

Introduction

One sunny afternoon in June 2005, Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Inc., addressed a jovial crowd of newly minted Stanford University graduates and their families. Sharing his thoughts on the meaning of work, Jobs offered the graduates some advice:

Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know it when you find it.¹

Facing this excited and apprehensive audience of career aspirants, Jobs advocated that, above all else, they should seek work that they love. Anything less would be settling.

Jobs's philosophy so resonated with audiences that a dozen newspapers reprinted his speech.² But Jobs was hardly the first to make this point. The advice to "do what you love" or, more commonly, to "follow your passion" can be found on dentists' office waiting room posters, throw pillows, coffee mugs, and mobile phone covers.³ It is shorthand for the idea that people who are making career decisions should prioritize their personal sense of

fulfillment and self-expression in those decisions rather than settle for what is available or what will proffer the highest salary.

The refrain of Jobs's advice echoed through many conversations I had with new college graduates. Claire, a graduate from the University of Houston (UH) who worked part-time at a natural history museum, for example, said that loving her work was not just important for her career success; it was key to her quality of life.⁴

I want[ed] to pursue something that I truly care about and think is very interesting and that I can learn from. I don't want to pick something just because it's a really popular field that has a lot of jobs. Because, yes, finding a job is incredibly important, but it would just hurt me to totally abandon my more social science, more anthropology, liberal studies background, just to find a computer sciences job that was really popular, or go into business school or something . . . just in order to find a job that would make more money. . . . I feel like if I had to pick a job just because it was a job, then it would just be boring to me, and I wouldn't be able to really excel at it because I just wasn't passionate about it. (Middle-class white woman)

As I show in this book, Claire is far from alone among her peers in her endorsement of passion-based career decisions over “abandoning” passion to find a job that might offer more financial security. And I find that many college-educated workers in the United States similarly endorse Jobs's “do what you love” advice.

But if we look more closely at Jobs's comment, we can begin to make out a curious tension. Jobs, who was one of the most successful capitalists of the twentieth century and one of the most demanding of his employees' time and dedication, advised new college-educated career aspirants to follow their hearts rather than seek employment security, professional notoriety, or a decent salary.⁵ “Love what you do,” he said. “Don't settle.”

This tension is not unique to Jobs's philosophy. The tension between capitalist demands for dedicated work and the ubiquitous cultural expectation for individualism and self-fulfillment characterizes many postindustrial societies. On the one hand, modern capitalist economies expect to have workers who are willing to put the needs of their organizations and their employers first. To be an “ideal worker” is to prioritize the desires and interests of one's employer above one's own.⁶ White-collar workers are further expected to enact “work devotion”—or single-minded loyalty and

allegiance to one's job—even if that devotion is not genuine.⁷ This ideal worker expectation prevails in twenty-first-century labor markets even as employers are increasingly less likely to reciprocate such commitments.⁸

On the other hand, cultural expectations for individualistic self-fulfillment are ubiquitous in postindustrial societies.⁹ The cultural valuation of individualism and self-expression has grown dramatically since the 1950s and along with it, the expectation that individuals should have as many opportunities as possible to make autonomous choice about the direction and character of their own lives.¹⁰ As a result, demands for self-expressive freedoms have expanded into virtually all social and life realms in places like the United States, including choices of occupations and career paths.¹¹

In the midst of these and other tensions and constraints, how do workers and career aspirants actually define good work and good career decision-making? Do they seek to maximize economic stability and security in their career choices? Do they ascribe to Jobs's and Claire's philosophy? How do they balance these considerations in their own career decision-making, and what are they willing to sacrifice to meet their priorities?

Career decisions are serious life decisions. Early occupational pathways can have lasting consequences for wages, mobility, and social status over the course of one's life.¹² Like other major life choices (e.g., whether to relocate to a new city, whether to have children), career decisions are enormously complex, with few formal institutional guidelines. And, like other major life choices, shared cultural meanings about "good" or "right" decisions are important to how people get their bearings and set their priorities, even under the most constrained life circumstances.¹³ These cultural meanings, I argue, shape not only how people make decisions about their own career paths but also how they come to understand the labor force overall—whether, for example, they think labor market processes are generally fair and whether they praise or criticize the career decisions of others.

