

What College Students Are After and Why

Anne Colby, Heather Malin & Emily Morton

To cite this article: Anne Colby, Heather Malin & Emily Morton (2022) What College Students Are After and Why, Journal of College and Character, 23:3, 189-209, DOI: [10.1080/2194587X.2022.2087680](https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2022.2087680)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2022.2087680>



Published online: 08 Aug 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)




View Crossmark data [↗](#)



What College Students Are After and Why

Anne Colby, Stanford University^a

Heather Malin , Stanford University^b

Emily Morton , Northwest Evaluation Association^c

Abstract

Public discourse often frames the value of undergraduate education in financial terms—credentialing and increased earning power. Students must prepare to be self-supporting, but are financial prospects their only important goals? We asked 1,500 students from 11 U.S. colleges to write about their goals, the reasons their goals were important, and how they were pursuing those goals. Most articulated goals of self-actualization, meaning, and contribution to their chosen fields and to the common good. Almost all reported that they were actively pursuing their goals, including through academic and other programs provided by their colleges. By building on students' aspirations as described in the study as well as their motivation in pursuing them, today's colleges can help students engage more fully with their education and more effectively prepare them for lives of meaning and purpose.

Policymakers and the popular press in the United States often treat the mission of higher education as if it were limited to credentialing graduates for the sake of their financial independence and security and supplying the labor force with skilled workers. A corresponding understanding of college students' motivations and goals would imply that students focus most centrally on completing a degree or credential leading to lucrative employment. In large part because of the escalating cost of higher education in the United States, declining public funding, and high student debt, commentators calculate the value of a university education as “return on investment (ROI)” for students and the nation, with both investment costs and returns framed in strictly financial terms. The question these commentators pose to students, families, and taxpayers is “Will the financial return on investment be sufficient to justify the cost?” (Payscale, 2017; Shapiro, 2005). This concern points to an urgent need for higher education researchers to address costs of college attendance and debt loads, graduation rates, employment

^aAnne Colby (acolby1@stanford.edu) is adjunct professor in the Stanford Graduate School of Education, formerly senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and director of the Murray Research Center at Harvard University.

^bHeather Malin (hmalin@stanford.edu) is a senior research scholar and director of research at the Stanford University Center on Adolescence, where she conducts research on diverse aspects of purpose development.

^cEmily Morton (emily.morton@nwea.org) is a research scientist at the Center for School and Student Progress at Northwest Evaluation Association.

preparation, and career trajectories of graduates. But the legitimacy of these practical matters does not foreclose debate about the scope of higher education's mission.

The use of financial return-on-investment to define the value of higher education contrasts sharply with the rich literature that begins from a conviction that higher education has a responsibility to prepare responsible citizens, persons of character, and ethical professionals and can pursue these alongside economic goals. (See, for example, Bok, 2020; Colby, 2020; Dalton & Crosby, 2011; Fischman & Gardner, 2022; Sullivan, 2016.) These authors and many others have spelled out the implications of a broader institutional mission for the goals, content, and processes of post-baccalaureate education, and some have provided empirical data to document students' development toward those outcomes.

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

Research on College Student Goals

Tracking Students' Goals

UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has conducted many surveys that include information on the goals that college students consider important. These studies consistently find that students place high value on both practical and developmental goals. In a study of college students' spirituality by Alexander and Helen Astin and their colleagues, students strongly endorsed practical purposes of college attendance such as preparing for employment (94%) or graduate education (81%). But the study also revealed a keen interest in personal, moral, and spiritual growth. Seventy-four percent of respondents reported that they discussed the meaning of life with their friends; 76% said they were searching for life meaning and purpose, and 69% expected college to enhance their self-understanding (Astin et al., 2005). The Astins' study of college student spirituality emerged from exactly the kind of larger view of higher education we referred to earlier, and in fact expanded the boundaries of the developmental frame beyond secular moral and civic outcomes to spiritual growth, broadly defined.

In another research program, HERI has tracked the characteristics of college freshmen for more than 50 years. Among other things, these surveys present a list of specific goals/objectives, which respondents rate on a five-point scale from not important to essential. As in previous years, respondents to the 2019 Freshman Survey rated a wide array of objectives as very important or essential (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Those ratings reflect the current climate of economic expectations, with 84% of respondents strongly endorsing the goal of becoming very well off financially. At the same time, large shares of respondents also rated very highly helping others who were in difficulty (80%), improving their understanding of other countries and cultures (62%), and promoting racial understanding (52%). Half endorsed the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life, and almost as many (48%) indicated that influencing social values was very important or essential to them.

In contrast with the Astins' study of college students' spirituality, HERI's Freshman Surveys are meant to be more strictly descriptive, tracking trends and associations among variables without putting forward claims about the desirability or social significance of patterns and trends or their relationships to alternative visions of higher education's mission. But, when considered in light of the distinction we made earlier about economic versus broader developmental views of educational goals, these responses tell a clear story. Students who have entered college in recent years value financial success, but they also believe in the importance of social contribution and personal growth.

Goal Content Categories

Other studies of college students' goals have gone beyond ratings of individual items by creating taxonomies that sort the items into theoretically significant categories. Roberts and Robins (2000) created a standardized list of specific items meant to assess domains of *major life goals* and asked respondents to rate their importance. Using principal components analyses, they assigned specific items to seven thematic content clusters representing different life/values domains: economics, hedonism, relationships, social, aesthetic, political, and religious.

In a 4-year longitudinal study of college students that built on the earlier instrument-development work reported in Roberts and Robins (2000), Roberts et al. (2004) found that college students were most likely to strongly endorse the items in domains of relationships (e.g., having children) and hedonism (e.g., having new and different experiences). The categories these investigators called social (helping others, public service) and economic (career and financial success) were next in order of popularity. The remaining three categories, politics, aesthetics (creativity), and religion, ranked last. Those domains were very important to significant minorities of students but were not high priorities for most. The relative importance of goal categories for study participants remained stable across the four years of college (Roberts et al., 2004) and beyond (Atherton et al, 2021). Like HERI's Freshman Surveys, these goal taxonomy studies reveal the inclusiveness of young people's aspirations. As Roberts and Robins (2000) put it, students (like most people) "want love, work, and play" (p. 1293).

