

# Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work

The Role of Higher Education



# Foreword

The financial crisis of 2008, followed by the slow recovery in labor markets, provided a wake-up call to the nation's colleges and universities about how they were preparing students for work and careers. A decade later, financial markets have reached historic highs, and unemployment is the lowest it has been in nearly 50 years.<sup>1</sup> Yet anxiety among students and parents about their prospects after college remains undiminished.

Their unease is easy to understand. We live in a world defined by complexity, uncertainty and volatility. Driven largely by technology, the rate of change continues to accelerate. Likewise, our global interdependence has risen markedly, even as our ability to solve pressing world problems — like climate change or economic crises — seems to be diminishing.<sup>2</sup>

For higher education, the accelerating rate of change means that it is no longer sufficient or even plausible to prepare our students for lives based on a notion of “career” as a stable and well-defined pathway through working life. Rather, the average college graduate can expect to have more than 11 distinct jobs before the age of 50,<sup>3</sup> many of which do not yet exist.

Increasing global interdependence means that career prospects for U.S. college graduates are no longer defined by a national market for talent built on the American system of higher education. Instead, our graduates now find themselves competing in an international contest to identify, attract and retain those individuals — from wherever — best equipped to navigate a complex and highly competitive labor market and world.

The Bates-Gallup national study, *Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work: The Role of Higher Education*, provides compelling new data to suggest ways for higher education to meet these challenges.

If reliable career paths are no longer to be defined externally, the ability to sustain work over a lifetime will increasingly depend on individual agency. Thus, colleges and universities must help students develop not only the content knowledge and cognitive and interpersonal skills required for employment, but also a mindset of informed self-determination and adaptability.

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1 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

2 Muggah, R. and Goldin, I. (2019). “How to Survive in Our Age of Uncertainty,” World Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/how-to-survive-our-age-of-uncertainty-muggah-goldin/>.

3 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

In 2013, Bates College began to develop a framework, built on the core strengths of the liberal arts, to better prepare our students to navigate the evolving worlds of work. Now fully established, the Purposeful Work program helps students in structured and concrete ways to seek and find work that aligns with their interests, values and strengths and brings them meaning.

We undertook the current study with Gallup to test the premises of our Purposeful Work program and to refine it based on what we learned. The study confirms that a focus on helping students find purpose in work is a powerful way of developing in students the kind of agency and adaptability they need to thrive in today's world.

Fully 80% of college graduates surveyed said that it is very important or extremely important to derive a sense of purpose from their work, yet less than half have succeeded in finding it.

This "purpose gap" is a glaring problem for the younger workforce, as millennials place a higher priority on purpose in their lives than previous generations, and they look to work more than other sources to find it.

The purpose gap is also a challenge for employers because of a strong correlation between employees' purpose and engagement and an organization's bottom line.

By identifying specific undergraduate experiences that align with graduates finding purpose in work, this Bates-Gallup study provides a road map for higher education to transform approaches to ready students for work, life and social contribution.

Higher education has a central role to play in improving the life prospects of individuals and thereby strengthening our economy and society as a whole. Colleges and universities need to embrace this role with renewed energy, imagination and, yes, purpose.

**A. Clayton Spencer**

***President***

**Bates College**

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# Summary of Key Findings

In fall of 2018, Bates College and Gallup embarked on a study to measure the extent to which college graduates seek purpose in their work, determine the proportion of graduates who find it and identify the college experiences that align with finding purpose in work after graduation. The study also explored the degree to which employers and college parents support such experiences.

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE STUDY INCLUDE:

**80%** Four Out of Five College Graduates Affirm the Importance of Finding Purpose in Their Work

Four out of five college graduates say it is very important (**37%**) or extremely important (**43%**) to derive a sense of purpose from their work.

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**<50%** However, Less Than Half of College Graduates Succeed in Finding Purposeful Work

Despite its importance to college graduates, less than half strongly agree to any of the items that indicate high levels of purpose in work.

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## Four Key Undergraduate Experiences Align With Graduates Finding Purpose in Work

High levels of graduates' purpose in work are strongly and significantly related to four key college experiences (controlling for all other factors):

- + Having an applied internship or job
- + Having someone who encourages students' goals and dreams
- + Being given realistic expectations for post-graduation employment prospects
- + Participating in a class/program that helps students think about pursuing meaning in work

## 3x Reflection and Understanding Interests, Values and Strengths Are Central to Finding Purpose in Work

- + Graduates who align their work with their interests, values and strengths are roughly three times more likely to experience high purpose in work.
- + Graduates who are highly reflective are **67%** more likely to have high purpose in work.



### Purposeful Work Is Particularly Important to the Younger Workforce

Compared to older graduates:

- + Millennials are more likely to derive purpose from their work than from other sources.
- + Millennials are more likely to regret not having had real-life work experiences in college, like internships and job shadowing.

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## 10x Graduates With High Purpose in Work Are Almost 10x More Likely to Have High Overall Wellbeing

Whereas only **6%** of those who have low levels of purpose in their work have high levels of overall wellbeing, fully **59%** of those with high purpose in work have high wellbeing.

- + Hiring managers widely endorse the attributes of job candidates who find purpose in their work when evaluating their employability.



### Employers Endorse the Fundamental Pillars of a Liberal Arts Education and Find These Skills and Habits of Mind Desirable

In response to open-ended questions, hiring managers place a high value on the hallmarks of a liberal arts education. Managers cite the following as qualities they look for when evaluating a job candidate's readiness for the workforce, and feel these should be priorities for colleges to focus on developing in their students:

- + Critical thinking
- + Effective communication
- + Collaboration and working effectively on a team
- + Curiosity and interest in work that is meaningful to them

# 01

## Introduction

Higher education has always sought to prepare graduates for life, work and participation in civic society. Today's rapidly changing economy and global competition for talent make the stakes higher than ever before. Students can no longer assume that a college credential alone is enough to guarantee career success. As a result, colleges and universities must be more intentional in the design of curriculum and programs that will provide graduates with the skills, experiences and self-awareness to be strong and competitive job candidates — not only for their first job but throughout their working lives.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the average college graduate holds 11.7 jobs before the age of 50. A 2016 LinkedIn study showed that the number of company moves among new graduates (zero to five years after graduation) has increased steadily over the past 30 years. This shifting across multiple jobs and careers requires college graduates to critically evaluate their work, weighing its merits against their interests and strengths and the needs of their communities and greater society. At the same time, recent national research from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) shows that business leaders think that while today's graduates are prepared for their first job, they lack requisite skills and knowledge for successful long-term career progression and advancement.



Gallup's 2016 landmark study examining millennial workers (those aged 22–37) showed millennials are more likely to be unemployed and underemployed than their predecessors. And while millennials place a higher premium on finding alignment with the mission and purpose of their work organizations (inspiring the phrase “from paycheck to purpose”) compared to previous generations, Gallup found they have lower levels of engagement — i.e., emotional and intellectual connection to their work.