To the limited extent that social scientists have considered these cultural perceptions, most scholars have presumed that people prioritize economic stability, employment security, and/or occupational status in their career decisions. Research on artists and musicians has shown that workers in the culture industry expect to manage tensions between artistic autonomy and employment precariousness as a matter of course and are often willing to sacrifice stable work and robust salaries to pursue their

passion.¹⁴ Yet this prioritization of passion is seen as the exception that makes the rule. Career aspirants, scholars often assume, are usually looking for the most well paying, most stable, and/or most prestigious occupational paths they can get given their level of training.¹⁵

But something is off about that assumption. Casual perusal of best-selling career advice books and popular advice columns reveals titles like *The Power of Being Yourself*¹⁶ and *What's Next? Follow Your Passion and Find Your Dream Job*,¹⁷ which sound more like refrains from Steve Jobs's speech than the sentiments of workers seeking to maximize their economic potential. What do career aspirants (individuals such as college students who are preparing for full-time engagement in the labor force) and workers value in career decisions? What cultural narratives do they use to make sense of career decision-making broadly and to set their priorities, and how are these cultural beliefs reflected in their actual decisions?

In this book, I argue that opportunities for self-expression and personal meaning-making are central to how many workers and aspiring workers—particularly the college-educated—define good work in the context of the contemporary postindustrial labor force. Although most career aspirants and college-educated workers recognize the importance of financial security and are clear-eyed about the challenges of employment in the modern labor force, many prioritize fulfilling work over these considerations. Many even willingly sacrifice a better salary and greater employment stability to pursue work they find fulfilling.

Using a robust, multimethod approach encompassing over 170 interviews with career aspirants and career counselors, four surveys of US workers, and an experiment, I illustrate that a powerful cultural frame of career decision-making is what I term the *passion principle*. The passion principle is a morally laden cultural schema that elevates self-expression and fulfillment—in the form of intellectual, emotional, and personal connections to an occupational field—as the central guiding principle for career decisions, especially but not exclusively among the college-educated. It urges individuals to seek work that is meaningful and to prioritize personal investment in their work. This schema frames decision-making aimed at maximizing one's economic and social status as morally questionable in contrast, in part because it would divert people from paths of self-realization.

WHAT IS PASSION, AND WHO VALUES
PASSION-SEEKING?

Passion, as I use it here, refers to a deep personal commitment to an occupational field (e.g., sociology, corporate tax law) or productive task realm (e.g., infant care, computer coding).¹⁸ Although potentially correlated, passion is distinct from individuals' satisfaction with the organizations they work for, the colleagues they work with, and the people who supervise them.¹⁹ It is about individuals' sense of connection to, and sense of fulfillment from, their substantive career fields.

Although passions seem highly individualistic and idiosyncratic, they are fundamentally rooted in the structural positions and environments people inhabit. Our passions are part of our self-conceptions (i.e., our self-understandings), and these self-conceptions do not emerge arbitrarily: who we think we are is partly determined by our social positions and the experiences and environments to which we are exposed.²⁰ Through a lifetime of socialization within classed, gendered, racialized, and sexualized social institutions, our self-conceptions, and by extension, the tasks we consider interesting, exciting, and meaningful, are patterned by those ascriptive processes.²¹ As such, what we are passionate about is neither random nor fully idiosyncratic.²²

There are several interrelated dimensions to having a sense of passion for one's work: an intellectual connection (finding work interesting or intriguing), an emotional, affective connection (finding excitement, joy, or happiness), and a personal connection (finding the right fit for one's unique sense of personhood). For example, Xavier, a Stanford math major, explained his emotional and intellectual connection to math and its close alignment with his personality.

EAC (AUTHOR): So, you used this word *passionate* before. What does that mean?

XAVIER: Math is just, I love it. When you get something right, and you know it's entirely right because you kind of know the ins and outs. . . . I just get to do a bunch of puzzles, really cool puzzles. It's fun, but it's also something that I feel really challenges me mentally. . . . So, that's, I guess that's the passion. It's just something I see myself doing for the rest of my life. . . . I think that's definitely my personality. (Middle-class white and Latinx man)

Passion for one's work does not come from the notoriety or prestige that work might imbue or from nonwork activities that can be funded by one's income. Nor is passion the same thing as commitment to hard work for its own sake. To be passionate about one's career field means to have a deeply personal and authentic sense of connection to that work.

Hinting at the moral value bestowed on passion-seeking, Will, a business management graduate from Montana State University (MSU), explained why he rejected his friends' path to maximize career opportunities and chose a field he was passionate about instead.

