

CALL FOR ARTICLES

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The Changing College-to-Work Transition and The Rise of Precarious Graduates

Edited by

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A college degree, once regarded as offering a reliable pathway to stable professional employment and upward mobility, no longer delivers on that promise. Over the past several decades, structural shifts in both the economy and higher education have fundamentally altered the landscape for recent college graduates (hereafter RCGs). The continued expansion of college attainment alongside slower growth in high-skilled job creation (Beaudry, Green, and Sand 2016) has made it increasingly difficult for many RCGs to secure employment commensurate with their credentials (Arum and Roksa 2014; Attewell and Witteveen 2023; Lu, Li, and Ciocca Eller 2026), or to find work at all (Kahn 2010; Rothstein 2023). The result is often a prolonged period of joblessness, depressed earnings, precarious employment arrangements, and limited opportunities for advancement.

Recent data show that the unemployment rate of RCGs has exceeded 5%, reaching levels not seen since the Great Recession. More strikingly, the unemployment rate of RCGs now surpasses that of the workforce as a whole, a pattern not observed in over three decades. Compounding this, underemployment, defined as college graduates working in jobs that do not require a college degree (such as retail, other service or manual work, or routine clerical positions), has remained persistently high, hovering around 40% over past decades (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2026).

These labor market challenges are further exacerbated by the burden of rising student debt, which intensifies economic insecurity and constrains life choices (Scott-Clayton 2018), including career choices, homeownership, and family formation. As a result, while college graduates still earn more on average than those without a degree, this wage premium has stagnated (Autor, Goldin, and Katz, 2020; Bengali et al 2025). Once student debt is factored in, the economic return to a degree is considerably smaller and, for some demographic groups, negligible or even negative (Looney and Yanellis 2024; Buchmann et al. 2025).

Emerging technological transformation may further complicate the transition from college to work. The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence is beginning to automate or replace many entry-level white-collar jobs that traditionally served as entry points for RCGs (Hampole et al.

2025). This change potentially threatens to reduce opportunities for RCGs to gain experience and establish themselves in the labor market (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025).

Given these converging pressures, the scale of employment challenges facing RCGs is substantial and growing. Public discourse has widely characterized the current environment as among the toughest labor markets in decades for RCGs. Many RCGs are likely to encounter periods of unemployment, underemployment, or career instability at some point in their working lives. Importantly, these experiences often have lasting consequences. Research on labor market scarring demonstrates that early-career employment adversity can depress earnings, slow occupational mobility, and shape long-term career trajectories (Oreopoulos, von Wachter, and Heisz 2012; Pedulla 2016; Rothstein 2023; Sharone 2024; Lu, Li, and Ciocca Eller 2026).

The implications of these developments extend well beyond labor market outcomes. RCGs experiencing employment struggles occupy a distinct social position: they have high levels of educational attainment and carry correspondingly high expectations but face considerable economic precarity typically associated with less-educated workers. This mismatch between educational investment and expectations on the one hand and labor market realities on the other positions this group as a theoretically and empirically important population of inquiry. Their experiences may generate distinctive orientations toward work, social mobility, and institutions, and translate into new patterns of social and civic (dis)engagement.

Key Research Questions

This issue seeks to advance our understanding of the patterns, causes, consequences, and broader societal and political implications of unemployment, underemployment, and economic insecurity among college graduates in America since the Great Recession, with particular attention to the post-COVID era. We welcome original empirical contributions from across all social science disciplines that address the growing labor market challenges facing this population and their individual and collective ramifications.

We are especially interested in contributions that situate this group in relation to meaningful comparison groups—which may include less-educated workers and/or college graduates who have achieved greater economic success and security—and examine how well-being, attitudes, and behaviors differ between these groups. Such comparison helps identify what is distinctive about the experiences and outcomes of precarious graduates.

We welcome studies using a wide range of methodological approaches, including survey research, administrative data analysis, qualitative methods, mixed-methods, experiments, quasi-experimental designs, and computational methods, among others. We especially encourage submissions that leverage novel data sources or methods. A number of existing national datasets provide opportunities to study college graduates, including but not limited to the Current Population Survey (CPS), General Social Survey (GSS), National Longitudinal Studies of Youth (NLSY), Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG). Administrative data that links education and labor market outcomes, such as that provided by the Texas Education Research Center, offers large sample sizes that can allow

researchers to zero in on groups that are most at risk of unemployment or underemployment. On the demand side, employer job postings data from platforms such as Glassdoor/Indeed or occupational databases such as O*NET provide opportunities to study how employers respond to or contribute to changes in educational requirements across jobs, and how these requirements vary over time and across labor markets.

The issue focuses primarily on the United States. We recognize that the employment challenges facing college graduates are a global phenomenon. We hope this issue will stimulate research in other national contexts, as well as comparative work that help shed light on how institutional arrangements and policy environments shaping graduates' outcomes across societies.

