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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Purposeful change: the positive effects of a course-based intervention on character

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ABSTRACT
Having purpose is linked to lifelong thriving across the lifespan. However, not all aspects of purpose, such as beyond-the-self purpose, are common among emerging adults. Purpose-relevant interventions in higher education, especially when focused on character development, may facilitate purpose development and have a positive effect on emerging adults' character. Using mixed-method data from college students in a course designed as a character intervention ($n = 32$), we explored how the course impacted student purpose. Pre- and post-course purpose scores indicated that the average intervention group's purpose changed significantly over the semester in two subdomains and that these intervention group changes were significantly greater when compared to a control group ($n = 49$). Qualitative analyses of intervention group assignments revealed four themes related to purpose: beyond-the-self orientation, tools to pursue purpose, individual flourishing, and building relationships. These results show the power of holistic character interventions to foster purpose in emerging adults.

Understanding who we are, what matters to us, and how to fulfill our purpose are crucial elements to living a meaningful life. Purpose has been defined by Damon (2003) as 'a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (p. 121). Scholars have proposed that purpose is characterized by three subparts: 1) a stable and future-oriented intention, 2) meaningful engagement in activity to realize that intention, and 3) a desire to connect with and contribute to something beyond the self (Bronk et al., 2018; Malin et al., 2014). While purpose can itself be good or bad, most scholars identify purpose with a morally good or noble purpose (Damon, 2003, 2008). Understood as such, purpose is a core aspect of character, which is 'the collection of stable, deep, and enduring dispositions that define who we are and shape how we characteristically think, feel, and act' (Lamb et al., 2021, p. 82; see also, Arthur, 2010; Miller, 2018; Nucci, 2017). Morally good dispositions of character can be identified as 'virtues' that direct human beings toward morally good ends in morally appropriate ways that enable them to flourish (Annas, 2011; Aristotle, 1999; Lamb et al., 2021; Lerner, 2019; Mendonça & Palheres, 2018;

Miller, 2018). In line with Aristotle (1999), purpose may be understood as the morally good aim or telos toward which virtues of character are directed or, as operationalized in this study, a 'metavirtue' that provides support and direction to other virtues to ensure they are directed toward morally good ends (Han, 2015). For the purposes of this paper, we operationalize purpose according to the definitions provided by Damon et al. (2003) and Bronk et al. (2018) as a reliable, future-directed disposition directed toward a goal that is both personally meaningful and oriented beyond the self, while positing, with Aristotle (1999) and Han (2015), that this goal must be a morally good end that promotes human flourishing. Understood accordingly, purpose functions to supply guidance, coherence, motivation, and meaning to one's thoughts, feelings, actions, and character in ways that promote the wellbeing of both individuals and communities (Damon, 2008; Han, 2015).

In the past decade, research on purpose has significantly increased as scholars have explored its importance and identified its positive effects in adolescents and young adults. Purpose has been described as an ideal way to 'apply positive psychology to moral education' (Han, 2015, p. 292). However, despite its benefits in

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young people's lives (Colby, 2020), recent studies consistently indicate that purpose might be uncommon (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Malin et al., 2014; Quinn, 2017), highlighting the need to successfully develop purpose, particularly in emerging adulthood given that identity formation is such a crucial developmental task for those transitioning out of adolescence and into adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Bundick, 2011). If purpose is a metavirtue that must be habituated over time, then those who develop it earlier will benefit more developmentally than those who develop it later (Han, 2015). Therefore, a strong need exists to create empirically-validated interventions that focus on purpose development in emerging adults, particularly the beyond-the-self dimension, given that emerging adulthood is an important time of growth in which individuals may be more self-focused (Arnett, 2000).

The goal of the current study is to explain the theoretical and empirical research related to purpose's value and development in emerging adulthood. More specifically, we examine the unique role of beyond-the-self purpose in this life phase and consider how to encourage development in that domain, particularly for emerging adults transitioning from high school to college. Given research citing the benefits of purpose and the lack of purpose among emerging adults (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Colby, 2020), the study examines the efficacy of an intervention designed to increase purpose among college students in this population through a course on character. Because purpose is not a fixed phenomenon but, like other virtues, can be developed over time (Damon, 2008; Han, 2015; Lerner, 2019; Mendonça & Palheres, 2018), we determine the effectiveness of our intervention by examining changes in reported levels of purpose and analyzing how tools gained through the intervention may support the development of purpose throughout emerging adulthood.

The Importance of Purpose

Theoretical literature and empirical findings clearly indicate that a sense of purpose promotes positive outcomes and supports important aspects of human flourishing, particularly for individuals moving from adolescence into adulthood. In late adolescence, for example, purpose is correlated positively with greater life satisfaction, happiness, healthy identity development, and avoidance of risky behaviors (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Hill et al., 2013). Practically, purpose in life is generally believed to offer a sense of direction for emerging adults that drives their decision-making and steers them in a productive and meaningful direction (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017). Studies also demonstrate that

purpose has a direct effect on positive developmental outcomes, such as greater academic success and higher motivation (Colby, 2020), by fostering meaningful aspirations, encouraging the development of relationships with like-minded peers and mentors, and helping youth establish a clear values system (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017). A sense of purpose has even been useful in promoting positive outcomes in more mundane activities such as schoolwork, for example, by providing students with a clear sense of motivation, relevance, and direction in their daily routine (Koshy & Mariano, 2011; Pizzolato et al., 2011). Given these psychological and physical benefits, purpose is clearly a key factor in positive youth development.

