Finding Their "Why": Examining the Development of Sense of Purpose During the University Years and Its Role in Student Well-Being

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FINDING THEIR “WHY”: EXAMINING THE DEVELOPMENT OF 
SENSE OF PURPOSE DURING THE UNIVERSITY YEARS 
AND ITS ROLE IN STUDENT WELL-BEING 

by 

Michael Q. King 

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment 
of the requirements for the degree 
of 

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY 
in 

Human Development and Family Studies 

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY 
Logan, UT 

2022
Finding Their “Why”: Examining the Development of Sense of Purpose during the University Years and its Role in Student Well-Being

by

Michael Q. King, Doctorate of Philosophy
Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Travis E. Dorsch
Department: Human Development and Family Studies

Nearly 20 million students were expected to be enrolled for post-secondary studies during the 2020-2021 academic year. As part of their recruitment efforts, colleges and universities often communicate to prospective students that matriculation will involve both academic training and the opportunity to discover their purpose. A lack of clarity regarding the role of these institutions in helping students develop their sense of purpose suggests that continued scholarly attention is warranted. In addition, the ongoing mental health crisis gripping institutions of higher education across the United States lends further support to the need to examine a developmental construct that has been described as providing a “sheltering fortress in a world of constant threat”. In the present two-study dissertation, Study 1, a quantitative study, was designed to examine sense of purpose as a potential buffer between university-related stress and psychological distress. Results from this study suggest that sense of purpose moderates the relationship between stress and burnout for sophomores but not for other student cohorts. This study has the
potential to inform future work within higher education settings, specifically with regard to “bridging” opportunities for matriculating sophomores. Study 2, a qualitative study, was designed to provide an in-depth exploration into the perceptions of graduating seniors on the development of their sense of purpose during the university experience. Results from this study highlight participants’ perceptions that the university played a key role in exposing them to a broader world, helping further establish identity and values, while providing structure and support. Independently, the studies possess the potential to offer unique contributions to current understanding of sense of purpose and inform meaningful research directions to future scholars. Collectively, the results have the potential to offer important practical considerations for college and university staff and administrators involved with student well-being and retention.

(193 pages)
Finding Their “Why”: Examining the Development of Sense of Purpose during the University Years and its Role in Student Well-Being

Michael Q. King

Nearly 20 million students were expected to be enrolled for college or university studies during the 2020-2021 academic year. These institutions often advertise to prospective students that, in addition to advancing their education, they will discover their purpose. Given previous work and current interest in sense of purpose, additional attention on sense of purpose in the university setting is worthwhile. In addition, as many university stakeholders are concerned about an ongoing mental health crisis, a further examination into a developmental construct (i.e. sense of purpose) thought to provide a “sheltering fortress in a world of constant threat” seems especially relevant. In the present two-study dissertation, Study 1, a quantitative study, was designed to examine sense of purpose as a potential buffer between university-related stress and psychological distress. Results from this study suggest sense of purpose moderates the relationship between stress and burnout for sophomores but not other years in school. Study 2, a qualitative study, was designed to provide an in-depth exploration into the perceptions of graduating seniors on the development of their sense of purpose during the university experience. Results from this study highlight that participants’ perceptions that the university played a key role in exposing them to a broader world, helping further establish identity and values, while
providing structure and support. Independently, the studies possess the potential to offer unique contributions to current understanding of sense of purpose and inform meaningful research directions in the future. Considered together, the results have the potential to offer important practical considerations for college and university staff and administrators involved with student well-being and retention.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my son, Theo.

Thank you for the gift of perspective.

My greatest hope is that I’ll get to hold you again.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will forever be grateful for the love and support of my dearest friend and companion, Katie. Her support has been unwavering, and she has encouraged me in all my pursuits. As our family concludes this chapter of life, where so many family decisions have been dictated by my professional ambitions, I hope the next chapter provides me with an opportunity to return the favor by spending more time supporting her.

I am grateful to my sons Samuel, Roger, and Jack. They have come to simply refer to this document as “Daddy’s big paper”. I am grateful for their patience as I have completed this dissertation and look forward to spending more time with them. I am grateful for the joy they have brought into everyday life and the welcome respite they provided throughout graduate school.

I am grateful to my parents, John and Pam King. Whether it was texts of encouragement or gift cards that helped provide for basic needs, they were always there for our family. While I know they are far more concerned with my performance as a husband and father, I hope they are proud of this accomplishment. I also acknowledge the support my grandparents have provided throughout my life. I am grateful to my mother-in-law Michelle Israelsen and father-in-law Dave Israelsen. Their work ethic and perseverance provided a meaningful example for me to follow. My siblings (Tracy, Holly, Randall, Heidi, Daniel, David, Laura, Joseph, Katie, Emily, and Michelle) have kept me laughing through the years and have been gracious enough to provide the necessary teasing to keep me humble.
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Michael Q. King
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Nearly 20 million individuals were projected to attend a college or university in the United States during the 2020-2021 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The developmental stages typically associated with this period of life, adolescence and emerging adulthood, have been identified as a crucial time for the discovery and development of a sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014). Perhaps aware of the developmental salience, many institutions of higher education advertise that they are prepared to help students discover and develop a sense of purpose. Examples include “GCU wants to help you find your purpose!” (Grand Canyon University, n.d.) and “This is where you will find your purpose” (Gonzaga University, n.d.). Speaking to prospective students, one university president stated “…if you choose to come here, you’ll be on a path to discover your purpose.” (Wyatt, 2017).

Sense of purpose has been described as the “reason behind the immediate goals and motives that drive most of our daily behavior” (Damon, 2008, p. 34). In addition, a sense of purpose has been analogized as a “sheltering fortress in a world of constant threat” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). These outcomes (i.e., a source of motivation and a shelter from threat) seem especially relevant to a population who is engaged in an experience that requires years of effort and is often accompanied by significant stressors (Liu et al., 2019). Victor Frankl, credited with paving the way for research on sense of purpose, often contended that “he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 1992, p. 84).
The present two-study dissertation was designed to further understanding in two key areas related to sense of purpose in the university setting. Study 1, a quantitative study, was designed to examine whether students with a “why” are better able to bear the “how” associated with university matriculation. Study 2, a qualitative study, was designed to examine graduating seniors’ understandings and experiences of the discovery and development of their sense of purpose along with a description of what role they feel the university played in that process.

**Literature Review**

To prepare the reader for the research questions guiding this two-study dissertation, relevant theoretical and scholarly work surrounding sense of purpose will be reviewed. This will include an introduction to *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1959) and the role Victor Frankl played in opening the door to future work on sense of purpose. Sense of purpose will be formally operationalized and a companion measurement tool introduced. Theoretical work, providing a foundation and rationale for a focus on sense of purpose, will be reviewed. Research on the emergence and development of sense of purpose, along with its role in well-being, will be discussed. The emergent *mental health crisis* on college and university campuses will be explored and sense of purpose as a potential buffer against deleterious outcomes will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with the presentation of the research questions that will guide the two complementary dissertation studies.
Man’s Search for Meaning

Researchers have credited Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959) with putting the construct of sense of purpose on the “psychological map” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). Frankl contended that any individual, regardless of situation, could discover meaning and that it would serve as their most powerful motivator (Frankl, 1992). According to Frankl, those who do not pursue meaningful aims (i.e., purpose) would experience existential frustration. To the psychoanalytic and behaviorist thinkers of the time, sense of purpose represented a “marginal factor” in human development and arguments suggesting it played a primary role in motivation were viewed as “soft-headed and sentimental” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). Despite its departure from mainstream understanding of behavior and development, Frankl’s work endured and now represents a foundation from which the door for research into human development through the lens of sense of purpose was opened.

Defining Sense of Purpose

As is typical for an emerging construct, definitions and theoretical conceptions surrounding sense of purpose have varied and at times overlapped (Bronk, 2014). Perhaps the most notable example are the numerous occasions where the terms *meaning* and *purpose* have been used interchangeably (Damon et al., 2003). Although Frankl (1992) did not offer a distinction between meaning and purpose, contemporary scholars have operationalized purpose as an important component of the broader concept of meaning (see Baumeister, 1991). Others contend that sense of purpose should be considered as
playing a unique developmental role in future-oriented psychological outcomes (i.e.,
goal-directedness, aspirations, and persistence) (Bernard, 1991; Damon et al., 2003). As
is the case with sense of purpose, a variety of definitions have been proposed for the term
meaning in the fields of psychology and human development (Steger et al., 2006). While
proposed definitions vary, there is agreement that a sense that one’s life is meaningful is
crucial for well-being. To provide needed clarity and to further operationalize sense of
purpose as a construct distinct from the broader concept of meaning, Damon and
colleagues (2003) offered the following definition: “Purpose is a stable and generalized
intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of
consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). In their presentation and validation of
a survey measure that captures this conceptualization of sense of purpose, Bronk and
colleagues (2018) provided further elucidation of the three main features found within
Damon’s definition:

1. Having a sense of purpose requires a commitment to a long-term aim. Differing
   from short-term goals, purpose is further-reaching and more stable. This feature
could be illustrated by contrasting the statements “I am going to try and get all of
my biology homework done today” and “I plan on becoming a pediatrician”.

2. To qualify as a sense of purpose, one’s pursuit must be personally meaningful.
   Importantly, the significance of the pursuit is thought to provide the individual
with the needed motivation to carry out the intended aim. Indeed, the level of
motivation would likely differ between a student that is studying law because
their parent was only willing to provide financial support for that career choice
and a student that is seeking to become a lawyer because they are passionate about legal representation for minorities.

3. One’s sense of purpose includes an intention to make contributions *beyond-the-self*. As discussed by Bronk and colleagues (2018), individuals with a beyond-the-self orientation are more likely to reap the benefits that are indicative of a sense of purpose (e.g., higher levels of life satisfaction) than those that are more self-focused. To illustrate, consider the potential differences between an individual that pursued a certain career to attain corporate-level status and an individual following a similar professional path to contribute to their community and broader society.

**Measuring Sense of Purpose**

Several approaches have been utilized in the literature to measure sense of purpose. One of the earliest of measures, the *Purpose in Life Test* (Crumbauch & Maholick, 1969), was designed to assess personal meaningfulness and orientation to long-term aims. However, scholars noted the importance of needing to incorporate the beyond-the-self dimension included in Damon and colleagues’ operationalization (Bronk et al., 2018). These same scholars noted that existing measures were designed for use with adults and not adolescents. The authors rightly point out that this is a problematic oversight given the central role of sense of purpose in identity development among adolescents and young adults. To address deficiencies in these and other existing measures of purpose, Bronk and colleagues (2018) designed and validated the *Claremont*
Purpose Scale. This scale, with a foundation in Damon and colleagues (2003) proposed definition for purpose, includes 12 items that were drawn from existing measures, including the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) and the Psychological Scales of Well-Being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The authors deliberately rephrased the items taken from these questionnaires to avoid acquiescence bias (e.g., “My life has a clear sense of purpose.” is replaced with “How clear is your sense of purpose in your life?”), which is the tendency to agree strongly with survey items phrased as statements (Fowler, 2009).

Theoretical Perspectives on Sense of Purpose

Several contemporary works on sense of purpose have relied on the foundational writings of Erik Erikson (see Bronk et al., 2018; Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003; Hill & Burrow, 2012). Erikson’s theoretical work, grounded in a psychoanalytic perspective, served as a catalyst for the field to consider development across the lifespan while also providing key insights related to the role of identity in adolescent development. On the topic of purpose, Erikson contended that commitment to meaningful aims is an essential aspect of healthy development, and that “purposefulness” is a criterion of “vital individual strength” (Erikson, 1968, p. 141).

Erikson’s work is often represented through his presentation of a series of eight psychosocial stages (represented in Figure 1). These stages, comprising the entire lifespan, represent what Erikson saw as key periods of development. In Erikson’s view, an individual will be presented with a “crisis” at each stage, and the resolution of these crises
will determine developmental outcomes. Within this theory, the healthy resolution of a crisis will contribute to overall well-being and lead to the development of personal assets, or virtues. Purpose – and its role in development – can be recognized within these stages.

Figure 1

_Erik Erikson’s eight Stages of Psychosocial Development (Erikson, 1963)_

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<th>Stage/Crises</th>
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<td>Ego Integrity vs. Despair</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>65+</td>
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At an early age, an individual is faced with the crisis of _initiative vs. guilt_. Erikson viewed this stage of development and its associated crisis as a period where the autonomy an individual developed previously is accompanied by an increased ability and desire to act on the world around them. Simply, if an individual receives support and is encouraged in their pursuits to show initiative, the resolution of this stage will be the development of
the virtue of purpose (Erikson, 1985). In the fifth stage of development, *identity vs. role confusion*, youth will experiment with a number of different identities and ultimately determine where they “fit” within society. Erikson (1968) saw the development of a sense of purpose as a means of resolving this crisis. Importantly, Erikson contended that those who have difficulty dedicating themselves to pursuits that are personally meaningful will encounter increasing difficulty in developing motivating belief systems in later life (Erikson, 1968). Erikson’s seventh stage, *generativity vs. stagnation*, involves the individual needing to determine whether or not the pursuits in which they are engaged will make contributions beyond themselves and positively impact future generations. The definition proposed by Damon and colleagues (2003) for sense of purpose captures this developmental concern well by considering a *beyond-the-self* orientation as a main feature of sense of purpose. Researchers have noted that while a beyond-the-self orientation is considered a key feature of sense of purpose in their work, youth will often not mention beyond-the-self aims when asked to describe what it means to have a sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014). Providing support for Erikson’s writings contending that adults think more about how their pursuits will impact others and contribute to society, past research has found that adults incorporate a beyond-the-self facet into their conception of meaningful living (Wong & Fry, 1998).

Inspired by Erikson’s conceptual thinking, Hill & Burrow (2012) identified three key propositions that should be considered when examining the role of sense of purpose in an individual’s development. First, sense of purpose will contribute to identity development due to the overall benefits it will have on one’s well-being. Second, sense of
purpose can facilitate the development of one’s identity by helping them resolve questions surrounding who they are and where they fit in society. Third, the construct of sense of purpose is related but distinct from identity and this would be shown by a unique ability to predict outcomes. Hill & Burrow (2012) conducted a series of studies highlighting that (1) purpose develops during adolescence and early adulthood in tandem with identity, and (2) while correlated, identity and purpose have distinct roles in predicting outcomes.

The theoretical work discussed up to this point highlights development across the lifespan and the milestones that one will reach on their journey. Importantly, in addition to the expected milestones of development, each individual will be presented with unique difficulties and challenges that present risks to their development and health. Other theoretical works have focused specifically on what allows individuals to maintain health in the face of difficulty. Aaron Antonovsky, a medical sociologist, observed that many of his colleagues were engaged in research on stress that was guided by a pathogenic orientation. In other words, others involved in stress research were concerned with questions like, “what makes a person have a heart attack?”. Beyond simply “standing the question on its head,” Antonovsky proposed that researchers ask, “what moves people toward the health end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum?” (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 76).

Recognizing the need for a term that conveyed this mode of thinking, Antonovsky coined the term salutogenesis. The first full presentation of the salutogenic model and the core concept of coherence were presented in Health, Stress, and Coping (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky later defined a sense of coherence as:
A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that the stimuli from one’s internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement.

(Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19)

Antonovsky referred to the three components found within this definition as comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. These three components, making up a sense of coherence, were posited to directly impact health as they would lead an individual to engage in behaviors that promote well-being.

Antonovsky later noted that his previous work had not adequately addressed the component of meaningfulness. He elaborated:

(Meaningfulness) refers to a way of looking at life as worth living, or seeing stressors as perhaps painful and yet worthy of being coped with rather than anaesthetized.

Seeing life in this way provides the motivational force which leads one to seek to order the world and to transform resources from potential to actuality

(Antonovsky, 1990, p. 79).

Antonovsky contended that a salutogenic orientation would improve one’s research, especially when considered in contrast with a pathogenic orientation (Antonovsky, 1990). He argued that a salutogenic approach would lead scholars to consider the use of continuous variables of health, as opposed to the dichotomous approach that one either does/does not have a disease. Acknowledging the difficulty of
doing so, Antonovsky advocated for measuring one’s overall health status as opposed to simply the variables associated with illness. He cautioned researchers that they may be guilty of ignoring “dependent variable data which may be even more important in the lives of people than what you have selected” (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 77). Addressing his preference for discussions on coping resources, Antonovsky contended that variables that act as “buffers, mediators or protective factors (become) paramount when one adopts a salutogenic approach” (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 77).

Emergence and Development of Purpose

The cognitive structures necessary to consider longer-term aims and commitments are not likely to emerge until adolescence (Bronk, 2014; VanDyke & Elias, 2007). While a young child will certainly engage in activities that they find personally meaningful, they are not as likely to be incorporating the other features found in Damon and colleagues (2003) conception of purpose (e.g. a long term aim and beyond-the-self orientation). The appearance of sense of purpose during these years has also been attributed to the theorized association between the development of purpose and the exploration of identity (Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968), with identity exploration not becoming a prominent developmental feature until adolescence or emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Research provides support for this connection by showing that the development of one’s identity and commitment to purpose are, in fact, intertwined (Hill & Burrow, 2012). Other work has allowed researchers to illuminate profiles of purpose development (Burrow et al., 2010) that strongly correspond to the identity statuses presented by Marcia
Importantly, the discovery and development of a sense of purpose has been discussed as playing an important role in resolving the crisis of this developmental stage, as proposed by Erikson, by offering adolescents a meaningful outlet to which they can dedicate their time and energy (Burrow & Hill, 2011).

While Erikson’s work primarily framed issues of identity within the stage of adolescence and the crisis of identity vs. role confusion (taking place between ages of 12 and 18), there is evidence that youth today engage in the process of identity exploration later than past generations (Schwartz et al., 2005). This delay, along with a set of new and often harder-to-navigate contexts of development, has led to the introduction of a new life stage, emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Beginning in one’s late teens and concluding at age 30, emerging adulthood was proposed to better understand the unique developmental experiences that youth encounter during the transition to adulthood in the 21st century. Researchers, while certainly influenced by Erikson’s work surrounding adolescence and the conflict of identity vs. role confusion, are increasingly associating identity exploration with the life stage of emerging adulthood (Schwartz, 2007).

Despite the potential benefits associated with the development of a sense of purpose (Benson, 2006; Damon, 2008), it is not observed in all young people (Bronk, 2014). Research suggests that a minority of adolescents and emerging adults identify with a strong sense of purpose (Bronk et al., 2010; Damon 2008; Moran, 2009). When asked to define what it means to have a sense of purpose, youth generally report features such as benefitting from a clear direction for their efforts or how it helps one lead a happier life (Hill et al., 2010). Such cases reveal that while there is overlap between researchers
and youth on understanding of sense of purpose, youth do not incorporate each feature of
sense of purpose as defined by Damon and colleagues (2003). As individuals move into
adulthood, they have been found to incorporate other features of how they view purpose,
but more specifically meaning, as including beyond-the-self motivations (Wong & Fry,
1998).

Research prioritizes the role of friends and family in helping youth further
develop a sense of purpose, particularly the feature of personal meaningfulness. Early
academic work in this area found that individuals with strong father figures in their lives
were more likely to engage in pursuits that facilitated personal meaning (Padleford,
1974). In addition to family-level influences, purposeful youth have reported on the
strong influence of mentors and like-minded peers on the discovery and pursuit of
activities that are meaningful to them (Bronk, 2012).