These indicators suggest that at a time when colleges must develop students who have fully considered and explored their professional aspirations, too many graduates appear unprepared to find pathways to work that is truly meaningful to them. The result is often dissatisfied workers, frustrated employers and graduates still searching for the “ROI” from their college education.

In response to these pressures and challenges, colleges are searching for new approaches to better prepare students for the modern-day workforce — not only to secure any job post-graduation but to ensure that graduates find pathways to meaningful work. Providing answers to these dilemmas will help institutions deliver on their value proposition and alleviate public concerns regarding the value of a college education. More important, such solutions are central to maintaining a vibrant 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy.

# 02

## Study Methods and Purpose

This study surveyed 2,205 college graduates, 637 hiring managers and 1,037 parents of college students from Oct. 23 – Nov. 5, 2018. Respondents were sampled from the Gallup Panel, a probability-based, nationally representative online panel of U.S. adults (see full methodology statement on p. 39). Gallup also conducted four focus groups in two major U.S. cities in summer 2018 — two groups with college graduates sampled from a diverse array of colleges, one group with hiring managers of college graduates and one group with parents of college students (i.e., parents with children bound for, enrolled in or recently graduated from a four-year program). Insights from the focus groups and coded responses from the open-ended survey questions are included to complement the quantitative research findings within the report.

This study arose from interest on behalf of Bates College, which in 2014 established the Purposeful Work program as a guiding philosophy for preparing students for life after college. The program is built on the premise that teaching students how to seek and find purpose in work is central to their long-term career success, sense of fulfillment in life and contribution to society. The program draws on the fundamentals of the liberal arts, has curricular and co-curricular aspects and takes a four-year, developmental approach to working with students. Purposeful Work reinforces Bates' long-standing commitment to equity by ensuring that all students have equal access to the tools and funded work experiences that help them align their interests, values and strengths with purposeful work throughout their lives.

The goal of this study was to examine the role of purpose and meaning in college graduates' work lives and provide higher education leaders with insights around several important research questions:

- + To what extent are college graduates seeking purpose in their work?
- + To what extent are college graduates finding purpose in their work?
- + How does the undergraduate experience relate to graduates seeking and finding purposeful work?
- + What skills and attributes are managers looking for in their workers and do they value employees seeking purpose in their work?
- + How do parents view the role of colleges in preparing their children for purpose in work?

As this study explored purpose and meaning in work more closely than previous research, the survey included several questions drawn from validated survey instruments, including those from Gallup's inventory related to purpose wellbeing, employee engagement and meaningful work as well as questions from Steger's Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI).<sup>4</sup>

These questions yielded a 12-item "purpose in work" factor that measures college graduates' purpose wellbeing and their meaning and engagement in work. The factor comprises the following statements, with response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree:

- + I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.
- + I am deeply interested in the work that I do.
- + I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.
- + My job gives me the opportunity to do work that interests me.
- + I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.
- + I have found a meaningful career.
- + The mission or purpose of my work organization makes me feel my job is important.
- + I have the ideal job for me.
- + I like what I do every day.
- + I get to use my strengths to do what I do best every day.
- + There is a leader in my life who makes me enthusiastic about the future.

The factor also includes one question:

- + How important is it to you to derive a sense of purpose from your work?

This 12-item factor is termed throughout this report as "purpose in work."

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4 <http://www.michaelfsteger.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WAMI.pdf>

# 03

## The Purpose Gap

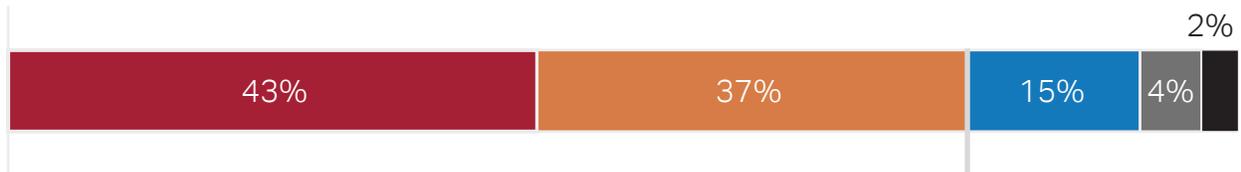
*Less Than Half of College Graduates Find Purpose in Their Work*

Gallup asked the survey respondents, "How important is it to you to derive a sense of purpose from your work?" with response options ranging from "extremely important" to "not at all important."

**FIGURE 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF PURPOSE IN WORK TO COLLEGE GRADUATES**

*How important is it for you to derive a sense of purpose in your work?*

● Extremely important ● Very important ● Moderately important ● Slightly important ● Not at all important



**Four out of five responding college graduates say it is very important or extremely important to have a sense of purpose in their work.**

## Documenting the Purpose Gap

Despite large majorities of graduates saying that finding purpose in work is important to them, a minority of graduates strongly agree to the following statements that reflect purpose in their work lives:

**FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGES OF COLLEGE GRADUATES WHO STRONGLY AGREE TO PURPOSE IN WORK STATEMENTS**



# 04

## The College-to-Purpose Pipeline

### *Undergraduate Experiences Aligned With Purpose in Work*

A central objective of this study was to determine which undergraduate experiences most closely align with graduates having high levels of purpose in their work after college. Gallup asked college graduates about a variety of college experiences including learning about potential pathways to work, having faculty share how academic content relates to different fields of work, and being given realistic expectations for employment prospects on graduation.

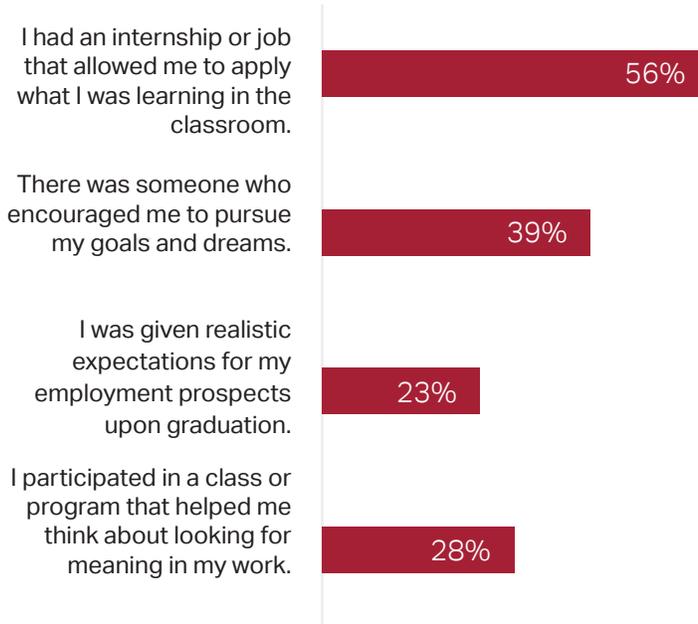
Gallup applied logistic regression to identify which college experiences have a statistically significant and independent relationship to graduates having high purpose in work, holding all other factors constant. The following experiences have the strongest relationship to graduates' achieving high levels of purpose in work (listed in order of magnitude of the relationship):

- + While attending [college], I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.
- + While attending [college], there was someone who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
- + While at [college], I was given realistic expectations for my employment prospects upon graduation.
- + I participated in a class or program at [college] that helped me think about looking for meaning in my work.



