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Purpose as a Unifying Goal for Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose, a long-term commitment to goals that are meaningful to the self and contribute beyond the self, 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; it is more often *developed* than *discovered*; people may have multiple purposes and their purposes may evolve over time; purpose may be but is not always centered on one's occupation; and the ethical quality of purpose cannot be taken for granted—it must be intentionally cultivated.

Given the challenges of contemporary life, it is understandable that across the political spectrum policy-makers, leaders, and prospective students frame the value of higher education in economic terms, focusing on graduates' personal earning power and value to the labor force. The same preoccupation with the instrumental, economic value of higher education appears to be driving a strong shift toward vocational majors and away from liberal arts disciplines.

Fortunately, some countervailing forces have protected and nurtured other essential purposes of college, especially education for citizenship and character. This journal has played an important role in those efforts, moving the field forward despite opposing pressures. Dedicated leaders, faculty, and students keep the movement vibrant with unwavering institutional and personal commitment and constant infusions of resources. In these difficult times, the slow, hard work of refining and implementing what we know about moral and civic learning is more important than ever. That work is well known to most readers of this journal, so I will not review it here.

Instead, I will focus on some promising directions in the field of college and character that I think could create new synergy between developmental and economic conceptions of college and between the pursuit of self-related goals and commitments to the common good. The encouraging directions I have in mind are first the growing attention to student well-being, flourishing, or thriving—terms I will use interchangeably—and, second, life purpose, an aspect of flourishing that is pivotal for character development more generally.

The well-being movement emerged at least in part from a focus on problems, barriers to student success and institutional health. In recent years, targeted remedies for problems such as cheating,

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incivility, depression, anxiety, irresponsible drinking and sexual activity, and other poor health behaviors are often organized by a larger, more positive vision of what it means for students to flourish or thrive. At its best, that vision understands well-being as intrinsically connected with “a well-lived life” in the deepest sense or “achieving the best that is within us” (Ryff, 2016) rather than simply freedom from impediments to self-advancement.

Some of the enthusiasm around student well-being or flourishing comes from the belief that this movement, if thoughtfully implemented, could bridge the divide between economic aspirations, on the one hand, and cultivation of mind, spirit, and contribution, on the other, as the driving goals of higher education (Schneider, 2013). Well-being is not a hard sell with students or their parents. Although students are legitimately hoping college will lead to stable, remunerative employment, they know that social, emotional, and motivational floundering in college hinders that outcome. They understand that thriving is the ultimate goal, and a good income is not sufficient for a flourishing life. An urgent concern with what constitutes a truly satisfying life has been reflected in the headline-grabbing popularity of courses that address things like “the good life” (Yale) and “how we can help ourselves and others—individuals, communities, and society—to become happier” (Harvard). Stanford has its own engineering-inflected version of this course, called “Designing Your Life” (Burnett & Evans, 2016), which is also cherished by students.

Leadership in this movement comes from national organizations such as Bringing Theory to Practice (2013) and from well-being programs that are developing on many campuses. Although there is no consensus about what flourishing or well-being entails, most programs include social, emotional, physical, spiritual, vocational, and moral elements. The Wellbeing Collaborative at Wake Forest University, for example, assesses and provides programming for dimensions that include meaning and purpose, intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness and humility, several aspects of civic engagement, and positive relationships of various kinds (Brocato, Isler, Hix, Pryor & Rue, 2018; Jayawickreme, Brocato, & Ha, 2018)

Institutions and students can benefit from thinking seriously about human flourishing, in general and for oneself (e.g., Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010; King, Barrett, Greenway, Schnitker, & Furrow, 2017). There is a great deal of philosophical, conceptual, and programmatic value in organizing personal, civic, and moral goals under the umbrella of well-being/flourishing, creating a shared rationale and frame of reference for these otherwise disparate educational goals. But it is also important to disaggregate the elements within that larger unity. There are important differences between precisely what educators need to think about and do to foster mental health, physical health, strong relationships, effective civic and political engagement, personal meaning, and purpose in life. Without disaggregating the components, educators risk blurring the differences among them, settling for superficial understanding of their meaning and creating interventions that are misguided or too general to be effective.

One of the elements of flourishing that warrants particular attention is *purpose*, which my colleagues and I have 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). To say that a purpose is a *commitment* means that it is a driver, a major priority in the person’s life. It need not be the only priority and seldom is, but it has to be what Angela Duckworth (Duckworth & Gross, 2014) and others have called a *higher order goal*, that is, a goal that organizes and gives energy to the more fluid intermediate goals that support it. It is because of the seriousness of the commitment, the drive to accomplish something seen as very important, that purpose gains its motivational power.

