

Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A. Clayton Spencer

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