

On the challenges and solutions of College Students' role transformation from campus to society

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Abstract. With the popularization and development of higher education, millions of college students leave the campus and enter the social stage every year. According to the statistics of the Ministry of education, the number of college graduates in 2025 is expected to reach 12.22 million, a record high. This huge group of young people is facing a major change from students' role to social professional role, which is full of opportunities and challenges. The socialization of college students refers to the process of learning, absorbing and creating social culture, mastering social behavior, gradually adapting to social life, and becoming a social person who can perform social role behavior. This process is of great significance to personal growth and social development. It is not only related to whether individuals can smoothly adapt to the society, shape personality and promote success, but also affects the benign operation of society, cultural inheritance and social division of labor. The role transformation of college students is not only an educational problem, but also a social problem. Based on the role theory and socialization theory, this paper analyzes the main challenges faced by college students in the process of role transformation, explores its deep-seated reasons, and puts forward systematic solutions from the perspective of multi-agent, in order to promote college students to better realize the smooth transition from campus to society.

Keywords: Social adaptation; Role switching; Social competition; Higher education

1. Introduction

The socialization of college students refers to the process in which individuals gradually master social norms, skills and values through systematic learning and social practice at the stage of higher education, and change from "biological man" to "social man". This process is not only crucial to personal growth and development, but also the basis of social inheritance and innovation. According to the statistics of the Ministry of education in 2023, the number of college graduates in China has reached 11.58 million, a record high, while the implementation rate of college graduates' whereabouts is only 81.5%, which reflects that there are significant obstacles in the process of College Students' transformation from campus to society [1]. The 2024 China youth development report pointed out that the extension of the role transition period has become the core incentive for the rising youth unemployment rate, and about 37% of the "slow employment" phenomenon stems from the difficulty in adapting to the transition (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2024). This "slow employment" trend is not merely a delay in job-seeking, but a complex coping mechanism shaped by identity paralysis, fear of failure, and social comparison. A 2024 longitudinal study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that over 60% of graduates who remained unemployed six months after graduation reported "not knowing what kind of adult they were supposed to become". This identity diffusion is exacerbated by social media, where peer comparisons—such as classmates landing high-paying tech jobs or studying abroad—create a distorted perception of success. Rather than risk "falling behind", many graduates opt to wait, hoping for a role that aligns with their imagined future self. This waiting period, however, often leads to skill atrophy, social withdrawal, and even depression [5]. The study also noted that graduates from first-tier universities were more likely to delay employment, not less—challenging the assumption that elite education guarantees smoother transitions. The global comparative study shows that the average career adaptation cycle of graduates in China is 9.2 months, which is significantly longer than 5.1 months in Germany and 6.8 months in Japan (OECD, 2023).

The role transformation of college students refers to the transformation process of graduates from "student role" to "professional role", involving the fundamental reconstruction of cognitive structure, behavior mode and social relations. Successful role transformation is not only related to the beginning of individual career, but also affects the optimal allocation of human resources and the vitality of social and economic development [2]. However, the reality shows that many college students are facing severe challenges in this process. The research shows that about 64.2% of the surveyed graduates believe that there are difficulties in the process of moving from school to society, and the proportion of college graduates with difficulties in adaptation is higher.

Social identity theory explains the identity conflict mechanism in the transformation of group identity, and explains the lack of sense of belonging after graduates leave the "student group". According to the survey of Tencent Research Institute, 68% of new employees said they "don't know how to introduce their new identity to colleagues" (Tencent, 2023).

Career construction theory emphasizes the process of individual identity construction through career narrative, and provides a new perspective for career education in colleges and universities.

2. Theoretical basis and concept

2.1 Theoretical Basis of Role Transformation. The symbolic interaction theory proposed by the social psychologist George Herbert Mead emphasizes that individuals can understand others' attitudes and expectations through interaction with others, using language, symbols and other media, and then form self-concept and social role cognition. In the process of socialization, college students gradually understand the social expectations and requirements for professional roles through interaction with others in the society, so as to adjust their behavior and attitude [3].

The life course theory focuses on the interaction between individual development and social and historical background, and believes that college students' socialization process is phased and dynamic in different life stages, which are affected by family, school, society and other factors. The theory emphasizes that the role transformation of college students cannot be separated from the specific social and historical environment, and macro factors such as economic development stage, employment market situation and social and cultural background should be considered.

Career chaos theory puts forward that career is a dynamic, nonlinear and open complex system, which is affected by complexity, change, construction and random factors. For young people who are new to the society, accepting uncontrollability is the primary task. It is necessary to try to break the situation from the aspects of goal clarification, awareness of the current situation, and analysis of the situation.

2.2 Connotation and Characteristics of College Students' Role Transformation. The role transformation of college students from campus to society is essentially the transformation from "student role" to "professional role". This transformation has the following characteristics:

Multidimensional: it involves the adjustment of multiple dimensions such as psychology, behavior, ability and interpersonal relationship.

