



WHY PURPOSE MATTERS: It May be the Ticket to Social Impact

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FOREWORD

In recent years, there has been a swell of new conversation and activity surrounding the age-old concept of purpose. The topic is making headlines in news outlets from *The Atlantic* to *The New York Times*, and institutions across a broad range of sectors are investing resources into helping their constituencies find it. From changing corporate recruitment strategies to creating new ways to support college students, institutional transformation is being driven by a desire to support and capture the benefits of a force that has been just under our noses all along.

At Echoing Green, we hold the conviction that this newfound interest in attaining and helping others attain an individual sense of purpose can be leveraged to drive social impact. If the trend continues and more institutions embed programs and policies into their work that consciously cultivate purpose, we will see more values-directed students, employees, volunteers, artists, and others motivated to make a difference day after day.

Yet in order for purpose to move from trendy to transformational over the long term, the work being done on the topic must be reinforced by strong research, evaluation, funding, and opportunities for practitioners to convene, exchange ideas, develop a clear set of values, and even a shared mission. These are the qualities afforded by a field.

Echoing Green has been in the business of social entrepreneurship for nearly 30 years. In that time, we have seen and participated in the development of a social entrepreneurial field. We know firsthand the difference that the support of a field can make, and the way in which working as part of a diverse yet interconnected network of individuals and institutions buoys all of our efforts.

For this reason, we are committed to exploring the development of a new purpose field; although already burgeoning, it needs further support if its critical place in the ecosystem of change-making is to be secured.

Our first step was to map the field as it exists today, which we have done in several ways. We found that the way in which people define purpose varies. Some focus exclusively on individual meaningfulness—the feeling that what one does matters to them personally. For instance, an individual who loves cars might find what they consider to be a sense of purpose in filling their garage with interesting models. Others focus on the intention to accomplish something both meaningful for the self and consequential to the world beyond the self.¹ For instance, one might feel a sense of purpose in being a janitor if they value their role keeping a hospital or school clean as a vital service to patients or students.² At Echoing Green, we define purpose as that which moves people to take responsibility for changing the world. We call this pro-social purpose.

We found examples of this kind of pro-social purpose engagement embedded into institutions across the country. However, in this paper we will highlight exemplars from just three: nonprofit, corporate, and higher education.

Within the nonprofit sector, we explore the work of AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons), a leading membership organization for people at the age of 50 and over. AARP has launched several new purpose programs for aging and intergenerational populations. We also factored in research on the overwhelming health

benefits of purpose. For instance, in 2010 researchers found that aging people are 2.4 times less likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's if they have a sense of purpose, and in 2013 a study found that purpose lowers one's risk of heart disease and stroke.

Within the corporate sector, we look most closely at Ben & Jerry's ice cream company. The socially impactful work that their company does is known, but we showcase how they are expanding their efforts to create a better world by focusing on developing and supporting a sense of individual purpose among their employees. We also explore the research-based benefits of these efforts, from the 2014 finding that purpose makes people at least four times more likely to be engaged in their jobs, to the 2011 finding that purposeful people are more creative and innovative.

Within higher education, we most closely review thought-leadership from Stanford University, including a recommendation that the college experience be completely reshaped around purpose—for instance, having students declare a mission rather than a major. We also review findings that purpose increases pro-social activity. For example, a 2014 study found that purposeful people are 50% more likely to donate money to charitable causes or to volunteer.

We close this paper by putting forth four foundational areas that require further investment: increased pro-social research; evidence-based interventions; interdisciplinary convenings; and a *purpose* funding category.

A CLOSER LOOK

When Raj Panjabi fled war-torn Liberia with his family at just 9 years old, he looked out the plane window at those he was leaving behind and swore to come back for them. When Ebola struck in West Africa in 2014, Raj, now the co-founder and CEO of Last Mile Health, took action; his organization rapidly trained 1,300 Liberian health workers, building an army that helped keep the virus at bay in many parts of the country. Driven by Raj's very personal purpose—a need to serve the community that he developed in his childhood—Last Mile Health trains and manages frontline health workers who bridge the gap between clinics and remote villages, bringing essential services to rural populations' doorsteps.