Youth involvement in extracurricular activities has been shown to
associate with the development of a sense of purpose (Bronk, 2012; Maton, 1990). These
activities range from sports to involvement in community service or religious groups. In
relation to religiosity, youth who report regularly praying to a higher power, regardless of
church attendance or affiliation, are more likely to report feeling that their life has a
purpose (Francis & Evans, 1996). A critical feature of extracurricular contexts is that they
provide an additional social network beyond the family and school, which is among the
most important predictors of the presence of purpose (Bronk, 2014). Importantly, youth
have reported identifying a sense of purpose as a result of engaging in various activities,
as opposed to choosing the activities they engaged in based on an already-established sense of purpose (Bronk, 2012).

While there may be a tendency to assume higher-achieving youth would report higher levels of sense of purpose than others in their cohort, previous research has shown that levels of sense of purpose are actually similar between average and high-achieving youth (Bronk et al., 2010). Regardless of one’s status or ability, it appears that the development of purpose is a gradual process, rather than one that occurs rapidly or all at once (Bronk, 2012). Moreover, it appears that the development of purpose is informed by what individuals want to accomplish as well as the kind of person they want to become (Bronk, 2012).

The further examination of sense of purpose during adolescence and emerging adulthood is a worthwhile endeavor for multiple reasons. Most notably, sense of purpose is likely to make its debut during these formative years. In addition, sense of purpose has been shown to be a developmental asset that mediates the relationship between stable identity and well-being (Burrow & Hill, 2011). Lastly, as shown in this review, while there have been a number of works highlighting the role of sociocultural environments (i.e., organizations, communities, and society) on the development of purpose, not as much is understood about the role of one salient and relatively ubiquitous environment, the college/university campus, on the discovery and development of students’ sense of purpose.
Sense of Purpose and Well-Being

Contemporary scholars have suggested that the field of psychology has been slow to recognize the role of sense of purpose on well-being (Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). Despite this limitation, a number of important contributions have fostered understanding of the benefits of sense of purpose. Seligman (2002), considered by many to be the father of positive psychology, contends that authentic happiness can only be achieved when one chooses to consistently engage with activities that are purposeful. Others have described sense of purpose as a developmental asset, particularly for youth (Benson, 2006). Sense of purpose has also been conceptualized as an antecedent to a number of meaningful outcomes, including higher achievement, higher self-esteem, and more prosocial behavior (Damon & Gregory, 1997).

Formal education settings have also been identified as important contexts wherein sense of purpose might contribute to positive outcomes. Students who are able to identify interests that inspire them and receive support for the exploration of these interests achieve higher levels of academic success (Benson, 2008). Perhaps furthering support for the connection between sense of purpose and identity, students who actively develop a sense of identity are also able to more clearly define the purpose for their education and how they plan to achieve their goals (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Highlighting the role of a beyond the self-orientation forwarded in Damon and colleagues’ (2003) definition of purpose, students who report professional aspirations that will benefit others are more likely to find schoolwork to be meaningful (Yeagar & Bundick, 2009). Students who can make connections between their education and long-term aims are also more likely to
remain motivated in their studies (Damon, 2008). Others suggest that pursuing purposes that are meaningful to the individual will result in a more holistic and meaningful academic experience (Yeagar & Bundick, 2009). Importantly, researchers have noted that the directionality of any relationship between purpose and achievement in academic settings is unknown (Bronk, 2014).

Beyond the academic setting, extant research suggests there may be an association between purposeful living and life satisfaction, from adolescence through adulthood (Bronk et al., 2010). For example, happiness found in settings like religiosity may, at least in part, be a function of purposeful living (Aghababaei & Blachnio, 2014; French & Joseph, 1999). Other empirical efforts have positioned sense of purpose as a catalyst for psychological well-being (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and highlighted its association with lower levels of psychopathology (Kish & Moody, 1989). In the university setting, prior worked has highlighted associations between well-being and the presence of purpose in life for matriculating students (Shek, 1993). Having a purpose has been discussed as increasing one’s ability to manage resources and work toward their goals (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Other work has highlighted how consideration of purpose can lessen the link between effort and overestimation of barriers to be overcome (Burrow et al., 2016). Sense of purpose has also been found to be linked with lower levels of perceived stress and cortisol reactivity (Scheier et al., 2006; Fogelman & Canli, 2015).

Researchers have discovered a number of meaningful connections between sense of purpose and mental health. Specifically, those with a sense of purpose showed
decreased anxiety (Burrow & Hill, 2013) and are better suited for regulating emotions and overcoming obstacles (Hill et al., 2018). Other work has found sense of purpose to be positively associated with hoped for outcomes such as self-esteem and negatively associated with anxiety and depression (Bigler et al., 2001). Researchers have noted in their review of this association that the relationship between sense of purpose and psychological well-being is strong, regardless of what may serve as a source for sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014).

In late adulthood, high levels of sense of purpose are strongly associated with lower levels of depression and higher levels of psychological well-being (Pinquart, 2002). With regard to physical health, purpose has been linked to greater longevity in non-clinical populations (Hill & Turiano, 2014). Having a purpose to one’s life has been found to predict higher sleep quality and fewer sleep-related issues (Turner et al., 2017). In later life, higher reported levels of purpose are correlated with decreased instances of symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease and mild cognitive impairment (Boyle et al., 2010).

It is not only that sense of purpose has positive psychological and physical effects, but a lack of sense of purpose can also have deleterious effects. Frankl contended that as having a purpose to one’s life was foundational to human existence, serious problems awaited those who attempted to live without one (Frankl, 1992). Among his warnings, Frankl sought to highlight the relationship between a lack of purpose and apathy (Frankl, 1992). Frankl hypothesized that this existential frustration was present within many individuals in the general population. In reviews of the relationship between one of the three features of purpose, specifically meaning in life, and well-being, lacking a sense of
meaning has consistently been found to be associated with pathology (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Further, lacking a sense of meaningfulness has been associated with higher levels of psychological distress and poorer levels of psychological health (Debats, 1998). A lack of meaningful direction has also been associated with alcohol and illicit drug use (Marsh et al., 2003). Purposelessness has also been discussed as a contributor to self-absorption, difficulty in relationships, addictions, a lack of productivity, and destructive behavior (Damon, 1995).

The Emerging Mental Health Crisis

At present, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the structure and delivery of the university experience. As of 4 April 2022, 79,342,899 infections had been reported in the United States, with 972,830 deaths from the disease (World Health Organization, 2021). Recent work has suggested that in the midst of the pandemic, purposeful individuals may still experience greater health in their daily life and well-being (Hill et al., 2021). These researchers, as is surely the case in many fields, call for further work to understand the impact of the pandemic. While multiple efficacious vaccines offer promise of an eventual return to normalcy, many unknowns still exist for students who matriculate on American college and university campuses. And although technology has allowed for the continued advancement of the educational mission of most institutions, some students will not receive the face-to-face experience they had hoped for. Although these tangible outcomes are certainly measurable, the intangible impact of the pandemic on students’ university experience is not yet fully understood.
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of concerning trends already existed among colleges and universities across the United States. Among the most cited has come to be known as the emergent mental health crisis (see Kitzrow, 2003; Schwartz & Kay, 2009). As part of institutional responses to this growing need, many colleges and universities have increased the number of mental health professionals providing on-campus services (DeRito, 2019; LeViness et al., 2018). In a recent large-scale study, 67,308 college and university students from 108 institutions across the United States completed the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA). Approximately one in four respondents reported being diagnosed or treated for a mental disorder during the previous year. More striking, roughly one in five reported thoughts of suicide with nearly one in ten having attempted suicide (Liu et al., 2019). Importantly, these findings suggest that exposure to stressful events is strongly associated with mental health related diagnoses and/or suicidality among college and university students (Liu et al., 2019).

Data from an annual survey conducted by The Association for University College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) reveal that the most common presenting issues among students who seek help from an institutional counseling center are anxiety (reported in 58.9% of cases), depression (reported in 48% of cases), and stress (reported in 46.9% of cases). Additionally, of those seeking help, 28.4% reported thoughts of suicide, 28.2% reported struggling academically, and 18.5% reported feelings of loneliness or social isolation (LeViness et al., 2018).
Stressors surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have appeared to further impact mental health. The American Psychological Association recently produced a report titled *Stress in America 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis* that outlined some of the specific impacts of the stressful events accompanying COVID-19 on mental health. Data cited in this report reveal that 19% of adults reported that their mental health worsened over the previous year, with that figure leaping to 34% for individuals in Generation Z (APA, 2020). In this same report, approximately 8 in 10 adults reported the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant source of stress in their life and roughly 2 in 3 adults reported that the overall amount of stress they have experienced during the pandemic has increased (APA, 2020).

While many institutions seek to aid students in need, many find their staff and/or infrastructure at risk of being overwhelmed. Indeed, 33.7% of the counseling centers surveyed in the AUCCCD study reported having a wait list at some point during the previous year. On average, counseling centers reported serving 11.8% of the total student population with the mean counselor-to-student ratio being 1/1411 (LeViness et al., 2018). While college and university counseling centers across the United States are doing admirable work, it appears that many remain ill-equipped to address the emergent mental health crisis on their own.

**Sense of Purpose as a Moderator**

The ongoing mental health crisis (see Kitzrow, 2003; Schwartz & Kay, 2009) leads to a natural desire to examine potential protective factors, or *buffers*, for students.
While the extant literature does not currently provide answers regarding the role of sense of purpose in buffering the impacts of stress for university students, previous studies have examined the potential moderating role of sense of purpose in other health outcomes. One of these studies explored how sense of purpose moderates the effect of social media feedback on self-esteem. In their work, Burrow and Rainone (2017) found that the association between “likes” on social media profile pictures and self-esteem were diminished for those with a higher reported purpose in life.

In the context of bereavement, higher reported levels of sense of purpose have been found to serve as a buffer between bereavement and negative outcomes, such as the experience of existential crises (Ulmer et al., 1991). Perhaps most closely related to the area of focus for this dissertation is previous research carried out by Hill and colleagues (2018). Results from this study suggest that individuals with higher reported levels of purpose in life showed fewer increases in negative affect and physical symptoms on days more filled with stress. In other words, the presence of sense of purpose may buffer the impact of stress on an individual’s physical symptoms. Importantly, however, work addressing this hypothesis has yet to be carried out in the higher education setting.

While such results are encouraging, the buffering effect of sense of purpose has not always been supported by research. A recent study designed to examine sense of purpose as a moderator between depression and chronic disease suggested that high levels of sense of purpose did not moderate the relationship between depression and a number of chronic health problems, including heart attack risk (Cox, 2021). In
interpreting these results, the author suggested that other variables associated with psychological well-being may be better suited to moderate this relationship.

Given the current challenges facing university administrators, faculty, staff, and students, it is important to pursue a more nuanced understanding of the role of sense of purpose on student well-being. In pursuing this aim, it is also important to explore factors that may influence the development of sense of purpose during the university experience. Specifically, a multi-methodological examination of the development of sense of purpose in the university setting, informed by Damon and colleagues (2003) conceptualization of sense of purpose, has the potential to make unique theoretical and practical contributions to the field’s understanding of this developmental phenomenon.

The literature presented in this section was intended to highlight the following key points, or takeaways, with regard to sense of purpose and growing concerns regarding the well-being of university students:

1. Institutions across the United States advertise that they are well-suited to help individuals discover and develop a sense of purpose. Understanding of how the post-secondary experience accomplishes this goal is limited.

2. Many definitions have been proposed for sense of purpose. A definition consisting of three main features (i.e. long-term aim, personally meaningful, and beyond-the-self orientation) is growing in support and is now accompanied by a validated companion tool for measurement.

3. Sense of purpose has been posited by theorists to play a critical role in development and act as a resource that helps individuals endure hardship.
4. Research has found sense of purpose to be closely tied to identity development and well-being.

5. Universities across the United States are in the midst of a Mental Health Crisis. In addition to therapeutic resources, students are likely to benefit from constructs that act as a proactive measure against psychological distress and burnout.

6. Previous research has been designed to examine sense of purpose as a moderator, or buffer, with varied results. Research has yet to explore how sense of purpose might buffer the impacts of stress for university students.

**The Present Dissertation**

The present dissertation addresses two notable gaps at the intersection of the psychological and higher education literatures. First, this work examines whether students with a “why” are better able to bear the “how” associated with university matriculation. This addresses the role of sense of purpose as a potential “sheltering fortress”, or buffer, between stress and psychological distress. Second, this work addresses the role of the university when helping students discover and develop a sense of purpose. Specifically, it articulates graduating seniors’ understandings and experiences of the development of their sense of purpose during their university experience along with a description of what role they feel the university played in that development. Addressing these two gaps both broadens and deepens understanding of the role of sense of purpose
in the post-secondary educational experience. The following research questions guided the completion of this two-study dissertation:

RQ₁: What buffering effect, if any, does sense of purpose possess between psychological well-being and the stressors experienced by students engaged in post-secondary education?

RQ₂: What are the perspectives of graduating students on the development of their sense of purpose as a result of their university experience?

These research questions were answered through the thoughtful design, execution, and analysis of complementary research studies, each of which is fully outlined in the document’s subsequent two chapters.
CHAPTER TWO

STUDY 1

Are university students with a “why” better enduring the “how”? An examination of sense of purpose as a potential moderator of the relationship between perceived stress and psychological well-being

Nearly 20 million individuals matriculate annually at post-secondary educational institutions in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). A number of these colleges and universities have sought effective strategies to address what has come to be referred to as an emergent mental health crisis (see Kitzrow, 2003; Schwartz & Kay, 2009). Students seek the assistance of institutional counseling centers to address serious personal concerns, including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and burnout (LeViness et al., 2018). In responding to this growing need, many colleges and universities have increased the number of mental health professionals providing on-campus services (LeViness et al., 2018; DeRito, 2019).

Data collected by The Association for University College Counseling Center Directors (LeViness et al., 2018) suggests that the most common presenting issues among students who seek help from an institutional counseling center are anxiety (reported in 58.9% of cases), depression (reported in 48% of cases), and stress (reported in 46.9% of cases). Of those students seeking help, 28.4% reported thoughts of suicide, 28.2% reported struggling academically, and 18.5% reported feelings of loneliness or social
isolation (LeViness et al., 2018). A recent study of 67,308 college and university students from 108 institutions across the United States revealed that 25% of students reported a diagnosis or treatment for a mental disorder during the previous year. More striking, roughly one in five students reported thoughts of suicide, with 9% of the sample having attempted suicide (Liu et al., 2019).

Despite institutions’ best efforts to “keep up” with this crisis, many students who want or need help aren’t provided immediate access. Indeed, 33.7% of the AUCCCD counseling centers surveyed in 2018 reported having a wait list at some point during the previous year. This should not come as a surprise as counseling centers reported serving 11.8% of the total student population with a mean student-to-counselor ratio of 1411/1. While college and university counseling centers across the United States are doing admirable work, they seem to lack the bandwidth to provide services in a broad and timely manner.

In addition to their direct support of counseling centers, colleges and universities have introduced initiatives and programs aimed at increasing the developmental assets (i.e., the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in university studies) of matriculating students (Utah State University, n.d.). A key developmental asset that warrants further examination for its role in the university experience -- and how it may safeguard the mental health of students -- is sense of purpose.

Sense of purpose is “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). Sense of purpose is posited to play an important role in
students’ overall psychological well-being (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and has been linked with lower levels of psychopathology (Kish & Moody, 1989). Individuals with a greater sense of purpose have been shown to display decreased anxiety and are better able to regulate their emotions and overcome obstacles (Burrow & Hill, 2013; Hill et al., 2018). Researchers have situated sense of purpose as a likely contributor to higher achievement, higher self-esteem, and more prosocial behavior (Damon & Gregory, 1997). Research across the lifespan has demonstrated the positive associations that exist between purposeful living and life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2010).

Researchers have credited Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1992) for bringing attention to sense of purpose as a developmental construct (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). Frankl’s seminal text opened the door for future work on sense of purpose. In his work, Frankl contended that “…suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning…” (p. 117) and added his voice to Friedrich Nietzsche’s by further contending that “he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (p. 84).

The present study was designed to examine whether and to what extent this principle -- that those with a sense of purpose are better suited to bear the burdens of life -- might apply in the university setting. Specifically, this research was guided by the following question: “What buffering effect, if any, does sense of purpose possess between psychological well-being and the stressors experienced by students engaged in post-secondary education?” Given the level of practical and empirical concern about the current mental health crisis on college and university campuses, this study was designed
to address an important gap: namely, the extent to which having a sense of purpose might buffer the impact of student stress on levels of depression, anxiety, and burnout.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical Orientation**

Erik Erikson’s seminal work brought attention to the developmental need for youth to dedicate themselves to meaningful purposes (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson, individuals encounter eight different stages across the lifespan, each consisting of a “crisis” to be resolved. The healthy resolution of crises are posited to translate into positive outcomes for the individual. As youth exit childhood and move into adolescence (Erikson’s fifth stage), individuals are said to encounter the psychosocial crisis of *identity vs. role confusion*. During this stage, Erikson posits that youth experiment with a number of different roles in an attempt to establish their identity and ultimately find their place within society. Importantly, the exploration of one’s identity is thought to coincide with the development of sense of purpose (Erikson, 1968; Bronk, 2014). Research provides support for this link, having shown that the development of one’s identity and commitment to purpose are associated constructs (Hill & Burrow, 2012).

Other scholars have focused on the factors that influence an individual’s ability to overcome hardship. Antonovsky’s conceptualization of *salutogenesis* draws attention to the factors that make an individual healthy rather than the factors that make them ill. At one point, Antonovsky acknowledged Victor Frankl as an individual who was also “working on the salutogenic problem” (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 78). At the core of
salutogenesis lies the role of coherence in predicting overall health (1987). Coherence, according to Antonovsky, consists of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The meaningfulness component, a key feature in Damon and colleagues (2003) definition of purpose, was defined as:

… a way of looking at life as worth living, or seeing stressors as perhaps painful and yet worth of being coped with rather than anaesthetized. Seeing life in this way provides the motivational force which leads one to seek to order the world and to transform resources from potential to actuality (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 79).

Antonovsky championed salutogenic -- as opposed to pathogenic -- orientations (Antonovsky, 1990), and argued that this would be most fruitful as researchers considered continuous, rather than dichotomous, variables surrounding health. In addition, he expressed a strong preference for discussions around coping resources. According to Antonovsky, variables that act as “buffers, mediators, or protective factors (become) paramount when one adopts a salutogenic approach” (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 77).

**Sense of Purpose and Psychological Well-Being**

Research has been slow to consider the role of sense of purpose in the development and maintenance of psychological well-being (Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). Early research brought attention to sense of purpose as a catalyst for psychological well-being (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and its association with lower levels of psychopathology (Kish & Moody, 1989). Contemporary research has extended this work
by highlighting an association between purposeful living and satisfaction with one’s life (Bronk et al., 2010). In addition to contributing to overall life satisfaction, sense of purpose is thought to enhance an individual’s ability to effectively manage resources as they pursue their goals (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Of note, sense of purpose has been found to help decrease an individual’s level of arousal in the midst of difficult or challenging circumstances (Burrow et al., 2016). A higher sense of purpose has also been associated with a decrease in perceived stress and cortisol production (Fogelman & Canli, 2015; Scheier et al., 2006). Moreover, those with higher sense of purpose tend to display lower levels of anxiety (Burrow & Hill, 2013) and are better able to regulate emotions as they seek to overcome obstacles (Hill et al., 2018).

