

Post-Graduation Social Capital and Career Adjustment Among Vanderbilt Alumni

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Abstract

Recent college graduates face major transitions as they navigate new environments, build professional identities, and redefine what career success means to them. This study examined how five Vanderbilt University Human and Organizational Development alumni leveraged social capital, mentorship, and residential mobility to adjust early-career roles. Semi-structured interviews revealed that career pathways were nonlinear and shaped by evolving values rather than predetermined plans; relocation decisions prioritized social familiarity and belonging over economic advantage; alumni networks continued to provide emotional support and access to professional opportunities after graduation; and institutional structures in both college and the workplace influenced their career pathways. These findings suggest that relationships formed in college function as long-term resources that guide decision-making, confidence, and adjustment in the workplace. This research emphasizes the importance of understanding early careers as a relational process shaped not only by skills, but by environments that rely on belonging.

Keywords: *social capital, alumni networks, mentorship, residential mobility, early-career adjustment, career development, Vanderbilt University*

Introduction

College graduation is one of the most significant transitions into a young adult's life, emphasizing educational attainment as well as entry into the professional and social networks that shape future opportunities. It is essential to understand how college experiences shape early-career success and workplace adjustment. Upon graduation, students often relocate, sometimes to major city hubs where there are existing networks, and sometimes to places where they must build new networks. Therefore, it is important to examine how alumni networks, mentorship, and relocation influence graduates' ability to adapt to their professional environments and achieve long-term career success.

For institutions like Vanderbilt University, whose graduates disperse across different cities and industries, understanding what factors promote successful career transitions is essential. Social capital is defined by the strength of one's social networks (Granovetter, 1973) and has been associated with improved access to information, mentorship, and professional opportunities (Seibert et al., 2001). However, less research has examined how these factors play out specifically for recent alumni transitioning into professional life.

This study addresses that gap by exploring how post-graduation social capital and residential mobility influence workplace adjustment and perceptions of career success among Vanderbilt alumni. Specifically, it investigates how alumni connections, mentorship, and residential relocation shape graduates' professional adaptation and definition of career success. Understanding how these factors shape adjustment and success can reveal important insights about how universities can prepare students for life after college.

The research question of this study focuses on identifying which aspects of the college experience (e.g., internships, mentorship, extracurricular involvement) graduates perceive as most influential in their career transitions and how they define career success. Therefore, I will discuss the research objective and propose the methods that will be analyzed in the study. Then, I will present the findings and offer future suggestions to address gaps. Overall, this study aims to help recent graduates understand which factors influence career success by identifying patterns across different college experiences.

Literature Review

This literature review examines how social capital, college experiences, and post-graduation mobility interact to shape early-career success among recent graduates. It synthesizes evidence on how interpersonal networks, experiential learning, and geographic location influence opportunities and adjustment.

Career Success and Social Capital

Background on Career Outcomes

Across the literature, social capital emerges as a foundational mechanism of early-career achievement, though researchers differ in their views on its source and function. A central theme is that relationships provide access to information, resources, and sponsorship, which is interpreted as career advantages. Seibert et al. (2001) relied on cross-sectional survey data, which identifies associations but not causality. Their framework focuses on three major perspectives: Weak Theory (Granovetter, 1973), which expands access to new information; Structural Hole Theory (Burt, 1992), which increases control over information flow; and Social Resource Theory (Lin, 1990), which emphasizes how high contacts offer access to resources. Collectively, these

frameworks highlight how relational diversity expands access to resources and influence within organizations. On the other hand, Mouw (2003) challenges causal interpretations of social capital, suggesting that social capital reflects the homophily of the natural tendency of people with similarities to become friends. Mouw challenges causal interpretations of social capital, suggesting that network advantages reflect selection rather than influence. In other words, individuals with similar levels of motivation tend to form friendships with each other, making it appear as though networks cause success when, in reality, they reflect preexisting similarities.

Together, these perspectives illustrate a tension in social capital research: social capital can both produce and reflect success. While Seibert et al. (2001) emphasizes network influence, Mouw (2003) emphasizes network selection. The implication is that the value of one's relationships depends not only on who is known, but also on how relationships are formed and maintained. This debate points towards the need for longitudinal approaches.

Types of Social Ties and Job Search Success

Research extends the debate over how networks shape career outcomes by examining the types of ties that most effectively support job seekers. Rather than asking whether contacts matter, scholars now explore when and how different relationships are beneficial. Barbulescu and Bidwell (2015) offer a model demonstrating that weak and strong ties provide different advantages across different stages of the job search process. Using longitudinal data from 226 MBA graduates, they find that diverse, weak ties help individuals discover a broad range of opportunities early in the search, while strong, close ties become more influential in the interview preparation and offer conversion stages. This illustrates how social capital evolves throughout the job-search process. Similarly, Cingano and Rosolia (2012) find that individuals in

diverse professional networks expand access to more information and a wider set of job opportunities, reinforcing the idea that networks facilitate job discovery.

Together, these studies reveal that network utility is stage-dependent as the usefulness of different relationships depends on the stage of the job search. However, these studies are limited by focusing on specific populations such as MBA students or Italian labor markets, making it unclear whether the generalizability of their findings applies to broader groups. Future research should study how network effects vary across industries, socioeconomic backgrounds, and stages of career development.

