

Either Perfect or Meaningful: Identity Development, Perfectionism, and Emerging Adults'  
Search for Meaning in Selective Higher Education Institutions

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Advisor: Michael F. Steger

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood is a time for young people to both develop their identity and decide what constitutes a meaningful life. Selective undergraduate institutions are ideally positioned to facilitate this development, providing space and resources for exploration and reflection. At the same time, the levels of psychological distress experienced by modern college students, particularly in selective institutions, has attracted growing attention and concern. Specifically, growing levels of perfectionism have been identified in both data and students' narratives of life on campus. Selective colleges and universities have developed a variety of wellness programs and centers, many of which are grounded in the research and application of positive psychology. Yet perfectionism, particularly as it relates to extrinsic motivation and social isolation, may undermine the search for and presence of meaning in life. This paper examines the potential incompatibility between high perfectionism and the development of meaning in life, suggesting that research look at the developmental trajectory of perfectionism and meaning development for college students in selective institutions. Implications for college and university well-being programs are also discussed.

*Keywords:* meaning, perfectionism, higher education, identity development, emerging adulthood, positive psychology

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## **Introduction**

College provides an exploratory environment ideally suited for the identity formation processes of emerging adulthood, which includes both the development of identity and development of meaning in life. Meaning in psychology can be broadly defined as the experience of life making sense in relation to a person's self-concept, experiences, relationships, and environment; one's life feeling as if it has an overarching aim or purpose; and the feeling that the person's existence has an impact on the universe (e.g. Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 1963; Steger, 2009). Experimentation and flexibility are necessary for this prolonged exploration of meaning and identity, and colleges and universities advertise their endless possibilities and support for figuring out who you want to be and what you want to do. Yet in the high-achieving environments of selective institutions, the quest for perfection often reigns, reflected by the voices of students and survey data. Certain types of perfectionism are not only linked to psychological distress but have also preliminarily been shown to impede the search for and eventual presence of meaning in life (Park & Jeong, 2016). This paper proposes several elements of perfectionist tendencies specific to the selective college environment as threats to meaning. If perfectionism and meaning development are incompatible, it will be difficult for colleges and universities to support their undergraduates' search for meaning without specifically addressing perfectionism on campus. Longitudinal research can help shed light on the relationship between perfectionism, meaning, and identity development across the college experience.

### **Emerging Adulthood: Identity and Meaning in the College Years**

#### **Identity Development in Adolescents**

The identity development of adolescents and young adults has long been a focus of developmental psychologists. Erikson (1968) theorized that adolescents, aged 12-18, are faced

with the challenge of understanding who they are personally and in relationship with society. They must make commitments to others and accept individuals with differences. This identity process involves a particular focus on romantic relationships (love) and occupation (work; Erikson, 1968).

Marcia (1967) took this a step further arguing that exploration is a normal, healthy part of identity development and proposing four statuses of identity development. Identity diffusion is a state in which an adolescent has not yet searched for an identity nor have they committed to any identity; this is the least mature or least advanced of the statuses. In a foreclosed status, an individual commits to an identity without exploring alternative identities, thus stopping exploration prematurely and putting an early end to an important developmental process (Marcia, 1967). Exploring without making a commitment, or moratorium, is the opposite, and has a negative relationship with well-being measures (Marcia, 1967; Waterman, 2007). Yet moratorium is a necessary process as it is the time when an individual actively searches for an identity commitment. Finally, the outcome of a healthy identity development process is identity achievement, which occurs after an individual has gone through a moratorium and has committed to an identity (Marcia, 1967).

Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) have proposed a more granular model for identity development in which there are three types of exploration: exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, and ruminative exploration. Exploration in breadth is part of the identity formation process and is one's evaluation of various alternatives before making an identity choice. Exploration in breadth is part of the identity evaluation cycle and involves gathering more information and reflecting on one's current commitments (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). Ruminative exploration, an extension of the initial model, is a maladaptive form of

exploration in which individuals have trouble settling on satisfying answers to identity questions. This type of exploration is linked to distress and lower well-being (Luyckx et al., 2008; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Watkins, 2004). Put differently, the three types of exploration involve searching for identity, searching further to help reflect on identity commitments, and continuously searching since no satisfactory commitments have been found.

### **Emerging Adulthood: Extended Search for Identity and Meaning**

As societies have become more complex, this period of exploration and non-commitment now extends into “emerging adulthood”. Emerging adulthood is a developmentally distinct period of identity formation in cultures where independence is prolonged between roughly ages 18-25 that is distinctly different from both adolescence and young adulthood and is characterized by a wide exploration of possible life directions (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults express that deciding on their own beliefs, or questioning and reconstructing worldviews, is central to achieving full adult status (Arnett, 1997). Rather than being marked by specific career or personal milestones, such as marriage or parenthood, successful attainment of adult status for emerging adults is focused on self-actualization. Emerging adults do not typically gauge their full entrance into adulthood by specific career or relationship milestones, but rather by whether they have become a fully self-sufficient and autonomous person (Arnett, 2000). According to Sharon (2016), many emerging adults are able to construct their own narratives and personally meaningful markers of what successful adulthood looks like. Further, the extent to which an emerging adult was able to construct their own concept of this attainment of adulthood has been found to predict their level of well-being (Sharon, 2016). This aligns with Erikson’s (1975) argument that allegiance to a coherent worldview is a protective factor in healthy identity exploration. This is particularly true in the unstable environment of post-modern societies.



Successful identity development during emerging adulthood in Western, post-modern societies depends greatly on individuals creating their own understanding of what it means to be a fully functioning adult.

Theorists of both identity and meaning have argued that healthy identity formation in emerging adulthood is closely linked to searching for and eventually acquiring meaning in life as well (Marcia, 1966; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Identity and meaning in life are different: identity focuses on the individual, their commitments, and their life goals; meaning focuses on construction of a coherent worldview and one's place in the grand scheme of existence (Erikson, 1968; Steger et al., 2006). Yet the two are intimately intertwined.

Mayseless and Keren (2014) argue that as emerging adults' roles in relationships and occupation become less clear, meaning in life has become a central task of identity development. As the job market becomes less stable and jobs are less permanent, and as social changes have led to further postponement of marriage and parenthood, the focus has shifted towards self-development. This quest for self-actualization, the authors argue, is grounded in an underlying narrative about the search for a meaningful life (Mayseless & Keren, 2014). In a world without clear paths and answers about what makes a worthy and worthwhile life, emerging adults instead must find and define their own meaning (Mayseless & Keren, 2014).