In contending that having a purpose to one’s life is an essential marker of the human experience, Frankl suggested that serious consequences await those who attempt to endure life’s challenges without one (Frankl, 1992). Extant research provides support for this supposition by highlighting inverse associations between sense of meaning and psychological distress and poorer psychological health (Debats, 1998). Researchers have also pointed to instances where a lack of purpose results in self-absorption, struggles in personal relationships, addiction, and other destructive behaviors (Damon, 2005).

**Sense of Purpose as a Moderator**

As mentioned, Victor Frankl contended that “he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 1992, p. 84). In the form of a scientific statement, this could be interpreted as a thesis suggesting that having a why (i.e. a sense of purpose) will
buffer the stress an individual experiences, allowing them to persist in the *how* of accomplishing a certain end. This aligns with Damon’s (2003) characterization of sense of purpose as a “sheltering fortress in a world of constant threat” (p. 119). Given the concerning mental health-related trends observed among college and university students, the promise of providing students with a shelter from threat may appear an ideal remedy. However, although extant research provides some support for sense of purpose as a “sheltering fortress”, the corpus of literature in this area offers mixed findings on whether sense of purpose is indeed a moderator of the relationship between stress and well-being.

One area that scholars may look toward to disentangle this ambiguity is research on social media use. Scholarship in this area has highlighted how sense of purpose may act as a buffer in the context of feedback on social media. Specifically, Burrow and Rainone (2017) found that the association between the number of “likes” an individual received on a profile picture of their social media account and self-esteem were diminished among those that reported higher levels of purpose in life. In the context of grief, sense of purpose has also been found to act as a buffer between bereavement and negative outcomes, including the induction of an existential crisis (Ulmer et al., 1991).

**The Present Study**

The design of the present study was influenced by Hill and colleagues (2018), who sought to explore the role of sense of purpose in moderating the relationship between daily stressors and daily well-being. Their work revealed that those with higher levels of sense
of purpose, while reporting the same number of daily stressors, did not display similar increases in negative affect or negative health symptoms.

With limited understanding of the role of sense of purpose as a potential moderator, the present study represents a potentially valuable contribution to the literature base. To address this knowledge gap, the purpose of the present study was to examine what buffering effect, if any, does sense of purpose possess between psychological well-being and the stressors experienced by students engaged in post-secondary education. In line with past theory and research, it was hypothesized that higher levels of stress would lead to higher levels of psychological hardship, but that higher levels of sense of purpose would attenuate this relationship in significant and practically meaningful ways.

Method

Participants

The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human participants at Utah State University. Subsequent to approval, participants were recruited in three primary ways. First, members of the research team contacted University instructors directly and provided them with the means to invite students in their courses to participate. This included a flyer (see Appendix B) and a sample message that was to be used to communicate with students about the research opportunity. Second, members of the research team contacted directors of various on-campus programs and offices. Examples included Athletics, Honors, Aggie Frist Scholars
(a program for first-generation university students), TRIO/Student Support Services, statewide campuses, and the Inclusion Center. These individuals were provided the same information as instructors with an additional request to print and post the flyer somewhere where it could be seen by students involved with their groups (e.g., lobbies, waiting areas, announcement boards, etc.). Third, members of the research team collaborated with the administrators of established social media groups, both on and off campus, requesting that an electronic version of the flyer be posted to their page/group website.

In an effort to capture a diversity of perspectives, these three recruitment strategies allowed recruitment to occur across a range of academic departments (strategy 1), programs and offices (strategy 2), and social media groups (strategy 3). The final analytic sample represents a non-probability, convenience sample, as participants ultimately self-selected based on their own desire to complete the online survey.

Participants were undergraduate students at Utah State University, located in the Intermountain West region of the United States. As the land-grant institution for the state of Utah, Utah State University emphasizes serving those that are socioeconomically disadvantaged as well as those from rural areas. 84% of students enrolled at this institution are state residents with 83% of the total student population being white (Utah State University, 2020). Among the participants in this sample, 92% were white. Other categories of racial identity more closely aligned with overall institution numbers. These include individuals identifying as American Indian/Alaskan native (1% among student population and sample), Asian (1% of student population and 2% of sample),
Black/African American (less than 1% of student population and sample). In addition, ethnic identity among the student population and sample closely aligned. Specifically, approximately 6% of both the student population and study sample identified as Hispanic. In line with the definition of emerging adulthood, students were between the ages of 18 and 30 ($M = 21.63, SD = 3.18$; Mean age for freshmen = 19.96, Mean age for sophomores = 21.09, Mean age for juniors = 22.08, Mean age for seniors = 23.54) and grade point average (GPA) ranged from .47 to 4.0 ($M = 3.61, SD = .45$). Additional information on the demographics of this sample is included in Table 1.

Table 1

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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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**Religion**

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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in particular</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another religion that is not listed</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**College**

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<tr>
<td>College of Agriculture &amp; Applied Sciences</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caine College of the Arts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon M. Huntsman School of Business</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Education &amp; Human Services</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Engineering</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>College of Humanities &amp; Social Sciences</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Natural Resources</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Science</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am not sure which college my major is in</td>
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**Campus**

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Statewide Campus</td>
<td>62</td>
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</table>

**Procedure**

Students who chose to participate were invited to take part in a one-time, online survey. Given the many demands placed on university students (e.g., coursework, employment, families, extracurricular engagement, social opportunities), the survey was
created to address the research questions as parsimoniously as possible. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix C. Students who elected to participate had the opportunity to be entered into a drawing to receive one of 15 $100 Amazon gift cards.

**Measures**

**Sociodemographic Information**

Participants were asked to respond to a number of sociodemographic items at the beginning of the online survey. Specifically, participants were asked to report on age, living situation, family and relationship status, and biological sex, as well as other items related to how the student identified including ethnicity, race, year in school, religious affiliation, major or intended major, involvement in university groups, and cumulative GPA. These items are included in the first section of the survey instrument (found in Appendix C).

**Sense of Purpose**

Sense of purpose was measured using the 12-item *Claremont Purpose Scale* (Bronk et al., 2018). This scale, intended for use with adolescents, is designed to measure sense of purpose along the three dimensions of purpose as described in prior work (see Damon et al., 2003). Damon and colleagues (2003) defined purpose as a “*stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self*” (p. 121). Bronk and colleagues (2018) designed the scale to capture the three dimensions of purpose set forth in this definition, specifically *personal meaning, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self orientation*. 
Likert scales for each item provided participants with five options. For example, students were asked, “How clear is your sense of purpose in your life?” and responded on a scale from not at all clear (1) to extremely clear (5). Items for this scale were drawn from existing measures, including the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (Steger et al., 2006) and the *Psychological Scales of Well-Being* (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), but the wording was changed to avoid acquiescence bias, or the tendency to agree with survey items phrased as statements (Fowler, 2009). For example, “My life has a clear sense of purpose” is replaced with “How clear is your sense of purpose in your life?”). The overall scale demonstrated both internal consistency of scores ($\alpha = .92$) and convergent validity in previous use with a sample of demographically diverse 18- to 30-year-old individuals (Bronk et al., 2018).

**Stress**

Stress was measured using the 21-item *University Stress Scale* (USS) (Stallman & Hurst, 2016). The scale was designed as a screening measure in an attempt to capture the demands being placed upon sampled students. Students were asked how often different environmental factors (e.g., housing/accommodation, academic/coursework demands, study/life balance, discrimination) had caused stress over the previous month and responded on a 4-point Likert scale from not at all (1) to constantly (4). The USS has demonstrated internal consistency of scores ($\alpha = .83$) in previous use with a convenience cross-section sample of Australian University Students (Stallman & Hurst, 2016).
**Depression**

Depression was measured using the 9-item depression subscale of the *Patient Health Questionnaire* (PHQ-9) (Kroenke et al., 2001). Likert scale items asked participants to rate from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*nearly every day*) how much they experience things such as “little interest or pleasure in doing things”, “feeling tired or having little energy”, and “feeling…that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down” during the past two weeks (Kroenke et al., 2001). This scale displayed internal consistency of scores as part of an initial validation study ($\alpha = .89$) with 6,000 patients across multiple clinics (Kroenke et al., 2001).

**Anxiety**

Anxiety was measured using a 7-item generalized anxiety disorder (GAD-7) scale (Spitzer et al., 2006). Likert scale items asked participants to rate from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*nearly every day*) how much they have experienced things such as “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge”, “not being able to stop or control worrying”, and “worrying too much about different things” during the past two weeks (Spitzer et al., 2006). This scale has displayed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$) in past research across 15 clinics within the United States (Spitzer et al., 2006).

**Burnout**

Burnout was measured using the student version of the 16-item *Oldenburg Burnout Inventory* (OLBI-S) (Reis et al., 2014). The original version of the scale was introduced as an alternative measure to assess burnout, as manifested through *disengagement* as well as physical and cognitive experiences with *exhaustion* (Demerouti
Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) with statements including “when I study, I usually feel energized”, “after a class or after studying, I usually feel worn out and weary”, and “it happens more and more often that I talk about my studies in a negative way”. Both the exhaustion and disengagement subscales of the OLBI-S were found to be reliable ($\alpha = .87$ and $\alpha = .83$ respectively) in past research with English education undergraduates in Nigeria (Igbokwe et al., 2019).

**Data Analysis**

Prior to inferential analysis with statistical models, exploratory data analysis was conducted. Descriptive statistics were computed to describe the univariate distributions of the independent and dependent variables. Bivariate correlation measuring strength and direction of linear relationship between pairs of variables were calculated with Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficients (see Table 2).

To address potential biases in the data, the following variables were examined to determine if they ought to be included in the model as covariates: age of participant, housing situation, number of dependent children, relationship status, religion, and participation in the university orientation program called “Connections”. For all but one, these variables were not found to have significant relationships with sense of purpose or well-being outcomes. The exception was the relationship that was found between number of dependent children and one of the well-being outcomes (i.e. depression). In an attempt
to account for potential confounding, number of dependent children was included in the model as a covariate.

To examine the potential overall attenuating effect of sense of purpose on the relationship between stress and the psychological outcomes of anxiety, depression, and burnout, a moderation analysis was conducted. As defined by Baron and Kenny (1986), a moderator is a variable that has an impact on the direction and/or strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable(s). A common approach to assess full- and partial-moderation is to use a path diagram for both descriptive and analytic procedures. As shown in Figure 2, the structural equation model (SEM) that was examined was specified to test the moderating effect of sense of purpose (Z) on the relationship between the independent variable “stress” (X) and the dependent variables “depression” (Y1), “anxiety” (Y2), and “burnout” (Y3). The interaction, or moderating effect of sense of purpose, is represented as “XZ”.
Figure 2

Proposed Structural Equation Model (SEM) used to Examine Sense of Purpose as a Moderator of the Relationship between Stress and Three Psychological Outcomes

\[ \text{Note. The interaction between stress and sense of purpose is represented as “xz”}. \]

Given the complexity surrounding structural equation modeling and the flexibility of analysis allowed by this technique, the lack of a universally accepted method among scholars for determining sample size is not surprising. Schreiber and colleagues (2006) suggest there is some consensus around seeking 10 participants per estimated parameter. The presented model in this study, with an included covariate, specifies 12 regressions, 3 covariances, and 3 variances, totaling 18 parameters to be estimated. Using this approach
as a guide, an initial sample size of at least 180 participants was sought. To assess model fit, the overly sensitive Chi square measure of absolute fit (West et. al, 2012) and several relative fit measures were utilized. The McDonald and Ho (2002) criterion for both the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI > .95) and Bentler’s Comparative Fit Index (CFI > .95) were employed, as well as the Hu and Bentler (1999) suggestion for root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA < .06).

In light of literature framing sense of purpose as a developmental construct (Damon et al., 2003), a secondary analysis was performed to examine whether sense of purpose moderated the relationship between stress and the three dependent variables across participants’ year in school (i.e., freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior). The three-way interaction allowed examination of the potential buffering effect of sense of purpose to vary by year in school. The three moderation pathways were analyzed via three independently fit multiple linear regression (MLR) models. All analyses were conducted in R 4.1.0 (R Core Team, 2021) and the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) was utilized for fitting SEM. Statistical significance is determined at the standard level, $\alpha < .05$.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Univariate summary statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, ranges, Cronbach alpha) and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 2. Alpha reliability statistics ranged from .83 to .92, indicating that each of the measures displayed good or excellent levels of
internal consistency (Cronbach, 1975). An examination of the bivariate correlations suggests that each of the variables is significantly correlated with all others (all \( p \)'s < .001). All three psychological outcome measures exhibited strong positive correlation with each other (\( r \)'s = .49 - .81), whereas stress and sense of purpose were negatively correlated with each other, \( r = - .27 \). As expected, stress was quite strongly associated with poorer outcomes (\( r \)'s = .52 - .71) and sense of purpose was negatively associated with the same outcomes (\( r \)'s = -.22 - .36). Indicators of normality appear to be within an acceptable range. When utilizing SEM, values for skewness are considered acceptable when between -3 and 3 and the acceptable range for kurtosis is between -10 and 10 (Brown, 2006). As shown in Table 2, values fall within these ranges.
Table 2

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Variables (N = 328)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Stress</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>-.27***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Depression</td>
<td>.71***</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Anxiety</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>.81***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Burnout</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>-.35***</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
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<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.56</td>
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<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>2.56</td>
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<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.86</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>2.47</td>
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<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
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<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.39</td>
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<td>0.80</td>
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<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Min</strong></td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>3.81</td>
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<td>Freshmen</td>
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<td>3.00</td>
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<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
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<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.81</td>
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<td>3.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
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<td>-1.00</td>
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<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kurtosis</td>
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<td>1.41</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>α</strong></td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.84</td>
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</table>

*Note.* Cronbach’s alpha (α) values between .7 and .9 represent good levels of internal consistency and values ≥ 0.90 represent excellent levels of consistency (Cronbach, 1975).

***p < .001.
Moderation Analysis

Figure 3 displays the parameter estimates as fitted by the proposed SEM shown in Figure 2 to investigate if sense of purpose moderates the relationship between stress and the three dependent variables (i.e., depression, anxiety, burnout). The model had mixed support from fit measures. The Chi square measure of absolute fit suggests the model fits the data poorly, $X^2(15) = 789.32$, $p < .001$. Importantly, researchers have noted, partly due to a dependence on sample size, little emphasis should be placed on the significance of this statistic (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). Other fit measures suggest good model fit, TLI = 1.00, CFI = 1.00, and RMSEA = 0.00. Stress was found to have significant direct associations with each of the dependent variables: depression ($b = 1.10$, $p < .001$), anxiety ($b = 1.30$, $p < .001$), and burnout ($b = .42$, $p < .001$). The direct associations between sense of purpose and the dependent variables were mixed. Sense of purpose was found to be significantly, and inversely, related to depression ($b = -.24$, $p < .001$) and burnout ($b = -.15$, $p < .001$) but not anxiety ($b = -.07$, $p = .40$).

As shown in Figure 3, results did not provide support for sense of purpose as a moderator between stress and the three dependent variables. Specifically, sense of purpose was not a significant moderator of the relationship between stress and depression ($b = -.06$, $p = .57$), anxiety ($b = -.04$, $p = .75$), or burnout ($b = -.11$, $p = .10$). To confirm these results, the three moderation pathways were run independently. Results of these follow-up analyses confirmed a lack of observable moderation (the output of these follow-up analyses are provided in Appendix H). Given the relatively high GPA among participants, the same analysis was performed with the students with the lowest grade
point averages (GPA <= 3.60). This analysis revealed the same results but with less power.

**Figure 3**

*Fitted Structural Equation Model (SEM) with Parameter Estimates Examining Sense of Purpose’s Moderation of the Relationship between Stress and Three Psychological Outcomes*

*Note.* The interaction between stress and sense of purpose is represented as “xz”.

*** $p < .001$. 
Moderation by Year in School

In light of literature framing sense of purpose as a developmental construct (Damon et al., 2003), a secondary analysis was performed to examine whether sense of purpose moderated the relationship between stress and the three dependent variables across participants’ year in school (i.e., freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior). Table 3 presents the follow-up MLR analyses. This analysis reveals a lack of support for sense of purpose as a moderator of the relationship between stress and depression or stress and anxiety, by year in school. However, support was found for sense of purpose as a moderator of the relationship between stress and burnout, by year in school.

Figure 4 illustrates the manner in which sense of purpose moderates the association between stress and burnout. This three-way interaction was probed using a simple slopes analysis, and revealed that for freshmen, juniors, and seniors, the association between stress and burnout was constant across sense of purpose (i.e., the same slopes were identified in each panel). For sophomores with lower sense of purpose ($M-SD = -0.58$), the relationship between stress and burnout was strongest and significant, $b = 0.91$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < .01$. For sophomores with average sense of purpose ($M = 0.01$), this association was also significant, although less robust, $b = 0.48$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .01$. For sophomores with higher sense of purpose, $(M+SD = 0.59)$, the relationship between stress and burnout was not significant, $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .69$. 
Table 3

Summary of Significance of Effects within Three Multiple Linear Regression Models including Potential Moderating Role of Sense of Purpose between Stress and Psychological Outcomes, by Year in School (N = 343)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (ref = Freshman)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Sense of Purpose X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (ref = Freshman)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Sense of Purpose X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Burnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (ref = Freshman)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress X Sense of Purpose X Year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model R² (Adjusted R²) | .55 (.53) | .47 (.44) | .36 (.33)

*Note: Freshmen is the reference category for year

p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .00
Figure 4

*Three-way interaction showing impact of sense of purpose on the relationship between stress and burnout by year in school*
Discussion

Victor Frankl contended that “he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 1992, p. 84). The present study was conceptualized as a targeted examination of the veracity of this statement and provides valuable insights as well as potential directions for future researchers to pursue. The present study was to examine what buffering effect, if any, does sense of purpose possess between psychological well-being and the stressors experienced by students engaged in post-secondary education. Results highlight the strengths and limitations of viewing sense of purpose (i.e., having a why) as a potential buffer to the deleterious effects of stress among college students.

Although the theoretical hypothesis that sense of purpose would attenuate the relationship between stress and psychological health went largely unsupported, one key exception was its ability to buffer the effects of stress on burnout in the sample of sophomores. While intriguing, this finding should be interpreted with caution and examined more directly in future research. At an inferential level, this study provides further support for the association of stress and key psychological health outcomes (i.e., depression, anxiety, and burnout) among college and university students. In addition, results point to strong co-morbidity among depression, anxiety, and burnout. Results also reveal strong inverse relationships between sense of purpose and depression and burnout, suggesting that sense of purpose may play an overall role in student well-being.

