Student Loan Debt, Family Support, and Reciprocity in the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract:

This study explores student loans, family support, and reciprocity during the transition out of college into adulthood. We examine experiences of family financial assistance and co-living among college students and graduates with loans, and whether support and reciprocity systematically differed by loan presence. We conducted four waves of qualitative interviews with college graduates with loans at two public universities, in their senior year and annually for three years after graduation ($N = 24$ participants, 72 interviews), and collected two rounds of survey data with undergraduates ($N = 3251$) and graduates 15 months after graduation ($N = 176$) from the same universities. Financial support from and living with family was common. Those with loans gave more money to family, even when they did not live with them. Interviews revealed that reciprocity, or expectations to help family in return for help received, could be burdensome. Findings indicate that receiving help may prolong—but also facilitate—the transition to adulthood.

Keywords: student loan debt | family support | reciprocity | transition into adulthood | inequality

Article:

Student loan debt is a pressing issue in the United States, potentially delaying transitions to adulthood. In 2019, 62% of students graduating from four-year public or private nonprofit colleges in the U.S. held student debt, averaging $28,950, a 25% increase since 2008 (Institute for College Access & Success, 2020). Increases have been partially driven by declining government investment in public higher education; states have not increased spending at pace with population growth, education costs, and demand (Hout, 2009). State budgets cuts in the wake of the Great Recession exacerbated this trend (Barr & Turner, 2013). Payment for college has increasingly fallen on individuals and their families (Furstenberg, 2008; Houle, 2014a), who frequently cannot afford costs up front (Napolitano et al., 2014) and instead rely on loans.

Parents' socioeconomic status shapes their children's ability to engage in and need for intergenerational economic exchange, as well as the need for loans to pay for higher education (Millett, 2003). Higher education and the loans that make it possible for many students can offer upward mobility (Baum & Steele, 2010; Brand & Xie, 2010; Millett, 2003). Yet, loans may also restrict class mobility (Witteveen & Attewell, 2017). Obligations to family may grow after young adults have completed college degrees, and at the same time graduates' dependence on their families may increase due to the burden of student debt payments, which may even exceed the additional income that education yields (Baker et al., 2017; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017).

Students with loans are less likely than their loan-free counterparts to receive financial help from their families during college (Kuperberg, 2021). Students with loans may be more likely to provide financial help to their families if their families have limited financial resources (Edin & Lein, 1997; Mazelis, 2017). After graduation, those repaying loans may experience student debt as limiting their independence if they need to depend financially on family. Their debt may potentially delay their transition to adulthood and continue or increase their dependence on parents or other family members.

In this mixed-methods longitudinal study, we explore the intersecting roles in the transition to adulthood of student loan debt, financial and housing support from parents and other family members, and reciprocal assistance to family members during college and after graduation. We use "family" to refer to families of origin, including parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, and extended families, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins; romantic partners and children are not included. We examine how family help and reciprocal exchanges, or "reciprocity," may facilitate or hinder the transition to adulthood among graduates with loans, and if reciprocity systematically differs before and after graduation by loan presence.

We conducted and analyzed qualitative interviews with individuals with loans at two universities to assess their experiences receiving help from and giving help to their families. The interviews took place in four waves: as the students approached college graduation and once a year for three years after graduation. We also collected and analyzed surveys of college students with and without loans at the two universities, and with graduates 15 months after graduation, to systematically assess whether rates of help to and from family differed by student loan presence.

Findings offer crucial information for policymakers, universities, college financial aid offices, and educators about the wide-ranging consequences of the rising costs of higher education and the degree to which multiple interacting inequalities may deepen the difficulties of those who are financially struggling. In addition, findings also speak to the experiences of current and former college students, and those contemplating attending college or taking out loans. Findings also advance understandings of reciprocity, social norms of intergenerational coresidence, college students' and graduates' financial health, inequalities related to student loan debt, family functioning, and theories and experiences of the transition out of college and into adulthood. Thus, this study is also of interest to researchers, financial educators and counselors, and practitioners such as family and individual therapists.

Background and Relevant Literature

We use a sociological theoretical framework, in which the social roots, meanings, and implications of behavior and roles are central. We draw from, build on, and link theories related to the transition to adulthood, social ties, and reciprocity. We connect these theories with literature on student debt to explore the complex roles of family support and reciprocity in facilitating or hindering the transition to adulthood among those with debt. Though taking out loans may facilitate financial independence from parents while in college, attending college itself (for many, enabled by loans) delays the transition to adulthood by prolonging student status. Financial struggles after college among those with student debt may make support from family all the more important. At the same time, both support from parents and parents' limited assets can increase expectations of and need for reciprocity from graduates. These expectations can be burdensome but can also foster a sense of adulthood, particularly among those unable to achieve other symbolic markers of adulthood. We consider the role of social norms in participants' assessments of their symbolic achievement of adulthood, and in expectations for and implications of family support and reciprocity. We use "social norms" to refer to social expectations about how people *should* behave (Gibbs, 1965).

Student Loan Debt and the Transition to Adulthood

Socially defined symbolic markers of adulthood include, in part, financial independence, moving out of parents' homes, and completing education (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Shanahan, 2000), though sense of adulthood is subjective and nuanced (Katsiaficas, 2017; Manzoni, 2016). Young adults continue to value traditional markers of adulthood, but increases in financial uncertainty and the educational attainment necessary to achieve financial stability have increasingly delayed them (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Harknett & Kuperberg, 2011). For example, it is now common for young adults to live with parents (Fingerman et al., 2017; Furstenberg et al., 2004; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

Because the transition to adulthood can be understood in varied ways, scholars have sought to clarify it, in part by conceptualizing the transition to adulthood as a period of *emerging adulthood* rather than as one moment in time (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2021). Emerging adulthood is the period between ages 18 and 29 that is characterized by "identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism" (Nelson, 2021: 179); earlier research defined it as the period between ages 18 and 25 (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2000). It is a period characterized by instability as many young adults move, change careers, and pursue additional education (Aquilino, 2006; Furstenberg, 2008, 2010; Houle, 2014a; Mehta et al., 2020; Mouw, 2005; Nelson, 2021; Osgood et al., 2005). This period also encompasses college graduation and the beginning of loan repayments (Kuperberg & Mazelis, 2022). Established adulthood is the period between ages 30 and 45, when people are more likely to have achieved traditional symbolic markers of adulthood (Mehta et al., 2020).

Growing student debt likely contributes to the prolonging of emerging adulthood, and existing research often focuses on the ways in which student loan debt may hinder attainment of markers of the transition to adulthood (e.g., Furstenberg et al., 2004; Houle & Warner, 2017; Kuperberg & Mazelis, 2022). Living with family is particularly common among those who take on student debt but do not achieve a degree (Houle & Warner, 2017), but may be common among those with degrees as well. Our prior research found 24% of college students with loans anticipated living with parents for longer than they wanted to as a result of their debt (Kuperberg & Mazelis, 2022). Compared to graduates without loans, those with loans are less likely to have savings and investments or to own a home, have less wealth, earn lower incomes, and are more likely to declare bankruptcy (Baker et al., 2017; Gicheva & Thompson, 2015; Kuperberg et al., 2017; National Association of Realtors Research Division, and American Student Assistance, 2017). Even if they graduate from college and earn similar incomes as do those without loans, having loan payments is a burden similarly educated young adults without loans do not have; the median borrower pays $448 a month in loan payments (Hanson, 2021). If independence is a sign of adulthood, then to the extent graduates lack residential or financial independence, they may feel adulthood is out of reach (Manzoni, 2016).