Echoing Green supports smart yet unproven ideas from individuals like Raj, helping them launch organizations such as Teach For America, Embrace, City Year, One Acre Fund, Freelancers Union, and almost 700 others. Each individual selected for the Echoing Green Fellowship must be able to answer one central question: *Why do you do what you do?* After nearly 30 years of successfully selecting world-changing social entrepreneurs, our organization has learned that the persistence and creativity needed for them to drive impact is rooted in a deep sense of personal purpose.

Historically, purpose has its origins in philosophical and religious traditions wrestling with the meaning of life. For example, Judeo-Christian religious/theological traditions coined the term *vocation* from the Latin root *vocatio*, which means a call or summon, proposing that people have a calling/purpose in life. Over time the topic of purpose would evolve to have a broader appeal within other aspects of society.

Inspired by the power of the purposeful examples of our Fellows, we at Echoing Green

began to ask a series of questions: Is our society trending toward becoming more purpose-driven? How might we know? What can we understand about the purpose that people are seeking and whether or not it includes an interest in contributing to others' lives? And can we leverage this new focus on purpose to further propel social impact?

New Research Finds a Sharp Incline in Purpose Conversation

We collaborated with Gabriel Grant of Yale University to empirically explore the societal interest in developing a sense of purpose and how we might measure its progress over time. To review the more recent shifts in people's interest in purpose, Grant employed culturomics, which uses emerging big data of digitized language to observe cultural trends based on the frequency of word and phrase usage over time. Using Google's digitized book corpus, the presence of the phrase "purpose in life" and related phrases can be tracked from 1800 until 2008 (years for which we have sufficient data). The data shows that the concept gradually grew in usage from 1850 until around 1915, at which point its popularity plateaued for over half a century. In the 1970's, the popularity of the phrase "purpose in life" began to slowly but steadily grow again until 1990, at which point its popularity escalated at an unprecedented rate right through to the end of the data set, showing a roughly 60% increase in between 1990 and 2008.³ This extreme rise in the interest in purpose appears to correlate with the rise of the millennial generation.

Performing a similar search within the academic literature supports this correlation. The same phrase, "purpose in life," first took hold in academic literature around 2000, about the time millennials started entering university, and has grown exponentially each year since.⁴

Whether the escalated interest we see in popular and academic literature favors personal meaningfulness, or a powerful combination of personal and societal impact, represents a fascinating question. Previous research out of UCLA shows that Americans are becoming more materialistic, individualistic, and possessive of narcissistic personality traits, which might suggest that we are seeing the more selfish definition of purpose.⁵ However, our tests lead us to believe that the particular phrase "purpose in life" culls almost exclusively references to a sense of purpose with both personal and social meaning. Meanwhile, the aforementioned research shows that this narcissism peaked around 1980-1990, at approximately the same time that we see an elevated interest in pro-social purpose. Thus, this contradiction suggests that our culture's skyrocketing interest in "purpose in life" emerges at what might be referenced in the future as the time of our collective existential crisis, when our individualistic values were strongest and when we began to shift toward pro-social, beyond-the-self pursuits.

Select Cross-Sector Investments in Purpose Development & Associated Benefits

The attention to purpose today, a topic which we at Echoing Green know to have tremendous power to create positive social change, is new and rife with opportunity. How might institutions respond to this increased interest in purpose? Many are electing to bring purpose programming and practices inside of the institutions themselves.

1. Nonprofit Sector

Possessing a sense of purpose is an effective way in which people can boost health and wellness, increasing everything from happiness to longevity. Is it any wonder, therefore, that so many nonprofits—from Teach For America to the National Hemophilia Foundation—are cultivating a sense of purpose among those they serve?

