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Liberal Education

Holy Grit! The Effects of Purpose Exploration Programming on Undergraduate Engagement and Life Trajectories

By: Tim Clydesdale

It is no picnic to grow up a “military brat” or a “preacher’s kid.” As the youngest daughter of a military chaplain, Tracy Turner had the dubious distinction of being both.¹ So *fourteen* times during her first eighteen years, Tracy and her family moved—out of one military chaplain fishbowl, across states or nations, and into another. Tracy adored her father, but the nearly annual relocations left her with few lasting friendships. Perhaps that is why Tracy grew enamored of novels and creative writing, and why she selected a literature major at Mennonite College. And perhaps that, in turn, is why she became a regular participant in Mennonite College’s purpose and vocation exploration programs. These programs encouraged her thoughtfulness as well as her nascent interests in international and community development.

Idealistic students like Tracy were the core participants in every exploration program we studied. But they were not the modal student type. Most participants, like most American college students, took an instrumental approach to their college education. James Nwosu, a second-generation Nigerian American, represents this very well. James attended Richboro University with a singular focus on preparing for a career in international finance. An only child, James enjoyed an affluent lifestyle and attended elite schools, and he selected this Jesuit campus because of its prestigious school of business and without concern for its staggering price tag. His goal was to have his own international finance career and exceed his father’s considerable success as an engineering consultant. And James showed every sign of being on track to do so.

I met James and Tracy during their senior year of college, when my evaluation team visited their campuses to observe the effects, if any, of the Lilly Endowment’s nearly quarter-billion-dollar investment in purpose and vocation exploration programming on eighty-eight campuses across the United States. I was initially dubious that these programs would accomplish anything more than an increase in maladaptive idealism among self-selecting college students—and for months, my social scientific skepticism held firm. But accumulating data has a way of wearing one down. By the time my team had studied twenty-six campuses, interviewed 284 students and 274 faculty or staff, received 2,111 responses to a survey of participants, and supplemented these with sixty-five comparison interviews of students at nine nonparticipating campuses, I could no longer deny the remarkable and enduring effects of

purpose and vocation exploration programming on college students, on faculty and staff, and, sometimes, even on whole campuses. Word limitations prevent my recounting that evidence here, so I relay James and Tracy's stories as illustrative of the hundreds more we heard.

That James sought a lucrative career and lifestyle was indisputable, but that desire was not the sum total of his identity. James also hoped his life would share "some of the opportunities that I've been provided." More specifically, James wanted to expose "at risk" teens "to a trading floor . . . [where] you can make a million dollars by thirty." And James's desire to broaden opportunity was both strengthened and specified through involvement in his campus's Purpose Exploration Hall.

The issues James explored during his college years were nearly the opposite, then, of those Tracy explored. Tracy sought to identify which career and what manner of living she should pursue given her well-established values, while James sought to infuse a dose of service into the finance career and lifestyle he planned. For Tracy, exploration included participation in a two-year pre-ministry fellowship requiring a church internship during the academic term, a summer of full-time ministry, and weekly meetings to discuss readings with other fellows. For James, exploration included two years of participation in the varied activities of Richboro's Purpose Exploration Hall, and accepting his hall mentor's suggestion that he see the economic challenges of a developing nation firsthand by studying abroad.

Tracy admitted that her interests in international and community development "weren't really whetted until coming to college," but that the process of ongoing conversations, community service, and her fellowship helped her identify this career field. That still left Tracy with a couple of big questions—like "where?" and "doing what, exactly?"—but Tracy was taking advantage of her senior year to research careers in international community development. Similarly, James used his senior year to apply for an international fellowship, developing for it a project proposal infused with service. Even a lucrative job offer from Wall Street did not dissuade him; despite his father's objections, James postponed responding to an offer from a multinational financial corporation in order to await the outcome of his application. James's desire to serve differed, then, from Tracy's in degree only. Tracy planned to live simply within a needy community and to serve that community via a helping career. James planned a financially successful life that would include service to needy communities akin to the one in which Tracy planned to reside. James, just as much as Tracy, sought to lead a virtuous life, and both deserve commendation.

Were James and Tracy's stories to stop there, they might encourage those who still value higher education as a life-transforming experience. They would not address the possibility of exploration programs fostering a maladaptive idealism, however. What transpired in James and Tracy's lives *after* they left their nurturing campus environments and made their way into "the real world," I contend, is what makes purpose and vocation exploration programming so compelling: these smart, driven, and compassionate young adults experienced setbacks and harsh reality checks, which they confronted honestly and resolved maturely while still maintaining the overall arc of their intended life trajectories. Rather than becoming disillusioned and disappointed, and rather than abandoning their ideals, Tracy and James demonstrated a *grounded idealism* that made peace with

setbacks and helped them chart revised courses to their long-term destinations. Positive psychologists label the dogged determination to attain one's goals despite challenges "grit," and they document its powerful effects.² But grit can be deployed to any end, which is why I add the qualifier "holy," as the goals that most exploration participants sought ultimately involved service to God and humanity. Tracy and James honed a grounded idealism, or holy grit, during their undergraduate years, and they deployed it to powerful effect during the crucial months that followed their graduation from college.

