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Enduring aspirations and moral learning: A longitudinal study of U.S. College students

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ABSTRACT

The present study tracked stability and change in college students' aspirations, as expressed in survey open text entries at two time points three years apart. Interviews with a subset of respondents provided descriptive accounts of their experiences of moral/civic learning connected with their college experiences. Participants (n=640) were drawn from 11 U.S. colleges and universities. Surveys were conducted in winter 2018-2019 and fall 2021. Fifty-four survey respondents participated in hour-long interviews in spring 2021. Most survey respondents' aspirations were stable over 3 years, with most focusing on contribution beyond-the-self, fulfillment and preparation for vocations. Only a small percentage focused on financial goals or credentialing. Aspirations to contribute beyond-the-self were expressed even more frequently in interviews. When asked to describe what they had learned in courses and extracurricular activities and in their relationships with peers and adults, interviewees described learning relating to ethics and virtue, social justice and civic issues.

Policy makers and the popular press in the U.S. often frame the value of higher education with a narrowly financial cost-benefit analysis, asking to what extent the cost of an undergraduate degree is repaid by increased earnings over the course of graduates' careers (Furstenberg, 2023; Wingard, 2022). Although few would deny the importance of preparing graduates who are financially independent and assets for their country's workforce and economy, the assumption that this exhausts the value of higher education is troubling for those who care about college students' moral and civic development. Fortunately, the financial return-on-investment (ROI) model does not capture students' own aspirations well.

In an earlier paper, we shared research showing that most participants in our study of U.S. college students were seeking more than credentials and high salaries (Colby et al., 2022). More often, their driving goals centered on social contribution, fulfillment and meaning, and preparation for valued careers, especially work that contributes to others' wellbeing and the common good. When asked to articulate their most important goals and the reasons those goals are important, a significant share expressed an intention and commitment to contribute to something beyond their own advancement and self-interest, and most reported college-related activities as central to their active pursuit of these goals.

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Having collected a new round of data from these students, we are now able to describe what happened to their goals and concerns after almost three years of college. We were interested to learn whether their priorities had shifted and, if so, how. We were especially eager to see whether their aspirations to make a positive difference in the world would be maintained or even potentially strengthened by their engagement with higher education. In addition to collecting this new wave of survey data, we conducted interviews with a subset of respondents. The interviews allowed us to explore students' reflections on what was most important and meaningful to them in their coursework, extracurricular engagements, and other college experiences. This material provides another window on whether and how these students' college learning supports and informs aspirations toward contribution beyond-the-self, especially the moral dimensions of their beyond-the-self commitments.

The emphasis we place on how college students think about their aspirations comes, in part, from the central place of goal commitments in the larger construct of purpose. Following Damon (2008), we define purpose as a *stable, active commitment to goals that are personally meaningful as well as aiming to contribute beyond the self*. This definition requires that the goals have certain characteristics: They must be meaningful to the person, which means they are autonomously chosen and connected with that individual's sense of self. Secondly, they must be intended to contribute to something larger than, or beyond, the self—to other people, to a field, or to the common good. Being purposeful also requires that the goals and actions toward them play a major organizing role in the individual's life and identity. The purpose construct, defined this way, is especially relevant for character education because, unlike other constructs related to active goal pursuit, such as grit (Duckworth, 2016), purpose requires directedness toward and commitment to goals of contribution rather than persistence toward whatever personal goals the individual may value.

This definition of purpose departs intentionally from purpose as general goal directedness (Ryff, 2014); as a subjective *sense* of purpose, meaning, or direction, whatever its source (Hill et al., 2022; Shin & Steger, 2014; Steger et al., 2006); and as synonymous with meaning (Seligman, 2012). In contrast, our preferred definition of purpose points to a distinctive construct that captures a unique configuration of elements not represented in related constructs like goal-directedness or meaning in life. It also avoids framing the purpose construct entirely subjectively. Requiring an active and sustained commitment to one or more beyond-the-self goals makes meaningful the question of whether someone who *feels* a sense of purpose is *actually* purposeful. Moreover, defining purpose around goals that combine personal meaning and social contribution helps explain the power of purpose to create synergies between self and other-oriented aims and public and private goods.

One driver of interest in purpose is the large body of evidence that shows its strong associations with a range of benefits, including subjective well-being, physical and mental health and longevity, resilience and academic persistence and success (Fredrickson et al., 2013; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Kim et al., 2020; Ryff et al., 2004). Whatever the definition and broader theory within which the construct is embedded, a research consensus has emerged that the benefits associated with purpose occur primarily for individuals with prosocial or beyond-the-self goals, not for those who are strongly committed to self-oriented goals (Bronk, 2013; p. Hill et al., 2010; P. L. Hill and Turiano, 2014). This research offers empirical as well as conceptual reasons to restrict the term *purpose* to goal commitments that include a beyond-the-self dimension.

Finally, it is by virtue of the beyond-the-self requirement that purpose connects with character, not only as an instrumental virtue (Kristjánsson, 2017), but as a potentially moral virtue (Han, 2015). Commitments to beyond-the-self goals do not ensure morally sound ends or means, but the construct's requirement that the goals be intended to benefit others and the common good means that purpose intersects with the moral domain in a way that general goal-directedness and subjective sense of purpose do not.

Purpose in college students

Purpose that includes a prosocial or beyond-the-self dimension has been shown to benefit college students in important ways. These benefits include persistence (Leppel, 2005); degree commitment (Hill et al., 2010; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018); GPA, academic standing and retention (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020); grit (Hill et al., 2014); even greater well-being in middle adulthood for those with prosocial purpose during college (Hill et al., 2010).

Beyond this research on purpose's beneficial effects, however, there have been few studies of purpose development during college. Studies of students' moral growth more often focus on increases in the maturity or sophistication of moral judgment during college (Rest & Narvaez, 1991). However, these documented shifts toward more advanced moral judgment do not imply a corresponding strengthening of college students' commitment to beyond-the-self contributions or more thoughtful appreciation of the moral dimensions of their own life choices and directions. More advanced moral judgment as assessed by the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Thoma, 2005) reflects increased capacity for rigorous analytical thinking about moral issues, which aligns with higher education's academic agenda. The development of purpose involves a very different kind of growth, the transformation of students' most valued aspirations, their directions in life and their lived commitments.