In considering the effects of specific components of purpose, Koshy and Mariano (2011) found that the 'beyond-the-self' dimension of purpose motivates individuals to think beyond their personal gains and encourages them to perform moral actions for the sake of others. The beyond-the-self dimension of purpose focuses on the desire of individuals to make a difference in the world, help others, and promote thriving communities (Bronk et al., 2018; Koshy & Mariano, 2011). Research suggests that this subdomain is the most important for distinguishing goals that foster purpose from those that merely bring personal satisfaction (Malin et al., 2014). Although all three components encompassed in the conceptualization of purpose are worthy of encouraging, much research has focused specifically on the beyond-the-self subdomain, which is especially relevant given the self-focus that characterizes emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Unfortunately, in one study, the beyond-the-self component of purpose was found in a paucity of both high school and college students and was the least likely of the subdomains of purpose to be developed within that developmental period (Quinn, 2017). Given the importance of this aspect of purpose not only for the individual but for the greater community, discovering ways to promote it is critical.

Purpose in Emerging Adulthood

Given the importance of purpose as well as its developmental nature, it is crucial to understand how purpose might, and does, function at different points in the lifespan. The major components of purpose – personal meaningfulness, goal orientation, and the beyond-the-self dimension – align with many features of emerging adulthood, characterized as a period for those transitioning from late adolescence into early adulthood, particularly ages 18–29, in industrialized nations (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Emerging adulthood categorizes those in this time of life with much ahead of them without the

pressure of needing to commit to specific aims (Arnett, 2000). As such, emerging adulthood is marked by five key components: *instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, optimism, including feeling anything is possible*, and *identity exploration* (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Given the exploratory theme of this developmental period, developing a purpose is just as important as exploring and identifying other aspects of adulthood during this period. Each of the five components of emerging adulthood could easily be combined to ignite interest in understanding one's purpose, including identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Erikson (1968) claimed that this period in the lifespan was marked by moving between identity and identity diffusion, that is, when individuals lack a clear sense of purpose. Marcia's (1980) prototypes of identity status also point to the generation of purpose and the importance of the transition to adulthood in that process, balancing exploration ('crisis') and commitment. Exploration requires the questioning of values and goals and where those values came from. Commitment is the process of owning certain values and goals and having a particular conviction about where they came from and why they are valued. These processes highlight the importance of identity in this period to formulating the values and goals that lead to purpose.

As emerging adults transition into adult society, they become more independent from their natal families (Eccles et al., 2003; Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016) and intensely consider identity and career decisions (Arnett, 2014; Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016). As Eccles et al. (2003) explain, increasing independence requires a more intentional role in one's development, including finding purpose and developing one's identity (see also, Lapsley & Hardy, 2017; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2013), as individuals reflect on what they want to do and who they want to be (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017). Arnett et al. (2001) note that a vital part of becoming an adult is deciding one's values and beliefs, which would require, on some level, understanding or considering one's purpose (also see, Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Supporting the neo-Eriksonian perspective, empirical evidence further indicates the importance of purpose in emerging adulthood. For example, in emerging adulthood, purpose was positively and significantly correlated with student self-efficacy (DeWitz et al., 2009), greater life satisfaction and hope (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Cotton Cotton Bronk et al., 2009), positive affect and happiness (Burrow & Hill, 2011), self-image and decreased likelihood for delinquency (Hill, Burrow et al., 2016), less difficulty with separation-individuation and positive attachments to parental figures (Hill, Burrow et al., 2016), identity, and well-being (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill, Burrow et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2009;

Sumner et al., 2015). Moreover, high prosocial purpose orientation (defined by a tendency to help others and positively influence society) in emerging adulthood was correlated with satisfaction with the college experience and best predicted well-being later in life (P.L. Hill et al., 2010). Interviews with adolescents and emerging adults from ages 12 to 22 indicated that the development of purpose facilitated identity formation, identity development reinforced the youth's commitments to purpose, and purpose and identity appeared to be largely overlapping constructs (Bronk, 2011). As such, it is clear that purpose is not only theoretically important to this developmental period, but also an asset for later development.

Intervention as a Means to Encourage Purpose

Interventions to foster purpose in young people have been created in various settings, including educational institutions, work, directed counseling-based interactions, and online contexts (Bronk et al., 2019; Koshy & Mariano, 2011; Pizzolato et al., 2011). Studies suggest that purpose can be fostered in an educational context when, for example, the academic subject matter promotes life's purpose as leading to prosocial ends and when the school and teachers support students' efforts at finding purpose (Koshy & Mariano, 2011). A similar study indicated that young people who were involved in more structured opportunities through school and work were better able to sustain purpose than those on less structured pathways (Malin et al., 2014).

Examining the effectiveness of intervention timing is essential to understanding how best to support purpose development. Studies have shown that purpose is positively associated with adolescents' future orientation, academic achievement, and coping strategies, and having purpose encourages adolescents to establish long-term goals that reach beyond benefit for themselves, specifically before they reach emerging adulthood (Damon, 2008; Pizzolato et al., 2011). For these reasons, fostering purpose early may be integral so that youth benefit from the positive effects of purpose on development and flourishing (Han, 2015). Previous intervention approaches evaluated for effectiveness include helping emerging adults develop skills and plans for achieving their aspirations and for coping with failure and disappointment (Pizzolato et al., 2011). Individuals identified and evaluated purpose through building a timeline of mini-goals and identifying social networks that support their goals and values. Another intervention involved an interview created to encourage students to contemplate their purpose in life, core values, and life goals (Bundick, 2011). Although this intervention was not directly

effective for increasing purpose identification, it was successful in increasing goal directedness. The effectiveness of aforementioned studies reflects a robust field of intervention science geared toward purpose, but until now no intervention has attempted to increase purpose through the holistic development of character beyond those that focus only on purpose or virtues such as gratitude (Bronk et al., 2019; Colby, 2020; Koshy & Mariano, 2011). This study aims to address this gap.