**FIGURE 3: THE PREVALENCE OF UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCES ALIGNED WITH PURPOSE IN WORK**

(% Strongly agree)



Although the power of these experiences is apparent, the data reveal that too few college graduates have benefited from them, denying them the best opportunity to find purpose in their work. The most common of these experiences is having an applied job or internship (56% strongly agree), while only 23% of graduates strongly agree they were given realistic expectations for their employment prospects upon graduation. These findings lead to the conclusion that colleges and universities need to be more intentional in promoting these experiences to prepare undergraduates for purposeful work.

## Balancing Realistic Expectations With Encouragement

As Gallup examined graduates' survey responses regarding purpose in work and educational value, a prominent theme emerged: Students believe that being given realistic expectations about their employment after graduation is important. This experience has a consistently positive and statistically significant bearing on whether graduates have high levels of purpose in their work and whether they strongly agree that their education prepared them for success in the workplace.

However, of the four undergraduate experiences aligned with purpose in work, graduates are *least* likely to say they were given realistic expectations for their post-graduate employment. This finding is consistent with previous research underscoring the need for colleges to prepare students for the setbacks many experience when they first enter the workforce, to provide students with reasonable expectations about their employability, and to help students build resilience to protect against the disappointments many encounter in their 20s.<sup>5</sup>

Another experience shown to be associated with high levels of purpose in work presents a potential conflict. If not appropriately balanced with being offered realistic expectations for their job prospects, encouraging students to pursue their dreams can set them up for disappointment when they enter the workforce.

The study's graduate focus groups shed light on the disparity between these two influential experiences. The college graduates who participated stated that their professors and advisors did not offer a sense of what work they would be eligible for with their degree. Many were led to believe their bachelor's degree would qualify them for jobs for which a master's degree is preferred. Upon learning this, they pursued advanced education, finding themselves on a treadmill of increasing student loan debt and concomitant salary expectations that were not met with job market reward.

Participants offered testimonies of a rude awakening upon reaching the workplace:

“It's a harsh reality ... you're not going to get a job that you wanted your whole life ... you just take what you can get at that point, when you're fresh out of college.”

5 Clydesdale, T. (2015). *The Purposeful Graduate: Why colleges must talk to students about vocation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Graduates spoke of a disconnect between their academic experience and the realities of the workplace.

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*“I had a lot of idealistic professors that really made me think that I was going to change the world kind of thing. That we all were. We were going to go out there and really be a great politician or a great lawyer and I think even though I did the co-op ... you go back to that and it's just kind of like it's not the real world. You go out there and you're just another person.”*

“

*“Even though I'm happy with my choice, I feel as though there was no guidance. There was no, 'these are what jobs are out there.' And I was naïve; I didn't know what was out there, to be honest. I kind of just knew the basic jobs — doctor, lawyer, teacher, nurse. It wasn't like anyone said, 'OK, these are your choices.' ... My daughter's taking economics and legal studies and I'm like, 'What kind of job can you get?' Still, even now at 43, I'm like 'what kind of job can you get with that?' Because I don't, I'm ignorant to what's out there to some degree. It's scary.”*

Participants indicated that advanced or graduate education increased the likelihood of direct engagement with staff or faculty who would take an interest in their needs and work aspirations as well as the possibility of obtaining internships and other opportunities for career exploration. Therefore, whereas undergraduate experiences can offer this direct engagement and active exploration, students may be better prepared for pursuing meaningful work by obtaining an advanced degree.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of professors and advisors balancing the encouragement of students pursuing their dreams against the reality of what they will be able to immediately achieve based on their field of study, previous work experience and other assets.

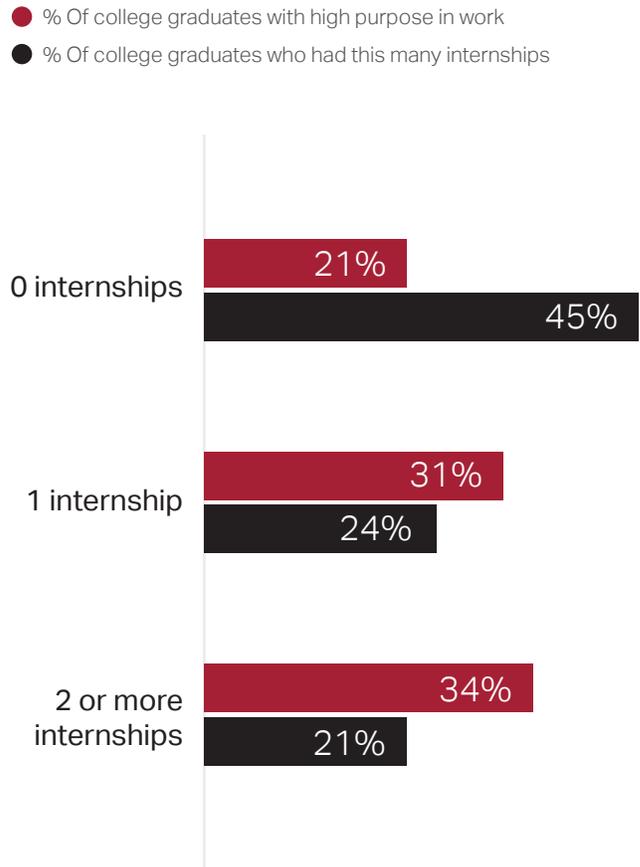
These findings also point to the importance of colleges being mindful of the ever-changing demands of the workforce that can vary by region and locale. While it may be unreasonable for professors and academic advisors to maintain this level of knowledge, institutions can keep pace through subscriptions and services that provide insights into workforce conditions based upon students' degrees and credentials. Some colleges employ lower-cost strategies to educate students about career avenues and opportunities. They may invite alumni or unaffiliated practitioners to share their career path and professional evolution with students. Some practitioners may teach a class, offering practices and strategies they employ in emerging and evolving work fields. Gallup's qualitative research with college students and graduates underscores the value they place on approaches that provide them visibility into the dynamic 21<sup>st</sup>-century workplace. When alumni contribute to these efforts, it presents opportunities for them to give back and forge deeper connections to their alma mater.

