

Driven to succeed: How we're depriving teens of a sense of purpose

Finding purpose can help youth discover their own path to success, professor says

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Miranda Chatfield graduated from Gunn High School in 2008 having done everything she was supposed to do. Smart and determined, she aimed for admission to an Ivy League college, took challenging classes and studied hard, often into the wee hours. The result was a prized admission to Cornell University.

Her achievements came at a high cost, however.

"I remember fear -- being fearful of my teachers, my classes. I was ... just so constantly worried about academics. 'What if I failed this test?' 'What if I have three tests on the same day?' 'I just can't go on. I can't make it.' Desperate feeling," Chatfield, now 22, said. "I've only begun to reflect on it in the last year, and it sounds strange, but maybe to some extent I repressed it after leaving high school because I just didn't want to think about that anymore. But there were times when I had stayed up the whole night ... and I had a test at 8 a.m., and I just felt like I couldn't do it."

Chatfield would ask herself, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I keep up?"

She describes the Gunn environment then as competitive, judgmental and "hostile to learning." Her parents, she said, pushed her but were not as demanding as other parents. She felt the added pressure, though, of other students' parents being "transferred" through her peers onto her. The high anxiety among peers at school, and on Facebook, was contagious.

"I was thinking once I got to Cornell, everything would be perfect. But I learned ... it doesn't seem to end," she said. Within two years, she was burned out, anxious and lost. She needed a break.

"I didn't feel like I belonged there," she said. "In a certain way, I wasn't really ready for college."

After taking the past year off to reflect and recharge, Chatfield returned to Cornell this fall with greater self-knowledge, better coping skills and renewed purpose.

Trevor Bisset also aimed for "the prize" of a top college and drove himself at Palo Alto High School to perform at the highest levels academically, athletically, and as a student leader. He had plenty of company, he said, recounting how the right college admission was "the end-all, be-all" for many of his peers. This quest carried with it a fear of failure -- fear of failing parents, friends and the advantages of a privileged upbringing. Not getting into that top college for many students, Bisset said, "would say something terrible" about their worth as human beings.

Bisset, who graduated in 2005, was rewarded with admission to Pomona College. But instead of thriving, Bisset spent his first two years at Pomona "acting out, drinking way too much, and very depressed." Hitting rock bottom, he stopped out for a year to "get off the hamster wheel and reflect."

Like Chatfield and Bisset, many Palo Alto adolescents spend their high school years in a contest for credentials, accumulating grades, scores and accolades they hope to leverage into a rosy future at a top college. For many, this is an intensely competitive, stressful process that crowds out other activities important to healthy development. Increasingly, it is a process that is not sustainable for many young people -- despite their tremendous abilities and stellar performances -- and contributes to a rising tide of mental health issues, a sense of drift, emptiness, "something missing," or a lack of joy, according to many educators, psychologists, parents and other youth experts.

These concerns also apply to students with more modest goals and achievements, who end up feeling "less than," discouraged, isolated or hopeless in the midst of a pressure-cooker culture.

"Is everybody talking about this? Yes. I go to a conference once a year with colleagues at peer institutions. It's very much a concern for all of us," said Julie Lythcott-Haims, Stanford University dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising and a Palo Alto parent. "The mental health outcomes are an acute concern, but even without them ... I think we would all be lamenting that something is amiss ... regardless of how elite the school is or how selective or how high the achievement level of the student."

Increasingly, the experts who examine these troubling youth trends say it's the adults, not the youth, who have lost their way. With the best of intentions, adults have undermined the normal, healthy process of youthful exploration, engagement, risk-taking and idealism through overprotective, over-involved parenting, teach-to-the test schools, and a hyper-competitive, commercialized college admissions process. The result is youth who feel pressured to adopt unfulfilling, short-horizon goals and meet ever-greater expectations along a narrowly defined path to success, without due regard to their own inclinations, health or well-being.

Many parents recognize these forces and the problems created. Some rail privately against it, and others attempt public action towards change. But most feel daunted in the face of a prevailing culture that craves achievement and status and are challenged to bring balance to the equation, even within their own households.

Many are wondering how to make the treadmill stop. And if it stops: Will young people still be as smart, as accomplished, as respected? If they get off the treadmill: Will they still be able to live a good life?