Côté (1996) found that adolescents with an integrated sense of identity responded to cultural destructuring in active ways that sustained their own sense of direction and meaning. Additionally, adolescents who spend time exploring the many alternatives for their own identity develop greater complexity in their sense of meaning (Negru-Subtiricia et al., 2016). As emerging adults seek to create cohesive life narratives and milestones of adulthood that are

meaningful to them, they must wrestle both with what this means for who they are and the world around them.

### **College as Ideal Environment for Emerging Adults**

Arnett (2016) makes the important distinction that the vast majority of research on emerging adults has been conducted with traditionally aged undergraduates in four-year institutions. In fact, the college environment is in many ways the ideal environment for the identity and meaning development of emerging adulthood to unfold. Students in most institutions do not need to declare a major until the end of their second year; they are surrounded by a variety of potential romantic partners; and they are shielded from many of the responsibilities of adult life, such as owning property and full-time work (Arnett, 2016). This provides the space for exploring multiple identities and potential life narratives. Colleges also advertise that they want to encourage this exploration and identity formation. Harvard College calls itself “the perfect place to pursue your favorite and still-to-be-discovered academic interests.” (“Why Harvard?” n.d., para 1). Williams Colleges tells prospective students that they can “follow [their] passions and discover new ones along the way” (“Williams College Admission,” n.d., para. 1). The University of Michigan offers “experiences that will change the way you see the world” and will allow you “to pursue your interests with confidence, whatever — and wherever — they are” (“Academics & Majors,” n.d., para. 2). In just these few examples, there are themes of openness, exploration, and flexibility. This is particularly true in selective universities, where the message is that high achieving students can explore and pursue any field that they desire.

### **Shifts in Student Motivation and Mental Health**

Within this context of prolonged identity development and the explorative college environment, students’ motivations for and experiences of attending college have shifted. Since

2010, 86% of incoming first-year undergraduates surveyed stated that getting a better job is a critical motivation in pursuing their undergraduate degree, compared with 73% surveyed between 2000 and 2009 (“Great Jobs. Great Lives.,” 2016). In a 2018 survey, when asked about their single main motivation for attending college, 58% stated “good job or career” with “learning and knowledge,” coming in a far second at 23% (“Why Higher Ed?”, 2018).

This shift towards career-centered motivation is accompanied by what many have called a college mental health crisis among traditionally aged undergraduate students. From 2010 through 2015, a national survey of college counseling centers found significant increases in self-reported distress, with the largest effect sizes for generalized anxiety, depression, and social anxiety (Xiao et al., 2017). A 2018 World Health Organization report found that close to one third of first-year students in 19 colleges across eight countries screened positive for at least one common anxiety, mood, or substance disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018). According to the American College Health Association fall 2018 survey of 40 undergraduate institutions, 24.1% of students reported having felt hopeless, 57% reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do, and 33.5% of report having felt “very sad” in the two weeks preceding the survey. Further, 31% report having felt overwhelming anxiety, and 31% report having felt “very lonely” in the two weeks preceding the survey (American College Health Association, 2018).

These surveys have also asked students about the most prominent sources of psychological distress in their lives. Of the undergraduates surveyed, 49.7% report academics having been traumatic or very difficult to handle and 32.1% report sleep difficulties as being traumatic or very difficult to handle in the last 12 months (American College Health Association, 2018). Relationships factor in here too; 30.5% report intimate relationships, 29.7% report other relationships, and 29.8% report family problems as being traumatic or very difficult to handle,

respectively (American College Health Association, 2018). When asked whether stress impacted academic performance, 22.8% of students surveyed said that stress caused them to receive a lower grade on an exam, with 8.1% reporting that stress caused them to get a lower grade in an overall course (American College Health Association, 2018). In summary, academics topped the list in what students consider traumatic or very difficult to handle, and students, in turn, reported that their experience of stress impacted their academic performance.

Table 1	
<i>Mental Health Indicators</i>	<i>Sources of Psychological Distress</i>
<u>In the previous two weeks, I have:</u>	<u>Has been traumatic or very difficult to handle:</u>
Felt overwhelmed by all I had to do – 57%	Academics – 49.7%
Felt very sad – 33.5%	Sleep difficulties – 32.1%
Felt overwhelming anxiety – 31%	Intimate relationships – 30.5%
Felt very lonely – 31%	Family problems – 29.8%
Felt hopeless – 24.1%	Other relationships – 29.7%

*Note:* Adapted from American College Health Association. (2018) *American college health association-national college health assessment II: Undergraduate student reference group data report fall 2018*. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association.

### **Perfectionism in the Undergraduate Population of Selective Institutions**

If nearly half of students find that academics is a source of psychological distress, we might theorize that these students place a high priority or expectation on their academic performance. With rising percentages of students stating career as their primary motivation for attending college, they may perceive the need for their academic performance to be consistently perfect. Curran and Hill (2019) found that perfectionism has increased among college undergraduates in the United States from 1989 to 2016.

These shifts in mental health and motivation seem to be particularly apparent in highly selective undergraduate institutions. News articles, blogs, and videos created by college students

themselves reflect these shifts in motivation and expectation. For example, upperclassmen at the University of Pennsylvania created a website called “Dear Penn Freshmen” in which students share their own tales of feeling inadequate and alone as they entered college (“Dear Penn Freshmen,” n.d.). These same students use the term “Penn Face” to describe the prevailing student expectation that you must act self-assured and happy even if you are struggling (Scelfo, 2015). Stanford students call it the “Stanford duck syndrome” in which students are expected to effortlessly glide across the surface all while frantically paddling underneath the water (Chen, 2015). From both the data and student voices, there is a sense that students are holding themselves to higher expectations and perceive that they cannot share in any way that might indicate that they are not effortlessly perfect.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Constructs of Perfectionism**