Purpose and Character

Despite scholarly interest in purpose, examining the trifold concept as a character virtue itself has been limited (Malin et al., 2017). Given Han's (2015) argument that purpose can be understood as a 'metavirtue' that supports and directs other virtues toward morally good ends, its role as a character strength becomes clear considering the role that virtues play in guiding morally good dispositions to think, feel and act in a positive way. Moreover, purpose is infused with meaning making and encourages individuals to think of the best they can be linking purpose to other areas of character (Malin et al., 2017). Research examining links between purpose and other character strengths (e.g., gratitude, compassion, and grit) suggest that there are small but significant associations (Malin et al, 2017). However, Malin's study was conducted with early adolescents so the relation may strengthen as development progresses. Given purpose's importance as a character strength and its integral connection to other virtues, holistic character development may be an effective way to foster purpose.

College as an Optimal Time and Place to Foster Character

For many emerging adults, college provides a context to explore identity and purpose. Colleges offer courses in different majors and opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities with guidance from professors and mentors before needing to commit to a specific life path (Eccles et al., 2003). Yet it is not necessarily the case that establishing purpose is a common activity in emerging adulthood or in college. Malin et al. (2014) revealed that purpose is particularly unstable between high school and college, and Steger et al. (2009) determined that those in emerging adulthood were more likely to *search* for meaning than to have already found it. Moreover, they discovered that searching for meaning later in life was correlated with lower well-being (Steger et al., 2009), which makes a focus on purpose even more

important in emerging adulthood. Since many scholars indicate that emerging adulthood is marked by discovery and exploration (e.g., Arnett, 2014; Marcia, 1980), emerging adulthood may be an optimal time for an intervention designed to foster purpose. In support of this argument, research suggests that, for some young people, entering college helps them to consolidate their nebulous or uncertain beyond-the-self values (Malin et al., 2014). In addition, research indicates that colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to facilitate growth in beyond-the-self purpose and further promote flourishing among these individuals and in turn the societies of which they are a part (Colby, 2020; Pizzolato et al., 2011). These studies suggest that college may provide an important educational context for purpose interventions.

Given developmental theory and empirical research, we focused on the time of transition between high school and college to create an intervention in the form of a college course to foster purpose and overall character development. 'Commencing Character' is a course offered as an option for a first-year seminar, a required course designed to encourage critical thinking, engage diverse perspectives, and improve students' communication skills (see the course description and structure in (Lamb et al., 2022). In particular, 'Commencing Character' encourages students to engage key concepts and methods of character development, reflect on their personal goals, purposes, and experiences, and apply research-based insights and strategies to develop purpose and other virtues of character (Lamb et al., 2022). Applying a broadly Aristotelian approach to character education informed by research in psychology, philosophy, and education, the course combines a careful study of Aristotle's ancient accounts of ethics with contemporary commencement speeches focused on specific virtues. It also integrates assignments and exercises that apply seven empirically-grounded strategies for character development identified by Lamb et al. (2021, p. 82): '(1) habituation through practice, (2) reflection on personal experience, (3) engagement with virtuous exemplars, (4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy, (5) awareness of situational variables, (6) moral reminders, and (7) friendships of mutual accountability.' Assignments based on these strategies challenge students to reflect on themselves, their values, and their purpose and to connect their purpose to the flourishing of others, thereby encouraging them to identify and internalize their own values and virtues in a light of a broader communal context. Thus, among other character virtues (such as justice, empathy, and

humility), the course specifically targets purpose development with a focus on the sub-domain of beyond-the-self purpose. After a session on the goals and purposes of college, the course commits one week specifically to purpose. Carefully chosen readings on purpose, an assigned journal reflection, and class discussion to increase virtue literacy encourage students to reflect on their own purpose and consider how it might have changed based on the readings and exemplars presented. The aim is to help students recognize the value of purpose, equip them with tools to discern their purpose, and emphasize how purpose involves both personal fulfillment and communal contribution, thereby incorporating both 'meaningfulness' and a 'beyond-the-self' orientation. Given the course's emphasis on both individual and communal flourishing, beyond-the-self purpose is particularly important, especially since it is the component of purpose least found in this age group in general (Bronk et al., 2018; Quinn, 2017). Importantly, after this dedicated week, students receive boosters throughout the course in the form of discussions reminding them of the value of purpose. Since all virtues must be oriented toward morally good purposes to be considered 'virtues' at all, the course consistently reminds students of how purpose is connected to other virtues such as justice, courage, resilience, gratitude, and hope. This novel intervention situates purpose more holistically within a broader character development framework, showing how purpose provides direction, meaning, and coherence to other virtues and how other virtues can support the development and enactment of purpose.

The Current Study

The current study investigated whether a semester-long course designed specifically to promote character development in college students with an explicit focus on the beyond-the-self domain of purpose impacts the development of purpose among emerging adults. We hypothesized that students in the intervention would have higher purpose scores at the end of the semester when compared to the beginning, and that students in the intervention group would experience greater change in purpose scores over the course of the semester when compared to a control group. We also used qualitative data to explore answers to two research questions: (1) in what ways was the course successful in promoting student development in the three domains of purpose? and (2) what specifically about the course may have been effective in fostering growth in purpose this population?