Peer and Alumni Networks in Early Careers

Peer and alumni connections illustrate how social capital formed during college persists in professional life. Marmaros and Sacerdote (2002) find that friendships and affiliations developed in university settings influence both job placement and income, while Ilyés and Sebók (2023) confirm that alumni networks function as institutional extensions of social capital, connecting graduates to hiring opportunities and professional mentorship. These studies suggest that alumni ties provide trusted information that reduce job search disadvantages and focus on credibility to employers.

These findings suggest that university-based relationships do more than facilitate initial employment, they embed graduates in a network that can enhance long-term professional adjustment. Marmaros and Sacerdote (2002) focus on a prestigious U.S. university, while Ilyés and Sebók (2023) examine Hungary's higher education system. This raises questions about how generalizable these findings are across institutional contexts. Additionally, there are no findings on how relationships evolve after post-graduation experiences. Future research should use

longitudinal and cross-institutional designs to explore whether alumni networks provide temporary advantages or function as forms of social capital that continue to shape professional outcomes. These studies are important in understanding how Vanderbilt alumni use peer and institutional connections to rebuild community after relocation.

College Experiences

Background on College Environment Shaping Outcomes

College environments play a central role in preparing students for professional success by shaping human capital skills, knowledge, and experience as well as the social capital of relationships and networks. Research shows that interpersonal and experiential learning promotes academic persistence and career readiness. Bronkema and Bowman (2019) found that students with at least three close campus friendships reported significantly higher GPAs, stronger satisfaction with college, and greater persistence toward graduation than those with fewer friendships. Their findings emphasize how close peer relationships help students develop motivation and social skills that later support professional adjustment and performance.

Internships and Career Preparation

In a Belgian field experiment, Baert et al. (2021) submitted 1,248 fictitious résumés to real job openings and found that applicants listing internship experience were 12.6% more likely to receive a positive callback than otherwise identical applicants without internships. The effect was strongest for women and graduates from less selective universities, suggesting that internships serve as labor-market signals of employability rather than as evidence of additional skills. Similarly, Sagen et al. (2000) surveyed more than 1,102 recent college graduates and found that career preparation experiences such as related work experience, internships, and

participation in student organizations were significant predictors of employment success. Work experience related to career goals had the strongest effect, while internships and participation in student organizations offered conditional benefits for students with specialized backgrounds. These experiences functioned as asset-enhancers, strengthening existing human capital rather than compensating for deficits.

However, most of this research focuses on short-term outcomes such as initial job placement, rather than long-term adjustment. A synthesis of these findings suggests that college experiences cultivate foundational skills and relationships, but how these assets evolve after graduation remains underexamined. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track whether the benefits of internships, relationships, and work experiences persist as graduates advance in their careers.

Residential Mobility

Background on Moving Vs. Staying After Graduation

The transition from college to career often involves geographic relocation, which creates professional opportunities, but can also disrupt existing social networks. Winters (2012) analyzed U.S. Census data on millions of recent graduates to measure the economic effects of geographic mobility. He found that individuals who relocated outside their college state earned 7-9% higher wages than those who remained, even after controlling for ability, field of study, and regional cost of living. Mobility also increased the likelihood of employment in higher-productivity metropolitan areas, suggesting that relocation expands access to stronger labor markets and career advancement. Overall, Winters concluded that geographic mobility functions as a form of human capital investment, allowing graduates to match their skills with market demand.

Residential Mobility and Social Capital

Yet, as Magdol and Bessel (2003) demonstrate, mobility also reshapes individuals' social environments in ways that influence adjustment and well-being. Using longitudinal survey data on 2,300 adults across two points, they found that residential moves were associated with a significant decrease in local and kin-based ties, accompanied by an increase in non-kin and work-related connections. Although mobility can weaken emotional support networks, it encourages the formation of new, professionally oriented relationships. This suggests that mobility represents a trade-off of economic and career benefits at the expense of social familiarity and stability.

Integrating these insights reveals that relocation is a social process that requires rebuilding networks. Graduates who successfully adapt often leverage alumni connections to reconstruct support systems in a new environment. However, most studies rely on large, cross-sectional datasets that cannot capture the longitudinal evolution of networks after relocation. Future research should track how movers re-establish social capital and whether the professional gains associated with mobility are sustained once initial networks fade and new ones emerge.

Synthesis and Implications

Across the literature, three themes emerge: (1) social capital can both cause and reflect career success, (2) college experiences build human and social capital that shape post-graduation outcomes, and (3) relocation transforms but does not eliminate an individual's network. Together, these findings reveal that career adjustment is not only determined by individual merit or skills, but also the evolution of relationships across transitions throughout life.

By integrating these perspectives, this study situated Vanderbilt alumni within sociological patterns of career development, showing that mentorship, alumni ties, and relocation shape not only employment outcomes but also graduates' sense of belonging and success in new professional environments.

Purpose of the Study

Theoretical Framework

The literature on career development, social capital, and mobility shows that interpersonal networks, mentorship, and relocation all shape early-career outcomes. Prior studies demonstrate that relationships provide access to information and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973), that bridging gaps between networks increases control over valuable resources (Burt, 1992), and that high-status connections offer access to greater career support (Lin, 1990). Yet most of this research examines established professionals or specific graduate programs rather than recent college graduates transitioning into their first jobs.