While students use the term “perfectionist” in colloquial ways to describe the general desire for an individual to be perfect, psychologists have broken perfectionism into a number of subconstructs. Hamachek (1978) broke perfectionism into two types: normal, in which individuals enjoy the pursuit of difficult to reach standards, and neurotic, in which individuals suffer from their strivings. A number of studies confirmed the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, although with different names such as positive striving versus maladaptive evaluation concerns (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993) and functional versus dysfunctional perfectionism (Rheaume, et al., 2000). Stoeber and Otto (2006) looked at perfectionism as two independent dimensions: perfectionistic strivings, setting high expectations for performance, and perfectionistic concerns, being self-critical regarding one’s performance. Perfectionistic strivings, particularly when not accompanied with high concerns, have been linked to higher levels of adaptive traits, such as endurance, positive affect, and active

coping styles; perfectionistic concerns have been associated with the traditional characteristics of perfectionism, such as depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Hewitt and Flett (1991) examined the interpersonal aspects of perfectionism and identified three dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism involves setting exacting standards for one's self. Curran and Hill (2019) note that while self-oriented perfectionism has been linked to adaptive achievement-related behaviors, this type of perfectionism also ties self-worth to achievement and makes one vulnerable to the motivational and psychological difficulties associated with not deriving lasting satisfaction from one's accomplishments. Other-oriented perfectionism involves having unrealistic expectations of others. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism is the perception that others judge you harshly, that your social context is overly demanding, and that perfection is required to gain others' approval (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Curran & Hill, 2019). Socially prescribed perfectionism is distinct in that it is perceived as not under an individual's control, and is thus reactive rather than proactive (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). According to Curran and Hill's (2019) data, socially prescribed perfectionism increased at nearly double the rate of other types of perfectionism among American college students over this roughly twenty-year period, reflecting students' perceptions that their environments demand perfection and do not leave room for faults or failure.

### **Students' Expressions of Perfectionist Culture**

In the 2014 book *Excellent Sheep*, author William Deresiewicz shared quotes from students in these elite and highly competitive institutions that reflect the aforementioned shifts in motivation, perfectionism, and mental health. One student said "For many students, rising to the absolute top means being consumed by the system" (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 9). Another student

wrote about the movement towards a limited number of similar career paths, saying “we moved cautiously, in groups, plodding down a few well-worn trails so as to ensure that two or four years down the road, we could be stem cells again, still undifferentiated, still brimming with potential” (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 16). This sentiment reflects the fear of making the wrong decision and connects with Marcia’s (1967) identity moratorium in which an individual is actively searching for an identity but has not yet made a commitment. There is also a connection with ruminative exploration, in which an individual dwells on the multitude of identities at hand and struggles to make a firm commitment (Luyckx et al., 2008). The desire to keep identity options open is related to constant rumination over what option is best, leaving emerging adults without firm commitments and a less secure sense of identity.

Students at Pomona College, who has distinguished itself as one of the “happiest” institutions in the nation, felt that even that distinction resulted in a burden to maintain that appearance of well-being (Deresiewicz, 2014). Deresiewicz (2014) found that students in elite institutions felt they had been trained to jump through hoops and to conform to a specific success-oriented quest for credentials. Again, we see this relationship to perfectionism in the way that students are sensitive to external cues. This is also opposite of emerging adults’ developmental task of formulating their own narrative of what they consider a meaningful adult life (Sharon, 2016). Further, students at elite universities have been funneling into a smaller set of majors and careers after graduation, namely finance and consulting (Deresiewicz, 2014). The irony comes when students who are told they can do anything choose a limited number of paths; arguably, they are converging on the same self (Deresiewicz, 2014).

### **The Emergence of Well-being as Campus Goal**

In response to these mental health statistics and outcry from students, a plethora of well-being initiatives, programs, and offices started, particularly at selective institutions. Founded in 2013, the Academic Resilience Consortium is a group of faculty and administrators from selective institutions who recognized the unprecedented challenges faced by today's undergraduates and saw the need for undergraduates to exercise various forms of resilience ("The Academic Resilience Consortium," n.d.). The University of Washington runs a resilience lab in which faculty, staff, and students collaborate to build a culture of resilience and self-compassion across campus. The program seeks to normalize experiences of failure and setbacks ("Resilience Lab," n.d.). Princeton Perspectives posts videos and hosts events that bring stories of struggle and setbacks out into the open ("Princeton Perspectives Project," n.d.). Harvard has created a Success-Failure Project in which students have a space to reflect on experiences of success, failure, and resilience ("Success Failure Project", n.d.). A program at Smith College projects stories of failure onto the wall of a campus hub; a fund at Davidson College provides money for creative endeavors with no requirement that the idea be viable (Bennett, 2017).

A 2017 New York Times article catalogued many of these initiatives that seek to normalize failure in environments where students are focused on conventional measures of success. In the article, students voiced the fact that everything on campus can feel like a competition where students get caught up in presenting and image of perfection. Many of the well-being programs explored by Bennett (2017) in this article discuss perfectionism specifically. These programs seek to normalize hardship among people in this emerging adult age group. The concept of resilience is widely discussed, as is the need to bounce back from challenges and failure. A number of programs, such as Harvard's first-year "Reflecting on Your



Life” program, also focus on what matters to students and why (“Reflecting on Your Life,” n.d.). Dickinson College hosts “What Matters Most” dinners during which students hear from a myriad of speakers who share what matters most to them; these gatherings also provide opportunities for students to reflect themselves (“Exploring Meaning and Purpose,” n.d.). When surveyed, students express that they are interested in developing meaning in their lives as well. Shin, Steger, and Henry (2016), in reviewing both developmental literature and survey data, show that developing meaning in life is a salient concern for college students. In a 2005 survey of undergraduates, over three quarters expressed that they were searching for meaning and purpose in life (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, & Bryant, 2005).

### **Well-being in College: Influences of Positive Psychology**

Many college well-being programs are grounded in the theory and research of positive psychology. In many ways, the focus on flourishing of positive psychology is the antithesis of what current undergraduates are facing. To understand the relationship between positive psychology and well-being in college, we will review the genesis of the field, its focus on research, its holistic nature, and its organizing frameworks.

In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Seligman (1999) introduced positive psychology as the antidote to traditional psychology’s focus on dysfunction and mere survival. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) proposed that positive psychology focus on positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions in order to understand what makes life worth living. They argued that psychology was long overdue in turning its attention to strength and virtue, and through rigorous scientific research has incredible potential to help people thrive. Further, they emphasized that well-being is not the

absence of ill-being; in other words, eradicating dysfunction and misery does not equate to promoting overall flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Rigorous scientific inquiry and measurement have also been a core focus of the positive psychology movement. Positive psychology's rapid growth has been due, in part, to the increase in scales that measure positive phenomena (Diener, 2009). Not only have the number of scales increased, but so has their accessibility. A wide array of scales and measures are available freely via the Authentic Happiness website, to be utilized by researchers and taken by interested laypeople ("Questionnaire Center," n.d.). The field has also sought to validate the use of positive interventions through random-assignment, placebo controlled design (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This focus on scientific research, both correlational and experimental, attempts to keep positive psychology honest and grounded as popular interest in the field and its application increases.