Although purpose as a goal of higher education is conceptually part of the focus on flourishing or well-being of the whole student, interest in this idea has been propelled by currents outside higher

education as well. The burgeoning scientific study of purpose in recent years has added to philosophical literature on the subject and provided a growing empirical knowledge base (e.g., Bronk, 2014; Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; Morton, Colby, Bundick, & Remington, 2019). This research consistently shows that purpose is associated with academic and vocational success, motivation, resilience, and psychological and physical well-being throughout life.

This research has contributed to a wave of interest in purpose as it relates to education, work, health, and the promotion of positive adaptation and development from early adolescence through the end of life. In 2015, the nonprofit Echoing Green brought together representatives of business, education, the media, and the professions to celebrate the rapidly growing “purpose movement” and map out its future (Cone & Brewster, 2019). (See <https://purpose360podcast.com>.) Since then, middle and secondary schools have created programs to foster purpose in life (Damon, 2015; Malin, 2018). Harvard and Stanford Universities have launched high profile programs to help successful business people rethink their life purposes toward expanded social contribution after midlife. The influential Gerontological Society of America (GSA, 2018) framed the focus of its 2018 annual meeting as “the purposes of longer lives” (<https://www.geron.org/press-room/press-releases/2018-press-releases/922-join-gsa-in-boston-for-the-nation-s-premier-aging-conference>), and many organizations aimed at positive aging have adopted purpose as an organizing concept.

As part of this wave of interest, the purpose concept is also gaining traction in higher education. In his 2014 critique, *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz (2014) excoriated contemporary college curricula that neglect students’ need to find life purposes. Taking a more positive view, William Sullivan’s *Liberal Learning as a Quest for Purpose* (2016) provided a sophisticated analysis and descriptive account of what it means to place purpose at the center of undergraduate education. In *The Purposeful Graduate*, Tim Clydesdale (2015) reported the positive impact of these programs on students’ academic engagement, resilience, positive expectations, life satisfaction, and realistic idealism. A consortium called PAVE (Purpose and Values Education—<https://pave.fas.harvard.edu/>) highlighted cocurricular programs that foster purpose by giving students opportunities to reflect on who they are and what they want in life, how they can develop callings and commitments, and how they understand what a life of purpose and fulfillment entails.

Despite this exploding interest in purpose, programs designed to foster it have only begun to take account of the theoretical and research literatures that have grown up around the construct. In the rest of this article, I clarify some aspects of purpose development that are important for programming but often misunderstood.

“Finding and Following Your Passion” Are Not Enough

People mean different things by *passion*. Generally, the word refers to strong emotion; often it implies something you love to do or find intrinsically fascinating. It may or may not have a beyond-the-self quality. The association of purpose with passion is not entirely off the mark. Purposeful people do feel strongly about their purposeful goals and concerns, believing in their goals’ importance and in their own ability to make a difference. The emotional aspects of their commitments help motivate and sustain them. Purposeful people report great satisfaction, even joy, in working toward their goals, even in small increments (Morton et al., 2019). But moving from passion to purpose requires enduring commitment that includes but goes beyond self-related goals like enjoyment (Stebleton, 2019). Purposeful commitment withstands emotional fluctuations and supports cumulative effort, steady

development of expertise, enabling the individual to sustain focus through times of doubt, boredom, and disappointment.

Some lucky people experience spontaneous passions that become real commitments and areas of contribution, that is, purposes. Others feel lost. They have trouble identifying enduring passions. They expect to find them ready-made but do not know where or how to look. Or they have what feels like a passionate interest but cannot see in it any role for themselves. Fortunately, this experience of confusion need not be a barrier to developing purpose. 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. O'Keefe, Dweck, and Walton (2018) stressed this assertion in their research on the sources and development of interests. They distinguished between a *fixed theory*, the idea that interests or passions are there all along waiting to be revealed, and a *growth theory* that sees interests as not found but *developed*, that a spontaneous spark of interest must be cultivated through investment and persistence. They reported that 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. As the authors put it: “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” (p. 4).

Despite the frequent call by commencement speakers and others that young people should find and follow their passion or purpose, it is more productive for programming to convey the idea of *developing* rather than simply *discovering* purpose. Research also underscores that developing purpose in one area need not preclude purposeful commitments in other areas. In studies of purposeful adults, we have found that many people have multiple purposes at any one time and evolving commitments, purposes, and passions across the course of their lives (Morton et al., 2019).

