

Are students receiving appropriate support in discovering meaning?

Perry L. Glanzer, Jonathan P. Hill, and Byron R. Johnson share their findings about how students think about purpose.

By Perry L. Glanzer,  Jonathan P. Hill, and Byron R. Johnson

Cultivating the Successful Quest for Purpose on Campus: What We Learned from Students

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, ERIN WOULD APPEAR TO be a clear success story. A minority student who overcame an extremely difficult family background to attend an Ivy League institution, she saw herself as someone who set goals and achieved them. She confessed, however, “I’m the kind of person that if I don’t have some sort of an end goal, it’s just really hard for me to motivate myself to do anything.” She had these end goals in high school and the support needed to reach them. She recalls, “In high school I just kind of chugged through it, you know, you have more of a structure and it was easier.”

However, after she came to college, she shared, “I had no sense of motivation, no sense of what I wanted to study, and I had no interest in going to class, and so I ended up saying, ‘Okay I can’t do this.’” The core of the problem, she admits, came from “a lack of a sense of meaning,” which manifested itself in different ways, “I was struggling with an eating disorder throughout high school and so that had been getting serious –

and I think that’s also linked with a lack of a sense of meaning.” Unfortunately, Erin did not find help from her university and eventually spiraled into depression. As a result, “I took that year off to recover from my eating disorder and my depression, and to search for a sense of meaning.”

This part of Erin’s story would appear to affirm the claim of an Ivy League professor, Anthony Kronman (2007), that our colleges and universities have given up on addressing the meaning of life. It also could support sociologist Christian Smith’s (2011) concern that individuals in higher education are not doing enough to guide young adults toward a morally thoughtful vision of the good life. Smith found, in his national survey, that many emerging adults are mired in moral individualism and relativism. He claimed, “They need some better moral maps and better-equipped guides to show them the way around. The question is, do those maps and guides exist, and can they be put into use?” (p. 69).

Part of the reason we set out to conduct our own research about purpose, the findings of which are in our recent book *The Quest for Purpose: The Collegiate Search for a Meaningful Life*, was our attempt to discover the degree to which students find maps and guides in college. After all, if college and university leaders wish to be “better-equipped guides” to help students *both* explore and eventually develop healthy purposes, they need to understand how students currently think about purpose development, the influences they believe shape them, and what purposes inspire them.

Fortunately for Erin, she did find some guides. When Erin returned from her year away, she discovered support for her meaning development in a cocurricular group on campus as well as a religious group off campus. The group on campus had a specific mentorship program that paired her with older students and adults, so she could talk about these matters. Was Erin’s experience unusual? Moreover, what kind of purposes do students find? We sought to find out.

The Growing Interest in Purpose

WE ACTUALLY KNOW MORE ABOUT college students’ search for purpose than ever before due to the scholarly attention devoted to purpose development over the past two decades. This growing research on purpose increasingly makes it clear, as Tim Clydesdale (2015) writes, that when colleges “launch sustained conversations with students about questions of purpose, the result is a rise in overall campus engagement and recalibration of postcollege trajectories that set graduates on journeys of significance and impact” (p. xvii).

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Yet, scholars also find that not all purposes or purpose conversations are the same. For instance, in an article for *Applied Developmental Science*, Damon, Mariano, and Bronk (2003) define purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). These positive psychologists have found that adolescents and young adults who find and demonstrate purposes that contribute to matters larger than the self—as opposed to solely self-oriented purposes or goals—also tend to have a whole host of other positive outcomes. These include stable identity development, happiness, positive affect, hope, resiliency, better school performance, meaning, and life satisfaction (for a helpful summary of this research, see Kendall Cotton Bronk’s [2014] *Purpose in Life*). The implication is that not everything students may consider life purposes are equal. Some purposes that have an influence beyond the self, such as someone focused on

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servicing others, lead to flourishing. Others that are largely self-focused, such as making money, may reinforce destructive tendencies.

In light of this research, we sought to discover how students’ think about purpose (thus, we did not give a definition when asking them about it), what purposes inspire them, and what influences their development of purpose. To find answers, we drew upon numerous sources, including interviews with 110 college students (ages 18–25) from 10 colleges and universities. We interviewed students at a variety of institutional classifications (e.g., a regional university, different types of

liberal arts colleges, and various levels of research universities) as well as different missions (private, public, religious, and secular). We asked a variety of questions aimed at discovering how students perceived how college helped their purpose development and what purpose or purposes they currently espoused (if any). What we discovered both did and did not surprise us.