The term "positive psychology" has inspired skepticism from both psychological scientists and the popular press. In response, the field has consistently pushed for a more expansive understanding of well-being. It is true that some of the early positive psychology work focused on happiness - with Seligman's (2002) *Authentic Happiness* as a prominent example - yet the assumption that positive psychology focuses on happiness misses the important distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic elements of well-being. Peterson (2006) describes hedonic well-being as maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, and eudaimonic well-being as being true to one's inner self over the long-term. Ryan and Deci (2001) further defined eudaimonic well-being as the extent to which a person is fully functioning, with a particular focus on meaning and self-realization. Ryff (1989) provided both theoretical and empirical evidence that the more enduring aspects of life, such as achieving satisfying relationships and

having a sense of purpose and direction, were not reflected in previous research on psychological well-being. Further, she argued that instead of being antecedents to psychological well-being, the eudaimonic aspects of life are in fact themselves are central criteria for well-being (Ryff, 1989).

To capture the holistic nature of well-being, a number of comprehensive frameworks have been proposed. Seligman's (2011) popular press book *Flourish* proposed the PERMA framework: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and achievement. Ryff and Singer (1998) proposed six theory-guided dimensions of well-being: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Diener et al. (2010) created an 8-item flourishing scale that asked about an individual's perceived success across the areas of purpose and meaning, relationships, engagement, contribution to the well-being of others, competence, optimism, respect of others, and perception of being a good person, summed to provide a single well-being score. These frameworks can provide a roadmap or structure for students to understand their own well-being and aspects that may need more or less attention. Also, while different in their semantics, each of these frameworks speak to some sense of meaning or purpose as a core dimension.

The holistic nature of positive psychology is also reflected in its wide array of subfields, particularly those that focus on adversity and on clinical populations. Far from suggesting that life is all positive affect and bliss, work on resilience fully acknowledges that the human condition is rife with challenges, setbacks, even tragedies. Resilience, as an example, is defined by Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, and Reed (2009) as a pattern of positive adaptations during or following significant adversity and risk. Positive psychotherapy, as explored by Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006), brings positive psychology methods, particularly a focus on strengths, to working with clinical populations.

In sum, positive psychology is the scientific inquiry of what makes life worth living. The development of meaning, which has become a focus of eudaimonic understandings of well-being, has also been identified as a core developmental task of emerging adulthood. Modern colleges and universities seek to develop students' understanding of themselves and their world, and the college time frame for traditionally-aged undergraduates fits squarely into the developmental phase of emerging adulthood. In this phase, identity and meaning are both of particular focus.

### **Meaning in Life: Definitions, Subconstructs, Development, and Sources**

#### **Foundational Definitions of Meaning in Life**

To better understand meaning as core task of emerging adulthood, it is necessary to understand meaning's psychological definition and subconstructs. Because of the developmental nature of meaning in emerging adulthood, the meaning development process and internal and external conditions for meaning are particularly important.

Viktor Frankl is considered by many to have first brought meaning to the forefront of psychology in his 1963 work *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl (1963) argued that the attitude we bring to our experience of suffering is what preserves our freedom and dignity in the face of unimaginable, inhumane conditions. It is this irrevocable spiritual freedom that makes life meaningful. Further, he rails against the idea that only enjoyment and creative pursuits are meaningful; we inevitably face suffering and may be restricted by external forces, but are still able to find meaning in these otherwise stifling conditions (Frankl, 1963). Frankl (1963) not only focuses on human dignity but also the importance of living for the future. These two meaning elements, life's inherent significance and its future-oriented purpose, provide a foundation for the exploration of meaning that follows.

Baumeister took up the mantle of meaning in his 1991 work *Meanings of Life*. He argues that each person actively constructs meaning in their lives, and further that humans have a fundamental need for their lives to make sense. Baumeister and Vohs (2002) argue that the essence of things making sense is through connection; in other words, that meaning links separate entities through category, ownership, or goal orientation. Meaning is a stable construct; in contrast, life is ever changing; Baumeister and Vohs (2002) assert that meaning is a tool for humans to impose structure and stability in an otherwise unstable human existence. They argue that meaning is an essential tool for all areas of focus for positive psychology – happiness, fulfillment, and the like, and that meaning can both remedy the bad and enhance the good (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

More recently, Steger (2009) defined meaning as “the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life” (p. 681). Meaning is how we understand the world, ourselves, and the interaction between the two (Steger, 2009). This understanding pulls in the importance of understanding our own identity; both the degree of fit we see between the world and ourselves and our understanding of what we are trying to accomplish in it (Steger, 2009). The definition connects to the exploration of self and role in the world that are core to identity development in emerging adulthood.

In addition to meaning’s theoretical home in concepts of eudaimonic well-being, the experience of meaning is positively correlated with a number of well-being measures such as satisfaction with life, authentic living, personal growth, and other measures of healthy psychological functioning (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Compton (2000) found that meaning was a significant mediator between personality variables

and subjective well-being in a sample of 347 university students. In this study, meaningfulness had a stronger relationship to subjective well-being than optimism, positive relationships, self-esteem, and internal locus of control (Compton, 2000).

### **Subconstructs of Meaning**

Bringing further specificity to our understanding of the construct of meaning, Martela and Steger (2016) have identified three subconstructs of meaning: coherence, purpose, and significance. Coherence is the feeling that one's life makes sense; purpose is a sense of core goals and direction, and significance is the sense that one's life has an inherent value and is worth living (Martela & Steger, 2016). Each of these three facets taps into a different part of the human experience, and thus each facet should be understood and examined separately (Martela & Steger, 2016). Coherence is descriptive, about understanding the world as it appears without placing value judgements on these perceptions. Purpose and significance, on the other hand, are both normative; they are attempts to justify one's pursuits and one's existence (Martela & Steger, 2016). To distinguish further, purpose is distinctly future oriented and depends on goal pursuit; significance regards one's life as a whole, past, present, and future, and does not depend on the attainment of some worthwhile goal (Martela & Steger, 2016). This theoretical model is particularly helpful in distinguishing the larger construct of meaning from its specific subconstruct of purpose, as they are used synonymously in much of the literature.