Beyond these general conclusions, however, the implications of these findings for character education are limited. One reason is methodological. Studies that depend on ratings of pre-determined items cannot reveal what specific goal items really mean to respondents. An example is the item "make my parents proud." In Roberts and Robins's measure, this item indicates an economic rather than relationship focus because empirically it clusters with goals relating to financial and other forms of success. But the probabilistic nature of statistical associations suggests that many students wish to make their parents proud for non-economic reasons as well, such as achieving their potential as human beings. Nor do item ratings reveal *why* the respondent considers the goal important or which goals students are actually pursuing. Moreover, a simple taxonomic framework cannot illuminate the best ways for educators to accommodate the diversity of goals that may seem to pull students in conflicting directions.

Creating Synergy Among Diverse Goals

In an earlier issue of this journal (Colby, 2020), we argued that universities need an explicitly integrative approach if they are going to educate for character and contribution to something beyond-the-self while also honoring students' economic, experiential, and other personal goals. In that article, we described two powerfully unifying constructs for higher education: flourishing (or wellbeing) and purpose, with purpose

being an essential element of flourishing. The idea of flourishing or deep (eudaimonic) wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001; C. Ryff, 2016) asks what it means to have a well-lived life, to achieve the best that is within us as human beings. A focus on full flourishing provides an ambitious and compelling vision for higher education, a vision that reframes “return on investment” by deepening what it means to invest and what the many returns on those investments can be.

A lot has happened in the world of higher education in the short time since our earlier article was published, including the coronavirus pandemic, heightened awareness of racial inequities, and severe political discord. Each of these issues presents challenges for higher education, making powerfully integrative approaches more important than ever. We are, therefore, again calling for integrative visions that will support resilience and robust wellbeing as well as immediate academic and vocational successes. To do so, educators must find ways to create synergies between self-related goals and larger moral and civic commitments so that both contribute to lasting wellbeing. We believe that by creating such synergies, the problems that the ROI approach refers to can be taken seriously without sacrificing the essential public purposes of higher education.

Eudaimonic Wellbeing

The concept of flourishing or (using Aristotle’s term) *eudaimonic* wellbeing has fundamental significance for education because its central concern is the realization of human potential, broadly conceived. Psychological theories of eudaimonic wellbeing propose that a satisfying life is based in self-realization, growth, meaning, and the capacity to confront “the existential challenges of life” (C. D. Ryff, 2013, p. 17). What this entails is articulated somewhat differently in different research traditions, but the central ideas are consistent across the major approaches.

The two dominant theories of eudaimonic wellbeing are those of C. D. Ryff (2013) and Ryan and Deci (2001). Ryff’s model includes six elements: (a) purpose—having meaning, direction, and purpose in life; (b) autonomy—living in accord with one’s convictions; (c) personal growth—making use of one’s talents and potential; (d) mastery or competence; (e) positive relationships; and (f) self-acceptance—mature self-knowledge, including awareness of one’s limitations.

Ryan and Deci’s model posits that human flourishing requires individuals to develop ways to meet three intrinsic human needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Thus, the core elements of Ryan and Deci’s model are included in eudaimonic wellbeing as Ryff has defined it. The additional elements of Ryff’s scheme—personal growth, self-acceptance, and purpose—are also implied in Ryan and Deci’s theory of wellbeing (self-determination theory [SDT]) since growth, self-knowledge and acceptance, and purpose are closely connected with human affinity for intrinsic motivation (autonomy) and connectedness. In its elaborated forms, SDT articulates the importance of integrity, intrinsic goals and motivation, and concern not only for one’s own wellbeing but also “the broader issues of the collective wellness of humanity and the wellness of the planet,” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 161; Krettenauer & Curren, 2020).

Only one element of these eudaimonic frameworks—relationships—is included in Roberts and Robins’s taxonomy of life goals. Because Roberts and Robins’s taxonomy describes *content* domains, it necessarily omits goals relating to self-actualization, autonomy, and other dimensions of wellbeing that transcend content, including (most importantly from our point of view) purpose. Their widely used taxonomy of goals therefore misses some of the most important dimensions of aspiration and growth for college students.

Purpose

Our own work in the past decade has investigated various aspects of purpose across the lifespan from early adolescence through late adulthood. Purpose, as we understand it, centers on the nature of

individuals' goals and their orientations toward their goals. 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 of purpose requires that the individual's goals have certain characteristics—that they are personally meaningful (of intrinsic value, autonomously chosen) and intended to contribute to something larger than, or beyond, the self. But being purposeful entails more than having meaningful, beyond-the-self (BTS) goals. It 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 goal-related constructs such as grit, it requires directedness toward and commitment to goals that center on contribution—to other people, to a field, or to the common good—rather than persistence toward any personal goal, whatever it may be.

The efforts of purposeful individuals are visible in virtually all areas of human endeavor and are essential to positive social functioning and advance in any domain. These purposeful individuals are the young people determined to save the planet; elections officials who steadfastly protect the democratic process; and those who work for racial and gender equality, add to the world's beauty through the arts; improve the treatment of animals; advance scientific understanding; and/or teach and mentor others. These and other purposeful endeavors require discipline, commitment in the face of challenges, and continuous growth in understanding and skill.

Maintaining focus and commitment requires sacrifice, and some purposes entail real heroism. On the whole, however, people who lead purposeful lives gain as much as they give. Research evidence is strong that purpose is highly beneficial not only for the common good but for purposeful individuals themselves. It is associated with academic and vocational success, resilience, and psychological and physical health throughout life (Bronk, 2014; Malin et al., 2017; Morton et al., 2018). For that reason, purpose has the potential to bring self-related, personal concerns and other-focused concerns together into a harmonious whole.

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

The Present Study

This article presents a mixed-methods analysis of data from the Time 1 survey of an ongoing longitudinal study of college experiences and purpose development. That survey, conducted in 2018–2019, included

three open-text questions asking respondents to describe in their own words: (a) their most important goals, (b) the reasons those goals were important to them, and (c) what, if anything, they were doing to pursue those goals. Respondents also rated items on a list of goals similar to those in the HERI Freshman Surveys.