One of my best friends, he wasted four years on an engineering degree. He hates it. He does not want to do anything with it. Too often people tailor their interests, their hobbies, what they want to do with their lives, around some sort of career or post-grad opportunity. I didn't want to do that because I wasn't gonna spend four or five years of my money and my time educating myself on something I didn't give a damn about. . . . There was no way I was gonna just go to college and waste four years on an engineering degree. I know that [engineering] might secure me a better job, but I didn't want to do math anymore. [*Laughs*] I wanted to do something I was passionate about and I wanted to learn about. (Middle-class white man)

I asked students and college-educated workers what they thought should be the most important factor when people make career decisions. Among the one hundred students I interviewed across three universities, over three quarters explained that passion should be a central factor in career decision-making, while only 9% and 21% said income and employment security, respectively, should be top priorities. These college-going career aspirants were not alone in their valuation of passion-seeking: over 75% of US college-educated workers I surveyed rated passion-seeking as important in good career decision-making in the abstract, and over two-thirds rated the importance of passion-based considerations *more* highly than they rated the importance of salary and employment security in their conceptualizations of good career decisions.

Career aspirants and workers were more pragmatic when it came to decisions about their own careers. Yet striking numbers of college students and college-educated workers prioritized fulfilling, self-expressive work in their *own* career decisions over fields that offered greater security

and/or high salaries. Many were willing to make financial sacrifices to secure meaningful work.

These career aspirants and workers found the passion principle a compelling approach to career decision-making because they believed that it promised to insulate them from the drudgery that might await them in the workforce. Isaiah, a UH graduate enrolled in a pharmacy program, explained the stakes he saw in having a job he can “really love.” Unless he loves his work, he feared he will live an unhappy *life*.

I never really liked the idea [of] a time-is-money type of diagram where it's, like, okay, the only way I'm going to make money is to go to work, and if I go to work and actually do this service for eight hours, and then come home, and then have a certain amount of time to enjoy with my family, and then I have to do the whole process all over again. I kept thinkin' about that long term. Unless I really love my job, I won't feel like I'm actually happy. (Upper-class Black man)

Although passion-seeking sometimes meant risking financial instability, career aspirants often believed it worth the sacrifice. UH student Brianna, for example, switched from accounting to journalism to follow her passion into broadcast journalism.

[Being a reporter] is something I've always wanted to do. When I was a kid, I used to dress up in my mom's blazers and pretend to give the news. I went to school initially for accounting just because I thought, well, I could make this much money if I wanna be an accountant. . . . When I was going to school, I was like, okay, this is not what I wanna do. I can't see myself doing [accounting] for the rest of my life. I said, you know what, forget all this. I'm gonna do what I wanna do. Forget being an accountant; go for being a reporter. (Upper-class Black woman)

After graduating, Brianna earned a master's degree in broadcast journalism and got her foot in the door at a small news station in the Midwest. As I show, other career aspirants who shifted their career paths to pursue their passion weren't always so lucky.

The passion principle often appears agentic and positive to the individuals who believe in it: it promises opportunities for prolonged self-expression and fulfillment while providing relief from the potential

drudgery of a life of participation in the paid labor force. And yet, as I argue below, it can also have a darker side.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE PASSION PRINCIPLE

Although this book shows that the value placed on passion-seeking is widespread, its popularity is relatively recent in the long history of industrial and postindustrial capitalist employment. From the late nineteenth century through the postwar era, stability and economic security were the most highly valued considerations in career decision-making.²³ For those who could attain white-collar jobs (typically, white middle-class men), the cultural notion of ideal work was that which offered long-term employment stability, comfortable working conditions, decent pay, and maybe even a pension.²⁴

This ideal is reflected in career advice books from the mid-twentieth century.²⁵ For example, a 1958 book, *Personal Adjustment to Business*, written by James Gates and Harold Miller, advised career aspirants to thoughtfully balance their skills and physical and economic needs when making career decisions: “Decisions should be based on a study of as many facts and circumstances as are available to the careerist. . . . Decisions must be based on logic, avoiding emotional, biased, or entrenched thinking.”²⁶ For Gates and Miller, financial security was the fundamental basis of good career decision-making because “security of employment fulfils a vital psychological need.”²⁷ One need not be intrinsically interested in the work before starting a job: interest can be “cultivated for virtually any job if we use our curiosity enough to probe into the potentialities of the job.”²⁸ Gates and Miller cautioned those who might dream too far outside the bounds of pragmatism: “Our society looks with special favor on the man who decides on a legitimate and attainable career for himself, and then plunges forward boldly and strongly into the required preparation.”²⁹ Although work that was “engrossing as well as profitable” would be a bonus, Gates and Miller underscored that it was far better to have a dull job than no job at all.³⁰

This perspective stands in stark contrast to the decision-making advice that has come to dominate career advice books in more recent decades.