George and Park (2016) suggest a similar tripartite model of meaning, using the construct of mattering instead of significance. The thematic message is similar; experiencing coherence as feeling that one's life makes sense and is composed of parts that fit together as they ought to be. They define purpose as having a clear, overarching direction in life that engages us with and pulls us towards our goals. Mattering for them is the feeling "that the entirety of one's life and

actions are consequential” (George & Park, 2016, p. 206). Lacking a sense of mattering is the feeling that one’s existence has little significance and will not make an impact on the world (George & Park, 2016). The researchers suggest that each subconstruct - coherence, purpose, and mattering – connects with specific well-being outcomes. For example, a high sense of coherence might minimize uncertainty, provide a greater sense of clarity, and support a better ability to deal with challenging life circumstances. On the other hand, higher purpose may lead to a having more self-congruent goals, whereas having a deep sense of mattering may buffer against existential anxiety (George & Park, 2016). These granular distinctions have the potential to improve the specificity of meaning research and the applicability of meaning interventions.

### **Presence, Crisis, and Search**

Simply looking at the extent to which a person is currently experiencing meaning in their life does not capture the full picture; this is particularly true for emerging adults who are more likely to be searching for meaning. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, created by Steger et al. (2006), helps researchers measure the presence of meaning and the search for meaning as independent constructs. The scale uses the presence of meaning definition offered by Steger (2009) above and defines the search for meaning as the “drive and orientation toward finding meaning in one’s life” (Steger et al., 2006, p. 85). It is important to note that the presence of meaning and search for meaning are not opposite ends of the same continuum; instead, they are discrete and in research are statistically independent of one another (Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Those searching for meaning may have yet to find a sense of coherence and purpose in their lives, or alternatively they may already experience the presence of meaning but are looking for further depth and understanding (Steger et al., 2008).

Studies using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) have found associations between the search for meaning and negative affect, neuroticism, anxiety, and depression, but also an association with open-mindedness (Steger et al., 2008). They suggest that the search for meaning may come from different motivations for different people, depending on the individual's personality traits (Steger et al., 2008). The relationship between search and presence is impacted by other character traits. For example, whether a person's search is inspired by one's tendency to seek out positive experiences or to avoid negative experiences may impact the outcome of the search (Steger et al., 2008). The tendency to ruminate on past experiences is one element of the search for meaning, which may reflect the identity development concept of ruminative exploration in which an individual struggles to make an identity commitment, at times for fear of making the wrong decision.

While Steger et al. (2006) made a distinction between the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, Schnell's (2009) research has looked at both the presence of meaning and a crisis of meaning, which reflects Frankl's (1963) original work and describes a more conscious process that occurs when one's sense of coherence and continuity are violated (Schnell, 2009). Like search and presence, meaning and crisis are relatively independent of one another; in other words, you can experience a crisis without experiencing the loss of overall meaning in life (Schnell, 2009). Schnell tells us that a crisis of meaning is the "violation of a sense of coherence and continuity, caused by critical life-events, personally relevant failure, biological threats, ego threats, or disorganization of psychological operations" (Schnell, 2009, p. 487). Further, a crisis of meaning is usually followed by a search for meaning (Schnell, 2009), demonstrating its connection to the search process (Steger et al., 2006). Crises of meaning are thus less stable than the presence of meaning, as a crisis disappears after a successful search for meaning. While we



might assume that crises of meaning are more common among emerging adults, Schnell's (2009) data showed no significant relationship between age and crisis of meaning. This aligns with the argument that events that challenge our sense of meaning can happen at any stage of life and are not specific to any particular life stage (Schnell, 2009).

Although the quest for meaning has been identified as an important element of emerging adulthood and generally as fundamental need for humans, Steger, Oishi, and Kesebir (2011) looked at individual differences in the importance in meaning, or in other words whether meaning is an important well-being factor for some people but not others. They found a strong relationship between life satisfaction and presence of meaning only for those people who had been actively searching, indicating that the discussion of meaning may be more accessible to those who are actively searching for it. It may be better for those who are experiencing low meaning in life to not search for meaning, at least in the short term (Steger et al., 2010). Schnell (2010) defines this state of low search and low presence as existential indifference. Individuals who demonstrated existential indifference experienced depression and anxiety at similar rates to those who were searching for or already experience meaning, but for those who were experiencing existential indifference, their psychological well-being in areas like positive affect and life satisfaction was significantly lower (Schnell, 2010). Schnell (2011), when researching sources of meaning, found that 17% of the population surveyed endorsed zero sources of meaning. Another 19% endorsed only one source of meaning; their level of experienced meaningfulness was not significantly higher than the level of meaning of those who expressed no sources of meaning (Schnell, 2011).

### **Meaning Development Processes**

We have briefly reviewed the proposed elements and components of meaning, for example George and Park's (2016) coherence, purpose, and mattering, and the basic cycle of meaning: crisis, search, and presence. These processes reflect the exploration and commitment of Marcia's (1967) identity theory, or the process of understanding oneself and one's role in the world. Let us dive deeper into how meaning develops. According to Baumeister and Vohs (2002), meaning-making is an active process through which people attempt to understand an event. This process may include attempting to find a positive aspect of a negative event, or finding an attribution in order to make sense of the event. Meaning making happens on both the global and situation-specific levels; global refers to the long-term foundational belief system, whereas situation-specific refers to finding meaning in a particular situation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

King and Hicks (2009) suggest two processes for how we find meaning in our lives. One is the construction of meaning, which occurs when we face negative events that challenge our understanding of the world. The other is meaning detection, a more subtle process that occurs when we have experiences that confirm our understanding of the world (King & Hicks, 2009). In terms of meaning-making experiences, detected meaning takes little effort and may go unnoticed; constructed meaning is an active, effortful experience in which someone is searching for answers (King & Hicks, 2009). Vohs, Aaker, and Catapano (2019) concur, proposing that negative experiences provide hidden well-being benefits through enhanced comprehension of one's life narrative. When a challenging event occurs, after the dust settles there is motivation to make sense of and integrate the experience into existing knowledge and meaning frameworks. Through this process of mental integration, we can strengthen and support perceptions of

meaningfulness (Vohs et al., 2019). Heine, Proulx, and Vohs (2006) suggest the meaning maintenance model (MMM) in which threats to meaning spur individuals to find alternate representations to regain their sense of meaning. This process of fluid compensation helps individuals to reinterpret experiences in ways that no longer violate their sense of meaning (Heine et al., 2006). In all three models dealing with negative experiences or those that violate sense of meaning, an individual actively processes information and finds ways to integrate that information into their existing sense of meaning.