Data on purpose in adulthood suggest that college attendance may not increase the chances that people will be purposeful. Unlike scores on the DIT, it is not clear that purpose status in adulthood is related to educational attainment (Bundick et al., 2021). These findings lend credence to critics of higher education who bemoan its lack of attention to students' purpose development (Deresiewicz, 2014; Kronman, 2007).

We have argued elsewhere (Colby, 2020) that even if college experiences don't result in fully purposeful commitments in young people, undergraduate education is well positioned to strengthen some foundational elements of purpose. These include the capacity for sustained commitment, better understanding of moral and civic issues and personal connections with opportunities to contribute to the greater good. The present study focuses on the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose, including students' learning about compelling issues in the world they might wish to contribute to and the self-related vs. beyond-the-self nature of their most important goals and reasons for those goals' importance.

Fulfillment/meaning and purpose

Our analyses of the Time 1 data from the current study (Colby et al., 2022), revealed that aspirations toward fulfillment, self-actualization or meaning were almost as prevalent as beyond-the-self aspirations. The strong presence in students' open text responses of these

two different emphases, fulfillment or meaning and BTS contribution, raises questions about the relationship between the two. We have argued here and elsewhere against conflating the constructs of meaning and purpose (Damon & Colby, 2022). But the distinctiveness of the two constructs does not mean that they are unrelated, either conceptually or empirically.

Several leaders in the study of meaning in life have described that construct as consisting in three distinct sub-constructs: comprehension, purpose, and significance or mattering (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). In this scheme, purpose is defined as having core aims and aspirations for life; significance or mattering is understood as the sense that one's life has inherent value, that one has 'a life worth living.' Although these two subconstructs do not align fully with our definition of purpose, together they come close by specifying that meaning entails not only a sense that one's life is coherent and comprehensible (comprehension) but that it includes the pursuit of goals with inherent value, goals that contribute to a life worth living. In this formulation, then, purpose is understood not as synonymous with meaning but as *contributing to* a sense of meaning in life. Another variant of this idea treats purpose as a component of (though not synonymous with) flourishing or eudaimonia (Kristjánsson, 2017, Ryff 2013; Seligman, 2012).

Research conducted by Ratner et al. (2019) has shown that theoretical formulations highlighting purpose's contribution to meaning in life are reflected in lay understandings of purpose and meaning, even as early as adolescence. That study asked groups of high school and college students to write about either purpose or meaning in life. Their responses revealed an absence of crisp distinctions between the two constructs but, insofar as respondents chose to write about both, they distinguished between and then connected the two, more often describing purpose as contributing to a sense of meaning than the reverse.

Of course, aspiring toward fulfillment or a meaningful life as a compelling goal is different from considering these concepts in the abstract. But it would seem, on both philosophical and psychological grounds, that recognizing the importance of purposeful commitment as a core element of a meaningful life would come closer to the ideal of full flourishing than seeking fulfillment and meaning entirely through personal growth, a balanced lifestyle, or psychological habits such as mindfulness. For this reason, we were interested to see whether students connected fulfillment and meaning with beyond-the-self aspirations in their open texts. And, in fact, more than one in five respondents did combine aspirations toward fulfillment and beyond-the-self contribution in their responses to our T1 survey. In our longitudinal analyses, we wanted to learn whether three years of college led more students to make this connection.

Present study

The study reported here uses open-text responses and other survey data from 640 college students collected in winter 2018–2019 and fall 2021 as well as interviews with 54 of the survey respondents in spring 2021. The sample was drawn from 11 U.S. colleges and universities on the east and west coasts and the Midwest (Colby et al., 2022; Malin, 2022). The data illuminate patterns of stability and change in these students' aspirations over time, allowing us to determine the extent to which their Time 1 emphases on social

contribution and meaning are maintained, weakened, or strengthened. The interviews reveal the salience and nature of moral and civic learning students pointed to as important and meaningful during college and the relationship of this learning to interviewees' purpose status, as coded independently. The study addresses the following research questions:

Questions for survey data

(1) How do the goals that are important to survey respondents and the reasons those goals are important compare at two time points roughly 3 years apart? What are the most prevalent categories of goals and reasons at Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2)?
(2) What were the longitudinal patterns *within individuals* for aspirations beyond-the-self (BTS)? What percent lost, gained, or maintained BTS aspirations over time? What were the longitudinal patterns for aspirations toward fulfillment/self-actualization/meaning? Does the percentage of respondents who exhibit both BTS and fulfillment orientations increase from T1 to T2?
(3) Were longitudinal patterns of stability and change in BTS or fulfillment orientations associated with respondents' demographic characteristics or with self-reported impact of COVID-19 pandemic disruptions during part of the study period?

Questions for interview data

(1) For interviewees who also completed surveys at both time points, what was the relationship between beyond-the-self aspirations expressed in survey open texts and interviews?
(2) When asked what they found meaningful and important in college, what share of interviewees responded by describing moral/civic learning experiences?
(3) What was the content focus of the moral/civic learning interviewees described? Did purposeful and non-purposeful interviewees emphasize different content areas?

Methods

Participants

The data reported in this article were collected as part of a longitudinal study of purpose development in U.S. college students (Malin, 2022). The full study included a survey conducted during winter 2018–2019 (T1; $n = 2261$) with longitudinal follow-up in fall 2021 (T2; $n = 1042$) and interviews with a subset of survey respondents conducted in spring 2021 ($n = 54$). Participants were recruited from eleven colleges and universities in four U.S. states: California, Massachusetts, Michigan, and North Carolina. Sites were selected to represent the full range of institutional types: four public universities, three private research universities, two liberal arts colleges, and two community colleges.