The current dissertation was influenced by the work of Hill and colleagues (2018), who sought to understand how sense of purpose moderates the relationship between daily stressors and daily well-being. When reflecting on the results of this work,
it is worthy to note key similarities and differences between the current work and the research conducted by Hill and colleagues. A key distinction between these works is their conception of purpose/sense of purpose. Where this work was based in an understanding of sense of purpose as presented by Damon and colleagues (2003), Hill and colleagues relied on previously collected data that included responses to the purpose subscale of the Psychological Well-Being Scales (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Both works found strong associations between sense of purpose, as measured by the scales used, and the health outcomes of interest. Where Hill and colleagues were specifically interested in affect and physical symptoms, this work focused on outcomes related to mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, and burnout). The analysis conducted by Hill and colleagues revealed that individuals reporting higher levels of purpose also reported less of an increase of their reported negative affect and physical symptoms when stressors were present. The current work lacked such a design that accounted for daily experiences and instead focused on a global level at one point in time. While valuable, such an approach may have contributed to lack of nuanced understanding of the role of sense of purpose as a moderator of the relationships between stress and mental health. While important differences exist between these two works, both position sense of purpose as an important feature of health and well-being.

In light of the findings specific to this work, it is valuable to note the phenomenon known as a “sophomore slump”. Such work on the experience of sophomores, within the broader discussion on the characteristics of university students at different stages (e.g., freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior) has been present for decades (e.g., Freedman, 1956). Recent work has highlighted that perceptions significantly change during the second year
of university (Webb, 2019). While a number of positive trends were identified with this year in school (e.g. perceptions of academic engagement, social integration, and instructors), students experienced little progress in self-perception of academic ability. Importantly, thoughts of drop-out also increased during this year in school. These findings provide further support for this and future works that examine differences by year in school as opposed to simply age. Additionally, recent work has highlighted how COVID-19 has impacted students differently based on cohort. For example, one study found that non-freshmen (i.e. sophomores, juniors, and seniors) were more likely to experience increased levels of anxiety (Kecojevic et al., 2020). In addition, female students have reported significantly higher levels of stress than males. Such findings communicate that the experience of COVID-19 has had unique impacts based on student situation. Further understanding on the typical effects based on cohort would likely contribute to existing efforts to university administrators to develop meaningful interventions and resources for students.

The findings of this work have important similarities with work carried out by Cox (2021), which showed that sense of purpose was not able to moderate relationships between depression and chronic health conditions. Two of the dependent variables examined in the present study, depression and anxiety, are classified as psychological illnesses (APA, 2013) and sense of purpose was not shown to moderate the relationship between these and stress. However, sense of purpose was shown as a moderator of the relationships between stress and burnout for sophomores. Further work is certainly needed to investigate the role of sense of purpose as a moderator and provide additional understanding of the role of the word “almost” in the contention that a sense of purpose
would allow a person to “bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 1992, p. 84). Future work should explore the potential role of sense of purpose in attenuating the impact of stress on this and other non-clinical outcomes.

In considering what role a sense of purpose may play in the health of their students, a number of key implications for university administrators emerge from this work. First, sense of purpose was found to be significantly and negatively correlated with reported stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout. In other words, sense of purpose can be understood as part of an overall portrait of student well-being. Second, administrators can be helped to understand that, under certain circumstances, a sense of purpose did help students “bear with the how” of university studies. Given that the specific moderating relationship was found between stress and burnout, sense of purpose may be viewed as one of many resources a student can possess to protect them from burnout and persist to graduation. Lastly, university administrators may consider what their role is in fostering a sense of purpose among their students. Specifically, university administrators may consider the timing in which they attempt to support students in developing a sense of purpose (e.g., an orientation program, general education courses, or throughout the university experience).

Limitations and Future Directions

While important contributions have been made by this research, some notable limitations should be acknowledged. First, the secondary analysis examining the moderating role of sense of purpose across years in school was somewhat underpowered; therefore, results examining whether sense of purpose does in fact attenuate the stress-
psychological health relationship based on year in school should be interpreted with caution. Future work, especially work that seeks to understand the role of sense of purpose among specific populations of college and university students, should seek to obtain larger sample sizes (e.g., 1,500) to ensure adequate power to examine group differences at a more granular level. In addition, a broader range of post-secondary institutions (i.e., trade schools and certification programs) could be considered for inclusion in future studies.

An additional limitation is that participants only had one opportunity to report on sense of purpose. The present study suggests that sense of purpose, and its role in attenuating the manifestation of stress-related outcomes, may not be static throughout the university experience. In examining the role sense of purpose plays in buffering the impact of stress on depression, anxiety, and burnout, future scholars could “increase the dosage” by incorporating a longitudinal research approach. Such work would shed light not just on students’ fixed sense of purpose at a single time point, but would position developmental researchers to examine changes in the trajectory of students’ purpose over time. As such questions around the internal and external processes that foster/shape sense of purpose in college students could be asked and answered. Utilizing a dose-response approach, future quasi-experimental work could also be designed to examine how sense of purpose trainings or workshops might impact students during their time on campus. Additionally, colleges and universities could seek meaningful ways to provide additional resources to students or groups who are identified as being at-risk for persistence or retention.
A limitation that became clear while carrying out this research was a lack of sensitivity among the chosen measures. Indeed, they may not have been able to adequately capture what it means to “bear with any how”. This study was narrowly designed to measure the dependent variables of depression, anxiety, and burnout. Although these are conceptually salient variables when discussing the psychological health of college and university students, they may have been too narrowly defined to truly capture how sense of purpose might help students persist in the face of matriculation-related stress. In the spirit of Antonovsky’s work on salutogenesis, future work could further be designed to utilize a strengths-based rather than a deficits-based approach, analyzing the factors that contribute to health rather than those that detract from it. One promising future direction would be to assess the ability of sense of purpose to contribute to positive factors such as GPA, retention, and persistence to graduation.

Importantly, the sampling method conducted in this work and the characteristics of the sample itself represent a notable limitation. The data collected for this work represents a convenience sample that had a high rate of response from females and students engaged in the colleges of education and humanities. In addition, the average GPA of participants was notably higher than what you would expect to find across the institution or university students globally. While efforts were made to address this concern in this work, future efforts to answer these and similar research questions will need to explore additional avenues for establishing a representative sample.

A final important consideration is that the present research was conducted during a global pandemic. While this does not represent an inherent limitation regarding how the work was designed, executed, or interpreted, it is important to acknowledge that the data
for this study were collected during a semester that was far from “normal” for most participants. During data collection, participants were adjusting to synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Indeed, during recruitment, many key gatekeepers (university faculty and staff, organization directors) expressed a concern that students would not be as likely to participate because they were “already burned out” from having to take multiple surveys related to their university-related experiences with COVID-19. Future work should be designed to identify meaningful baselines for student perceptions of stress, sense of purpose, depression, anxiety, and burnout. Such work would allow scholars and university administrators to better understand what is “normal” and subsequently build curricula to target the development of sense of purpose in the most practical and meaningful ways.

Conclusion

This study represents an important step toward understanding the role of sense of purpose in the well-being of university students. Importantly, it provides empirical support for the direct relationship between stress and the negative psychological outcomes of depression, anxiety, and burnout among college students. The primary theoretical hypothesis, that sense of purpose would buffer the impact of stress on students’ psychological health, was largely unsupported. However, results highlighted a strong inverse relationship between sense of purpose and the three dependent variables, suggesting that sense of purpose may represent an important feature of overall psychological health.
Scholars and institutional administrators can build from these findings by conducting more targeted examinations into the role that sense of purpose and other psychological “buffering agents” might play in fostering student well-being and psychological health. Furthermore, they should explore how sense of purpose might operate differentially at specific points across the matriculation experience and across different individuals and groups. Sense of purpose certainly does not represent a solution to the ongoing mental health crisis, but it will likely have an important part to play in future discussions surrounding student well-being and persistence.
Millions of individuals are enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The marketing campaigns of these institutions often include statements regarding the development or discovery of one’s sense of purpose. Examples include “GCU wants to help you find your purpose!” (Grand Canyon University, n.d.) and “This is where you will find your purpose” (Gonzaga University, n.d.). One university president communicated to prospective students that “…if you choose to come here, you’ll be on a path to discover your purpose.” (Wyatt, 2017).

Two important messages related to development are found within these statements. First, they suggest that the developmental periods often associated with university matriculation (adolescence and emerging adulthood) are a critical time for discovering one’s purpose. Second, prospective students are being promised that a post-secondary experience, specifically at the advertised institution, will lead to the discovery and development of a sense of purpose.

Theoretical and empirical work provides support for the claim that adolescence and emerging adulthood are critical periods for the development of sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968). While the developmental period proceeding these stages (i.e., childhood) involves participation in activities that are personally meaningful, the
ability and cognitive structures necessary to contemplate and commit to longer-term aims do not typically emerge until adolescence (Bronk, 2014; VanDyke & Elias, 2007). Theorists have attributed the development of sense of purpose during these stages to the emergence of an individual’s ability to contemplate matters relating to their own developing identity (Arnett, 2000; Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968). Research has provided support for a direct relationship between purpose and identity, showing that increases in one are associated with higher levels of the other (Hill & Burrow, 2012).

The second claim embedded in these advertisements does not have the same level of support. Quite simply, there are no empirical data indicating that any institution is better suited than another to help matriculating students develop a sense of purpose while on campus. Moreover, data that might help scholars understand how colleges and universities might foster the development of sense of purpose in their students is limited. Indeed, literature examining how sense of purpose is discovered is scarce and could be bolstered by innovative theoretical and empirical work (Bronk, 2014). Specifically, a need exists for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that may position post-secondary institutions to foster the discovery and development of matriculating students’ sense of purpose.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical Orientation**

Erik Erikson, in building from the seminal work of Sigmund Freud, viewed development as a sequence of eight stages occurring across the lifespan (Erikson, 1963).
In Erikson’s view, each of these stages presents an individual with a psychosocial “crisis” to be encountered and ultimately resolved. The stage most often associated with adolescence, *identity vs. role confusion*, highlights the questions individuals face related to who they are and where they fit within the broader world. Erikson argued that in order to positively resolve this crisis, adolescents need to dedicate themselves to purposes that are personally meaningful. Without a healthy resolution of this crisis, Erikson posited these individuals would have difficulty acquiring belief systems that would motivate them later in life (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson’s theory, the developmental stage associated with adulthood, *generativity versus stagnation*, highlights another important aspect of purpose -- the need of individuals to be involved with works beyond-the-self.

Researchers note that youth are engaging in the process of identity exploration later than those of previous generations (Schwartz et al., 2005). A number of factors are hypothesized to be leading to this delay – ultimately paving the way for discussion of a new life stage: *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000). This life stage, beginning in one’s late teens and concluding at or around age 30, was proposed as a way to understand the unique circumstances surrounding the transition to adulthood in the 21st century. Researchers, although still influenced by Erikson’s theoretical stages associated with adolescence, are increasingly associating identity exploration with the stage of emerging adulthood, as described by Arnett and his contemporaries (see Schwartz, 2007).

**Defining Sense of Purpose**

While Victor Frankl’s work is credited with putting sense of purpose on the “psychological map” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119), it did not distinguish between key
definitional concepts surrounding the construct. One such example is the juxtaposition of
the terms *purpose* and *meaning* (Damon et al., 2003). Prior work had operationalized a
sense of purpose as existing within the broader concept of meaning (see Baumeister,
1991). As such, Damon and colleagues (2003) sought to bring conceptual clarity to the
term purpose, operationalizing it as: "*a stable and generalized intention to accomplish
something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond
the self*" (p. 121).

Bronk and colleagues (2018) extended this line of thought by further detailing the
three features inherent to Damon and colleagues’ definition. First, sense of purpose
represents a *long-term aim*. Second, sense of purpose requires *personal meaning*. Last,
sense of purpose is a pursuit that will result in contributions *beyond-the-self*. Youth who
are asked to define sense of purpose generally discuss the benefits of having clear goals
(i.e., a long-term aim) or the potential contributions to overall happiness, but often fail to
detail the need to make contributions *beyond-the-self* (Hill et al., 2010). Despite this, the
work from Hill and colleagues suggests that youth, while often not incorporating each
feature of a sense of purpose into their definition, are largely in line with how it is defined
by researchers.

**Contexts That Support the Development of Purpose**

Extant research suggests that few programs, regardless of the setting, are
intentional in teaching individuals how to develop a sense of purpose (Koshy & Mariano,
2011). While perhaps not designed to do so, extracurricular activities and the individuals
involved in them can play an important role in an individual’s development of sense of
purpose (Bronk, 2012; Maton, 1990). The perceptions of available social support in these settings, above and beyond the support of family and peers, is an important predictor of the presence of purpose (Bronk, 2014). Importantly, youth report discovering purpose while engaging in a variety of new activities as opposed to seeking out opportunities based on already-established patterns of behavior (Bronk, 2012).

Prior work suggests that the scaffolding of purpose is embedded in many contexts, including extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community, involvement in the arts, religious settings, and in the home (Bronk, 2012; Shamah, 2011). Of note, such activities don’t require significant financial investments on the part of parents or the community (Bronk, 2014). Scholars have discussed what makes these settings well-suited to support the development of purpose, namely the opportunities these contexts provide youth to be involved in decision-making processes and to recognize their ability to make important contributions to themselves and others (Benson, 2008; Shamah, 2011).

Although it is possible for youth to act on an interest they have considered and developed, the more typical path to discovering purpose involves first becoming involved in activities that are potentially purposeful (Bronk, 2012; Damon, 2008). This is a phenomenon that Damon (2008) compares to the planting of a lawn:

The first buddings of purpose are a bit like the grass seeds that we spread around in our yards: only some will sprout, and we have no idea which ones. Fortunately, only a minuscule proportion of the seeds need to keep growing to produce a thriving lawn (p. 139).

In an attempt to help scholars further consider the context, processes, and conditions that foster the development of sense of purpose in young people, Damon and colleagues
(2003) posed the following questions, using the phrase “noble purposes” to differentiate purposes that harm and destroy versus those that serve humanity:

1. What noble purposes have inspired young people throughout the course of history?
2. How have young people traditionally been introduced to these purposes?
3. What kinds of noble purposes are inspiring today’s young?
4. What kinds of noble purposes are youth today not responding to?
5. What kinds of noble purposes are today’s educational institutions advancing? (pp. 126-127)

**Development of Sense of Purpose in the University Setting**

A need exists to better understand what role, if any, the university plays in helping students develop a sense of purpose. Of great relevance to this ideal are the mechanisms that might best position a university to contribute (or not) to the discovery and development of one’s sense of purpose. Importantly, answers to these five questions are likely to assist university administrators as they consider ways to help students discover and develop a sense of purpose during their time on campus.

Researchers have noted that additional attention on the development of a sense of purpose during the undergraduate experience is needed (see Schluckebier, 2013). Authors have brought attention to the role of professors in encouraging students to use material from their courses to identify potential careers that will be personally meaningful and make contributions beyond the self (Cohen & Jordan, 1996). Some institutions have made the development of purpose part of their culture through providing opportunities to
engage in service or to take part in curricula that allows students to explore potential interests and passions (Braskamp et al., 2008).

For students who lack a meaningful direction, sense of purpose can be increased by participating in university activities (Molasso, 2006). Recent research has highlighted the potential value of interventions that focus on the development of purpose as a means to increase graduation rates and quicken the process of obtaining a degree (Hernandez, 2017). Transactional research has emphasized the role that institutions' career development offices play in making purpose more central to the services they provide (Kosine et al., 2008). Similarly, university counselors have sought to promote meaning by recommending activities like journaling and by encouraging students to participate in volunteerism opportunities (Hodges & Crowe, 2014).

A doctoral thesis offered insight in its description of the “experiences undergraduate students cite as helping them develop and articulate their purpose in life” (Schluckebier, 2013, p. 1). The author, using an orientational qualitative approach, followed an open-ended interview protocol with 12 students at a North Carolina university who had reported high scores in developed purpose according to the Student Developmental Task & Lifestyle Assessment (Winston et al., 1987). Themes articulated in this work were the support systems that aided in the development of purpose in life, the role that exemplars played, and the importance of experiential learning (Schluckebier, 2013). This study represents an important contribution to the field’s understanding of the development of sense of purpose during the university years and the role of experiences in facilitating that development.
Despite the emerging body of research examining the development of purpose, there appears to be a lack of a unifying theory related to how sense of purpose develops as a result of university matriculation. Institutions are advertising that students will discover their purpose during their time on campus; however, a need exists for additional clarity on what mechanisms actually make a university ecosystem well-suited to fulfill this promise. In an effort to establish an initial theory of the development of purpose in the university setting, the primary purpose of the present study was to explore perspectives of graduating students on the development of their sense of purpose as a result of their university experience. A secondary purpose will be to explicate the role students feel the university played in that development. Given the emphasis being place on the student experience and their perspectives of a complex phenomenon (i.e. the development of a sense of purpose) a qualitative methodology was most appropriate. Further, as a goal of this work is to contribute to understanding and provide a unifying theory, a *constructive grounded theory approach* was used.

**Method**

Given the desire to explore student perspectives on the role of the university experience in supporting the development of a sense of purpose, a qualitative approach was used to frame this study. This methodological approach is well-justified when scholars seek understanding of a detailed and complex phenomenon, especially when the knowledge to be gained rests upon participants’ understanding and sensemaking (Creswell, 2007; Weick et al., 2005). Utilizing a qualitative approach in the present study
afforded participants autonomy and flexibility in how they responded to questions and prompts, thus enhancing the depth and richness of data. The intent of this study was to gain multiple perspectives and locate students’ experiences within the broader context of the university setting. Given this intent, a constructivist grounded theory approach was deemed most appropriate for the execution of the proposed research (Charmaz, 2017). Grounded theory provides a structured, yet flexible, approach to answering research questions when little is known about an area of interest (Charmaz, 2006; Chun Tie et al., 2019). It has been discussed as a “method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187). Referred to as the “third genre” of grounded theory extending from the original work of Glaser and Strauss, constructivist grounded theory methodology has its foundation in participants’ construction of meaning related to the topic being researched (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 2). This variation to grounded theory is distinct from other genres that are designed to generate conceptual theories accounting for behavioral patterns (i.e. 1st genre) or the symbolic meaning ascribed to social interactions (i.e. 2nd genre). In line with the constructivist tradition, this work was designed to generate an initial theory grounded in participant understandings of the role of the university in the development of a sense of purpose. This approach was used to frame the collection, analysis, and interpretation of all study data.

**Participants**

Participants ($N = 10$) were drawn from the population of Spring 2021 graduating seniors at Utah State University. Where prior research in this area excluded those who
did not measure high in sense of purpose (see Schluckebier, 2013), the present study was designed to allow for a wide range of experiences with sense of purpose. Demographics of the study sample are included in Table 4.