Our intention in using open-text responses to assess college students' important life goals was to mitigate some limitations that arise when studying goals using standard item ratings. As discussed previously, item ratings are difficult to interpret because they do not reveal the reasons or explanations behind a respondent's goal rating, and they force respondents to consider imprecise and truncated approximations of their important goals. Moreover, the items rating approach presents challenges to interpreting the salience of respondents' goals. Respondents can potentially rate all items on the list highly, whether or not they would have thought of the item on their own. Asking respondents to write about a single goal ensures that the goal they describe is especially salient for them.

By using a qualitative approach to asking about life goals and analyzing the resulting data, we were able to gather more nuanced and salient information about the content of their goals, the reasons driving their goals, and how they were pursuing their goals. This more individualized, qualitative information about students' life goals was easier to interpret and understand in the context of their college experiences. We explored the following research questions about the qualitative content of students' life goals: What are the most important life goals among college students today? What are the reasons they say those goals are important? And what, if anything, are they doing to pursue their most important goals?

We were also interested in students' ratings on the Life Goal items and how their ratings might be interpreted in light of the information provided in their open-text responses. Based on the purpose construct described above, we sought to understand whether students who described an important BTS goal differed in how they rated the Life Goal items compared to students who did not describe a BTS goal. We first asked what percent of students rated each Life Goal item as *very important* or *essential*. Next, we posed the following question: Do ratings of the Life Goal items differ between students who did and students who did not describe a BTS goal in the open-text items?

Methods

Participants

We invited students from 11 colleges to participate in the survey and received responses from 2,261. Two of the 11 colleges were overrepresented (comprising 1,107 respondents between the two colleges), so we randomly selected a subsample of 170 respondents from one of the overrepresented colleges and 176 respondents from the other to be included in this analysis. The resulting sample consists of 1,500 respondents from four regions of the United States (44.2% California, 19.9% Michigan, 22.8% Massachusetts, 13.1% North Carolina). Sites were selected to represent different types of institutions (four public universities, three private research universities, two community colleges, and two small liberal arts colleges). Our recruiting targeted students in their first and final years of college; however, some respondents were in different years (43.7% first year, 17.6% second or third year, 34% final year). Survey respondents were 67.3% female, 4.5% Black, 42.4% White, 16.5% Latinx/Hispanic, 22.4% Asian American, 14.2% Multi-racial/other. (Compared with HERI's Freshman Survey data for 2019 [the year of our data collection], our sample over-represents Asian and [to a lesser extent] Latinx students and under-represents White and Black students. This is due to the larger number of participants from California than

from the East Coast and Midwest.) In the sample used for this study, 29.5% self-identified as low socioeconomic status on the MacArthur Subjective Social Status Ladder. At some sites, we attempted to oversample for students in special programs, such as honors colleges or service-learning programs. Ten percent of respondents in this analysis were participating in one of these special programs.

Data Collection Procedures and Measures

Three different recruiting procedures were used across the 11 college sites. At eight sites, college faculty or administrators emailed our survey invitation to their students. At one site, we recruited participants through a research experience program that gave students course credit for participating in studies, and two sites provided student e-mail lists so we could invite students to participate. Students received a Qualtrics survey link in an e-mail and, if they chose to complete the survey, were able to do so on a device and at a time of their choice. For opening the survey link, they were offered the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of 50 gift cards worth \$100.

Survey Measures and Open-Text Questions

Life Goals. Respondents rated 20 life goals on a 5-point scale (“Not at all important” to “Essential”). Five of the 20 items came from the HERI Freshman Survey, and 15 were adapted from prior research on life goals and purpose (Bundick et al., 2006; Roberts & Robins, 2000). The 20 items were selected to represent the broad goal areas that recur in research on life goals among adolescents and young adults, such as career and economic success, family and relationships, creative endeavors, hedonism, and contributing to society (e.g., Twenge et al., 2012).

Open-Text Questions. After rating the Life Goal items, respondents were prompted to think about their important goals and briefly describe (a) a personally meaningful goal, (b) why they aspired to that goal, and (c) what, if anything, they were currently doing to accomplish that goal.

Analysis

Code Development and Coding Procedures

Two members of the research team read the open-text responses and discussed themes emerging from each of the three open-text items: Goal Content, Reasons for Goals, and Actions toward Goals. We used an open coding approach with constant comparison to identify emerging themes for each of these three items (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Starting with a subsample of 50 responses, we looked for recurring ideas and developed categories to represent the themes that were emerging for each item. We then looked at responses from a second subsample, comparing those responses to our emerging categories and revising, merging, or dropping categories to better fit the responses. By coding each open-text item separately, we could then identify more complex patterns of goal content and reasons than would have been possible if we tried to develop one set of codes to apply to all three open-text items.

We conducted interrater reliability checks with each subsample of 50 responses until we had a completed coding scheme for the three open-text goal items (Goal Content, Reasons for Goals, and Actions Toward Goals). In a final reliability check of 200 surveys, we achieved 98% agreement for Goal Content codes, 98% agreement for Reasons for Goals codes, and 94% agreement for Actions Toward Goals codes. Because we allowed for double coding, there were additional cases where we agreed on at least one but not all codes for an individual’s responses to the item. We achieved at least 80% reliability

even when considering double coded responses with partial discrepancies. At this stage, each of the two coders coded half of the remaining 1,300 surveys.

Based on the purpose construct that framed this study, we were interested in learning to what extent and in what ways college students' goals are beyond-the-self oriented. Therefore, we next coded the open-text responses as BTS or non-BTS. To be coded BTS, either the respondent's Goal Content (e.g., "mentor others"), Reason for Goal (e.g., "because everyone deserves access to technology"), or both, had to indicate BTS orientation. We did not code Actions Toward Goals for BTS orientation, because it is the intention or motivation driving the goal, not the action, that determines whether a goal is BTS oriented.

Open-Text Codes Compared With Life Goal List Responses

A *convergent parallel* mixed-methods approach was used to triangulate the open-text life goal responses to the items on the Life Goal list (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Researchers use a convergent design when they want to compare results from qualitative and quantitative data on a topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 77). In this analysis, we wanted to see if respondents who described a BTS goal and those who did not differed in how they rated the items in the Life Goal list. This comparison is conducted by transforming the qualitative results to quantitative data (in this case, qualitative descriptions of life goals were categorized as BTS or non-BTS). We then used independent-samples t-tests to test the statistical significance ($\alpha = 0.05$) of differences in respondents' Life Goal ratings by whether they were coded as BTS or non-BTS.

