

Benefits of Purpose for Academic Success *or* Not Just for Future Discernment: Vocation for Present Learning

overview

Discerning and pursuing a prosocial purpose (i.e., aims centered on personal passions AND contributing to the world) in college confers numerous benefits, including academic achievement and persistence.

quick facts to share

A sense of purpose predicts emerging adult well-being, predicts the development of dispositional characteristics that aid in perseverance during university, and may also promote more education-focused mind-sets in students (Pfund, Bono, & Hill, 2020).

Purpose is associated with academic and vocational success, resilience, and psychological and physical well-being throughout life. Supporting college students' purpose development requires understanding that purpose is a driving life commitment not simply a feeling of passion and that it must be intentionally cultivated (Colby, 2020).

When 1,500 students from 11 U.S. colleges were asked to write about their goals, the reasons their goals were important, and how they were pursuing those goals, most articulated goals of self-actualization, meaning, and contribution to their chosen fields and to the common good. The current research indicates that, in college as in later life, pursuing personal and beyond-the-self goals is not a zero-sum game. (Colby, Malin, & Morton, 2022).

In a study of life purpose, data analysis showed that both resilience and persistence were predicted positively by awakening to purpose. Practical implications of this study lie in supporting students to actively explore and fulfill their life's purpose since doing so might strengthen their resilience and intent to persevere (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022).

going deeper

A Higher Goal During Higher Education: The Power of Purpose in Life During University
(Pfund, Bono, & Hill, 2020)

The purpose development process commonly occurs in adolescence and emerging adulthood, the developmental stage in which most college students are. The development process includes both purpose exploration (considering what goals could suit them) and purpose commitment (identifying and embracing a particular goal that will then shape the way they advance toward the future). Finding a sense of purpose in life is one factor that has been clearly demonstrated to influence adolescent development (Hill, Burrow, & Sumner, 2014) and emerging adult well-being (Hill, Edmonds, Peterson, Luyckx, & Andrews, 2016). In adolescent and emerging adult samples, purpose commitment was positively associated with both life satisfaction and positive affect, so individuals who feel more committed to their purpose in life experience greater affective well-being and life satisfaction.

Having a purpose has been shown to have a variety of benefits for college students, whether it is garnering the perseverance to help withstand the various stressors college students must endure or the potential it has for promoting well-being.

A sense of purpose is also positively associated with grit (Hill, Edmonds, et al., 2016), a characteristic marked by “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). In fact, one study found that sense of purpose was associated with greater grit at the start of the college semester and that sense of purpose was able to predict changes in grit throughout the semester, even above and beyond positive affect (Hill, Edmonds, et al., 2016). This finding is particularly relevant to college students, considering grit is predictive of college grade point average and educational attainment.

Students with a greater sense of purpose may be more likely to see the long-term implications of “sticking it out,” believing they can achieve at university, as well as figuring out the best way to do so. In fact, an initial investigation into the topic has found that sense of purpose predicts the extent that students are committed to obtaining their degree (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018).

Research suggests that there are three primary pathways that appear to predict a greater sense of purpose (Hill, Sumner, & Burrow, 2014; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009):

1. **Proactive Route:** engagement along this route reflects the tendency for individuals to find their life direction by virtue of active exploration of different options.
2. **Social Learning:** this group may either learn about a specific purpose or life goal from a role model or discover the value of purposeful engagement from those around them.
3. **Reactive Path:** a major life event may direct them toward new life goals or strengthen previous ones.

Purpose as a Unifying Goal for Higher Education (Colby, 2020)

In this article, purpose is defined as an active commitment to goals that are both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon, 2008).

Education should expand, not just uncover, students’ fascinations and issues of deep concern. Likewise, it should expand their understanding of the myriad ways to contribute to issues of overriding concern and foster the expertise needed to succeed in those roles. In essence, purpose (and passions) are developed, not discovered ready-made. Seeing interests or passions as fixed dampens engagement with new areas and causes loss of enthusiasm in the face of challenges—generating the feeling that perhaps one has chosen the wrong field. Urging people to find their passion may lead them to put all their eggs in one basket but then to drop that basket when it becomes difficult to carry.

