



# EDUCATION

**A GLOBAL COMPACT FOR  
A TIME OF CRISIS**

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EDITORS

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## EDUCATION FOR A PURPOSEFUL LIFE

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**P**urpose has long been identified in philosophy and theology as an essential component of a well-directed life. In recent years, support for this longstanding theoretical intuition has come from studies in psychological science and medicine that have documented important life benefits associated with purpose. Such benefits may include energy and motivation, resilience under pressure, a positive personal identity, emotional stability, academic and vocational achievement, faith and trust in the affirmative value of life, and a sense of direction that can withstand episodic periods of uncertainty and confusion.<sup>1</sup> Recent writing in medicine, especially in gerontology, has suggested that purpose may contribute to energy and health throughout the lifespan.<sup>2</sup> In response, nonprofit organizations worldwide are dedicating themselves to the task of helping people find and sustain purpose in their lives.<sup>3</sup>

The benefits of purpose can extend beyond individuals to the broader world. Purposeful people have the capacity to contribute greatly to their societies. The features of purpose that spur motivation, achievement, commitment, and direction in individuals have the potential to drive social change in ways that broadly improve the human condition. Many moral markers of human history have been created by people committed to prosocial purposes.

For education, the essential task is to provide young people with the tools they need to build lives of purpose. Some of these tools are informational and cognitive, some are social, and others are capacities related to character. The challenge for education is that there is no textbook or curriculum program for teaching purpose to schoolchildren—nor, given the nature of purpose, could

any particular book, program, or other standardized approach be effective across a broad spectrum of the world's children, for the development of purpose is an individual achievement that occurs in particular ways for each person. Yet, psychological study has provided us with pedagogical principles that can be applied creatively in a wide variety of school settings to help students to become purposeful, each in their individual ways.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, we provide a scientific foundation for such guidelines and present a set of principles for a universal pedagogy of purpose.

### AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF PURPOSE FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

It is elementary that any field of practice requires clear, unambiguous definitions. Among other things, this means that every key term must have its own meaning. No word should be used to signify different things, as it is used across various contexts, and no concept of interest requires more than one term to denote it. In medicine, for example, when a doctor makes a diagnosis, it is essential that the diagnostic term that the doctor uses is understood in exactly the same way by everyone treating the patient.

The same principle applies to educational practice, and in the area of purpose, we must make a special effort to ensure that this is carried out. *Purpose* is a term that is widely used in the vernacular, and the vernacular uses of the term do not have sufficient clarity or rigor for either scientific research or educational practice. Most critically, many vernacular uses of the term do not capture the features of purpose that provide the individual and societal benefits that are special to this particular capacity.

In ordinary language, the term *purpose* is commonly conflated with the following related but conceptually distinct terms: *goal*, *passion*, *meaning*, *vision*, *mandate*, *dream*, *wish*, and *desire*. We have noticed this conflation not only among laypersons but also among professionals attempting to do scientific and educational work in this area. Such lack of conceptual rigor would be a serious impediment to progress in both science and education if not corrected.

For this reason, our team synthesized a definition from philosophical writings when we first started to investigate purpose, and we have seen some early signs of an emerging coalescence around this definition in recent scientific and educational treatments.<sup>5</sup> We composed this definition to (1) draw on the way

purpose has been discussed in philosophy over the centuries and (2) to capture the features that give purpose its special psychological province. Our operational definition is as follows:

*Purpose is an active commitment to accomplish aims that are both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.*

This definition includes three elements necessary to capture the distinct qualities of purpose as a unique psychological capacity. First, purpose is a *commitment*. It is not a fleeting aim or one-time effort—however noble that effort may be. If someone jumps into a river to save a drowning victim of a plane crash, this is a commendable act, but it would be an exaggeration (and thus a misnomer) to call this a purpose in life (assuming, of course, that the person does not regularly patrol rivers looking out for plane-crash victims). Rather, this is a one-time heroic response to a chance event. It may be, of course, that this person has a commitment to, say, “help people in trouble,” of which this response is one of many instantiations. If so, it is this more general aim (helping people in trouble) that defines the person’s purpose rather than the particular goal of saving drowning plane victims that arose in that one moment. Purpose implies a commitment over time. This does not mean that it must last forever: people take on new purposes and let others go over the course of their lives. But if a person does not stick with a goal in more than a momentary, ephemeral way, that goal does not serve as a purpose for that person.