Family Support and Reciprocity

Strong social ties, such as those to family, can be valuable for those who are economically struggling, offering practical and financial assistance (Edin & Lein, 1997; Mazelis, 2017; Mazelis & Mykyta, 2011, 2020). Family support facilitates young adults' development during emerging adulthood, life-course transitions, and life chances in a variety of ways (Aquilino, 2006; Flaster, 2018; Hamilton, 2013; Houle, 2014b). College students and graduates also rely on family ties for assistance, especially with finances or housing, as they navigate higher education and the transition out of college (Aquilino, 2006; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Financial transfers from parents can help students avoid loans, such that they graduate college debt-free due to their reliance on family (Rauscher, 2016), complicating the understanding of financial independence (Manzoni, 2016). Greater family resources can also aid graduates in their career development (Rauscher, 2016). Conversely, when parents do not provide financial support, student debt increases (Zissimopoulos et al., 2020).

As important as family support is, social ties are complex. When financial need is dire and individuals need to depend on family members for assistance, arguments or embarrassment over money concerns or shared housing can complicate relationships (Mazelis, 2017). Direct financial transfers from family members may not be possible, although parents may provide housing as an alternative; parental resources shape the financial support available to adult children (Aquilino, 2006). Cost savings from coresidence may make attending college more affordable, and American parents are generally willing to provide housing to their adult children as long as those children are making progress in their education or careers (Aquilino, 2006). But selection into loans by those with fewer family resources (Millett, 2003) can compound economic disadvantages if students with loans receive less family financial help during or after college. During emerging adulthood, family ties between parents and children change due to shifts in expectations and patterns of interaction as they move towards relationships in which both are adults (Aquilino, 2006). Parents may begin to rely on children for support, but tensions can arise when adult children still depend on their parents for financial and/or residential support (Aquilino, 2006).

After college, those with loans may need to rely more on family for help due to loan repayment obligations (Hanson, 2021). The need for family financial support among those with loans may affect relationships with their families because their post-college need for help may violate norms and expectations of financial independence after college, especially if they are not pursuing post-graduate education or working (Aquilino, 2006). Those who have achieved a higher education level than their parents may be particularly subject to such norms because of expectations related to the general association between education and greater economic opportunities (Harknett & Kuperberg, 2011); their parents may believe their children can and should contribute financially because their college degrees position them to be able to. College students and graduates with loans are less likely than those without loans to have college-educated or wealthy parents, increasing the likelihood of child-to-parent financial transfers (Koh & MacDonald, 2006; Millett, 2003).

Ties with family members can present obligations—and though they can be constructive for some and onerous for others, often they are *both* beneficial *and* problematic (Hansen, 2004; Mazelis, 2017; Nelson, 2005). Economic disadvantage tends to correlate with social networks composed of economically disadvantaged individuals, leading to greater obligations and expectations of reciprocity (Edin & Lein, 1997; Mazelis, 2017). Mutual reliance makes people feel more comfortable with getting help, but the reciprocity that is often expected creates a sense of burden (Mazelis, 2015, 2017). During college, these expectations may also be elevated compared to those without loans, due to the combination of a) lower financial resources of parents and b) students' access to loans. Students also sometimes receive cash amounts (termed "refunds") for living expenses as part of their loans; this access to liquid funds may create specific expectations of sharing, given evidence that influxes of cash can create such expectations (Mazelis, 2017; Stack, 1974). Those with loans who rely on family for housing or financial help post-graduation may also face expectations of reciprocity as a result; past research has found adult children who live with their parents are more likely to give them money (Koh & MacDonald, 2006). Students and graduates who are not receiving help from family members may also face expectations of providing support to parents and others in their families (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

The Present Study

We explore the experiences of young adults with student debt and the roles of family support and reciprocity in their lives as they transition to adulthood. We build on theories related to reciprocity, transitions to adulthood, and social norms surrounding intergenerational support to explore how loans may be related to help college graduates give to and receive from their families and how these arrangements may hinder or facilitate the transition to adulthood.

Though some research subjects in this study are older, crossing into the typical age range for "established adulthood" (Mehta et al., 2020), most are in the "emerging adulthood" range. We focus on the experiences of students in regional public universities, which present students the best chances for economic mobility (Chetty et al., 2017). Our study overcomes the limitations of existing nationally representative datasets. Established national quantitative datasets lack information on how young adults experience financial exchanges with family. These data also aggregate those attending a wide variety of universities, potentially confounding patterns because those attending more expensive universities may be more likely to take out loans, but systematically differ in family background and post-graduate opportunities from those attending other types of universities. Our study focuses on students and graduates at two similar universities, utilizing a mixed-methods design. Multiple methods allowed us to gather complementary information, including qualitative participants' nuanced understandings of their situations and a systematic assessment of broader patterns of inequality by loan presence using survey data.

In our inductive analysis of qualitative interviews we ask, *how do those with loans experience living with family members and financial support exchange with family members? How does family support and reciprocity hinder or help students and graduates with loans in their transition to adulthood?* As we rely on grounded theory techniques in which theoretical explanations organically arise from coding data, we do not form particular hypotheses for the qualitative component of the study.

In our examination of survey data, we ask, *to what extent do college students and graduates rely upon or give aid to families, and how do these rates differ by loan presence?* Families may differ in the type of support they are able to provide to their children based on resources; for example, they may be unable to provide financial assistance but offer help in other ways, such as free or reduced-cost housing—even enabling some students to avoid loans. Those with greater need may get more family support, but at the same time, if their families lack the resources to help, they may get less family support. Students with loans likely have lower family resources, in line with previous research (Millett, 2003), which would make family aid less available and family need more prevalent. We therefore hypothesize that:

H1: Compared to students without loans, students with loans will receive less help from family and give more help to them during college.

After graduation, loan payments reduce graduates' disposable income, and income is also lower among graduates with loans (Kuperberg et al., 2017). Loan repayment obligations may mean some graduates need family assistance for longer than do those without loans, leading to potentially different patterns of family aid by loan presence before and after graduation. We therefore hypothesize that:

H2: Those with loans may receive more help from family after graduation even though they receive less help in college, as a result of their greater need.

Alternatively, since their parents likely still have fewer resources after graduation compared to parents of those without loans, graduates with loans may receive less help after graduation. These financial resource differences lead us to hypothesize:

H3: College graduates with loans will continue to provide more financial help to their families than graduates without loans.

Method

Qualitative Interviews and Data Analysis

We conducted 72 interviews with 24 participants over four years. In Spring 2016 (Wave 1), we interviewed 24 graduating seniors with student loans at two regional public research universities in the United States (12 students at each). Both schools were rated "best bang for your buck" by *The Washington Monthly*, and their student bodies have similar profiles of diverse local students, including many first-generation college students. One school is in the northeast, in a higher cost-of-living area, and the other is in the southeast, in a lower cost-of-living area. Participants arguably are the most likely of any group of students to benefit from their student loans: they attended public universities less costly than their states' flagship campuses, and succeeded in graduating, better positioning themselves to repay debt than those who attend but do not complete college.

Our recruitment methods allowed us to maximize variability across a range of experiences, majors, and demographic factors. Basic demographic information about the qualitative interview participants is presented in Table 1. At Wave 1, participants ranged in age from 21 to 40 (median of 23). Sixteen identified as women and 8 as men. Eleven identified as African American or Black, 10 as White, 2 as Asian American, and 1 as Hispanic. Self-reported loan amounts ranged from $9,000 to $130,000 (median of $30,000, mean just below $40,000). We interviewed only those with loans so that we could explore the range of experiences of those with loans. Survey data allowed us to examine whether responses of those with loans systematically differed from those without loans. Results cannot be generalized to all U.S. college graduates with loans, as there may have been systematic bias in the choice to participate in this study or to attend these two universities.