Open-Text Codes With Demographic and College Variables

The relationships between goal content codes and the following demographic and college variables were investigated using chi-square tests of association: gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, college type, and major.

Results

Open-Text Codes

As noted in the previous section, the survey included three opportunities for students to write responses in their own words. In these "open-text" responses, students wrote briefly about their most important goals, the reasons those goals were important to them, and actions they were taking toward those goals. [Table 1](#) lists the codes (bolded) and, when relevant, the overarching category (italicized) for each of the three open-text sections, along with examples and percent of cases that received each code and overarching category.

Goal Content

As shown in the table, most of the students' statements about the content of their goals fell into three broad categories: Beyond-the-Self Contribution, Meaning/Self-Actualization, and Career/Vocation.

Collectively, the goal content category defined by codes indicating an aspiration to contribute beyond-the-self was the most common. This category, represented in 38% of respondents, includes 30% coded as BTS General, which represents goals that express a general desire to help or contribute, aspirations toward more specific contributions, and the desire to contribute through a career or vocation. (The latter were coded for both Career/Vocation and BTS.) This BTS Career/Vocation group includes students with prosocial goals such as helping others and those who wish to contribute to advancing

Table 1

Codes for Open-text Responses to Goal Content, Reasons for Goals, and Actions Toward Goals

Code	%	Example responses
Goal content		
<i>Beyond-the-self goals</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● BTS general: Help others, make world better, serve God, etc. 	38%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● BTS family: Help or support family 	9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide for my family ● Buy my parents a house ● Be well off so nobody I love has to struggle
<i>Personal growth, fulfillment, meaning goal</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meaning/self-actualization: Personal growth, happiness, meaning 	27%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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 on my own and be able to be happy independently Find meaning in my life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meaningful career: Career that is satisfying, meaningful, enjoyable 	9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Find a career that will be personally fulfilling ● Obtain a position I enjoy every day
<i>Career/vocation or creative goal</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Career/vocation: Specific job, role, career path 	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creative: Creative endeavor, output 	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create films ● Become published ● Make great art

(continued)

Table 1

(Continued)

Code	%	Example responses
<i>Specific educational goal</i>	7%	
● Finish undergraduate degree	4%	● Obtain my bachelor's Finish college
● Complete a graduate degree	3%	● Be the first in my family to get a PhD
		● Obtain a master's degree
Relationships: Become a good parent, have a good relationship	11%	● Have a family
		● Be in a satisfying relationship
		● Be a good mom
Material and worldly success: High income, status, affluence, worldly success	10%	● Own a home in the country
		● Be successful
		● Have lots of money
Reasons for goals		
Fulfillment, happiness, self-expression, growth	53%	● To enjoy my life
		● I want my life to have meaning
		● I take pride in being self-sufficient and financially independent
		● I want to better understand other cultures
		● Self-actualization is the best form of achievement in my eyes
<i>Beyond-the-self reasons</i>	47%	
● To help others or the world	35%	● 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

(continued)

Table1

(Continued)

Code	%	Example responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moral beliefs: Because it's the right thing to do, moral prescription 	6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gratitude: Because I'm grateful, want to give back 	8%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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
<p>Material success or stability, status attainment</p>	8%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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
<p>Actions toward goals</p> <p><i>School-related activity</i></p>	60%	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Academic coursework, major, degree 	54%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Going to college ● Making sure I get good grades ● Getting my degree in mechanical engineering ● Studying orbital mechanics and the aerodynamic considerations of rockets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Programs sponsored by college 	11%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interning in my field ● Doing research setting up cameras to catch an invasive species ● I've joined a dance team ● Working with my school's resources to network
<p>Practice: Practicing a desired skill or virtue, enacting early phase toward a goal</p>	40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I'm vegan ● I've been setting limits on things that waste time like Netflix and phone ● I've started a blog and hope to write about things that help others ● I applied to join the Peace Corps ● I wrote a novel and am pursuing publication

(continued)

Table 1

(Continued)

Code	%	Example responses
Volunteering or paid work to make beyond-the-self contribution	9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Working with youth ● Volunteering in my local community ● Political activism for human rights causes
Religious activity	1%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being involved in my church ● Fostering interfaith discussions ● Leading a Christian group
Not pursuing the goal	5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Nothing at the moment ● Not at an age where I'm ready for it

Italics indicates an overarching category with subcodes following. Subcode percentages may not sum to overarching code percentages because some responses received more than one subcode. Not all codes are subcodes within a larger overarching category.

a field. In addition to the 30% of responses that received the BTS General code, another 9% were coded as BTS Family, which refers to a desire to give back to or help one's parents or other family members.

The second most prevalent goal content category (after BTS Contribution) was Meaning/Self-Actualization, with 35% of entries receiving codes in that category. This includes 27% in the Meaning—General subcategory, which refers to the desire to achieve personal improvement or growth, meaning in life, or fulfillment. Another 9% indicated the aspiration to have a career that is satisfying and meaningful, coded as Meaningful Work.

A third category, referring to vocational and achievement goals, was present in a quarter of the sample. This includes 20% focused on goals of Career/Vocation, which identify specific careers or roles the respondent aspires to, and 5% coded for Creative aspirations, such as writing, visual, or performing arts, or other creative activities. As noted previously, many of the responses coded as Career/Vocation were also coded for Beyond-the-Self Contribution.

Several other categories of goals were represented in smaller shares of respondents. Notably, only 10% aspired to become rich or successful as their foremost goal, and only 4% mentioned completing their college degree.

Reasons for Goals' Importance

As with goal content, a small number of coding categories accounted for almost all of the reasons students gave for their goals' importance. A majority of students gave reasons coded in the category Fulfillment/Happiness (53%). A second category of reasons was coded in 49% of responses. That second highly prevalent category, Beyond-the-Self reasons, includes codes referring to Help Others or the World, Moral Beliefs, and Gratitude/Give Back. In contrast with these two most commonly cited types of reasons (Fulfillment and Beyond-the-Self), Material Gain was cited as a reason by only 8% of respondents.