Method

Participants

Study participants consisted of students at a mid-sized university in the southern United States. Students in the two sections offered of the Commencing Character course were invited to participate by way of an email from an external researcher indicating that participation on the survey was required for course credit, but that students were not required to include their responses in the research study. Students in the control comparison groups (n_{T1} control = 73) were recruited both through emails sent directly to students in first-year seminar courses other than Commencing Character and via SONA, which provides access to a group of students who sign up to receive research credit for their Introductory to Psychology course by participating in research studies conducted at the university. For this study, students in the intervention group elected to take the Commencing Character course and therefore could not be traditionally recruited (i.e., randomly and representatively) to the class. Sample sizes for a mixed ANOVA with two groups and two timepoints detecting within-between interactions were determined post-hoc, Cohen's f = .27 (generated from Han et al., 2017), a = .05, and correlations among repeated measures = .5. Such an analysis would require 48 participants total, or 24 participants in each group. Determinations were made using G*Power. Attrition was 0% for the target course and 33% for the control comparison. There were no differences in the control group between those who took the survey only at Time 1 compared to those who took the survey at Time 1 and Time 2. The sample represents the racial and ethnic makeup of the university where data collection took place, and the control sample is skewed towards women because there are typically more women than men in the university's Introduction to Psychology courses. The final pairwise sample was n = 80 (intervention n = 31; 54.8% Women; 71% White; 12.9% Asian; 6.5% Hispanic/Latinx; 4% Black; 3.2% Multiracial; control n = 49; 85.7% Women; 77.6% White; 14.3% Asian; 10.2% Hispanic/Latinx; 2.0% Black; 2.0% Multiracial; M_{age} = 18.4).

Procedure

Recruitment and participation took place at the beginning and end of the Fall 2019 semester. All participants were asked to sign a consent form before each time they completed the two surveys via Qualtrics. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the study (IRB00023552). Those in the Commencing Character class signed an additional consent form after submitting all of their course assignments allowing their written

work to be included in the research study. Participants in the Commencing Character course completed a 30-minute online survey via Qualtrics at the beginning of the fall semester of 2019. The control group completed the same survey via Qualtrics. The survey items were randomized in order within each measure across all participants at both timepoints to avoid order bias (i.e. responses influenced by order of presentation). The survey was part of a larger study examining the character virtues targeted in the course and consisted of various measures of personal assets, character strengths, and leadership attributes as well as demographic information. Since this study's focus is the development of purpose, other measures were not analyzed in this study.

Participants in the intervention group were awarded course credit for participation. Participants in the non-psychology pool control group were awarded a $20 gift card for participating in both the pre- and post-course surveys, and psychology pool participants were awarded course credit for participation. In addition to the quantitative surveys, at the end of the semester students in the Commencing Character course consented to their class assignments being used as qualitative data. The students were not offered any compensation for sharing their data, and the instructor was not aware of whether or not students had consented to participate in the research study. All thirty-two students consented to have their work used as data, which were subsequently coded and used as part of this study.

Measures

Purpose

The Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS; Bronk et al., 2018) is a 12-item scale consisting of three domains: Personal Meaningfulness (e.g., *How well do you understand what gives your life meaning?*) Goal Orientation (e.g., *How much effort are you putting into making your goals a reality?*), and Beyond-the-Self (e.g., *How often do you hope that the work that you do positively influences others?*). Response options include 1 = *none/almost none; not at all/a little bit; never/almost never* to 5 = *all/ almost all; extremely*. A greater sense of purpose is indicated by higher purpose scores in that domain for that individual. Reliability for the full scale was *Cronbach's* α_{T1} = .79-.88; *Cronbach's* α_{T2} = .82 − .87.

Qualitative Assignments

Final Reflection Essays

The final reflection essays were composed of eight short-answer questions with responses that varied from one to three paragraphs in length asking students how useful/relevant/effective certain strategies or assignments were in changing their character. The integrative assignment was given at the end of the semester to aid students in consolidating their thoughts and feelings about the course and reflecting on what they had learned. It also served to help the instructor understand whether or not the course was successful in fostering purpose and character development. Students were asked to answer reflection questions with as much accuracy and detail as possible. The reflection question examined in this study is: *How, if at all, has your sense of purpose changed because of this course?*

Three research assistants trained in coding qualitative data acted as coders. Two of the coders each read through sixteen of the responses, and the third coder followed the same procedure with all thirty-two responses. Coding was conducted using directed content analysis to examine participant responses (Daly, 2007). Directed content analysis is well-suited to research based on existing theory and prior research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is the case with this study. The aim of this approach is to validate or extend an existing theory, and extant research aids in focusing research questions. Moreover, it allows for researchers to find new codes and then determine whether a new category may be created. Coding took place in three waves based on a triadic coding scheme using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to aid in interpreting data (LaRossa, 2005). First, coders read through the essays line by line employing the technique of open coding to determine what discrete codes existed. A priori codes were established based on current literature, and new codes were determined when coding based on the research questions. Having established relevant codes, coders read through the assignments a second time using axial coding whereby they determined categories and compared similarities and differences among participant responses to establish which codes belonged under which categories. Lastly, selective coding was used to determine the core categories and codes in the data that would be able to form an explanatory whole. Using these three strategies allowed for interpreting the data in the best way possible. If the third coder disagreed with an existing code or found a new code, one of the principal investigators with extensive qualitative research experience was brought in to discuss the codes until the group reached consensus.

Results

We report first on our quantitative analyses of survey data and then the qualitative analyses of coursework.

Quantitative Results

The following analyses explore whether there were statistically significant changes from pre-course self-report on purpose subscales to post-course self-report on those same subscales, as well as how those changes compare between the intervention and control groups. Given that change over time and group differences in purpose were of interest in the current study, we conducted paired-samples t-tests to address intraindividual change within the intervention course and then a 2 × 2 mixed Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to explore interindividual differences of the two groups, where the within-subjects variable was time as it related to each subscale of purpose and the between-subjects variable was group. All analyses were performed in SPSS Version 26, and statistical significance was evaluated at the $p = .05$ level.

