

For people in their 20s, exploring education options can benefit their later careers, while job instability can be harmful.

With economic instability and precarious work on the rise, career paths for young people as they enter adulthood have become increasingly complicated. Can young people still afford to ‘explore’ education and job opportunities in the early stages of their careers? In new research which surveys high schools seniors over 14 years, [Nancy Galambos](#) and [Harvey Krahn](#) find that fluctuating employment for those in their 20s is associated with poorer earnings later on. Fluctuating educational experiences, on the other hand, have no effect on young people’s eventual career outcomes.



When we read about youth, titles like [Generation X](#), [Generation Me](#) and [Arrested Adulthood](#) tend to paint an alarming picture of the younger generation in their 20s as directionless, floundering, and less likely than previous generations to become mature and productive citizens. In contrast, books like [The Boomerang Age](#) and [Emerging Adulthood](#) argue that more recent socio-demographic trends indicative of instability in education, employment, and living arrangements, as young people move from one job to another, seesaw between education and work, switch from one educational program to the next, and sometimes come back home to live with their parents are relatively benign.



There is no doubt that post-baby boom birth cohorts (labelled as Generation X, Generation Y, the millennials, and so on) have experienced such fluctuations, but are these experiences interpretable as floundering or do they merely reflect the freedom of young people in western societies today to explore their options until they find the best fit? Answers are important because we need to know whether shifts in how young people navigate the transition to adulthood are cause for concern and require appropriate policy interventions or whether they are simply reflective of a new and adaptive way of entering adulthood. In new research, we argued that fluctuations in employment and education statuses cannot be interpreted negatively as floundering, or more positively as exploring, unless we know something about their longer-term employment and career outcomes.

To probe this issue, we drew on data from our longitudinal study of school-work and youth-adult transitions that surveyed a group of Canadian high school seniors (the class of 1985) six times across 14 years. We tallied the number of month-to-month shifts in employment statuses (e.g., full-time to part-time; unemployed to part-time or full-time employed) and in education statuses (e.g., full-time student to part-time student or non-student) between the ages of 19 and 25, reasoning that larger numbers would reflect greater instability or fluctuation in employment and education, respectively. We then determined, statistically, whether instability in employment and education in these years of early adulthood predicted three career outcomes seven years later at age 32: individual income; career satisfaction; and occupational status.

After controlling for other variables that can be related to career outcomes (e.g., number of nonstudent jobs held and spells of unemployment experienced since high school), our analyses showed that a larger number of employment fluctuations through the first half of the 20s (age 19 to 25) was associated with lower income at age 32. Furthermore, men with more employment fluctuations also were less career-satisfied and reported lower occupational status. The picture grew more complicated, however. For young adults who had completely switched careers at least once, more employment fluctuations predicted higher income and higher career satisfaction at age 32. Overall, the results suggested that frequent moves in the transition to adulthood between part- and full-time work, as well as between unemployment and employment, can be harmful with respect to future career outcomes – and are consistent with the concept of floundering – unless such fluctuations reflect a deliberate career switch, which may be characterized as exploring.

The story was different, but simpler, when it came to educational fluctuations. The greater the fluctuation in education statuses from age 19 to 25, the higher the occupational status reached by age 32. There was no association between instability in education status and eventual career satisfaction or income. We conclude that fluctuations in educational status generally reflect an exploratory process in which alternative educational paths are considered, attempted, and sometimes abandoned in favor of choices that prove to be a better match for the young person's tastes, interests, and abilities. In today's world, where career choices seem endless, and ever-changing, but job security and benefits are hard to come by, seeking and finding the appropriate educational path may, like making a career switch, optimize future career outcomes.

Our research provides a more nuanced response to black-and-white debates about the long-term implications of changing school-work and youth-adult transitions in North America. It also points to important educational and labor market policy implications. Our post-secondary educational system is frequently criticized by politicians, the media, and also some parents for failing to move young people more quickly through college and university programs, on the assumption that this is wasting time and money. But young people — our social, political, ecological, and business leaders of tomorrow — are not assembly-line products. And post-secondary choices are far more complicated than they were half a century ago. We need to recognize the value of a prolonged period of post-secondary educational exploring that allows young people to take the time to find a better fit of their aspirations and skills with future careers, and not penalize either young people who are engaged in such exploration or the post-secondary educational institutions that allow and encourage them to do so.

In contrast, our research indicates that excessive employment floundering in early adulthood, with a few exceptions, has long-term negative career implications for young adults. Negative career outcomes for young workers can also translate into less-than-positive outcomes for employers and society in general (i.e., a less motivated, less productive, and less innovative work force). As citizens, as employers, and as social leaders and politicians, we need to ask whether a labor market future offering less employment security, lower pay, and fewer employment benefits for a larger proportion of our workforce is really better in the long-term for our economy and our society, or not?

If not, what steps can we take to reduce the employment floundering that many North American young people today experience? Let's start talking, for example, about tax benefits for employers that hire local young people rather than moving jobs overseas, and who make strong efforts to hire talented and well-trained young people from disadvantaged minority groups, about increasing the minimum wage and encouraging labor unions, particularly those that champion young workers rather than merely protecting older workers, about requiring employers to pay interns rather than exploiting them, and about a long list of other policy initiatives that could assist our youth to make satisfactory transitions into the next phases of their lives.

*This article is based on the paper, "[Exploring or Floundering? The Meaning of Employment and Educational Fluctuations in Emerging Adulthood](#)" in *Youth and Society*.*

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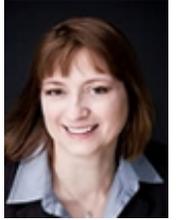
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