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## The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students About Vocation

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## *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*

Tim Clydesdale, 2015  
Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press

Reviewed by Aaron Morrison

Dr. Tim Clydesdale, in *The Purposeful Graduate*, addresses the recent reports of college students “academically adrift” and “lost in transition” (p. xv). For higher education to help these students, Clydesdale offers a possible solution: purpose-exploration programming, as concluded from his thorough evaluation of the Lilly Endowment’s Initiative for the Theological Exploration of Vocation.

Clydesdale has three goals in mind for his book: (1) to “evaluate” the programs funded by the Lilly Foundation’s initiative, (2) to render “sociological analysis” of why certain “programs worked when and where they did,” and (3) to give a “recommendation” to create institutional “space” for purpose exploration programs (p. 23). I believe Clydesdale largely succeeds in meeting his goals, making this an important contribution to ongoing discussions of spirituality and higher education.

*The Purposeful Graduate* appeals most to those familiar with social science research and who care about the students on their campuses. In particular, I think president’s cabinet-level administrators would value this book in preparation for curriculum design discussions, and mid-level administrators would appreciate it in creating co-curricular programming. Remarkably, Clydesdale keeps this volume accessible to non-religious audiences, although it might resonate more easily with Christian audiences.

Clydesdale separates *The Purposeful Graduate* along seven chapters. The first three chapters feature a narrative tone, marked by stories and analysis of how purpose-exploration programs successfully impacted campuses and individual lives. Chapters 4 and 5 contain more pronounced social science language. Here, Clydesdale presents the central evidence from his evaluation with many individual quotes and charts. Lastly, in Chapters 6 and 7, he writes his recommendations to institutions on making purpose-exploration programs happen and the lessons they teach.

Clydesdale holds high hopes for purpose-exploration programs. I empathize, and I also notice some weaker points. My concern starts with Clydesdale's typologies of faculty and student respondents in Chapters 4-5. Creating a typology risks the convenient appearance of evidential fit for the author's conclusions. To his credit, Clydesdale realizes the limits of creating a new typology: "this is not the first, nor will it be the last, typology of American college students" (p. 87). Clydesdale's use of new typologies does not diminish his analysis significantly, but it represents a missed opportunity to test other well-regarded typologies by other scholars.

The many individual student testimonies convince me: Purpose-exploration programming deeply affected *some* students. However, this volume does not fully answer *which* students and *what ratio* of each student type purpose-exploration programming affected. To borrow from Clydesdale's typology, it makes sense that "Future Intelligencia, Activist Reformers, Idealists, and Utilitarians" (p. 87) gain a lot from participating in purpose-exploration programs. Yet, only attracting a couple types of students among many cannot effectively argue for \$2.5 million worth of programming (p. 241).

Clydesdale wisely acknowledges this problem of self-selection in Appendix 2 (p. 241). *The Purposeful Graduate* does not claim purpose-exploration programs can "convert generic members of a campus population into purposefully grounded idealists." Rather, it merely shows the "positive effect" such programs can have "on students, educators, and campuses in general." "Self-selection," by Clydesdale's reckoning, does not "undermine the value of a program." He points to the participants' self-reports with comparisons of participants and non-participants, "both of which this evaluation employed" as evidence.

Another critique of note occurs on pp. 96-97. Clydesdale argues purpose-exploration programming could systematically improve graduation rates. He tries to compare participant institutions' six year graduation rates with those of randomly sampled "similar" institutions. Clydesdale himself says this was a "crude experiment." He cites "new programs" (rather than their content) could have made students "feel more appreciated and more educationally productive." The systematic improvement of graduation rates due to purpose-exploration programming remains unclear, but Clydesdale does prove such programming at least improved graduation rates among some students.

Clydesdale believes this volume adds to the literature on the “value of engaging spirituality on campus” in two ways:

- (1) [by] identifying theologically embedded exploration of purpose and vocation that is especially generative among campus populations,
- and (2) describing the broad impact that occurs when a critical mass of students and educators coalesces into a pro-exploration, self-sustaining community. (p. 214)

*The Purposeful Graduate* demonstrates what happens when students connect discussions of life’s ultimate questions with the ordering of their everyday habits and pursuits. The initial moves of Chickering, Kuh, Astin, Nash, and Palmer correlated spiritual development with positive student outcomes like civic engagement and academic scores (p. 214). Now, scholars and practitioners possess more evidence of how discussions of spirituality, framed through the topic of vocation, can change the cultural fabric of an institution.

As an administrator, I found several sections particularly instructive. In Chapter 6, the section on “strategic blunders” (pp. 176-188) contains leadership lessons I will reflect on for a while. Clydesdale even has a useful chart of all the blunders he identified. Another useful section sees Clydesdale delivering a much welcomed critique of how social science research misuses the term “spirituality.” He comments, “Most of [the] literature sprinkles this term like salt on French Fries” (p. 216). Lastly, I appreciated the appendix on programmatic tools used by these institutions (p. 290), which provides a great reference for administrators to begin brainstorming.

I commend all the work the author and his team undertook in putting together *The Purposeful Graduate*. The individual success stories helped me remember why I love to see students become virtuous citizens. I predict faculty and administrators will pour over the evidence in this volume for some time, especially regarding how to mine the liberal arts to help emerging adults transition into full adulthood. In a world anxious over which paths to choose, Clydesdale reminds us to pause amidst the noise of life and reflect why we are here. 

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