Despite the personal and social value of purpose, it is important to understand that purpose can sometimes be seriously misguided. This work shows that courses in moral philosophy are far from sufficient. Instead, ethical issues need to be woven into authentic problem solving throughout the college experience so that students will develop a habitual, pervasive morality that can infuse their purposeful commitments as well as other realms of their personal, public, and professional lives (Colby & Sullivan, 2009).

What College Students Are After and Why (Colby, Malin, & Morton, 2022)

The public debate between an exclusively economic framing of higher education's value versus a larger mission and goals raises the question of how students themselves see their college education and what they are after during this time in their lives. Arguments for higher education's moral and civic mission do not require that students begin with a full appreciation of that mission. But exploring what students say they are trying to achieve and why it is important to them can reveal whether educators who press for higher education to fulfill its moral and civic promise are aligned with or pushing against students' own ideas about their goals.

UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has conducted many surveys that include information on the goals that college students consider important. These studies consistently find that students place high value on both practical and developmental goals. But the study also revealed a keen interest in personal, moral, and spiritual growth. In another research program, HERI has tracked the characteristics of college freshmen for more than 50 years. Among other things, these surveys present a list of specific goals/objectives, which respondents rate on a five-point scale from not important to essential. As in previous years, respondents to the 2019 Freshman Survey rated a wide array of objectives as very important or essential (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). 84% of respondents strongly endorsing the goal of becoming very well off financially. At the same time, large shares of respondents also rated very highly helping others who were in difficulty (80%), improving their understanding of other countries and cultures (62%), and promoting racial understanding (52%). Half endorsed the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life, and almost as many (48%) indicated that influencing social values was very important or essential to them.

Research on purpose has revealed clear benefits for college students. For example, Leppel (2005) found that students who pursued higher education in order to benefit society were more likely to persist than those who were seeking only financial success. Likewise, studies by Sharma and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018) and P. L. Hill et al. (2010) found that students with a stronger sense of purpose, especially altruistic purpose, reported stronger degree-commitment. Following up on this, Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2020) found that the increased degree commitment associated with altruistic purpose assessed in the first month of college mediated a positive indirect effect of purpose on first year GPA, academic standing, and retention. In another study, P. Hill et al. (2014) found that purpose predicted increased grit across the course of a semester, while positive emotionality at Time 1 did not. Moreover, it appears that the benefits of purpose during college extend well beyond graduation. P. L. Hill et al. (2010) found that being strongly goal-directed during college predicted greater wellbeing in middle adulthood—but only when the goals pursued in college were prosocial in nature, not when they were financial, creative, or concerned with personal recognition.

In the current survey conducted, students wrote briefly about their most important goals, the reasons those goals were important to them, and actions they were taking toward those goals. Collectively, the highest goal content category defined by codes indicates an aspiration to contribute beyond-the-self was the most common. The second most prevalent goal content category was Meaning/Self-Actualization, with 35% of entries receiving codes in that category. A third category, referring to vocational and achievement goals, was present in a quarter of the sample. Many of the responses coded as Career/Vocation were also coded for Beyond-the-Self Contribution. A majority of students gave reasons coded in the category Fulfillment/ Happiness (53%). A second category of reasons was coded in 49% of responses. That second highly prevalent category, Beyond-the-Self reasons, includes codes referring to Help Others or the World, Moral Beliefs, and Gratitude/Give Back. In contrast with these two most commonly cited types of reasons (Fulfillment and Beyond-the-Self), Material Gain was cited as a reason by only 8% of respondents.

Their most prevalent goals and reasons for those goals reveal that most respondents were motivated by (a) an aspiration to help others or contribute to society; (b) many aspects of wellbeing, including personal growth, self-acceptance, meaning, and autonomy; and/or (c) expertise in and potential to contribute to an occupational field or other specific area of concern and value. More than half exhibited a beyond-the-self orientation—an orientation toward contributing to something larger than self-advancement.

Recommendations from article:

- Push back on public perceptions of college's value
- Sharpen attention to human flourishing as a developmental goal
- Reach out broadly (understand and build on students' own aspirations)

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