Survey participants for open text analyses

Two of the participating institutions were overrepresented in the full survey sample, so in the previous analysis of T1 open-text responses, we created a subsample of 1500 respondents by randomly selecting 170 from one of the overrepresented colleges and 176 from the other. All of those 1500 respondents had completed open texts as part of the T1 survey. Six hundred forty of those 1500 respondents completed follow-up surveys at T2, including the survey open text questions. To assess the possible effects of attrition on our findings, we compared the T1%s of respondents with each goal and reason code for the full T1 open text sample ($n = 1500$) with the T1 code percentages for the subset that constitute the sample for the present study ($n = 640$). Seventy-three percent of the codes differed by less than 1%. All remaining pairs differed by 2% or less.

The longitudinal open-text sample ($n = 640$) used in the present analysis includes 53% who were in their first year at T1, with the remaining respondents in their second year or higher at T1. Mean age of participants who completed the survey at both time points was 21.5 years at T1. The mode at T1 was 19 years. This longitudinal survey sample was 67.4% female; 3.6% Black, 42.7% White, 13.3% Latinx/Hispanic, 25% Asian American, 15.4% Multiple race/ethnicity or Other; and 27.6% self-identified as low socioeconomic status at T1.

Interview participants

Potential interviewees were selected from the pool of T1 survey respondents who provided contact information and permission for additional research participation. The interview sample was selected to be demographically diverse and proportionately representative of the eleven sites, and to include respondents with a range of scores on the T1 purpose scale. The resulting sample of 54 interviewees was 61% female; 10% Black; 37% White; 8% Latinx; 16% Asian American; 29% multiple race/ethnicities or other. Thirty-seven percent identified as low socioeconomic status. Approximately six months later, 32 of the interviewees completed the T2 survey.

Survey procedures and measures

After receiving approval from Stanford's Institutional Review Board (IRB), invitations to participate in the Time 1 survey were emailed to students by college administrators or the research team. Students were invited to participate in a drawing in which 50 respondents would receive $100 gift cards. A Qualtrics survey link was emailed to students who responded, with consent required before proceeding. All T1 respondents were invited to complete the Time 2 survey, for which they would receive a $20 gift card. Again, consent was required to proceed.

Open-text responses

As part of the Stanford Purpose Assessment (Malin, 2022), respondents were prompted to briefly describe an important life goal, why the goal is important, and what, if anything, they are doing to pursue the goal. Current analyses are based on the responses describing goals and reasons. None of the 640 respondents included in the analyses for this paper failed to provide open text material at either time point. Those responses varied in length from a single word (which would not be codable) up to 20 or more words. The mean length for all open text passages was 11.46 words.

Questions on impact of covid-19 pandemic

The Time 2 survey included three questions about the impact of the pandemic on the respondent: (1) To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your current activities? (2) To what extent has the COVID-19 impacted how you think about your future? (3) To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your life goals? The items are rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) (α=.84).

Demographics

Gender. Respondents were asked to select their gender from three options: female, male, or other.

Race/Ethnicity. Respondents were asked to select their race/ethnicity from seven options: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Pacific Islander, White, or Other. Respondents could select more than one race/ethnicity, and those who did were coded as multiple race/ethnicity.

Socioeconomic status. The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Hill et al., 2010) was used to indicate respondents' socioeconomic status. Respondents were shown a drawing of a ladder with seven rungs and asked to mark their position on the ladder relative to all people in the United States in terms of money, education, and respected jobs. In the analyses conducted for this study, we considered self-reported socioeconomic status of 3 or less to be low SES.

Interview procedures and protocol

Survey respondents who agreed to be interviewed were emailed a consent form that included the statement: 'By responding affirmatively to our request for an interview, you are affirming that you have read and agreed to this consent information, including the Consent Statement below.' The hour-long interviews began by reviewing the informed consent statement and affirming consent for audio-recording. Each participant received a $20 gift card. Interviews were conducted using zoom video with audio recording. Recordings were transcribed and de-identified.

Code development and coding of open texts and interviews

The current study involved three different sources of qualitative material: (1) survey open-text responses written at both time points about their most important goals and the reasons those goals were important; (2) interview material relating to interviewees' goals and reasons for those goals' importance and activities toward the goals; time use; and other responses that were relevant for coding the purpose construct; and (3) interview responses to questions about respondents' experiences with college coursework, extra-curricular activities, and relationships with peers and adults such as faculty and advisors, including interviewee accounts of what they learned from these experiences.

Codes for the survey open-text responses were developed by experienced coders using an open coding approach with constant comparison to identify emerging themes for each of the content areas to be coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Draft codes were revised for

clarity until adequate inter-rater reliability with new subsamples was achieved. The same experienced coders used this process to develop and evaluate the reliability of codes for what interviewees said they had learned during college. Coding criteria for purpose status in the interviews had been developed in prior studies (Malin et al., 2015). No new codes for purpose status were created for the present study.

Open-text response coding

For the survey open-text coding, this process resulted in the Goal Content and Reasons for Goals codes displayed in Table 1. In that table, some of the codes are organized into categories of related items. Note that the coding and reliability assessments refer only to the individual code items in that table, not the organizing categories for the codes. In a reliability check of 200 surveys, two independent coders achieved 98% agreement for the specific Goal Content and Reason codes listed in Table 1. These reliability assessments were performed on matrices of the full set of goal codes and the full set of reason codes assigned by each rater to each case for the reliability sample. At T1, the remaining surveys were divided between the two researchers for coding. Those same two coders were joined by a third to code the T2 open texts, after training and reliability assessment of the third coder. Reliability of the full set of specific goals and reasons codes for the new rater and one of the original raters was 89% agreement for the goal codes and 92% for the reason codes. Coding of T2 open texts was blind to T1 responses and codes.