### The Importance of Internships and Applied Learning Experiences

Previous research has demonstrated the impact of “real-life” work experiences on college students’ long-term wellbeing and workplace engagement outcomes, as well as hiring managers’ esteem for these experiences when evaluating the merits of a job applicant. When business leaders were asked, “What talent, knowledge or skills should higher education institutions develop in students to best prepare them for success in the workforce in the coming years?” the number-one response was internships and on-the-job experience.<sup>6</sup>

Among college graduates, 56% had an applied internship in their college years, indicating that many more could benefit from this experience. When examining levels of purpose in work among college graduates, there is a clear advantage to having an internship. While 21% of graduates who had no internships have high levels of purpose in their work, the percentage of highly purposeful graduates increases to 31% among those who had an applied internship. Understandably, many students are unable to commit to an internship due to time or financial constraints. In such cases, real-life work experiences with lower barriers to entry, such as job shadowing, may also be helpful in conferring advantages to students, offering a realistic understanding of work environments and job demands without forcing students to forego a semester of classes for unpaid or low-pay work.

**FIGURE 4: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRADUATES’ NUMBER OF INTERNSHIPS AND PURPOSE IN WORK**



<sup>6</sup> *The 2013 Lumina Study of the American Public’s Opinion on Higher Education and U.S. Business Leaders’ Poll on Higher Education: What America needs to know about higher education redesign.* (2014). Gallup and Lumina Foundation.

## Employers and Parents Agree on the Value of Internships

Hiring managers' and college parents' responses to open-ended survey and focus group questions reinforce the relevance of students gaining real-world experience. For example, in response to the open-ended question, "How can colleges do a better job of developing students to become engaged workers?" managers most commonly cite the following:

- + Stress and teach analytical/critical thinking and problem solving; allowing them to think for themselves
- + Exposure to real-world situations/teaching real-life scenarios
- + Require or encourage internships, mentorship or apprentice programs
- + Teach more soft skills along with technical/focus on practical/real skills curriculum

Similarly, Gallup asked participants in the hiring manager focus group, "What are some things that colleges could be doing better to help prepare students for the workplace?" The respondents' answers are consistent with the survey responses:

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*"I think an internship should be required, at the time giving as much field experience opportunity as possible before the person graduates and doing that as early as possible in the four years or two years they're in, not just the last two months as a graduation requirement. And then also, making soft skills a part of the curriculum."*

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*"Our firm, we're about 12 people total and we hire anywhere from someone who interned through the year or entry-level positions up to designers, planners and project managers, so depending on the role, the needs change but everybody should have a minimum bachelor's degree and a minimum internship for a previous work experience."*

When asked the open-ended survey question, “How can colleges help students pursue paths that lead to work that is purposeful to them?” college parents most commonly cite “career counseling/opportunities to research and explore all careers” followed by “offering internships/job shadowing/apprenticeships.” Parents in the focus group also affirmed the value of students gaining real-life skills through such experiences as internships and co-ops to complement their academic experience:

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*“For me, and maybe I’m biased because I teach in a college level, there’s just too much focus on the book stuff. Then when you try to apply that to the real world, there’s a big disconnect ... I think for some students, I think, it’s really, really shocking, that transition stage.”*

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*“The experiential learning part of it is the reason we chose [this college] for my son. He’s now ... finished two years of schooling, and he’s on his co-op job from now until the end of the year. He’s getting paid while he’s learning. He’s learning about not only what he’s going to school for, he’s learning about two-hour commutes and things that are done on your time. All about responsibility. That part of it, he’s learning while he’s in school. Thank God.”*



# 05

## Reflecting on Purpose in Work

### *A Critical Life Skill*

At what point in their college careers graduates first start thinking about aligning their skills and interests with their future work is an important aspect of the undergraduate experience. While more than two in five college graduates who responded to the survey (44%) started to think about these issues before enrolling in college, almost a quarter (24%) waited until their senior year or later, if they had started at all.

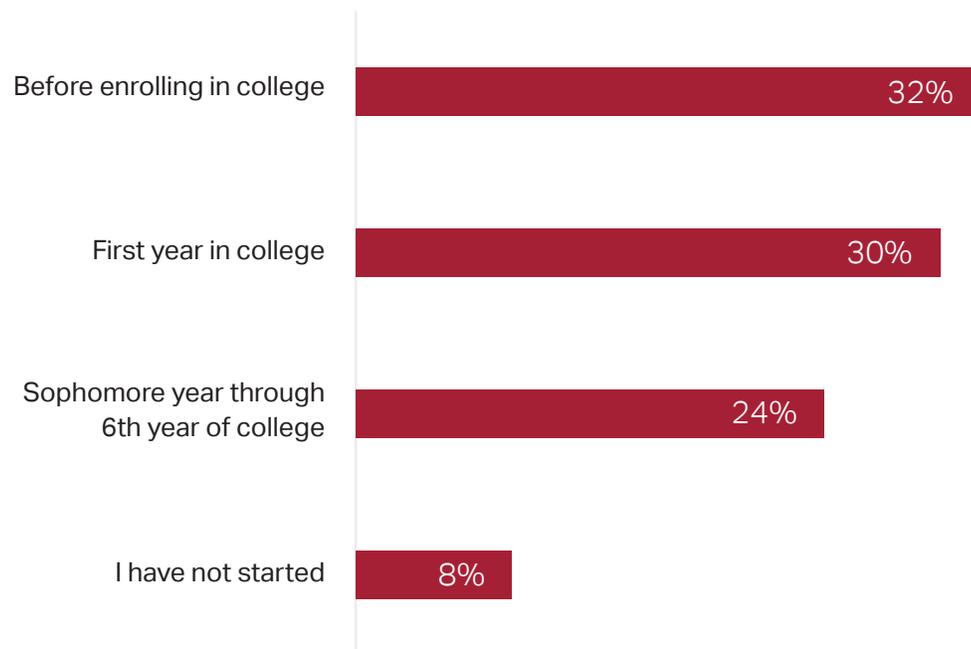
The study reveals that many students wait too long to begin their career exploration, indicating that colleges must be creative and nimble in adapting to individual student needs. Career development professionals and other college officials should support a continual process of self-examination, as even though nearly half of respondents advise they entered college having already put careful consideration into their future work lives, a majority needed more guidance along the way. A structured system of student experiences and opportunities as described in the previous section would provide such a scaffolded approach.

The survey also measures levels of purpose in work based upon when graduates started thinking seriously about aligning their future work with their skills and interests. The analysis demonstrates that those who embark upon this process during their first year in college or earlier are more likely to have high levels of purpose in their work and less likely to have low levels of purpose in work. Arguably, people who start this process earlier may be more motivated, which also relates to higher levels of purpose in work. Nonetheless, these findings suggest that helping students develop habits of mind that allow them to evaluate purpose and align their work aspirations to their interests and assets enables them to leverage their formative undergraduate experiences and sets them on a course for success.

**FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONSET OF SERIOUSLY CONSIDERING WORK AND PURPOSE IN WORK**

***When did you start thinking seriously about how your skills and interests might align with your future work?***

*% Of graduates with high purpose in work*



Having one or more applied learning experience is also associated with starting to think seriously about how one’s skills and interests might align with their work in the future. Whether people who start thinking about their work feel more compelled to test the waters with an internship experience, or whether an internship inspires someone to consider more deeply how their skills and interests align with specific fields and professions is not clear. It is likely a combination of both. Regardless, internships can serve as “testing grounds” for young learners to assess their career interests and aspirations against real-world experiences, allowing them to adjust their work goals and expectations if necessary. Students who wait until senior year to have an applied learning experience may miss the opportunity to change their major or set their sights on further education as they realign their career goals and aspirations.