A particularly potent and relatively new conversation has surfaced among nonprofits working with individuals who are in or are approaching what we've traditionally called "retirement age." As their roles in life evolve, individuals at traditional retirement age become more susceptible to losing their sense of purpose.¹¹ Additionally, during this time, their need for the tremendous health and wellness benefits associated with a sense of purpose is particularly high. The way in which purpose has entered the conversation on aging mirrors its entry into several other nonprofit conversations as well.

Whether it is Encore.org's Purpose Prize, which has given away nearly 5 million dollars in cash prizes and honored nearly 500 social innovators over the age of 60, or the Milken Institute's "[Aging and Beneficial Purpose in the 21st Century Report](#)," which recommends purpose development be more widely adopted as an effective tool for those working on behalf of aging populations, purpose in the nonprofit sector, and particularly in the "aging" nonprofit sector, is catching on.

"There is a trend in our membership wanting increased opportunities to channel their need to find purpose," explains Emilio Pardo, president of Life Reimagined and an executive vice president at AARP. "Today, the average 50-year-old has 20 to 25 years of work ahead of them," Pardo continues. "We need to lead people to do inner purpose work to prepare them to do the outer work."

AARP embedded purpose development into existing services, launching a new program with the goal of encouraging members to explore what purpose means to them. Life Reimagined, the program that Pardo runs, offers AARP members personal coaching and self-empowerment tools that include a *Life ReImagined* book, a series of workshops, and an [interactive website](#). Though the site is only about a year old, it has more than 1 million registered users. Meanwhile, AARP's Experience Corps program provides AARP members the opportunity to put their purpose into action by tutoring K-3 students in disadvantaged schools. "I will never forget the day after a school shooting," says Lester Strong, an Experience Corps CEO and a vice president of AARP. "Everyone was scared of a copycat shooting and many of the teachers chose to stay home, but the Experience Corps volunteers came at their regularly scheduled time. 'If the students are here,' they said, 'we are here.'"

The program has positively impacted both the students and the volunteers, whose involvement serves to bolster their sense of purpose. Students show improved literacy, test scores, and behavior,¹⁷ while volunteers experience increased motivation, skills/knowledge, confidence, desire to do things outside of the home, etc.¹⁸ An independent study found that 84% percent of volunteers felt that participation in Experience Corps had changed their lives for the better, and over half went on to sign up for additional volunteer opportunities.¹⁹ By focusing on individual purpose development, AARP and other nonprofits are investing in the health and wellness of their constituents. By further providing opportunities for *pro-social* purpose development, they are cultivating social change agents prepared to promote the health and wellness of *others*.

Wellness Benefits



Having a high sense of purpose is correlated with everything from increased happiness⁶ to greater life satisfaction⁷ to better sleep,⁸ according to studies by leading purpose researchers out of Claremont University, Cornell University, and others. A study by German professor Martin Pinquart showed that a high sense of purpose also corresponds with lower levels of depressive symptoms,⁹ and Healthways research shows that a high sense of purpose even increases the likelihood that individuals will learn something new every day.¹⁰

Health Benefits



Having a sense of personal purpose leads to improved overall health and longevity.¹² Purposeful people have stronger immune systems,¹³ as well as a reduced risk of disability¹⁴ and certain diseases. For instance, a team of researchers from the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago found that aging people with higher baseline purpose in life are 2.4 times less likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's.¹⁵ Meanwhile, researchers at Mount Sinai St. Luke's and Mount Sinai Roosevelt have found that possessing a high sense of purpose in life is associated with a lower risk of heart disease and stroke.¹⁶

2. Corporate Sector

The proliferation of new corporate recruitment and engagement strategies promising purpose to meaning-hungry millennials is so significant that author Aaron Hurst suggests that we are entering a new economic era “driven by connecting people to their purpose,” aptly called the *purpose economy*.²⁴

In an important effort to remain relevant to consumers and to attract and retain the next generation of talent, companies like Price Waterhouse Coopers, Unilever, Deloitte, IBM, PepsiCo, Patagonia, and Zappos are investing in purpose. Ernst & Young even went so far as to launch the EY Beacon Institute, which strives to advance “the science and execution of purpose in business.”