Research Questions

Drawing on these theories, this study applies social capital frameworks to understand how recent Vanderbilt alumni navigate the shift from college to professional life. The purpose of this research is to examine how college experiences, including alumni networks, friendships, mentorship, and extracurricular involvement, interact with post-graduation networks and relocation to influence early-career adjustment and perceptions of success. Specifically, it investigates how alumni leverage university connections and mentorship in new environments, and how moving to different cities affects their ability to maintain or rebuild professional networks.

Guided by these frameworks and the gaps identified in prior research, the following questions direct this study:

1. How do specific aspects of the college experience such as mentorship, coursework, internships, and extracurricular involvement shape recent graduates' career transitions?
2. How do recent graduates draw on social networks and personal skills to navigate workplace adjustment and early-career development?

Methods

Context of the Current Study

The present pilot study is a broader project examining how Vanderbilt University alumni develop and utilize social capital, mentorship, and geographic mobility during their transition from college to adulthood. The larger project seeks to understand how recent graduates navigate the post-graduation period, with attention to career decision-making, professional networks, and adjustment to new environments.

The current study focuses on alumni who graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Human and Organizational Development (HOD). This program was selected because it emphasizes interdisciplinary training in organizational behavior, human development, and professional practice. These are all areas that are relevant to understanding post-college transitions. Focusing on HOD graduates also allows for consistency in academic background, comparable advising structures, and shared experiences with internship and career development pathways.

Sample Selection

The study utilized a systematic random sampling strategy to identify potential participants from Vanderbilt's recent graduating classes. Publicly available names were gathered from the official university commencement programs for the classes of 2021 through 2023. Only students who received a Bachelor of Science in HOD were included to ensure consistency in academic preparation and program context.

All names were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to form a complete dataset of eligible graduates. To generate a randomized list, the RAND() function in Excel was applied to assign a numerical value to each entry, and the dataset was then sorted in ascending order. The top fifty names were selected as the initial outreach pool.

Of those fifty graduates, forty-four were contacted individually through LinkedIn using a personalized message that introduced the researcher, described the purpose of the study, and invited them to participate in an interview conducted over Zoom. The message also included information on informed consent about confidentiality and participation. In total, five individuals agreed to participate and completed interviews.

Sample Description

The final sample consisted of five alumni, ages 23-26. Three participants identified as female and two identified as male. Graduation years ranged from 2021 to 2023. All participants were fully employed at the time of the interview, representing sectors such as financial services, private equity, healthcare and life sciences consulting, and investment and financial services. Four out of the five participants had relocated to major cities, primarily New York, while one remained in Florida after graduation. Several participants had already transitioned between roles or industries.

Table 1

Key demographic and occupational characteristics of the sample:

Participant ID	Gender	Graduation Year	Major(s)/Minor(s)	Original Location	Current Location	Current Industry
7	Female	2023	Major: HOD Minors: Business and Spanish	Potomac, Md.	New York City, New York	Financial Services
11	Male	2022	Major: HOD Minor: Business	Englewood, NJ	New York City, New York	Financial Services
20	Female	2023	Majors: HOD and MHS	Weston, Conn.	New York City, New York	Healthcare & Life Sciences
66	Male	2023	Majors: HOD and Economics and History Minor: Business	Plantation, Florida	Fort Lauderdale, Florida	Investment/ Financial Services
95	Female	2021	Majors: HOD and Public Policy Analysis Minor: Spanish	Oakwood, Ohio	New York City, New York	Private Equity

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom between October and November 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and followed a consistent interview guide that balanced structure and openness, allowing participants to elaborate freely on relevant experiences.

The interview guide included questions about participants' post-graduation career paths, experiences with mentorship, professional networking, relocation decisions, and perceptions of early-career success. Follow-up prompts encouraged reflection on both personal and professional growth. All participants provided verbal consent to be recorded and have their responses transcribed. Interviews were recorded using Zoom's secure recording feature and later transcribed verbatim. Identifying information, such as names, was removed from transcripts to maintain confidentiality. All data were stored in encrypted digital folders accessible only to the researcher and faculty advisor.

Questions of Interest

The interview guide was developed to explore three central constructs shaping alumni experiences after college: mentorship, social capital, and relocation. These constructs emerged from the broader literature on post-graduate transitions and were used to structure the kinds of narratives participants were invited to share.

To examine mentorship, the interview guide encouraged participants to reflect on relationships with professors, supervisors, older students, peers, and workplace mentors. These questions sought to uncover how guidance, advice, and modeling influenced academic decisions, internship preparation, and early-career pathways. Since mentorship is often informal, the guide remained flexible to allow participants to describe a wide range of interactions they considered supportive or influential.

Social capital was explored through questions about how participants built and sustained professional relationships during and after college. Participants were asked to describe how they connected to opportunities, whether and how they remained involved with alumni networks, and

what role campus organizations or peer groups played in shaping those experiences. These questions were designed to illuminate how formal and informal networks functioned as resources in their transitions from Vanderbilt to their careers.

Relocation was examined by asking participants to reflect on where they moved after graduation, the motivations behind those decisions, and the challenges or advantages they experienced in adjusting to a new environment. The guide also prompted participants to consider how their social networks supported or complicated their adjustment to different cities.