The second essential point in our definition is that purpose must be “meaningful to the self.” A person needs to “own it”: to believe in it and to pursue it voluntarily. A command that feels unwelcome or externally driven will not be a purpose unless the person comes to see the value in it herself. It may be important to obey an external command, but the obedience will not be purposeful if the enterprise is not meaningful to the person. A child who does not find schoolwork meaningful will not approach homework assignments with purpose. The child still may learn something from doing it, but this will not be a purposeful activity until the child sees meaning in it.

The third essential point is that purposeful aims are “of consequence to the world beyond the self.” Purpose is meaningful to the self (see point two above), but it also includes an intent to accomplish something for the world beyond the self. This additional beyond-the-self component has been frequently noted in philosophical and theological treatments of purpose. As Rick Warren said in the opening line of his popular 2002 theological book *The Purpose-Driven Life*: “It’s not about you.”<sup>6</sup> This “beyond-the-self” component of purpose generally signifies a prosocial intent. There are also purposeful intents that can

be beyond-the-self without being *intentionally* prosocial. We often have heard about examples of artists and scientists whose purpose is directed toward their domain (art or science), and thus is beyond-the-self, but who construe their work as contributing to their fields—to the art or science itself—rather than being directed explicitly toward the benefit of other people. Their work may eventually contribute to human welfare, but this is not why they are doing it. Still, their work is purposeful because it aims to contribute to a domain of activity beyond the self—in such cases, the domains of art or science.

As we have defined it, the concept of purpose is distinct from other concepts that, although related, are in some ways distinct from it. For example, it is common for purpose to be conflated with meaning, as in the statement, “I hope to live a life of meaning and purpose.” In our definition of purpose, the terms *meaning* and *purpose* are not the same because purpose has a beyond-the-self component that meaning lacks. This is *not* to deny the value of meaningful activities: people, for example, may find meaningful activities, such as going to movies or listening to music, uplifting as well as pleasurable. But such activities are distinct from purposeful engagements that attempt to leave a mark on the wider world beyond the self.

Similarly, each of the other associated concepts we have mentioned—*goals*, *passions*, *visions*, *dreams*, *mandates*, *wishes*, *desires*—have value in themselves, but they are not the same as purpose. (If they were, we would not need the term *purpose*.) A purpose is indeed a goal, but it is one particular kind of goal: short-term and self-oriented goals do not represent purpose. A purpose often ignites passion but not always. At times, people pursue purposes in subdued, patient, reflective, or sometimes even grim ways. Purpose is more than a dream because it includes action. Purpose is not a mandate because it is voluntary.

Purpose is a unique psychological capacity with its own particular qualities. It is these qualities that give purpose its special power to benefit purposeful individuals and their societies. For example, the enduring aspect of purpose implies the commitment that is required to accomplish consequential tasks. The meaningful aspect of purpose implies that purpose is a voluntary commitment, which creates the conditions for the energy and motivation that purpose fosters. The beyond-the-self component preempts the hazards of self-absorption and facilitates resilience and resolution under pressure. In these and other ways, defining purpose in a rigorous way captures the unique qualities that explain how purpose contributes both to social improvement and personal well-being. It also helps us understand how purpose develops through the lifespan—a question that we now turn to.



## HOW PURPOSE DEVELOPS IN YOUTH

For most young people, purpose is a fairly late-developing capacity. Studies of purpose have found that only about one in five adolescents between the ages of twelve and twenty-two have a fully developed sense of purpose. It is rare for children younger than twelve to exhibit purpose, and the prevalence of purpose does not increase much between midadolescence and early adulthood.<sup>7</sup> In middle-aged and older adults, the prevalence of purpose has been reported as slightly less than one out of three. Younger adults tend to fall somewhere between these two groups.<sup>8</sup> This is an unusual phenomenon in child development: most psychological capacities grow rapidly during the childhood and adolescent years. Many young people do not find sustaining purposes until the end of their twenties, and, as we discuss in the following two sections, many never become purposeful, even as they reach middle and late adulthood.

There is a common pattern among young people who find purpose. The initial step is the child's discovery of personal interests and talents that the child finds especially compelling. The psychologist Peter Benson called such personal interests and talents "sparks" and claimed convincingly that every child has his or her own particular sparks.<sup>9</sup> Those who eventually turn their interests and talents into purposes experience two revelations as they learn more about the world: (1) something in the world needs to be improved, corrected, or added to; (2) I have the desire and ability to make a contribution to this. The task of doing this may be daunting, as it is for young people who dedicate themselves to heroic challenges such as curing cancer or alleviating poverty. Or it may be quite ordinary, as in those who dedicate themselves to conventional vocations, raising a family, or any number of other purposes that contribute to the healthy functioning of human society. Purposes need not be heroic or extraordinary to provide psychological and social benefits.