**Procedure**

Prior to data collection, the study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human participants at Utah State University. Upon approval from the IRB, the research team worked with the Registrar’s office to obtain a list of Spring 2021 graduates. All students on the provided list, including those attending regional campuses, were contacted directly via their university email. Students were provided a description of the study along with a recruitment flyer (see Appendix E). Students were able to express interest in participation by completing a short web-based survey. This survey represented an opportunity to ensure participants met the multiple inclusion criteria. First, they needed to be a Spring 2021 graduate. This ensured that all participants in the final sample could discuss the same experience (i.e., reflections of students who had just completed their degree and university experience). In addition, as the stage of interest was emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 30 at the time of informed consent. In line with grounded theory methodology, recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached within the data (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018). The survey used to determine eligibility, gather basic demographic information, and identify potential times for an interview can be found in Appendix F.
Table 4

*Demographics of Sample (N = 10)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Situation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Campus</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Campus</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, never married</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biological Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 race</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in particular</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Engineering</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon M. Huntsman School of Business</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GPA</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-2.99</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00-3.49</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5-4.0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transfer Student</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Student</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-transfer student</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants engaged in a single semi-structured interview with the author (Appendix G). The average length for the interviews was 20 minutes and 48 seconds, the longest interview lasting 26 minutes and 28 seconds and the shortest lasting 16 minutes and 22 seconds. Interviews utilized a series of retrospective, open-ended questions that allowed participants to reflect and respond in ways that represented their perceptions of their experiences. In line with the study aim, the interview guide was designed to allow participants to discuss various ways the university experience may have contributed to their development of purpose. The interview guide was also designed to address the questions posed by Damon and colleagues (see pp. 53-54), which afforded a sharper understanding the processes and conditions that fostered the discovery and development of a sense of purpose for these students (2003; pp. 126-127). Given the COVID-19 protocols for the collection of human subjects data, all interviews were conducted via Zoom and a video/audio recording was kept as the primary medium of data for each interview.

Each interview consisted of three main sections. The first section asked participants to define sense of purpose (e.g., “What do you think it means to have a sense of purpose?”). Participants were also prompted to consider how this definition might have developed since the beginning of their university experience (i.e., as freshmen). Participants were then asked to consider how they came about the definition they currently held and why it may have changed.

The second section of the interview involved asking participants to consider the impact the university experience had on their personal sense of purpose. This question was intended to provide participants with the flexibility to give a wide range of responses
and elaborate on those answers. Participants were also asked to consider how their experiences at Utah State University were or were not designed to further develop their sense of purpose. Subsequently, participants were asked “What types of causes or purposes do you find you are passionate about?” and what role the university played in helping them identify these passions. The section concluded by probing participants as to whether there were “certain causes or purposes that the university of professors wanted you to adopt?” Participants were then asked to discuss whether or not these causes, if identified, resonated with them.

The final section of the interview allowed participants an opportunity to provide additional details they felt were pertinent to the issue of the development of sense of purpose in the university setting. This strategy is commonly used in qualitative interviewing and allows participants an opportunity to share experiences or insights that are not directly prompted by the interview protocol (Creswell, 2007). At the conclusion of each interview, students were given an opportunity to ask any questions they had of the researcher. Participants were each given a $50 gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation.

**Data Analysis**

Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by an undergraduate research assistant. Transcripts were cross-checked against the original recordings to ensure accuracy. Before engaging in formal analyses, the research team (author and an undergraduate research assistant) were trained in constructivist grounded theory methodology by the author’s research mentor. This training consisted of discussions of
ontology, epistemology, methodology, a review of the different traditions of grounded theory, theoretical saturation, theoretical sensitivity, trustworthiness, potential biases, and stages of coding. Readings related to each of these topics were provided to the research team for review and discussion.

Issues of trustworthiness are especially relevant given concerns over grounded theory research being perceived by some as nothing more than “nice stories” (Sikolia et al., 2013). Sikolia and colleagues (2013) suggest increasing trustworthiness in grounded theory research by attending to the following issues: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A number of practices were implemented in this work to attend to these issues. First, an emphasis was placed on detailed descriptions of the data and sufficient time being spent on the analysis (discussed more in the subsequent paragraph). Additionally, an emphasis was placed on the words being used by participants along with understanding what was meant by the words and phrases being used. Lastly, an experienced qualitative researcher (i.e. a university professor) oversaw the process and provided valuable feedback throughout the process.

Initially, the research team conducted a preliminary reading of all interview transcripts, without engaging in any coding procedures. In line with the systematic approach to grounded theory analysis (see Strauss and Corbin, 1998), a second read of each manuscript was conducted, wherein the research team engaged in initial coding. Open coding (a largely inductive process) involved forming categories of relevant information as well as forming potential subcategories within them. In the present study, these categories and subcategories were used to engage in the next step, axial coding. During axial coding, the researchers attempted to assemble the previously identified
categories into a conceptually coherent hierarchy. As a final step in the coding process, the research team engaged in theoretical coding, or the identification of a key storyline or construct through which the process of the development of sense of purpose could be represented. Creswell (2007) discussed the creation of a visual model as one way to represent the conditions that influence a central phenomenon, actions that are in response the phenomenon, the conditions in which the phenomenon exists, and the consequences that result. Each interview transcript was subjected to these coding procedures until saturation was reached.

Claiming data saturation can be difficult as this process has been described as “mysterious, subjective, non-linear, gradual, and unfixed” (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018, p. 258). The pursuit of data saturation was influenced by a number of factors, including the scope of the investigation, the homogeneity of the sample, and expertise of the researcher (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018). These authors describe factors, in addition to efforts involving theoretical sampling and constant comparison, that influence the ability to reach data saturation. Some that are especially relevant to this work were the nature of the research question, experience of the researchers and the use of a theoretical framework. As the nature of the work was to answer a more general question (e.g. what was the role of the university in helping you develop a sense of purpose), this suggests a simpler question and briefer process to reach saturation. Further evidence can be found in the relatively short amount of time individuals felt they were able to answer the question of interest. With regard to experience, the research team was led by a university professor with an extensive background in qualitative methodology and carried out by a doctoral candidate with multiple published works involving qualitative methodology. Lastly, the
familiarity with using a guiding theoretical framework, and extent to which this was done as part of this work, influenced the process of saturation. In the present study, data collection ended after 10 participants had been analyzed.

Results

Table 5 displays the codes that were identified in the areas of interest along with the themes these codes were collapsed into. These included codes relating to defining sense of purpose, suspected definition as a freshman, how they came to their current understanding of sense of purpose, the impact of the university experience on their sense of purpose, experiences designed to develop sense of purpose, purposes advanced by the university, current purposes, and advice to incoming freshmen.

Table 5

*Themes and codes identified by the research team*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Sense of Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personally meaningful</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets you out of bed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gives you motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leads to fulfillment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provides a sense of belonging</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Long-term aim</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oriented to goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having an end goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowing where you want your life to go</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where you see yourself ending up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vision for your life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group objective</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Beyond-the-self orientation
Contributions to society
Impact on others
Creating things that surpass you
Ability to help others

Other features
Informs how you conduct yourself
Feeling comfortable/confident
Doing what you’re meant to do (destiny)
Established identity

Suspected Definition as a Freshman

Absence/Beginnings of beyond-the-self orientation
More focused on being with friends
Focused on having fun/being happy
Based in personal performance/outcomes

On the path to purpose
Answer would’ve been less mature
Smaller idea
Not as clearly defined
Personality didn’t shine through
Didn’t care to know

How Participants Came to Current Understanding of Sense of Purpose

Experiences & opportunities
Religious missions
Volunteer opportunities
Religious teachings
Exploring the unknown
Employment
Leadership roles
Reflections questions in assignments
Access to resources
Coursework
Clubs/Organizations
Contributing
Introduced to world issues

Impact of others
Caring professors/instructors
Support and feedback from family/friends
Meeting new people
Impact of University Experience on Sense of Purpose

Identity/Values
Changes who you are
Allows for exploration
Introduces new material
Allows you to be yourself
Allowed switching focus
Fostered belief in self
Validation of pursuits

Identity/Values
Changes who you are
Allows for exploration

Exposure
Introduces new possibilities
Access to opportunities
Participate in experiences
Widened horizons
Diversity
New perspectives
Broad class offerings

Structure/Support
Access to a community
Sense of belonging
Professors/Instructors
Organized coursework
General education
Employment/Volunteer opportunities
Clear goal to work toward

Experiences Designed to Develop Sense of Purpose

Programs/Curriculum
“Connections”
Required courses
Reflection questions/assignments
Coursework
Clubs
General education
Activities/Events
Sporting/Social events
“Pobev”
Job Fairs
Volunteer opportunities

Access to Others
Class setup
Dorms
Professors/Office hours

Purposes Advanced by the University

Social issues
Environmental sustainability
Accessibility
Social justice
Intersectionality
Respect for diversity
Solving world issues

Interacting with others
Being accepting
Engaging with others
Pay attention to words used

Personal development
Having an open mind
Becoming a learner
Use knowledge to achieve goals/dreams

Current Purposes

Beyond-the-Self
Community involvement
Preventing sexual abuse
Providing relief to families
Working with youth
Environmental sustainability
Helping people
Accessibility
Helping parents create a loving home
Mental health awareness
Helping families get their needs met
Protecting humanity
Public speaking
Personal Pursuits
Religious beliefs
Financial health
Applying knowledge to profession
Arts

Advice to Incoming Freshmen

Immerse yourself into the experience
Trust the process, don’t rush
Enjoy the journey and experience
Make time for yourself
Do things for the right reasons
Expand your identity
Fill schedule with meaningful things
Immerse yourself in coursework
Work hard for knowledge, not just the grade
Find professors that love teaching
Learn how to learn from “boring” professors
Be creative in what you do

Leave your comfort zone
Be willing to do the “hard” things
Don’t approach it like high school
Get out there and do something
Try new things
Don’t be set in your ways
Allow yourself to grow/change

Expose yourself to new things
Allow yourself to change your mind
Don’t wait for the “real coursework”
Meet new people
Explore different options
Have an open mind
Be flexible
Let things happen

Have a long-term perspective
Don’t burn yourself out
Don’t make your major your purpose
You don’t have to have it all figured out
There is an expiration date on opportunity
Involve others
Focus on others
Build a support system
Make friends that can develop purpose

Defining Sense of Purpose

As an entry point to each interview, students were asked the general question, “What do you think it means to have a sense of purpose?” Each of the students interviewed incorporated at least one of the features of sense of purpose as discussed by Damon and colleagues (2003). Half of the participants offered definitions that included features not within the definition provided by Damon and colleagues. Table 6 illustrates the features of sense of purpose, as described by Damon and colleagues (2003), that participants included in their definitions.

Long-term Aim

When discussing sense of purpose, over half the students interviewed used terms and phrases that suggested that a sense of purpose includes a long-term aim. Student definitions included terms like “end goal” and “life vision” and suggested that a sense of purpose represents where you want to be and what direction you want your life to go. One participant explained, “I’ve always defined it (as) having a goal or something to work toward that I want to accomplish within my lifetime”. Others discussed how a sense of purpose can be found in group settings by discussing “group objectives” and the role of collaboration. One participant explained: “Sense of purpose for me means…I have my people and we have a specific objective in mind”.

Table 6.

Participants’ definitions of sense of purpose and their incorporation of the three features of purpose as proposed by Damon and colleagues (2003).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Long-term aim ( (n = 7) )</th>
<th>Personally Meaningful ( (n = 3) )</th>
<th>Beyond-the-self Orientation ( (n = 4) )</th>
<th>Other Features ( (n = 5) )</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Participant 1</td>
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<td>Participant 2</td>
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<td>Participant 10</td>
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*Note.* Dark gray represents the presence of that feature in each participant’s definition.

**Personally Meaningful**

A minority of participants incorporated the idea of personal meaningfulness into their definition of sense of purpose. For those that did, participants described how a sense of purpose would lead to fulfillment and a sense that one’s efforts were meaningful. In line with Damon and colleagues’ (2003) definition of purpose, these students discussed the role that personal meaningfulness plays in motivation. One student simply stated that “purpose is the wind in your sails”. Others described the role of sense of purpose in helping you start your day by saying it gives you a “reason to get up every morning” or that it is “what gets you out of bed”.

Beyond-the-Self Orientation

Less than half of participants incorporated a beyond-the-self orientation into their definition of sense of purpose. Participants that incorporated this feature into their definition described that a sense of purpose would involve making contributions to society, having an impact on others, and producing things that would outlive them. One student discussed the limits of only being engaged in activities that improved your own situation by saying, “you can only clean the house so many times before it makes a difference again and so…contribute to society I feel…gives you a sense of purpose”. Another student explained:

Sense of purpose is very much…oriented in a sense of impact on others. I like helping people and doing things, creating things, that people like or connect to…That's something that's a really big drive for me…And then with that, also… leaving an impact, like making things or doing things that will surpass me.

Other Features

Half the participants mentioned features beyond the three key elements that make up purpose as defined by Damon and colleagues (2003). These include a sense of purpose informing how you conduct yourself, doing what you are meant to do, or having what you do generate a feeling of success. One student mentioned that a sense of purpose means “along the way being able to just be yourself”. Another student indicated that having a sense of purpose required an individual to be able to “identify yourself spiritually, emotionally, physically”. Another student explicated how sense of purpose includes “feeling confident and comfortable…with your life and where it's going”.
How Participants Would Have Answered as Freshmen

When students were asked how they might have responded to the previous question as freshmen, two key themes emerged. Students felt that their answers to this question as freshmen would have: (1) lacked the beyond-the-self orientation, and/or that (2) they likely would have been somewhere along the path to purpose.

Absence of Beyond-the-Self Orientation

Students described that while they might have had goals they wanted to reach, these would have lacked a beyond-the-self orientation. These participants discussed how they interacted with others and were social but that their focus was not necessarily on trying to help people. To these students, they had goals and objectives but they were more likely to be tied into personal accomplishments or “having fun”. One participant reported, “my sense of purpose then was just being social” but indicated they are now trying to make “contributions…to society”. Some students did not include a beyond-the-self orientation in their definition of purpose but discussed it as a development that had likely taken place as a result of the university experience. One participant described this by saying: “A big goal in my life has been to be happy and…have fun…but I think as I've gone throughout my college experience…it's changed a lot to not just making me happy, but making others happy”. Another reported that, “I’ve kind of grown up a lot and tried to focus on other people”.

On the Path to Purpose

Students described how their definition and understanding of sense of purpose would have likely varied from how they understood it at present. These responses varied from, “I don’t think I would have even known…what my sense of purpose was or why it
was important to have one” to “I think that I hadn't really developed the sense that I'm living under now. I think that my purpose was perhaps a little bit different. But I think I would ultimately have given the same answer”. Students discussed how they would have had a “smaller” idea of what purpose was, that they would have a similar concept but that it was not as “clearly defined”, and that their answers would have simply been “less mature”. One student indicated that they probably could have come up with an answer to the question as a freshman but they would have “stumbled” in trying to do so.

**How They Came to Current Understanding of Sense of Purpose**

After being asked about how they might have previously understood sense of purpose, participants were asked “How do you feel you came to understand sense of purpose in the way that you do?”. Responses fell into two broad themes, specifically: (1) *experiences and opportunities* and (2) the *impact of others*.

**Experiences and Opportunities**

Many participants discussed the role of experiences and opportunities in developing a sense of purpose. Relevant to many within the population of interest are opportunities to engage in religious “missions”. For those in this sample, these missions consist of 18-month or 2-year experiences where they leave home and relocate to another part of the world to perform service, participate in personal study of religious texts, and teach others the doctrines of their religion. One student described the impact of this experience by saying:

Honestly, probably my mission instilled me with a huge sense of purpose…waking up every day with your eyes fixed on one goal…to bring people closer to Jesus
Christ. It was just, it was a really simple goal. And it informed everything that I did. And the more I focused on it, the more I could get out of that purpose, the more motivation, I could distill from my purpose from my goal. And so, I think that's probably the biggest thing that's informed my change of purpose.

Another student described the experience of “falling away” from faith and the impact this had on their sense of purpose:

Over the course of my time, at college, I have fallen away from faith. I don't really consider myself religious at all at this point. But part of that faith crisis and evolution for me, was having to replace that sense of purpose, that sense of structure that I got from religion, and just over the course of time, through thinking through, you know, reading, motivational life coach books, and I think I've just kind of slowly pieced together things that resonate with me into the answer that I gave to that first question.

Without being prompted, some participants began referring to the role of the university in providing resources and opportunities by saying, “Since coming to college, I feel like I've been given, like the resources and opportunities to reach that purpose”.

**Impact of Others**

Students also referenced the role of others in developing their sense of purpose.

One student reported:

I feel like I found my purpose by being around people that understood what I felt, but also uplifted me and pushed me to be my best. And so, it was nice to know that I was fulfilling my purpose, because I knew the people around me were supporting me.
Impact of the University on Sense of Purpose

Students were asked, “What impact did the university experience have on your personal sense of purpose?” Responses appeared to align with one of three themes: the role the university plays in allowing an individual to *explore their identity and values*, *exposure*, and *structure and support*.

**Exploration of Identity and Values**

Students described the role of the university in helping them explore their identity and their values. One student noted that these experiences led to them being “a completely different person”. Another student discussed the role of reflective exercises that were common in their university assignments:

I feel like the…assignments I was given is what helped me gain my sense of purpose, because we did a lot of reflective papers on ourselves, which kind of help you kind of see where you're at, and how you can improve and change and how like, the coursework can apply to you. So, I feel like a lot of my sense of purpose with Utah State has a lot to do with like, my professors and the assignments given.

Other participants described how the structure of the university experience allowed for changes in what they were studying. One student described their experience with this change:

My freshman year, I…changed majors, I realized I didn't want to become a lawyer because of a class I took…it was an entrepreneur class. And it said, like, if you could do anything in the world and money didn't matter, what would you do? And I'm like, “not be a lawyer. Okay, I'm going into the wrong thing”.
**Exposure**

The university experience was credited for exposing students to many things, including people, ideas, and possibilities. One student described this by saying:

I think the biggest thing that the university did was to expose me to different types of people, different viewpoints. Really just a lot more of the world I grew up, before coming to college, I lived in (a) small town, rural town, very close knit, conservative religious, where most people share the same life experiences, share the same attitudes and views. So, for most of my life…I never personally was exposed to or experienced any of them until coming to Utah State…where there's a more diverse student body, there's a more diverse faculty, classes that are designed to expose you to different attitudes and views. So yeah, I think that's the biggest thing is just the exposure that they have.

**Structure and Support**

A key feature of the university experience was being provided a structure and a support system. One student described:

I had a lot of different colleagues and friends that are in my cohort that I got really close to and that helped…define different aspects of who I was and professors who encouraged me and supported me along the way and helped me to kind of push myself and grow and become better.

Another student described the role of the university in providing a place where they belonged and didn’t feel “restricted”:

I feel like it's a place where there's a lot of diversity. And I think I could go anywhere and feel like, welcomed. It helped me to realize…I can be myself, I can do plans or goals to accomplish, and like certain things, or I wanted to be part of different
projects, like I could do it. And it was just really cool. Because I felt like I could just I didn't feel like restricted, and I felt like I could just be a part of something. And I feel like that really helps me to, like build up my purpose and just realize like, wow, I can do this and this and this.

Experiences Designed to Develop Sense of Purpose

Students were given the opportunity to discuss what experiences they feel were designed to help them discover and develop a sense of purpose. Responses fell along the themes of programs and curriculum, activities and events, and access to others.