What Helps Nurture Purpose Development?

AMBER, A SENIOR AT A private university, shared that as an entering first-year student she thought, “Going into college was just something I knew I needed to do to get a better job one day ... I viewed it as just the next step towards a career.” Yet, during college, her view changed. She shared, “Now, I view it much differently...it’s [about] being more of a well-rounded person.”

What helped change her view? In her first year, she took an introductory-level course that helped her reflect more deeply on her education. “We really examined our purpose and our calling...I mean the whole course was based around what is vocation, and what’s the point of higher education...I think that really helped shaped the rest of my college career.”

At the beginning of college, she also did not have a definitive purpose. At the time of our interview, she shared, “I just figure my purpose is at every point, every check stop, I should be doing those things to make myself and others happy, which to me is serving.” Her relationships with peers, in particular, helped shape her vision for service. For example, she pointed to a cocurricular student group,

Since all my friends are in [group name withheld] and we’re all about service...being around that atmosphere has pushed me to find more and more ways I can serve other people. Being the youngest of three...I can be on the more selfish side, but I think getting into [this group] and going off of other people’s models and their work ethic and their service to others has really pushed me to examine [myself] in everyday life – not just when we’re putting on an event. How do I serve others?

She also pointed to other peer relationship models, such as her boyfriend, as inspiring her to further service.

When asked about older adult mentors though, Amber hesitated. She admitted that she does “not really have too many adult figures” in her life. When asked if she had conversations about purpose with faculty, she confessed, “No, I haven’t.” Overall, however, she concluded, “You know, I think if I would have

skipped the whole college experience I think it would have been much harder for me to figure out, how do I stay me in this world.”

Student Expectations and the Development of Purpose

AMBER’S STORY ILLUSTRATES A NUMBER of things we found about what students claimed influenced and did not influence their purpose development. First, student expectations played a major role in purpose development. We found that students we call Instrumentalists—those who primarily see college as a means to enhance their personal happiness, achievements, or job prospects—showed much less interest in purpose development. In the words of one Instrumentalist, “I didn’t think that I needed college to help me think about my purpose in life.” Instrumentalists only saw college as helping with their purpose if they understood their purpose, like Amber initially did, primarily in terms of their career (e.g., “I saw higher education as the next step towards getting my goal of being a high school psychologist.”).

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In contrast, the group of students we called the Holistics had a broader view of college’s ends and, thus, were much more inclined to want to explore various forms of purpose development. As Hao—a senior at a public university—shared, “You need education to be a better person, because you just can’t one day wake up and know what you wanna be.”

What higher education leaders should note, however, is that 10 percent of the students we interviewed reported conversion-type experiences, where—like Amber—they went from being Instrumentalists to Holistics because someone presented the vision of college as being more than a place to obtain credentials. In addition, most of the conversion moments, like Amber’s, happened during a first-year experience course or orientation program that outlined the purpose of higher education.

Second, we found that a shared worldview and a sense of trust between students and faculty and staff contributed to students' willingness to talk about purpose. As a result, students at all types of institutions shied away from talking to their professors and student affairs professionals about matters of meaning and purpose. The exception to this finding was students we interviewed at an evangelical college, where students expected professors and staff to share their religious worldview. It became clear to us that students might not trust educators whose worldview is unknown. We think this challenge is also likely why most students rarely mentioned cocurricular programming led by faculty or staff as helping them develop purpose.

Whom did we find who students trust to talk about purpose? Similar to Amber, we found they prefer talking to their peers. While those of us serving as faculty members may have dreamt about going into this field to sit and talk with students about big questions,

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the reality we found is that when students were stimulated by classroom content to talk about meaning and purpose, they went and had those conversations with their roommates and friends. As Albert, a sophomore at a research university, confessed, "I guess I've never really wanted to talk to professors about anything besides academics."

While a significant minority of students shared that they were influenced by self-chosen adult mentors, most students, like Amber, did not have adult mentors with whom they discuss issues of meaning and purpose. Erica, a junior at a private university, shared, "I don't know any adults in college. Isn't that the downfall of college? It's that it structurally cuts you off from real adults." We had students in their final year admit, "I haven't really developed any meaningful adult relationships in my time here" and "I've had

problems making friends, especially adults. Like, I'm not sure how to speak to them...So I don't necessarily have close mentors."