Using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide, we asked students about help they received. For example, we asked about living expenses, who pays for what in the household, how students paid for college, and help received in covering expenses. In follow-up interviews one year after graduation (Wave 2) we again asked about living situations and expenses, and we asked about support participants gave to family members, including whether they paid rent or otherwise contributed to household expenses or needs, and how they felt about these arrangements. In follow-up interviews two and three years after graduation (Waves 3 and 4), we asked for more details about aid received from and given to parents and family members, including household expenses and in-kind contributions, and feelings about these arrangements.

The two authors are both professors and both women; the first author conducted all interviews at both institutions, and the second author sat in on the majority of interviews at one of the institutions, occasionally asking additional questions during the interviews as well. Our status as faculty members had the potential to create a divide between us and research participants, but when we first met them, we emphasized their status as about-to-be former students and encouraged them to call us by our first names. We audio-recorded all interviews and they were transcribed by a professional service. The first author and a graduate student research assistant coded transcripts using NVivo qualitative analysis software, relying on inductive analysis and grounded theory techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We read transcripts carefully, using software to create nodes for each interview topic. We attached labels to text from interviews based on the content themes in a process of open coding, and then regrouped, looking for connections between codes in a process of axial coding. Though our genders, personal financial backgrounds, family backgrounds, and debt profiles may have differed from those of some participants, we prioritized participants' experiences and understandings of their situations in our coding. Coders were in agreement on notable patterns.

Survey Data and Analysis

Participants. We collected surveys at the same two universities from which we recruited interview participants. We sent the first survey to all undergraduates enrolled at both universities in March 2017. We collected a second survey in August 2018, in which we re-surveyed those from the first survey who reported they would graduate in May 2017. After we removed students with missing responses to independent variables, we were left with a sample size of 3251 for Round 1 and 176 for round 2. Some respondents did not respond to questions about some dependent variables but did respond to others; we retained these to make full use of the data. Many students amass student loan debt and do not graduate from college; such students are only included in the first survey round, as follow-up surveys are with graduates only.

Table 1. Qualitative Interview Participant Demographics at Wave 1.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Relationship Status
Alice	Woman	22	Black	Long-term partner
Andrea	Woman	25	Black	Engaged
Ashley	Woman	22	Black	Single
Ava	Woman	25	Black	Long-term partner
Bella	Woman	22	Hispanic	Single
*Crystal**	Woman	40	Black	Married
David	Man	29	White	Married
Dean	Man	24	White	Long-term partner
Flo	Woman	26	White	Married
Jason	Man	29	White	Long-term partner
Jennifer	Woman	21	Black	Long-term partner
Kelly	Woman	22	White (Lebanese-American)	Long-term partner
Leo	Man	23	White	Single
Mary	Woman	21	White	Single
Mia	Woman	21	Black	Engaged
Monique	Woman	23	Black	Long-term partner
Noah	Man	22	Black	Single
Olivia	Woman	22	Asian/Indian	Long-term partner
PJ	Man	22	White	Single
Richard	Man	23	White	Married
Rose	Woman	24	Black (Nigerian-American)	Single
Serenity	Woman	23	Black	Single
Simone	Woman	23	Asian/Vietnamese	Long-term partner
Stephen	Man	22		Single
Mean		24		
Median		23		
Standard Deviation		4.1		

Note. *Only Crystal has children – two adolescents.

Data Collection Procedures. In March 2017 we emailed invitations to take a survey to all undergraduates at the two universities we studied (*N*=19,268). We distributed the survey to all students to maximize sample size (Groves, 2006; Laguilles et al., 2011). The response rate was 19.3%, yielding 3727 surveys that were at least partially completed. This response rate is in line with typical response rates for web surveys; response rates at this level do not increase non-response bias compared to those with higher rates (Groves, 2006; Laguilles et al., 2011). Response rates were lower at the northeastern (14.8%, *N*=706) than the southeastern school (20.9%, *N*=3021), with the northeastern school sample size also reflecting its smaller student body. We collected a second round of survey data 17 months later, in August 2018, contacting only those who reported in the first round that they would graduate in May 2017. Of the 788 graduating seniors who participated in the first round, 504 provided email addresses and consented to follow-up surveys, but 22 emails were no longer valid by August 2018. Among the remaining 482, 179 responded, for a 37.1% response rate among those with valid emails. Both surveys were distributed using the program *Qualtrics* and incentivized with paid raffles.

To assess whether there was bias in the follow-up responses, we compared Round 2 respondents to the 788 graduating seniors in Round 1, including 284 who did not agree to be contacted again and 325 whose email addresses were no longer valid or who did not respond to the Round 2 survey. One sample t-tests (treating Round 1 values as population parameters) indicated that the rate at which the Round 2 respondents had taken out student loans in the Round 1 survey did not significantly differ from the rate of all graduating seniors in Round 1, and there were no significant differences in average amount of loans or the gender or racial distribution between rounds (not shown, available from authors). Another 22 students with no loans in Round 1 indicated they had taken out loans by Round 2; we used Round 2 loan presence when analyzing differences by loans in that round. Table 2 presents the sample size of those who had loans in both survey rounds.

Table 2. Percent and Number of Students who had Students Loans in Survey.

	Student Loans (%)	Student Loans (N)	No Loans (N)	Total N
Round 1	67.4	2191	1060	3251
Round 2 – Responses in Round 2	77.8	137	39	176
Responses in Round 1 by Round 2 respondents	65.9	116	60	176

Note. Responses in Round 1 for respondents to Round 2 are presented for comparative purposes only, and responses in Round 2 are used when calculating numbers from Round 2 in Table 3.

Variables.

Student Loans In Round 1 student loan presence was determined by two “check all that apply” questions: “How do you pay for your tuition and other educational expenses (like textbooks)?” and “How do you pay for your other living expenses while in college (housing, food, car, entertainment, etc.)?” A majority, 2191 (67.4%) respondents, indicated they had taken out loans and 1060 respondents did not take out loans. In Round 2, we asked, “Have you ever taken out student loans to fund your college tuition and education expenses or living expenses while in college as an undergraduate?” and “Have you ever taken out student loans to fund your graduate school tuition and education expenses, or living expenses while in graduate school?” We combined affirmative responses to either question as indicators of student loan presence.

Outcome Variables We used the same Round 1 questions used to determine loan presence in college to determine whether students received help with tuition or living expenses in college from “Parents” or “Another family member (Grandparents, sibling, etc),” excluding romantic partners (which was a response option). One measure indicated parents or other family helped pay for “tuition and other educational expenses” and a second combined those who had parent/family help for “other living expenses while in college” with those living with parents, stepparents, or extended family for a measure of “Family help with college living expenses.”

We asked, “Do [Round 1]/Since finishing college, have [Round 2] your parent(s) or any other relative give [n] you a regular monthly or weekly allowance to help pay for your expenses?” In both rounds we asked, “Who do you currently live with?”; responses *my mother*, *my father*, and *my stepparent or my parent’s live-in partner* were coded as living with parents in Round 1. In Round 2, we also asked, “Since graduating from college, have you lived with your parents?” Graduates could respond “no,” “yes and I still do,” and “yes, but I don’t anymore.” Those who indicated they had lived with their parents after graduation but no longer did, or currently lived with a parent or stepparent were included in a measure of “Lived With Parents Since Graduation.”

In Round 2, we asked those reporting living with parents since graduation, “Do/Did your parents charge you for rent or other living expenses while you live(d) with them?” In both rounds we asked, “Since starting college [Round 1]/graduating college [Round 2], have you helped your parents or other family member who is not your child (siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews etc.) by giving them money?”

Control variables Regression models controlled for parents’ highest level of education, age, race, and gender. Parents’ education was based on combining answers to questions about mothers’ and fathers’ highest level of education in Round 1; results were divided into: both parents had less than a high school degree; at least one had a high school degree or GED, some college or a technical degree, a college degree, a graduate degree; or both parents’ education was unknown. We asked students to report their race or ethnicity using a “check all that apply” question, and divided responses into “White or White/Middle Eastern only,” “Black only,” “Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latinx,” “Asian American or Asian only,” and “Other response or mixed race.” Gender was divided into women, men, and other gender individuals, with the latter category including transgender men and women, gender nonbinary, and intersex individuals.