Although these constructs provided structure, the interviews relied on broad, open-ended questions to allow participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms. Questions such as “Tell me about your time at Vanderbilt,” “Where did you move after graduation and why did you choose that city?”, “Did you have any mentors during or after college?”, “How would you describe your current social networks?”, and “How do you define career success for yourself right now?” encouraged participants to move fluidly between past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations. This approach ensured that the data captured both thematic consistency across participants and the unique nuances of each individual’s trajectory.

A complete version of the interview guide is included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into MAXQDA for systematic qualitative analysis. An inductive, data-driven approach was used to identify patterns in participants’ transition experiences. Analysis began with open coding, during which transcripts were reviewed line-by-line to generate over twenty initial, descriptive codes that captured concepts in the data.

These codes were then refined through focused coding, collapsing overlapping ideas and organizing related content into broader analytic categories. To support organization and facilitate recognition among patterns, a color coding system was applied (e.g., mentorship=light blue, career goals=dark green, influences=pink, etc.). Throughout the process, analytic memos documented insights and relationships among codes. After multiple coding cycles, a total of 195 coded segments were organized into four parent themes, which informed the structure of the findings section.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed four major themes that shaped participants' early-career trajectories: (1) career pathways and success, (2) relocation and opportunity mobility, (3) social capital and support networks, (4) educational and structural influences. These themes showed that alumni did not adjust to post-graduation life independently. Instead, their careers were continuously shaped by evolving relationships, location-based opportunities, and structural constraints.

Theme 1: Career Pathways & Success

Across all five interviews, career trajectories were nonlinear, characterized by pivoting majors, switching industries, reevaluating plans, and redefining what success means to them. Every participant changed majors, industries, or long-term goals at least once. Career decision-making was viewed as an ongoing learning process rather than a linear path from college into a predetermined profession. Although each participant took a different route, a clear pattern emerged that clarity came from movement, not from certainty at graduation.

A core pattern in this theme concerns how career success was self-defined. Participants consistently rejected traditional indicators such as wealth, prestige, or status as the primary measure of achievement. Instead, participants emphasized personal fulfillment, contribution, and confidence in day-to-day work. Participant 11 summed this up by explaining that success meant “being in a role that I enjoy and can make an impact in,” positioning meaning and purpose at the center of his trajectory. Participant 66 described success as feeling capable and mastering “softer skills” like communication, composure, and relationship-building that help them become someone others trust in the workplace. He explained:

“Career success for myself right now.... is maximizing learning opportunities and areas for curiosity. I think, particularly early on in your career, your biggest responsibility and goal should be trying to learn as much as possible, regardless of how immediately useful it is.”

Together, these perspectives suggest that early-career achievement is defined by how individuals show up in their roles, not by what titles they hold.

Although each participant navigated their path differently, their experiences share a common progression. Many began with uncertainty about the “right” direction, used their early roles to test possibilities, adjusted when something felt misaligned, and gradually built a clearer understanding of who they wanted to become professionally. For example, participant 7 entered consulting while still considering law school, using her first job to assess whether her long-term interests remained relevant in practice. Participant 11 reevaluated his college major and first job position after noticing that his work no longer aligned with his evolving values. Participant 20 initially planned to be a high school biology teacher, majoring in secondary education and biology, but shifted toward healthcare and life sciences during COVID-19. She discussed:

“I think it was during COVID, so I wanted to really understand a lot more about the healthcare industry, because that was really interesting to me, and just understanding how we as people and consumers interact with other things. HOD also called me because everyone was in HOD, and it seemed like it just taught you a lot of life skills, so kind of always wanted to minor in that, just to learn more about how to be in business, how to think, and those things.”

Participant 66 discovered through campus organizations that he was interested in finance. Finally, participant 95 used a gap year to step away from her original plan to attend law school, however, after taking the LSAT decided to pursue a different path.

Graduates treated early careers as opportunities to learn not only what they are good at but also what they did not want long-term. As they gained more real-world experience, they increasingly defined success in ways that aligned with their personal needs rather than expectations shaped by Vanderbilt’s high-achieving environment.

Theme 2: Relocation & Opportunity Mobility

A central pattern in participants’ post-graduation experiences was that geographic relocation was driven more by relationships than by economics. Although moves to major hubs like New York City offered access to competitive industries, participants emphasized social familiarity, support, and belonging as the main reason behind their decisions.

Four of the five alumni chose to live in New York City, but their explanations focused more on people rather than places. Participant 20 described the move as a “safe option” because she already knew many Vanderbilt peers who would be there, making the shift less intimidating. Participant 11 focused on proximity to family, explaining that being closer to home helped him

emotionally so he did not feel isolated. For participant 66, who stayed in Florida, the same relational factor applied, although he did not relocate to New York City, he still relied heavily on Vanderbilt and hometown networks. He explained:

“I wanted to move back to Florida, because I'm from Florida. I love it down here. So, that was kind of a criteria for some of the jobs I was looking at, and then, you know, my return offer and junior summer offer ended up being in Miami as well, so it all worked out.”