All of the open text codes for specific goals and reasons were identified, on conceptual grounds, as representing either beyond the self (BTS) or non-BTS concerns. If the respondent received either a goal or reason code identified as BTS, the open text material for that respondent was said to exhibit a BTS orientation. Similarly, open texts that were coded as including one or more goals or reasons expressing aspirations toward fulfillment/self-actualization/meaning were identified as having a fulfillment orientation. A given pair of open text responses (an open text response for goals and an open text response for reasons) could receive specific goals and reasons codes that met the criteria for both BTS and fulfillment orientations, for BTS but not fulfillment orientation, for fulfillment but not BTS orientation, or for neither BTS nor fulfillment orientation.

Interview coding

The interview material relating to purpose was coded using guidelines developed by the authors for previous studies of purpose (Malin et al., 2015). Those guidelines specify that a code of *purposeful* requires evidence in the interview transcript of (1) one or more stable goals that were (2) central drivers of the individual's focus and that were (3) described as intending to contribute toward beyond-the-self impact and were (4) supported by actions in pursuit of the beyond-the-self goal. In order to receive a code for action, interviewees must describe in some detail credible and significant actions they have taken toward the realization of one or more BTS goals. Thus, the coding of purpose in the interviews has much deeper requirements than the coding of a beyond-the-self orientation in survey open texts. Most notably, the survey open text designation of *beyond-the-self orientation* does not require that respondents describe actions they have taken toward the goals. Inter-rater reliability was assessed by two experienced research team members independently coding 20% of the interview sample ($n = 11$). Inter-rater agreement on codes of purpose vs. non-purpose was

Table 1. Codes for goal content and reasons for goals.

Code	Examples
Goal Content	
Beyond-the-self contribution (BTS)	
• **BTS general**: Help others, make the world better, serve a particular need	• A goal that I aspire to accomplish is help people and have a positive impact on their lives • Empower Black women to pursue STEM careers • Mentor others • Be a part of the change our environment needs
• **BTS family**: Help or support family	• Provide for my family • Buy my parents a house • Be well off so nobody I love has to struggle
Fulfillment/self-actualization/meaning	
• **Fulfillment/self-actualization**: Fulfillment, personal growth, happiness, meaning	• Personal development. I want to know at the end of my life that I'm the best version of myself • Live in the moment. Be mindful. Be resilient • Live a life without fear and not be scared of judgment • Live a happy and meaningful life • Find meaning in my life
• **Meaningful career**: Career that is satisfying, meaningful, enjoyable	• Find a career that will be personally fulfilling • I want to be happy with my job and feel that I am doing something meaningful that I enjoy
Career/vocation or creative achievement	
• **Career/vocation**: Specific job, role, career path	• Become a physical therapist • Attend law school • Become a teacher that changes the lives of children and embeds a love of learning. (Coded for career and BTS General)
• **Creative**: Creative endeavor, accomplishment	• Create films • Become published author • Make great art
• Finish **undergraduate degree**	• Obtain my bachelor's • Finish college
• Complete a **graduate degree**	• Be the first in my family to get a PhD • Obtain a master's degree
Relationships: Become a good parent, have a good relationship	• Have a family • Be in a satisfying relationship • Be a good mom
Material and worldly success: High income, status, affluence, worldly success	• Own a home in the country • Be successful • Have lots of money
Reasons for Goals	
Fulfillment, happiness, meaning	• I want to have a happy and fulfilling life • I want my life to have meaning • Self-actualization is the best form of achievement in my eyes • So I can feel I lived life to the fullest and can look back and be happy
Beyond-the-self contribution	
• To **help others** or the world	• I want my work to positively affect people's lives • Because everyone deserves access to technology • My brother is mentally ill, I want to help people like him • Earth is what allows me to be alive and we should take care of it to ensure that humanity remains • I have always been amazed by space travel. I want to be able to contribute to space exploration
• **Moral beliefs**: Because it's the right thing to do, moral prescription	• It's important to leave the world better than we found it • It's my duty to elevate and empower others • It's an important value in my family
• **Gratitude**: Because I'm grateful, want to give back	• My family sacrificed a lot for me, I want them to relax now • They've done so much for me • Because they provided me the tools to succeed
Material success or stability, status	• To be financially secure because I've lived in poverty • I want to be financially well off • It's important to me to do great things and be recognized

100%. After achieving reliability, those raters divided the remaining interviews for coding. After completing the coding, ambiguous cases were discussed to consensus. Seventy-six percent ($n = 41$) of the 54 interviews were coded as having a BTS goal and 35% of the interviews ($n = 19$) met the criteria for full purpose.

Code development for interview material relating to respondents' perceptions of learning yielded six categories of learning in college, including moral/civic learning, which is a focus of this paper. (The other five categories were self-knowledge; personal strengths such as confidence and determination; vocational knowledge and skills; interpersonal capacities needed for goal achievement, such as teamwork and networking; and general intellectual development.) Reliability assessment for these codes involved two research team members independently coding 10 interviews. Percent agreement was 80% for the moral/civic code.

We used the same code development process to identify subcodes for specific content variants of the moral/civic learning code. The resulting subcodes capture learning related to: (1) ethics/virtue; (2) equity/social justice; and (3) other topics of civic concern, such as the environment or health care. Reliability assessment yielded agreement of 90% for code 1, 85% for code 2 and 95% for code 3.

Analyses

Changes from T1 to T2 in distributions of open text codes used group level data. Longitudinal analyses of all 15 open text codes were beyond the scope of our analyses since most of those codes were less central to our investigation of college students' moral learning as it connects with aspirations toward beyond-the-self contribution and life meaning and fulfillment. Closer investigation of the latter two aspirations was a priority because they were not only the most conceptually relevant goals and reasons but also the most frequent open text codes at both time points. For that reason, we conducted longitudinal analyses for those aspirations, tracking individual change from T1 to T2. Descriptive analyses were used to obtain frequencies of goal and reason open-text codes at T1 and T2, patterns of change for BTS and fulfillment orientations, and the relationship between these two longitudinal patterns. Chi-square tests of independence were used to evaluate the association between two demographic variables (i.e., gender and ethnicity) and BTS and fulfillment change patterns, as well as differences in the presence/absence of references to moral/civic learning in purposeful and non-purposeful interviews and differential patterns of themes within moral/civic learning displayed in purposeful vs. non-purposeful interviews. Analysis of variance was used to test whether participants with specific BTS or fulfillment change patterns differed in their socio-economic status or in the Covid pandemic impact they reported.