For example, Auren Uris's 1974 *Thank God It's Monday* noted, "The perfect job is one that makes it possible for you to wake up after a great weekend and nevertheless say happily, 'Thank God it's Monday.'"³¹ He contrasts his ideal of a "self-actualizing man" to one he called the "Horatio Alger Man (1860–1945)," who achieved material success for himself alone, and the "Organization Man (1945–1965)," who was caught up in the rat race and loyal to their company above all else. Uris spelled out his credo for the self-actualizing person:

I intend to find fulfillment in my work.

I will not sell my soul for a mess of pesos; no amount of money can offset frustration, stagnation, or boredom.

I will not remain in a job from which I get insufficient pleasure and job satisfaction.

I will not sacrifice personal values or convenience to job demands.³²

Uris's recommendation to leave a job one does not find fulfilling is in sharp contrast to Gates and Miller's advice twenty years earlier.

By the 2010s, the emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-actualization was standard fare in career advice books.³³ For example, in his 2013 book, *What You're Really Meant to Do*, Robert Steven Kaplan proposed that "the key to achieving your aspirations lies not in 'being a success' but rather in working to reach your unique potential."³⁴ He argued that one must begin by considering one's passion independently of practical considerations like salary or security. Only later is it appropriate to worry about pragmatic concerns.

Getting in touch with your passions may require you to give your fears and insecurities a rest and focus more on your hopes and dreams. You don't need to immediately decide what action to take or assess whether your dream is realistic. . . . Again, allow yourself to focus on the *what* before you worry about the *how*.³⁵ . . . If you're true to your convictions and principles, I know you're far more likely to *feel* like a big success. In the end, that feeling will make all the difference.³⁶

It generally goes unacknowledged in Kaplan's book, and others like it, that the people who can even entertain the idea of taking such risks typically already enjoy the greatest economic, racial, and gender privileges.³⁷

What might have fostered such a growth in the emphasis on self-expression and fulfillment in career decision-making? Although a full examination of the historical emergence of the passion principle is outside the scope of this book, as I discuss in Chapter 2 and review below, there are key economic and cultural processes that collided in the 1970s through the 1990s that provided fertile ground for the expansion of the passion principle as a career decision-making guide.

The first change was a major shift in the structure of work in the United States. The institution of work has become more precarious in the past four decades, with owners shirking more of the risks of business ownership and profit-making to workers. In decades past, the “capital-labor accord,” or the mutual commitment and loyalty built between organizations and their long-term (white-collar) workers, was the norm: workers were expected to commit to the organization they worked for and, in turn, the organization would commit to retain and even advance those workers if they proved skilled and reliable.³⁸

Today, such voluntary dedication to workers among organizations is a rarity, as is workers’ decades-long dedication to a single company.³⁹ Aggressive deregulation, sweeping technological change, globalization, and shifts in corporate governance have reduced worker power and eroded the loyalty that organizations once showed to workers who were loyal to them.⁴⁰ As a result, twenty-first-century work is marked by “equality of uncertainty.”⁴¹ For workers without a college degree or access to decent-paying trade jobs, work stability was never taken for granted. Now, even the most privileged, well-educated white-collar professionals face the possibility of job instability and financial insecurity.⁴² And recognition of this instability is widespread: workers take for granted what Allison Pugh calls a “one-way honor system,” in which employees expect—and are expected to—enact moral obligations to work hard for their employer. Little beyond a paycheck is expected from employers in return.⁴³

Along with the rise in worker precarity over the past four decades, powerful cultural shifts have taken place. The political sphere saw the rise of *neoliberalism*, a political and economic ideology that advocates for radical free market capitalism under the presumption that economic and social well-being is best achieved by scaling back governmental regulations and

resisting redistributive processes that might restrict the free market.⁴⁴ Neoliberalism promotes the idea that individuals are solely responsible for their own economic and social success or failure and that government assistance and social welfare programs are demotivating and unnecessary.⁴⁵ Neoliberal beliefs about personal responsibility for one's livelihood and career outcomes bled out of the political realm in the 1980s and 1990s and into nearly every US institution.