What Develops?

Concern Beyond the Self

Children's empathy and desire to help emerge at a young age and become more mature and finely attuned over time. By the time of early adolescence, many children show sustained concern about issues like bullying, homelessness, or the need for family solidarity (Malin et al., 2017). When adolescents show a spark of civic interest in issues such as gang violence, immigration, or school culture, teachers and other adults can connect them with opportunities to build on that interest toward deeper engagement and efficacious contribution. In other cases, the young person may have an intense interest in something that does not involve contribution beyond the self, such as a sport or a hobby. Again, movement toward purpose can occur through supporting and building on what is there, helping deepen expertise and broaden students' understanding of how they might contribute in their interest-area.

Capacity for Enduring Commitment

Young people have many sparks of interest, many issues they feel strongly about. What does it take for them to develop the commitment to stick to one or more of these over time so that their understanding deepens and their expertise grows? Developing commitment requires engagement, that is, *action*

connected with the issues of interest and concern. Engagement is especially powerful when it is pursued within a community of interest including peers and often guiding adults (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2014). The social process of engaging in action with others leads to expanded intentions, goals, understanding, and skill. When active engagement is combined with reflection on its meaning and its place in one's sense of self, the commitment is further deepened and stabilized. One of the clearest findings in studies of highly morally committed individuals (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992; Walker, 2014) is that their moral and civic, that is, purposeful, concerns are central to their sense of who they are as persons.

Even in colleges that pay significant attention to purpose development, many students will graduate without a clear sense of direction for their lives and contributions. But if they have developed the substrates, they will be well prepared for continued exploration of purposeful commitments. Those substrates include sound, well-informed judgment, desire to contribute to something larger, openness to and sense of connection with the world around them, the desire to learn, and endurance in the face of difficulties. All of these qualities are supported by active engagement accompanied by productive reflection on their experience, guided by some key concepts such as contribution, responsibility, and a sound understanding of thriving or well-being. (For discussion of educational strategies for achieving these outcomes, see e.g., Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011; Sullivan, 2016.)

The Complicated Relationship Between Purpose and Profession

Often, programming around purpose development is located in campus career offices, which is a natural and productive connection. Because of students' urgent concern with their career prospects, they are highly motivated to think about their interests, abilities, and purposes in that context. It makes sense to think carefully about what you believe in and are good at, what you want to do and are able to contribute, as you begin a career. Research reveals the benefits of work that feels meaningful, especially in beyond-the-self ways (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013; Weiss, 2018). But, for many students, this sequence is not a simple "complete A (determine my purpose and 'natural fit') and move to B (prepare for a career that embodies that fit)." The process often involves trial and error. Or, more precisely, trial, reflection, adjustment, more trial, more reflection—gradually moving toward stable commitment to meaningful and useful work. Research by Chen, Ellsworth, and Schwarz (2015) has shown that attaining work that is intensely meaningful, purposeful, and satisfying can come about by finding a career that is a *good fit* with one's personal interests, abilities, and convictions; by *cultivating* purpose in work through *creating* modes of meaningful contribution within a given work context; or some combination of the two.

The benefit of including the cultivation approach in career programming is that it helps students see how a wide array of occupations could provide meaningful ways to find satisfaction and meaning and contribute beyond the self. Occupations need not be obviously altruistic or prosocial in a simple way to be purposeful. Contributions to basic science, scholarship, culture, and the arts, for example, can provide a strong basis for beyond-the-self meaning and commitment (Damon, 2008; Damon & Bundick, 2018).

Understanding the breadth of options *within* as well as across fields can be helpful, especially for the many undergraduates who arrive at college with a particular career future in mind. In a study of undergraduate business education (the largest college major in the United States), my colleagues and I documented the ways that some colleges and universities are helping students understand the wider meaning, impact, and social contexts of their chosen field and inviting them to think carefully about their career choices within that field (Colby et al., 2011). New York University's Stern School of Business, for

example, has a “social impact core,” which includes a required course in each of students’ four years at Stern (NYU Stern, 2019). (See <https://www.stern.nyu.edu/portal-partners/current-students/undergraduate/academics/social-impact/social-impact-curriculum>.) In the senior level course, Professional Responsibility and Leadership, students consider a wide variety of business contexts and roles, what these contexts and roles require and value, and how those demands and opportunities align with or challenge students’ own beliefs and purposes. Through case discussions, writing, and readings drawn from the humanities as well as business, students explore the tensions they will have to negotiate as business professionals and how those vary across sectors and roles within the profession. In the process, they connect career questions with questions about who they want to become and what, for them, would be a meaningful professional life. The programs the Stern School and others have put in place illustrate how educators can prepare students for purposeful relationships with their work regardless of their original reasons for choosing that occupation.