Analysis of Survey Data. We estimated two-sample t-tests of differences in outcome variables by loan presence for each variable and round. We then calculated a series of logistic regressions examining whether these relationships persisted once we controlled for parents’ education, age, gender, race, and school. Finally, we reshaped the data to “long” form, treating each round as a separate response, and using the *xtset* and *xtlogit, re* commands estimated whether responses differed across rounds in random effects logistic regressions, controlling for the same set of variables and accounting for ID as a random effect. We calculated these models separately for the total sample (controlling for loans), and by student loan presence. The second author calculated all results using Stata version 17.

Results

During initial interviews, we sought to explore the experiences of college seniors with loans who were approaching graduation. Subsequent interviews tracked experiences after graduation. Surveys explored whether these experiences systematically differed between students and graduates with and without loans. Findings suggest loans can delay transitions to adulthood in some respects, but facilitate them in other ways, especially after graduation. Participants' stories revealed the importance of family support, and even in initial interviews there were clues about reciprocity—students giving financial help to their family members, or more often, planning to do so upon graduation—although we did not ask directly about reciprocity until surveys and later interviews. Below we detail qualitative findings, and then survey patterns. In both sections, we first discuss aid *from* family members during college, then aid *to* family members during college, and finally family support and reciprocity after college graduation.

Qualitative Findings

During College: Aid from Family Members. Most qualitative interview participants, all of whom had loans, reported not receiving family support in paying tuition at their four-year institutions, and noted this lack of support as the reason for their loans. A few, such as Mia,[1] David, and PJ, reported that their parents had helped pay for tuition at lower-cost community colleges before they transferred to the four-year institutions from which they were about to graduate. Mia, who lived with her parents throughout college, told us:

> When I was at county college, my parents paid for all my tuition each semester, and it was probably between 1500 to 2500 per semester…. They paid for that out of pocket. I'm really grateful for that because that really kind of helped me get started and continue to come here…. They did payment plans. I felt bad because I'm making them pay for my schooling, but they knew that, "Hey, if I contribute this toward your school, when you go on to another school you can get those loans out, so at least we did our part to at least help you a little bit, then you can kind of continue on and finish."

Though those we spoke with received no or only minimal direct financial assistance from their parents or other family members in paying for major college expenses like tuition, and none mentioned a regular allowance, many received financial help from parents (e.g., parents helping them pay for cell phone or internet bills, car insurance, or health insurance while keeping the students on their own plans, with unexpected sporadic costs such as needed car maintenance, or with small regular sums to help out with buying food). As Alice, who lived with roommates near campus, told us, "Here and there, they will give me $20 or $30 every now and then. I will use that for groceries." Jennifer, who also lived with roommates near campus, said, "My parents pay for my phone and my sorority dues." Students' parents were not in a financial position to help pay tuition at these four-year institutions, but they could cover smaller expenses to help their children get by or to make the most of their college experience.

Though a few participants who were older than traditional college age were living with spouses or partners, and several participants used loan funds to live with roommates on or near campus, some parents of participants—like Mia, mentioned above—provided a place to live, allowing students to keep their living costs low and limit their loan needs to tuition and fees. Olivia reported that she lived with her parents rent-free, telling us, "As far as paying bills, I can't afford it right now."

As she approached graduation, Simone was also living with her parents rent-free and told us, "I plan on staying at home for right now until I get married. Stay home, save money." Several students mentioned they planned on continuing to live with their parents after graduation, and some who weren't living with their parents during college mentioned they would move in with their parents rent-free to save money after college. Bella was living with roommates; she told us her mother's plan for her after she graduated: "I'll move in with her [in Florida] for a year, and pay off my student loans. That way I'm debt-free, start on my own. That sounds good. That sounds like a solid plan." For all of these participants, living with their parents made college possible for them; the benefits were clear enough that they planned to continue living with their parents after graduation. Though not as quantifiable as direct financial assistance would be, the residential support these participants received was incredibly valuable to them and provided them with welcomed reassurance. As Simone thought about leaving college and her worries about the future, she told us, "I think it will be okay. I think I am a little dramatic sometimes. My parents aren't going to make me drown, you know what I mean?"

During college: Financial transfers to family members. Help did not only flow in one direction. Students *provided* financial support to family members in addition to *receiving* it from them. We did not ask directly about support qualitative interview participants gave to their family members at Wave 1, but several discussed this aid spontaneously. Olivia, Simone, and Rose, who all lived with their parents, contributed to household expenses—Olivia and Simone occasionally purchased groceries and Rose was responsible for the family water and sewer bills. Olivia described contributing what she could to the household, but her parents did not *require* money from her:

> I used to contribute a little more, like to groceries and things, but they actually cut my hours at work. Now, most of the time I have enough money to pay for my car insurance, my phone bill, and anything that I do, I pay for it myself pretty much. Sometimes I have a little extra and I'll do things with my mom where I'll take them to eat or do something, that way.

David told us he had lived with his parents during part of college and "I was paying them a little bit of money…. It was supposed to be a set amount but then the numbers weren't working out too well and I wasn't really able to afford to pay them everything…. They were understanding. I mean, my dad is pretty well off so it was not that big of a deal to him." David's perception that contributing might be more important if parental need were greater fit with what we learned from other participants as well.

When we first spoke with him at Wave 1, PJ was living with his parents rent-free, but had provided financial help to them as well. He told us, "I think it was last year, my dad borrowed about $2000 from me. Then he said he was going to pay it back in December of 2015, before New Year's, and I totally forgot. So I was like, 'all right, whatever.'" PJ also told us he was already planning on contributing substantial financial support to his parents after graduation. He explained his plan:

> After I graduate, obviously I'm going to help them out. I was actually talking to my dad about two weeks ago, I was asking him, "How much do you guys pay on mortgage and

> everything?" Because obviously once I start working I'm not going to be just like keep living for free, because I'm just going to feel guilty even though if they're like, "It's OK."… I was like, "I'm going to pick up the mortgage once I start working."

In the qualitative data, several participants reported *planning* on giving direct financial help to their parents for household expenses after college when living with parents, but no one reported that they were *already* providing financial support to their family members during college, aside from purchasing groceries or paying a particular bill, with the exception of PJ's $2000 transfer to his father.

After graduation: Housing support, reciprocity, and adulthood. When we followed up with our qualitative interview participants one, two, and three years after they graduated, we learned that many were living with family members, in some cases a continuation of their arrangements during college. They often were providing financial support to their families as a condition of living with them. Seven of 24 Wave 1 participants (during college) lived with a parent, but 12 of the 20 participants who completed at least one follow-up wave lived with parents at Waves 2, 3, and/or 4—and the remaining eight were all living with a spouse or long-term partner. No one lived alone. Participants living with parents experienced these living arrangements in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways; they noted advantages, but the situations did not feel positive for them all of the time. They generally saw living with their parents as a financial benefit—if not a necessity—but some struggled with conflictual relationships with their parents, how much they were expected to give in return, or with their sense of independent adulthood. Because of their ambivalent assessments, sometimes the same participants emphasized that family help had improved their situations and described how it created burdens.

Negative feelings wrapped up in benefits Sometimes living with parents made participants feel trapped. Often they did not really want to be there, either because of ongoing familial conflict or because it threatened their sense of independence. And sometimes the financial or household help participants provided to their families in return for a place to stay felt burdensome. Yet even in these cases, participants generally concluded that overall, living with family members was the right decision.