Relationships Between Goal Content and Reasons for Goals' Importance. Our coding also allowed us to examine the relationships between the goals individuals wrote and the reasons they cited for those goals' importance. By looking at the connections between goals and reasons, we could better understand the particular meaning of respondents' expressed goals. More specifically, reason codes enabled us to capture BTS motivations for goals that were not inherently BTS. Career/Vocation goals were as likely to be associated with BTS reasons (68%) as were BTS goals (67%). In contrast, only 7% of Career/Vocation goals referred to material gain as a reason. Students also provided BTS reasons, though less frequently, for other goals, including Meaningful career (29%) and Meaning/Self-actualization (24%).

Relationships between goals and reasons can also reveal the degree to which our respondents connected Beyond-the-Self Contribution with Fulfillment/Happiness. In addition to the BTS reasons given for Meaningful Career and Meaning/Self-Actualization goals, almost a quarter of BTS goals (24%) were said to be important because they are fulfilling or a source of happiness.

Actions Toward Goal

Most respondents (95%) indicated that they were actively working toward their goals. The most frequent actions students described were activities sponsored by or connected with their colleges, including *Academic* activities such as courses, majors, or degrees and other school-based *Programs*, such as internships or research projects. Many students (40%) also referred to actions coded as *Practice*, which included doing things that embodied their goals, such as improving their time or financial management, writing or other creative activities, relationship-building, or taking early steps toward a career aspiration such as identifying opportunities in their desired field. Volunteering was reported less often (9%) but was important for many respondents with beyond-the-self goals.

Connections of Actions to Goal Content. With some variation, the two most commonly cited actions were important for almost every goal type. The BTS General goal was the only one for which volunteer work was prominently cited as an action (21%), but, even for this goal, Academic activities (50%) were most frequent, then Practice (30%). The BTS Family goal was even more likely to be pursued through Academic activities (74%). The Meaning/Self-Actualization goal was pursued most often through Practice (66%) followed by Academic activities (42%). Academic activities (70%) and Programs such as projects and internships (27%) were prominent ways to pursue Career/Vocation goals. Goals of completing a Current or Graduate degree were the only ones for which actions were almost exclusively Academic (94%).

Beyond-the-Self Orientation (BTS) in Goal Content and Reasons

Fifty-five percent of the sample exhibited a BTS orientation in their open-text responses. Goals of General BTS and Family BTS are, by definition, beyond-the-self. Among the non-BTS goals, we found that one—aspiration to a particular Career/Vocation—was more likely than any of the others to be associated with a BTS orientation (74%). The goal of Relationships was also more likely than not to be associated with BTS orientation (52%). This was not the case for any of the other goals. For example, only 27% of respondents with the Meaning/Self-Actualization goal were coded as BTS, though a larger percentage of those who aspired to a Meaningful Career showed a BTS orientation (36%). Forty-five percent of respondents with Creative goals showed a BTS orientation, and, for all other goals, the rate of BTS orientation was less than 30%.

Illustrations of the Holistic Nature of the Open-Text Responses

The analyses reviewed previously present results from our separate coding of students' goal content, reasons, and actions and the relationships among them. A limitation of this approach is that it does not capture well the uniqueness and connectedness of students' three part open-text responses. In order to

provide a more holistic sense of the open-text responses, we offer here three examples that illustrate the diversity of students' expressions and their coherence across the three write-ins. The first two examples exhibit a BTS orientation, while the third centers on Meaning/Self-Actualization and does not include an orientation beyond-the-self. In these examples, we have italicized the verbatim open-text material.

Student A: [My goal is to] *develop a transformative technology that will help save our world from climate demise. [This is important to me because] I have intimate knowledge of the science behind climate change and thus am aware of the urgency. [I'm working toward this by] piloting climate change initiatives with my university and at internships.*

Student B: [My goal is to] *bring new awareness to the role of faith in modern life through interfaith dialogue. [This is important to me because] in a lot of my interactions with people my age, faith is seen as a bygone. I think I can help. [I'm working toward this by] fostering interfaith discussion as well as incorporating faith and service into my life.*

Student C: [My goal is to] *be in a position where I have the freedom to pursue projects that I think are important. [This is important to me because] I don't want to be stuck in a place where I feel out of control, or unproductive. [I'm working toward this by] studying biology, which I intend to use to pursue the projects I find interesting.*

Relationships of Goal Content and BTS Orientation to Demographic and College Variables

Demographic Characteristics

Overall, distributions of goals, reasons, and actions were consistent across demographic characteristics, as were proportions of respondents with a BTS orientation. The three goal categories of BTS contribution, Meaning/Self-Actualization, and career were the most frequently coded goals for all genders and for all racial/ethnic categories that represent at least 1% of the sample. Despite this overall consistency, several goals showed significantly different frequencies associated with demographic variables.

Gender. Women were more likely than men and nonbinary students to aspire to a meaningful career, $X^2(2, 1,499) = 9.86, p = 0.007$ and to close family and other relationships, $X^2(2, 1,499) = 6.23, p = 0.044$, and less likely to describe creative aspirations, $X^2(2, 1,499) = 11.39, p = 0.003$. We found no gender differences in BTS orientation.

Race/Ethnicity. Black respondents were more likely than other groups to express general BTS goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 8.70, p = 0.003$, and to exhibit a BTS orientation, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 4.02, p = 0.045$, and were less likely than others to focus on close relationships as an important goal, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 6.25, p = 0.012$. Latinx respondents were more likely than others to express BTS family goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 4.13, p = 0.042$, and the goal of completing their bachelor's degree, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 7.09, p = 0.008$, and less likely to describe the goal of a meaningful career, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 3.99, p = 0.046$. Asian American students were more likely than others to describe goals related to material success, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 9.99, p = 0.002$, and Meaning/Self-Actualization, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 8.71, p = 0.003$, and less likely to describe specific career/vocation goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 5.20, p = 0.023$, or a graduate degree, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 4.11, p = 0.043$. White respondents were more likely than others to describe specific career/vocation goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 3.99, p = 0.046$, meaningful career goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 6.28, p = 0.012$, and fulfilling family relationship goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 5.29, p = 0.021$, and were less likely to describe meaning/self-actualization goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 5.16, p = 0.023$, material success, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 9.87, p = 0.002$, and BTS family goals, $X^2(1, 1,499) = 12.76, p < 0.001$.