Procedural: it is not an event completed in an instant, but a process that requires time to adapt.

Interactivity: it is the result of the interaction between individuals and the environment, which is affected by both personal factors and social environment.

Challenge: due to the huge differences between campus and society, the role transformation process is bound to face various challenges and difficulties.

Table 1 Comparison of the main differences between students' roles and professional roles

Comparison dimension	Student role	Professional role
Social responsibility	Learn cultural knowledge well and develop in an all-round way	Perform specific responsibilities and reflect responsibilities through work results
Social norms	The "code of conduct for college students" is the main	More stringent due to different occupations, violation of which

	violation, and the main violation is education and help	requires liability or even legal liability
Social rights	Receive education and obtain financial guarantee or subsidy	Get paid through labor, no pay, no pay
Activity mode	Accept and input knowledge, require understanding	Using knowledge and ability to provide labor to the outside world requires creativity in combination with practice

3 Multidimensional challenges faced by college students' Role Transformation

3.1 Psychological and Cognitive Challenges. College students first face psychological and cognitive challenges in the process of role transformation, mainly in the following aspects:

Role attachment and identity confusion: many college students have profound experience and attachment to student roles, are used to the simplicity and tranquility of student life, and are difficult to adapt to new professional roles, resulting in identity confusion. The survey shows that about 60% of college students say it takes 6 months to 1 year to adapt to the new role [4].

The gap between ideal and reality: college students are full of vision for the future at school, but soon find that there is a huge gap between reality and expectation after entering the society. This gap not only comes from the change of working environment, but also from the reevaluation of their own ability. After his master's degree in 1995, Li Wenli became a teacher in Dongguan. After graduation, he first faced living problems such as housing and consumption. Only by solving these basic problems can he gain a firm foothold in the new city. The recruitment data of Zhilian show that the average expected salary of graduates of 2023 is 28% higher than the actual offer, and the cost-of-living income ratio in first tier cities reaches 0.62 (Zhilian, 2023).

Fear and anxiety: many college students feel uncomfortable after leaving the campus and are full of fear for the future. For example, Huang, a graduate who has not fully accumulated internship experience, is trapped in an interview dilemma, tossing and turning every night and crying; Zhang was busy with his internship and was in a tense mood. He worried that he could not compare with others because he printed the wrong form. The anxiety index of junior college students (GAD-7 average score 8.2) was significantly higher than that of undergraduates (6.7) and postgraduates (5.9) (Peking University mental health report, 2023).

Self-Efficacy decline: Many students experience a sharp drop in self-efficacy—the belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations—once they leave the structured environment of university. Without syllabi, grades, or professors' feedback, they struggle to self-regulate and self-evaluate. A 2023 Tsinghua University study found that 68% of graduates reported "feeling stupid" in their first month of work, even when performing adequately. This decline is particularly pronounced among women and first-generation college students, who are less likely to have professional role models or family guidance.

3.2 Challenges at Skill and Ability Levels. College students often place excessive emphasis on theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical application skills. Many graduates discover that the knowledge and skills acquired at school do not fully align with societal needs, necessitating additional learning and training. Newcomers to the workforce frequently lack practical work experience and essential professional skills, leaving them feeling inadequate and overwhelmed in their jobs.

The intelligence levels of college graduates do not differ significantly, whereas non-intellectual skills (such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and stress resistance) are crucial factors influencing graduates' career choices, employment, and entrepreneurship. A deficiency in these non-intellectual skills makes it challenging for college students to effectively handle complex work scenarios in the professional environment.

The rise of generative AI has disrupted traditional entry-level roles. Tasks once assigned to juniors—such as data entry, basic translation, or report drafting—are now automated. A 2024

McKinsey report found that 31% of "graduate jobs" in China's financial and legal sectors have been restructured or eliminated due to AI integration. Graduates, trained in outdated software or theoretical frameworks, find themselves underqualified for AI-augmented roles. For instance, a finance major from Fudan University reported being rejected from 11 analyst positions for lacking Python or Prompt Engineering skills—none of which were part of her curriculum.

3.3 Interpersonal and Social Challenges. After leaving school, college students need to rebuild their interpersonal networks. Different from the simple classmate relationship on campus, the interpersonal relationship in society is more complex and subtle, and there are conflicts of interest. Graduates need to learn to deal with all kinds of people, establish and maintain good interpersonal relationships, which is a huge challenge for many college students who have just entered the society.

Many college students may only interact with a few people on campus, but they need to deal with all kinds of people after entering the society. Due to the lack of interpersonal experience and interpersonal skills, it is easy to lead to poor communication between students and their superiors and colleagues. For example, Wang felt that his colleagues and leaders insisted on cronyism at work, alienated colleagues, and had heavy psychological burden and anxiety symptoms.