### **Contexts and Environments for Meaning Development**

If meaning develops when individuals first encounter information that violates their understanding of the world then make sense of that conflicting information, it follows that there are conditions and environments under which meaning is more likely to be threatened or confirmed. Weinstein, Ryan, and Deci (2012) argue that the three needs of self-determination theory – autonomy, relatedness, and competence – moderate the connection between meaning and well-being.

The foundation of self-determination theory, or SDT, is that the motivation orientation of our actions, or whether they are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated, has important consequences for our well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT breaks extrinsic motivation into four distinct parts that range from most external and reward driven (external regulation), to most assimilated to self and least reward-driven (integrated regulation). External regulation is the sense of feeling externally controlled and acting in order to gain rewards or avoid punishment (Brown & Ryan, 2015). This sense that one is subject to the rewards and punishment of others relates to socially prescribed perfectionism. The other end of the extrinsically motivated spectrum is integrated regulation, which feels self-determined and where actions are brought into

alignment with our values and goals. Mindfulness and a relationally supportive context develop integrated regulation by giving us a sense of autonomy and competence. Mindfulness in particular provides the opportunity for us to self-endorse our behavior rather than mindlessly following our implicit behavioral tendencies (Brown & Ryan, 2015). With integrated regulation, our behavior becomes more aligned with our particular tendencies and goals, and our engagement and performance increase. Having intrinsic goals is related to both meaning in life and well-being (Weinstein et al., 2012).

Martela, Ryan, and Steger (2018) looked at autonomy, competence, relatedness, as well as beneficence as predictors of meaning in life. Autonomy and competence in particular relate to the concept of living as one's true self; autonomy as a sense of ownership over one's actions, and competence is a sense of mastery over one's own actions (Martela et al., 2018). In this study, both autonomy and competence were independently associated with meaning in life, both in the general sense and when there were daily fluctuations in meaningfulness (Martela et al., 2018).

### **Sources of Meaning: Relationships and Self-Actualization**

If the three needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence provide a context in which individuals develop meaning, then it may be possible to map individual's endorsed sources of meaning into this framework. Self-actualization, as it relates to autonomy and competence, and relationships, similar to relatedness, are particular sources of focus.

Schnell (2009) defines sources of meaning as "ultimate meanings" that underlie human cognition, behavior, and emotion, thereby motivating the direction of action. These sources of meaning are accessible to the consciousness and can be reflected upon, although they most often operate outside of our awareness (Schnell, 2009). The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe) was developed through a series of qualitative interviews using a laddering

technique in which participants were asked to discuss the contents of meaning until they reached a meaning that was not reducible to other meanings (Schnell, 2009). Schnell makes the important distinction that sources of meaning are not normative or “ought to” values, they are instead values that are already in use (Schnell, 2009).

Schnell’s (2009) sources of meaning fall across a number of categories which are organized into four domains: self-transcendence; self-actualization; order; and well-being and relatedness (Schnell, 2009). Schnell (2011) found eight sources of meaning that were strongly predictive of experienced meaning; these sources come from all of the previously mentioned domains, indicating that no one single domain has a monopoly on meaning. However, Schnell (2011) found that certain sources of meaning were more predictive of experienced meaningfulness: generativity, relationships, and self-actualization. Relationships maps onto the relatedness need of SDT, and both generativity and self-actualization relate to SDT needs of autonomy and competence. If an individual feels self-actualized, they are employing, challenging, and fostering their individual capacities (Schnell, 2009). In other words, they have freedom to use their specific strengths and feel a sense of competency as they test the limits of their capabilities.

Relationships are consistently identified as core sources of meaning, across both self-report and rank-order studies (Schnell, 2009; Steger, 2009). Delle Fave, Brdar, Wissing, and Vella-Brodrick (2013) found that family and personal life were endorsed as sources of meaning by the majority of respondents across a large and diverse sample of respondents. Grouden and Jose (2015) found that the presence of meaning was linked to significant relationships with others, also within a large and diverse sample. Their data showed that meaning from both family and from interpersonal relationships positively predicted presence of meaning. Beyond being

predictive of meaning, family and close relationships buffered against the negative effects of the search for meaning (Grouden & Jose, 2015). Lambert et al. (2013) found that a sense of belonging predicts experienced meaningfulness in life. They define belonging as “having relationships that bring about a secure sense of fitting in” (Lambert et al., 2013, p. 1418). Further, they found across correlational and experimental studies that belonging both predicted and caused undergraduates to perceive high levels of meaning in their lives (Lambert et al., 2013). Supportive and secure relationships provide a sense of meaning and the fertile ground necessary for the development of intrinsic motivation.

Baumeister (1991) hints at the need for autonomy in creating meaning, connecting to the meaning source of self-actualization. The ability to pursue self-chosen goals that are congruent with one’s values and understanding of self is linked to meaningfulness. McGregor and Little (1998) looked at the relationship between people’s personal projects and experienced meaning in life. They made the distinction between goal efficacy, or how likely it is that one’s projects will be successful, and goal integrity, which is the extent to which a project is consistent with one’s core self (McGregor & Little, 1998). Their research found that goal integrity was positively correlated with meaning in life. Sheldon and Elliot’s (1999) self-concordance model argues that the extent to which an individual’s goals express enduring interests and values influences both the level of effort put into achieving these goals and whether an individual experiences well-being from attaining these goals. Their longitudinal findings not only showed a relationship between self-concordance and well-being, but also demonstrated that the SDT needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence provide the psychological nutrients that support psychological development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

These themes of self-concordant goals and self-actualization are reflected in Shin et al.'s (2016) research on the relationship between self-concept clarity and meaning in life for college students. Self-concept clarity is defined as the extent to which an individual possesses internally consistent contents of self-knowledge that are clearly and confidently defined (Campbell et al., 1996). SCC is a more comprehensive concept as compared to authenticity, as it includes both our understanding of a “true self” and our self in relation to the environment, other people, affect, and time (Shin et al., 2016). Research over the first eight weeks of college students’ freshman year shows that MIL and SCC (self-concept clarity) are positively correlated, both as students first enter college and over the course of the study (Shin et al., 2016). The authors hypothesize that a strong sense of self-concept provides a more stable frame of reference when interacting with a new and challenging external environment, making it easier for an individual to make sense of and integrate these new life experiences in to their sense of coherence. If meaning at its core is about understanding where you fit in the world, it makes sense that you would need to have clear and stable sense of self first. This also connects to the process of making identity commitments in emerging adulthood (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Marcia, 1967).