The deeper, largely untapped innovation, however, is in understanding the complicated interplay between institutional purpose and individual employees’ purpose, connecting the two and making it “stick.” A handful of impact-driven companies such as Eileen Fisher, New Belgium Brewery, and Ben & Jerry’s are leading this exploration by weaving personal and institutional purpose development together with social impact in exciting new ways.

Andy Barker, Social Mission Strategy & Policy Manager at Ben & Jerry’s, and Jane Bowman, the head of HR (or what Ben & Jerry’s has been calling its “People Mission Department”), see purpose as inextricably interwoven into their roles. “Jane is looking at it from people up,” Barker explains, “I’m looking at it from social mission down.”

Ben & Jerry’s People Mission is rooted in four motivating principles: connectivity, autonomy, mastery, and purpose.²⁵ As such, individual purpose development shows up everywhere from the company’s toolkit for professional development, to its performance management systems, to its institutional success evaluations. For example, employees are asked to rate their agreement with statements like: “I find great meaning in my work,” and “I regularly have the opportunity to help others improve themselves at Ben & Jerry’s.” Their working assumption is that purpose-driven people are better employees. “Personally speaking,” Bowman explains, “the clearer I am about my purpose, the more authentic, effective, confident, and propelled to carry my purpose out I am. It has an energy to it. And this has given me a deeper commitment to my work, to Ben & Jerry’s, and to our parent company Unilever.” Considering that Ben & Jerry’s boasts a remarkably long tenure—with several employees having spent three or four decades with the company—she may not be the only one with this experience.

“Three years ago when we first sent out the survey employees were like ‘What?’” Bowman laughs, “but now that people are beginning to understand the importance of purpose, the survey is really relevant.”

Today, Ben & Jerry’s is testing new ways to espouse purpose within the company, including equipping employees to lead and attend purpose exploration workshops. They also have a Purpose Team—a cross-departmental group dedicated to determining how the corporation can further instill an emphasis on individual purpose into their work. “We see under-realized energy in our people,” Barker explained, “and believe that an exploration of purpose can help us realize more of it. We are a B Corp, a company with a social mission, so in a way every job in the place is contributing to achieving that mission, from scooping ice cream to creating spreadsheets. Asking people about their own purpose can open up new ways to make that come to life.” For instance, the company offers an employee-directed grant-making program as well as employee-led community action teams that work on local projects. Ben & Jerry’s also holds a social entrepreneurship competition that rewards winning organizations with training by company employees.

Employee Engagement & Creativity



Employees with a strong sense of purpose are at least four times more likely to be engaged in their jobs as other employees, according to research Gallup’s Global Well-Being Index.²⁰ They have greater levels of persistence, performance, and productivity,²¹ in addition to more energy to take on challenges and positively affect those around them. They also have fewer absences from work and are less likely to abuse leave time, file injury claims, or take advantage of other workplace policies.²² Finally, research from the University of Pennsylvania has demonstrated that individuals with a sense of purpose show increased creativity and innovation.²³

Social Consciousness



Individuals with high levels of purpose are 50% more likely to donate money to charitable causes or volunteer their time than those with low levels.²⁶ What’s more, college seniors who ranked highly specifically in pro-social purpose (as differentiated from creative, financial, and personal recognition forms of purpose) show higher levels of personal growth, integrity, and generativity—the desire to give back to future generations—than peers who identified with the other aforementioned forms of purpose when all were tested again 13 years later.²⁷

It's no longer enough for a company to support employees' purpose by tacking one-off volunteer opportunities onto employees' busy professional lives. Today, employees want more, and research shows that companies can benefit from giving it to them. During a time in which workplace engagement in the United States is remarkably low, companies driven by purpose have employees that are three times more likely to stay with the company. Purpose-driven companies also outperformed the S&P 500 by 10 times between the years 1996 and 2011.