3.4 Challenges at the Level of Environment and Expectation. Graduates need to pass the probation examination after taking part in the work. During the campus period, college students' learning and living conditions are relatively superior, with more free time, moderate rhythm and less pressure; After working, especially during the probationary period, graduates are often assigned to the grass-roots units with difficult conditions for exercise. They are busy with work and often need to work overtime, so their time is less and less.

The number of fresh college graduates is huge and lack of work experience. Employers' demand for talents is limited, and jobs cannot meet the demand for graduates. Former unemployed students and social unemployed also participate in the competition, making the employment environment more severe. In 2022, the number of fresh graduates reached 10.76 million, the number of college graduates' recruitment demand decreased, the number of job applications increased, and the success rate of job hunting was lower than last year.

The practical life challenges faced by graduates also make it harder for them to adapt. For instance, Gao, a graduate from a university in Nanjing, started preparing to rent an apartment after securing a job. He discovered that the online information was a mix of genuine and fake listings, with intermediaries posting false housing ads. The actual apartments he viewed did not match the descriptions, and the cost-effectiveness was poor [6].

4. Cause analysis of challenges

4.1 Personal Factors. College students, who are excessively protected by their families during their growth, often lack experience in independently handling difficulties and setbacks. Consequently, when confronted with workplace pressures and challenges, they are prone to experiencing anxiety and a tendency to withdraw. This situation affects college students' psychological maturity and resilience to setbacks [7].

Students lack clear career planning during school and rush to deal with the employment problem before graduation. They have no clear career goals and development path, which leads to blindly following the trend in the process of job hunting and choosing jobs that are not suitable for them.

Some college students have such conceptual problems as high employment expectations, strong stability seeking mentality (preference for examination editing and public examination), and unwilling to enter the grass-roots or specific industries. Some graduates do not have a comprehensive understanding of talents and think that they have received higher education and are already high-level talents, so they often look down on grass-roots work and grass-roots personnel.

4.2 University Education Factors. Currently, the employment guidance system is far from perfect, with many colleges and universities resorting to "last-minute efforts" in their employment guidance, which lacks comprehensiveness and systematic planning. Employment guidance is predominantly

provided just before graduation, without offering phased and targeted guidance services from the freshman to senior year.

The integration of production and education is not deep enough, the cooperation between universities and enterprises is mostly at the superficial level, and the quality of students' practice is not high or the degree of correlation with their majors is not strong. Many internship opportunities fail to provide sufficient learning and development space, and students are often arranged to do simple and repetitive work.

The specialty setting and course content of some colleges and universities lag behind the social development and fail to reflect the latest trends and demands of the industry in time. This leads to a gap between students' knowledge and social needs, which requires additional training from employers to be competent [8].

4.3 Social and Environmental Factors. Economic fluctuations and industrial transformation affect the capacity and structure of the job market. In recent years, with the slowdown of economic growth and the adjustment of industrial structure, the growth of traditional jobs has slowed down, while talent cultivation in emerging industries needs a certain period, resulting in structural contradictions in the employment market.

Policy support and social security for flexible employment, innovation and entrepreneurship need to be further improved. The employment information of some regions and industries is asymmetric, and the effectiveness of recruitment channels needs to be improved.

Too narrow and harsh life choices bind young people, such as pursuing high income, decent jobs or stable careers. Many families have high expectations for their children's employment and hope that they will engage in decent and stable work. The gap between this expectation and reality has brought extra pressure to graduates.

5 ways and strategies to promote successful role transformation

5.1 Student Level. Psychological and cognitive adjustment: students can reduce expectations, be down-to-earth, accept from scratch, change "learning attitude" to "result oriented", and clarify goals through daily work summary. Recognize the gap between ideal and reality, adjust expectations, and accept starting from the grass-roots level. When encountering problems, we should first reflect on our own shortcomings, rather than blame it on the external environment, so as to cultivate the problem-solving consciousness of professionals. Overcome the dependence psychology, cultivate independence [9], and do our best to take care of themselves and be independent.

Enhancing Abilities and Skills: Shift from "empty talk" to "action-oriented". Upon receiving a task, first break it down into steps and then accomplish it in stages. Continuously acquire new knowledge, refine your knowledge structure, and equip yourself to be competent for work and adaptable to the environment. Develop skills in communication, collaboration, time management, and other areas, master basic office skills, pay meticulous attention to details, and demonstrate professionalism. Broaden your horizons by gaining insights into the knowledge and cultures of diverse fields, and expand your network of like-minded individuals through participation in social events and membership industry organizations.

Career planning and exploration: fully understand your personality, temperament, ability, career interest, career values and career development goals with the help of career planning and design theory and evaluation tools. Accumulate experience through internships and part-time jobs to understand social operation. Establish a rational concept of employment, reasonably adjust employment expectations, recognize the rationality of "employment first, then employment", and have the courage to explore careers at the grass-roots level, small and medium-sized enterprises, and the new economy.