Programs and Curriculum

Some students specifically mentioned the “Connections” program, which is designed as an extended orientation for incoming freshmen at Utah State University. One student described this experience by saying:

So I was a part of (Connections) my freshman year and…I think it was…really cool, because I guess it was totally designed for incoming freshmen…And I felt like (the peer mentor and faculty mentor) really wanted to help me…It's cool, because some of the first people that I ever met, like were in those groups in connections and…I still see and talk to them…I feel like kind of a starting point helps me to like realize it's like, oh, like I have a place here.

Other students discussed the role of general education courses. One student described the experience of being introduced not only to new information but new perspectives:

I took (a) class and it really was fantastic. I loved the class; it was to expose us to the many different aspects and views in the world of human-animal
interactions. …That class specifically wasn't necessarily a big part in the spiritual (or) religious progression that I've had, but it was the first time at university that I remember specifically learning not only new information but new perspectives. Another student noted the role of the professor in the delivery of curriculum by saying:

It honestly might even just be the professor who helped me unlock this purpose. (That instructor and course) made me realize the world is so big. But…it's like crazy how connected and intertwined all of our lives are. And sometimes we look at the bigger picture that we don't realize it. But when we start to look at the smaller details, like we can find common ground, and we can find these things that like support one another.

Activities and Events

Students noted the different events and clubs that a student could engage in to explore potential purposes. One student noted:

I've loved going to Pobev (poetry and performances along with beverages). Pobev gave me short-term purpose, a lot of times because my purpose would be “okay, I'm gonna learn this song really well. I'm going to, you know, tighten up this act really well. So, I can go and entertain”... Another thing is there are…some clubs that help form purpose on the engineering side. I would say, some of the engineering clubs like Engineers Without Borders, [which had] the purpose of providing clean water to people in South America. That was a good forming experience.
Access to Others

Students noted how the structure of the university aided their development of a sense of purpose. One student in particular noted the difference they noticed between studying on the main campus versus a statewide campus:

I was on campus in…Logan my freshman year of college, and I definitely felt like that helps…being on campus and going to classes and meeting everyone, and then the majority of the rest of my education was with (at a statewide campus) and they don't have as many events.

Purposes Advanced by the University

Students were asked if they felt there were any specific purposes that were advanced by the university or specific instructors. These fell into three main categories, including social issues, interacting with others, and personal development.

Social Issues

Students noted the role that professors played in advocating those students seek to address social issues. One student noted how professors wanted them to “solve the world’s problems”. Another student mentioned a specific focus of one of their professors by saying:

(I had a) sociology professor who was very passionate about the open educational resource library with the university. He designed his class originally around us helping to expand that. According to him, he felt that open educational resource is a very useful tool in helping people to rise above less privileged situations by providing free educational resources to them rather than having to purchase or rent textbooks.
Another student described a “push” that didn’t extend into overbearing pressure:

I think the emphasis of a lot of my tech conferences (was) accessibility and social justice.

I think that was some kind of wanting us to adopt that. But it never felt like any kind of push, it just felt like things to think about. And so, I think that was kind of what it was is the fact that it was something that was always a part of my coursework, as well as like my professor’s research…And I am very happy that there's that push in our coursework. Because, again, I think social issues can be kind of intimidating, because it's like, I want to make an impact and be helpful, but I don't really know how. And so, I think being shown and given and taught very concrete ways that I could do good, and be good was pretty impactful. And I'm very happy that those were like, issues and topics that we're kind of (included in) my coursework.

Another student mentioned a specific concept included within their program and the impact it had on them:

And I think the one thing that (my) program really wanted me to adopt was to understand what intersectionality is, which honestly, has been one of the most beneficial things I feel like I've been taught at this university…just learning about intersectionality is so important.

**Interacting with Others**

Other students noted how instructors wanted positive interactions to be a priority for students. When asked about purposes advanced by the university, one student noted how, “respect for diversity was a big one in my field”. Another student answered by saying they were taught the importance of “having an open mind and being accepting of
people”. Another student discussed how a professor wanted students to be more mindful of how they communicated:

(The instructor) really focused on just us adopting the ability for us to pay attention to the words we use and like the connotation that has just for us to be super mindful of the words we use and how other people define it differently and how you need to be aware of that.

**Personal Development**

Other students noted how professors wanted students to understand the purpose of the university in helping them develop as an individual. One student noted:

I feel like some of my professors, they just wanted me to realize…I can become a learner and just realizing that I can learn what I need and want and I can take that knowledge that I have from my different classes and being able to accomplish my dreams and goals.

**Current Purposes**

Students were asked to discuss what current causes or purposes they find themselves wanting to commit their time and energy to. These purposes landed in line with either being focused on *beyond-the-self* or *personal pursuits*.

**Beyond-the-Self**

A number of students discussed how they wanted to benefit others and improve quality of life. One student suggested:
I feel like it sounds so cliche, because I'm sure you hear this…but I just want to help people, you know, because I'm like, “what am I really doing if I'm not helping people?” , and that's kind of like, why I wanted to go to school.

Another student described wanting to help a specific age group by saying they wanted to help “young people rise above the situations that they’re in”. Other pursuits went beyond helping individuals and instead focused on helping the environment. One student reported:

Embedded in me is caring about the environment…It like, ingrained in me, and I hold on to that. It's like, I'm super, like, I have changed a lot in my environmentally like, savviness, and how much I do care about the environment. So, I almost wondered if I should have gone into environmentalism?

**Personal Pursuits**

Students also reported that pursuits extended into their personal lives and improving their own personal or professional situation. One student discussed financial wellness by responding, “I love just get out of debt, build wealth, like for real, with, like, something that everybody can connect to and build”. Another student discussed how the university experienced had helped them better recognize their own strengths:

And I think the university has also taught me that it's okay to not flaunt your strengths, but it is okay to show off. Like it is okay to lean into them and to be that person that's good at public speaking, but it's also okay to be the person that's not good at analytics. Like, it's okay that you're good at this and someone isn't but I definitely think like, the classes that I've taken doing public speaking,
Advice to Incoming Freshmen

Participants were asked whether they had “any advice you would share with incoming freshmen with regards to how to find a sense of purpose?”. Themes included immersing yourself in the experience of university, leaving your comfort zone, having a long-term perspective, and involving others.

Immerse Yourself into the Experience

Many students reported that they would encourage freshmen to be deliberate about how they approach their university experience. One student encouraged this while also advocating for striking a balance by saying:

Don't just get involved with things or take classes for the sake of it. I think it's really important to understand, like, do things with intent… And definitely don't …push yourself to do a lot of things. Or take really like, a lot of courses or complicated classes, just for like the receipt of it, or the look of it, I think just hitting that sweet spot of doing things that make you feel good, and that you enjoy doing and enjoy going to.

Another student cautioned freshmen to not miss the opportunity before them by saying, “I think something I would say it's just putting yourself out there and just going and just taking all the opportunities you can get because you won't always have those opportunities again”. Another student would encourage others to specifically immerse themselves in the coursework, regardless of whether or not it directly tied to a major:

I would just say, really immersing themselves in, in whatever it is that they've chosen to study. And not only that, but…don't just go through those as your check as if you were checking a box to get to your real classes or to get to your major, really,
think those classes played a huge role in opening my mind to the different fields that are out there. And you know, the different problems that need solving, different types of people that the world needs to continue moving forward. So, I think that would be my main advice is just immerse themselves in those classes, and really try to understand the issues that are out there.

Another student would provide the simple encouragement of, “Just kind of let things happen as they come. And that will help define your sense of purpose over time.”

**Leave Your Comfort Zone**

Students expressed thoughts that suggest a sense of purpose wasn’t going to develop without effort. One student stated, “you can't find what you want to do if you're just sitting on your bum all day”. Another student cautioned about using the same approaches to education that had been used in the past:

Your idea of high school, don't bring it to college, like college is so different and so awesome. Like, my freshman year, I really held back from joining different clubs and activities because like, in high school, like I was led to student government, that's where I was, that was my identity. That's what I kept doing. I wanted to keep to leadership, because that's just how high school works. You pick one thing and you stuck with it. But like, like college, you get to pick so many different things and like you're not limited, you're able to do these things. And I would also encourage the students to like don't be afraid to tap into those passions that you were like nervous to tap into in high school because you were afraid you were gonna be made fun of or it just didn't fit like, definitely just go for it. Like even if it means going by yourself. Some of the best people I met was because I put
myself out there by myself and ended up having like some of the best memories ever.

**Expose Yourself to New Things**

In connection with being willing to leave their comfort zone, participants encouraged freshmen to specifically be open to new opportunities and ideas. One student cautioned against getting too caught up in one area of study:

Explore a lot of different things, find out, explore a lot of different ideas, don't get so caught up in one. (Don't have just) one idea of what you want your future to look like. Be flexible. Be willing and open to explore different ideas and different concepts of remote qualities and causes.

Another student discussed how your interests and passions may lay outside of your current understandings or what you had set out to do:

I would say try different things. And don't get too caught up in what you set out to do. Because like, I went to two years of community college before I came to university, and so I didn't know what the heck I wanted to do in my first year. And I don't know, it's just good to try different things and meet different people...don't be afraid to switch it up. And yeah, just go for it.

**Have a Long-Term Perspective**

Some participants encouraged others to not lose themselves in the experience and to achieve a balance in their undergraduate experience. Others cautioned against making a major your purpose and instead think about what you were looking to accomplish long-term. Lastly, students reported that they would encourage freshmen to not feel as if they had to have everything figured out right away.
*Involve Others*

Some students mentioned the benefit of including others in the experience. One student encouraged:

Focus on the people that you're surrounded with…because we all want to be happy…but like, it's kind of hard to be happy to have fun by yourself, you know, so I think that can include like focusing on the people you're around kind of trying to, like, build a good support system.

Another student discussed when is a good time to establish friendships and the role this plays in development by saying “the start of every school year is a great opportunity to make friends. And that can drive your purpose too”.

*Post-Secondary Education as a Context for Development of Sense of Purpose*

This work was designed to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that may position post-secondary institutions to foster the discovery and development of matriculating students’ sense of purpose. Data were used to establish a theory of how the university experience can serve as a context for the discovery and development of a sense of purpose. Figure 5 provides an illustration of the proposed theory, combing the established codes and themes into a comprehensive model.
A grounded theory of the role of the university experience in the development of a sense of purpose
In advertising to prospective students, universities commonly make statements like “This is where you will find your purpose” (Gonzaga University, n.d.). Through statements such as this, institutions are communicating that the university experience is an ideal context for the discovery and development of a sense of purpose. Rather than examining the veracity of this claim, the present study was designed to explore the perspectives of graduating students on the development of their sense of purpose as a result of their university experience. Study data provide support for prior claims that this period of life represents a critical time for the development of a sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968). Indeed, many students reflected on their experiences and reported that they had begun at the university with either a less mature understanding of purpose or were completely unaware of what would have represented a sense of purpose in their lives.

Extant research on sense of purpose has often relied on the contributions of Erik Erikson to justify continued exploration (see Bronk et al., 2018; Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003; Hill & Burrow, 2012). Central to Erikson’s theorizing is the development of one’s identity. Erikson and his contemporaries have discussed how sense of purpose is likely to emerge as a result of one’s contemplation of their own identity (Arnett, 2000; Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968). Importantly, extant literature suggests that increases in identity are associated with increases in a sense of purpose (Hill & Burrow, 2012). The present study aligns with this supposition, having shown that participants often discuss matters of identity when reflecting on their development of sense of purpose. As seen in
the grounded theory produced from this study (see Figure 5), a main feature of the university experience that fosters the development of sense of purpose is providing a setting where students can explore their identity, explore potential identities, and be authentic in this exploration.

Prior work has specifically explored the experiences that undergraduate students cited in helping them develop and articulate a purpose in their life (see Schluckebier, 2013). This work highlighted the role of both relational and environmental systems that supported the development of purpose in life. This work found that exemplars, along with those discussed as “non-exemplars”, played an important role in helping students determine the type of person they wanted to become and what purposes they wanted to pursue. Lastly, this work highlights the essential role of experiential learning in the process of developing purpose in life. The current work provides support for these findings (e.g. the role of support systems and meaningful opportunities) and provides further insight into the role of the university in helping a student explore their identity and values. Schluckbier (2013) rightly calls for future work examining how the varying aspects of one’s identity influences the development of purpose in life.

The university was discussed as a setting for this exploration to take place through a number of meaningful experiences. Participants discussed how their university experience introduced them to new material, new ideas, and new possibilities. This exposure contributed to an overall development and refinement of personal values. Participants discussed how the university had a broad offering of courses and extra-curricular activities, which further expanded opportunities for exploration. This exploration was made possible by the structure and support that exists within a university
Participants discussed how everything from job opportunities to the way a class was organized supported their ability to explore their identity and develop a sense of purpose.

Damon and colleagues (2003) posed a number of questions to researchers, many of which were addressed in the present study. First, how have young people traditionally been introduced to...purposes? Findings from this study provide support for students being exposed to purposes through a variety of settings. These include course assignments (e.g., reflection exercises), introduction to new perspectives, encouragement to solve world issues, and the opportunity to engage in volunteer experiences. Second, what kinds of noble purposes are inspiring today’s young? Participants in this study were inspired by both purposes that had benefits beyond the self as well as purposes that benefitted their own personal well-being. Purposes beyond the self that inspired participants in this study included sustainability, accessibility, and alleviating suffering. Participants were also inspired by opportunities to improve their own situation (e.g. personal finances). Last, Damon and colleagues questioned what kinds of noble purposes are today’s educational institutions advancing. Participants noted how instructors desired for them to become engaged in social issues, interacting with others in a respectful way, and continuing their personal development. It appeared that participants perceived that instructors were much more invested in seeing their students become involved, rather than become involved in certain causes.

A number of meaningful implications come from such insights. First, universities and similar institutions can have confidence in the purpose and role of general education courses. These courses, when presented correctly, exist as a meaningful context for the
exploration of personal values and interests. Universities can make reasonable efforts to help students understand the purpose of these courses and the benefits that they will likely experience. Specifically, universities can help students understand these courses provide an ideal setting to explore meaningful aims they can commit themselves to.

Second, university instructors can be deliberate about creating opportunities for exposure to new ideas along with providing opportunities for reflection. Students can be helped to understand the purpose of a university education goes far beyond completing assignments and attempting to earn high marks. Lastly, universities can seek to continue offering extracurricular activities. In addition to activities that exist purely for recreation, students should be presented with opportunities outside of the classroom to volunteer or engage in other activities that allow for the exploration of meaningful ways in which they can make contributions beyond themselves.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the contributions this study makes to the sense of purpose and higher education literatures, some important limitations should be considered in the design and execution of future work. First, this study only included students who had graduated from the institution and were willing to participate in an interview. It is reasonable to suspect that those who were willing to participate might have had more positive experiences or developed views toward sense of purpose that were adaptive. Future work could incorporate the experiences of those that may report more negative experiences. As an extension of this limitation, this study was not able to account for the experiences of college students who had engaged in the university experience but did not see it through
to graduation. Future work could target the experiences of individuals who did not complete their degree in an effort to better understand the potential link of sense of purpose (or a lack thereof) and dropout.

This study was also limited in that it sought to account for the development of purpose during the university experience but only collected data from participants at one point in time, post-graduation. Therefore, all data were retrospective in nature and represent only participants’ recollections of how they developed a sense of purpose while on campus. While these are meaningful data, future work could adopt a prospective design, more fully accounting for the development of sense of purpose across the university years. Such work could utilize a mixed-method design by utilizing survey, journal, interview, and observational methods. Indeed, attention is still needed to more fully appreciate how purposes are discovered and developed by students in the college and university setting (Bronk, 2014).

Conclusion

The discovery and development of sense of purpose represents an important milestone in one’s progression to adulthood. Post-secondary institutions have the potential to play an important role in providing students with an opportunity to discover and develop a sense of purpose during their years of matriculation. Specifically, colleges and universities have the ability to scaffold the development of purpose by providing a setting where students can contemplate their identity and be exposed to new people and ideas, while providing a structured system of support. Additional work is surely needed
among key populations to more fully elucidate the role of the university in the
development of a sense of purpose.
CHAPTER FOUR
GENERAL DISCUSSION

Sense of purpose has been discussed as a developmental asset that drives daily behavior, provides a shelter from threat, and equips an individual with the “why” required to endure the “how” (Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003; Frankl, 1992). Victor Frankl’s work and contention that “he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 1992, p. 84) is credited with putting sense of purpose on the “psychological map” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). Since that time, the field has made important strides in sense of purpose research and researchers continue to identify a number of meaningful future directions.

The present two-study dissertation was designed to further understanding in two key areas related to sense of purpose in the university setting. Study 1, utilizing quantitative methodology, provided a meaningful examination of the potential for sense of purpose to act as a moderator between stress and psychological health. Overall, sense of purpose was found to play a limited role as a moderator but remains an important predictor of health outcomes. Study 2, utilizing qualitative methodology, provided rich data surrounding the role that recent graduates felt their university played on their discovery and development of sense of purpose. Overall, the university experience aided the development of one’s purpose by 1) providing a setting where identity could be explored, 2) exposing students to new possibilities and new ways of thinking, and 3) providing structure and support. Additional detail on how this work furthers understanding in these two areas (i.e. sense of purpose as a potential moderator and the role of the
university in the development of a sense of purpose) is discussed in the subsequent sections.

**Defining Sense of Purpose**

Research on sense of purpose commonly relies on the definition provided by Damon and colleagues (2003), which frames sense of purpose as a “...stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). As discussed by Bronk and colleagues (2018), three main features emerge from this definition: personal meaning, goal-directedness, and a beyond-the-self orientation. Prior work has found that when youth are asked to define what it means to have a purpose, they hold conceptions of purpose that largely align with researchers (Hill et al., 2010). Results from the present dissertation, particularly Study 2, provide support for this finding.

Participants in Study 2 commonly referenced how a sense of purpose meant having long-term aims or goals they were working toward. They also suggested that sense of purpose included the features of personal meaningfulness or a beyond-the-self orientation. Of note, half of the participants from this sample also included features of purpose that were not included in Damon and colleagues (2003) proposed definition. These included how sense of purpose informs how individuals conduct themselves, how having sense of purpose provides assurance that individuals are doing what they’re meant to be doing, and how sense of purpose helps individuals “identify” themselves.

It will certainly be enriching to learn more from future work on how conceptions of purpose, specifically Damon and colleagues (2003) three aspects of purpose, vary by
culture. Indeed, Bronk (2014) notes that a large majority of research has been performed with those in the “Western” world. An awareness of the specific values that are socialized by different families, communities, and broader society will be important for future work on the development of sense of purpose. The values socialized within these groups certainly play an important role in what we ultimately pursue as a long-term aim, what we find to be personally meaningful, and how we contribute beyond ourselves. A deeper understanding of the role of culture in the development of a sense of purpose will strengthen our ability to conduct meaningful analysis of the results of future work.

Results from this dissertation, specifically Study 2, suggest that the university setting is a context where one’s definition of sense of purpose can emerge and develop. Indeed, the majority of participants reported that there were important differences between how they defined sense of purpose as freshmen and as graduates. University faculty and administrators interested in helping adolescents and emerging adults develop sense of purpose could be intentional in having students occasionally consider what it means to have a sense of purpose. Data from this dissertation suggest such conversations would be a developmentally appropriate activity.