### **Interests, Values and Strengths: The Essential Considerations for Purpose**

Survey respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of a variety of factors when deciding to pursue their current area of work. Graduates with high levels of purpose in work are generally more inclined to place higher priority on numerous factors compared to those with low purpose in work. That is, they are more likely to say most factors were “very important” in their decision to pursue their current work. This finding may indicate that graduates with high purpose in work are generally more contemplative in thinking about their work. However, the survey responses show there are specific factors — notably how their work relates to their interests, their values and their strengths — that contribute to high purpose in work. Graduates with a high sense of purpose in their work are about three times more likely to align their work with these aspects of themselves.

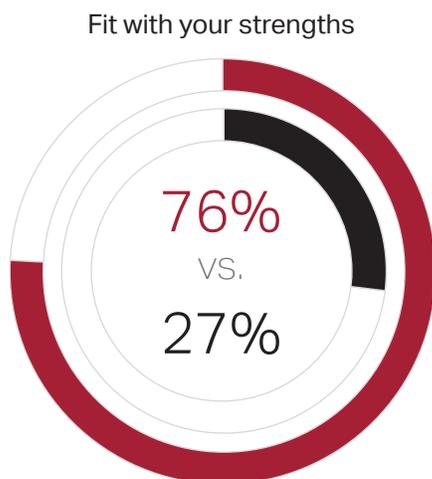
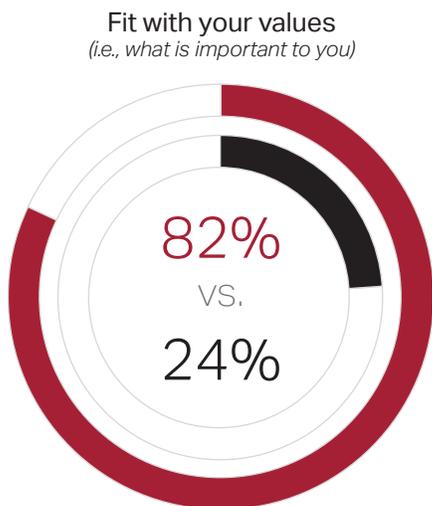
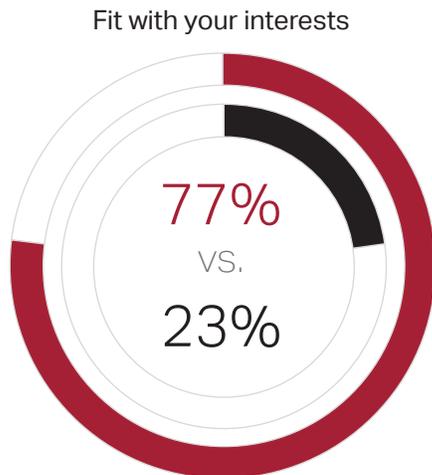
**Graduates with high purpose in work are about three times more likely to align their work with their interests, values and strengths.**



**FIGURE 6: PURPOSE IN WORK AND CONSIDERATION OF FIT WITH GRADUATES' INTERESTS, VALUES AND STRENGTHS**

*How important were each of the following when you were deciding to pursue your current area of work?*

● High purpose in work ● Low purpose in work



College parents were also asked to specify the priority they place on steering students toward purposeful work and careers. Parental survey responses underscore the importance of students' considering how their work aspirations reflect their unique interests and strengths. In response to the question, "When guiding your son/daughter towards a future career, how important are each of the following to you, as a parent?" parents most commonly cite:

- + Choosing work that is a good fit for your son/daughter's interests
- + Choosing work that is a good fit for your son/daughter's strengths

These parental priorities exceed other considerations offered including:

- + Choosing work that will be relevant/in demand for years to come
- + Choosing work that gives your son/daughter financial independence
- + Choosing work that is stable

Additionally, in response to the open-ended question, "How can colleges help students pursue paths that lead to work that is purposeful to them?" following career exploration and internships/job shadowing opportunities, parents most commonly cite:

- + To get to know the students/their interests/goals/test/evaluate to determine strengths
- + Align programs/classes to their interests/profession/career

These discoveries have powerful programmatic implications for leaders to consider in determining how to support a student experience that leads to greater self-knowledge and awareness. Academic leaders and career development staff should be intentional in having students identify and reflect upon their interests, values and strengths during their college years. Additionally, they can help students connect possible career choices to the academic content they are studying and how their professional aspirations may best align with their interests, values and strengths. While many colleges, particularly those in the liberal arts tradition, already prioritize such reflection and awareness and offer a variety of tools to increase students' knowledge of their interests and strengths, these findings suggest an important connection between such activities and graduates' heightened sense of purpose in their future work lives.

### Reflective Graduates Find Their Purpose

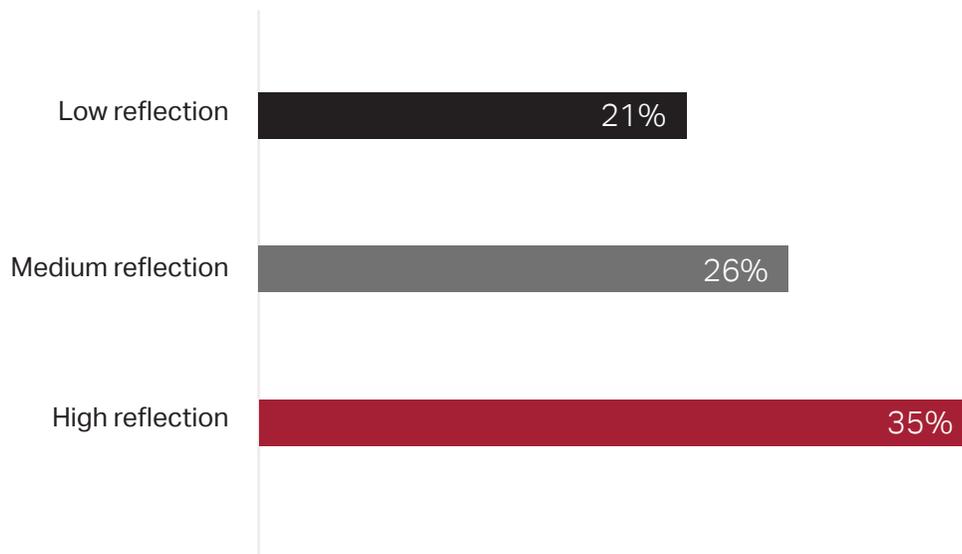
The Gallup survey contained several items to assess graduates' traits, including levels of reflection. These items asked respondents for their level of agreement with the following statements:<sup>7</sup>

- + I rarely spend time in self-reflection.
- + It is important for me to spend time reflecting on my experiences.
- + I frequently examine my feelings.

