Purpose in Life, Student Development, and Well-Being: Recommendations for Student Affairs Practitioners

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To supplement student development research, the author reviews clinical psychological research on the concept of purpose in life. This review is presented to provide implications and recommendations for practice in the higher education setting. By not only encouraging students to identify a purpose in life but also assisting them in this process, student affairs practitioners may positively influence their personal development and well-being.

Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss seven vectors of development that contribute to the formation of identity. The establishment of identity is believed to be the core developmental issue with which students grapple during the college years. They suggest that developing purpose is an important aspect of students’ identity development. It is during this time that students reflect upon their current life situation and their goals for the future in order to make decisions regarding life after college. Developing purpose, the sixth vector, encompasses three areas: vocational plans and aspirations, personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments. Vocational planning is often accomplished as students identify those activities that not only give them great pleasure but also use their skills and abil-

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ities. Personal interests, the second aspect of developing purpose, involves making choices about personal commitments of time and energy. Finally, considerations of lifestyle and family are integral aspects of developing purpose as students attempt to clarify goals in the midst of increasing intimacy in relationships.

In student development research, at least two instruments have been used to measure the extent to which this concept of life purpose has been identified and developed. The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory was developed by Winston, Miller, and Prince in 1987 to measure the behavioral dimensions of this construct. In addition, the attitudinal dimension is often measured by the Developing Purposes Inventory of the Iowa Instruments (Barratt, 1978). Research from fields other than student development provides further evidence of the importance of the identification of such meaning as well as interesting findings from which implications for student affairs practice may be drawn. Particularly, existing literature found in the field of clinical psychology proves useful in this regard. This article reviews such research and provides student affairs practitioners with suggestions for assisting students in the development of a life purpose.

**Frankl’s Theory on Purpose in Life**

The majority of clinical research concerning the concept of purpose in life is based on the theoretical framework that Viktor Frankl proposed and developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His theory posits that the world is full of diverse people to encounter and meanings to fulfill (1959). He describes the concept of “will-to-meaning” as the “striving to fulfill as much meaning in existence as possible and to realize as much value in life as possible” (p. 161). Furthermore, he believes that this will-to-meaning implies a particular kind of perception or interpretation that will reveal the person as an individual with a purpose to fulfill and a justification for existence. Frankl suggests that meaning is available to anyone regardless of gender, age, educational background, IQ, or religion.

However, negative consequences may result when one does not find his or her purpose in life. Frankl refers to the lack of perceived meaning in personal existence as existential frustration. Common manifes-
tations of existential frustration may include feelings of boredom and apathy. This, then, may lead to both a loss of joy in living and of the motivation to continue the struggle for survival; Frankl refers to this condition as existential vacuum (Florian, 1989). Interestingly, Frankl contends that existential vacuum, a common human condition, occurs as a result of the machine age and the loss of individual initiative (Martin & Martin, 1977). Severe existential frustration may result in neuroses that need to be addressed clinically through treatments that involve assisting the individual in his or her search for meaning.

The Purpose in Life (PIL) test, developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick in 1964, has been the instrument most commonly used in the field of clinical psychology to assess the degree to which individuals experience a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. This test is composed of two parts: Part A contains 20 questions on a 7-point Likert scale, and Part B consists of a series of open-ended questions. The majority of existing research on the purpose in life construct reports results from Part A of the PIL only. This instrument has been translated into at least six languages and is used virtually globally in research (Crumbaugh & Henrion, 1988). Numerically higher scores on the PIL reflect increased purposefulness. Meier and Edwards (1974) report a test-retest reliability of 0.83 on the PIL. One criticism of the PIL is that it is related to American middle-class values or to American society's dominant values (Chang & Dodder, 1983).

**Purpose in Life and College Students**

Much of the clinical research on purpose in life has focused on traditional-aged college students. Most of these analyses have used the PIL and have resulted in correlational data between the construct of purpose in life and a few other constructs. This research is relevant to practice in student affairs and warrants attention in this regard. Specifically, many of the constructs related to purpose in life are directly or indirectly related to aspects of identity development as well as to physical and psychological well-being and may be descriptive of an identity type that is conducive to success in college. The propositions that follow, generated from clinical psychological research, have been developed to guide discussion and practice in the field and to provide a framework through which to research this topic.
1. Students' identification of a purpose in life shapes and is shaped by their personal values and beliefs.