Purpose Does Not Guarantee Moral Maturity

Despite the personal and social value of purpose, it is important to understand that purpose can sometimes be seriously misguided. Some fanatics, even terrorists, meet our purpose criteria (enduring, active commitment to goals that are personally meaningful and aim to contribute beyond the self). Even for individuals with worthy goals, the means are not always consistent with the ends. In fact, passion can lead to cutting corners morally to achieve the goal, a compromise that may seem justified in the moment but seldom ends well. The potential for morally misguided purpose means that educating for purpose has to go hand-in-hand with educating toward moral growth, addressing developmental goals such as humility, wisdom, regard for truth, and enduring faith in fundamental moral principles (Damon & Colby, 2015).

My colleagues and I, as well as many others, have written about how colleges can bring the full range of their resources to bear on helping students develop lived, embodied moral maturity (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). 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).

Professional education illustrates some institutions’ awareness of and response to the dangers of purpose uninformed by strong moral character. This possible disconnect between morality and purpose is especially vivid in military academies, given that cadets are being trained for the profession of war-fighting, which can involve harming, even killing, other people. No doubt, most cadets who survive the rigors of their training are purposeful. But hard experience has shown that military purpose is not always accompanied by maturity and strength of character sufficient for the complex and morally challenging role of military officer. In an ongoing study of the United States Military Academy (West Point), Project Arete (Callina et al., 2017) is documenting and assessing the Academy’s efforts to prepare “leaders of character.” Strategies for achieving this are threaded through the curriculum, the institutional culture and student life, the athletic programs, and the military training. The study yields detailed accounts of the ways courses in many disciplines address the core moral questions of war-fighting as well as the challenges of operating ethically in military conflicts. These courses connect basic knowledge with its implications for ethically grounded military leadership, in part through active, engaged pedagogies.

An example is the required senior capstone course called MX400 Officership. This course is meant to hone judgment and refine decision-making ability, including the moral dimensions, to synthesize successful mission command and professionalism” (https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20130430_art007.pdf). The course includes guest speakers, case analyses, written reflections, roleplaying, and small group and full class discussions. For example, cadets read the book *Black Hearts: One Platoon’s Descent into Madness in Iraq’s Triangle of Death* (Frederick, 2010), which analyzes how and why some of the worst atrocities in the Iraq war took place. The subsequent classroom discussions focus on the roles of key actors in the situation and mistakes that precipitated the moral disaster that ensued. Cadets grapple with how military leaders can keep their troops on track morally, even in the face of cynicism, low morale, turnover of leadership, lack of contact with home, and the presence of illicit drugs and alcohol.

Conclusion

I have tried in this article to clarify some common confusions about educating for purpose. First, passion is not purpose; second, purposes as well as passions or interests need to be developed in college, not simply discovered. The developmental dimensions important for purpose include sincere concern that extends beyond self-interest, enduring commitment, perseverance, a sense of self that centrally includes beyond-the-self commitments, and the knowledge and expertise needed to pursue one’s purposeful goals effectively. I have also suggested that generally any particular purpose can be served by several different vocational paths; a purpose need not be identified with a single occupation. Purposeful goals can also be pursued in ways that are separate from one’s means of earning a living, as in many variants of civic purpose. Finally, purpose does not guarantee moral maturity. Educators must also give serious attention to students’ moral development in the fullest sense.

The concept of flourishing or thriving recognizes that enlightened self-interest and purposeful commitment often align. No doubt, one reason the purpose construct is so attractive across sectors and life stages is that it offers a research-based win-win strategy for serving the self and something larger. I worry, at times, that an *overemphasis* on individual benefits could potentially debase the purpose idea. I tell audiences that focus intently on the benefits to individuals that I, myself, am more concerned with the social impact of purpose. The world, not just the purposeful individual, needs this kind of contribution and commitment.

Despite this caveat, a comprehensive vision of human thriving that includes moral, civic, *and* self-related goals is the basis of the construct’s motivational value. In fostering purpose and other moral and civic elements of thriving, educators build on students’ current concerns and goals, whatever they are, to deepen and expand them beyond narrow instrumentalism *or* simplistic idealism. This integration of self and beyond-the-self concerns makes thriving and purpose pivotal for combining economic (and other advancement-related) goals with education for citizenship and character toward a compelling new way to think about a whole-student mission for higher education.

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