Those who did have trusted mentors found them in religious settings or through student affairs, where closer relationships and experiences are developed. For instance, Marianna, a junior at a Catholic university, shared what she viewed as a significant purpose conversation:

I feel like some are pretty involved in campus ministries, so the couple of priests who are really involved with that, so Father John is one of them... earlier this year I actually went to Father John because I was like, "I don't know what I want to do, all the business students are applying for internships, and I don't even know if I want to do something in business, or if I do want to go off on this poverty studies wing," and so he was someone nice to be able to like talk it through with me...I feel like a priest is like perfect for that.

Like Marianna, those students who identified a mentoring relationship with an adult spoke about relatives, university employees, or religious leaders. In fact, we only found one student whose adult mentor was not among those three groups.

Beyond roommate/friend discussions and mentoring, students told us that discussions about purpose largely occurred when participating in certain types of student organizations, such as religious or service-focused groups. For instance, Quinn, a business major at a liberal arts college, identified his involvement with a student investment club that incorporates a charitable component as the impetus for his discovery of the importance of "giving back" in his overall conception of purpose and the good life. He admits, "I think I've certainly understood that giving back is important. [It's] something I didn't completely understand earlier."

Overall, when students discuss life purpose with their friends and roommates, have an adult mentor with whom they talk about purpose, and voluntarily engage with like-minded others in mission-focused and morally formative organizations, they reported the greatest degree of purpose discovery and development.

The Purposes College Students Choose

SO WHAT PURPOSES DID STUDENTS find? In some ways, understanding the purposes college students choose is fairly straightforward. When asking students about purpose, we found that they articulated either one or more of 11 "purpose ingredients," or they claimed not to have found a purpose. We found that the 11 ingredients could be placed into three categories.

The first consisted of self-oriented purposes, such as happiness, career success, experiencing or discovering the world, comfort, creative accomplishment, and making money (e.g., “I would like to make a lot of money and not have to worry about making car payments or worrying about insurance or when I buy a house-mortgages, and just, you know, being financially secure”).

The second pertained to relational purposes (making and sustaining friends, building a family, helping others). Students with these purposes shared things like: “I always felt like my purpose was to help people” and “The main thing that probably makes life worth living for me are the people that I’ve developed connections with.”

The third involved what we called transcendent purposes (loving God, serving their country, changing the world for the better). These students shared purposes such as “My biggest purpose is to love God and bring glory to Him” or I am “trying to make the world a better place for animals.”

Some students focused on only one purpose ingredient (e.g., “I’m studying what I’m most passionate about which is politics, I wanna work in that when I grow up...I think my purpose then would be to work and study politics...”). Many students, however, combined these purpose ingredients in a wide variety of ways (this was one reason we decided to refer to them as “ingredients”). In some cases, students combined two of the ingredients, with one of the ingredients being the primary motivator. As John, a student at a regional public university, stated, “My purpose is to excel in my career and somehow use that career to help other people.” Some students even added three or more different purpose ingredients together with certain ingredients especially prone to combinations, such as friends, happiness, material goods, and family (e.g., “To own my own house, have kids, and get married, like everyone else. Be well off”).

In some cases, students ordered the ingredients under one overarching ingredient. For example, Katrina, a private university student, noted, “Overall, for me, it’s God and through Him I can be happy...I mean then there’s also my family and my friends. But the utmost thing would be God.” Happiness most often served as the overarching purpose, such as it did for Andre, a senior at a public university, “Having a family, a nice family, a good job, nice cars, [and a] nice house. Just really being accomplished...Having those things would make me happy.” However, not everyone prioritized their list of purpose ingredients or even came up with a purpose.

The Purposes College Students Love and Detest the Most

AFTER OUR INTERVIEWS, WE DEvised a survey instrument that measured students’ attitudes toward

these particular purpose ingredients. We asked a nationally representative sample of 2,503 college students the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with 13 purposes. Since students often gave multiple purposes in our interviews, we did not make the answers mutually exclusive.

Overall, over a quarter of college students (27.4%), when asked in a straightforward manner, strongly opposed “making money” as their ultimate purpose. In fact, when we consider both strongly disagree and disagree, over half of students asked opposed the idea that their purpose is to make money. That finding was also the least affirmed purpose (7.8% strongly agreed).