This surge in neoliberal policies and perspectives ran alongside a sharp uptick in cultural expectations for individualism and self-expression in the United States and other postindustrial nations. Individualism has long been a core American value, but after World War II, and especially in the 1980s and 1990s, demands for self-expressive choice-making expanded into virtually every realm of life.⁴⁶ This is reflected, and likely amplified, by the massification and curricular expansion of higher education over the past half century.⁴⁷ Not only should our shoes and cars and dishware express our sense of individuality, so too should our choice of religion, neighborhood, college major, and occupation. Self-expression is now a *moral* expectation of oneself and others: it shapes people's expectations of others' behaviors and serves as a "feeling rule" that directs what people want to feel about themselves and their circumstances.⁴⁸

Social theorists have argued that these and other late twentieth-century structural and cultural changes introduced a deep sense of existential uncertainty to many people's lives—uncertainty about who we should be, how we should live our lives, and where we are to find meaning. In contrast to finding meaning in one's community as in centuries past, postindustrial citizens tend to find meaning in a "reflexive project of the self"—an ever-evolving personal narrative about who we are as individuals and where we are headed that we continuously work on and reflect on over the course of our lives.⁴⁹ For many, but especially the most sociodemographically advantaged, this self-reflexive project becomes a central goal of lives lived within postindustrial societies.

So we have the cultural valuation of individualized, self-expressive action on the one hand and an increasingly uncertain labor market that nonetheless demands an unwavering work ethic on the other. How do modern career aspirants and workers orient their decisions when

individualism reigns, work is increasingly precarious, and professional workers are expected to work longer hours than ever? As I argue, the historical, economic, and cultural context of the past several decades means that the passion principle is an especially alluring approach to career decision-making for those privileged enough to consider it.

THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE PASSION PRINCIPLE

In this book, I explain what the passion principle is, who believes in it, what it means for individual career aspirants and workers to follow it, and what sort of work it does for existential meaning-making about good lives. But the consequences of the passion principle reach far beyond its implications for individual career decision-makers. I argue that this cultural schema has a more nefarious side. While the passion principle may seem beneficial to individual workers by encouraging them to search for fulfilling corners of the labor force, it may, in the aggregate, actually help reproduce processes of socioeconomic inequality and occupational segregation. Not everyone has the financial, educational, or social resources to parlay their passion into gainful employment. I find that socioeconomically privileged passion-seekers are more likely to end up in stable, well-paid work related to their passion, while college-educated passion-seekers from lower-class families are more likely to end up in precarious employment far afield of their passion. In addition, the passion principle helps frame patterns of occupational segregation and inequality as the benign result of individual passion-seeking while scaffolding beliefs (like the meritocratic ideology and the personal responsibility trope) that dismiss occupational inequality and resist structural solutions that could help address that inequality.⁵⁰ Finally, the demand-side manifestation of the passion principle means that it feeds into the culture of overwork, encouraging passionate professionals to tolerate contingent or underpaid employment and allowing employers to exploit workers' passion in the name of their bottom line. Broadly, this book seeks not only to examine the passion principle as a schema informing individual career decision-making, but also how the passion principle contributes to structural and cultural processes of social inequality.

THE CULTURAL SCHEMA OF THE PASSION PRINCIPLE

This is a book about a cultural schema. Cultural schemas are shared cultural frameworks for “viewing, filtering, and evaluating what we know as reality.”⁵¹ We learn schemas through lifelong experiences of socialization and come to understand ourselves, our experiences, and broader social and institutional processes through them.⁵² Schemas are not only *cognitive* frameworks for understanding reality; they also have *moral* and *emotional* dimensions. Schemas, in short, help us make sense of a complex social world and orient our actions within it.⁵³

The first half of this book establishes the passion principle as a cultural schema and illustrates its ubiquity among career aspirants and workers. The second half examines how prioritizing passion-seeking affects individual career aspirants and interfaces with aggregate structural and cultural processes. How might the passion principle—when utilized as a guiding principle by individual career aspirants and as a broader cultural prescription for how workers ought to make decisions—help perpetuate processes of sociodemographic inequality? While cultural valuation of passion-seeking seems to be ubiquitous, this concept has not yet been systematically examined in social science scholarship as a site of social reproduction.