Results

Survey open-text codes for goals and reasons

Table 2 presents the percentage of respondents who received each open-text goal and reason code and each overarching category at T1 and T2.

Table 2. Percentage of survey respondents reporting goals and reasons T1 and T2 ($N = 640$).

Goal	Time 1	Time 2
Beyond-the-self (BTS) Contribution	37.8%	35.7%
BTS general	31.1%	29.8%
BTS family	7%	5.9%
Fulfillment/Self-actualization/Meaning	34.2%	33.8%
Fulfillment/self-actualization	26.1%	27.8%
Meaningful career	8.9%	7%
Career/Achievement/Creative	25.6%	24.2%
Career/vocation	20.8%	19.8%
Creative	4.8%	5.6%
Education	6.9%	8.2%
Undergraduate degree	4.1%	2.1%
Graduate degree	3.1%	6.1%
Relationships, family	11.3%	14.1%
Material and worldly success	9.1%	7.9%
Reason		
Fulfillment, happiness, meaning	55.2%	58.2%
Beyond-the-self (BTS)	47.2%	45.2%
Helping others	36.9%	37.8%
Moral beliefs	5.2%	3.5%
Gratitude	6.6%	4.7%
Material success	6.3%	6.1%

Participants with multiple codes in one superordinate category were only counted once when calculating the percentage of superordinate categories.

Research question 1: What were the most prevalent goals and reasons, and did the frequencies of goals and reasons change from T1 to T2?

Changes in the frequencies of goals and reasons from T1 to T2 were small, with only five of the 15 codes showing changes of 2% or more. Two of those changed by 3% points, while the other changes were less than 3% points. There is no evidence to suggest that these are meaningful, replicable changes from T1 to T2.

Goal content

Most respondents' open-text goals fell into three broad categories: beyond-the-self contribution (averaging 37.5% over the two time points), fulfillment/self-actualization /meaning (averaging 34% T1 and T2), and career/vocation (averaging 24.9). Other goals were represented in smaller shares of respondents, with less than 10% of respondents expressing a goal of material success.

Reasons for goals' importance

Two coding categories accounted for the great majority of reasons students gave for their goals' importance—reasons relating to a desire for fulfillment/happiness (averaging 56.7% T1 and T2) and reasons expressing a desire for beyond-the-self contribution/impact (averaging 56.85% T1 and T2). Only 6% cited a desire for material gain as a reason for their goals.

Relationships between goal content and reasons for goals' importance

Our coding also allowed us to examine the relationships between the goals individuals wrote about and the reasons they cited for those goals' importance, thus illuminating the meaning of respondents' expressed aspirations. More specifically, reason codes enable us

to capture beyond-the-self motivations for goals that are not inherently BTS. More than half (58%) of career/vocation goals were associated with BTS reasons, as were a third of goals aspiring toward meaningful careers.

Relationships between goals and reasons also illuminate the ways that some respondents connected aspirations toward beyond-the-self contributions with aspirations toward fulfillment/happiness. In addition to BTS reasons given for meaningful career and fulfillment/self-actualization/meaning goals, almost a third of BTS goals (32.3%) were said to be important because they are fulfilling or a source of happiness.

Research question 2: What are the longitudinal patterns of change in open text beyond-the-self and fulfillment orientations and what is the relationship between them?

Each set of open-text goals and reasons was designated as exhibiting a BTS orientation if the texts received one or more codes indicating a BTS goal or reason and a designation of fulfillment orientation if responses received any fulfillment codes for goals or reasons. These second order designations provided the basis for tracking patterns of stability and change in BTS and fulfillment orientations over the three-year period between surveys.

The percentage of open texts exhibiting the presence/absence of BTS orientation at each of the two time points is displayed in Table 3, which shows that most respondents' BTS orientations remained stable over time, with BTS concerns present at both times or neither time. Among those who changed from T1 to T2, somewhat more lost than gained BTS orientation. The results for fulfillment orientation, displayed in Table 4, were similar: Most remained consistent over time, exhibiting fulfillment orientation at both times or neither time. Among those who changed from T1 to T2, a larger share gained than lost fulfillment orientation.

Table 5 shows the relationship between BTS and fulfillment orientations at both time points. Most respondents had one but not both orientations at any given time point. Just over one in five exhibited both BTS and fulfillment orientations at T1 and roughly the same share had both at T2.

Table 3. BTS orientation change patterns.

	N	%
Not present either time	168	26.3
Time 1 only	141	22.0
Time 2 only	111	17.3
Present both times	220	34.4

Table 4. Fulfillment orientation change patterns.

	N	%
Fulfill not present either time	123	19.2
Time 1 only	117	18.3
Time 2 only	137	21.4
Fulfill present both times	263	41.1

Table 5. BTS and fulfillment orientations T1 and T2.

	T1		T2	
	N	%	N	%
Neither BTS nor Fulfillment orientation	37	5.8	39	6.1
BTS only	223	34.8	201	31.4
Fulfillment only	242	37.8	270	42.2
Both BTS and Fulfillment	138	21.6	130	20.3

Research question 3: Can gains and losses of BTS and fulfillment orientations be explained by demographics or the impact of the Covid-19?