Another important pattern in this theme was that relocation was understood as part of the identity-shaping process of early adulthood. Participants described moving not only to pursue opportunities but also to discover who they could become in a new environment. The presence of familiar people such as alumni, friends, family, and peers, provided emotional stability, which made them feel more capable of taking on demanding roles, adjusting to new workplace expectations, and building new networks.

Together, relocation was not just a physical move, but also a social transition. Instead of prioritizing career decisions itself, participants made location choices that helped them preserve continuity during a period marked by uncertainty and change. In doing so, alumni demonstrated belonging as a key resource in their ability to adapt. This suggests mobility and community function together.

Theme 3: Social Capital & Support Network

Across all interviews, participants described relying on relationships formed during college to navigate their early-career transitions. Networks of peers, alumni, and mentors were not only sources of encouragement but also actively shaped career decisions, opening pathways

that participants did not initially expect to pursue. Social networks from Vanderbilt functioned as continuing support systems, influencing both access to opportunities and confidence in the workplace.

One pattern in this theme was that alumni used social capital to redirect their professional direction, especially when uncertain. For example, participant 95 received mentorship from a former professor who had leadership experience as the former mayor of Nashville. This mentor not only provided advice about law school but also helped her reconsider what type of work would feel meaningful, as she said, "For a while, I was thinking about law school, so he gave me a lot of peer advice, and even outside of law school, I think he really shaped how I view my career and things like that." Mentorship did more than provide guidance, it helped participants redefine their pathways towards their careers.

Social networks also provided emotional safety during times of uncertainty. Participants described knowing that someone was helping them during major decisions, whether it was asking for advice before switching industries, reaching out for connections during job searches, or feeling reassured. For recent graduates, adjusting to new routines, new expectations, and new cities, these relationships functioned as continuity.

Another important pattern in this theme was that these connections were not initially formed for professional advantage. Friendships, student organizations, and campus engagement initially served as social belonging, transformed into professional resources when participants needed support. For instance, participant 11 discussed how his "biggest mentors were the ones where I was a freshman and the guys in my fraternity were seniors," and their advice guided participant 11's mindset about what jobs to stay away from and which to pursue. Rather than approaching job searches independently, alumni leaned on individuals who had already

experienced similar challenges. Overall, this theme shows that alumni did not separate their personal relationships from their professional development.

Theme 4: Educational & Structural Influences

While personal relationships shaped access to opportunities and values, participants also described how institutional structures in college and in the workplace influenced what paths felt possible after graduation. These structural forces included financial resources, academic environments, and organizational expectations. Graduates' decisions were shaped by the systems surrounding them.

One pattern in this theme was that college experiences shaped major decisions and early direction. Participant 7 emphasized how she applied to Vanderbilt as a Latin American Studies major with an interest in international relations, but shifted her path after learning about HOD. She states:

“I kind of found out about the HOD major, like, a ton of my friends were doing it, a ton of classmates, and just came, like, became pretty, like, interested in that, because it gives you a very, like, well-rounded major that you can apply to, like, basically anything, and I wasn't totally sure about what I wanted to do, so I was very much, like, attracted to that.”

A second significant pattern was the role of workplace structure in adjustment. For instance, participant 66 described the shift from college to work as a transition into a more demanding lifestyle:

“My biggest challenge was probably buying a house, or, like, trying to figure out how to do that. Because that was definitely, like, a bigger pill to swallow. I'd probably say, like, more relevant to your interview questions and kind of the tenor of this is, you know, just getting more structure in

your life, right? Going from... working in more of, like, a college environment where it is, like, a bit more loose and lackadaisical to a very structured environment where, you know, particularly in finance, like, you're on from, like, 8am to, like, often, like, 1 or 2 in the morning, right? And just working through some of those life adjustments, particularly on, like, sleep schedules and things like that, was definitely, like, a bit of a challenge, but I wouldn't say, like, too intense, frankly, especially if you knew what you were getting into.”

This change did not simply require new skills, it reshaped how the participant understood success and self-care. High-pressure environments forced alumni to evaluate whether a role supported their well-being.

Participants explained that structural pressures such as workplace structure, scholarships, and performance standards, could either strengthen their professional identities or prompt them to reconsider direction. As a result, participants learned that success depends not only on what they can do, but on the environment in which they are doing it.

Discussion

This study explored how five Vanderbilt HOD alumni navigated their transition from college into the workforce, focusing on how relocation decisions, social relationships, mentorship, and structural environments influenced their early-career adjustment. The findings extend existing research by showing that young adults do not follow linear pathways determined by major or initial job. Instead, their early careers depend on experimentation, reflection, and adaptation, driven by personal and environmental contexts. The following sections connect these conclusions to existing literature and discuss their theoretical significance, practical implications, and limitations.

Interpreting the Findings

One central contribution of this study is the emphasis on career ambiguity as productive rather than problematic. Although early adulthood is commonly understood as a period of identity exploration, much research continues to view career deviation as failure or lack of preparation. The current findings challenge that interpretation by showing that trial-and-error decision-making helped them clarify their values, learn about their capabilities, and refine long-term goals.

A second key insight concerns relocation as a relational decision. Whereas economic models emphasize geographic mobility as a path to increased wages and opportunity (Winters, 2012), participants in this study framed relocation around belonging and emotional stability. They selected locations where they could maintain support systems. These findings align with research demonstrating social support reduces stress during major transitions (Magdol & Bessel, 2003), but go further by suggesting that being social is the main driver of mobility, not just readjustment after the move.