Preliminary Analyses

Normality of Distribution and Correlations

The data are relatively normally distributed with some moderate skewness, which, given the sample size, is to be expected. Even though the sample is large enough for analysis, smaller samples and those that are not purely random and representative are subject to a greater likelihood of skewness. See, Table 1 for subscale descriptive statistics. In addition, subscale correlations are significantly and positively correlated across participants and timepoints, as expected. See, Table 2 for correlations among purpose subscales at both timepoints.

Missing Data

Given the types of analyses performed in the current study, missing cases were deleted pairwise. For those that attritted from Time 1 to Time 2 in the control group, we conducted independent samples t-tests comparing the groups' purpose subscale scores, which indicated no

significant difference between the two ($p = .08 – .88$). Therefore, those data are assumed to be missing at random.

Group Differences in Baseline

We conducted independent samples t-tests to determine whether baseline scores were significantly different between the intervention and control groups. These analyses indicated no statistically significant differences between these Time 1 group means. See, Table 1 for overall and group descriptive statistics of the subscales at Time 1 and Time 2.

Main Analyses

To examine whether student purpose was impacted within the Commencing Character course and whether it was impacted to a greater extent than student purpose in other courses, we conducted two sets of analyses. The first set included paired-samples t-tests of intervention purpose scores, and the second set comprised 2 × 2 mixed ANOVAs comparing the intervention and control groups' purpose scores on repeated measures. The assumption of homogeneity of variance between groups in the mixed ANOVAs was captured in the Box Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices, which none of the analyses violated (i.e., *p was always > .05*).

Change Within Intervention

Among the intervention group, there were statistically significant positive changes in Personal Meaningfulness ($t(30) = 3.64$, $p < .001$) and Beyond-the-Self purpose ($t(30) = 2.60$, $p = .007$) on the Claremont Purpose Scale. These results indicate that, on average, the intervention group experienced significant positive changes in these two purpose dimensions. There was no significant change in Goal Orientation subscales over time within the intervention group.

Table 1. Overall and Group Purpose Descriptive Statistics.

	Time 1 Mean(SD)	Time 2 Mean(SD)	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)
Personal Meaningfulness	3.19 (.78)	3.43 (.78)	T1 − .50 (.27)	T1 .74 (.53)
			T2 − .051(.27)	T2 .19 (.53)
Intervention	3.10 (.76)	3.58 (.71)		
Control	3.25 (.80)	3.33 (.82)		
Goal Orientation	3.90 (.60)	3.89 (.76)	T1 − .77 (.27)	T1 1.05(.53)
			T2 − .77 (.27)	T2 .39 (.53)
Intervention	3.93 (.46)	3.95 (.71)		
Control	3.88 (.68)	3.86 (.81)		
Beyond-the-Self	4.18 (.75)	4.18 (.73)	T1 − .44 (.27)	T1 − 1.05 (.53)
			T2 − .74 (.27)	T2 .05 (.53)
Intervention	4.29 (.64)	4.56 (.51)		
Control	4.11 (.81)	3.94 (.76)		

Table 2. Overall Purpose Subscale Correlations.

	Time 1 Goal	Time 1 BTS	Time 2 PM	Time 2 Goal	Time 2 BTS
Time 1 PM	.339**	.305**	.542**	.229*	.291**
Time 1 Goal	–	.294**	.317**	.585**	.324**
Time 1 BTS	–	–	NS	NS	.581**
Time 2 PM	–	–	–	.562**	.378**
Time 2 Goal	–	–	–	–	.462**

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01 NS = non-significant
Abbreviations: PM, Personal Meaningfulness; Goal, Goal orientation; BTS, Beyond-the-Self.

Change between Groups

For the Personal Meaningfulness subscale of purpose, there was a significant main effect of time ($F(1,78) = 11.13$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$). Descriptive statistics indicate that, across the entire sample, there was statistically significant positive change from Time 1 to Time 2 Personal Meaningfulness scores ($M_{t1} = 3.18$; $M_{t2} = 3.46$). There was also a significant interaction effect of time and group ($F(1,78) = 5.57$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$), indicating that changes from pre- to post-course scores were significantly different as a function of group. Relative to the control group, the intervention group reported significantly greater increases in Personal Meaningfulness scores based on descriptive statistics (see, Figure 1). For the Beyond-the-Self subscale, there was a significant main effect of group ($F(1,78) = 7.37$, $p = .008$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$), indicating statistically significant different group averages of scores across time-points ($M_{cont} = 4.03$; $M_{inter} = 4.42$), and a significant interaction effect of time and group ($F(1,78) = 8.49$, $p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$), indicating that changes in beyond-the-self purpose differed by group, where the intervention group reported positive change and the control group reported negative change (see, Figure 2). In each of these significant effects, they indicated medium effect sizes. Similar to the paired-samples t-tests, the Goal Orientation subscale did not have any significant effects.