If students desire anything materially, it is simply to be comfortable (close to half strongly agreed with this purpose). We also found that students rarely talked about mansions or stacks of money. Instead, they mentioned that they hoped to be “financially independent from their parents,” be able to have a

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“comfortable lifestyle,” “loans paid off,” “a particular standard of living [so] I can eat organic food,” “a home,” or “a home and a dog.” The students we interviewed, like the survey respondents, clearly did not embrace an “I want to get rich” narrative.

Yet, most students in the national survey also did not strongly support the pursuit of what we call transcendent ideals. The majority, in fact, did not highly prioritize serving God, country, or making the world better. In fact, the transcendent purpose “love God or a higher power” was the second highest category with which students strongly disagreed as a purpose (24.8 percent), finishing just below making money. While students did not strongly oppose serving their country (2.2 percent strongly disagreed), that purpose still received less positive support than loving God (37.6 percent versus 35.2 percent). So, what do students want to serve?

Perhaps themselves. The most important purpose for most students, by some margin, was to “be happy,” with over four fifths (81.2 percent) strongly agreeing that being happy is one of their purposes. In third place, students placed the self-oriented “experience life to the fullest” (66.5 percent). Still, more than half of students strongly affirmed many other-oriented purposes, such as care for a family (70.4 percent), help others (57.9 percent), and build lasting relationships (56.6 percent). In our assessment, it would be a mistake to label most college students as purely individualistic despite the fact that most students have individualist tendencies woven throughout their stated purposes.

What Does this Mean for Higher Education Leadership?

IN HER BOOK *BIG QUESTIONS*, *Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*, Sharon Parks maintained that the quality of young adult lives and the future of society “depends in no small measure upon our capacity to recognize the emerging competence of young adults, to initiate them into big questions, and to give them access to worthy dreams” (p. xi.). We believe our research can help educational leaders with this process.

To begin, if educators want to initiate students into big question conversations, they will need to try to identify Instrumentalists and open up their minds to a broader vision for higher education. One can identify the Instrumentalists simply by asking them what they believe is the purpose of higher education. Then, similar to Amber, these students need to encounter the holistic vision for college early in their experience. We should aim for this kind of change, “When I first came to college I was still in the mindset that the purpose of higher education is to get you further along towards finding a career, but now I understand that...the purpose is to help you understand the world better and know and to help you figure out how best you can be of assistance to the world.”

We also suggest that educational leaders should focus their efforts concerning the “big questions.” Conversations about meaning and purpose, in particular, show great promise as all students—including those who identify as atheist, agnostic, or just nonreligious—can find ways to participate. In contrast, discussions about faith or spiritual development, even when defined broadly, can end up alienating this segment of students. Furthermore, according to recent literature in positive psychology, weighting discussions toward concrete visions of life purpose and away from the more diffuse concept of meaning can help students focus on the topic even more.

Moreover, one added advantage of focusing on purpose is that its specificity and goal-orientation make it easier to assess. For instance, instead of asking first-year students whether they are interested in developing a meaningful philosophy of life (a question from the long-running Higher Education Research Institute [HERI] survey of first-year students), it would likely be more helpful to ask first-year and final-year students what their purposes currently are (if they have any). Comparing the answers of first-year and final-years would provide educational leaders with more concrete information about whether students are finding purpose in college.

Four Types of Students

IN A PLURALISTIC UNIVERSITY, WE imagine a liberal education about purpose starting by exposing students to the variety of purpose ingredients. Students could then be encouraged to think about what purposes they

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already prioritize or what different purposes they might choose (if they are currently purposeless). Then, they could share their reasons or story for their choice or prioritization. After identifying their degree of support for these purposes, students could be asked in groups to evaluate the various options (including their own).

In our book, we also suggest that students with different purpose ingredients can be separated into

four types. The *Purposeless* comprise the first category. The next three categories consist of clusters of particular purpose ingredients that have a broad theme in common. They are the *Self-Achievers* (who desire the particular ingredients of happiness, experiences, career success, comfort, self-exploration, creating, and/or money), the *Relationalists* (who desire the purpose ingredients of family, friends, and to help others), and the *Transcendents* (who desire to make the world better, to love God, and/or to serve their country and/or community). An education about purpose could involve introducing students to the four broad types, asking in which of these types they best fit, and then encouraging them to evaluate the types. Our hope would be that this kind of exposure to the purpose ingredients and broad purpose categories, as well as other students' reasons for choosing or rejecting different ingredients, would provide a kind of introductory education to purpose.