The adults in a young person's life play an important role in the search for purpose. Many purposeful young people have connected with role models who demonstrated lives of purpose and mentors who helped them along the way. In addition, young people who have found purpose often say that their families have supported their choices eventually. This does not always happen immediately. Often, families resist an unconventional choice that their child might make—to become, say, an artist, a chef, an athlete, a risk-taking entrepreneur. Such resistance, if not too overwhelming, actually may test and strengthen the child's resolve in the cases where that resolve is well-considered.

Finally, adults—especially schoolteachers—can play a role in young people's development of purpose by helping them learn the skills and knowledge they need to pursue their purposes effectively. In order to play this role successfully, teachers must show students how academic learning can enable purposeful pursuits. We return to this essential teaching challenge later in this chapter when we present the educational principles behind purpose learning.

Purposeful adolescents, young adults, and later-life adults from the United States exhibit a wide range of purposes that inspire their efforts and direct their daily and future choices. These include building and supporting a family, pursuing a vocation, serving God or another faith-related cause, implementing artistic aims, doing charitable work in one's community, contributing to the broader civic society, preserving the planet and its resources, and contributing to the welfare of pets and other animals.

## PURPOSE IN MIDDLE AND LATE ADULTHOOD

In this paper, we have focused so far on young people—children, adolescents, and young adults. These developmental phases mark ages of special opportunity and relevance for formal education. But it is important to consider the development of purpose in the later phases of life as well in order to provide needed context for designing educational efforts at any phase. Developmental scientists who focus on the ways that particular phenomena play out across the whole of life have stressed that middle and even late adulthood provide ample prospects for positive developmental change.<sup>10</sup>

In our contemporary world, understanding the potential for purpose in later adulthood is more important than ever due to worldwide demographic shifts toward an aging population due to lower birth rates and greater longevity. This demographic shift offers opportunities and challenges. As the share of populations over age sixty-five grows, so does the capacity of many older people to engage more actively and meaningfully with life. On average, older people are healthier, more likely to live independently, and less likely to be disabled than ever before.<sup>11</sup> This recent “longevity bonus”—accompanied by a greater likelihood of a high quality of life and increased active engagement in the postretirement years—allows for an age of opportunity in which life goals, trajectory, and meaning may be reimaged, reinvigorated, and realized.

This image of older adults as purpose-driven contributors to the world beyond the self flies in the face of widespread stereotypes of older people as withdrawn from key life roles, burdens on younger adults, or focused solely on enjoying hard-earned leisure time. Yet, a study that we conducted of U.S. adults aged fifty to ninety-two revealed substantial numbers of fully purposeful individuals.<sup>12</sup> Overall, the prevalence of purpose in this nationally representative sample of 1,198 U.S. women and men was 31 percent, with those over sixty-five showing a rate of 33 percent. As in studies of younger people, we found that purpose was associated with higher scores on measures of many other aspects of positive adaptation and development.

The study also revealed that purpose in this age group does not meaningfully vary as a function of health status or demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status. This means that purpose is widely accessible to people of all backgrounds, all ages across the spectrum of later life, the full range of socioeconomic statuses, both men and women, and that being in poor health need not prevent purposeful pursuits.

The search for purpose should never cease. As people age, they take on new aspirations and commitments: this is one of the hallmarks of healthy aging. In so doing, they draw on capacities they developed earlier in life. In this way, the accomplishments of the early years can set the stage for an entire life of meaning, fulfillment, and contribution to the common good. It is encouraging that the prevalence of full purpose is higher in adulthood, even late adulthood, than in young people; but, even so, too many adults miss the life satisfaction and opportunity to contribute provided by a purposeful approach to life. This reality is the basis for our sense of urgency in calling for greater attention to educating for purpose for the sake of both individual and collective well-being.

## EDUCATION FOR PURPOSE IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Recent developmental science research on purpose has increased our understanding of how purpose develops across the lifespan. These studies show that the potential for purpose learning never ceases during one's lifetime. It is also clear that purpose is a deep psychological capacity that requires years to fully mature, and it draws on an intricate mix of cognitive skills, character dispositions, emotional regulation, social supports, and life experiences. For this



reason, it is essential to initiate young people's quest for purpose during the school years.