Qualitative Results

Themes in Purpose

To further explore purpose-related themes within the intervention, we employed a qualitative analysis of final reflection essays in Commencing Character. Four major themes emerged when analyzing and coding the final reflection essay question focused on purpose: 1) beyond-the-self orientation, 2) tools to pursue purpose, 3) individual flourishing, and 4) building relationships. Significant crossover was found among the themes in student responses, which is to be expected given the interconnectedness of the themes. In order to qualify as a major theme, a minimum of 20% of the sample needed to mention the theme as being important to them.
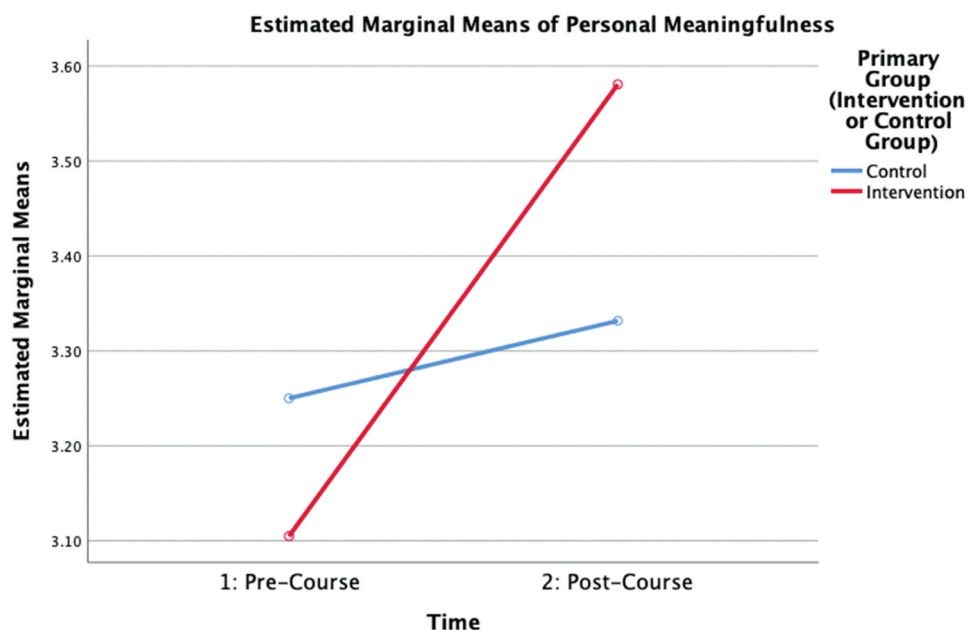

Figure 1. Group differences in changes in Personal Meaningfulness Scores.
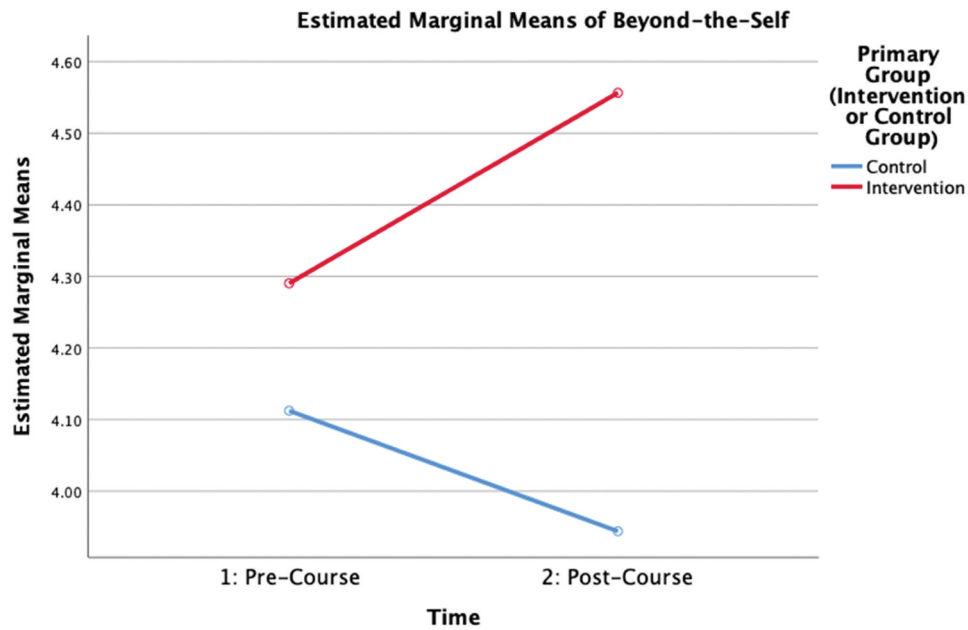
Figure 2. Group differences in changes in Beyond-the-Self Purpose scores.

Importantly, 23 out of 32 students said their purpose had changed as a result of taking the Commencing Character course. Thus, 72% of students reported their purpose as being affected by the intervention. Themes are presented in order of frequency of student responses to demonstrate what was most commonly mentioned among participants.

Beyond-the-Self Orientation

Results demonstrated that after the intervention students showed a tremendous shift in how they perceived their purpose. Half of the 32 (16) students noted a shift from a self-oriented focus at the beginning of the semester to a beyond-the-self orientation at the end of the semester. Moreover, more than half of the students, 56% (18) reported their purpose as focused on communal flourishing at the end of the semester:

> In high school, when I pictured my life after college, I thought I would have a job that makes me over $100k and will have a nice family, basically the life my parents are living … From this class, I realized that I have a purpose beyond just pleasing myself but doing good for others. -*Liam*

> I believe my sense of purpose has changed from this course because I view my future in a new light now. I am still not sure what my purpose in life is, but I know it will include helping our community in some way. I have always strived to help others through community service and extracurriculars, but I never thought that my sense of purpose would be based on helping others. -*Paula*

Other student responses indicated a similar focus on communal flourishing as an important aspect of their evolved sense of purpose.

Tools to Pursue Purpose

Students found that class lectures, readings, and assignments on purpose helped them in understanding how to both define and obtain their purpose. 41% (13) of the students identified this as a very important aspect of the course. One way of deepening their understanding was by gaining a better vocabulary to describe their purpose. Another tool was learning the practice of reflection in order to focus on what is important to them. Through reflection, many students mentioned realizing that they did not need to follow what their parents thought but could define their purpose for themselves. Learning how to take different perspectives was listed specifically as a tool to pursue purpose. Lastly, students felt they were taught to examine their daily actions through the lens of virtues and thus to understand what is important to them, which helped to establish their purpose or what they would like it to be:

> I believe a sense of purpose comes in life through experience by taking action. This course provided [a] guide on how to carry out these actions while being a good citizen of virtue. This course taught me what it means to have good character and how to live a life to pursue what we want. Therefore, the course provided the tools for me to develop my sense of purpose in life. -*Chloe*

If anything, I believe this course may have given me a better vocabulary to describe that purpose, or at least the virtues that may impact the means through which I seek to achieve it. -*Jennifer*

These comments highlight the relationship between purpose development and the development of other virtues, which reflects the holistic character framework applied during the intervention.

