

PART I

THE CONTEXT OF THE QUEST

Chapter 1

Are Colleges Giving Up on Life's Meaning and Purpose?

The Historical and Cultural Context

Beyond academic and research excellence, universities have forgotten their main purpose, which is to help students learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.

—Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc¹

Most students, especially those enrolled in liberal arts programs, have a passionate (if intermittent) interest in the question of what makes a life valuable and fulfilling . . . But like their teachers, they regard the question as a personal one that cannot usefully be studied in a public way.

—Anthony Kronman²

An increasing chorus of scholars today laments that colleges and universities fail to help students grapple with issues of meaning and purpose.³ For example, one recent scholar argued that universities

have forgotten that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to turn eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds into twenty-one and twenty-two-year-olds, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.⁴

Often these scholars claim colleges and universities used to give attention to educating students about life's meaning and purpose, but that today's educational leaders fail to provide help to students eager to discuss these issues. The reasons offered for this failure, though, like the quotes above, diverge.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the common scholarly narrative explaining higher education's lack of attention to purpose development, examine this narrative critically, and explore three areas where this narrative falls short: (1) explanations of why professors gave up on life's meaning; (2) claims regarding how secular humanists provided and can continue to provide a way forward; and (3) the role that growth, pluralism, and diversity played in the current failure.

To What Extent Was Education about Purpose a Part of Early American Colleges?

Stories of decline sometimes tend to romanticize the past. Because of this tendency, it is helpful to briefly revisit the extent to which scholars believe early American colleges actually focused their educational efforts on developing purpose in students. Since the early American colonists established liberal arts colleges without a graduate faculty of theology, law, and medicine (such as in Europe), the opportunities for exploring these matters resided only in the liberal arts college. Still, the absence of specialized theological faculties did not prevent the generalized integration of theological beliefs within the liberal arts curriculum and the colleges as a whole. Harvard College's early college laws actually stipulated, "Every one shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life. John 17:3."⁵ Faculty did not expect students to develop their own conceptions of purpose or to select from a menu of available options. The liberal arts curriculum involved further developing and bolstering one's Christian identity and life purpose. Harvard was not alone. From the founding of Harvard in 1636 to the period before the American Civil War, American institutions of higher education were largely Christian, and their professors shared the belief that they "possessed authoritative wisdom about the meaning of life."⁶ Professors were expected to supply students with the intellectual, moral, and spiritual resources to fulfill a life journey with a particular type of meaning and purpose. In this sense, helping students understand their purpose was clearly at the forefront of early American higher education but in a way that would seem foreign to many college students and faculty today.

It should be recognized that this shared endeavor existed in, what was at the time, a radically pluralistic context. The sixteenth-century Reformation had produced deep theological divisions that created an atmosphere of significant theological and metaphysical disagreement over a whole host of religious beliefs. Moreover, colonial and early antebellum America had the most ideologically diverse system of colleges in the world. Nowhere else on the planet would one find colleges supported or started by Congregationalists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Reformed, Lutherans, Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, Deists, and Moravians in the same region.

Despite this theological and institutional plurality, what undergirded how American colleges approached meaning and purpose in life can be summarized by two shared metaphysical beliefs. First, the leaders of these institutions, even the Deistic founder of the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, shared a belief in what could be considered Judeo-Christian metaphysics: the idea that God set up *both* a moral and natural order and the two are fundamentally inseparable. Therefore, one can discern human purpose through study of the natural order, and one can come to understand the natural order through nature, including human nature. This view tied together the “is” and the “ought” and served to unify the whole curriculum. It particularly shaped the moral philosophy capstone course that students took in virtually every college. In his study of moral philosophy professors, D. H. Meyer observed that the idea that “the entire universe is presided over by a wise, benevolent, and all-powerful deity who has ingeniously contrived the whole operation to serve some moral purpose . . . met little responsible opposition in the early nineteenth century.” He also adds, “The belief that man was psychologically adapted to fit into a morally purposive universe seemed, in fact, to have the universal assent of mankind.”⁷ Where college leaders differed was over the degree to which one could use reason or revelation to discover this moral purpose. Whereas Puritan Congregationalists and Presbyterians tended to distrust human reason and experience, progressive Protestants such as the Quakers and Anglicans placed more faith in both as means of discovering truth and goodness. Deists looked to reason almost exclusively.

Second, although not shared among Deists, Christian educational leaders in America believed human attempts to bear God's image and follow God's moral order required God's gracious help extended through the intervening work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Catholics and Protestants, Baptists and Presbyterians differed over the details about how one acquired God's grace, but they did not differ regarding this core belief. One's purpose or meaning involved reconciliation with God and sanctification or recovery of one's true created purpose.

These two foundational beliefs, sustained and nurtured by these communities, proved essential in sustaining the common outlook shared by the Christian colleges before the Civil War, which educated the vast majority of students.⁸ Most educational leaders held these two common beliefs and shaped their courses of study in metaphysics as well as natural and moral philosophy according to them.