Based upon their responses to these items, respondents were placed in high, middle and low categories of reflection. Their responses demonstrate that graduates with higher levels of reflection are 67% more likely to have high levels of purpose in their work compared to those with low levels of reflection.

**FIGURE 7: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVELS OF REFLECTION AND PURPOSE IN WORK**

*% With high purpose in work*



<sup>7</sup> Grant, A.M., Franklin, J., Langford, P. (2002). The Self-reflection and Insight Scale: a new measure of private self-consciousness. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 30: 821–36.

These findings can guide institutions that are seeking to promote a sense of purpose in work among their students and graduates. College leaders can best achieve these aims by encouraging students to think deeply about their future work early in their college careers and by promoting more internships and applied learning experiences to support students' active and ongoing consideration of their future work. Academic leaders and career development professionals should consider ways to enhance the guidance students receive, ensuring they provide students with realistic expectations for their job prospects given their degree program and discipline, and that they have access to mentors and other trusted advisors connected to the realities of the workforce. A focus on infusing these experiences into existing course curricula and college requirements while also developing reflective skill sets will help students make the most of their college education and provide pathways for ongoing, engaged and meaningful work.

**Graduates with higher levels of reflection are 67% more likely to have high levels of purpose in their work.**



# 06

## For Millennials, Purpose Is as Important as a Paycheck

As the millennial generation comprises the largest single segment of employees in the U.S., their unique needs and challenges are a focus of public discussion. In 2016, Gallup released a landmark report characterizing what defines this generation of employees — their behaviors, attitudes and beliefs — for business leaders and others to use to adjust to the changing needs of today’s workforce. Not only are millennials more likely to be unemployed and underemployed than other generations, millennials who are employed have lower employee engagement.<sup>8</sup>

Employee engagement is particularly important not only for individual-level wellbeing but also due to the many benefits at the organizational level and beyond. Gallup’s ninth meta-analysis of more than 300 studies across 230 organizations in 49 industries and 73 countries compared work units in the top and bottom quartiles of employee engagement.<sup>9</sup> This in-depth analysis showed engagement to be a meaningful predictor of performance across such critical outcomes as productivity, profitability, customer loyalty, turnover, absenteeism, safety incidents and quality.

Employee engagement and purpose wellbeing are closely related but not the same. Specifically, engaged workers are eight times more likely to be thriving in their purpose wellbeing (67% thriving) than workers who are classified as “actively disengaged” (8% thriving). And workers thriving in purpose wellbeing are, in turn, 20 times more likely to be engaged at work (60%) than those who are “actively disengaged” (3%).

<sup>8</sup> *How Millennials Want to Work and Live* (2017). Washington, D.C.: Gallup.

<sup>9</sup> Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., Agrawal, S., Plowman, S. K., & Blue, A. (2016). The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes. 2016 Q<sup>12</sup> meta-analysis: Ninth edition. Washington, D.C.: Gallup. Retrieved from [www.gallup.com/services/191489/q12-meta-analysis-report-2016.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/services/191489/q12-meta-analysis-report-2016.aspx).



One of Gallup's most compelling insights from the millennial report was the greater priority millennials place on aligning their work with the mission and purpose of their organization compared to other generations. As millennials have recently been dubbed the "burnout generation,"<sup>10</sup> these indicators place increased importance on millennials finding purpose in their work. If past is prologue, the trends toward lower workplace engagement and a greater priority millennials place on aligning work with organizational mission and purpose should focus colleges' and universities' efforts on preparing current students with skills and competencies to find purpose in their work.

The current study reaffirms and deepens Gallup's previous insights into this young cohort of millennial workers. Open-ended responses offered by millennial respondents indicate they are more likely than older graduates to cite professional success, their careers and work when asked, "What in your life offers you a sense of purpose?" This finding is notable given that while younger graduates are just as likely as older graduates to say they derive purpose from their family, their spouse or partner and relationships with others in their life, they are less likely than older graduates to find purpose in volunteerism and helping others. In short, younger college graduates are more likely than older graduates to derive purpose from their work lives and less likely to find it through mission-driven activities outside of work.

<sup>10</sup> Petersen, A.H. (2019). How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation. *BuzzFeed News*. Retrieved from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>.

### **Regrets and Do-Overs: More Internships, Please**

In response to open-ended survey questions, millennial college graduates cite a variety of regrets about their college experience. When asked, “If you could turn back the clock to when you were an undergrad, what would you have done differently to pursue a path to purposeful work?” millennials are more likely to say, “A wider variety of internships/job shadowing.” This finding is notable given that millennials have had greater exposure to internships than previous generations (63% of millennials had an applied internship compared to 51–53% of Gen X and baby boomers). When asked, “What could your college have done to help you efficiently pursue a path to purposeful work?” millennials are more likely than previous generations to provide such responses as “Offer internships/job shadowing/work experience.”

In light of this study’s findings suggesting that increased access to on-the-job experiences is associated with increased purpose in work, and that millennials place high priority on both finding purpose in their work and gaining real-world work experiences, it follows that efforts to increase access to internships, job shadowing or co-op type experiences will be well placed. Many college and universities have already heeded the call, forging formal partnerships with local and regional employers, raising funding for unpaid opportunities and expanding their alumni networks to extend opportunities for students to gain work experience through internships and job shadowing. As noted previously, when colleges lower or remove barriers to students gaining real-world experiences through activities such as job shadowing, they impart relevant skills and knowledge while helping students evaluate and navigate their paths to purposeful work.



# 07

## Wellbeing and the Importance of Purpose

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Gallup has explored global measures of wellbeing and a life well-lived. In more recent years and in partnership with leading economists, psychologists and other globally-acclaimed scientists, Gallup developed a wellbeing measure that transcends countries and cultures, defining wellbeing among residents from Afghanistan to Zaire along five interrelated elements: purpose wellbeing, social wellbeing, financial wellbeing, community wellbeing and physical wellbeing.

Wellbeing is not static. It can change over time in response to life events and circumstances, such as the death of a spouse or sustained unemployment. Personal behaviors may also impact wellbeing, like eating healthier, avoiding spending to save money and becoming more engaged in one's community.

Importantly, wellbeing and life satisfaction do not merely benefit the individual; they are also associated with broader, population-level outcomes such as lower rates of obesity, chronic disease burden and acute illness, resulting in reduced healthcare expenditures — much of which are borne by employers.

In examining the relationships among the five elements of wellbeing, Gallup identified purpose (defined as liking what you do every day and learning or doing something interesting each day) as the most important element given its disproportional impact — for better or for worse — on one's overall wellbeing. Specifically, if someone is thriving in their purpose wellbeing, Gallup research shows they are more than twice as likely to be thriving in their lives overall.