Neither the association between BTS change patterns and gender (χ^2 (6, $N = 640$) = 3.17, $p = .787$) nor between BTS change patterns and ethnicity (χ^2 (24, $N = 640$) = 24.05, $p = .459$) was significant. The same was true for the associations between fulfillment change patterns and gender (χ^2 (6, $N = 640$) = 7.1, $p = .312$) and between fulfillment change patterns and ethnicity (χ^2 (24, $N = 640$) = 25.62, $p = .373$). Respondents with the different BTS change patterns did not significantly differ in socioeconomic status (F(3, 636) = 1.39, $p = .244$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$) or Covid impact composite score (F(3, 636) = .86, $p = .46$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$). Likewise, respondents with the various fulfillment change patterns did not differ significantly in socioeconomic status (F(3, 636) = .72, $p = .54$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$) or Covid impact composite score (F(3, 636) = 1.82, $p = .143$, partial $\eta^2 = .008$).

Research question 4: For the 32 respondents who completed both the interview and the T2 survey, how did the presence of BTS aspirations compare in these two sources of data?

Some respondents did not include BTS aspirations in their brief survey responses but did describe such aspirations in the lengthy, more interactive interviews. When respondents did include BTS aspirations in their brief survey responses, they were almost certain to also describe those aspirations in their interviews. More specifically, 55% of respondents whose survey open text responses did *not* include beyond-the-self (BTS) goals or reasons *did* express BTS aspirations in their interviews. Ninety-three percent of the respondents whose survey open texts cited beyond-the-self goals and/or reasons also described BTS aspirations in their interviews.

Research question 5: What share of interviewees described moral/civic learning when asked about their curricular, extra-curricular, and other college experiences? Did purposeful and non-purposeful interviewees differ in their reports of moral/civic learning in college?

Almost two thirds (65%) of interviewees reported moral/civic learning in response to interview questions about what had been important to them in their coursework and other college experiences. Interviewees who were independently coded as purposeful were more likely (74%) to describe moral/civic learning in connection with college experiences than interviewees who were non-purposeful (57%). According to a chi

square analysis, this relationship is not statistically significant: $\chi^2(1) = 1.45$, $p = .229$. Since the total number of interviews is near the lower limit for chi square analyses, the lack of significance may be due to the small sample size.

Research question 6: What content themes were present in the moral/civic learning that interviewees described?

Interview material that discussed moral/civic learning in college was also coded by content theme. That coding identified three content areas or themes: (1) ethical, virtue-related learning; (2) learning focused on equity, social justice, and related themes; and (3) learning about a particular social or policy issue of concern, such as the environment or health care. Interviews that were independently coded as purposeful exhibited different configurations of these content codes than non-purposeful interviews. Just over eighty-five percent of purposeful interviews that referenced moral/civic learning received codes that combined ethics (code 1) and/or social justice themes (code 2) with a substantive issue of concern (code 3). This 85.5% share of the interviews coded as purposeful includes three patterns, all of which include code 3, along with one or both of the other codes: 21% with ethics (code 1) along with a civic topic (code 3), 14.5% with social justice (code 2) and a civic topic (code 3), and 50% who exhibited all three codes together. Only 15% of non-purpose interviews matched any of those three configurations. Eighty-five percent of interviews that were non-purposeful were accounted for by three other code configurations: 45% with ethics alone (code 1), 15% with social justice alone (code 2), and 25% who combined the ethics and social justice codes (codes 1 and 2). The association of these distinctive patterns with purpose status coded from the interviews is statistically significant: $\chi^2(6) = 20.33$, $p = .002$

Illustrations of students' moral/civic learning

Content codes alone cannot provide a concrete sense of the moral/civic learning students said they'd experienced during college. We, therefore, offer some brief case examples, beginning with a student who described important moral learning experiences but had not yet developed purposeful commitments.

This case is a White woman majoring in business at a private university in North Carolina. She looks forward to having a family and combining her family life with a meaningful and stable career. Moral issues are important to her, and she feels that her empathy and compassion have deepened during college. When asked about her values, she points to 'Just being very open-minded . . . . Take everything with a grain of salt and not have your mind set. This value has gotten stronger since I've come to college, and I've met different types of people that I've never met before. My sociology courses have really helped with open-mindedness as well, learning about different cultures, different people, the way society perceives people who are different. That's helped me be more empathetic.'

This case is not unusual. More than half of the interviewees who had not yet developed fully purposeful commitments described moral/civic learning in college. For example, one student who aspired to finish college and find an interesting job talked about a criminal justice course that was especially memorable:

> [I learned that] there's a difference between being accused of a crime and being guilty of one . . . . It's given me perspective on the world . . . . I'll stop and think, 'That's just an accusation. That's not guilt under the law.' And then I guess that's translating into—wait and see who somebody is. Don't judge them based off of first appearance. I think that can be very easy to do, but . . . I'm trying to wait a little longer than that first impression to see who somebody is.

Examples like this abound in the interviews we conducted.

Also abundant in the sample are examples of purposeful students who describe moral/civic learning that was important to them in college. One such student, who received all three moral/civic content codes, is a Pakistani American woman attending a liberal arts college in Michigan. She described herself as a community activist, saying: 'That defines, really drives, who I am.' She went on to talk about extracurricular experiences that highlighted the importance of integrity (code 1), citing a disappointing situation in which a club president she knew misappropriated funds.

Her interview is even more replete with references to learning related to social justice (code 2). She described engaging with older students who supported her and taught her how to 'tactfully voice what you want' and to use the college's resources to work toward inclusion and equity. This student's social justice focus intersected with her interest in protecting the environment (code 3):

> [Before coming to college] I didn't really view environmentalism as something that I needed to focus on because I was low-income and BIPOC [which refers to Black/indigenous/people of color], and I was like, 'We've got bigger things to worry about, bigger fish to fry, . . . that's a White thing, to be blunt about it.'

This changed when she took a course that covered the 'influential contributions of indigenous and BIPOC' individuals to the field of environmental sustainability: 'Learning these things. . .was amazing to me. And I was like, "I want to be more involved in this, I care more about this now." So that shaped what I want to look at career-wise.'