Educational programs have risen to this challenge, introducing curricula and other classroom experiences designed to foster purposeful academic work among students and encourage students' interests in purposes beyond the classroom. One excellent source of current educational efforts directed at students' purpose learning is Heather Malin's *Teaching for Purpose*.<sup>13</sup> In her book, Malin articulates the implications of basic research for educational programs and reviews several multischool programs with names such as Project Wayfinder and the Open Institute. She also describes "purpose toolkits," designed by Claremont Graduate University and other research centers, that are being adopted by elementary and secondary school programs around the world. In general, these programs and toolkits implement—each in its own way—the following principles:

- Teachers help identify each individual student's talents and interests.
- Curricula present the "why" of academic subjects: why this material is important to learn, why it was created, why it is useful and enlightening, and so on.
- Teachers introduce human exemplars of purpose across the domains of knowledge (math, science, history, the arts) that students are expected to learn.
- Pedagogical strategies offer students multiple options for learning and encourage their choices.
- Educators engage students in purpose-oriented pursuits, such as long-term projects with real-world implications

Teachers also can provide examples of purpose in the ways they comport themselves in the classroom. One golden (but too often neglected) opportunity to do this is to tell students why they chose teaching as a profession, what they find fulfilling about teaching, and what they hope to accomplish with their students. The point is not to persuade their students to become teachers (students must make their own occupational choices) but rather to demonstrate what it looks like for admired adults to pursue an occupation with purpose.

Along the same lines, teachers can interject into the curriculum stories about the life choices of those who created the knowledge students are learning in school. When, for example, young people hear about the dedication, persistence, and creativity of the scientists who unravel the secrets of the universe,

not only does this bring scientific knowledge to life, but it also provides young people with models of purposeful work. This is so for every field of knowledge that is taught in the classroom. It applies with special force to the field of history, which offers teachers countless opportunities to inspire students with cases of purposeful men and women who have contributed to the best traditions of civilizations.

Elementary and secondary schools around the world share the universal mission of preparing students for the fundamental opportunities and challenges of life, including productive vocations, constructive citizenship, and the literacies and numeracies that enable adaptability and continued learning across the lifespan. In contrast, university systems from country to country differ in their stated missions. And in any case, higher education does not reach all young people. Nevertheless, recent trends in university education in the United States and elsewhere have shone a spotlight on purpose learning in this context as well. We now turn to a discussion of teaching for purpose at the university level.

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION TOWARD PURPOSE

To gain a better understanding of factors that contribute to university students' purpose development, we are currently engaged in a study of purpose in a diverse group of colleges and universities in the United States. This research is still in an early stage, but some preliminary insights are beginning to emerge. First, an overview of the participating institutions reveals attention to purpose development in a number of programs. In addition to curricular offerings and particular kinds of in-class experiences, programs that are likely to address purpose development include those that engage students with their local communities and other forms of civic participation, programs that help students think about their choices of university major and vocational field, those that address purpose as a dimension of students' psychological flourishing or well-being, and those that take advantage of on-campus residence hall experiences to foster psychological growth.

In addition to collecting detailed information about the study's participating institutions, we have also surveyed samples of students at each. The study design also includes a second wave of survey data and interviews with a subset of respondents. Those follow-up data are being collected now, and findings

based on the full study will be available in 2023. Since the longitudinal follow-up is not yet complete, our analyses to date cannot support causal conclusions. They can, however, suggest some preliminary conclusions, such as associations of certain undergraduate experiences with purpose development. Based on the first wave of student surveys, we have learned that purpose is more prevalent in some disciplinary majors than others. Perhaps not surprisingly, students majoring in professional/vocational fields that are prosocial in nature, such as healthcare professions, education, and social services, are more likely than average to be purposeful. We also saw higher levels of purpose attainment in students who participate in civic engagement activities, those who talk one-on-one with faculty or other advisors about their goals and plans for the future or the alignment of their own strengths with “what the world needs,” and those with classroom experiences that included creative problem-solving and taking the perspectives of others different from themselves, as well as those who felt that their university experience has increased their capacity to “solve complex, real-world problems” and “understand problems facing my community.”