Measurement of Purpose

Study 1 used a tool to measure sense of purpose that had been designed to capture the three main features of sense of purpose (Bronk et al., 2018). This instrument asked participants twelve questions, four of which aligned with each of the three features of sense of purpose. Measures of internal consistency suggest this measurement tool displayed high levels of reliability, $\alpha = .89$ (Cronbach, 1975). In addition to the continued
development and use of psychometrically sound quantitative measures, future work on sense of purpose should be designed to further incorporate qualitative means for assessing the presence of sense of purpose. This is especially relevant given the wide variety of personal definitions reported in Study 2. Such data could be gleaned through one-on-one or group interviews, participant journaling, or prompted written/verbal responses. Having a clear understanding of how an individual defines sense of purpose would position researchers to more fully understand the role of sense of purpose in student well-being and the role of the university in the development of sense of purpose among their students.

Future work could also examine the cultural relevance and appropriateness of existing measures. Indeed, the experiences surrounding the three main features of purpose (i.e., long-term aim, personal meaningfulness, and beyond-the-self orientation), as well as the communicated values regarding each of these areas, are certainly influenced by culture, community, and a constellation of personal attributes. Authors have noted that much of the research conducted on sense of purpose to this point has utilized Western individuals, leaving much unknown about the nature of sense of purpose among minoritized racial, ethnic, and cultural subgroups (Bronk, 2014). It is likely that researchers will observe differences across culture on issues related to the definition and measurement of purpose. For example, whether a culture embraces individualism or collectivism would certainly impact to what extent, and how, one makes contributions beyond-the-self. In addition, the access a culture has to education and opportunity will influence the long-term aims one is able to pursue. Being deliberate about how researchers has operationalized sense of purpose and how existing measures are used to
measure sense of purpose among diverse groups represents an important step toward addressing this gap.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Sense of Purpose**

Past writings on sense of purpose have commonly built from Erik Erikson’s theoretical work (see Bronk et al., 2018; Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003; Hill & Burrow, 2012). Within an Eriksonian framework, sense of purpose plays an important role across the lifespan, but especially when an individual encounters the developmental crisis of *identity vs. role confusion*. During this period, adolescents explore potential identities to determine where they best “fit” in society. In Erikson’s (1968) view, the development of a sense of purpose plays a crucial role in helping one resolve this crisis. Importantly, the development of one’s identity and the commitment to meaningful aims (i.e., sense of purpose) were viewed by Erikson as intertwined. Research has come to support this by showing that the two, identity and purpose, actually develop in tandem (Hill & Burrow, 2012).

While participants in Study 2 were not directly asked about this connection, issues related to identity were commonly mentioned in response to questions on sense of purpose. As shown in Figure 5, participants expressed that the university experience aided their discovery and development of purpose by providing a setting where they could address their *identity and values*. This included mentions of the university changing who they were, allowing for their exploration, allowing them to be themselves, and validating their pursuits. It was also not uncommon for participants to include markers of identity in their definitions of sense of purpose. A prime example was a student’s comment that
having a sense of purpose meant they were able to “identify yourself spiritually, emotionally, (and) physically”. Among the Study 2 participants, connections between identity development and sense of purpose were clearly visible. Specifically, Study 2 revealed a number of meaningful ways in which the university experience provided a context where individuals could develop their identity and discover a sense of purpose.

Importantly, a number of participants in Study 2 discussed how they had become more concerned with issues beyond themselves or included beyond-the-self features in their definition of what it means to have a sense of purpose. These findings provide further support for the integration of Erikson’s stages, specifically regarding issues of generativity. According to Erikson, this issue becomes a primary concern for those in middle-adulthood as they encounter the crisis associated with the stage he called generativity vs. stagnation. When reflecting on their development, participants discussed how they were more self-absorbed at the beginning of the university experience but had become more concerned with how they could make contributions beyond-the-self as a result of their university experience. Findings suggest that the university experience is a context where the insight and skills needed to make contributions beyond-the-self can be developed. In addition, these findings suggest that the university experience may prepare students for the future crisis of generativity vs. stagnation by helping them identify how they might make meaningful contributions to society.

Antonovsky’s theory of salutogenesis, centered on the role of coherence in health, brought attention to the “ease/dis-ease continuum” and provided Antonovsky with a platform from which to challenge the pathogenic orientation common in his field (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 76). Antonovsky contended that coping resources deserve
additional attention in research and that, “buffers, mediators, or protective factors (become) paramount when one adopts a salutogenic approach” (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 77). Study 1, aligned with this perspective, was designed to examine sense of purpose and its potential as a “buffer” between the stress associated with the university experience and psychological health. Results from this study suggest that sense of purpose, while correlated with health, was not generally shown to act as a buffer between stress and psychological health. However, sense of purpose did act as a buffer between stress and burnout for sophomores in the Study 1 sample. As such, university administrators can view sense of purpose as a potential retention tool that is also correlated with health outcomes. Prior work has noted how the different “years” of students (i.e. freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) have unique perceptions of their university experience (Webb, 2019). Importantly, that same work revealed sophomores experienced little progress in perception of their academic ability and reported increased thoughts of dropout. These findings provide valuable context and insight for the current findings. University administrators can review retention data and identify key times when having a sense of purpose may protect a student from burnout and dropout. Future work is needed to understand what role sense of purpose may play in the university experience across years. For example, while a sense of purpose may not act as a buffer between stress and psychological health for seniors, is it possible that a sense of purpose may contribute to increased confidence in their ability to be successful beyond university?

Future scholars would be wise to incorporate Antonovsky’s thinking into the design and execution of follow-up research. First, researchers should consider not only how sense of purpose is negatively associated with psychological distress but positively
associated with well-being among university students. This would frame sense of purpose more appropriately as a feature of well-being and not only as a “sheltering fortress in a world of constant threat” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 119). In addition, future scholars could consider Antonovsky’s work on coherence, but especially the component of \textit{meaningfulness}. According to Antonovsky, those with a strong sense of coherence are more likely to make decisions that will lead to well-being. In this way, it is plausible to hypothesize that sense of purpose might buffer the association of stress and well-being by influencing the decisions that students will make. For example, a stronger sense of purpose might influence a student’s willingness to appropriately manage their time or participate in tutoring, thus leading to decreased stress and less-compromised health.

University administrators and faculty might consider how they can be intentional in having conversations with their students about the “why” motivating their university studies. Such conversations are likely to be beneficial to those that currently view some or all of their university experience as “checking a series of boxes”. Importantly, students can be helped to understand that their “why” doesn’t have to be tied to a particular profession. For example, a student may commit their university experience to becoming more skilled at reading, writing, and communication.

\textbf{Discovery and Development of Purpose}

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are viewed as crucial periods for the development of sense of purpose, both due to cognitive limitations in earlier life and the role sense of purpose plays in helping individuals resolve the “crisis” of \textit{identity vs. role confusion} (Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968; VanDyke & Elias, 2007). Contexts that help
support the development of sense of purpose can be found throughout the community and within the home (Bronk, 2012; Shamah, 2011). Among these settings, few use a formalized approach of instructing individuals on how to go about developing a sense of purpose (Koshy & Mariano, 2011). Importantly, youth have reported that sense of purpose is developed after engaging in a variety of activities, as opposed to only engaging in experiences based on an already-established purpose (Bronk, 2012). Damon (2008) provided the following encouragement to parents:

The awareness that every parent should start with is that the first buddings of purpose are a bit like the grass seeds that we spread around in our yards: only some will sprout, and we have no idea which ones. Fortunately, only a minuscule proportion of the seeds need to keep growing to produce a thriving lawn” (p. 139).

Similar to how parents may foster a sense of purpose, the current work provides support for the value of exposing university students to a number of meaningful activities in the university setting, recognizing that only “some will sprout” into a thriving sense of purpose (see Figure 5).

Results from Study 2 provide support for this assumption in a number of meaningful ways. Indeed, participants identified exposure as a main feature of the university experience that aided their development of purpose. This “spreading of grass seed” came in the form of being introduced to new possibilities, opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences, being introduced to new perspectives, and having access to a broad range of class offerings. Participants also noted that the university helped to expand their horizons and exposed them to diverse perspectives. Results highlight university structure/support as a feature that fostered the discovery and development of purpose.
Participants specifically reported how the university setting provided a sense of belonging, supportive professors and instructors, and access to a broader community. When considering what advice they would impart to incoming freshmen, participants recommended that students involve a support network. While this work does not provide support for post-secondary education being the only place a sense of purpose can develop, it does highlight certain structures and supports that may not be present in other settings.

As noted in the extant literature, the contexts that facilitate the discovery and development of purpose are rarely designed with the intention of developing a sense of purpose. Findings from the present dissertation suggest that the same was true for participants of Study 2. These participants discussed that rather than specifically instructing them on sense of purpose, they were provided with an opportunity to reflect on their values and be exposed to new possibilities, all within a setting that provided structure and support. Importantly, a number of graduates who were interviewed in Study 2 mentioned how they had committed themselves to professions and causes they weren’t aware of just a few years earlier. When asked how freshmen might develop a sense of purpose, these participants consistently suggested that freshmen leave their comfort zone, immerse themselves into the experience, and expose themselves to new things. University administrators can seek to continue to build up the structure and support that allows for students to more easily focus on their studies and exploration. Faculty can be intentional to include opportunities to reflect on personal values and seek for opportunities to expose students to new possibilities and ways of thinking.
Sense of Purpose and Well-Being

Prior work has positioned sense of purpose as an important predictor of well-being. Specifically, scholarship has found sense of purpose to be associated with life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2010), lower levels of psychopathology (Kish & Moody, 1989), decreased anxiety (Burrow & Hill, 2013), and increased ability to regulate emotions and overcome obstacles (Hill et al., 2018). Study 1 of the present dissertation was designed to further explore how sense of purpose might protect student well-being in the midst of stressful events. Findings provide further support for the relationship that exists between sense of purpose and desired outcomes, specifically the negative association between sense of purpose with both depression and burnout. University administrators should be aware that a sense of purpose, or its very pursuit, could be considered as part of an archetypal profile of a healthy student. Quite directly, it is imperative that future work examine the role of sense of purpose in well-being among university students. The key aspect of this call for research is how colleges and universities choose to define “well-being”. One direction for future work could be to examine sense of purpose and its relation to practices that lead to better academic outcomes, including time management and help-seeking behaviors. Conversely, future research could examine how often students find themselves in existential frustration and what impact this has on factors such as learning, engagement, retention, academic outcomes, and job placement.

Antonovsky would invite researchers interested in the health outcomes of university students to consider how a sense of coherence (made up in part by a sense of meaningfulness) impacted these outcomes (Antonovsky, 1990). Such examinations would be structured to help researchers better understand how a sense of coherence impacts the
decision-making of students when it comes to their health behaviors (e.g. time spent on self-care, sleep, diet, time management, etc.). Using a salutogenic approach, researchers would design future projects to understand the overall health of students more fully, as opposed to simply the health outcomes associated with illness. This would potentially position sense of purpose as a developmental asset that leads one to construct the “sheltering fortress” that acts as an aide to help one persist through difficulty.

The Emerging Mental Health Crisis

Universities across the United States are witnessing a mental health crisis among their students (see Kitzrow, 2003; Schwartz & Kay, 2009). In an effort to address this challenge, many institutions have increased the number of on-campus services intended to assist students with mental health concerns (DeRito, 2019; LeViness et al., 2018). The present dissertation studies were designed to examine a salient developmental asset (i.e., sense of purpose) to determine whether it could potentially buffer the effects of stress on mental health. Results from Study 1 suggest that sense of purpose, as presently understood, does not moderate the relationship between stress and symptoms of psychological distress. However, one key exception existed. Specifically, sense of purpose did moderate the association of stress and burnout among sophomores in the sample. The present findings may come as a surprise to those that have embraced statements like, “…suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning…” (Frankl, 1992, p. 117) and “he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, 1992, p. 84). However, it is worthy to acknowledge that key distinctions exist between the campaigns Victor Frankl was forced to endure and the campus experience.
students choose to participate in. Frankl and the millions of others forced into Nazi
concentration camps lacked any sort of volition, whereas students who matriculate at a
university apply to be admitted and ultimately choose to attend. How might a sense of
purpose serve a different role in a setting where all autonomy is taken away versus a
setting where a multitude of options are presented? Future research could be designed to
address this question.

The Role of Sense of Purpose on Campus

Results from these complementary dissertation studies suggest that sense of
purpose has an important role to play in the well-being and development of university
students. A number of practical implications are therefore communicated to university
administrators. First, university administrators may consider adopting a comprehensive
model of health with an understanding of where sense of purpose fits within that model.
Universities can engage in the much-needed work of understanding how a sense of
purpose may possess unique benefits for students depending on year in school. This
work, specifically Study 1, found that sense of purpose buffers the impact of stress on
burnout for sophomores but not for other years in school. How might a sense of purpose
uniquely enhance the university experience and contribute to the well-being for freshmen,
juniors, and seniors? Second, university administrators are reminded of the role and
importance of the university experience in helping one develop a sense of purpose. As
illustrated in Figure 5, the university experience represents a unique context where a
student is able to explore their identity, further establish their values, expose themselves
to new ideas, and learn about new opportunities all while having the structure and support that provides access to resources and a sense of belonging.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation represents an important contribution to current understanding of sense of purpose within the university setting. In utilizing these findings, university administrators can continue to structure the design and delivery of the “university experience” in an effort to expose students to new opportunities and new ways of thinking. Administrators can also consider where sense of purpose fits within a broader biopsychosocial model of student well-being. Researchers have a number of meaningful future directions that can be pursued to further understand sense of purpose, how it fits within development, and its role in well-being.
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Appendices
Appendix A
Letter of Information, Study 1

The Development of Sense of Purpose During the University Years

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Dorsch, PhD, an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family at Utah State University.

The purpose of this research is to explore the potential impact of having a sense of purpose during your university experience. The research team is specifically seeking to understand the role of sense of purpose as a potential buffer between the stress that students experience and psychological distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, and burnout).

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time for any reason.

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in an online survey. It is anticipated that your participation in this survey will take 10-15 minutes. If you agree to participate, the researchers will collect demographic information, current levels of sense of purpose, burnout, anxiety, and depression.

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. There is a risk of loss of confidentiality, since online activities always carry a risk of a data breach, but we will use systems and processes that minimize breach opportunities. There may also be discomfort in completing surveys surrounding psychological distress, specifically questions on anxiety, depression, and burnout. These surveys however represent the same type of questions that would be asked in routine psychological examinations. It is important to be aware of the resources available to you as a student at Utah State University. Utah State University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) supports student mental health development and self-reliance through short-term therapy, support groups, workshops, referrals to outside long-term resources, and self-guided resources. Services are confidential and most are free to qualified students. To contact CAPS, you can call (435) 797-1012 or email "capsinfo@usu.edu". You can find more information at "https://aggiewellness.usu.edu/". You can also reach out to the National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800-273-TALK if you are ever in an emergency situation, please call 911.

At the conclusion of this survey, you will have the option to provide your email address and be entered into a drawing for 1 of 15 $100 Amazon gift cards. In addition, the results have the potential to offer important practical considerations for university staff and administrators involved with student well-being.

We will collect your anonymous information through a Qualtrics survey. This survey data will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system. We will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide remains confidential.

If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at travis.dorsch@usu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

By continuing to the survey, you agree that you are 18 years of age or older, and wish to participate. You agree that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you are being asked to do. You also agree that if you have contacted the research team with any questions about your participation, and are clear on how to stop your participation in this study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.
Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer, Study 1

Students at Utah State University!
You are invited to participate in a study designed to explore what impact a sense of purpose has on your university experience. The research team is specifically seeking to understand the role of sense of purpose as a potential buffer between the stress that students experience and psychological distress (i.e. depression, anxiety, and burnout). As a participant in this study, you can elect to be entered into a drawing to win one of 15 $100 Amazon Gift Cards!

Those invited to participate:
Undergraduate students enrolled at Utah State University (including online students and those attending regional campuses) that are between the ages of 18-30.

Time commitment:
Participants will be asked to take part in a one-time online survey. The survey is designed to take 10-15 minutes to complete.

Compensation:
15 participants will be randomly selected to receive a $100 Amazon Gift Card.

To participate, simply follow this link:
https://usu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2gBaPlYqwh3MGPat

Or scan this QR code:

Researcher Contact Information: Michael King (michael.king@usu.edu)
Faculty Contact: Travis Dorsch (travis.dorsch@usu.edu)
USU IRB Protocol ID: 11849
Appendix C
Survey Instrument, Study 1

Start of Block: Demographic Information

What is your age (in years)?

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<th>22</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>27</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>29</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Current Age | ![Current Age Bar](image)

Select the living situation that best fits your current accommodations:

- [ ] On-campus housing
- [ ] Off-campus housing
- [ ] Living with parents

How many dependent children are you responsible for caring for?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How many dependent children | ![How many Dependent Children Bar](image)
What is your current relationship status?

○ Married

○ Single, never married

○ Living with partner, not married

○ Widowed

○ Divorced

○ Separated

○ Other ________________________________________________

What is your biological sex?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Non-binary

○ Prefer not to answer

Do you consider yourself to be transgender?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Prefer not to answer
Of these options, how would you identify?

- Heterosexual or straight
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Other ________________________________
- Prefer not to answer

Please select your ethnicity

- Hispanic or Latino
- NOT Hispanic or Latino

Please select your race

- American Indian / Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African-American
- White
- More than one race
- Unknown
- Other ________________________________
What is your present religion, if any?

- Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Nondenominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Reformed Church of Christ, etc.)
- Roman Catholic (Catholic)
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Orthodox (Greek, Russian, or some other orthodox church)
- Jewish (Judaism)
- Muslim (Islam)
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Jehovah's Witness
- Atheist (do not believe in God)
- Agnostic (not sure if there is a God)
- Unitarian (Universalist)
- Nothing in particular
- Another religion (Please list)

- Prefer not to answer
Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, some young adults serve a "mission". Which of these statements best represents your situation?

- I am a returned missionary (this includes those that may have returned home before their anticipated release date)
- I am planning to serve a mission
- I do not plan on serving a mission/I did not serve a mission (whether it was a personal decision, due to medical conditions, or any other reason)
- I'm not sure whether or not I will serve a mission

Please select the USU campus you attend (If you take classes from multiple campuses, please select the location you most often attend):
Campus

- ▼ Beaver ... Wendover

What type of degree are your pursuing?

- Associates
- Bachelors

What is your current year in school?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
Please select the college that houses your major:
College

- I have not yet decided on a major ... I am not sure which college my major is in

Where have you been enrolled for undergraduate studies?

- Only Utah State University
- Utah State University and another/other institution(s) inside the state of Utah
- Utah State University and another/other institution(s) outside the state of Utah

As an incoming freshmen, did you participate in Utah State University’s "Connections" (USU 1010) course?

- Yes
- No
- I’m not sure

When you transferred to Utah State University, did you participate in Utah State University's "Connections" course?

- Yes
- No
- I’m not sure
Regarding your involvement at USU, please select any that you participate in:

☐ NCAA Varsity Sports Team
☐ NCAA Club Sports Team
☐ USU Marching Band
☐ Student government
☐ USU Honors Program
☐ Aggie First Scholars (AFS)
☐ TRIO
☐ Sorority / Fraternity

What is your cumulative GPA (example: 3.4) for your undergraduate degree?