Personal values and beliefs help to define one's identity while also providing a guiding framework for decision-making about one's vocation in life. Interesting relationships exist between particular values and beliefs and purpose in life. Using surveys to sample 99 volunteer undergraduates, Simmons (1980) found that students who have a clearly identified purpose in life tend to value intellectualism, responsibility, and self-control. These values, when espoused by students in the higher education setting, could assist in maximizing their success in reaching their educational goals.

According to Love and Talbot (1999), the derivation of meaning, purpose, and direction in life is an integral aspect of spiritual development that is becoming an increasingly important quest for college students. Spiritual development may actually provide an impetus for the development of purpose in life (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992). Nam, Heritage, and Kim (1994) found a positive relationship between religiosity and purpose in life with a sample of 344 undergraduate students. The relationship between valuing religiosity and developing a purpose in life is salient in discussions of holistic development among students.

2. Students' identification of a purpose in life affects and is affected by their desire to be actively involved in social situations and leadership roles.

Tinto (1987) suggests that student involvement and integration may result in higher retention rates. One's level of identified purpose in life is salient in this regard as it is positively related to an enjoyment of planning and organizing events (Yarnell, 1971) as well as to his or her level of participation in campus organizations (Doerries, 1970). The development of a purpose in life may provide the impetus for such involvement.

Additionally, students who have certain personality types may be more likely to become involved in campus activities than are other students. Participation in campus activities, then, may actually lead to the identification of a life purpose. Pearson and Sheffield (1974) found that individuals having high levels of identified purpose are likely to be
those characterized as extroverts and those who enjoy social situations. Involvement, then, may actually result in the formation of a life purpose.

3. Students’ identification of a purpose in life influences and is influenced by their physical health as well as their health-related behaviors and habits. Students’ physical health influences their success in college in that those who are healthy are capable of attending classes regularly and of becoming involved in the campus culture. Using approximately 45 Canadian undergraduates as their sample, Thauberger and Cleland (1981) found a positive relationship between level of identified purpose in life and overall physical health and well-being. Additionally, students having identified a purpose in life may not feel the need to attend to their temporary crises with the use of alcohol and drugs; research suggests that students with an identified purpose in life are unlikely to use these substances (Nam et al., 1994).

4. Students’ identification of a purpose in life impacts and is impacted by their psychological well-being and overall satisfaction with life. Psychological well-being and satisfaction with life are both states of being that may influence a student’s enjoyment of and effort in his or her college experience. Much research in clinical psychology supports the existence of a relationship between the identification of a purpose in life and psychological health. Zika and Chamberlain (1992) found that students are less likely to be depressed, hopeless, or anxious if they have identified a life purpose. Similarly, they are better able to cope with developmental crises (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). Overall, quality of life is positively related to identified purpose in life as well (Ulmer, Range, & Smith, 1991).

These four propositions provide valuable information about the importance of the identification of a purpose in life. The identification of a life purpose is related to students’ values and beliefs, their level of involvement in social situations, and their physical and psychological health and well-being.
Implications for Student Affairs Practitioners

Based on the propositions listed above, the following implications have been developed to assist student affairs practitioners as they work with students to encourage their identification of a purpose in life. These implications are practical and provide ideas for various areas of student affairs administration.

1. Student affairs practitioners should spend time reflecting on their own values, beliefs, and purpose in life in order to be able to effectively lead students in doing the same.

At work, student affairs practitioners could incorporate reflection and discussions about these issues into initial job training sessions as well as into on-going training and development seminars, workshops, and other events. Furthermore, during lunch gatherings as well as before and after work, student affairs practitioners have the opportunity to engage in conversations about these important issues with the goal of clarifying their individual purpose in life.

Discussions about values, beliefs, and life purpose should not stop when leaving the college or university setting. As professionals, student affairs practitioners should engage in activities that further their development even while at home and on vacation. Spending time in solitude on a daily or weekly basis; keeping a journal of thoughts about values, beliefs, and purpose; as well as discussing these issues with family and friends are all activities that could provide an impetus to the solidification of a life purpose.

2. Student affairs practitioners should be willing to invest quality time with students and deem this the priority task within their job descriptions. Quality time with students will afford more opportunities for meaningful conversations to occur.