Some scholars suggest that schemas are too flimsy, too weak, to do any real work in the social world. After all, they are only beliefs. Traditional structuralist approaches in social science tend to downplay cultural beliefs and practices as inconsequential, particularly in comparison to laws, institutions, and concrete resources.⁵⁴ Individuals may value passion-seeking, but they are ultimately at the mercy of the structural forces in which they are embedded. Some cultural scholars argue further that cultural beliefs are too fleeting in individuals’ minds to make much of a difference in their lives, and, besides, people hold contradictory meanings about the same things.⁵⁵ So why write a book about a cultural schema?

Individual agency is indeed constrained; one cannot study career decision-making without acknowledging the tremendous structural constraints people face as they move through school and the labor force.⁵⁶ And individuals indeed hold and deploy contradictory meanings about the labor market and their place within it. Yet cultural schemas about good careers and good career decision-making likely wield power nonetheless.⁵⁷

In instances where action is less habitual, such as lengthy and highly deliberative career decisions, cultural meanings are likely to impact behavior by shaping the strategies of action people believe are available and desirable.⁵⁸ Decision-makers often act as though their narrative accounts of the world are true; cultural meanings can help shape behaviors as people seek to enact their visions of their future selves and future lives.⁵⁹

Within well-documented structural and cultural constraints, I argue, cultural schemas of good careers and good career decision-making are consequential for the lives of individual career aspirants and workers. They influence what opportunities career decision-makers pursue or may foreclose for themselves, the risks they are willing to entertain, the economic and cultural resources they require for advancement, and the benchmarks against which they judge their success or failure. Beyond these individual-level outcomes, dominant schemas of career decision-making can entrench aggregate processes of socioeconomic inequality. These schemas may presume economic, cultural, and social capital that is unevenly distributed, such that career decisions made on the basis of these schemas perpetuate the advantages of some career aspirants and the disadvantages of others. Moralized beliefs about good career decision-making may also lend cultural legitimacy to patterns of labor market inequality, influencing what career aspirants and workers expect of their peers, their employers, and the labor force broadly.

Although I focus here on the United States, the passion principle may be salient in other places (especially Anglophone and western European countries) that similarly venerate individualistic self-expression, that have seen an expansion of higher education, and where neoliberal ideals of labor force participation hold sway.⁶⁰ In these contexts, the passion principle may find a sturdy foothold among college-educated young adults and help shape broader cultural narratives about career decision-making.

PASSION AMONG THE COLLEGE-GOING AND COLLEGE-EDUCATED

The passion principle may be present—with varying levels of salience—at many life stages. It is perhaps at its most crystalline among young adults

finishing their formal education and moving into the workforce, but these cultural considerations of good jobs and good career decision-making may stretch across the life course. Notions of passion-seeking likely arise in primary and secondary school classroom discussions about occupations and in high school counselors' advice about what paths are available and desirable after high school. It is likely parroted in students' admissions essays and mulled over throughout college. Once people are in the workforce, the passion principle may become especially salient again when changing jobs or industries (whether of their own volition or not). It is probably most evident among white-collar workers but may exist in some sectors of blue-collar work (e.g., "cultural tastemaker" bartenders, baristas, and barbers) as well.⁶¹ It is also present in narratives of "encore careers," or the ideal of finding fulfilling work after retirement.⁶²

Because "following your passion" is a culturally valued *life* goal as well as a career goal, it is likely central to individuals' self-reflexive projects long before and long after career launch. The salience and consequences of the passion principle may be built into our assumptions about what we are asking when we inquire what a child wants to be when they grow up and is even evident in notions of the "post-retirement career," when individuals can "finally" do what they have always wanted to do.⁶³

Out of the need to bound my inquiry, this book focuses most intently on the passion principle during an important part of a normative life course for US college-educated young adults: finishing college and entering the labor market. I also attend to broader patterns and implications across the college-educated workforce. As I argue in the conclusion, one of the reasons that the passion principle is such a resonant cultural schema is because it dovetails so nicely with normative ideals of individualistic, self-reflexive projects. Therefore, I could have easily looked at high school students' beliefs about decision-making or the meaning-making and identity work of people preparing for retirement. All, I suspect, would have provided insights into the passion principle.

Importantly, though, only a minority of young adults have the privilege to pursue a college education. At present, only about a third of the US workforce has a college degree. College tuition and fees have spiked over the past thirty years, and student loan debt has ballooned to keep pace.⁶⁴ The passion principle is not exclusive to the college-educated. As I show, seeking fulfilling