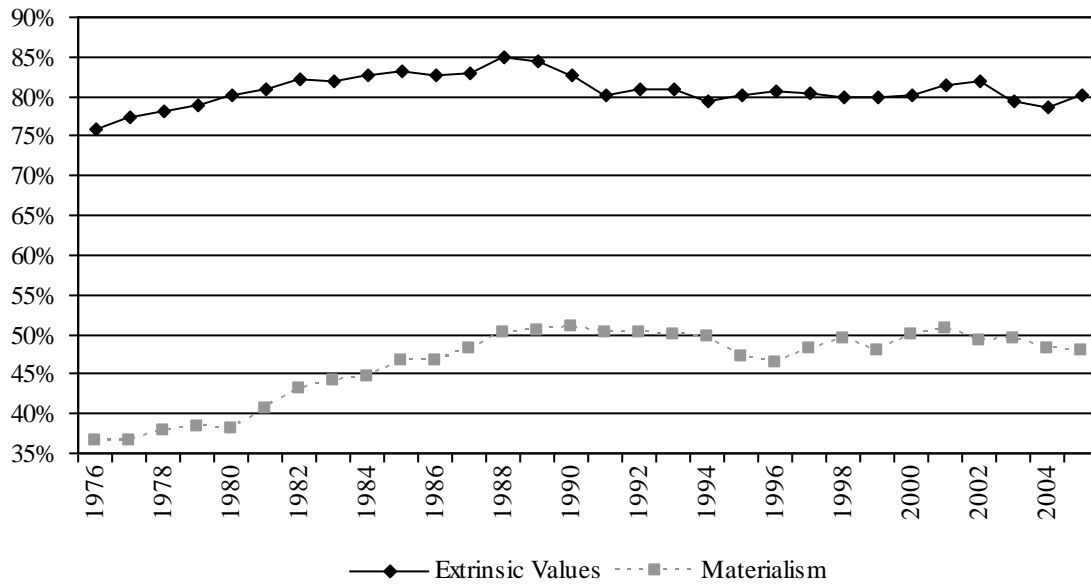


Figure 4.

*Trends in Intrinsic and Extrinsic Work Values*

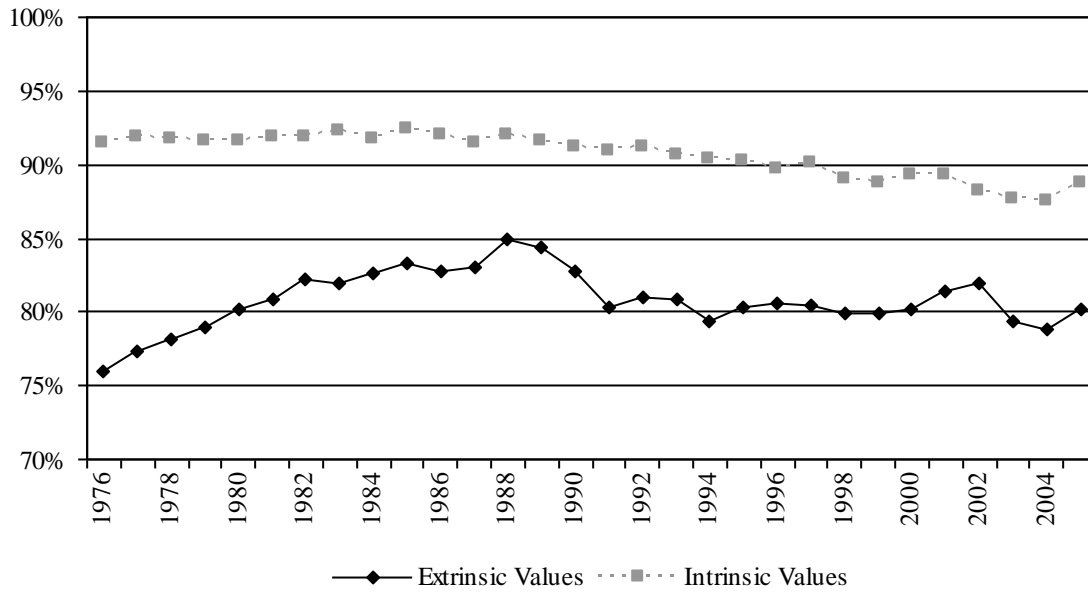


Figure 5

*Trends in Importance of Work Skills by College Plans*

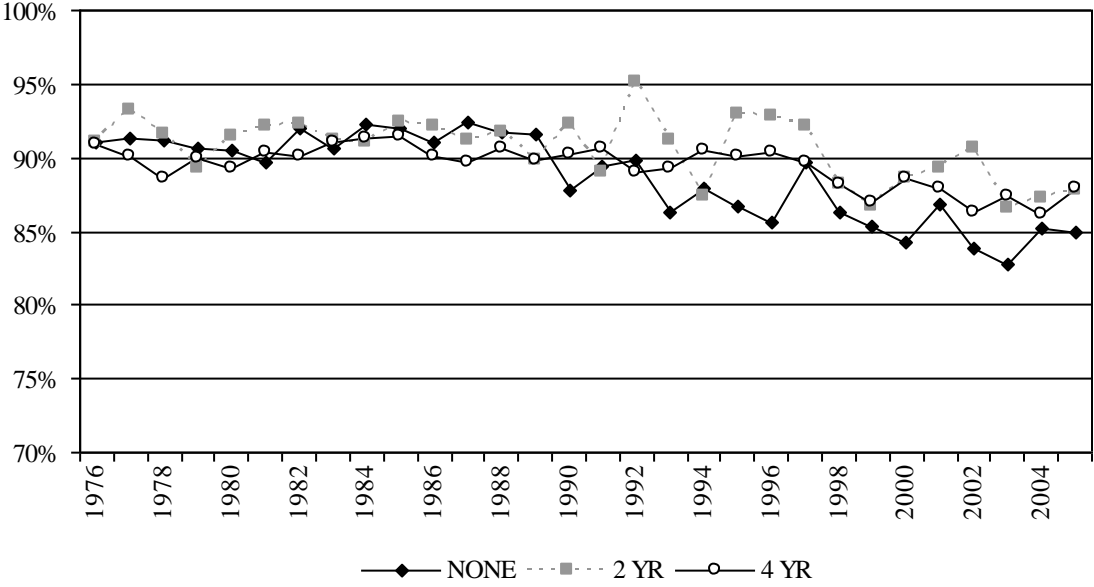


Figure 6

*Trends in Work Centrality, Working Overtime, and Leisure Time*

