

## The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation

reviewed by Karri Holley – October 31, 2016

**Title:** The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation

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Tim Clydesdale's *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students About Vocation* outlines the results of a multiple campus initiative that encouraged students to critically examine how they might lead meaningful lives. The Lilly Endowment initially supported the initiative. When the Lilly funds came to an end, many campuses continued supporting these so-called *pro-exploration programs*, encouraged by the enthusiasm of students, faculty, staff, and alumni. This initiative and related programs explored the idea of vocation, defined not as a person's main employment or occupation, but rather as a sense of purpose that gives meaning to their lives.

The term pro-exploration undoubtedly has religious connotations, a fact that is acknowledged early in the text. The initial Lilly funding targeted institutions with a religious affiliation in keeping with the mission and history of the Lilly Endowment. However, Clydesdale is careful to note that all students possess a vocational identity regardless of their religious identity. In an era of workforce development, where vocational training correlates with specific skill sets and employment opportunities, the idea of exploring vocation as an individual passion seems to be a luxury. Yet the book positions pro-exploration programs as a nod to the original purpose of higher education: educating globally knowledgeable, capable, and responsive citizens. This goal is too often not realized and pro-exploration programs provide an active path towards this end.

*The Purposeful Graduate* features seven chapters and a useful appendix that provides further background on the initiative, its methodology, and the surveys that were conducted. Chapter One introduces purposeful paths, comparing outcomes for those students who participated in the initiative with those who did not. The chapter profiles two students with similar backgrounds and characteristics: one who participated in the initiative (Melody) and one who did not (Katie). By participating in a pro-exploration program, Melody gained fluency as a global citizen and her post-graduation life was marked by a deep commitment to social change. Katie did not participate in this type of program and embarked on a career path that was highly focused on her individual desires and circumstances. In Chapter Two, Clydesdale reflects on the contexts of individual participating campuses and also higher education more broadly. Noting that the public's trust in higher education has been shaken, he emphasizes that a necessary response for colleges and universities is a renewed focus on undergraduate education, along with educating the whole person to engage in effective local and global citizenship.

For readers interested in program development and structure, Chapter Three outlines how the program developed on different participating campuses and program design influenced programmatic outcomes. For example, programs housed in academic affairs directly impacted the curriculum and faculty development, while those in religious life prioritized ministry opportunities. The content of the program also varied according to the institution. One campus designed a religion elective titled Work and Meaning that fulfilled a core requirement and offered students access to internships, fellowships, and international service projects. Another institution prioritized campus-wide involvement in undergraduate mentoring and expanding off-campus contexts where students could experience work.

Chapters Four and Five focus on key participants in the initiative: students, faculty, and staff. The chapters present a student typology defined by the priority given to educational performance and an instrumental versus idealistic educational orientation (as illustrated in the example of Melody and Katie in Chapter One that was described earlier). Programmatic effects on students, including retention, trajectory calibration, social norms, and maturity were influenced by these factors. Faculty and staff benefits were also observed and these effects influenced teaching and campus engagement.

Clydesdale acknowledges in Chapter Six that not all campuses developed effective programs. Ineffective ones were not simply defined by a lack of positive student outcomes, but also by the inability of the program to develop *pro-exploration communities* that extended across the campus. Not all campuses continued their programming when the Lilly funds were eliminated. Some programs hired ineffectual staff, others discouraged broad faculty and staff participation, and a few sought to accomplish too much with a single program. Recommendations for practice are also offered. Effective programs included those well-suited to their campus culture and history, those designed as self-sustaining programs for a specific group of participants, and those that regularly sought feedback from campus stakeholders.

Chapter Seven concludes with larger lessons for higher education stakeholders. The lessons emphasize the foundation on which the book rests: “colleges and universities must equip graduates for the long slog from commencement to stable employment and productive citizenship” (p. 204). Pro-exploration programs allow students to systematically identify their interests, understand their role in a global society, and make deliberate post-graduation decisions relative to their individual pathways. They effectively use resources that enable students to understand life choices and their consequences. Based on the data outlined in the book, Clydesdale recommends focusing these programs on students in their sophomore and junior years. Traditionally students are at reflective moments in their emotional and personal development during this period of time.

Institutional structure and culture are not always conducive to the kinds of conversations necessary to help students develop their unique life purposes. A lesson from this text is that institutions should be deliberate in their efforts to foster a true sense of purpose among students. These efforts move beyond the classroom, bringing students, faculty, and staff together as part of a larger campus community. Faculty and staff are potentially welcome resources. The initiative evaluation noted that faculty and staff wanted to participate in the conversation, receiving benefits alongside the participating students.

By encouraging students to examine their individual purpose as global citizens, campuses move beyond ensuring that students graduate with a specific skill set or a body of knowledge. The pro-exploration programs outlined here offer one avenue for achieving these ends. Questions remain about how such programs might be sustained, how they might be developed at different institutional types (for example, community colleges, or those focusing on non-traditional age college students), or in what ways these programs might be integrated with the academic curriculum of an institution. Although this text covers a great deal of ground, it does not tackle these questions directly.

*The Purposeful Graduate* is bookended by references to positive psychology and sociology concerning how communities might help people lead fulfilling and meaningful lives. The tone throughout is optimistic, even when examining those programs that did not have long-term success. This makes the text an enjoyable, and increasingly rare, read among higher education literature.

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