3. Higher Education Sector

The improved health and wellness, creativity, productivity, and engagement that correlates with having a sense of purpose is encouraging, but these healthy, creative people are *also* more likely to improve the world around them. While the research in this area is in its infancy, compelling stories about the power of pro-social purpose to drive social impact are emerging.

Colleges and universities recognize that today's students desire meaningful work upon graduation. Beyond traditional job- and salary-seeking, millennials want to make a tangible difference in the world. In response, higher education institutions are threading purpose development throughout their student services—from classrooms to student affairs to athletics. Many institutions are developing new courses and programs such as Georgetown University's [Formation by Design](#) course, Harvard University's [Purpose and Values Education](#) course, University of Minnesota-Rochester's Living on Purpose course, Stanford University's Designing Your Life course, and the [190 universities and leadership development nonprofits trained in Echoing Green's original Work on Purpose curriculum](#), which teaches students pro-social purpose development. Students consistently rank these purpose development courses highly. In fact, Stanford's course is its most popular on campus.²⁹

On a larger scale, schools like Bates College, Princeton University, and Wake Forest University are making life and career development more central to the functioning of the university, rooting these services in purpose exploration. For instance, Bates launched a college-wide purpose initiative that includes a new internship program, practitioner-led courses, and a Purposeful Work Infusion Project that has been included in 58 classes and 25 departments and programs across all divisions of the college just since winter 2015.

Perhaps the most ambitious vision for purpose in higher education was by the d.school at Stanford University as part of a project called "[Stanford 2025](#)," which culminated in May 2014. Led by a team of designers that incorporated feedback from students, faculty, and administrators, the project explored ideas for future undergraduate experiences focusing on the intersection of living and learning on campus.

In one scenario about the future of higher education, called "Purpose Learning," they suggest that students might declare a mission rather than a major. Instead of majoring in "economics," for example, one might instead declare that their mission is to eradicate poverty in their community, and that they are studying economics and other disciplines to build the skills and strengths necessary to tackle such a problem. The student would then use project-based learning and real-world problem-solving to develop their mission, emphasizing what they call "mastery with meaning."

Comfort with Diversity



A recent study shows that a sense of purpose "bolsters comfort with ethnic diversity" among White Americans. Interestingly, this was shown to be true among individuals who had fostered a sense of purpose before the study, as well as among those who were urged to simply consider what it means to have a sense of purpose as part of the study.²⁸

The popularity of the scenario has led the d.school to develop tools, curriculum, and experiences that integrate purpose into a student's learning journey. In a two-week prototype, the design team asked students to wear temporary tattoos with a word or symbol relating to one's purpose or mission to provoke discussion to help crystallize one's thinking. These students found themselves with increased mindfulness of purpose as they initiated conversations with others. During a job interview, one student asked her prospective employer, "How would you say your personal purpose ties to the work you do?" Meanwhile, a number of universities have approached Stanford about adopting the purpose model.

"This is fast becoming the age of purpose," explains Dr. William Damon of Stanford University. "There are decentralizing, centripetal forces pulling people away from another. Communities are dissolving in the face of technology and the next generation is facing incredibly complex choices for which they need their own internal compass that is both meaningful to the self and consequential to the world."

WHAT'S NEXT

Though some collaboration exists among institutions engaging with purpose, including those featured in this article, these endeavors are largely emerging independently, prompting a strong need and opportunity to create shared language, measures, and best practices. In addition to the players in the sectors detailed here, organizations and institutions focusing on individual purpose development within religion, government, K-12 education, and other spaces tell us that they too frequently operate in isolation, rarely able to access purpose work happening outside their immediate fields.

More institutions can benefit from cultivating individuals' sense of purpose. Yet we know that embedding purpose into an institution is not easy, particularly in this moment, which we believe directly precedes the establishment of a new purpose field, movement, or era.

We would like to put forth four foundational needs of the emerging purpose field that would help accelerate its establishment, and support institutional leaders seeking to integrate a focus on individual purpose into their work.

