

Fostering “Purpose” as a Key to Success

Stanford Seminar Helps Mentors Motivate Low-Income Youth

By Marguerite Rigoglioso

It's an increasingly urgent question: What do kids, especially those from low-income backgrounds, need to succeed? In California today, success is elusive for too many young people. One in three California students drops out of high school. Only half of the state's high school graduates enroll in college, and only 60 percent of those students graduate from college within six years. For low-income students and youth of color, the outcomes are even worse.

According to Stanford University education professor William Damon, the problem is deeper than a lack of skills or opportunities.

“What causes students to get off track in many cases is that they lack a larger sense of purpose in their lives. Purpose differentiates kids who succeed from those who don't,” says Damon, one of the world's leading scholars on human development. “Having purpose prevents burnout and promotes resiliency.”

Damon shared insights from six years studying what motivates young people at a recent Youth Purpose seminar sponsored by the Stanford University Center on Adolescence, where he serves as director. Some two-dozen counselors, mentors, and youth advisors from the San Francisco Bay Area attended to learn how to help students identify and develop a strong sense of purpose. The participants — all College Access Foundation of California (CAFC) grant recipients — learned how purpose can be the missing link that helps young people from low-income backgrounds reach and complete college.

A Need Transcending Demographics

Damon's research, synthesized in *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life* (Free Press, 2008) has involved a study of hundreds of young people ages 12 to 22 across the United States.

His key discoveries: About 20 percent of children are very purposeful, clear about where they are headed and why, and preparing themselves in realistic ways to get there. One in four children is at the other extreme — drifting and discouraged. The rest are somewhere in the middle. They may have dreams, but they don't have any realistic plan for achieving them.

For bright and promising young people from underprivileged backgrounds, a sense of purpose can be particularly powerful. For that reason, the College Access Foundation convinced Damon to share his research findings with an audience of advisors and counselors who serve those students on a daily basis.

At the seminar, Damon offered advice on ways to help students look at the bigger picture beyond just grades, test scores, applications, and acceptance letters.

His results showed that when young people marry their drive with their purpose, they can achieve remarkable successes — and they have plenty of energy to keep going.

Damon emphasized another important fact: Purpose is a strong motivator for young people regardless of their race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or geographical location. “The percentage of kids who are able to engage in ‘practical idealism’ — to connect passion with action — is the same no matter where you are,” Damon said. “You don’t find more ‘purposeful’ and accomplished kids among the affluent, or more ‘drifters’ in the inner city. You see the same potential everywhere.”

Damon then moved on to the more pressing questions — How can adult advisors help young people fulfill that potential? How does one apply the notion of “purpose” in the daily struggle to help low-income students persist in their education?

Working with a definition of purpose as “the long-lasting intention to accomplish something that’s meaningful not only to oneself, but to the world beyond,” participants began developing their own internalized understanding of the concept. Their first task — answering the question: What is the larger purpose of my organization? — gave them a first-hand sense of how focusing attention in this direction can be tremendously energizing.

Eliciting Students’ Passion

Damon then offered suggestions for incorporating purpose into the mentoring and counseling process. Providing youth with role models in their areas of interest is a first important step, he said. “Students who combine idealism and practical strategies begin by encountering someone who lives the life they admire,” he told listeners. Rarely, he stressed, does a student’s passion emerge from his or her family — in fact, sometimes families don’t take the young person’s calling seriously. In those cases, other adult mentors can serve as cheerleaders for students’ aspirations. They can also inspire youth by sharing what they find meaningful in their own lives and work.

Another way adult guides can keep students motivated is by reframing failures as learning experiences. “Helping kids see difficulties as steps toward a goal — rather than as negative indicators of their own potential — trains them to keep a positive outlook in the face of the many barriers they are likely to encounter,” Damon noted.

What *doesn't* work, he stressed, is scaring kids into studying or bullying them out of their own interests. "Encourage them to acquire knowledge by tying it to the context of purpose and identity. Show them *why* people care about the things they're learning, be it a fact or a chemistry formula. Help them see college as a means to an end, not an end in itself," Damon suggested. "And listen carefully to their deepest desires. Provide them with the direction and resources they'll need to follow something in that area. That's where they'll become genuinely motivated."

Brandy Quinn, a Stanford doctoral student in psychological studies in education, added another important piece of advice: Mentors who cultivate an authentic relationship with students, rather than pursuing an agenda to "change" students, are, in fact, far more successful in getting them to grow and transform. She also suggested that empathy, mutuality, and trust are much more important in the relationship than sharing a common background with the student.

Putting Purpose to Work

Quinn asked participants to evaluate a program in their organization that already fosters purpose. Three staffers from Summer Search, a Bay Area youth leadership development organization, hunkered down in a separate room, enumerating the ways in which the domestic and international summer trips they offer help young people find meaning. They began to see that the trips, which expose students to service learning, language study and leadership training, inspire in young people a sense of idealism and competence, and encourage them to become role models in their communities.

On the question "How can we improve?" the trio paused, wheels turning. Before long, program director Monica Hanza offered a simple but effective solution: "We may need to instruct new mentors, who are busy focusing on practical details with students, to bring bigger picture issues into the discussion."

In a second exercise led by Karen Rathman, a senior scholar at the Stanford Center on Adolescence, participants gathered in small groups to identify barriers to success among their low-income students. Their long lists of difficulties centered on common themes: students' lack of support at home, negative influences among peers, insufficient resources in schools and communities, and violence and drugs in their larger environment.

Mentors were then asked to come up with strategies for incorporating purpose as a means of overcoming such problems. Although they found the exercise challenging at first — Could "purpose" alleviate any of the seemingly intractable issues their students faced every day? — all of the groups developed a set of promising solutions. One group, which identified "students' lack of self-efficacy" as a primary concern, suggested that students try an interesting new activity for one month or interview an accomplished adult as a way to develop confidence and a practical sense of what it takes to succeed.

The exercise helped participants solidify the understanding that “purpose” is not a concept reserved for the more privileged. Although “working with low-income students may seem particularly daunting, fostering purpose is an effective mentoring tool that cuts across the socio-economic spectrum,” said Rathman.

Taking It to the Streets

Two days later, Summer Search program director Julia Matsudaira was applying what she had learned to her organization. “Yesterday in our weekly mentor training I went over all the handouts from the seminar, highlighting Professor Damon’s definition of purpose as it relates to our work with adolescents,” she said. “Understanding that clear, sustained purpose is found at the intersection of high aspirations and high activity levels is helping us feel significantly more informed and purpose-driven ourselves in our work with students.”

Nancy Lippe, director of MVLA Community Scholars in Los Altos, reported: “I put the seminar to work. I asked the students to share their ‘big life vision’ with the group — what their ideal job/career would be. Then I asked them, given their big vision, what an ideal summer job would be. As a group we brainstormed ideas for each person — who to call about jobs, places they might look into, and so forth. It was great! A next step is to contact the local chamber of commerce and see if they might send a few members to speak with the club about various career areas.”

“This is a very dedicated and smart group of professionals,” reflected Bill Damon. “They don’t need a lot of tooling. They just need their ideas validated, emphasized, and, in some cases, reframed slightly. My sense is that they’re going to take this work and incorporate it into what they’re doing with great success.”

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Further Reading

To read more about helping young people develop a strong sense of purpose, visit:

<http://www.williamdamon.com/pathtopurpose.html>

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct08/vol66/num02/The_Moral_North_Star.aspx