Alice was living with her mother at Wave 2 and contributing about $100 per month toward the phone and electric bills. She gave her mother the food stamps she received as part of her AmeriCorps placement compensation, approximately $190 per month. She told us, "It's definitely saving me money and I have to place a live, so I'm thankful for that," though she did hope to move out to live more independently, with her boyfriend. By Wave 3 she had done so, but when she looked back at the time she lived with her mom, she did not think of it as a way to maximize her ability to save, but that she had "nowhere else to go." Ava felt tension between the advantages of living with her parents to save money and the desire to be on her own. She told us at Wave 2, "I'm like ready to be out now. I'm like, I'm done, I can't do it. It's nice living here to save money, but I'd rather be in my own place."

At Wave 3, Monique was giving $300 a month to her mother (which helped her mother cover the $1600 monthly mortgage) and did a lot around the house. Monique's romantic partner was also staying there and contributing $300 a month. Monique reported feeling overwhelmed at times. She explained, "Some days I'm her biggest help and she commends me on that.... I do a lot around the house, like besides work. I come home and I'm cooking because I have three younger siblings. I'm cooking dinner, I'm getting kids home from school and giving baths and getting them to bed. I take them to school in the morning, I get them dressed...I'm doing a lot."

Yet, Monique reported mostly feeling like the arrangement was working well, even if there were days her contributions felt weighty, and she knew she did a lot around the house because she had not always been able to contribute financially. She explained, "I wasn't working for a long time at the beginning of the school year, so it got to the point where it was like, I'm not paying you rent, so anything you'll ask, I'll do." She was grateful for her mother's continued understanding and flexibility: "When I started paying my mom, she was like, 'If there's ever a month that you're going to be short, just let me know, it's not a problem.'" At Wave 4 Monique and her partner were still living with her mother, and her ambivalence showed through again when she said, "Some days it's like, 'This is best because I'm not struggling.' Other days, it's like, 'I get no privacy and it's loud in here, I want to leave.'"

For Serenity, the negative often felt like it outweighed the positive—she would have liked to stay with her mother longer to save money, but there was extreme tension and conflict with her mother, exacerbated by unclear communication regarding how much she was supposed to contribute, which in turn seemed to feed resentment. In describing living with her mother at Wave 2, she explained, "I don't like it. I want to move out. Hopefully by the end of this year.… It sucks because I don't think that I should have to, because I could really save money by just being at home, but the space just between us in that place is just not healthy for myself, so I feel like I need to get out." Nonetheless, when last interviewed at Wave 3, Serenity still lived with her mother.

Paying down debt, keeping costs low, and a sense of security Many participants lived with their families rent-free, contributing by doing chores, cooking, or taking responsibility for one household bill. Housing assistance was common and welcome, especially because some participants reported not wanting to ask for direct financial support from family members. Many participants noted that they did not believe their relatives had the resources to be able to give them money. Ava and her newborn infant were living rent-free with her parents at Wave 2, but by Wave 3 Ava was expecting her second child and had moved out to live with her husband, who she married between Waves 2 and 3. At Wave 3 she said, "I wouldn't really ask them [for money]. It'd be like a last resort…. I just feel like I shouldn't take money from them, because I know that they need it too, you know?" At Wave 2, Flo told us, "Nobody's got it. My whole family's broke…. Everybody's poor. I'm probably the richest, and I'm in debt." At Wave 3 Flo reiterated, "There's no financial help from anybody…. My family, [my husband's] family, we're all pretty poor."

The frequent sense participants had that their family members did not have disposable cash to share made them at times even more appreciative that they had a place to live rent-free. Participants described parents who framed co-living as an opportunity to help them pay off debts and save for the future, rather than as a disappointment or burden. As she had told us at Wave 1 that she planned, we learned at Wave 2 that Bella moved to Florida after graduating to live with her mom. Bella mentioned, "Even before I graduated, she told me that, 'You have to stay home and save money,' and pay off the debt load as much as I can." Bella secured work as a nurse and explained that she has had been able to pay a large amount toward her loan debt each month because of living with her mother rent-free. She explained, "Well, at first, my mother was helping and paying for everything until I got settled on my feet. She still is helping me. I have to pay the phone bill and the Internet bill." But she said she didn't need to contribute to rent, utilities, or groceries. Between Wave 1 and Wave 2, Bella had gotten engaged to be married. Bella predicted that when she moved out to live with her husband, she wouldn't be able to put as much money toward her loans because she would have to cover more household expenses than she did when living with her mother.

Jennifer moved in with her boyfriend and his parents after college graduation, while she attended an 18-month certification program at a community college. At Waves 2 and 3, she and her boyfriend each contributed $100 a month to his parents for household expenses, but Jennifer was clear in her Wave 2 interview that his parents didn't require this out of need; rather, it made her feel better to contribute even what she saw as a token amount. Her own parents also paid for her car insurance and her health insurance. Jennifer explained:

> Because my parents pay the car insurance… and I stay on their health insurance, I can afford other things and I don't have to worry about it. Same with living where I live. If I had to afford an apartment, I don't know how I'd do it, because I quite honestly would have run out of money after month two.… I don't know how I would have done any of it.

The arrangement Jennifer and her boyfriend had with his parents allowed them to save to buy a house, and by Wave 4 they were homeowners.

Like Jennifer and her boyfriend, Olivia was giving about $100 per month to her parents to go toward groceries at Wave 2. She had offered more money but they had declined, as she explained: "I've offered to give, but most of the time they're like, 'No, it's OK, just put it in your savings and save,'" and they also told her she should ask them if she needed anything. As she expressed, "They tell me all the time, 'If you ever need anything, just ask,' but I don't. I always try to figure it out by myself, because they already do so much, and they don't charge me rent." By Wave 3, Olivia estimated her monthly contribution to be almost $200, double what it was a year earlier, but she felt it was a wise decision to continue to live with her parents:

> I see a lot of my friends, or people, they don't understand. They're like, "You're still living with your parents?" I'm like, "Yeah, but, at the end of the day, whenever I talk to you, you're scrounging trying to make ends meet, and if something big's happening, you can't afford it." So, my mom has always said, "Live with us until you can save, at least have a thousand-dollar emergency fund and then two months' worth of your income saved, so that if something happens, then you have room to cover it."

Olivia and her parents had discussed her finances, and "they would rather me take time to improve my credit and have money to be OK so that I don't have to keep coming back or struggling when I get out there and then asking for help." Olivia's parents seemed to have the perspective that the more they could help her and the less they require of her financially, the better positioned their child would be. Bella's mother also seemed to share this view, as described above. These participants felt supported and saw unequivocal benefits in their living arrangements.

Like Bella, many participants reported that their parents wanted them to focus their resources on repaying loans. At Wave 2 Leo reported that he had nearly repaid all his loans ($20,000 of the $26,000 he reported owing at Wave 1) while living rent-free with his mom. At Wave 3, PJ reported that he had completely paid off his $20,000 student loan debt because, as he recalled, "literally every paycheck I would get, I would just throw it into my loans." He also reported giving his parents approximately $500 per month on average, but this was far less than he would have had to pay for rent and utilities if he had moved out. At Wave 3, PJ explained how their arrangement was working:

> I don't pay rent or anything. However, once per year, I will give my dad just a one-time payment of just how much ever money he asked. He doesn't keep a running record of each individual line item, how much I owe.... So when I tell him, "Hey, how much do I owe you this year, or something like that, and if I have it in my bank account, or if he just tells me, I'll just save up to that much. It's usually around $6,000 or $7,000 per year.