### **Perfectionism as a Threat to Meaning Formation**

For students who attend college, their undergraduate experience is central to their journey through emerging adulthood, a stage in which meaning is considered a fundamental task by both researchers (e.g. Arnett, 2000; Mayseless & Keren, 2014) and college students themselves. Research demonstrates that the conditions of self-determination theory that support intrinsic motivation – autonomy, relatedness, and competence – are supportive of meaning. Concurrent with this development of meaning, however, are changes in students’ motivations for attending

college, along with increasing levels of psychological distress, perfectionism, and external markers of success. Is the development of meaning in emerging adulthood incompatible with the competitive environments of selective colleges? How do perfectionism, specifically as it relates to extrinsic motivation and social isolation, influence the development of meaning?

### **Perfectionism and Extrinsic Motivation**

Weinstein et al. (2012) cite their own unpublished research showing that people who strongly espoused intrinsic pursuits reported higher meaning in life when compared to those who more strongly espouse extrinsic pursuits, like striving for wealth. Interestingly, those endorsing extrinsic pursuits both wanted meaning and were searching for meaning but had not found meaning (Weinstein et al., 2012). Further, self-determination theory posits that when the three needs are not met, individuals will seek out compensatory goals, like those that focus on outward appearance and material goods. This compensatory goal seeking does not assist in need satisfaction and prevents these extrinsically oriented individuals from finding a sense of meaning (Weinstein et al., 2012). This suggests that the external validation that those high in socially prescribed perfectionism seek out is not related to well-being and may inhibit the successful development of meaning.

Beyond the extrinsic/intrinsic distinction, Elliot and Devine showed that engaging in behavior that is inconsistent with the self will lead to feeling uncomfortable, bothered, and uneasy (as cited in McGregor & Little, 1998, p. 496). This supports the idea that inconsistency between attitude and behavior will have specific affective consequences. Further, it is these feelings of unease and discomfort that existential philosophers have described when one is aware of meaninglessness (McGregor & Little, 1998). Sheldon and Elliott (1999, p. 495) argue that “not all progress is beneficial,” reinforcing the idea that pursuing goals that are misaligned with



an individual's values and self-concept will result in unsatisfying outcomes. Similarly, McGregor and Little (1998) hinted at this situation two decades ago by suggesting that using efficacy in goal attainment as a replacement for integrity of goals in early life might leave one vulnerable to later despair. Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) found that extrinsic aspirations, such as financial success and social recognition, were associated with lower levels of self-actualization and vitality. More specifically, the centrality of money-related expectancies was negatively related to college students' mental health and well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Returning to the experience of modern college students, the focus on career placement and credentials is driven by motivations that improve external appearance and financial prosperity but that may be incongruent with personal beliefs and attitudes. Further, the prevalence of extrinsic motivation may impede the process of meaning development, as students' needs of autonomy and competence are not met.

### **Perfectionism and Social Isolation**

As noted previously, Curran and Hill (2019) found that perfectionism among college students has increased in a linear fashion from 1989 to 2016. The highest increase was in socially prescribed perfectionism, wherein individuals feel that others judge them harshly, that their social context is overly demanding, and that perfection is required to gain others' approval (Curran & Hill, 2019). Hewitt and Flett (1991) describe socially prescribed perfectionism as being the most debilitating because the perceived expectations of others are experienced as excessive and unfair, and out of an individual's control.

Forming intimate relationships is a developmental task of emerging adulthood, and close relationships are both a psychological need for self-determination and have been highly endorsed as sources of meaning. Perfectionism, specifically socially prescribed perfectionism, also

presents a threat to close relationships and by extension may pose a threat to meaning. Kim, Seto, Davis, and Hicks (2014) argue that when people feel socially isolated or lonely they do not have access to experiences that support their sense of meaning and importance in the world. Stillman et al. (2009) found that ongoing feelings of loneliness and events of discrete exclusion led to a global reduction of experienced meaning in life. Socially prescribed perfectionism is a threat to social belonging, reinforcing this type of perfectionism's particular impact on meaning. While perfectionists tirelessly seek others' approval, they feel socially disconnected and alienated (Hewitt et al., 2017). Because of the external expectations perceived by those high in socially prescribed perfectionism, they both fear negative evaluation and avoid the disapproval of others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Increasing perfectionism, particularly socially prescribed perfectionism in its focus on external markers of success and risks of social isolation may pose a direct threat to college students' search for meaning. Graham et al. (2010) propose the existential model of perfectionism and depressive symptoms (EMPDS) which posits that perfectionistic concerns are an antecedent to catastrophic thinking, thus interfering with individuals' ability to find a sense of coherence and purpose in their lives. Park and Jeong (2016) conducted the first empirical study of the constructs of meaning in life and perfectionism and found that maladaptive perfectionism was negatively related to the presence of meaning and positively related to the search for meaning. Further, individuals demonstrating a high level of maladaptive perfectionism are at a higher risk for depressive symptoms when they are searching for meaning (Park & Jeong, 2016). These findings come from a cross-sectional study with a population of undergraduate students.

Longitudinal research using the EMPDS framework demonstrates the connection between perfectionism and depressive symptoms, and provides theoretical support for the

opposition between meaning and perfectionism. Those with maladaptive perfectionistic concerns are plagued by nagging self-doubt, social apprehension, and harsh self-scrutiny, and evaluate their pasts as unacceptable, meaningless, and unsatisfying (Graham et al., 2010). If these individuals struggle to create coherent narratives of their experiences and cannot fully acknowledge their right to exist in the world, it will be difficult for them to develop the sense of coherence, purpose, and significance that are central to meaning.

### **Proposed Longitudinal Research**

Much of the identity development of emerging adulthood occurs during students' undergraduate careers. There are trends we need to pay attention to, both in terms of psychological distress and measures of human flourishing, in order to support students' healthy development. The presence of meaning is one outcome of healthy identity development in emerging adulthood and has been shown to be a protective factor in overall well-being. At the same time, students are experiencing higher levels of externally motivated perfectionism as well as higher levels of psychological distress. We need to learn more about how perfectionism and meaning interact in order to more effectively provide support for students in their pursuit of well-being. In the selective college environment dominated by perfectionism and extrinsic goal pursuit, it will be important to investigate how both perfectionism and meaning change across the college experience and whether these shifts have any identifiable pattern.