Another case illustrates a second pattern common among purposeful interviewees, focusing on moral/civic learning that brings together ethics/virtue (code 1) and a civic issue of concern (code 3). The interviewee is a Black man majoring in environmental and urban planning policy at a private university on the east coast. He describes the impact of a favorite professor on his direction in life: 'Coming into [college] my freshman year, I was focused on the money. I figured I'd be a businessman, econ through and through. . . . But I realized that I had no passion for it.' Among other things, he was influenced by a revelatory course:

> My eyes were opened . . . through looking at things like pig farms, large scale industry, and how that impacts the people and the flora and fauna that are around these places. In taking that class, I figured out, 'Okay, money and industry, that's how you kill the planet, so how can I help us bounce back from that?'

He also described a photography class that he said

> Widened my scope of thinking, because you have to capture a single moment and you have to think about why you're capturing it, who you're capturing. And so, with that, I move through life with this consciousness of 'Why am I here, what am I doing, who else is here?'

Ethical questions were also preoccupations in his conversations with friends:

> My roommates and I sit for hours just talking. One of the questions we've chatted about is the ethics of capitalism. At [college name] you're living with a bunch of investment bankers and consultants. It's been interesting to see their side, their boundaries . . . . We're trying to figure out what we see as valuable and moral in our lives, so we're more confident when we act in the future.

Purposeful interviewees often talked about the need for humility (code 1) in relation to their aspirations for impact. As one South Asian woman put it: 'I need to make sure that I'm constantly evaluating the ethics of something, especially in social sector work, double-checking on any savior complexes, listening more than speaking.' Another woman at the same elite university minored in Asian languages, along with her majors in engineering and environmental science, so that she could 'talk to the people that I'm affecting [by her international sustainability projects] – to be able to talk to the stakeholders who maybe don't have English skills or money for translators.'

Most, but not all, purposeful interviews report moral/civic learning in college. Those few who don't are focused more on achieving their particular beyond-the-self goals than reflecting on moral/civic considerations. This is the approach of a White man at a liberal arts college in New England, who is committed to improving K-12 education:

> I have always been interested in issues around education and assessment and equity and engagement, and those dimensions of education policy. The driving impulse for me came out of the public school [I attended], which seemed so antithetical to what makes a good learning environment, what enables students to succeed and be curious and creative . . . . I don't think my sense of direction has changed at all in college, though my college experience has colored and sharpened it. I wanted to do something in education policy and assessment, but how I might do that, where I might do that wasn't clear. College has given me the tools to understand how to approach it, what kinds of degrees or professional experiences I might need.

He goes on to describe a wealth of projects, internships, and independent study courses that have deepened his expertise and experience in his chosen field.

Another purposeful interviewee who was intently focused on preparing for his career rather than engaging in broader moral/civic learning in college was a young man with a burning passion to achieve excellence as a sportscaster. He believed that this career would allow him to bring audiences the understanding of and joy in sports that animated his own life. When he talked about coursework, extra-curriculars, and other experiences in college, he valued most the activities that helped him gain skills and knowledge needed to accomplish his professional goal. This intense focus served him well in many ways but may also have prevented him from experiencing learning that could develop his own character or his grasp of the moral or civic dimensions of his life and work. An aspiring doctor mirrored this same kind of single-minded focus.

Discussion

This study takes a close look at college students' aspirations, focusing especially on goals and associated intentions to contribute to something larger than, or beyond, the self—to other people, to a valued field of endeavor, and to issues presenting

challenges and opportunities for the world. The study's longitudinal surveys and qualitative interviews help us understand what those aspirations look like in college students, how prevalent they are, their stability and change across three years of college, their relationship with aspirations toward the related constructs of fulfillment and meaning, and the extent to which the beyond-the-self component of purpose, and student development more generally, are informed by moral and civic learning experiences during college.

Prior to conducting the interviews and collecting the second round of longitudinal data, we had already explored some of these questions through analyses of the Time 1 survey responses (Colby et al., 2022). Most of the 1500 T1 respondents expressed one or more of three types of aspirations: to contribute beyond the self in some way; to achieve lives of fulfillment, self-actualization, and meaning; and/or to prepare for a valued career. Aspirations toward financial success for its own sake were much less frequent.

Roughly three years later, we recontacted the survey respondents, again asking them to write about their goals and reasons. Fortunately, the 640 who completed the T2 survey were a representative subset of the original 1500, with essentially the same distributions of T1 open text codes as the full T1 sample. It was hard to predict what these students might say in their second set of open text responses. College is a time of change for many students, and higher education culture includes diverging incentives to move in other-oriented and self-interested directions. Reports are mixed on the degree to which the college experience is well suited to fostering broad psychological growth, including the development of purpose and meaning (Clydesdale, 2015; Fischman & Gardner, 2022). To add to the uncertainty, the COVID-19 pandemic had upended students' lives in the time between the two surveys.

What we saw at the group level was remarkable consistency over time in students' most important goals and the reasons those goals are important to them, with only a few items changing more than two percentage points in the group-level data. Individual longitudinal patterns tracking respondents' orientations toward the top two reported aspirations—beyond-the-self contributions and fulfillment/self-actualization/meaning— also show more stability than change, though some students did acquire or lose these aspirations over time.

Theoretical articulations of fulfillment or meaning and beyond-the-self commitments suggest that their co-occurrence, even integration, better represents full flourishing than either orientation alone (Kristjánsson, 2017; Ryff, 2014). At T1, a substantial share of respondents, just over one in five, exhibited the combination of BTS and fulfillment, but, to our disappointment, that percentage was no higher three years later.

Interviews with a subset of survey respondents provide another lens on students' most valued goals and the reasons those goals are important to them. Interview questions designed to reveal students' purpose status are much like the survey prompts for open text responses. But interviewees are given time to talk at length about their goals and the goals' significance and history in their lives. Probably for that reason, we saw an even larger share of interviewees than survey respondents expressing beyond-the-self aspirations.