5.2 University Level. Deepen education and teaching reform: establish a linkage mechanism of enrollment, training and employment, dynamically adjust specialty settings and course contents according to social needs, and strengthen the proportion of practical teaching. Closely follow the development direction of new productivity, reconstruct the teaching content and training path, add cutting-edge courses such as big data analysis, intelligent manufacturing and green technology, and

organically integrate industrial cases into teaching [10]. Strengthen practical teaching, jointly build laboratories and jointly develop projects with enterprises, and promote "order type" talent training.

Construct a comprehensive employment guidance system throughout college years: from freshman to senior year, implement staged services including career enlightenment, career exploration, skill training, job-hunting counseling, and post-graduation tracking. Equip the institution with professional employment guidance instructors, offer systematic training to enhance their guidance capabilities and expertise. Conduct individual consultations and group counseling sessions to foster a healthy employment mindset among college students, improve their mental well-being, and help them maintain a positive attitude towards career selection.

Strengthen school enterprise cooperation and psychological support: build high-quality internship bases and order classes with enterprises, invite enterprise mentors to participate in teaching and employment guidance, and let students contact real projects of enterprises in advance. Strengthen mental health education, provide psychological counseling, and help students relieve pressure. Make full use of the second classroom activities to carry out various forms of "social workplace zero distance" activities, such as inviting entrepreneurs into the campus to create an atmosphere of innovation and entrepreneurship.

5.3 Social and Government Level. Policy support and guarantee: implement and improve tax relief, social security subsidies and other policies that encourage enterprises to absorb graduates. We will improve the security system to support flexible employment, innovation and entrepreneurship, and provide guaranteed loans, site support, and training guidance for entrepreneurship. Vigorously explore grassroots employment positions (such as "special post teachers" and "Western China plan"); Foster and expand emerging industries and create more high-quality jobs [11].

Create a fair and healthy employment environment: eliminate employment discrimination, standardize the recruitment market, and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of graduates. Establish a multi-party collaborative education mechanism of "government, school, enterprise and bank", clarify the responsibilities of all parties, and build a resource sharing platform. Strengthen the guidance of public opinion, publicize the value of "leading by industry", commend outstanding youth representatives who have made achievements in different fields, and create a social atmosphere that encourages innovation and tolerates failure.

Build a multi collaborative support platform: the government takes the lead in establishing regional alliances, through resource barriers, and realize cross regional resource interconnection; Dynamically release the industrial demand map and regularly update the list of regional scarce posts. Innovate the "credit mutual recognition" mechanism, promote mutual recognition of courses and transfer of credits among colleges and universities, and provide more flexible learning paths for students.

Table 2 Multi-dimensional support strategies for college students' role transition

Subject of responsibility	Strategies	Measure
Student	Psychological cognitive adjustment	Set realistic expectations; Take responsibility; Adjust goals
	Ability and skill improvement	Boost execution; Fix soft-skill gaps; Adopt lifelong learning
	Exploration of career planning	Set Goals; Get Field Experience
Institutions of higher learning	Education and teaching reform	Establish the linkage mechanism of enrollment training employment; Strengthen practical teaching
	Employment guidance system	Whole process vocational guidance; Professional teaching staff
	School enterprise cooperation	Co construction of practice base; Enterprise mentor participation

Government	Policy support guarantee	Tax relief and social security subsidies; Flexible employment support
	Fair employment environment	Eliminate discrimination in employment; Standardize the recruitment market
	Multi-domain collaboration platform	Cooperation between government, school, enterprise and bank; Resource sharing platform; Regional coordinated development

6 conclusions and Prospects

The role transformation of college students from campus to society is a complex system engineering, which is a profound change in individual psychology, ability, behavior and interpersonal relationship. At present, college students are facing multiple challenges from subjective cognition and objective environment in this process. The causes involve multiple levels of individuals, schools, families and society. The successful role transformation needs multi-party collaborative efforts: college students themselves need to be proactive, adjust their psychology and improve their ability; Colleges and universities need to reform education, strengthen guidance and optimize services; The society and government need to optimize the environment, create opportunities and policy support [12].

Looking forward to the future, with the further development of society, new technologies and new economic forms (such as artificial intelligence and green economy) will spawn more new jobs and put forward new requirements for talents' ability. The process of College Students' role transformation will put more emphasis on lifelong learning ability, digital transformation adaptability and cross domain knowledge integration ability. This also puts forward higher requirements for the future education and teaching reform in colleges and universities and the support system of the whole society. Through joint efforts, we believe that every college student can successfully complete the role transformation from campus to society, shine brilliantly on the social stage, and realize the unity of personal value and social development.

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