

Higher Education's Grand Challenge

Over the past decade, colleges and universities have focused their efforts on student success as measured by increased graduation rates and reduced time to degree. These efforts have led to major gains, and they are ongoing. They also lead naturally to the next frontier in higher education which is success as measured by impact on students *after* graduation.

This goal is as appropriate to small liberal arts colleges as to regional and national public flagships with a dual mission of human development and work force development. If college is meant to prepare students to achieve financial viability, find meaning in their human relationships and their work, and contribute to the common good, higher education needs to figure out which experiences during a student's education are most likely to lead to these life-transformative outcomes. And it needs to make these experiences available to all students at scale. This is the grand challenge for higher education that animates the work of the Coalition for Life Transformative Education.

The Rationale for Our Work

Recent studies provide important insight on the correlation between certain kinds of learning experiences in college and high well-being and work engagement throughout life. These include emotionally supportive mentoring and opportunities for students to connect curriculum and classroom experiences to real-world problem solving. Many colleges and universities offer rich learning experiences of this kind, but more often than not they occur serendipitously through co-curricular activities. More important, only a small fraction of students report having these formative experiences as part of their education.

The most comprehensive effort to explore the link between a student's experience in college and life outcomes has been undertaken by the Gallup organization¹. Over a period of years, Gallup has conducted the largest survey of college graduates in history in order to explore what in their college experiences really mattered for their well-being later in life². Tens of thousands of college graduates from hundreds of different colleges and universities are included in the survey. Graduates range in age from recent graduates to seasoned alumni more than forty years after graduation.

The results of this study are remarkable. In particular, college graduates did not see what we typically think of as the core of the educational experience -- curricular content, class size, campus characteristics, etc. – as the factors of greatest importance. Instead, The Gallup survey results show that graduates who reported having had meaningful experiential learning and “someone cared about me as a person” were more than twice as likely to report high levels of well-being and work engagement later in life³. And this was true no matter how many years out from college they were. Although the findings were unequivocal, less than five percent of college graduates surveyed strongly agreed that they had both of these experiences while an undergraduate student—meaning that higher education has a very large gap to close if it is to have the transformational impact students want and need.

These findings were reinforced in a recent study conducted by Gallup in partnership with Bates College designed to explore the extent to which college graduates seek purpose in their work and to identify the college experiences that align with finding purpose after graduation.⁴ The study found that 80% of college graduates say that it is extremely important (43%) or very important (37%) to derive a sense of purpose from their work. Yet less than half of college graduates succeed in finding purpose in their work. Likewise, the study showed that graduates with high purpose in work are almost ten times more likely to have overall well-being. As with earlier studies, this research confirmed that finding purpose in work is highly correlated with “having someone who encourages students’ goals and dreams” and having the opportunity to link curriculum to real world issues through internships or jobs.

These two Gallup results are consistent with findings broadly across the literature in higher education from other sources⁵ and are further reinforced by the work of Carol Dweck on Mindset⁶. Dweck’s research indicates that shaping the attitudes, behaviors and beliefs students have about themselves—not just content knowledge—can be life-transformative. While her work has primarily been in the K-12 arena, more recent studies show that the same principles of growth mindset apply in higher education with very significant results⁷.

Belonging: Mental Health and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The research observations above suggest that higher education could promote well-being and fulfillment across a lifetime. By doing so, mental health and wellness become central to the mission of higher education and not an auxiliary service to be dealt with reactively. According to a recent Harvard study of higher education across ten institutions, the most important concern of college students today is belonging.⁸ Until students feel they belong through inclusion and a healthy sense of personal identity, their ability to learn and develop is limited.

Furthermore, there is an imperative to address current inequities by being intentional about bringing to every student the kind of life-transformative experiences described above that now reach only a small subset of our student populations. Helping every student find identity, agency, purpose, and well-being over a lifetime begins with inclusive curricula and teaching strategies to effectively connect and support all audiences and demographics.

The Coalition for Life-Transformative Education

In response to these observations and findings, a diverse coalition of colleges and universities have come together to take on the grand challenge question: If the learning experiences identified in the Gallup findings and elsewhere are so profound, don't we have a moral obligation to ensure that they are made available to every student, not merely those students who encounter them through serendipity or optional co-curricular activities? All of these institutions offer, in one form or another, the kinds of life-transformative experiences described in the Gallup findings. But it will take creativity, determination, and tapping into the unique strengths of each of them to meet the grand challenge described above.

The institutions listed on the CLTE website have committed to pursue the aspirational challenge stated above—to bring life-transformative educational experiences to every student at scale—at each of our institutions and to share what we learn, with each other and with every other organization (e.g.,

community colleges, continuing and professional education programs and high schools) interested in bringing life-transformative learning experiences to every student in America.

The assembly of universities in this coalition—from across the nation, ranging from large to small, public and private, research and professional—is unprecedented in its breadth and ambition. It is also differentiated by its focus on explicitly linking what happens with students after graduation to experiences they have in college, rather than maintaining a narrow focus on degree completion. The two foci are not at odds of course. Indeed, we believe that when students are empowered, as they move through their studies, with a sense of belonging, agency, purpose, and the power of knowledge, it not only lays the foundation for success in life and work, it also motivates them in real time to persist through degree completion.

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1 Busted, Brandon, “The REAL Data Revolution,” Trusteeship, Volume 4, No. 4, July/August 2019. (available at: <https://agb.org/trusteeship-article/the-real-data-revolution/>)

2 “Measuring college and university outcomes,” Gallup Alumni Survey, 2018 (available at: <https://www.gallup.com/education/194264/gallup-alumni-survey.aspx>)

3 The Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index has a long history. Well-being is a concept that captures the important aspects of how people feel about and experience their daily lives — encompassing more than just physical health or economic indicators, well-being includes five elements: purpose, social, financial, community, and physical. The Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index is the world’s largest data set on well-being, with over 2.5 million surveys fielded to date. The Well-Being Index provides in-depth insight into the well-being of populations, is frequently cited by national media, and has been leveraged by Nobel laureates and academicians for peer-review and scholarly articles. Gallup surveys over 10,000 randomly selected adults every month by mail. The resulting samples are projectable to about 98% of the U.S. adult population. (from the Gallup website)

4 “Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work: The Role of Higher Education (2019), “Summary of Key Findings.” Gallup website (available here: <https://www.gallup.com/education/248222/gallup-bates-purposeful-work-2019.aspx>)

5 Murphy, Mary C., Coalition for Life-Transformative Education Literature Review, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 30 September 2018.

6 Dweck, Carol, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Ballantine Books, December 2007.

7 Phelan, Meagan, "When Professors See Intelligence as Innate, Grades Go Down," AAAS, 15 February 2019 (available at: <https://www.aaas.org/news/when-professors-see-intelligence-innate-grades-go-down>)

8 Rosenberg, John S., "Campuses' Cultures," Harvard Magazine, May-June 2019 (available at <https://harvardmagazine.com/2019/05/campuses-cultures>)