These initial insights from our study of university students’ purpose development call attention to differences between undergraduate education in the United States and other countries. Most first-year university students in the United States have not yet identified their major fields of study nor their choice of career. They are required to take courses from a broad array of disciplines, both to support general learning and development and to aid exploration of choices prior to committing to a major. In most U.S. universities, student life on campus, extra-curricular activities, psychological support systems, and institutional culture are highly salient in the student experience. And general intellectual outcomes, such as creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking, are emphasized along with content knowledge. In contrast, undergraduate education outside the United States generally involves choosing a disciplinary focus prior to enrollment, and most universities are nonresidential, unlikely to be strongly campus-focused, and less likely to provide opportunities for students to talk with faculty individually outside of class.

Primarily due to changing workforce needs in a transforming, knowledge-based global economy in which innovation and adaptation are central, some universities in Asia and Europe are increasing their focus on educational outcomes like intellectual curiosity, creativity, complex problem-solving, and the like. In some parts of the world, notably Asia and some European countries

(for example, the Netherlands), American-style liberal arts education is gaining traction. Paradoxically, these trends are inverted in U.S. higher education, where concern about the cost of education and graduates' earning potential is driving a decline in humanities and other arts and sciences majors in favor of a narrower focus on preparation for a particular career.

Because intellectual, vocational, and personal exploration; the development of new interests and commitments; preparation for active democratic citizenship; and increases in reflectiveness and awareness of one's place in the larger society are strong foundations for the development of purpose, some of these international comparisons and trends may be cause for concern. The move outside the United States toward greater emphasis on exploration, creativity, and the like may be a good sign for young people's purpose development but not if its importance is framed entirely in terms of individual and national economic competitiveness. Likewise, the move within the United States toward a more narrowly vocational approach to university education could carry risks for purpose, active citizenship, and concern for the common good. But approached with an emphasis on purpose development—a concern for students' capacities for long-term active commitment to endeavors that are meaningful to them and valuable beyond individual advancement—preparation for particular fields of work can support rather than detract from students' larger flourishing. In our view, this argues for explicit attention to the importance of purpose development in university students and assessment of current risks and opportunities in relation to that educational goal. Prevalence data from adolescent and adult samples show that we cannot take purpose development for granted; we must support it with programs intentionally designed to encourage it.

## PURPOSE AND MORALITY

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that, despite its personal and social value, purpose can sometimes be misguided. Certain fanatics could meet the basic criteria of purpose (active commitments to goals that are personally meaningful and intended to promote causes beyond the self) and yet show woefully bad judgment about those causes. Even some who try to address worthy goals may use means that are morally questionable and inconsistent with

the ends they claim to seek. Their passion can lead to cutting ethical corners to achieve their goals, a compromise that seldom ends well.

This raises the question of how we are to decide whether a particular goal or a means to achieve that goal is morally sound and justifiable. Distinguishing between noble and ignoble purposes or strategies, good or evil pursuits, true or false moral values cannot be accomplished by empirical research. These are *prescriptive* or *normative* questions. They must be addressed by careful thinking at the intersection of multiple disciplines, especially philosophy, theology, and psychology.

Educators must confront prescriptive questions—questions about what it means to be morally mature. Educators charged with guiding young people cannot sidestep questions of what kinds of behaviors and pursuits, including purposes or means to those purposes, are on morally sound footing and ought to be supported or nurtured. Recognizing and confronting the potential for morally misguided purposes means that educating for purpose must go hand-in-hand with educating toward moral and character growth; addressing developmental goals such as humility, wisdom, regard for truth; and enduring faith in basic human values that go beyond self-interest.<sup>14</sup>

We have written about how educators can bring the full range of their resources to bear on helping students develop lived moral maturity.<sup>15</sup> At the university level, for example, this work shows that courses in moral philosophy are far from sufficient for fostering virtue and lived moral understanding. Instead, ethical issues need to be woven into authentic problem-solving throughout the educational experience so that students will develop a habitual morality that can infuse their purposeful commitments as well as the other realms of their personal, public, and professional lives.<sup>16</sup>

Professional education also must demonstrate an awareness of the limitations, and even dangers, of purpose unaccompanied by strong moral character. All professions, including business, law, and medicine, have provided examples of purpose gone awry and the need to educate for professional responsibility and ethics. As they must for other critical developmental outcomes, educators must pay attention to character growth from the very outset of moral learning in primary school through the end of formal education in the university. Purpose is an important element of human flourishing, but it does not stand alone. We urge educators to embed their efforts to foster purpose in a thoroughgoing program of character development across the entire span of human development.



## NOTES

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