William Damon, Stanford School of Education professor and psychologist, has spent years studying this set of issues and believes that it is a sense of purpose -- intrinsic, sustaining and noble -- that is missing in the majority of today's youth, causing many of them to drift and founder. And it is this lack of purpose that should be attracting community attention, and not just its by-product, stress

"People don't worry about the right things," Damon said. "The biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress; it's meaninglessness."

Working hard for something they didn't choose themselves, and don't believe in, is counterproductive to long-term health and fulfillment. It is simply not sustainable. A purposeful life, by contrast, can unleash tremendous energy, creativity, exhilaration and a deep satisfaction with efforts and accomplishments, according to Damon.

Damon is a strong advocate for bringing higher visibility to the concept of purpose, especially in the case of young people.

"We all need a purpose, but at that formative period of life, when you don't even know who you are, you really need it," he told the Weekly.

Finding purpose early builds confidence and habits of mind that can be practiced and strengthened with practice, contributing to a strong core, positive attitude and eagerness to learn about the world, according to Damon.

Purpose is something young people not only need, but want.

"It's impossible to work with young people and not see their yearning for purpose and relevance," said Becky Beacom, former Paly parent and manager for the Palo Alto health education division of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation.

"What is too often missing -- not altogether absent but evident only in a minority of today's youth -- is the kind of wholehearted dedication to an activity or interest that stems from a serious purpose, a purpose that can give meaning and direction to life," Damon writes in "The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life."

Palo Alto First Congregational Church Senior Pastor Dave Howell said the prevailing ethic in Palo Alto is often "if you can't be the best at something, don't do that." Instead he offers a different test: If you don't find joy, then go do something else.

"It isn't about being the best at something; it's about finding things that give you joy and meaning, and then your sense of purpose and who you are comes out," he said.

For many youth, their path to purpose is not so obvious or found so early. It may require more time to search and sift. During this process, Damon believes strongly in the value of asking and reflecting on "why" questions. Why do young people go to school? Why has my teacher chosen her profession? Why are there rules against cheating? Why is this activity important in my life? Why is it good to be kind? What am I grateful for, and why? Why is it important to vote? Why am I doing community service? (And if it is to document hours for a college application: Is that a good reason? Is there a better reason?) Why do I want to go to college?

Damon encourages parents, teachers and other adults to engage youth in these types of conversations. Students bear out the wisdom of this in remembering and valuing teachers who initiated class discussions exploring the reasons for things.

"My (Paly) English class was fantastic because we discussed the ethical underpinnings of the stories, and kids were able to connect that with their personal lives," Bisset said.

During high school years, many local youth focus their lives on securing admission to a top college and may think of this goal as their purpose. But building a resume for college is not a purpose, according to Damon and other youth experts interviewed by the Weekly. A top college is "really a status symbol more

than it is an educational goal," Damon said. "That is not a functional way of looking at college -- it should be seen instead as a source of education."

Pastor Howell agrees: "Getting into college is not actually contributing to the world. It's what you learn and how you use that" that is the contribution.

"As far as education goes, the most important thing is the match with the student's interests," Damon said. "There are plenty of kids here (at Stanford) who are not getting as good an education as kids at much less prestigious places because they are not motivated, or they're not matched to what they find here. So, status is the wrong thing to be following."

Damon claims that true success requires a sense of meaning that "runs deeper than fame or fortune" and that without it, a "dispiriting sense of emptiness" prevails.

Deceptively, kids who perform well may appear purposeful, but in fact they may not be. Instead they may fall into the 31 percent Damon describes as "high activity, low purpose." This group often shows signs of negative stress; they are working hard but not in control of the agenda.

According to Damon, it's not that hard to discern the high achiever who lacks purpose.

"It's the 'why' questions that tell you," he said. Ask a top student why he wants to go to Harvard University, for example. If it is to please a parent, achieve a social status, look good, make a lot of money, attract girls, avoid shame -- these are not the kind of answers that indicate a deeper, intrinsic, life-sustaining purpose, Damon said.

Lythcott-Haims agrees: "There's no depth to their answers. ... Trying to help a high-achieving, low-purpose person figure out what to study, what path to pursue in college, which activities to undertake as opposed to which to not undertake ... when they come to you seeking guidance, they have so little sense of what drives them. And they look to what's practical, what's going to be materially rewarding, what's the resume builder, as opposed to 'I am fueled by a real passion for this.'"