Third, the role of social capital was especially relevant. Consistent with Granovetter (1973) and Seibert et al. (2001), participants relied on contacts for job information and referrals. However, the current study demonstrates that these networks did more than provide access, they redirected participants' pathways. Mentors encouraged major changes, peers opened new career pathways, and familiarity within a city shaped what felt possible. These findings reinforce social capital theory, while extending it by showing how relationships shape interpretation, not only opportunity. For these alumni, who to trust mattered just as much as where to apply.

Lastly, participants' adjustment was influenced by structural environments, including economic conditions, workplace culture, and institutional support. For some, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped their interests. For others, corporate expectations reshaped their

understanding of wellbeing and success. For the rest, scholarships and financial aid shaped post-graduation decision-making. The findings suggest that early-career success matters just as much as the fit between the person and the systems within which they work.

Implications for Theory

Collectively, these findings point to a theoretical shift that career development should be understood as a relational and contextual process, rather than an individual linear progression. The findings demonstrate that environments, relationships, and influence plays a role in how early adults shape their professional identities. This expands sociological models of social capital by showing that networks operate not only as short-term job-search tools, but as long-term developmental resources that continue to influence opportunity and confidence well after graduation. The study also emphasizes that career identity is co-constructed as alumni rely on peers, family, and mentors to interpret their options and evaluate whether a path feels aligned. Finally, context shapes what goals feel attainable, reinforcing the need for higher education research to incorporate social-ecological perspectives when examining post-graduation outcomes.

These findings have meaningful implications for universities, employers, and students as they support the transition from college to career. For universities, the results suggest the value of strengthening alumni mentorship and networking opportunities before graduation, ensuring that students enter the workforce with guidance already. Institutions should also provide relocation preparation that addresses the social challenges of moving, such as building new networks. Additionally, advising should normalize nonlinear pathways, showing students that change is productive and part of growth and finding their own identity. For employers, the findings point to onboarding practices that support emotional and social adjustment, not just

technical tasks. Finally, students can benefit by recognizing the importance of investing early in relationships that support both belonging and opportunity, while approaching career change as an expected part of transitioning into their careers.

Strengths & Limitations of the Study

This project offers several strengths that contribute to research on post-graduation adjustment. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in detail, providing nuances that would be difficult to capture through surveys. Since all participants shared a similar major and educational background, the study was able to focus on within-group variability, showing how similar starting points can lead to different outcomes. Additionally, the findings highlight relational and structural influences that are overlooked in quantitative studies of the college-to-career transition.

On the other hand, several limitations affect the extent to which these findings can be generalized. The small sample size of five participants limits representativeness, and participants all graduated from a single elite and well-resourced university, which may provide more support than other institutions. Moreover, all participants were employed and high-achieving, meaning the experiences of graduates facing unemployment, prolonged job searches, or financial instability are not reflected here. Consequently, these results should be interpreted as emerging patterns rather than definitive conclusions about all recent graduates. Additional data are needed to determine whether these themes apply across different institutional contexts and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could build on several of the patterns highlighted in this study. First, participants in this project redefined success in terms of belonging and personal fulfillment rather than external prestige. It would be valuable to investigate how this shift emerges over time and whether it is influenced by perspective gained after leaving Vanderbilt's campus culture, where status and competitiveness often feel more central. Understanding what prompts this change could offer insight into how identity continues to evolve throughout early adulthood.

Second, the strong trend of relocation to New York City suggests that geographic social clustering among Vanderbilt alumni may have implications for institutional planning. As Vanderbilt expands its physical presence in New York, future research could analyze how alumni networks support this strategy and how universities might leverage existing alumni hubs to enhance networking, career outcomes, and belonging.

Third, although this sample revealed nonlinear career paths, more research is needed to examine what drives these transitions. As job mobility increases among early-career workers, future studies could explore whether frequent transitions represent instability or whether they operate as a strategic form of learning.

Conclusion

This study provides an initial understanding of how recent Vanderbilt HOD alumni navigate their early-career transitions through relationships, location, and changing definitions of success. These findings show that career development is rarely linear. Participants relied on shifting goals and social networks to guide their decisions. Relocation was closely tied to belonging rather than economic gain, suggesting that familiarity plays a critical role in workplace adjustment. Alumni networks, mentors, and peers formed during college continued to serve as

sources of support after graduation. Together, these patterns emphasize that early-career adjustment is not just dependent on individual preparation, but also on evolving contexts and relationships that help graduates make meaning of their career paths.

Looking ahead, the next steps are to expand the sample size to include more diverse majors, industries, geographic outcomes, and post-graduation circumstances. A larger dataset will allow for more detailed comparisons and a deeper analysis of how social capital functions beyond the first role after college. Additional interview questions and follow-up conversations will also explore how definitions of success continue to change as alumni gain experience, as well as how workplace culture, mentorship, and institutional support shape long-term career development. This expanded research will strengthen the theoretical contributions of the study and inform practical strategies universities can implement to better support students as they enter and adapt to their early-career roles.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today to discuss your experiences after graduating from Vanderbilt. As a quick refresher, I am an HOD Honors student studying how college experiences and social networks shape career adjustment and success among recent graduates.

