

YOUTH PURPOSE

Exploring the Nature and Development of Purpose in Youth

Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.

William Damon, Professor of Education at Stanford and Director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, and his team are researching how young people acquire a sense of noble purpose. The study assumes that purpose is essential for a constructive and meaningful life and that youth is a formative time for acquiring a lifelong purpose.

What noble purposes inspire today's young? How are young people being introduced to such purposes? What kinds of noble purposes are today's educational institutions advancing and what kinds are they neglecting? These are some of the questions the study asks.

Researchers aim to discover what social, cultural and educational conditions promote purpose among the young. Are these conditions present or absent—and to what extent—in our schools and other places young people spend time? Based on research on Laws of Life Essay Contests in four American communities, today's young may have a far stronger sense of moral purpose—a positive view of life, compassion, personal and social responsibility— than is presumed in most popular media portrayals.

The present project began with a working conference of scholars and researchers who hammered out questions, methods and definitions for the study of youth purpose. The conference report is now available at the Stanford Center on Adolescence. A new survey of youth purpose in diverse communities across the United States, began in October 2003. Supplementing this survey will be case studies of several young people who have demonstrated extraordinary purpose in their lives so far. The findings from these investigations will help create a new field of scientific inquiry and methods of educational practice.