



## Career Funneling

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[What inspired you to conduct this research on career funneling?]

AMY BINDER, PHD: So in career funneling, which was a paper that Dan and I and a third graduate student, Nick Bloom, published in 2016 in the journal *Sociology of Education*, we were looking at the extraordinary numbers of students at private elite universities who

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: were marching off to an incredibly narrow band of jobs. And we began by looking at the numbers going into finance and consulting. And I-- this is before Dan and Nick came on to the project-- and I had been reading both social scientific work and in the public media that extraordinary numbers of students were doing so, such that a *New York Times*

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: article in 2007 wrote that nearly 50% of students at Harvard went into either investment banking or consulting. And I found this number to be shocking. I wondered about how it was that students were taking jobs

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: in such numbers, and I was really interested in what universities were doing to create these kind of escalators to get students into these jobs. So often, when we think about job taking, we think about how individuals have particular passions or preferences for certain kinds of jobs.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: And we also think about how the labor market pulls students, or people, potential employees, into jobs. But we don't really think about the organizational level of universities as helping to create the conditions under which certain jobs become prestigious in attribution by the people who

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: are looking for them.

DANIEL DAVIS: It was really interesting, for me, when I first joined on this, because you think of these students at Harvard and Stanford as having the whole world of opportunity in front of them. So why would they end up going into such a narrow band of fields?

AMY BINDER, PHD: OK, so in terms of the research question for this book, it really came out of not only thinking about these empirical questions-- like how many students are taking these jobs in such a narrow band of fields-- but also from work that I had been doing looking at how universities are really

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: the place where a lot of student identities, student desires, come about. So a book that I had written prior to this research was called *Becoming Right-- How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives*, and that was a comparative case study of two campuses. And we noticed that while conservatives

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: on both of those campuses held to very much the same political tenets-- low taxes, small government, and so forth-- the way that they expressed themselves-- whether in a very provocative manner, in a much more civil kind of refined manner-- was shaped incredibly by the campuses that they were on.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: So bringing that kind of conceptual framework to the question of all of these students taking these jobs in this narrow band of fields, we wanted to look at how universities shape the preferences for particular kinds of jobs and kind of decrease interest in other kinds of jobs.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: So the research question was to think about the university, think about the organizational machinery on that university, and how it is a very important intermediary

actor between individuals on the one hand and the labor force on the other.

DANIEL DAVIS: A lot of sociology falls in sort of this dichotomy, right? Its either individual characteristics, so in this case student backgrounds, or market forces, what jobs are paying the best or something like that? But often overlooked is that mezzo level. So organizations, whether it's workplaces, colleges, whatever, they have this really powerful ability to shape people.

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: And as sociologists we're curious which of these variables, obviously all of these play in. But this piece really foregrounds that the mezzo level. And we are making the argument that it may be more powerful than individual characteristics or broader market forces than maybe a lot of sociologists

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: have assumed in the past. [Which research methods did you use?]

AMY BINDER, PHD: I have always been predominantly qualitative research. So I've used interviews, I've used media sources, I've used observations. And I think that those kinds of methods really help you get inside the black box of these larger

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: social forces and patterns. It helps you understand how students are interpreting their lives and so on. So we used interviews and we also used what's known as a comparative case methodology. So with comparative cases, you try to find a couple of cases that can really speak to one another and help you get serious leverage as the researcher.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: So we picked, in this study, two campuses-- Harvard and Stanford-- which have a lot of similarities. They both seem to be atop the national rankings and international rankings for most selective schools, most prestigious schools. But we also selected them because they have some really

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: interesting differences. And those would be proximity to different labor markets. Harvard has a little bit stodgier reputation and Stanford has a little bit quirrier reputation. And we were wondering the degree to which these similarities and differences would shape students' pathways out

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: of college into these kinds of jobs.

DANIEL DAVIS: There's a qualitative method, mostly interviews, although I did spend some time on Stanford's campus, which seeing these different departments in proximity to each other it was helpful for me to do a bit of a field observational approach at that school. [What did this case study uncover or confirm and what can

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: we do with this information?]

AMY BINDER, PHD: Our findings confirmed that a huge number of students are marching off to these jobs. Our findings also indicated that a lot of the students, even among those who are taking these jobs, are unhappy about taking these jobs, or at least express ambivalence about them.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: We know what the perks are-- they have high salaries, they seemed to be incredibly prestigious for one reason because students compete so hard for them. And remember, these are students who have competed every step along the way. Yeah, they've competed to do well in middle school, so they could do well in high school,

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: so they could get into the college of their choice. And so the kind of structured recruitment on campus that is run through career services and which allows these kinds of firms to come onto campus to recruit these students, these are also highly competitive structures.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: And these students know how to compete and there's a lot of resonance between what they're doing here for these jobs and what they've been doing all of their lives. And so we found that career services allow these companies in, they charge them a lot of money

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: to have a presence on campus, to coordinate resume drops, to interview students on campus, to hold receptions. And one of our colleagues, Lauren Rivera, who's a professor at the Kellogg School at Northwestern estimates that 75% of students on campus

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: think about entering the structured recruitment, and about 50% go through it, with extraordinary numbers coming out of it. So we found this incredibly intensive recruitment structure and we found that this created this peer culture in which there was a ton of energy, a ton of talk,

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: and a sense that if you're not participating in it you're kind of missing out on something important on campus.

