

Grade Point • Perspective

It's not just about jobs. Colleges must help students find their passions.

By **Angel B. Pérez** March 10, 2017

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During a recent lecture in my Trinity College course on American higher education, I asked my students, “Why do you go to college?” Most of them answered, in various forms, “To get a job.”

Not one mentioned going to college to explore their purpose or to embark on a meaningful life.

So maybe it should come as no surprise that each year, higher education graduates millions of students into career paths that leave them unhappy and unfulfilled. They suffer from a crisis of meaning.

Author William Damon notes in “The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life” that 31 million people between ages 44 and 70 want an “encore career.” They have not found fulfillment in their chosen jobs and want to find something that provides greater meaning and impact. In “The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters,” author Emily Smith notes that 70 percent of all employees are dissatisfied with their jobs and actively disengaged in their work.

For decades, colleges and universities have approached career preparation the same way. They provide job-search tools, networking advice, and résumé consulting. Higher education’s approach to helping students plan for the future must change because the landscape that graduates inherit already has.

Research shows today's students may have between 10 and 14 jobs by the time they are 38 years old. Stanford professors Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, write in "Designing Your Life," that in the United States, only 27 percent of college graduates are working in the field of their major.

Each year, I travel around the world giving speeches about the journey to higher education and counseling families through the process of applying and the transition to college. I find that students and parents are more obsessed now than ever with making sure they choose the "right" college with the "right" major.

Yet for the majority of college graduates, major does not translate directly into a job. In fact, this generation of college graduates will embark on careers that have yet to be imagined, let alone created.

Higher education must teach students how to make thoughtful decisions about the trajectory of their lives and empower them with the resources to do just that.

Studies show that this generation of students cares deeply about purpose, meaning, and happiness at work. In reference to millennials, one recent Chicago Tribune article notes that they ask themselves: "Is my work meaningful to me? Do I have a cause? Do I have influence, purpose, and alignment?" If higher education does not teach students how to explore these issues at the college level, students graduate at a disadvantage.

Helping students reflect during their college years on how to create lives of meaning and purpose is not just a "feel good" exercise. In fact, studies show that the more that colleges provide these opportunities, the stronger the likelihood of its students graduating.

Professor of Sociology Tim Clydesdale of The College of New Jersey found in his research study that schools providing purpose-exploration programs experienced significant increases in their six-year graduation rates. His study — and subsequent book, "The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation" — have had a significant impact on higher education.

Even employers are taking note of this generation's interest in finding meaningful work and making changes to their own organizational cultures. In "Conscious Capitalism," authors John Mackey and Raj Sisodia highlight companies including Whole Foods Market, Google, Starbucks, Twitter, Deloitte, Pepsi, and the Tata group that have fundamentally transformed their cultures to focus on doing work for the greater good.

They note that "business has a much broader positive impact on the world when it is based on a higher purpose. Purpose is the reason the company exists. A compelling sense of higher purpose creates an extraordinary degree of engagement among all stakeholders and catalyzes creativity, innovation, and organizational commitment." They believe that employees today look for inspiration to find meaning in their work.

In fact, professor Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School found that “of all the events that can deeply engage people in their jobs, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work.”

Companies are listening and responding. Social entrepreneur Aaron Hurst works with companies to help them infuse cultures of meaning and purpose into their daily operations. In “The Purpose Economy,” he writes, “The purpose economy is defined by the quest for people to have more purpose in their lives. It is an economy where value lies in establishing purpose for employees and customers.”

Some colleges are already implementing course work, advising, and seminars to create a platform for students to use their college years to figure out not only what they are good at doing but also what they are passionate about. However, more should join the movement.

Stanford University’s Life Design Lab, which includes the popular course “Designing Your Life,” is an innovative approach. Harvard University’s “Reflecting on Your Life” sessions and Bates College’s Purposeful Work program are other examples. My own institution, Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., recently developed a new strategic plan for student career and personal preparation, a key pillar of which is to create intentional infrastructure in a student’s academic and co-curricular journey that encourages the exploration of purpose and meaning.

Trinity also was one of seven liberal arts colleges that took part in a five-year study that examined how decision-making in college can affect the trajectory of an individual’s post-college life. The study’s results supported the idea that learning takes place as much outside the classroom as inside. The study also showed that the college experience is not a single path toward graduation but one that has varied choices and opportunities along the way.

During his farewell speech in January, President Barack Obama urged young people to find their passion and “hitch your wagons to something bigger than yourselves.” The truth is, today’s young people already expect to do exactly that. Colleges and universities across the country must help our students meet that expectation. For the sake of our students and the future of our country, we must reinvent ourselves to help students explore meaning and purpose.

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