Before we start, I want to mention a few quick things:

- To help maintain confidentiality in our data, please try your best to refrain from using specific names of individuals in your responses.
- I will be recording our conversation so I can focus on what you say instead of taking detailed notes.
- Only my advisor, Professor Warren Lowell and I will be hearing the recording. Your name and identifying details will be removed in the transcript
- After the study is complete, the recordings will be deleted.
- You can skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions for me about the process? If not, do I have your consent to begin recording?

I. College Background

1. Can you tell me the story of how you decided to attend Vanderbilt?

- a. What factors mattered most in your decision (academics, location, scholarships, culture?)
2. Where else did you apply?
 - a. Why did you choose Vanderbilt over your other options?
3. Can you tell me how you chose your major?
4. Did you come to Vanderbilt with an idea of the kinds of jobs or career paths you might want to pursue after graduation?
 - a. What did you picture yourself doing at the time? Did you know anyone in that field?
5. Over the course of college, did your career ideas change?
 - a. Did certain classes, internships, mentors, or extracurriculars shift your plans? Were there moments when you reconsidered your direction entirely?

II. College Experience

1. Tell me about your time at Vanderbilt
 - a. What kind of extracurriculars, organizations, or activities were you involved in?
 - b. Did you have any leadership roles or special projects?
2. Thinking back, what experiences during college do you feel shaped you the most?
 - a. Academic experiences ,social or extracurricular activities, internships, mentorship, study abroad

III. Communities and Belonging

1. Were you involved in any structured communities during college such as Greek Life, athletics, cultural/religious organizations, or service communities?
 - a. Which of these communities were most important to you, why?
 - b. How involved were you?
2. If you participated in Greek Life, how did that shape your friendships and social networks during college?
3. Have you maintained connections with fraternity/sorority peers after graduation?
4. Do you feel Greek life alumni connections are stronger, weaker, or about the same as Vanderbilt's broader alumni network?
5. Were you involved in a varsity or club sport at Vanderbilt?
 - a. Have those sports-related connections carried into life after graduation?
6. Were you a member of any pre-professional or academic organizations (consulting club, finance society, honor societies, research labs, etc.)?
7. Looking back, do you feel these organizations helped you transition into your career more than purely social ones (like Greek life or sports)?
8. How did these communities shape your personal or professional development?
9. Have you stayed connected to peers from those groups after college?
10. Did these groups connect you with mentors, alumni, or job opportunities?
11. Did you have family members (siblings, parents, relatives) who also attended Vanderbilt?
 - a. If yes, did their connections or legacy status provide you with additional networks, mentorship, or opportunities?

- b. Do you feel family ties to Vanderbilt made your transition after graduation easier?

IV. Mentorship

1. Did you have any mentors during college such as professors, staff, older students, or coaches?
 - a. Can you give me an example of one or two people you would consider mentors?
2. How did these relationships develop?
 - a. Did they reach out to you, or did you seek them out?
3. How did they influence your career path?
4. Did any of your mentors make introductions for you to people in their professional networks?
5. Did your mentors share details about their own career paths or experiences? If so, what did you take away from those stories?
 - a. What part of their story influenced the way you thought about your own path?
6. What kinds of advice did they give you about choosing classes, internships, or jobs?
 - a. What was the most valuable piece of advice you got from them?
7. Did they help you with specific skills or tasks (resumes, cover letters, interviews, applications)?
 - a. Can you share a time when their help made a difference?
8. Did they ever discuss graduate school or further education with you?

- a. Did that advice affect your decisions after graduation?
- 9. Did you stay in touch with your mentors after graduating?
 - a. How often, and in what ways?

V. Transition After Graduation

- 1. Can you walk me through your senior year of college with regard to preparing for life after Vanderbilt?
 - a. What kinds of steps were you taking (job applications, graduate school tests, internships, networking)? Did you feel prepared at the time?
- 2. Did you have an internship or summer job before senior year that played a role in your post-graduation plans?
 - a. Did you stay in touch with that employer, or did it lead to other opportunities?
- 3. Did you already have a job lined up after graduation?
 - a. If yes, how did that happen? What was the process like? If no, what did your job search look like in those first months after graduating?
- 4. Where did you move after graduation?
 - a. Why did you choose that city? Did you consider other cities?
- 5. Did you already know people there before moving (friends, family, alumni)?
 - a. Did having or not having connections there make the transition easier or harder?
- 6. What was the biggest challenge you faced in the months right after graduation?
 - a. How did you handle it?

VI. Relocation and Social Networks

1. How would you describe your current social networks in the city you live in now?
 - a. Do you know many Vanderbilt alumni there?
 - b. Do you have friends or family nearby?
2. How, if at all, have any alumni connections helped you adjust to your new location?
 - a. Networking for jobs?
 - b. Social support?
3. Do you think your move as helped or limited your ability to build professional relationships?
 - a. Would it be different in a city with more/fewer alumni?
4. How important were social connections in your decision to move to this city?