Individual Flourishing

The idea of individual flourishing was another common theme and was found in 25% (8) of student responses. Individual flourishing or personal fulfillment, which can be related to the Personal Meaningfulness component of the Claremont Purpose Scale, was discussed in various ways, such as working towards self-improvement or actively trying to live a life of virtue. Students also mentioned understanding that individual and communal flourishing are intertwined. Importantly, these students may not have achieved purpose yet, but they understood that they have agency over their actions and that working towards their goals will help them flourish personally:

My outlook of college was to worry about myself for now to get to the position that I wanted to, and then worry about others when I got there. However, as I have taken from this course this may not be the best course of action. I, at this very moment, have the ability to practice and exemplify virtue. -*Maya*

Before coming to college my perspective of purpose was always associated with a career. Though ones purpose can incorporate a career … I learned that one's purpose is not limited to a career … During this class, I was able and pushed to ask big questions about my purpose … This course has allowed me to personally define what my future should look like. -*Edgar*

Building Relationships

Students spoke about creating communal connections or building relationships as being key to the course and their purpose, which is not surprising given that friendships of mutual support and accountability were among the seven strategies of character development utilized. Students felt that developing friendships and creating connections were important ways to live a virtuous life and find a purpose that would help the community thrive. Although only 21% (7) of the students mentioned the idea of building connections specifically, this theme often connected to the idea of communal flourishing and the importance of one's individual purpose benefiting others:

I think the course has encouraged my purpose. I still believe my purpose is to have connections with people, but this course encouraged the importance of friendship and the value of friendship. It taught me about mutual accountability and emulation. I want to find connections with people that can hold me accountable and keep me living a virtuous life. -*Imani*

I have realized how important human connection is in my everyday living, and how it is an important part of who I am … From this class, I have been able to form new friendships, or strengthen the ones with my peers that I knew previously that are in this class. I feel as if my purpose is to uplift others and connect with people, both of which were identified in this course. -*Jason*

The following example brings many of the themes together:

My sense of purpose has changed slightly from being more self-focused to being more focused on my community and others around me. I realize the role of virtue and character on not only improving my own wellbeing but improving the lives of those around me as well. This is an important reason to pursue virtue for me, and I think caring for others is great motivation for becoming a better person. This course has cultivated the sense of community and virtue that I now feel, and I look forward to taking this new sense of purpose forward with me in life. -*Amy*

Discussion

Both theoretical and empirical research have supported the value of purpose in the lives of emerging adults and demonstrated that the pursuit and attainment of purpose is a way to help youth flourish (Colby, 2020). The present study sought to examine the effectiveness of a college course-based intervention encouraging purpose in first-year college students. We predicted that it would be possible to change student purpose through an intentional character intervention and that the course would be effective on multiple levels. To examine the success of the course in fostering purpose, we will discuss results of the quantitative and qualitative results simultaneously because of their complementary nature to provide better insight in understanding the growth in purpose revealed in our analyses.

Intervention Effectiveness

Our first hypothesis, that purpose scores would be significantly higher for students in the intervention group after participating in the course, was partially supported. Results of the paired t-tests demonstrated that there were statistically significant positive changes in both the meaningfulness subdomain and the beyond-the-

self subdomain of the Claremont Purpose Scale. It is important to note that, with the absence of a main effect of group, the possibility exists that the changes found in the mean differences are random error. However, the qualitative data provide a deeper understanding and help interpret the quantitative results in ways that suggest actual change. Unexpectedly, the goal orientation subdomain did not significantly change over time, but when examining the qualitative data where students reflect on their own experiences of change in their purpose, these results are not surprising. By far, the majority of the students (72%) reported their purpose as being affected by the course and specifically mentioned changing from a self-oriented focus to a beyond-the-self focus (50%), as well as gaining tools to pursue purpose (41%). Therefore, if the course was effective in creating a change in purpose, it is logical to assume that students may need time to solidify a new purpose, and the goal orientation subscale questions are directed towards present efforts to make goals a reality. Students may not be able to simultaneously reevaluate their long-term aims and work towards their fruition in a single semester. Previous findings by Malin et al. (2014) support this possibility, suggesting that entering college helped some young people to coalesce their beyond-the-self values, but that the majority of emerging adults were not focused on actual career goals. In our data, students discussed how focusing on their beyond-the-self purpose caused them to reconsider previous career goals and what would be both personally meaningful to them and helpful to the world. Therefore, after this shift has occurred, it is likely that students are re-evaluating their concrete goals. It may also be that the nature of this intervention is not as effective at fostering goal orientation as the other two domains of purpose.

Our second hypothesis, that change in purpose scores would be significantly greater for students in the interventions group but not for students in the control group, was also partially supported. Although there was overall positive change in personal meaningfulness scores across the sample, students in the intervention group reported significantly greater increases in their personal meaningfulness scores in comparison to the control group, with a medium effect size. This medium effect size is similar to what has been found in other purpose interventions (Bundick, 2011; Dik et al., 2011; Pizzolato et al., 2011). It may be that all students increase their meaningfulness scores because, as they enter a liberal arts college and begin a college experience designed to help them to reflect on humanity and their place in it, what makes their life meaningful may become more salient for them. Moreover, in a study examining purpose acquisition of emerging adults,

Glanzer et al. (2018) found that the entire sample could speak about their personal goals or vision of a good life, but far fewer knew their purpose. In their study, the participants were more focused on individualistic thoughts, which has been suggested to be common in this developmental phase (Arnett et al., 2001), and could explain why all students in our study demonstrate an increase in personal meaningfulness as they are focused on themselves. Another possibility is that the intervention was not as effective in promoting growth in this area as the beyond-the-self purpose dimension.