The interview material also provides an initial sense of the moral quality of college students' purpose, especially its beyond-the-self component. The interview asked respondents what was meaningful and important to them in their coursework, extracurricular experiences, and relationships with adults and peers. Almost two-thirds answered by describing one or more kinds of moral or civic learning. Without any prompting to do so,

they referred to learning that supported growth in integrity, compassion, humility, open-mindedness and commitment. From their coursework, extra-curriculars, mentors and peers, they learned about inequities they had not previously understood, as well as means for promoting a more just society. The purposeful interviewees also described valuable learning about the complexities and urgency of issues such as environmental protection, education policy, and health care delivery and connected these issues with social justice considerations and/or with moral virtues such as humility, compassion and integrity.

Implications, limitations, and unanswered questions[1]

From the perspective of purpose development, we had hoped, even expected, to see increased prevalence of the beyond-the-self orientation over time and more frequent integration of aspirations toward BTS and personal fulfillment. Although the longitudinal analyses did not support these expectations, the surprising stability in aspirations toward BTS and fulfillment expressed in surveys three eventful years apart does underscore the sincerity and durability of respondents' open text statements.

Our data hint at two limitations of the open text data, despite their robustness. First, comparisons of the BTS aspirations individuals expressed in their open texts and interviews suggest that the open text entries may not provide complete accounts of respondents' important goals. Although aspirations that appear in a respondent's open texts are also evident in the corresponding interview, the reverse is not always the case. It appears, then, that survey open text responses provide a conservative estimate of BTS aspirations, as compared with a probing, hour-long interview. Even so, there is a clear relationship between the two sources of information collected about six months apart. In essence, the open texts may include some false negatives for BTS aspirations but almost no false positives. This interpretation is provisional, because numbers are small for these analyses, with only 32 interviewees completing the T2 survey. If further research confirms that open texts provide a conservative estimate of BTS and fulfillment orientations, that could reinforce our conclusion that large numbers of students aspire to goals of contribution and personal growth rather than financial rewards or simple credentialing. But, if confirmed, this apparent limitation in the open text method could call into question our observation that only about 20% of respondents connect fulfillment and BTS contribution. This figure could also be a conservative estimate. This is a question worth addressing in future research.

As it stands now, however, our study suggests the need for broader, more explicit efforts to help students think clearly about what it means to seek a fulfilling life. Our finding that most students do not combine aspirations to BTS contribution and fulfillment/self-actualization /meaning is a reminder that we cannot take these connections for granted. Education in this area would articulate the rewards of connecting with and contributing to public goods as well as the value of personal goods such as life balance, personal growth, and work that feels meaningful and stimulating. This might be accomplished through expanding dedicated courses on fulfillment and happiness that have become popular in the past decade (Burnett & Evans, 2016) to include the place of social contribution in fulfillment; incorporating questions of life purpose into first year courses and programs that address the goals of the college experience (Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013); helping mental health-related programs intended to support students' wellbeing recognize the value of social contribution (Brocato et al., 2018); and expanding programming in career planning and placement offices,

which sometimes focus on meaningful work, but often do not connect meaning with contribution to a field or aspects of the common good (Baumeister et al., 2013; Weiss, 2018).

Our study also raises the question of why some students gained and some lost BTS and fulfillment orientations over time. Although our analyses can't answer that question, they do rule out some possible explanations, showing that longitudinal patterns of gain and loss are not connected with gender, race, or social class. Nor is the self-reported impact of pandemic disruptions a factor in the likelihood or nature of change in BTS or fulfillment orientations. This is despite our finding that higher scores on the Covid impact assessment were associated with increased stress and decreased life satisfaction in the longitudinal sample (Colby et al., 2023). We also recognize that some apparent gains and losses of BTS or fulfillment aspirations may reflect limitations of the open text method, which might have missed some aspirations the student would have described in a longer, more interactive exchange. Overall, the open text method, by focusing on the respondents' most central goals and reasons, may do a better job capturing what is enduring than what is changing during college.

It is encouraging that almost two-thirds of our interviewees highlighted the importance of their moral and civic learning during college. Their interest in and thoughtfulness about these issues reflects on the moral quality of purpose in college students and its underpinnings for those yet to develop purpose. It appears, however, that moral/civic learning experiences may be more salient for students who were already purposeful than for the others, who could potentially benefit at least as much from growth in moral and civic understanding and engagement. This is another area where increased focus and intentionality could enable higher education to do better.

Another fruitful avenue for understanding the dynamics and mechanisms of college students' goals and motivations toward social contribution and other beyond-the-self commitments would be to connect the findings of this study with the larger fields of moral and civic growth in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Some of the constructs at the heart of those fields are conceptually related to what we have called the beyond-the-self dimension of purposeful commitment. These constructs and research endeavors have focused, for example, on moral valuing, motivation, and self-ideals (Pratt et al., 2003); identification with and action for the common good (Flanagan, 2015); the developmental roots of social responsibility (Wray-Lake et al., 2016); and adolescent generativity as it relates to prosocial identity (Lawford et al., 2005).

Our own study and the larger context of research on youth civic engagement support our claim that a narrowly financial return-on-investment framing does not capture what students take from the college experience nor the seriousness and generosity of their aspirations. Based on our data, we are confident that students would welcome and benefit from greater institutional attention to moral and civic growth and its important place in human flourishing. The stability of students' aspirations toward contribution and fulfillment over time, despite the challenges of a massive public health crisis and a turbulent world, makes us even more confident of that claim.

Note

1. For the sake of simplicity, this study used a dichotomous designation for purpose, as coded from interview material. In taking this approach, we do not mean to imply that the purpose construct is best understood as dichotomous, treating purpose as fully present or entirely

absent. The larger study of purpose development in college, of which this study is a part, includes a survey measure of purpose as a continuous variable and also analyses that identify four developmentally distinct purpose statuses described by Malin (2022) as dabbling, dreaming, drifting, and full purpose. In our current analyses, which focus primarily on college students' goals and experiences of moral/civic learning, the four purpose statuses are reduced to two categories, designating the presence or absence of full purpose. Findings using the continuous measure and the 4-category purpose status designations are reported elsewhere (Malin, 2022; Malin, et al., under review).

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