Previous studies of purpose in life suggest it helps give life meaning by connecting a person to something larger than themselves; purpose “contributes to the world beyond the self.”<sup>11</sup> Purpose has been shown to contribute to psychological wellbeing and flourishing and is particularly associated with one of the main forms of wellbeing, eudaimonia, which is often defined by “relevance to a broader context, personal growth, excellence and authenticity, meaning relevance, personal growth, self-actualization and authenticity.”<sup>12</sup>

Decades of Gallup research demonstrates that workers with deep intellectual and emotional connections to their work deliver a host of benefits that extend far beyond themselves individually to their work unit and their organization, such as improvements in productivity, profitability and other critical outcomes. Employees who are meaningfully engaged at work not only support the success of their organizations but also, by extension, contribute to thriving local and national economies.

This study aims to expand on existing research related to purpose by specifically examining *purpose in work* among college graduates as related to their overall wellbeing, as well as how these outcomes relate to graduates’ experiences in college. This research offers insights for higher education leaders to use in their efforts to increase the likelihood that students will graduate college with the requisite skills, knowledge and experiences to position them for meaningful and purposeful work. Such efforts will not only improve students’ job prospects as they exit college, but also offer graduates greater satisfaction and wellbeing throughout their lives.

11 Damon, W., Menon, J. L., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Journal of Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 119–128.

12 Huta, V. (2015). *An overview of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being concepts*. In L. Reinecke & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Handbook of media use and well-being*. Chapter 2. New York: Routledge.

As with Gallup’s research related to purpose wellbeing, college graduates who are thriving in their *purpose in work* have higher overall wellbeing. A logistic regression controlling for a variety of factors to demonstrate the independent relationship of variables to graduates’ overall wellbeing reveals that *purpose in work* has a particularly strong and significant relationship to graduates’ overall wellbeing. Whereas only 6% of those who have low levels of purpose in their work have high levels of overall wellbeing, fully 59% of those with high purpose in work have high wellbeing.

Given the importance of finding purpose in one’s work to overall wellbeing, and how infrequently graduates strongly agree with individual statements that reflect purpose in work, it is clear that colleges and universities are not meeting a common expectation of the higher education experience: that college will prepare students to lead meaningful and engaged work lives.

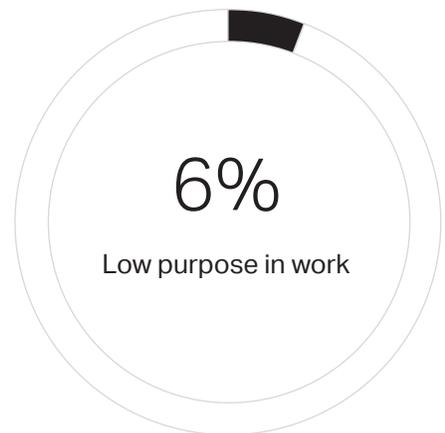
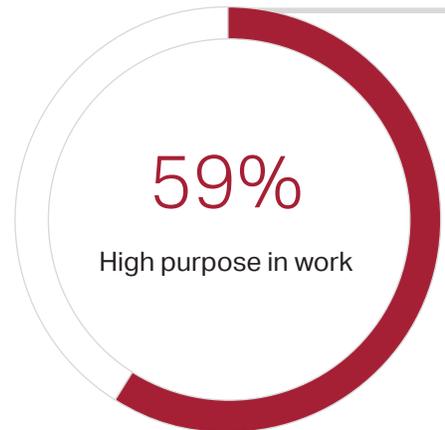
### Hiring Managers Value Employees With a Sense of Purpose in Their Work

Not only does a sense of purpose in one’s work prove valuable to the individual worker, it is also highly regarded by employers. Hiring managers who participated in the study focus group reinforced the importance of a sense of purpose among their employees. In response to the question, “When you’re looking at a job candidate, is it important to you that they may find a sense of meaning or purpose in the work that you are hiring them for?” managers offered such unequivocal statements as “Absolutely.”

**FIGURE 8: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PURPOSE IN WORK AND OVERALL WELLBEING**

#### *Graduates Thriving in Wellbeing*

*(% Thriving)*





○ **Graduates with high purpose in work are almost 10x more likely to have high overall wellbeing compared to those with low purpose in work.**

A few managers provided additional context for their affirmation:

“

*“The happiest people are the ones that, like I say, do the best job, but they’re the ones that go the extra mile, they’re the ones that come in on time, that come early, that stay late because they’re happy and they’re fulfilled.”*

“

*“All organizations are driven in part by money, obviously. And we’re always looking for people that we can grow organically in our organization. So ... if people aren’t seeing that sense of fulfillment, purpose, they’re not going to be the best employees and they’re not going to forward your company’s mission. So for us, it’s important we have people that come into the business ... and buy into what we’re trying to do.”*

As colleges and universities address the challenges of preparing students for a dynamic workforce, they may consider opportunities to provide students with skills and habits that help them find a sense of purpose. Such strategies will not only enhance their wellbeing but will also improve their employability in the jobs they aspire to hold.

# 08

## Employers Affirm the Value of the Liberal Arts

In recent years, the liberal arts have faced increasing levels of scrutiny, with critics contending that liberal arts colleges produce graduates who are less prepared for today's workforce than more career-oriented institutions. The humanities, in particular, have come under intense critique, as a common misconception prevails that these degrees are ill-suited to the careers of the future. While numerous research studies have debunked these perceptions,<sup>13</sup> many of these myths persist in the public sphere.

The goal of a liberal arts education is to prepare graduates for complexity, diversity and change — all of which are commonplace and in ascendance in today's workforce. Uniting a broad education across diverse disciplines with in-depth study, liberal arts education imparts a combination of intellectual and practical skills that include critical thinking, effective communication, analysis and problem solving, teamwork and collaboration.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, liberal arts graduates have been shown to gain “high-level abilities, transferable from discipline to discipline and from one environment to another.”<sup>15</sup> While critics assail the failure of some liberal arts programs to provide graduates with skills aligned with the needs of today's workforce, recent research supports the enduring relevance of “human skills,” like leadership, communication and problem solving, paired with “hard skills” as the critical avenue for graduates to secure long-term employment.<sup>16</sup>

13 Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal education and the future of work. (2018). Washington, D.C.: Hart Associates. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2018EmployerResearchReport.pdf>.

14 What is Liberal Education? American Association of Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education>.

15 AAC&U National Panel Report. (2002). *Greater Expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U.

16 Blumenstyk, G. (2018, December 4). One way to set up liberal arts major for success: focus on skills, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; Weise, M., Hanson, A., Sentz, R. & Saleh, Y. (2018). *Robot-Ready: Human+ skills for the future of work* (2018). Indianapolis, IN: Strada Institute for the Future of Work.