In addition, the results of the beyond-the-self analysis also supported our hypothesis, in that students in the intervention group significantly increased their scores over time, but students in the control group significantly decreased their scores over time, with a medium effect size. This change is in line with previous results demonstrating that beyond-the-self purpose is rare and demonstrates the powerful influence of the intervention on students (Glanzer et al., 2018; Malin et al., 2014; Quinn, 2017). It is uncertain why the control group scores decreased. It could be that, for those students, the transition into college made them more self-focused, which accounted for the change in scores. Our second hypothesis was only partially supported in that goal orientation scores were not found to have changed for either group over time; however, as previously mentioned, it may be that specific individual goals are in flux during the first semester of college.

Possible Strategies

The qualitative data provided by students give some insight as to why the intervention may have been effective for many of the students, at least in the beyond-the-self domain. Of the four major themes detected, three of them are possible ways through which students developed their purpose. First, students reported that they gained knowledge about how to pursue purpose such as expanding their vocabulary to describe what their purpose is, learning to spend time reflecting on their personal experience, and developing their ability to take others' perspectives. Students also felt that being taught to examine their daily actions with an awareness of how they relate to certain virtues helped them establish what is important to them. This awareness potentially reflects the value of an intervention that both focuses on purpose development directly and situates it within a larger character framework that connects purpose to other virtues. Compellingly, the ways in which students mention they have gained the capacity to pursue purpose map onto research-based strategies of character development used by the instructor in the class, so it is

encouraging to find that the methods used to teach the course are valid in encouraging purpose in emerging adults (Lamb et al., 2022).

The last two qualitative themes can also help to explain why the intervention may have been successful. Students mentioned living a life of virtue and self-improvement as means to pursuing purpose. One of the course strategies is habituation through practice, or actively attempting to inhabit a life of virtue, and it seems that practice, along with the ability to reflect on their actions, helped students move towards their purpose in life.

Another important theme to emerge that could be a helpful strategy to discover purpose is building friendships or creating communal connections. Students explicitly mentioned how much these relationships helped them develop their purpose. Our findings are supported by Malin et al.'s (2014) findings that relationships served as important contexts that assisted youth in gaining or maintaining purpose during times of transition. Liang et al. (2017) also found that affirmation, cultivation, and guidance from others (e.g., teachers, mentors, parents, extended family members, and even peers) were among the most important factors that aided youth in developing their purpose. These findings align with the instructor's use of friendships of accountability and engagement with exemplars as strategies to promote the development of virtues in the course, including purpose (Lamb et al., 2022). Peer exemplars are included in these strategies and seem very effective for these students with regard to their growth in purpose, aligning with research that 'attainable' and 'relevant' exemplars are effective for promoting growth in character (Han et al., 2017).

Limitations

As with any empirical study, this study faced certain limitations. First, our sample lacks diversity and is skewed in gender and race given that the majority of participants were White women, which means that it is not possible to generalize these results across populations. The intervention participants also received the qualitative prompt before the post-test survey, creating the possibility that purpose scores were boosted by the writing assignment itself. Nevertheless, the qualitative data support changes revealed in the quantitative data. The small class sizes necessary not only to teach meaningful and engaging courses but also to offer an effective intervention limit the sample size, thus making random assignment impractical and running statistical analyses more difficult. However, despite the size of the intervention sample, we detected strong increases in personal

meaningfulness and beyond-the-self subdomain purpose scores based on pre- and post-test surveys, and compared to the control group, the intervention group's scores increased more, thus supporting the effectiveness of the intervention. In addition, we saw a relatively medium effect size, indicating some level of generalizability of the findings to individuals taking similar types of college courses at similar types of institutions.

Other limitations present possibilities for future directions. For example, comparisons of this study with findings from Malin et al. (2014) and Liang et al. (2017) cannot be considered precise because methods and measures were not the same. In future research, it will be important to replicate research techniques to determine whether similar results will be found. Moreover, goal orientation did not seem to be affected by the course-based intervention. It may be that this lack of movement is developmentally appropriate when considering the changes in the other subdomains of purpose, but future interventions could target specific daily actions to help participants solidify their changing purpose and move forward toward goal achievement, though these activities may be more fitting for later years of college rather than the first. In addition, post-test scores may have been impacted by demand characteristics of the intervention course, namely that purpose was an intentional aspect of the course. As such, future research might want to assess the effects of more implicit purpose and meaning interventions and compare those effects to the moral explicit content of a course like the one in this study. Lastly, we have speculated on strategies that may have been effective to foster purpose based on qualitative data, but it would be worthwhile to target these strategies more specifically to understand their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Fostering purpose is timely considering the many challenges facing young people and our society at large. Importantly, the course-based intervention created to encourage the development of purpose in emerging adults within the wider context of holistic character development was effective in increasing scores in two out of three of subscales of the Claremont Purpose Scale – the personal meaningfulness and beyond-the-self dimensions. The subscale that did not move – goal orientation – may have been in flux due to the successful reflection on purpose that students reported. Given the current concern with negativity that is permeating society through political division, social unrest caused by systemic injustice, and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, now more than ever is a crucial time to

encourage purpose in emerging adults, particularly purpose that shifts focus beyond the self toward the flourishing of the community.

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