SES. Self-rated SES made a difference in only two goals, with lower SES students more likely than others to cite a BTS family goal, $\chi^2(6, 1,500) = 50.74, p < 0.001$, and higher SES students more likely than others to cite the goal of having fulfilling relationships, $\chi^2(6, 1,500) = 17.86, p = 0.007$. SES made no difference in BTS orientation.

Relation of Goal Content to Institutional Type and Majors

Institutional Type. The three most frequently cited goals were consistent across the 11 participating institutions: BTS contribution, Meaning/Self-Actualization, and Career/Vocation (though not always in that order). Even so, some differences among institutions in goal frequencies were statistically significant. Students at large public and private universities were more likely than students at small liberal arts colleges (SLAC) and community colleges (CC) to describe specific career/vocation goals, $\chi^2(3, 1,500) = 10.36, p = 0.016$, and less likely to describe Meaning/Self-Actualization, $\chi^2(3, 1,500) = 8.37, p = 0.039$. SLAC and private university students were less likely than CC and public university students to cite material success as a goal, $\chi^2(3, 1,500) = 12.35, p = 0.006$. CC students were more likely than other students to cite the goal of completing their undergraduate degree, $\chi^2(3, 1,500) = 55.67, p < 0.001$.

Majors and Goal Content. The top three categories of goals were consistent across academic majors, just as they were across institutional type, though again with some variation in the order of prevalence among the three top categories. The only exception to this was students whose majors were still undecided at the time of the survey. Those respondents' two most prevalent goals were again self-actualization/meaning and beyond-the-self contribution, but their third most frequently expressed aspiration focused on having a family rather than moving toward a specific vocation, which was close behind Family as the fourth most prevalent code.

Despite this broad consensus among all declared majors, the relative emphasis on some of the coded goals showed some significant associations with academic major. For example, business majors were more likely than others to aspire to material success, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 20.85, p < 0.001$, and less likely to aspire to General BTS goals, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 10.45, p = 0.001$, and *BTS Family* goals, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 7.82, p = 0.005$. Arts/humanities students were more likely than others to express creative aspirations, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 106.68, p < 0.001$, and less likely to describe Career/Vocation goals, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 4.48, p = 0.034$ and *BTS Family* goals, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 8.18, p = 0.004$. Undecided majors were more likely than others to aspire to Meaningful Career, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 11.49, p = 0.001$, rather than a specific Career/Vocation, $\chi^2(1, 1,499) = 4.84, p = 0.028$.

Survey Ratings of Standardized Goal Items

Five of the 20 goal items presented in our survey were rated as very important or essential by 80% or more of our respondents. These items included two referring to work (have a successful career and do work that is meaningful) and three that refer to positive relationships (have a satisfying marriage/relationship; stay connected with good friends; and take care of people I'm close to).

Many of the items on our list were designed to capture beyond-the-self goals. To assess the extent to which scores on these items aligned with beyond-the-self orientation in open-text responses, we used independent-samples t-tests to compare mean ratings on the list items for respondents whose open-texts were coded as BTS and non-BTS. Nine items were rated significantly higher by BTS respondents. All but two of these ("have children" and "have a meaningful career") identify explicitly beyond-the-self

Table 2

T-tests of Difference in Life Goal Item Means Between Open-text BTS and Non-BTS Orientations

Life goal item	% Scored 4 or 5	Non-BTS mean	BTS mean	Mean difference
Become an authority in my field	44.6%	3.25	3.29	0.04
Become successful running my own business	25.3%	2.62	2.48	-0.14*
Be very well off financially	64.7%	3.96	3.72	-0.23***
Contribute to solving problems in society or the environment	62.8%	3.54	3.90	0.37***
Create things that affect how others think or feel	44.5%	3.26	3.36	0.10
Have a successful career	85%	4.31	4.27	-0.04
Help people in need	73%	3.75	4.18	0.43***
Integrate spirituality into my life	33%	2.65	2.85	0.19**
Have a satisfying marriage/relationship	82%	4.20	4.27	0.06
Lead or participate in community improvement or public service	46.6%	3.10	3.60	0.50***
Live an adventurous life	59.5%	3.76	3.69	-0.07
Maintain a physically active lifestyle	65%	3.84	3.81	-0.02
Do work that is meaningful	87.3%	4.24	4.52	0.29***
Make discoveries or inventions that will do good in the world	39.8%	3.00	3.27	0.27***
Serve God or a higher power	26%	2.30	2.42	0.13
Stay connected to my good friends	80%	4.12	4.13	0.01
Take care of the people I'm close to such as family and friends	87.7%	4.31	4.50	0.19***
Have a lot of fun	74%	4.11	4.01	-0.10*
Have children	74%	3.11	3.32	0.22**
Be politically active	31.8%	2.82	3.02	0.20**

Mean Difference is BTS yes – BTS no.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

aspirations (e.g., “help people in need”). Three items were rated more highly by non-BTS respondents. The latter include “have fun” and two that refer to financial success. Table 2 shows the percent who rated each goal as very important or essential, along with the mean differences for each goal between those who were coded BTS and those who were not.

Despite these differences, there is a lot of overlap between the two groups (BTS and non-BTS), and the mean differences are not large for most items, even when they are statistically significant. Only two items showed mean differences between the two groups larger than 0.4: “help people in need” and “lead or participate in community improvement or public service.” The 8 items that were not significantly different for the two groups refer to professional and creative achievements, positive relationships, active or adventurous lifestyles, and religious belief.

Discussion

This article has reported on what a sample of 1,500 U.S. college students said when asked to write briefly about the goals that mattered most to them, why those goals were important, and the actions they were taking to achieve their goals. The results offer a heartening picture of what college students are after. Their most prevalent goals and reasons for those goals reveal that most respondents were motivated by (a) an aspiration to help others or contribute to society; (b) many aspects of wellbeing, including personal growth, self-acceptance, meaning, and autonomy; and/or (c) expertise in and potential to contribute to an occupational field or other specific area of concern and value. More than half exhibited a beyond-the-self orientation—an orientation toward contributing to something larger than self-advancement.