Other graduates gave money to their parents on a monthly or even more occasional basis. As in PJ's situation, these amounts were far less than these graduates would have had to spend if they were living independently, and the arrangement felt beneficial to the participants. At Wave 3, Ashley anticipated moving back in with her mother after she finished graduate school, and she knew she would have to contribute to household expenses but that it would be "cheaper than it would be if I was living by myself." Even Noah, who at Wave 3 was contributing the most of any of the participants we interviewed, as much as $200 per week, felt his decision to live at home and pay his parents was "just the smartest thing financially." He explained that his parents told him, "'Stay at home, and just, you know, pay off your student loans.'… I was like 'OK.' All right, so, you know, and then I help them when I can. I mean, now I can actually help them.... I can save my money, pay my loans, and then help my parents too." Their arrangement felt not just like the smart financial decision to Noah, but a win-win situation for everyone. He said, "If I was unemployed and I was just at home, then I would feel like a bum, but, you know, the fact that I can contribute, it just feels more like a partnership more or less.... We help each other out."

At Wave 2, Mia also noted that sometimes she worried about her debt, "but then I realize it's going to be fine because if we need help, we have people that can help us." And as Olivia told us at Wave 3, "At the end of the day, ever since I've graduated, I've seen that I've always been able to pay my bills. I've always had a job. My parents care. I have people who will help. So, there's no need to really stress out about it. It kind of always works out."

Living with parents as adulthood hindrance and help The arrangements Leo and PJ had with their parents allowed them to transition to adulthood and independent living debt-free. Yet, living with parents, even if contributing to household costs and even if assessed as a wise financial decision, made some participants feel stuck, unable to transition to adulthood. As Ava, who was living with her parents, said at Wave 2, "I just feel like you can't be grown up living with your parents." Monique also said that living with her mom kept her from feeling like an adult, because "When you're past a certain age you're supposed to be out on your own."

Speaking from her perspective as a parent of teenaged children, Crystal explained that she would need to consider whether or not to charge her son rent if and when he moved back in with her and her husband after college because, "The purpose really is for him to save and get out. That's where we want you to go because we want you to be independent at this point, you're an adult. You need to be on your own. But if him paying rent is going to hold him back from saving money so he'll have money to move out on his own, then maybe I won't accept rent from him, unless I accept it and put it away [for him]."

At Wave 4, when we asked participants what they thought it meant to be an adult and if they felt grown up, they spoke of both financial independence and moving out of their parents' homes. Ava had lived with her parents at Waves 1 and 2, and was living with her husband at Wave 3. But by Wave 4 she was a survivor of intimate partner violence, living in a women's shelter with her children. Ava was conflicted, having at times felt like an adult, but at other times her deep need for help kept her from that sense of adulthood. She said, “I feel like part of being a grown up is being self-sufficient, like not having to rely on your parents or whatever.”

Flo said being an adult is “being able to provide for yourself” and Jason told us, “It’s when you have the ability to survive, even if it’s not comfortably, but you have the ability to survive on your own.” Crystal reported that what it means to be an adult is to be “fully independent” and “When I moved out of the house, that was when I was an adult.” Crystal, Flo, and Jason, who were among the older of the participants, were all married and living with their spouses at Wave 4, and none of them lived with parents at any wave. They said they felt adult due to this independence, all pointing specifically to how they first felt like adults when they no longer lived with their parents.

Monique said she did not feel like an adult, but she would “when I’m out on my own and when I can pay all my bills and not struggle.… Pay all my bills, have something saved for emergencies, that would make me feel like a grown up.” Yet sometimes, even when participants met the thresholds they believed represented the transition to adulthood, they did not feel grown up. Jennifer said her definition of being an adult was paying bills, living on your own, and having a job—all things she was doing when at Wave 4 she was living with her fiancé in a house they had recently purchased, yet she said, “It just doesn’t—I don’t feel adult.”

Mia was engaged at Wave 1, had married and purchased a home with her husband by Wave 2, and was divorced and renting an apartment with a new partner by Wave 4. She said that “to be an adult to me means being responsible and being able to support yourself, and you know, keep yourself accountable for everything that you do, and be able to, you know, I guess succeed in everything that you do.” This is indeed a high bar, and might be why Mia said she did not always feel like an adult, but she said she *began* to “when I started like being able to cover multiple bills and still have some money left. I’m like, OK, this is how it works. OK, I’m figuring it out. I’m getting the hang of this. So I think it was more an accomplishment feeling of, you know, being able to support myself by myself.”

Olivia summarized the confusion and ambivalence some participants experienced when assessing their sense of their adulthood: “I feel like I have the responsibilities and the bills of a grown up, but I don’t feel prepared to be a grown up. I think this generation is struggling with adulting and how hard it actually is. And I know that things are worse for us financially…. I feel like a college kid, but I have adult responsibilities, if that makes sense.”

Survey Results

Help to and From Family in College by Loan Presence. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the total survey by loan presence and survey round. Survey results confirm that many undergraduates with loans relied on family help during college, but that they received *less* help than those without loans (see Table 4). Just under half of students had help from parents or family in paying tuition, with significantly lower rates among those with loans in both t-tests and regressions. Family help with living expenses or with a place to live was more common. The majority of students reported help with living expenses, with rates lower among those who took out loans compared to those without loans in t-tests and regressions. Undergraduates with loans were significantly less likely than those without loans to report receiving a regular allowance from family members. Although most undergraduates received help with living expenses from family, only a minority lived with their parents. Living with parents and receiving help from family were significantly less common among those with loans.

In addition to being less likely to receive help from family, undergraduates with loans were significantly more likely than those without loans to give money to parents or other family (see Table 4); almost half of students with loans gave money to family versus around one-third of those without loans. Among those living with their parents or families at the time of the survey, giving money to parents or family was also significantly more common among those with loans. Giving money to family among those with loans was not restricted to those living with family; just over a quarter of students with loans who gave money to their families lived with them, significantly fewer than those without loans who gave money to their families. Among those without loans, over a third of those giving money to family lived with family. This indicates that giving money to family was more likely to be in exchange for housing if students did not have loans, while those with loans were more likely to give money to family without receiving housing help in return. Indeed, among those with loans who were not living with family, nearly half reported giving money to family. Giving money to family was significantly and substantially less common among those without loans who were living independently, with only about a third of these students doing so. Open-ended survey responses (not shown, available from authors) also suggested several students with loans used their loan refund checks specifically to help family members facing financial issues.

Differences by Loan Presence After Graduation Surveys with college graduates 15 months after graduation revealed some differences in patterns compared to the first survey round (see Table 4). Although those with loans were *less* likely to receive an allowance in college compared to those without loans, they were marginally *more* likely to receive an allowance after college in t-tests, and significantly more likely to receive an allowance in regressions. Regressions controlled for factors such as age that might obscure differences in overall comparisons because graduates with loans were older than graduates without loans (see Table 3). Examination of differences across rounds shows that the reversal in trends related to allowance and loan presence was driven by a decline in allowance among those without loans, while those with loans had no significant differences across rounds. Another area of difference between rounds was living situation; while in college those with loans were less likely to live with parents, there were no significant differences in living with parents after graduation and/or living with them during the Round 2 survey in either t-tests or regressions. Over half of graduates reported living with parents since graduation, and among both those with and without loans, living with parents after graduation was significantly more common than living with parents at the time of the survey among undergraduates.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: Percents and Differences by Loan Presence Within Rounds.