Proposals should include a clearly stated research question, a description of the data sources and methods, preliminary findings or evidence of feasibility, and a timeline for completing the project. Proposals should situate the work within relevant literatures and articulate a clear contribution to the goals of this issue.

Below is a set of thematic topics that illustrate the scope of the issue but are not exhaustive. We welcome proposals that engage related questions not discussed here.

Patterns, Trends, and Structural Causes

An important set of questions concerns how RCG unemployment and underemployment have evolved over time and what structural forces drive these trends (Kahn 2010; Rothstein 2023). How have employment outcomes for college graduates changed over time, across cohorts, and across economic cycles? How have *perceptions* of economic insecurity changed among college graduates in recent years? Can changes in economic outcomes explain changes in perceptions of economic insecurity, or are other factors necessary to account for this phenomenon?

Contributions might examine how macroeconomic conditions—including secular shifts in the demand for college-educated workers, changes in institutional linkages between education and employment, and broader technological transformation such as the expansion of remote work and the rise of AI—shape RCG employment pathways and workplace experiences (DiPrete et al. 2017; Hampole et al. 2025). Comparisons between “hard” economic outcomes and survey data on individual beliefs may be insightful for understanding the experiences of RCGs.

A second set of questions concerns how employment and socioeconomic challenges are distributed across social groups. Do adverse labor market outcomes fall disproportionately on graduates from disadvantaged demographic or socioeconomic backgrounds such as gender, race, and class (Gaddis 2015; Quadlin 2018)? In particular, how do these inequalities shape intergenerational economic mobility (Chetty et al. 2026; Torche 2011)? Growing difficulties in translating educational attainment into commensurate labor market positions may have especially important consequences for graduates from less advantaged families, and yet research often finds that the earnings return to a college education is, if anything, larger for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds on average (e.g., Zimmerman 2014; Bleemer 2022). How can we square these two considerations? Does research that estimates average returns miss rising inequality in outcomes?

In addition, how do attained characteristics, including degree type, field of study, and the selectivity or type of the graduating institution (Roksa and Levey 2010; Dale and Krueger 2014; Posselt and Grodsky 2017; Moss-Pech 2025; Ciocca Eller et al. 2026), shape likelihood of unemployment and underemployment? What is the relationship between the rise and fall of for-profit colleges and precarity among degree holders? Contributions that examine intersections among these ascriptive and attained characteristics are also welcome (Conwell and Quadlin 2022).

The role of universities could also be important and worth exploring more. How have changes in the higher education sector—including rising tuition and student debt, the expansion and subsequent contraction of for-profit colleges, growing differentiation across institutions (e.g., elite private, public, community colleges), and changes in admission mechanisms (e.g., the test-optional movement)—shaped graduates’ exposure to economic precarity? More broadly, research could examine how higher education institutions themselves contribute to or mitigate inequalities in the transition from college to work.

Additionally, we encourage research on geographic variation in RCG employment challenges (Conzelmann et al. 2025). How does RCG’s employment outlook vary across regions and metropolitan areas? What local economic conditions, industry compositions, or policy environments explain these geographic differences (Deneault 2026)? What spillover effects do RCG’s employment conditions have on less-educated workers and local labor markets in general?

Economic Consequences and Labor Market Processes

A central concern of this issue is the economic toll of unemployment and underemployment on RCGs (Abel and Deitz 2016). Contributions may examine how these experiences affect earnings trajectories, job security, occupational mobility, access to benefits, and overall financial stability. Research on wealth accumulation among economically precarious graduates is also of interest.

Student debt could be a compounding factor. How does debt burden interact with adverse labor market experiences to shape graduates’ economic security, and what are the implications for their major financial decisions such as homeownership and savings (Mezza et al. 2020)?

We also welcome research on employer hiring practices in the context of oversupply of college graduates and increasingly uncertain market for skilled labor (Rivera 2016; Modestino, Shoag, and Balance 2020). How do employers evaluate different collegiate credentials and past employment experience when the supply of degree-holders exceeds demand? How do employers decide which graduates are hired, for what roles, and at what wages?

Subjective Experience, Meaning Making, and Adaptation

Beyond the objective dimensions of labor market position, this issue is interested in how RCGs subjectively experience, interpret, and navigate economic precarity (Lamont 2018; Ayala-Hurtado 2025). How do they reconcile high aspirations with experiences of joblessness, underemployment, or stalled mobility? Do economically insecure RCGs experience new forms of stigma or recognition gaps despite their educational credentials? What are the cognitive and narrative strategies RCGs use to manage this dissonance, whether through adjusting expectations, reframing success, attributing outcomes to structural forces, or other strategies? It is especially interesting to examine how similar experiences of economic insecurity and status dislocation are interpreted differently across educational groups, such as by comparing their experiences and responses with those among the traditional non-college working class (Kramer 2016; Lunz Trujillo 2022).