Although these students surely wanted to graduate and find employment and financial security, only a few focused on the shorter-term goal of a degree or credential or on strictly financial rewards. This result means that, even if return on investment is important for higher education policy, treating financial ROI as the driving force in students' educational experience misunderstands the goals that are most salient and motivating for students.

The priorities and patterns we observed were remarkably consistent across different kinds of institutions located on the country's two coasts and Midwest and across academic majors. The goals of contributing to something larger than (beyond) the self; personal development and fulfillment; and preparation for a vocation were the most prevalent categories across all eleven participating institutions and all declared majors.

Patterns were also largely consistent across gender, race/ethnicity, and social class, with emphasis on the same categories of goals, reasons, and actions across all groups. Students from different SES backgrounds were equally likely to exhibit a beyond-the-self orientation, as were respondents in all gender categories. Within this overall pattern, lower SES respondents were more likely to express a desire to help or give back to their families (BTS family).

Consistent with some earlier studies, BTS orientation in our data was somewhat more prevalent among Black respondents than in other groups (Colby et al., 2020). In addition, Latinx respondents were more likely than others to exhibit BTS family. Taken together, these findings suggest that students in historically disadvantaged racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups are at least as likely as other students to aspire toward helping others or contributing to a field or some aspect of the common good. The important message here is that purposeful commitments are not luxuries available mostly to privileged students. The positive relationship between purpose and college success that other studies have shown underscores the significance of our findings on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Our data from student ratings of a standard list of goals also carry a message for educators concerned with student success and wellbeing. As expected, students whose open-text responses reveal a beyond-the-self orientation endorsed BTS-related items on the survey's standard list more highly than students who did not exhibit a BTS orientation. But the converse was not true: personal goals on our standardized list were not rated more highly by non-BTS students. Personal goals, including professional and creative achievements, positive relationships, active or adventurous lifestyles, and religious commitments were valued equally by BTS and non-BTS respondents. These data illustrate an important point—that choosing to pursue contributions beyond the self does not require sacrificing personal, self-related goals. This finding in our study of college students is consistent with what we saw in our earlier research on purpose in middle and late adulthood (Bundick et al., 2019). Our current research indicates that, in college as in later life, pursuing personal and BTS goals is not a zero-sum game.

Overall, our data provide strong evidence that most college students' own aspirations align with the two integrative constructs we propose as organizing frames for undergraduate education: eudaimonic well-being and purpose. Furthermore, almost all of the students in our sample reported that they were actively pursuing their aspirations. Many did so through academic and other programs provided by their colleges and universities, such as projects and internships. In addition, many students were aware that the best way to pursue some of their goals was to begin enacting their aspirations – to be clear about what behaviors their goals imply and to practice those behaviors in their daily lives.

These encouraging findings about college students' aspirations do not mean that their character development is complete. Variations in students' references to happiness or Meaning/Self-Actualization suggest that many are still learning what true wellbeing is, both generally and for themselves. Some, but not all, identify beyond-the-self contribution as a critical element of a fulfilling life.

Likewise, a wish to contribute beyond the self is not in itself fully developed purpose. For mature purpose, goals must be clarified and stabilized, commitment must withstand challenges, and contributions must be guided by expertise and wisdom. The college experience is well suited to support all these areas of growth. It is a pivotal time for students, a time when they are forming a sense of where they are heading, what is important to them, and how to make major life choices, including choices about the kind of people they want to be and the kind of lives they want to live.

Recommendations

Push Back on Public Perceptions of College's Value

Colleges and universities almost universally include statements of public purpose in their mission statements and communications with students and other constituents. So far, however, these efforts have not shifted public discourse away from a narrow return-on-investment conception of higher education's value. One barrier to this shift could be a misunderstanding of the relationship between BTS commitments and self-related goals—a mistaken belief that students must choose *either* career preparation and financial security *or* meaning, moral growth, and contribution beyond the self. We believe that research on college students' goals can help counter this misleading idea. Students clearly value and actively pursue personal growth, fulfillment, and social contribution. And they simultaneously endorse a range of personal, professional, and financial aspirations. Perhaps public messaging from students and recent graduates could help higher education leaders illuminate the many ways that the public and private purposes of higher education should and can be synergistic.

Sharpen Attention to Human Flourishing as a Developmental Goal

Higher education offers students many curricular opportunities to reflect on the meaning of individual and collective human flourishing and to explore the implications for their own lives. Some of these are direct and explicit, including some wildly popular undergraduate courses at Yale, Harvard, Stanford, and elsewhere (Burnett & Evans, 2016; Schrum, 2020). These courses supplement more traditional course material in virtually every academic field that considers questions about what human flourishing means, how it connects with beyond-the-self contribution, and how human flourishing has been supported and obstructed throughout history. Given students' interest in creating lives of meaning and fulfillment and the recognition by many that true fulfillment involves social contribution, we suggest that educators highlight these curricular themes and connect them more directly with students' own experiences and choices.

Our data also provide support for efforts to enrich or reshape student services and programs around the constructs of purpose and well-being. These efforts are already happening on some campuses that have broadened their mental health and counseling services to address positive well-being in a multi-faceted way rather than focusing primarily on academic and mental health problems (Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013; Brocato et al., 2018).

Along the same lines, we believe that career services can better contribute to student development by providing not only knowledge and skills that assist career placement but also coaching, events, and other opportunities to think about life direction, purpose, and meaningful work. Stanford University, for example, has renamed its career center to reflect this broader mission. The program's name is now BEAM—Bridging Education, Ambition, and Meaningful Work.

Academic and other advising, student organizations and clubs, internships, and civic engagement programs offer a wealth of other opportunities for students to explore their own emerging strengths and interests, their growing understanding of what is important to them, and how best to move toward their most valued and meaningful goals. We believe that the more intentional these programs are in connecting students with ways to grow and contribute in the particular ways that are most meaningful to them, the more effective the programming can be.