### **Participants**

Participants of this study should be a demographically representative sample of undergraduates in a selective institution recruited before they arrive on campus for their first year.

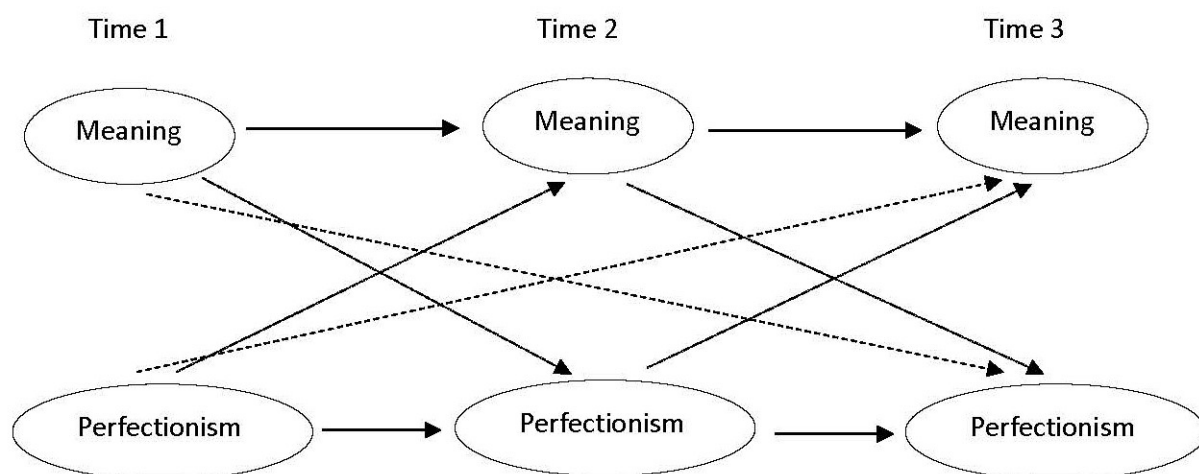
## Measures

Either the multi-dimension perfectionism scale (Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991) or the revised almost perfect scale (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) would be administered at three points throughout the semester. Time 1 would be August before arriving on campus, Time 2 in January during the first week of classes, and Time 3 in April before final exams. At Time 1, students would also be surveyed on a number of demographic variables, such as gender identity, age when entering college, first generation college student status, family income level, high school type, and ethnicity.

## Results of Interest

This will allow us to look at a number of questions. Are levels of perfectionism higher in this cohort when they enter college, as compared to the general population at this age? Is there a significant positive or inverse relationship between changes in perfectionism and levels of meaning? Do shifts in perfectionism precede shifts in meaning, or vice versa? Are there particularly subconstructs of perfectionism, such as socially prescribed or perfectionism concerns, that are more or less related to the search for or presence of meaning?

Figure 1



### **Suggestions for Intervention**

The overarching message for college faculty and administrators may be that we cannot expect meaning to develop if we simply provide conditions for freedom and exploration. If perfectionism and extrinsic pursuits are specifically threats to meaning, then they should be individually addressed in programs that seek to facilitate undergraduates' search for meaning. The self-determination needs for development of intrinsic motivation – autonomy, relatedness, and competence – may provide a helpful rubric for administrators to evaluate the environment and context they are providing for students. Do curricula, class formats, and extracurricular activities provide students with a sense of autonomy? Are residence halls, advising structures, and mentorship activities structured in a way that fosters supportive and close relationships? Do grading structures and leadership opportunities provide opportunities for students to demonstrate competence in multiple areas?

With increases in perfectionism and campus cultures that students perceive as not supportive of failure, administrators may want to facilitate greater awareness of the subconstructs of perfectionism and possibly more importantly the behavioral and well-being outcomes associated with each type. If students have an opportunity to reflect on their own patterns of perfectionism, they may be able to examine and challenge those underlying beliefs. For example, if they are high on the perfectionistic concerns that are related to constantly feeling like they do not measure up, they may be able to shift thought patterns more in the direction of perfectionistic strivings that have been associated with more adaptive habits. If they are high in socially prescribed perfectionism, that which perceives the environment as harsh and unforgiving in its standards, they might work on understanding where these assumptions about the environment

come from and then decide which standards they want to hold for themselves and which they want to give up.

Finally, rather than focusing on any one source of meaning, our sense of meaning may be best served by diversifying our sources. Schnell (2011) found that endorsing a variety of sources of meaning leads to a greater sense of experienced meaningfulness. Reker (1994) refers to this as the breadth of meaning, that we experience greater well-being if we have a wider variety of sources of meaning. Further, Grouden and Jose (2015) found endorsing a diversity of sources of meaning was protective against negative well-being outcomes, even if an individual is also in the process of searching for meaning. Hicks, Schlegel, and King (2010) found that when social functioning was threatened through loneliness priming, individuals shifted to positive affect as an alternate source of meaning, demonstrating the ways in which we can actively shift sources when necessary. If students are focusing their perfectionism on academic performance, for example, it may not be productive to try to break them of this habit, particularly in high-achieving environments where stellar performance is regularly applauded. Instead, we might help the student cultivate other sources of meaning in their lives, such as their close relationships or personal projects that are not dependent on the evaluation of others. In moments of feeling inadequate in an academic sphere, they may then be able to shift attention to alternate sources, as suggested by researchers (e.g. Reker et al., 1987; Schnell, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

For adolescents with the necessary funds and requisite test scores, attending a selective college or university in the United States has become the way to find a career, develop your identity, and figure out what constitutes a meaningful life. Yet while striving to live up to exacting standards of performance, students may find themselves in a state of constant search for

both meaning and identity in which no commitment is ever satisfactory. Young adults may be sacrificing meaning for perfection, playing an “either/or” game that research shows will have an impact on their levels of well-being and psychological distress. If you live your life by standards that are fundamentally impossible to meet, you may never feel that your life makes sense, has an overarching purpose, or has inherent importance and value.

Before helping students reflect on the meaning of their lives, college and university well-being programs may be better served by targeting perfectionism and the structures and environments that support it. By addressing maladaptive perfectionism directly, colleges may in turn help develop intrinsic motivation and social belonging for their students, both of which support finding meaning in life.

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