	Round 1				Round 2			
	Total	Has Loans	No Loans	T-Test/X^2	Total	Has Loans	No Loans	T-Test/X^2
Parents education: < high school	5.1	4.8	5.6	$X^2 = 98.61$***	4.0	2.9	7.7	$X^2 = 11.88$*
HS	16.2	17.8	13.0		16.5	17.5	12.8	
Some college	29.0	32.7	21.3		30.1	34.3	15.4	
BA	28.0	27.2	29.7		28.4	28.5	28.2	
Graduate degree	20.4	16.5	28.6		20.5	16.1	35.9	
Unknown	1.3	1.1	1.8		0.6	0.7	0.0	
Age (mean)	23.6	23.7	23.6	T = 0.31	25.2	25.9	22.7	T = 2.46*
White	51.6	48.1	58.7	$X^2 = 131.9$***	59.1	54.0	76.9	$X^2 = 9.61$*
Black	26.2	31.9	14.3		19.3	22.6	7.7	
Latino/a	9.5	8.7	11.1		10.8	10.2	12.8	
Asian	6.4	4.8	9.6		2.3	2.9	0.0	
Other Race	6.5	6.5	6.3		8.5	10.2	2.6	
Women	77.4	77.5	77.2	$X^2 = 0.20$	79.6	78.1	84.6	$X^2 = 0.79$
Men	21.3	21.3	21.4		17.1	18.3	12.8	
Other Gender	1.3	1.2	1.4		3.4	3.7	2.6	
Southern school	81.6	81.5	81.9	T = –0.26	85.2	85.4	84.6	T = 0.12

*$p < .05$ ***$p < .001$.

Table 4. Aid To/From Parents/Family Members of College Students and Graduates.

	Total		Has Loans		No Loans		Significance Tests by Loans		N
	%	Odds Ratio: Round	%	Odds Ratio: Round	%	Odds Ratio: Round	T-Test	Odds Ratio: Round	
Family help w/tuition	46.4		39.7		60.1		–11.13***	0.45***	3251
Family help w/college living expenses	60.0		56.3		67.6		−6.24***	0.61***	3251
Received regular allowance									
R1	18.2	0.73	16.0	1.61	22.9	0.00**	−4.83***	0.70***	3235
R2	14.6		17.3		5.3		1.87†	9.83**	171
Lived w/parents									
R1 - At survey	25.7	10.28***	23.6	9.35***	30.2	12.13**	−4.04***	0.72**	3251
R2 - Since graduation	53.1		51.1		60.5		−1.03	0.75	175
If lived w/parents, paid rent, R2	15.4		17.6		8.7		1.02	2.74	91
Gave family money									
R1 – All	43.4	1.03	48.0	1.11	34.1	0.91	7.54***	1.47***	3233
R2 – All	47.1		52.2		28.9		2.57*	3.31**	172
R1 – Lived w/parents at survey	50.1	0.86	54.6	0.95	42.7	0.60	3.33***	1.42*	831
R2 – Lived w/parents since grad	50.0		55.1		34.8		1.69†	2.78	92
R1 – Did not live w/parents	41.1	0.80	45.9	1.06	30.3	0.45	7.25***	1.55***	2404
R2 – Did not live w/parents	43.8		49.2		20.0		2.09*	5.17†	80
If gave family money = Yes									
R1 – Lived w/parents at survey	29.6	11.15***	26.8	7.97**	37.9	107.00†	−4.00***	0.63**	1405
R2 – Lived w/parents since grad	56.8		54.3		72.7		−1.14	0.44	81

Note. Results from t-tests, logistic regressions (to estimate differences by loan presence) and random effects logistic regressions (to estimate differences by round), controlling for parents' education, age, race, gender, and school attended (Reference: Parents have less than high school, White, women, southern school). R1= Round 1, R2= Round 2. †*p*<.10 **p*<.05 ***p*<.01 ****p*<.00

Discussion

Our findings advance understandings of the transition to adulthood, the role of student loan debt in the transition to adulthood, norms regarding adulthood, and intergenerational reciprocity for young adults who have graduated college. Student loans delay some traditional markers of the transition to adulthood among college graduates. Loans (and the high cost of college that so often necessitate them) may delay financial independence, and those seeking to avoid loans in college may delay residential independence. Yet, for those with and without loans, support from family may facilitate a more secure and durable—albeit later—transition to established adulthood.

Many of the findings related to residential arrangements because it was one of the most common types of familial support discussed by participants, and because of both the symbolic and substantial practical importance of this support. Parents may have thought of co-living as a way to aid children with debt repayment, framing the arrangement as symbolically fulfilling middle-class ideals and norms of helping children pay for college. Participants may have framed co-living as something their parents insisted upon in order to help them, rather than a delay in financial independence after college resulting from their loan obligations. Unable to help with more direct financial aid during or after college, some parents leveraged their limited resources to help children pay for debt after graduation, often by providing them housing. Children symbolically took on a more adult role by providing parents with financial support, even though at times the amounts were not that large.

The qualitative data tell the story that family support has made an enormous difference in the lives of the graduates with loans who we followed over time. This was clearly the case for PJ and Leo in their debt repayment, as well as for others in terms of their sense of security and optimism. Many participants had confidence that their parents would be there to help if they needed. Even as they faced uncertainties ahead, they felt secure and supported, which alleviated their worries. As prior research has argued, coresidence can facilitate payment of debt and saving for purchases, such as home ownership, that may aid graduates to transition more securely to established adulthood in the future (Aquilino, 2006; Mehta et al., 2020). Living with parents allowed students and graduates to save on housing costs while establishing themselves in careers (like Olivia), completing additional school and saving money to purchase a home (Jennifer), and paying off loans more quickly than they would have been able to if they were paying for independent housing (Leo and PJ).

Our finding that college students without loans were more likely to live with parents but less likely to rely on financial help from parents after graduation also exemplifies the value of coresidence. Crystal's comment that living with family may allow her son to save *in order to* live independently, and thus be an adult, acknowledged this complexity. Navigating social norms about adulthood is difficult in this context, as suggested by participants who felt conflicted, like Ava. At times they felt like adults, but at other times needing help made them feel they weren't adults. Some who were receiving support from family, especially if it was in the form of coresidence, felt they might be violating societal norms of adulthood, but recognized that they would not reach the goal of financial independence and eventually fulfill the social norm of living independently as adults without this support.

Our study contributes to the mounting evidence that norms surrounding independence in adulthood may be shifting (Manzoni, 2016). Most of the study subjects are in the period of life defined as emerging adulthood; some reached symbolic markers more commonly associated with established adulthood, while others continue to experience delays in transitioning from emerging adulthood. Findings suggest that these age-based categories may not always fit the reality of college graduates' experiences because of the nuances that surround the transition to adulthood.

Confirming prior research, we found that family support can both facilitate and delay the transition to adulthood (Fingerman et al., 2017; Manzoni, 2016). Coresidence often came with expectations of reciprocity, as others have found (Aquilino, 2006). Most of those giving money to family members who were providing them with housing were paying less than they would have paid for independent housing. Reciprocity helped some of those living with their family manage their sense of their own adulthood by symbolically taking on a more adult role, such as Jennifer, who reported she felt better when contributing to the household, even what she saw as a token amount. Nonetheless, reciprocity meant that family help could create a burden, and at times led to feelings of resentment. Providing disposable income to family members can also delay the traditional markers of the transition to adulthood, as it can limit graduates' ability to save.

The survey data also demonstrated that students helped family more often than we would know if we relied only on the qualitative data, and that those with loans were especially likely to help family both before and after graduation, confirming hypotheses 1 and 3. Survey data also revealed that the majority of students in our survey, with and without loans, reported receiving help from family, and those without loans were more likely to get help with tuition and living expenses, in line with our first hypothesis. Because survey data showed that living with family was more common among undergraduates *without* loans than among those with loans, it suggests that living with family may help some avoid loans, and that lacking this help—whether due to familial unwillingness or inability, infeasibility, or student reluctance—may increase loan presence. On the other hand, it is possible that the causal chain is reversed: family members might not offer assistance because they perceive students as not needing it *because* they have loans. Though loans may enable students to live independently in college, facilitating the transition to adulthood in some respects, this independence may be fleeting; in the longer run after graduation those with loans are as likely to live with parents as graduates without loans, and are more likely to receive an allowance from parents, in line with our second hypothesis. This suggests that taking out loans may facilitate students' financial and coresidential independence from parents while in college but increase dependence after college.