Reach Out Broadly

This study began with an assumption that students' own goals matter, and those goals and actions toward them can evolve and become more thoughtful and mature during college. The more that educators can understand and build on students' own aspirations, the more powerfully motivating those aspirations will be. There is no value in pressuring students to feel they must "give back" or "make a difference." But educators should be careful that their respect for students' autonomy and their recognition of the vulnerability many students experience don't lead them to underestimate and short-change students, especially those from less privileged backgrounds. Our study and others make clear that students from historically disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups and those from low-income families are at least as motivated as their more privileged peers to address the social issues they care about. As long as educators acknowledge and connect with individual students' own particular concerns, values, and interests, they can help all their students move toward their highest aspirations.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the students who completed our survey, responding thoughtfully and candidly to the open-text items; the Mellon Foundation; and other members of the Stanford Center on Adolescence who helped with this article, especially Elissa Hirsh, Lisa Staton, and William Damon.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Mellon Foundation [31700630].

ORCID

Heather Malin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8187-8015>

Emily Morton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3662-8556>

References

- Astin, A. W., Astin, H., Lindholm, J. A., & Bryant, A. N. (2005). *The spiritual life of college students: A national study of college students' search for meaning and purpose* [Report]. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles. https://spirituality.ucla.edu/docs/reports/Spiritual_Life_College_Students_Full_Report.pdf
- Atherton, O. E., Grijalva, E., Roberts, B. W., & Robins, R. W. (2021). Stability and change in personality traits and major life goals from college to midlife. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(5), 841–858. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220949362>
- Bok, D. (2020). *Higher expectations: Can colleges teach students what they need to know in the 21st century?* Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691212357>
- Bringing Theory to Practice. (2013). *The well-being and flourishing of students: Considering well-being, and its connection to learning and civic engagement, as central to the mission of higher education*. https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/kcs/WHPL_Canon_WB_BTtoPWellbeingInitiative.pdf
- Brocato, N., Isler, M. R., Hix, L., Pryor, J. H., & Rue, P. (2018). *Turning wellbeing data into effective programming*. NASPA. <http://wp-cdn.aws.wfu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/320/2018/01/08031406/WFU-NASPA-2018-Turning-wellbeing-data-into-effective-programming-03-05-18.pdf>
- Bronk, K. C. (2014). *Purpose in life: A component of optimal youth development*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7491-9>
- Bundick, M., Andrews, M., Jones, A., Mariano, J. M., Bronk, K. C., & Damon, W. (2006). *Revised youth purpose survey*. Stanford University Center on Adolescence. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t10273-000>
- Bundick, M., Remington, K., Morton, E., & Colby, A. (2019). The contours of purpose beyond the self in midlife and later life. *Applied Developmental Science*, 25(1), 62–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1531718>
- Burnett, B., & Evans, D. (2016). *Designing your life: How to build a well-lived, joyful life*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Colby, A. (2020). Purpose as a unifying goal of higher education. *Journal of College and Character*, 21(1), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2019.1696829>
- Colby, A., Bundick, M., Remington, K., & Morton, E. (2020). Moral flourishing in later life through purpose beyond the self. In L. Jensen (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of moral development: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 440–458). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190676049.001.0001>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. SAGE.
- Dalton, J. C., & Crosby, P. C. (2011). Core values and commitments in college: The surprising return to ethics and character in undergraduate education. *Journal of College and Character*, 12(2), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1796>
- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. Free Press.
- Fischman, W., & Gardner, H. (2022). *The real world of college: What higher education is and what it can be*. MIT Press.
- Hill, P., Burrow, A., & Bronk, K. C. (2014). Persevering with positivity and purpose: An examination of purpose commitment and positive affect as predictors of grit. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(1), 257–269. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9593-5>
- Hill, P. L., Burrow, A. L., O'Dell, A. C., & Thornton, M. A. (2010). Classifying adolescents' conceptions of purpose in life. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(6), 466–473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2010.534488>

- Krettenauer, T., & Curren, R. (Eds.). (2020). Self-determination theory, morality, and education [Special Issue]. *Journal of Moral Education*, 49(3), 275–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2020.1794173>
- Leppel, K. (2005). College persistence and student attitudes toward financial success. *College Student Journal*, 39(2), 223–241. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ725568>
- Malin, H., Liauw, I., & Damon, W. (2017). Purpose and character development in early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(6), 1200–1215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0642-3>
- Morton, E., Colby, A., Bundick, M., & Remington, K. (2018). Hiding in plain sight: Older U.S. purpose exemplars. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14(5), 614–624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1510022>
- Payscale 2017 College ROI Report. April 25, 2017. <https://www.payscale.com/about/payscale-2017-college-roi-report>
- Roberts, B. W., O'Donnell, M., & Robins, R. W. (2004). Goal and personality trait development in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(4), 541–550. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.4.541>
- Roberts, B. W., & Robins, R. W. (2000). Broad dispositions, broad aspirations: The intersection of personality traits and major life goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26(10), 1284–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167200262009>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 141–166. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141>
- Ryff, C. (2016). Eudaimonic well-being and education: Probing the connections. In D. W. Harvard (Ed.), *Well-being and higher education: A strategy for change and the realization of education's greater purposes* (pp. 37–48). Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Ryff, C. D. (2013). Psychological well-being revisited: Advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 83(1), 10–28. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000353263>
- Schrum, J. (2020, June 23). A father learns the true reward of taking a free online happiness course with his son. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/a-father-learns-the-true-reward-of-taking-a-free-online-happiness-course-with-his-son/2020/06/22/d3fd5c76-b4b5-11ea-a8da-693df3d7674a_story.html
- Shapiro, M. O. (2005 September). Review of “College choices: The economics of where to go, when to go, and how to pay for it.” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 43(3), 837–838. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4129491>
- Sharma, G., & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. (2018). The relationship between college students' sense of purpose and degree commitment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(4), 486–491. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0045>
- Stolzenberg, E. B., Aragon, M. C., Romo, E., Couch, V., McLennan, D., Eagan, M. K., & Kang, N. (2019). *The American freshman: National norms*. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. <https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2019.pdf>
- Sullivan, W. M. (2016). *Liberal learning as a quest for purpose*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190499242.001.0001>
- Twenge, J. M., Campbell, W. K., & Freeman, E. C. (2012). Generational differences in young adults' life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation, 1966–2009. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(5), 1045–1062. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0027408>
- Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. A., & Sharma, G. (2020). Sense of purpose and progress towards degree in freshman college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120975134>