________________________________________________________________

End of Block: Demographic Information

Start of Block: Claremont Sense of Purpose Scale

How clear is your sense of purpose in your life?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all clear</th>
<th>A little bit clear</th>
<th>Somewhat clear</th>
<th>Quite clear</th>
<th>Extremely clear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you understand what gives your life meaning?</td>
<td>Do not understand at all</td>
<td>Understand a little bit</td>
<td>Understand somewhat</td>
<td>Understand quite well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How confident are you that you have discovered a satisfying purpose for your life?</th>
<th>Not at all confident</th>
<th>Slightly confident</th>
<th>Somewhat confident</th>
<th>Quite confident</th>
<th>Extremely confident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How clearly do you understand what it is that makes your life feel worthwhile?</th>
<th>Not at all clearly</th>
<th>A little bit clearly</th>
<th>Somewhat clearly</th>
<th>Quite clearly</th>
<th>Extremely clearly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How hard are you working to make your long-term aims a reality?</th>
<th>Not at all hard</th>
<th>Slightly hard</th>
<th>Somewhat hard</th>
<th>Quite hard</th>
<th>Extremely hard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
<td>☰</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How much effort are you putting into making your goals a reality?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effort Level</th>
<th>Almost no effort</th>
<th>A little bit of effort</th>
<th>Some effort</th>
<th>Quite a bit of effort</th>
<th>A tremendous amount of effort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How engaged are you in carrying out the plans that you set for yourself?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Level</th>
<th>Not at all engaged</th>
<th>Slightly engaged</th>
<th>Somewhat engaged</th>
<th>Quite engaged</th>
<th>Extremely engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What portion of your daily activities move you closer to your long-term aims?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities Level</th>
<th>None of my daily activities</th>
<th>A few of my daily activities</th>
<th>Some of my daily activities</th>
<th>Most of my daily activities</th>
<th>All of my daily activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How often do you hope to leave the world better than you found it?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency Level</th>
<th>Almost never</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Almost all the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How often do you find yourself hoping that you will make a meaningful contribution to the broader world?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Almost never</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Almost all the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all important</th>
<th>Slightly important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Quite important</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How often do you hope that the work that you do positively influences others?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Almost never</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Almost all the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

End of Block: Claremont Sense of Purpose Scale

Start of Block: University Stress Scale

How often have each of the following caused you stress over the past month? If any are not applicable to you, tick Not at all.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Constantly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic/coursework demands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procrastination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University/college environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances and money problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing/accommodation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship break-down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study/life balance</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation issues</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language/cultural issues</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other demands</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**End of Block: University Stress Scale**

**Start of Block: Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Student Version)**

Below you find a series of statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the scale, please indicate the degree of your agreement by selecting the response that corresponds with each statement.

---

I always find new and interesting aspects in my studies.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

---
It happens more and more often that I talk about my studies in a negative way.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Lately, I tend to think less about my academic tasks and do them almost mechanically.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I find my studies to be a positive challenge.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of study.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

Sometimes I feel sickened by my studies.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

This is the only field of study that I can imagine myself doing.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree
I feel more and more engaged in my studies.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

There are days when I feel tired before I arrive in class or start studying.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

After a class or after studying, I tend to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree
I can tolerate the pressure of my studies very well.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

While studying, I often feel emotionally drained.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

After a class or after studying, I have enough energy for my leisure activities.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
After a class or after studying, I usually feel worn out and weary.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I can usually manage my study-related workload well.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

When I study, I usually feel energized.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

End of Block: Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Student Version)

Start of Block: PHQ-9 (Depression)

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Several days</th>
<th>More than half the days</th>
<th>Nearly every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little interest or pleasure in doing things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble falling/staying asleep, sleeping too much</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling tired or having little energy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor appetite or overeating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling bad about yourself or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite; being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way

If you checked off any problems on the items listed above, how difficult have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not difficult at all</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult</th>
<th>Very difficult</th>
<th>Extremely difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

End of Block: PHQ-9 (Depression)

Start of Block: GAD-7 (Anxiety)
Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Not at all sure</th>
<th>Several days</th>
<th>Over half the days</th>
<th>Nearly every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to stop or control worrying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying too much about different things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble relaxing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being so restless that it's hard to sit still</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming easily annoyed or irritable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you checked off any problems on the items listed above, how difficult have these made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Not difficult at all</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult</th>
<th>Very difficult</th>
<th>Extremely difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

End of Block: GAD-7 (Anxiety)

End of Survey
Appendix D

Informed Consent, Study 2

The Development of Sense of Purpose During the University Years

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Travis Dorsch, PhD, an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family at Utah State University.

The purpose of this research is to explore the development of sense of purpose during the university experience. The research team is specifically seeking to understand the role of the university in helping students develop their sense of purpose.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time for any reason.

If you take part in this study, you will first be asked to complete a short survey and participate in an interview. The survey will ask you to provide basic demographic information and preferences for a scheduled interview. Upon completing this survey, you will be contacted regarding your participation in an interview. If you are selected to take part in an interview, a member of the research team will work with you to schedule a time to take part in a one-time semi-structured interview via Zoom, a web-based video conferencing tool. It is anticipated that your participation in this interview will take 30-45 minutes. If you agree to participate, the researchers will ask questions about your experience developing sense of purpose during the university experience. We anticipate that at least 10 people will participate in this research study. If selected to participate in an interview, you will be compensated with a $50 Amazon gift card. In addition, the results have the potential to offer important practical considerations for university staff and administrators involved with student well-being.

Participation in this study presents the potential risk of loss of confidentiality, since online activities always carry a risk of a data breach, but we will use systems and processes that minimize breach opportunities.

We will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide remains confidential. We will not reveal your identity in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize the specifics you share with us.

We will collect your information through a Qualtrics survey and a Zoom-recorded interview. This data will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system. We will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide remains confidential. Your interview recording will be transcribed verbatim, and these transcriptions will be deidentified along with your survey responses. We anticipate deleting your interview recording, along with any other identifying information, by August 1st, 2021.

You can decline to participate in any part of this study for any reason and can end your participation at any time.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact Travis Dorsch at travis.dorsch@usu.edu. Thank you again for your time and consideration. If you have any concerns about this study, please contact Utah State University’s Human Research Protection Office at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

By signing below, you agree to participate in this study. You indicate that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you will be asked to do. You also agree that you have asked any questions you might have, and are clear on how to stop your participation in the study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

Participant’s Signature: ___________________________________________
Participant’s Name, Printed: _______________________________________
Date: ____________________________________________

Human Development and Family Studies | hdfs.usu.edu | 2905 Old Main Hill | Logan, UT 84322
Appendix E

Recruitment Flyer, Study 2

Spring 2021 Graduates at Utah State University!

Researchers at USU invite you to take part in a study intended to explore the development of your sense of purpose while at USU. The research team is specifically seeking to understand what role the university experience played in the development of your sense of purpose.

Those that participate in an interview will receive a $50 Amazon gift card*.

Those invited to participate:
- Undergraduate students enrolled at Utah State University (including online students and those attending regional campuses) that are between the ages of 18-30.
- Spring 2021 graduates

Time commitment:
- Participants will be asked to take part in a one-time interview via Zoom. The interview is designed to take 30-45 minutes to complete.

Compensation:
- Those that participate in an interview will receive a $50 Amazon gift

To notify the research team of your interest, simply follow this link: https://usu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5AvKH0J0s6vBWvK

Or scan this QR code:

*While supplies last. Notifying the research team of interest in your participation does not guarantee participation.

Researcher Contact Information: Michael King (michael.king@usu.edu)
Faculty Contact: Travis Dorsch (travis.dorsch@usu.edu)
USU IRB Protocol ID: 11849
Appendix F

Interest and Participant Availability Survey, Study 2

Start of Survey

What is your age (in years)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>24</th>
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<td>Current Age</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Select the living situation that best fits your current accommodations:

- [ ] On-campus housing
- [ ] Off-campus housing
- [ ] Living with parents

How many dependent children are you responsible for caring for?

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>Current Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is your current relationship status?

- Married
- Single, never married
- Living with partner, not married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Other ________________________________________________

What is your biological sex?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer

Do you consider yourself to be transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer
Of these options, how would you identify?

- Heterosexual or straight
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Other ________________________________
- Prefer not to answer

Please select your ethnicity

- Hispanic or Latino
- NOT Hispanic or Latino

Please select your race

- American Indian / Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African-American
- White
- More than one race
- Unknown
- Other ________________________________
What is your present religion, if any?

- Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Nondenominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Reformed Church of Christ, etc.)
- Roman Catholic (Catholic)
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Orthodox (Greek, Russian, or some other orthodox church)
- Jewish (Judaism)
- Muslim (Islam)
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Jehovah's Witness
- Atheist (do not believe in God)
- Agnostic (not sure if there is a God)
- Unitarian (Universalist)
- Nothing in particular
- Another religion (Please list)
- Prefer not to answer
Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, some young adults serve a "mission". Which of these statements best represents your situation?

- I am a returned missionary (this includes those that may have returned home before their anticipated release date)
- I am planning to serve a mission
- I do not plan on serving a mission/I did not serve a mission (whether it was a personal decision, due to medical conditions, or any other reason)
- I'm not sure whether or not I will serve a mission

Please select the USU campus you attend (If you take classes from multiple campuses, please select the location you most often attend):

Campus

▼ Beaver ... Wendover

What type of degree did you graduate with?

- Associates
- Bachelors

Please select the college that houses your major:

College

▼ I have not yet decided on a major ... I am not sure which college my major is in
Where have you been enrolled for undergraduate studies?

- Only Utah State University
- Utah State University and another/other institution(s) inside the state of Utah
- Utah State University and another/other institution(s) outside the state of Utah

As an incoming freshmen, did you participate in Utah State University's "Connections" (USU 1010) course?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

When you transferred to Utah State University, did you participate in Utah State University's "Connections" course?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
Regarding your involvement at USU, please select any that you participate in:

- [ ] NCAA Varsity Sports Team
- [ ] NCAA Club Sports Team
- [ ] USU Marching Band
- [ ] Student government
- [ ] USU Honors Program
- [ ] Aggie First Scholars (AFS)
- [ ] TRIO
- [ ] Sorority / Fraternity

What is your cumulative GPA (example: 3.4) for your undergraduate degree?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
What day, or days, of the week would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Monday
☐ Tuesday
☐ Wednesday
☐ Thursday
☐ Friday
☐ Saturday

What time of day on Mondays would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Morning
☐ Afternoon
☐ Evening

What time of day on Tuesdays would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Morning
☐ Afternoon
☐ Evening
What time of day on Wednesdays would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Morning

☐ Afternoon

☐ Evening

What time of day on Thursdays would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Morning

☐ Afternoon

☐ Evening

What time of day on Fridays would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Morning

☐ Afternoon

☐ Evening
What time of day on Saturdays would be most convenient for you to take part in the interview?

☐ Morning

☐ Afternoon

☐ Evening

Please provide an email address where you can be contacted if you are selected to participate in an interview.

___________________________________________________________

End of Survey

Appendix G

Interview Protocol, Study 2

“Thank you for your willingness to participate and congratulations on your graduation. I recognize this is likely a busy time for you and am grateful that you are willing to spend some time today sharing your thoughts.”

My name is Michael King. I am a doctoral student here at Utah State University. The purpose for conducting this interview is to learn from you about your experience with
developing a sense of purpose while at Utah State University. I want to emphasize a few things before we begin:

(1) This is not a testing format where answers are in any way are right or wrong. In addition, you are encouraged to share as little or as much related to each question as you feel is relevant. I might interrupt/interject, but this shouldn’t only be to clarify or understand your comments in more depth.

(2) While this conversation will be recorded and transcribed, your information will be treated in a respectful manner and your information will be kept confidential. The eventual publication of this work will not consist of any identifying information and your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the process.

(3) While we value your responses, it is important for you to know that you are able to choose to not to answer any of the questions or withdraw from the interview at any point without any sort of penalty.

Are there any questions before we begin or anything you need?

I will now begin the recording.
1. What do you think it means to have a sense of purpose?
   a. Do you think you would have offered a different answer at the beginning of your university experience?
   b. How do you feel you came to understand sense of purpose the way that you do?
   c. Do you have any advice you would share with incoming freshmen with regards to how to find a sense of purpose?

2. What impact did the university experience have on your personal sense of purpose?
   a. What experiences, if any, at Utah State University do you feel were designed to further develop your sense of purpose?
      i. Were there other experiences that were particularly influential in developing your sense of purpose?
   b. What types of causes or purposes do you find you are passionate about?
      i. What role, if any, did the university play in helping you identify professions/fields of study/causes that are now personally meaningful to you?
   c. Do you feel that there were certain causes or purposes that the university of professors wanted you to adopt?
      i. Did these resonate with you?

3. Is there anything else you would like to mention or would like to share?
Appendix H

Additional Outputs for Study 1

Moderation analysis for role of sense of purpose between stress and depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.94 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>0.94 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>0.94 (0.03) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>1.24 (0.07) ***</td>
<td>1.16 (0.07) ***</td>
<td>1.15 (0.07) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.21 (0.05) ***</td>
<td>-0.20 (0.05) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.06 (0.10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
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<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adj. R^2</td>
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<td>0.53</td>
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*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

Moderation analysis for role of sense of purpose between stress and anxiety

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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>1.05 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>1.05 (0.03) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>1.35 (0.08) ***</td>
<td>1.33 (0.09) ***</td>
<td>1.33 (0.09) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.05 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td></td>
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<td>-0.04 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adj. R^2</td>
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<td>0.44</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

Moderation analysis for role of sense of purpose between stress and burnout

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>2.54 (0.02) ***</td>
<td>2.53 (0.02) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
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<td>0.44 (0.05) ***</td>
<td>0.43 (0.05) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
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<td>-0.15 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>-0.14 (0.03) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td></td>
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<td>-0.11 (0.07)</td>
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<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
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*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05
CURRICULUM VITAE
Michael Q. King, M.S.

BACKGROUND

CONTACT INFORMATION

Michael Q. King
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Utah State University
2905 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84332
michael.king@usu.edu

EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

2017-present  Doctor of Philosophy (anticipated: December 2021)
Utah State University
Specialization: Human Development and Family Studies
Committee Chair: Travis E. Dorsch, Ph.D
Dissertation: Finding Their “Why”: Examining the Development of Sense of Purpose during the University Years and its Role in Student Well-Being

2015-2017  Master of Science
Utah State University
Specialization: Marriage and Family Therapy
Committee Chair: Megan Oka, Ph.D., LMFT
Thesis: Stillbirth: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Clinical Encounter for Couples

2012-2015  Bachelor of Science
Utah State University
Major: Human Development and Family Studies
Minor: Psychology

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY

2021-Present  Program Coordinator, Outreach and Student Success Coaching
Office of Student Retention and Completion
Utah State University
Logan, Utah

2018-2021 Graduate Instructor
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Utah State University
Logan, Utah

2018-2021 Psychotherapist
North Logan Therapy Associates
North Logan, Utah

2017-2021 Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Utah State University
Logan, Utah

2019 Instructor
University Connections
Utah State University
Logan, Utah

2015-2019 Graduate Teaching Assistant
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Utah State University
Logan, Utah

2016–2017 Psychotherapist/Behavioral Health Intern
Bear Lake Community Health Centers
Logan, Utah

______________________________________________________________________________

TEACHING

CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

HDFS 2660 Parenting and Child Guidance
• Spring 2021 (Students = 83)
HDFS 1500 Human Development Across the Lifespan
- Fall, 2020 (Students = 106)
- Spring, 2019 (Students = 214)
- Fall, 2018 (Students = 108)
- Spring, 2018 (Students = 210)

USU 1010 University Connections
- Fall, 2019 (Students = 29)

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

HDFS 1500 Human Development Across the Lifespan*
  Instructor: Kaelin Olsen, MS
  - Summer, 2019
  - Summer, 2018

HDFS 1500 Human Development Across the Lifespan
  Instructor: Travis E. Dorsch, Ph.D.
  - Spring, 2018
  - Fall, 2017
  - Fall, 2015

HDFS 2400 Marriage and Family Relationships
  Instructor: Shawn Whiteman, Ph.D.
  - Spring, 2017

HDFS 3700 Mental Health Awareness and Advocacy
  Instructor: Logan Lyons, PhD
  - Spring 2020
  - Fall 2019

HDFS 3700 Mental Health Awareness and Advocacy
  Instructor: Ty Aller, MMFT, LAMFT
  - Fall 2017

HDFS 3700 Mental Health Awareness and Advocacy*
  Instructor: Ty Aller, MMFT, LAMFT
  - Fall 2017

HDFS 5250 Addiction and the Family*
  Instructor: W. David Robinson, Ph.D., LMFT
  - Fall, 2016
  - Fall, 2015

PSY 7610 Research Design and Analysis
  Instructor: Tyson S. Barrett, Ph.D.
UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING FELLOW

HDFS 1500: Lifespan Development  
Instructor: Travis E. Dorsch, Ph.D.  
  • Fall, 2014

HDFS 2450: The Consumer and the Market  
Instructor: Yoon G. Lee, Ph.D.  
  • Fall, 2014

RESEARCH

REFEREED PUBLICATIONS


Wishkoski, R., Meter, D., Tulane, S., King, M. Q., Butler, K., Woodland, & L. Laura. (1st Review). Attitudes toward research in an Undergraduate Social Science Methods Course. *Communications in Information Literacy*.


BOOK CHAPTERS


RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

*Parent Personality and Child Outcomes in Organized Youth Sport*

Michael Q. King, Travis E. Dorsch, & C. Ryan Dunn

*Marital Satisfaction Among Parents of Youth Involved in Organized Youth Sport*

Valeria Eckardt, Michael Q. King, Travis E. Dorsch

RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS


meeting of the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPSPA), Minneapolis, MN.

FUNDED GRANT PROPOSALS


King, M. Q., & Dorsch, T. E. (2014, March): Designing an evidence-based education program for parents in organized youth sport. Utah State University Office of Research and Graduate Studies: $2,000

AWARDED FUNDING

2021 CEHS Graduate Student Research Award: $3,000
College of Education and Human Services
Utah State University

AWARDS

2020 Graduate Instructor of the Year
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Utah State University

2017 Best family economics paper of the year. *The impact of family financial investment on parent pressure, child enjoyment, and commitment to participation in organized youth sport.*

2015 Undergraduate Researcher of the Year
Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services
Utah State University
EDUCATIONAL CURRICULA


PUBLIC OUTREACH


SERVICE

UNIVERSITY

2018-2019  Graduate Student Representative  Utah State University Department of Human Development and Family Studies  Logan, UT

2016-2017  Graduate Student Representative  Utah State University Department of Human Development and Family Studies  Logan, UT

2014  Vice President  Utah State University Marriage and Family Therapy Student Association  Logan, UT

COMMUNITY

2021-Present  Youth Athletics Coach  River Heights, UT

2018-2019  Classroom aide, Providence Elementary  Providence Elementary, Providence, Utah

COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

*This is Your Teen on Life and Extra-Curricular Activities.* Cache County School District Personal Development Day. North Logan, UT (2019, October).