Pro-Social Research

First, we see a need for additional research on pro-social purpose. The existing research shows us that having a reason to get up in the morning will likely have positive effects on an individual's wellbeing, but what about the world outside of the individual? There is something special about being driven by a concern beyond the self that researchers haven't yet parsed out. We lack proper data on how various forms of purpose develop: Why do some people develop pro-social purpose, desiring to serve their communities as exemplified by the example of our Fellow Raj, while others develop self-focused purpose, or even anti-social purpose such as terrorism? Ideas abound, but ultimately we lack the empirical studies that would help us understand what drives these variations. In fact, most purpose studies have not yet considered a pro-social dimension, leaving us unable to determine whether causes and benefits correlate with possessing a clear self-oriented life goal or with pursuing a beyond-the-self purpose.

Evidence-Based Interventions

Second, there is a need for evidence-based purpose interventions. Though techniques for teaching and supporting purpose are plentiful, we lack the long-term evaluation to determine which of these techniques, if any, are effective, in what ways, and at which points in people's lives. This is largely because practitioners, who develop and test interventions, and researchers, who have vital access to evaluation resources, too often work in silos. More partnerships between these populations would allow for the development, documentation, and dissemination of more effective interventions, which would be tremendously useful to institutional leaders across sectors.

Interdisciplinary Convenings

Thirdly, we lack opportunities for purpose researchers, thought-leaders, and purpose-oriented institutional representatives to optimize best practices across disciplines/sectors/fields of influence. Select sector-specific purpose convenings exist—from the academically-targeted May Meaning Meeting started by Dr. Amy Wrzesniewski (Yale University), to the GoodWork Project started by Howard Gardner (Harvard University), William Damon (Stanford University), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Claremont Graduate University), to the business-focused Conscious Capitalism conferences. However, the tribes within this emerging purpose field almost exclusively operate independently, having yet to benefit from collective engagement.

In January 2015 Echoing Green hosted Purpose360, the world's first multi-sector pro-social purpose convening. Corporate CEOs, college presidents, clergy, the world's top purpose researchers, and other leaders engaging purpose development performed a 360-degree review of individual purpose development in the United States. Many of the recommendations given in this article were co-developed at this convening. Yet when those in attendance were asked what was most important to the burgeoning purpose field moving forward, again and again they reported that they needed more interdisciplinary gatherings such as Purpose360, places at which they could form unlikely cross-sector alliances, secure new funding, and challenge their own perspective.

Funding Category

Finally, we have yet to institutionalize funding for purpose development. Funders such as the John Templeton Foundation and the Lily Foundation embraced the power of purpose early on, drawn by the link between purpose and faith. However, purpose is also a strong secular notion. What could be possible when funders dedicated to education, healthcare, or psychological wellness create a purpose funding category, to support the growing research in this domain? Could we proactively mitigate some of the world's greatest problems through investment in purpose before they reach stages of crisis?

CONCLUSION

Every day at Echoing Green, we see the power of individuals driven by a sense of purpose. We witness the kind of change these individuals can make in the world and are excited by the prospect of what could happen if more institutions intentionally developed and supported purpose. Might our kindergartens hold the potential to become breeding grounds for pint-sized justice warriors confident that anything is possible and that they can create a better world? Could our colleges be transformed into communities designed to unleash positive change agents upon graduation? We are convinced that if institutions such as these were to fully embrace purpose, not only would the institutions fare better in today's millennial-driven society, but society itself would prosper. The Raj Panjabis of the world—whose commitment to social good makes them seem so extraordinary today—would emerge as the cultural norm; we would be surrounded by a thriving network of ordinary individuals who simply see purpose as part of life.

We believe in social entrepreneurs. Yet as an organization with a nearly 30-year history of identifying and supporting these heroes, Echoing Green recognizes that the hero model falls short. Social entrepreneurs cannot change the world alone. Nobody can. If we want to see long-term sustainable change, this is a road we must walk together.

For more information on Echoing Green's work on the purpose field, please see our [Purpose360 Round Up](#).

Footnotes

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