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Seek Your Purpose Before Your Paycheck



Christine B. Whelan (<http://acculturated.com/author/cwhelan/>)

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In a new national survey, 18-24-year-olds report that having a clear purpose in life is a big part of being a "real" adult. The problem is, most young people don't feel like they've found that sense of purpose.

If you're graduating from college this month, congratulations. After you toss your cap in the air and before you jump into your life's next chapter, spend a few minutes pondering the three biggest questions of your emerging adult years: What matters to me? Why does my answer matter? And how can I make it happen?

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What matters to me?

More than 86% of young adults say that making decisions in line with their purpose makes them an adult, according to a national survey I conducted recently. But only 43% say they have a clear picture of what they want in life... and only 30% know why they are here.

This isn't good news: Coasting is existing, not thriving. The majority of young adults who say they don't have a clear picture of what they want in life also say they are existing but not thriving, while those with purpose more often say they are thriving.

I'm a clinical professor in the School of Human Ecology (<http://sohe.wisc.edu/staff/christine-b-whelan-ph-d/>) at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, where I teach large classes on well-being to more than 200 students a semester. My students are eager to learn how to “adult”—especially how to adult on purpose (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIW9o1RbIE>)—but most of their college education doesn't help them do that. After graduation they want to get a paid job that's in line with their purpose and passions, but they haven't figured out what those are yet. My national research bears this out: Only 36% of 18-24 year olds say that the career path that they have chosen is aligned with their life purpose.

So spend some time thinking about this: what matters to you? What might your purpose be?

Why does purpose matter?

Research shows that embracing a purpose mindset in your twenties—identifying how your specific talents and values intersect with the needs of others—is correlated with increased well-being in your thirties. So the time is now to think about the “big picture” of your life.

Young adults are prioritizing the ability to pursue their passions at work more than older workers are. The national data show that 18-24 year olds are significantly more likely than adults 25 and older to say their ideal job is one in which they are able to pursue their personal passions, to integrate work and personal life in meaningful ways, to contribute to society as a whole, and to make good pay. Indeed, as they head into the job market, 69% of young adults say that they would be willing to take a cut in pay to work at a job that allowed them to focus on more meaningful work.

But, my students ask me, will purpose pay off my student loans? Maybe.

Living purposefully isn't about glamorous work or important sounding titles. Seemingly mundane jobs can be full of meaning when approached from a purpose mindset. So can high-profile positions that earn lots of money and things you do outside of paid work.

How can I make it happen?

Successful behavioral change hinges on the synthesis of personal discovery and the ability to translate it into action. For the last four years I've tested a series of worksheets, exercises and small-step programs with more than 600 college students

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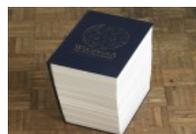


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[nationwide](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHx9V6uAmeM) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHx9V6uAmeM>). My research is now a book, *The Big Picture: A Guide to Finding Your Purpose in Life* (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Big-Picture-Finding-Purpose/dp/1599474247>), which combines research and real-life-tested exercises to help students choose a college, a major, a first job, a lasting career, a long-term relationship, or more importantly, a purpose.

So how do you get into the purpose mindset? Try [answering](http://thebigpicture.life/not-sure-where-to-start/) (<http://thebigpicture.life/not-sure-where-to-start/>) these three, tested questions from my book to get you started:

1. What do I love to do?
2. What am I passionate about improving/impacting?
3. How can I do what I love while being a force for positive change?

Advice from your older self

No matter what your age, now is always a great time to ask yourself what matters most, why it matters—and to figure out a plan to make it happen. According to my research, the number one advice older adults would impart to their 20-year-old self is to make sure you know your purpose before making big decisions. So: what's your big picture purpose?

(If you think of it, tell me on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/christinewhelan) (<https://twitter.com/christinewhelan>), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/christinebwhelan/) (<https://www.instagram.com/christinebwhelan/>) or [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/Dr-Christine-B-Whelan-107419625947945/?ref=hl) (<https://www.facebook.com/Dr-Christine-B-Whelan-107419625947945/?ref=hl>) [[#bigpicturepurpose](https://www.facebook.com/Dr-Christine-B-Whelan-107419625947945/?ref=hl)] or [enter the purpose contest](http://thebigpicture.life/contest/) (<http://thebigpicture.life/contest/>) to win \$500 toward paying for it.)

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