Furthermore, if there are, as social science research suggests and Parks seemed to imply, more “worthy dreams” or more worthy purposes, educa-

Furthermore, if there are, as social science research suggests and Parks seemed to imply, more “worthy dreams” or more worthy purposes, educational leaders should consider their role in encouraging them.

tional leaders should consider their role in encouraging them. While supporting the general quest for purpose is important, positive psychologists note that it is actually having a “beyond-the-self” purpose where the benefits to human flourishing appear to emerge. Yet, as our survey reveals, college students today are most attracted to a mixture of self-oriented and relational purpose. Transcendent goals, interestingly, fare the worst among the options. Should educators use the literature from positive psychology to point to the benefits of certain beyond-the-self-purposes over others? It is worth a discussion.

If we emphasize cultivating beyond-the-self purposes, our research points to possible influences that could be important. Similar to the way students learn

about a higher level of moral reasoning from someone in the level just above them, students without purpose, or with largely self-achieving purposes, might be inspired by hearing the reasoning of those with different purposes.

While what we outlined above is merely a brief educational activity, we believe students would benefit more from a Purpose in Life 101 class or cocurricular program where they receive a broad education about purpose and the good life. Indeed, if a short educational activity were all that is offered, we would expect little benefit to the student. Rather, we view such an activity as a gateway to a broader array of curricular and cocurricular programs that help students think deeply about developing purpose. Selecting a purpose is not the same as picking out a new phone. Students will already come with some vision of life purpose from various traditions. The goal is not necessarily to have them abandon traditions to which they may already be committed. For some, college may be the time to develop a deeper commitment to and understanding of their own tradition (this might particularly be the case for traditions deeply connected to the student's sense of self and important social ties—most often religious traditions). For others, it may be a time to realize they are drawing their life purpose from traditions with which they might not entirely agree. In any case, focusing on purpose development cannot be accomplished with a simple one-day seminar: they need to be woven throughout the university experience.

Beyond a program or class, if educators want to help students develop purpose in the cocurricular, they can focus on three important areas. In light of the importance of peer conversations, fostering moral and spiritual friendships among students would clearly be a helpful goal in encouraging purpose development (for a helpful example, see Frank Shushok's [2011] “Spiritual and Moral Friendships: How Campuses Can Encourage a Search for Meaning and Purpose”). In addition to fostering peer relationships, mentoring programs that allow students to connect to adults off campus would be another important approach. As one student told us, “I worry that college students only hang out with people their own age; it gets really scary because we all think similarly.” Finally, our research supports the importance of universities providing a robust forum for student religious life because these groups often provide mentoring opportunities. Erin's story provides a good example of the importance of these later two examples.

Her story also provides an illustration of the journey we think it important for students to take. At the time we interviewed Erin during her senior

year, through the influence of mentoring and both on- and off-campus groups, she had found what she described as her particular calling and purpose. She now wanted to “go into some sort of a clinical setting where I could talk to people, because I guess it has to do with my personal struggles, too, but I just, I want to be able to counsel people in some way.... So that’s how I got interested in counseling psychology.” In fact, she was writing her senior thesis on attitudes toward suicide within her particular ethnic group. Overall, the support she discovered outside the classroom helped nurture her meaning and purpose. In turn, it gave her academic direction and a sense of vocation. She also moved from being incapacitated by her own struggles to embracing a purpose that contributed to both her own flourishing and a focus on others.

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purpose. Not surprisingly, those of us who work in and study the field of higher education value the process of questioning and searching. As a result, some of the recent research implicitly values whether students indicate they are *questing* for purpose, regardless of what the content of the purpose might be. Certainly, purposelessness is not necessarily a problem if one is questing for a purpose (versus wandering aimlessly). Yet, students need to know that the quest ultimately needs to lead toward finding a specific purpose or set of purposes one chooses to pursue. In light of Christian Smith’s suggestion that emerging adults may need better guidance and maps for their quest for purpose and the good life, we believe our research can help provide these road maps that lead students toward purposes that promote human flourishing.

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