Expectations are another important dimension of meaning-making. How do RCGs and their parents perceive the changing economic returns to college and the value of higher education? When expectations diverge from realities, how do RCGs revise their beliefs and change their behaviors? Contributions might also examine how expectations about future prospects shape the educational aspirations and decisions of subsequent generations of young people?

We also encourage research on identity and social comparison. How do unemployment and underemployment reshape RCG's sense of social worth, identity, and cultural membership? Do economically precarious RCGs identify with their more successful college-educated peers, or do shared workplace experiences draw them toward coworkers without a degree? What factors shape their class identity, and what are their downstream consequences for attitudes and behavior?

Social Relationships, Life-course Transitions, and Well-being

Contributions may examine how unemployment and underemployment affect RCG's social relationships, transition to adulthood, and other life-course transitions (Newman 1988; Sharone 2024). How do unemployment, underemployment, and economic insecurity affect friendships, romantic relationships, and intergenerational relationships? Living arrangements offer another window into these processes. Are precarious RCGs more likely to delay independent household formation, return to or remain in parental homes, remain financially dependent on parents for health insurance or intergenerational transfers, or pursue non-traditional living arrangements?

Research on family formation is also of interest: How do RCG's adverse labor market experiences shape decisions about partnership, marriage, and parenthood? Drawing on frameworks developed to explain the retreat from marriage among economically marginalized populations without a college degree (Cherlin 2014), contributions might examine whether similar dynamics are emerging among RCGs facing precarity.

We also welcome research on the socio-psychological consequences of RCG economic precarity. How do unemployment and underemployment affect graduates' mental health, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and life satisfaction? Building on the literature connecting economic despair to health and risk behavior among non-college graduates (Case and Deaton 2021; Moreira, Goidel, and

Armstrong 2025), contributions may examine whether and how similar dynamics operate among RCGs.

Civic, Political, and Collective Responses

The political and civic ramifications of widespread RCG economic precarity constitute another important area of inquiry (Vaisey 2006; Milkman 2017). How do experiences of unemployment, underemployment, student debt burdens, and unmet mobility expectations shape trust in institutions, including higher education itself, the labor market, and government? For example, research could examine whether these RCGs are more likely to express cynicism toward meritocratic ideologies or disillusionment with mainstream institutions.

We also encourage contributions on civic and community engagement. Do adverse labor market experiences depress participation in community organizations, voluntary associations, and public life, or do they generate new forms of collective solidarity and mobilization?

Politically, how do RCGs respond to precarity through political action, withdrawal, or new forms of political activity (MacDonald 2025)? Do such experiences shape political attitudes, partisan identification, and policy preferences (Kitschelt and Rehm 2023)? Over the past decade, we have seen a rise in “educational polarization” between college graduates and those without degrees in terms of partisanship and voting behavior (Zingher 2022; Grossmann and Hopkins 2024; Zingher 2026). How do precarious RCGs fit into this growing cleavage? Does the tension between credentials and class generate new political identification among this group? Likewise, women are dramatically outperforming men educationally among Gen Z, the youngest adult cohort (Buchmann et al 2025). Does this gendered gap in educational attainment help to explain the growing political divide between young men and women?

Finally, contributions examining organizing and collective responses to precarity are of interest. What responses have precarious RCGs had in the face of the government’s repeated failures to deliver student debt relief? Are RCGs in precarious employment drawn to unionization or other forms of labor organizing (MacDonald 2026)? How do their organizational behaviors compare to those of less-educated workers in similar economic circumstances? To what extent do they build solidarity with less-educated coworkers and existing labor movements, and what does this mean for the future of organized labor?

The Editorial Team

Lu, Riehl, and Zingher bring complementary expertise to the proposed issue. Lu studies social stratification and labor markets, with a focus on the college-to-work transition. Riehl is a labor economist whose work focuses on competition in college enrollment and its implications for students’ career outcomes. Zingher is an expert on political behavior, class, and educational polarization, especially on how education, class, and other social divisions structure political attitudes and behavior. Moreover, all three co-editors have devoted considerable attention to studying how changes in the country’s level of educational attainment has downstream social,

economic, and political consequences. Together, the expertise of the editorial team spans the major domains of the proposed issue and has enabled them to identify questions that would be difficult to develop from either disciplinary perspective alone. Their disciplinary backgrounds in sociology, economics, and political science also help engage a multidisciplinary audience and encourage submissions from a range of social science fields.

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to three pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on November 10, 2026, to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

In other words, your submission may be up to five pages in length. This includes everything, abstract, references, etc. Note that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, **so please start your application at least two days before the deadline.** All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Everyone submitting to the journal must abide by RSF's AI policy:

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will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org. **Do not email the editors about the issue.**

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **April 9, 2027** (with a group dinner on the night of the 8th). The selected contributors will gather for a two-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 3/9/27**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Note that submission of the draft prior to the conference is mandatory for participation. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 7/14/27. The

papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 2/17/28. The full and final issue will be published open access on the RSF journal website in fall 2028, as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse

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