Purpose and Resilience in Graduate Education

What Matters Most and How to Make It Happen

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Languishing + less social support

Pandemic Fatigue + Learning Loss

Situational + Clinical Mental Health Challenges
It’s tough out there right now, amiright?
Applied learnings for today

1. In tough times, we often ask WHY.

   Thinking about purpose is important for everyone at all ages and stages of the life course... and for graduate students it may be essential.  
   (The problem)

2. How does purpose make us happier?

   Having a sense of purpose (a sense of WHY it matters) increases your sense of agency (a sense that the HOW is possible) and increases your life satisfaction (a sense that you are thriving as a result of meaningful success)  
   (The promise)

3. What do I do next?

   Practical small-steps exercises can take daunting concepts and turn them into pleasurable explorations of possibility that you can use yourself, and with your students, your academic teams, your family.  
   (The program)
Graduate students can be an unhappy bunch, especially in a global pandemic. But research tells us that students who are satisfied with life do better in graduate school. How can we help folks stay on track?
COVID contributed to a worldwide decline in graduate student satisfaction.

- In 2022, only 62% of graduate students were satisfied with their graduate program, down from 71% in 2019
- 65% say pandemic negatively impacted the quality of their program
Is there such thing as a happy graduate student?
Effect of life satisfaction on academic success

On track to complete degree program on time

- Satisfied: 85%
- Dissatisfied: 15%

- On track: 8%
- Neutral: 57%
- Not on track: 35%

Engagement in day-to-day work

- Satisfied: 61%
- Dissatisfied: 39%

- Engaged: 21%
- Neutral: 23%
- Not engaged: 56%

Satisfaction with life was highly correlated to academic progress and engagement. Among respondents who were satisfied with life, 85% were on track to complete their degree program on time and 61% were engaged with their day-to-day work.

Erin L. Espaldon (2016) “Graduate Student Well-Being Survey Results,” Graduate Institutional Research Officer, Institutional Research, University of California, San Diego
What’s the point of all of this?
Purpose: Possible Definitions

a. singular life aim – the why behind everything you do

b. self-organizing life aim that stimulates goals
Purpose Mindset:

Using your gifts, in keeping with your values, to make a positive impact on the lives of others.
Part II: The Promise

More than 15 years of research shows us that greater sense of purpose in life is correlated with better educational, health, financial and social outcomes.
Purpose:
A sense of why it matters

Agency:
A sense that I can do it

Life Satisfaction:
A sense that I'm succeeding
Purpose is linked to positive educational outcomes:

- Increased ability to identify and pursue new goals
- Boosts resilience in the face of hardship
- Higher GPAs and graduation rates
- Positive identity formation and individuation

Wrosch et al, 2003; Ratner et al, 2022; Pizzalato et al, 2021; Kiang et al, 2021
Purpose is linked to positive health outcomes:

- Better sleep
- Fewer strokes & heart attacks
- Lower risk of dementia
- Lower risk of premature death

Purpose is linked to preventative health measures:

- More likely to embrace preventative health services (mammograms, flu shots)
- Lower levels of pro-inflammatory gene expression
Purpose Agency Life Satisfaction

Purpose is linked to financial + personal success:

✓ Higher incomes
✓ Healthier, longer-lasting relationships
✓ Less tumultuous lifestyles

Eric Kim et al. (various studies)
Purpose can shape how we see our environment, and how we perceive the challenges in front of us.

What is asked of me? How hard will it be? Am I up to the task?

Purpose → Agency → Life Satisfaction

Burrow, Hill et al 2015
NOT FOR SCHOOL
BUT FOR LIFE
we learn
- Seneca
Part III: The Program

Small-steps programs boost self-efficacy by turning daunting concepts into pleasurable explorations of possibility. Play along...

(If you made an AI selfie avatar this week, you can do this.)
Let’s make it personal:

Strengthen your sense of purpose on a daily basis, starting today.
Try it for yourself