Catching up with Tracy and James a year after they graduated from college, I learned that Tracy did not find work in international community development as she had hoped, nor did James win the international fellowship for which he had applied. Both were disappointed, but only briefly, and both were quick to redirect their efforts. Tracy and James both recognized the opportunities that still lay open to them, the privileged position they occupied as college-educated young adults, and the lifetime they had to pursue their goals. So James accepted his Wall Street job offer, and Tracy arranged housing and recruited other seniors to live in and serve a fading deindustrialized city near Mennonite College. James had the golden backup plan, or so it seemed until the financial world "ended" in September 2008—just two months into his employment. His own company received so many resignations and issued so many layoffs that James was left without an identifiable supervisor for nearly a month.

Tracy, meanwhile, discovered that launching an intentional service community with young adults is arduous without support from an umbrella volunteer organization, and she watched it nearly fall apart when participants realized the significance of not having health insurance. Her project survived, but at the cost of its members securing jobs based on benefits and scaling back their community service to nights and weekends. As stark as the foregoing sounds, our conversations with James and Tracy were anything but. They were delighted to speak with us and to share all that had transpired since their first interviews, and they were genuinely optimistic about the future. Though some consider optimism to be a generational trait,³ I argue that James and Tracy's grounded idealism helped them accept these setbacks and move forward without surrendering their goals.

For James, grounded idealism found expression through his enjoyment of the work of a financial analyst; he was learning how international finance works, while simultaneously developing an exit strategy. James was aghast to see senior partners putting in the same eighty-hour weeks as he did. In two years, when his training program ended, James planned to move to the Far East, either by company transfer or by joining an international organization to teach English. After that, James would start his own company, and then sell it by the age of forty so that he could "give back and actually have a true purpose in life." James's years at Richboro University inculcated a language of purpose, his time abroad sensitized him to the underbelly of globalization, and his daily walk on Manhattan's sidewalks solidified his resolve. "Down on Wall Street," he told us, "you can be walking right next to a millionaire and in the same [moment] see a homeless person who has nothing, and is fighting to survive." For now, James understood that he was in training—for a purpose larger than himself and for people who have never had the opportunities that James refused to take for

granted.

Tracy spent her first year after college doing the kind of service that James planned for his near and long-term future. So Tracy did not lose her appetite like James did when encountering homeless persons. She was not walking past them to dine at her city's toniest establishments with other investment bankers; instead, she was walking beside them to a church pantry in order to help them obtain food and other essentials. For this, Tracy was grateful. She was also grateful for an old Lutheran church that donated the use of its tattered manse to Tracy and four other young adults in exchange for their volunteer work. However, her first year after college had not been without its challenges:

What I think a lot of people my age have been having a difficult time with, is making ends meet while trying to live intentionally. I never once thought I would be talking about health insurance as much as I've talked about it since graduation. . . . I hate it that the finances really do rule so much of the choices that I've made. I would've gone to Europe much, much earlier in my life if I had had the capital to do so. [Yet] what I like about where I am is [that] I'm with a group of people who are trying to make the best of their own personal situations and trying to make the best of the community situation so that life squeaks past a little easier for everyone. And I like being invested in that so young. It's a choice that I would make again if I had to.

Tracy found a job that provided health insurance, leaving her with nights and weekends to do the community service she cherished. And yet, Tracy was not resentful. "It's difficult to make ends meet, but it's difficult for everyone. . . . I don't feel particularly victimized by that reality." Nor was she resentful about not finding international work, for her frequent moves as a child left her "hungry for a sense of belonging and place," which spending a fifth year in the Rustbelt City region was beginning to impart. If there was any resentment in Tracy, it lay in the gap between her long-term desire to marry and have children, and the current absence of a boyfriend. In the interim, however, "I feel good about the quality of life I lead, and I think that I have a life that is centered in faith." She then added with a laugh, "but I am also just out of college, I live in a household of postcollege friends, and there's wine!"