In addition to probing the perceptions and experiences of college graduates, Gallup surveyed managers who hire college graduates to determine their priorities for how colleges can best prepare students for work and the relative importance of a variety of traits in evaluating job candidates. These findings underscore the value of the liberal arts tradition in transforming college graduates into successful job candidates. They also validate research that suggests graduates who combine a liberal arts foundation with key hard skills avoid underemployment and job loss due to automation, and in many cases their performance outpaces graduates from more occupation-oriented programs.

The survey asked managers to rate the relative importance of the educational outcomes on which colleges should focus. In response, managers most frequently cite the following:

- + Developing students' critical thinking skills
- + Developing students' ability to communicate effectively
- + Developing students' ability to effectively collaborate/work on a team
- + Developing students' curiosity and interest in work that is meaningful to them

Similarly, when asked to prioritize attributes in evaluating job candidates, managers offer (listed in order of greatest priority):

- + Critical and analytical thinking
- + Clear and effective oral communication skills
- + Clear ethical judgment
- + Ability to solve real-world problems
- + Clear and effective writing skills
- + Ability to collaborate/work effectively in a team

These findings are consistent with previous research that dispels the common myth that the liberal arts do not sufficiently prepare graduates for the workforce, as critical thinking, effective communication and the ability to collaborate and work as part of a team are all hallmarks of a liberal arts education.<sup>17</sup> And while they affirm the pillars of a liberal arts education in providing such skills and experiences, such return on investment is by no means strictly confined to a liberal arts education. These outcomes may be developed and promoted as a fundamental part of the undergraduate experience in many types of institutions.

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<sup>17</sup> Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal education and the future of work. (2018). Washington, D.C.: Hart Associates. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2018EmployerResearchReport.pdf>.

# 09

## Conclusion

As this report clearly demonstrates, finding purpose in one's work is not merely a "nice to have" aspect of employment but an increasingly essential component of creating a thriving and productive workforce. Purpose in work not only confers substantial benefits to the individual, it is valued by employers who recognize the superior performance of purposeful workers contributing to the mission and bottom line of their organization. Moreover, younger employees, who comprise a substantial segment of today's workforce, place heightened priority in finding purpose in their work and work organization, yet few of them believe they have found that purpose.

As colleges and universities look to enhance the undergraduate student experience to increase the likelihood of graduates finding both meaning and success in their work and careers, this study contributes specific and actionable findings to support their efforts. Programmatically, institutions can increase students' exposure to real-world work experiences, build reflective skills and encourage them to explore and pursue interests while not setting them up for disappointment upon reaching the workforce. However, simultaneously providing students with realistic expectations for their job prospects is also a must.

Fundamentally, when colleges support students through a developmental process of reflection and awareness of their interests, values and strengths, helping them align their personal traits with realistic professional aspirations through real-world exposure, students will be well-served, institutions will be more successful and the global workforce will be more vibrant and engaged.



# 10

## Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel web study completed by 2,205 college graduates, 637 hiring managers, and 1,037 parents of students who are college bound, in college or who recently graduated from college. Data were collected Oct. 23 – Nov. 5, 2018. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based longitudinal panel of U.S. adults whom Gallup selects using random-digit-dial (RDD) phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones. Gallup also uses address-based sampling methods to recruit Panel members. The Gallup Panel is not an opt-in panel and members do not expect to receive incentives for participating. The college graduate sample for this study was weighted to be demographically representative of the U.S. adult population, using the most recent Current Population figures. The parent and hiring manager sample was not weighted. For results based on this sample, one can say that the maximum margin of sampling error (accounting for the design effect from weighting) is  $\pm 2.4$  at the 95% confidence level for the college graduate population,  $\pm 3.9$  for hiring managers, and  $\pm 3.0$  for parents. Margins of error are higher for subsamples. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error and bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

Gallup conducted four in-person focus groups as part of this study — two in Boston, MA, and two in Charlotte, NC, in July 2018. Two groups consisted of college graduates from a diverse array of four-year colleges, aged 21–55 years old with an emphasis on younger graduates (0–10 years post-graduation). The third focus group was conducted with hiring managers of college graduates and the fourth group was conducted with parents of college students.

Gallup worked with Bates to determine screening criteria and facilitation guides for each group. Participants were recruited and screened by phone and were offered incentives ranging from \$100 to \$200 to participate in these 90-minute discussions.



- + Each college graduate participant held a bachelor's degree from a U.S.-based college or university, earning degrees in a variety of disciplines (e.g., humanities, STEM, social sciences, etc.). Participants also varied according to their employment status (e.g., full time, part time, unemployed or homemaker) and several were first-generation college graduates. Recruitment for the college graduate groups ensured diversity in race, gender and income, and several held advanced degrees beyond their bachelor's. Topics discussed in the groups included participants' education-to-work journey, how their college education prepared them for work and for finding purposeful work and what, in retrospect, they would have done in college to better prepare for the workforce.
- + Participating hiring managers were all employed full time and made hiring decisions often or very often regarding employment for positions requiring a college degree or higher. They, too, were diverse with respect to their gender, age, race, income level and the industries in which they worked. Topics discussed in the group included their hiring decisions for positions requiring a college degree or more, the importance of employees who derive purpose in their work and attributes or experiences they look for in reviewing a job candidates' qualifications for their positions. They were also asked how colleges could better prepare students for entering the workforce.
- + The college parents each held a college degree or higher and had college-bound children aged 14–18, and/or children aged 19–25 years old who were currently enrolled in or recent graduates of a four-year degree program. Topics discussed in the group included their aspirations for their children — both in college and in their careers — how they would like college to prepare their son or daughter for the workforce, and the relative importance they place on their son or daughter finding purposeful work.

Given that these discussions were qualitative in nature, they are not generalizable to the greater population.



11

## About Bates College

Located in Lewiston, Maine, Bates is internationally recognized as a leading college of the liberal arts, attracting 2,000 students from across the U.S. and around the world. Since 1855, Bates has been dedicated to educating the whole person through creative and rigorous scholarship in a collaborative residential community. Committed to opportunity and excellence, Bates has always admitted students without regard to gender, race, religion or national origin. Cultivating intellectual discovery and informed civic action, Bates prepares leaders sustained by a love of learning and zeal for responsible stewardship of the wider world.

Bates established the Purposeful Work program in 2014 as a guiding philosophy for preparing students for life after college. It is grounded in the college's mission, has curricular and co-curricular aspects, and takes a four-year developmental approach to working with students. Purposeful Work is about helping students discover the joy and power that arise from aligning who they are with what they do. It helps students identify and cultivate their interests and strengths and provides opportunities for them to acquire the knowledge, experiences and relationships necessary to pursue their aspirations with imagination and integrity.

[www.bates.edu/purpose](http://www.bates.edu/purpose)

# About Gallup

Gallup delivers forward-thinking research, analytics and advice to help leaders solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of the world's constituents, employees and customers than any other organization. Gallup consultants help private and public sector organizations boost organic growth through measurement tools, strategic advice and education. Gallup's 2,000 professionals deliver services at client organizations, through the web and in nearly 40 offices around the world.

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