Higher education—and the student loans that facilitate it—can provide a chance of upward mobility (Baum & Steele, 2010; Brand & Xie, 2010; Millett, 2003). Yet, increased dependence after college, combined with increased financial help to family compared to graduates without loans, may exacerbate class divides among highly educated young adults by loan presence (Kuperberg & Mazelis, 2022). The relative economic disadvantage of family members of those with loans meant those family members likely had need for financial support of their own, and those with loans may have felt a need to provide assistance to their family members due to this greater financial precarity. For example, David was aware that his contributions to the family budget would be more important if his parents' financial need had been greater. Recent college graduates or students with loan funds to draw upon often wanted to provide their families with assistance, but contrasting David with Monique suggests class, race, and gender may also play roles in the distinctions we identified. Monique was providing financial help her mother depended on to cover the mortgage as well as help with caring for her younger siblings, likely constraining her ability to get ahead; David did not have to worry about providing financial or in-kind support to his family. Responses to open-ended survey questions indicated many students used loan refund checks to help family members with financial problems, also suggesting family need drove these transfers.

Living with family members seemed to intensify the sense of responsibility to contribute to household expenses, as those living with family were more likely to give them money. But as expected, both before and after graduation, those with loans were more likely than those without loans to give parents or family money if they lived with them—or even if they did not—which created additional burdens. Qualitative findings revealed that college students and graduates with loans often felt a need to help family members financially, even as they struggled with their own expenses—including student debt payments. This was precisely why they needed loans in the first place: their family members struggled financially. Provision of help to family can add to financial obligations and exacerbate economic difficulties, making their transition to adulthood more difficult to navigate and increasing inequality. These transfers in young adulthood can also set expectations for later financial and caregiving support in later life, with expectations of reciprocity increasing as parents age (Aquilino, 2006). This study confirms other research on the dual effects of reciprocity among low-income adults (see Hansen, 2004; Mazelis, 2017; Nelson, 2005), demonstrating that the same pattern exists for college students and graduates: it can present an advantage in addition to a burden. Reciprocity drains—but also provides—resources. Yet if higher education were adequately funded, the experiences of college students and graduates would be less dependent on family resources, reducing this burden. The outsized role that family resources play in the current higher education funding structure exacerbates existing inequalities.

During college, students and families could have viewed loan refunds (cash leftover after tuition is paid) as a resource to draw on for family, but post-graduation, there were no loan refunds. Despite this, over half of graduates with debt reported giving money to family members in Round 2, indicating aid to family was likely related to family need and either graduates' sense of obligation to provide assistance or family requests for financial contributions. Graduates and their families may have also viewed graduating from college as a marker of the transition to adulthood. If families saw graduates as adults, they might have expected financial stability that obligated them to contribute to the household, even if graduates had not achieved it. Graduates may have seen themselves as adults and felt this pressure as well, as a result of social norms and expectations about adulthood.

Living independently is one marker of the transition to adulthood, but financial stability is a marker as well (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Shanahan, 2000), and sometimes achieving one means not achieving the other. Participants generally thought that paying bills *and* living independently defined the transition to adulthood, but this finding illuminates the need for nuance in how we define adulthood (Manzoni, 2016), for many were paying bills but *not* living independently. Many had used loans to facilitate independent housing in college, but after graduation were living with their parents, giving their parents money and paying some of the household bills, while also saving to live independently. They were confident they would be on firm financial footing when they did move out because of their current reduced housing costs. Social norms regarding living separately from parents and becoming financially independent as symbolic markers of adulthood led some participants who lived with their parents to feel they had not quite arrived at adulthood. At the same time, living with parents might allow their transition to adulthood to be more stable and lasting, enabling them to reach a period of established adulthood with greater independence. Aid to family members may facilitate rather than hinder graduates' transition to adulthood, but can also be a symbol of adulthood itself, which highlights the complicated ways in which we should understand and theorize this transition. Completing a college degree is also a marker of adulthood, but when that degree is accompanied by considerable debt, the financial independence that can represent adulthood may remain elusive. Increasing public spending on higher education would reduce student loan debt and could therefore facilitate college graduates' transitions to adulthoods characterized by financial independence.

Study Limitations

This paper is not without limitations. The sample was drawn from only two 4-year, public universities in the United States. Although study design overcame some limitations of national datasets, it also reduced generalizability, especially of overall descriptive rates, which are not likely accurate estimations of national rates. Results are not representative of college students in the United States more generally, especially those at different types of colleges, although focusing on two similar universities allowed us to control for conflation of loan presence and college quality that may affect national comparisons because of selection into different types of colleges. Young adults in other countries with different funding structures for higher education and different social norms regarding helping family members may also meaningfully differ.

Although the first survey included students at varied stages of college completion, the second survey round and the qualitative data were limited to those who successfully completed college, those in the best position to repay their loans and transition to adulthood. This study does not include those with debt but who left college with no degree, who likely face greater financial hardship than those who graduate (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). This may lead them to need more help from family members as well as to have greater burdens to help family due to those family members' own financial hardships. Our focus is on those best positioned to repay their loans and succeed in a competitive labor market; to the extent they confront substantial difficulties, those disadvantages are likely to be even more severe for those who do not complete degrees.

The qualitative interviews were limited to individuals with student loans. Those with debt were the focus of the research, but because we did not conduct qualitative interviews with individuals who did not have loans, we may not fully understand explanations underlying patterns in the survey data among those without loans. Finally, we did not interview family members of students and graduates, so we lack the additional knowledge their perspective could have provided.

Conclusion

Findings confirm past research about the dual nature of reciprocity as both a benefit and a burden. Sharing housing and pooling resources helps graduates with loans, even though it also often serves as an obligation; it helps their family members as well. This study demonstrates that help from family for college students and graduates provides benefits, but also creates obligations that may feel burdensome, paralleling existing research on reciprocity among other economically struggling populations (Hansen, 2004; Mazelis, 2015, 2017; Mazelis & Mykyta, 2020; Nelson, 2005). As coresidence with parents has become more common among emerging adults, social norms about these living arrangements may continue to shift (Fingerman et al., 2017; Manzoni, 2016). After graduation, coresidence with parents delays the transition to adulthood if we deem that transition to consist of living independently. Research participants do feel that in some ways living with their parents keeps them from crossing a threshold to adulthood, but it also positions graduates better for loan repayment, a major obstacle in reaching financial stability—another marker of the transition to adulthood. This suggests a need to complicate understandings of the transition to adulthood to recognize that competing facets create contradictory sentiments, experiences, and outcomes among those confronting this transition. Future research should further disentangle factors with potentially competing effects, such as degree completion, residential independence, financial stability, and support to and from family.

Rising student debt is reshaping the experiences of emerging adulthood for college graduates. Policymakers discussing student debt cancellation and higher education funding should consider the role of rising college tuition and student debt in college graduates' lives as graduates seek to transition to an established adulthood characterized by financial and residential independence. Policymakers should also note the pressure high college costs can place on family relationships as well as the indirect societal consequences of delayed transitions to adulthood, for example for prospects of home ownership. University administrators should be aware of the calculations students often need to make as they weigh the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling and taking on debt. As students pursue college degrees as a means to achieve financial independence, they should consider the additional debt they may need to take on to live on campus and weigh the benefits of residential independence during college against potential dependence on family in the longer term. Financial aid advisors need to consider the implications of family support and reciprocity when counseling college students regarding loans. Practitioners such as family therapists may find increasing numbers of family clients that include adult children struggling with meanings of dependence and independence and conflicts over shared living spaces. As student debt cancellation policy remains uncertain, the future of emerging adults' transition to adulthood remains uncertain as well. Future research should explore new patterns as the student debt landscape potentially shifts.

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Open Practices

The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

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1 All participant names are pseudonyms the participants chose.

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