Student affairs practitioners should practice and model time management strategies that maximize significant one-on-one time with students. The importance of building rapport with students should not be minimized as rapport often leads to more meaningful conversations. These one-on-one meetings should incorporate conversations
about life issues as well as conversations about the students’ tasks or role in relation to the practitioner. As practitioners desire to assist in the holistic development of students and seek to be mentors in this process, it is imperative that they be willing to sacrifice time in other areas of their work schedule in order to attend to students on a one-on-one basis.

Student affairs practitioners can also invest quality time with students through informal gatherings and activities outside of the work setting. This displays interest in students’ lives beyond just the task with which they work or the leadership role that they fill. Because of the nature of the profession, student affairs practitioners should not hesitate to invite students out for coffee, to attend their concerts and recitals, and to be approachable to them throughout the day.

3. Student affairs practitioners should practice the art of asking questions, listening, and reflecting in order to engage in meaningful, intentional conversations with students about existential issues.

When meeting with students, whether on a formal or informal basis, student affairs practitioners should be intentional in guiding conversations by having a flexible plan in their mind as to the desired direction of the conversation. Discussions should incorporate the asking of questions as well as active listening and reflecting with the students. Topics of discussion concerning students’ present lives should include the following: their rationale for their use of time, their reasons behind their involvement or lack of involvement in campus activities, and their interests and passions in life.

Student affairs practitioners, in any role, should also direct conversations with students toward issues of the future. Discussions of personal talents and abilities as well as short-term and long-term goals would assist students in thinking about issues of life purpose. Students should be encouraged to think about how their talents can be combined with their interests to define their purpose in life and to achieve their goals in life.
4. Student affairs practitioners, in all areas of administration, should incorporate issues of purpose in life into every aspect of their work with students.

There are numerous examples of methods by which critical thinking and discussion about existential issues may be implemented in student affairs. In residence life, for example, times of solitude and self-reflection can be incorporated into the training of resident assistants (RAs). Broader issues of life purpose may become an integral aspect of the goal-setting initiatives and strategies of the RAs. Academic success workshops can be developed for students living in the residence halls who are on probation. Discussions about purpose in life can be incorporated into assignments or seminars in order to connect this existential issue with academic success as well as with time management. Another suggestion is to incorporate “philosophers in residence” into the system. In study rooms or social lounges in the residence halls, for instance, faculty and graduate students can organize formal and informal discussions as well as creative programs about existential issues.

Similarly, in the area of student health, students attending drug and alcohol education classes should be required to self-reflect in a guided, intentional manner. By encouraging these students to think about their purpose in life, they may be less likely to participate in health-related behaviors that may deter the fulfillment of their goals and purposes. Similarly, psychological counselors should incorporate group sessions that address existential issues. “Purpose journals” could be used as an assignment or sanction for students in order to assist them in thinking about their broader purpose. Students may be asked to spend time during each counseling session recording their thoughts about their lives, talents, passions, and future goals.

In student programs and leadership initiatives, student affairs practitioners can lead “Purpose in Life” workshops that involve speakers, group discussion sessions, and time for solitude and self-reflection. Additionally, collaborative activities with religious centers, recreation centers, ethnic centers, and other resource centers can include discussions of the possible connections between the various resources offered by these centers and students’ purposes in life. Students
should be encouraged to become involved in other campus activities and resource centers in order to help define their passions and purposes as their identity continues to develop.

Future Research on Purpose in Life

Additional research on the importance of developing a purpose in life is needed. First of all, the research results reviewed in this article are predominantly of a correlational nature. Therefore, it would be expedient to attempt to determine the causal directionality involved in the relationships between purpose in life and other constructs. In addition, updated research would help identify possible changes in the degree of identified purpose among college students over the past 20 years. Longitudinal studies could be useful in demonstrating possible age-related changes in purpose in life. Due to the number of ethnic minorities attending college, studies that directly looked at ethnic differences in purpose in life could provide more information about the needs of ethnic minorities. Also, both qualitative and quantitative research could help answer questions such as the following: What are students' sources of purpose in life? How do these sources of meaning change as students develop? What types of life events, occurring during the college years, result in changes in degree of identified purpose in life? How does the development of a life purpose interact with and depend upon other aspects of student development?

Conclusion

This article contains a review of clinical psychological research that highlights the importance of identifying a purpose in life. Student affairs professionals are admonished to consider the effect of students' identification of a life purpose upon development and well-being during college. By taking a closer look at this concept of purpose in life, student affairs practitioners may be better prepared to assist students in identifying such a purpose. This, in effect, may lead to student identity development and well-being that could benefit individual students as well as the campus-at-large.
References