DANIEL DAVIS: And for a lot of these students, you know, they haven't spent a lot of time thinking about their own passions and interests. And so if you don't really know what you want to do and you're getting toward the end of your college career with sort of this big lingering question mark, this competitive set up structures looks like a solution. And they tell themselves, well these will be temporary jobs.

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: So a couple years banking analyst program or a couple years at McKinsey, and then I can do something else. But of course, where you go to work ends up shaping your networks and the things you know about and the things you apply for after. So they see these jobs, in some ways, as putting the decision off, but not realizing that they are still making choices as they do it.

AMY BINDER, PHD: And often these jobs serve as kind of golden handcuffs for these students. You start making a certain amount of money, you see yourself as being kind of in the center of decision making and power, and then it's very hard, even if you do somehow, ineffably, find your passion, making a leap to doing something else is harder to do.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: We do see, from other research, that students who enter consulting are more likely to go into other kinds of work. Students who enter investment banking, in particular, are likely to stay in the financial world.

DANIEL DAVIS: Another finding what was interesting, to me at least, was that when we started the project we thought from previous literature there were three main career paths, all right? It was going to be Wall Street finance, management consulting, or McKinsey or something, and law. But then once we started doing the interviews with the students, we found that law

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: had slipped in the sort of prestige structure, and had been replaced by high tech jobs. And so it's interesting that in any given era the sort of hierarchy of what's seen as a most prestigious job, it evolves. It's fluid. And so over time these most desired kinds of jobs can change.

AMY BINDER, PHD: And yet another interesting thing, riffing off of Dan's response, is that when we found that students were interested in high tech, we thought OK they might be interested in all kinds of high tech. They might be interested in biotech, they might be interested in new sources of energy tech. And there were definitely some students and graduates who we talked with who said as much.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: But most of that kind of prestigious, the kind of job I want to get right after college job, that they were talking about were in the mega industries or the mega firms of Apple,

Google, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and so on.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: So in the same way that just a few jobs had gained so much currency in finance and consulting, it was also true in high tech. And high tech had this interesting kind of flavor to it for these students. There was kind of a halo effect to tech.

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: We had just been through the economic recession when we were conducting these interviews. Students had begun to look a little more askance at these kinds of jobs. I knew that their peers were judging them if they were going into Wall Street in particular. So tech kind of had a "I can get into this thing

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: that everybody recognizes and it's not so bad as anything else". Of course, we have a lot of information about how these kinds of corporations in high tech have the same kind of, let's say, imperialistic designs as some of the investment banks and consulting firms as well. So we weren't convinced by that whole kind of halo of tech.

DANIEL DAVIS: Amy had mentioned the structured recruiting that's on campus, right? And so administrators create this. And so when we were doing the interviews with them and sort of asking, why do you give so much more space and time to some of these firms than others? And they're like, well these are what the students want, so we're responding just to demand. And then we talked to the students

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: and, why do you want this? Well there is so much more stuff on campus for it and their peers are talking about it. And so there becomes a sort of circular loop where administrators are trying to respond to student demand, while also manufacturing that same demand they're responding to. And so you end up with this loop effect. So some of these students, they don't know exactly what they want to do.

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: But large firms are able to hire earlier in the year, they know that they have a certain cohort size need for an incoming set of entry level jobs. So they're able to offer these jobs earlier. And so students will start seeing their peers getting job offers, and if you're not sure what you want to do that creates this added anxiety.

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: Because now, you know, Lacey has a job and I don't. And I think I want to go into marketing, but marketing doesn't offer jobs for quite a few more months. So you have this choice-- wait or just jump into the structured recruiting as well? And a lot of students will make that choice, because they're nervous of the future. And so it creates that funneling effect.

DANIEL DAVIS [continued]: [What questions could you pose to students for them to further reflect on this case study?]

AMY BINDER, PHD: So the questions that I would ask are of universities and less of students. You know, students have agency. These are powerful people. But they're 22-year-olds by the time they're taking these jobs. We're really focusing in on undergrads. We weren't looking at graduate students. We're talking about 22-year-olds, or 18 to 22-year-olds, because they're also

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: thinking about internships along the way. So keeping with that organizational level analysis that we set out to study from the beginning, I really ask questions of universities. Sometimes university administrators, presidents, faculty, others will question students

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: and why can't you find your passions? And why are you marching off to this narrow band of jobs? And why are you so superficial? And why are you so materialistic? And the problem with those questions is that these administrators are not looking at their own practices. They're not looking at what they've set up on campus to create the peer culture that grows up

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: to match the organizational machinery of all of the structured recruitment. And so universities have to do a lot better job of being ingenious and being innovative, and maybe not allowing some of these gold plates recruiters on campus. Or if they do continue to allow all of this recruitment

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: on campus, to think about alternatives for other sectors in society that don't have the same amount of money to come on campus and lavish hundreds of thousands of dollars on students, which helps the career services center subsidize itself as well. So I'd really direct questions to campus leaders as opposed

AMY BINDER, PHD [continued]: to students. It doesn't mean that there aren't questions to be asked of students, but that's where I'd really put the responsibility and the focus.