VII. Career Transition

1. Can you tell me the story of how you got your first job after Vanderbilt?
 - a. How did you hear about the position?
 - b. What made it appealing to you?
2. Who did you talk to during your job search?
 - a. What was some of the advice that you received?
3. Can you walk me through your transition to your new job?
 - a. How did the moving process go?
 - b. Have you moved multiple times for your job?
 - c. Did you have help from any friends or family?
 - d. How were the first few months at work?
 - e. What was easiest to adjust to?

- f. What was most challenging?

VIII. Career Success and Adjustment

1. How would you define career success for yourself right now?
 - a. What does success look like to you? Is it financial stability, professional growth, work-life balance, or something else?
2. How do you feel about your current workplace environment?
 - a. What do you like the most about it? Are there aspects you would like to change?
3. Do you see your current location as helping or hindering your career success?
 - a. If you were in a different city, how do you think your career might be different?
4. Since graduation, how many jobs have you had?
 - a. What led you to switch jobs? Were those changes planned, or unexpected?
 - b. What did you learn from those changes?
5. Have you ever switched into a different career path since graduating?
 - a. What motivated that change? How did you make the decision? What was most challenging about starting over?
6. How satisfied do you feel with your current job?
 - a. What feels frustrating or unfulfilling? Do you see this as temporary, or something you would like to change soon?
7. What are your career goals for the next 5 years?
 - a. Do you feel equipped with the skills, experience, and connections to get there?

8. How might your networks support you in reaching these goals?
 - a. Are there any particular people or communities you expect to lean on in the future?
9. What barriers (lack of networks, financial constraints, lack of mentors, etc.) have limited your success or adjustment?

IX. Social Networks

1. Who do you consider part of your professional network right now?
 - a. Are these mostly colleagues, alumni, mentors, or others? How did you first connect with them?
2. In what settings do you typically connect with Vanderbilt alumni?
 - a. Networking events, social gatherings, or professional organizations, online groups? Do you prefer formal or informal settings?
3. How often do you connect with Vanderbilt alumni?
 - a. Is it more frequent for professional reasons or social support? Do you find your self reaching out when you need something, or maintaining regular contact?
4. How helpful have Vanderbilt alumni connections been?
 - a. Have they provided you with job opportunities, advice, mentorship, etc.? Can you give me a specific example?
5. Have you built professional relationships outside the Vanderbilt network?
 - a. How did you make those connections? What role have they played in your career? How do those relationships compare to your Vanderbilt network?

6. Can you share a time when a professional relationship inside or outside Vanderbilt has directly influenced your career?
 - a. What happened because of that connection (a job lead, mentorship, new skills, etc.)?

X. Wrap-Up

1. Is there anything about your post-college experience that I haven't asked about, but you think I should be aware of?

Turn audio recording off before the referral

2. Do you know other recent Vanderbilt graduates who might be willing to share their experiences with me?
 - a. Would you feel comfortable connecting me with this individual by providing an introduction, after you receive their consent?
3. Do you have any feedback on the questions or the process?

Appendix B

Vanderbilt University Consent Form for Research Individual Interview

Key Information and Introduction:

This research study is conducted by Jordyn Cambeiro, an undergraduate student in the Human and Organizational Development Honors Program at Vanderbilt University and supervised by the Principal Investigator Professor Warren Lowell at Vanderbilt University, Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development.

What is this research about?

The purpose of this research is to understand how recent Vanderbilt graduates navigate career transitions, including the role of social networks, alumni connections, and relocation in shaping their adjustment and professional success.

What will I be asked to do?

Your participation is voluntary and will involve a virtual interview that is expected to last about 45-60 minutes, including the time to review and provide consent. The interview will include a series of questions about your experiences at Vanderbilt, your professional adjustment after graduation, and how you define career success.

What are the risks and benefits of the study?

Your participation in this study poses minimal risk. All data collected for this study will be stored on a secure internal platform at Vanderbilt and accessible only to our research team. While we will not use your name in any materials, in the unlikely event of a data breach, there is a small chance that your information could become identifiable. One risk of the study is that you might feel discomfort sharing your experiences. We ask that you please only share information you are comfortable disclosing under those circumstances. There are no direct benefits to you for this study.

Compensation

There is no monetary compensation for this study.

How will my confidentiality be maintained?

Data collected from this study may be used in presentations and a written thesis. All identifying information will be removed, and participants may be referred to by such terms as gender, age range, or city of residence, but nothing that personally identifies them. Interviews will be audio-recorded during Zoom meetings with your permission for your consent. These recordings will be used for transcription and analysis, stored on Zoom cloud, and then later transferred to a secure storage platform for analysis. Recordings will be deleted at the end of the study. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your information confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. To minimize this risk, personal information that can identify you will be stored separately from your research data.

Audio Recordings

We would like to audio-record our interview. If you agree, we will use the recording for the purposes of transcription and further analysis. I will go through and transcribe the audio recordings. All audio files will be destroyed at the end of the study. No recordings will be saved for future use. Even if you do not want to be recorded, we would still like to interview you.

Who should I call if have questions or concerns about this research study?

If at any time you have any questions regarding the research or your participation, you can contact Jordyn Cambeiro. You can reach her at jordyn.a.cambeiro@vanderbilt.edu or (702) 858-6778. You can also contact the principal investigator at warren.lowell@vanderbilt.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Vanderbilt University Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) at irb@vanderbilt.edu.

Consent

You will be asked to provide verbal consent to your participation.