Three Core Values

Authority  Varied life  Peace  Friendship  National security
Leadership  Exciting life  Beauty  Accepting one’s portion in life  Stability of social order
Dominance  Creativity  Unity with nature  Humility  Devoutness  Reciprocation of favors
Success  Freedom  Protecting the environment  Respect for tradition  Health
Capability  Independence  Inner harmony  Moderation  Sense of belonging
Ambition  Curiosity  Helpfulness  Self-discipline  Spirituality
Influence  Choosing your own goals  Honesty  Obedience  Love
Intelligence  Broadmindedness  Forgiveness  Cleanliness
Self-respect  Wisdom  Loyalty  Responsibility
Pleasure  Social justice  Equality  Family security
Enjoying life  Daring activities 
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three Key Strengths/Gifts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adding Humor</td>
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<td>Advancing Ideas</td>
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<td>Analyzing Information</td>
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<td>Awakening Spirit</td>
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<td>Breaking Molds</td>
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<td>Bringing Joy</td>
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<td>Bringing out Potential</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Composing things</td>
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<td>Creating Dialogue</td>
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<td>Creating Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Designing Things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discovering Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing the Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring the Way</td>
</tr>
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<td>Facilitating Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixing Things</td>
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<td>Getting Participation</td>
</tr>
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<td>Getting Things Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting to the Heart of Matters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Things</td>
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<td>Healing Wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping Overcome Obstacles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructing People</td>
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<td>Investigating Things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making Connections</td>
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<td>Making Deals</td>
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<td>Making Things Work</td>
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<td>Managing Things</td>
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<td>Moving Physically</td>
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<td>Opening Doors</td>
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<td>Operating Things</td>
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<td>Organizing Things</td>
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<td>Performing Events</td>
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<td>Persuading People</td>
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<td>Processing Things</td>
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<td>Putting the Pieces Together</td>
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<td>Researching Things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resolving Disputes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeing Possibilities</td>
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<td>Seeing the Big Picture</td>
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<td>Selling Intangibles</td>
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<td>Shaping Environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving Problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Starting Things</td>
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<td>Straightening Things Up</td>
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<td>Translating Things</td>
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<td>Writing Things</td>
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Three Impact Groups

Children and youth
Local commerce
My clients
My family
My friends
My work
The climate
The planet
Animals
Retirees
Veterans

My spiritual group
The environment
My community
My country
The global community
The less fortunate
The marginalized
My personal growth
Fellow citizens
My school/alma mater
My team
Because I value ____________,
______________ and ______________
I will use my gifts for
______________, ________________ and
______________ to positively impact ______________,
______________ and ______________


Because I value relationships, perseverance and creativity, I will use my gifts for translating research, making connections and organization to positively impact the lives of my children, my students and the broader public.
Turning Purpose into Action
Anxieties and fears that hold us back

- Public speaking
- Making a mistake
- Never being content
- Failure
- Not being successful
- Being ridiculed
- Meeting new people
- Looking dumb
- Being trapped
- Being invisible
- Not finding a job
- Disappointing people
- Illness/pain
- Being alone
- Not belonging anywhere
- Not being loved
- Making the wrong decision
- Poverty
- Authority
- Death

Yeah-Buts that stop us in our tracks

- I’m too young, too old, too smart or not smart enough.
- I’m not a risk-taker.
- I’m not persuasive enough.
- My ideas aren’t captivating enough.
- I’m not committed enough.
- It’s just so difficult to decide what to do.
- I’m really trying. It’s not my fault. Really!
- I don’t have enough talent.
- It takes too much work, and that’s not my style.
- I should have been born earlier.
- I’m afraid, and that must be telling me something.
- I don’t have enough money.
I accept my fears and anxieties about....
Purpose-Based Commitments: Stepping Stones to Purposeful Living
SPENDING = VALUES
How can I spend my limited resources of time, talent and treasure in keeping with my values to maximize my well-being and the well-being of others?
What are three purpose based commitments you can make right now to live your purpose statement?

“PURPOSE IS THE PLACE WHERE YOUR DEEP GLADNESS MEETS THE WORLD’S NEEDS.”
~ FREDERICK BUECHNER
Christine’s Daily Purpose Statement December 10, 2022
Because I value **relationships**, **perseverance** and **creativity**, I will use my gifts for **translating research**, **making connections** and **organization** to positively impact the lives of **my children**, **my students** and **the broader public**. I accept my fears and anxieties about **not being perfect enough**, **imposter syndrome** and **financial concerns for the future** and still today make conscious, purpose-based commitments to **deliver a great plenary lecture**, **plan out the next few weeks of holiday hosting** and **check in with my students on their final projects**.  
 #dailypurposestatement
Now, every time I witness a strong person, I want to know: What dark did you embrace in your story? Mountains do not rise without earthquakes.

— Katherine MacKennon
Applied Learnings

• **Purpose matters for grad students!** This is the time to be asking what matters most, why does it matter and how to make it happen—because intrinsic motivation and meaning-making is key to life satisfaction in graduate school and beyond.

• **Purpose is a verb, not a noun.** Live your purpose today by taking small steps to use your gifts, in keeping with your values, to make a positive impact on the lives of others.

• **Try a daily purpose statements for you, your team and your students.** Visit [http://www.christinewhelan.com](http://www.christinewhelan.com) to download free worksheets.

Learn more in my 10-lecture series, free with an Audible trial. It made the AP Bestseller List!!