A skeptic might argue that Tracy and James would have proceeded along these lines without participation in campus exploration programming—that these two young adults were more resilient, intentional, and mature to begin with and that purpose or vocation exploration added nothing to these preexisting traits. There is evidence to support the former, but not the latter. Participants entered exploration programs slightly higher in maturity than nonparticipant peers, but they also made substantial gains over the course of their participation. Follow-up interviews with 123 recent college graduates, both participants and nonparticipants in exploration programming, inquired into graduates' satisfaction with six broad areas of life: work or graduate school life, finances, living arrangements, social life, love life, and spiritual life. On the whole, all interviewees indicated they that were more satisfied than dissatisfied with these six areas of their lives—an unsurprising result, given the ultimately privileged position from which a

college graduate engages the world and given the optimism of youth. Those who had participated in purpose exploration during college, however, expressed broader satisfaction with life after college than did those who did not participate, a statistically significant result that held firm even after controlling for respondents' gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and attendance at religious services.⁴ Participants in purpose exploration were not semi-satisfied with their lives, they were broadly satisfied with them—they were, in short, flourishing. They were independent, responsible, broadly engaged, and pursuing positive life goals.

So how should we make sense of this, and what might it mean for higher education? The takeaway lesson is that *purpose exploration produces a pattern of examined living and positive engagement with others, thereby increasing the odds that emerging adults will flourish after they graduate from college*. While this may be a bold claim, it is but a variation of an ancient truism. Since Socrates, educators convinced that “the unexamined life is not worth living” have labored to facilitate thoughtful self-examination within their students. Purpose exploration programming offers appealing mechanisms for life examination and fosters relationships that sustain ideals in spite of setbacks. Such outcomes represent the “higher” in higher education, and if delivered widely and consistently, they would pull the rug out from under the feet of higher education’s many critics.

Purposeful citizens, missional campuses

Despite the draconian cuts to higher education budgets during the Great Recession, more than 90 percent of the campuses I studied continued their exploration programs—despite the attendant real costs—for three or more years after their grant funds were depleted. The majority also became dues-paying members of the Council of Independent College’s Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education, where they were joined by a hundred additional campuses eager to replicate these exploration programs’ good work. The reasons for this are many, to be sure, but among them are the value-added benefits these programs deliver to students, to faculty and staff participants, to cocurricular life, and even to the campus as a whole. Eighty-six percent of faculty respondents, for example, agreed or strongly agreed that their campus’s exploration programs had “positively impacted my own work at [this school]”; 75 percent agreed that their participation “helped me hone my own sense of ‘vocation,’ ‘calling,’ or ‘purpose,’” and 85 percent said that participation “deepened my appreciation for the mission of [this school.]” The percentages were even higher among staff participants—90 percent, 84 percent, and 93 percent, respectively. Purpose exploration programs have the remarkable effect of refreshing the good citizens one finds on every campus, of strengthening support for institutional mission, and of helping to launch pro-exploration communities dedicated to the holistic flourishing of students, faculty, and staff and to the service of others near and far.

Purpose and vocation exploration will not, to be sure, appeal to all students or all employees. The anxious waters that invisibly flood contemporary campuses lead majorities to seek relief wherever they can—often via binge drinking and disengagement. But students, faculty, and staff from a wide variety of campuses and with even wider worldviews have reported pivotal life changes as a result of the opportunity to explore ideas of purpose and vocation. Quality exploration

programs can help encourage yet ground idealistic students like Tracy, support more instrumental types like James as they convert generalized desires to do good into tangible commitments, renew employee support for mission and citizenship, and even re-center institutional mission among administrators' activities. Purpose and vocation exploration programming deserves careful consideration by any campus serious about integrative learning, holistic development, and lifelong citizenship.

Young adults have become subjects of intense attention, both scholarly and otherwise. Some fall into the aimlessness that is so well captured by popular media, while others delay commitments and spend years "tinkering" with identities, careers, and relationships. These wider realities highlight the intentionality, resilience, and maturity that is demonstrated by participants in purpose and vocation exploration. Tracy and James' adulthood was not emerging, it was realized. Lengthening pathways to adulthood are, of course, macroeconomic and macro-cultural phenomena. But the blame for emerging adults' travails is starting to congeal around higher education. Graduating purposeful citizens has long been the enduring goal of higher education; purpose exploration programming may well be the anticoagulant that colleges and universities need at this critical moment.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

Notes

1. Throughout, quoted material is taken from interviews conducted by the author. All individual and institutional names are pseudonyms, and all identifying information has been changed in this article.

2. See, for example, Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

3. See, for example, Neil Howe, William Strauss, and R. J. Matson, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

4. Tim Clydesdale, *Calling on Purpose: The Conversation Every Campus Must Have with Students* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Tim Clydesdale is professor of sociology at the College of New Jersey. This article is adapted from the author's forthcoming book *Calling on Purpose: The Conversation Every Campus Must Have with Students* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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