The Loss of Purpose and Meaning

Although a variety of scholars have discussed what led to the decline of these beliefs and forthright efforts to address meaning and purpose,⁹ Anthony Kronman has perhaps examined the topic most extensively in *Education's End: Why*

Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life. Kronman tells the story in two stages. In the first stage, Kronman's historical narrative points to the rise of the research ideal as the dominant factor that led to the exclusion of questions of meaning and purpose from parts of the curriculum starting in the late nineteenth century. According to the research ideal, "a college or university is, first and foremost, a gathering of academic specialists inspired by their shared commitment to scholarship as a vocation."¹⁰ Teaching, mentoring, and morally developing students becomes secondary in this paradigm. Imported from Germany, this model of the research university, with its emphasis on increasingly specialized knowledge production, eventually displaced the antebellum college model (although not without a fight in some cases).¹¹ Kronman maintains that the first disciplinary area where scholars abandoned addressing issues of meaning and purpose was science. In the classical curriculum, students in natural philosophy studied how the intricacies and laws of God's created order could lead to an understanding of God's character and larger purposes. Kronman argues:

By the end of the nineteenth century, the study of nature had been thoroughly disenchanted, in part because of the intensifying demands of research itself, which could be met only if the investigation of the physical world were purged of all moral and theological presumptions. As a result, the physical sciences ceased to be connected with, or have much to contribute to the search for an answer to the question of the meaning of life.¹²

The young social sciences, being created around the turn of the century, which hoped to imitate the scientific approach, would eventually demonstrate the same tendencies. In other words, the first shared metaphysical belief of the early American colleges—the unity of nature and morality—began to unravel.

This led to the second stage of Kronman's story. Since the natural and social sciences gave up addressing meaning and purpose, this change left the humanities to take up the task. Kronman claims that a group of humanities teachers emerged in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century who tried to save the older tradition of addressing the meaning of life in the curriculum or more broadly speaking, "the art of living."¹³ The old tradition, however, still needed to be transformed by new approaches and methods. These humanists believed English literature could stimulate the emotions and imagination while provoking one to think about life as a whole. Philosophy divorced from theology could use reason to evaluate the plurality of meaning systems now offered. History could provide a catalog of humanity's cultural achievements. Overall, advocates of this approach, what Kronman calls "secular humanists," believed that higher education could still help one explore the meaning of life even without its Christian foundation and particular view of human fulfillment.¹⁴

In Kronman's view, however, two movements dismantled the old system and stripped away the power of secular humanism. First, the research ideal and the associated professionalization imported from the natural and social sciences undercut attention to big questions of human meaning and purpose. Second, the "political correctness" of the academy relativized all accounts of life's meanings and disestablished the authority of the Western tradition.

While Kronman's retelling captures part of the story, we believe it leaves out important components. We maintain that we need to think more critically about this narrative and the role that other factors played—including even the role of certain secular humanists—in undermining the university's approach to meaning and purpose.

Why Scientists Gave Up on Life's Meaning

A slightly different story of these important changes is told by Julie Reuben in her book, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*. What Kronman fails to address, but Reuben does, is the important role the emergence of evolutionary models of cultural, societal, and ethical progress played in the late nineteenth century. Influenced by the work of Herbert Spencer, evolutionary models broke out of the confines of the biological sciences. Although these theories presented a serious challenge to the natural theology dominant in the first part of the nineteenth century, they did not remove questions of human purpose and value from the equation. Quite the opposite. When evolutionary theory first appeared, the view emerged that the theory, especially forms of theistic evolution, could actually help with matters of human meaning and purpose. Reuben notes, "Because a wide range of disciplines from geology to sociology adopted evolutionary approaches, many intellectuals believed that these disciplines could be synthesized into an overarching evolutionary philosophy that would offer a comprehensive view of life."¹⁵

Some thinkers even believed a new evolutionary ethics could be developed and that practices such as eugenics could aid with advances in morality. Orientation courses in evolution were introduced into the curriculum as a means to help provide students with the moral orientation they no longer received from religion. In fact, Reuben observes, "The tendency to find a replacement for religion in an all-encompassing evolutionary theory was common in the late nineteenth century."¹⁶

This view would find classic expression in John Dewey and James H. Tufts' *Ethics*, first published in 1908 and subsequently revised in 1932. In their view, morality was not found in God's created order, as in the old natural theology, but rather in the ever-changing adaption and evolution of society. They wrote, "A direct influence of science upon morals has come from the general spirit and method of scientific inquiry, and in particular from the doctrine of evolution as

presented by Darwin and Spencer.”¹⁷ The result of applying evolution to ethics, according to these authors, “places the morals of any given time or people in a perspective that renders them less absolute.”¹⁸ Consequently, one cannot refer to a moral order established by God. Instead, one must be a pragmatist:

The business of reflection in determining the true good cannot be done once for all, as, for instance, making out a table of values arranged in a hierarchical order of higher and lower. It needs to be done, and done over and over and over again, in terms of the conditions of concrete situations as they arise.¹⁹

In this pragmatic outlook, the research agenda of the natural and social sciences were still tied to notions of moral progress and human welfare. In other words, initially, science and social science professors in the research university had not driven out human purpose; they merely secularized it and approached it scientifically.

Still, by the first decades of the twentieth century, many young science faculty began to reject this model. Reuben remarks that “they began to see the interests of their disciplines in a model of science that stressed the importance of factual description rather than constructive adaptation to the environment and that associated objectivity with the rejection of moral values.”²⁰ This new understanding of science also happily freed the scientists from administrative meddling. This change is where the physical sciences’ abandonment of purpose, addressed by Kronman, started to gain traction. Scientists began to become averse to normative ethical questions, including the overall normative question about the purpose of life. We see this historical development as far from inevitable though. These were battles fought in the trenches by faculty and administrators over the very definition of what science would become.²¹

This change had important implications for the course on moral philosophy, a forerunner to many of the social science disciplines. This course was considered the capstone course of the college curriculum and was the primary course where issues of meaning and purpose were directly addressed.²² From the late 1800s until the 1960s, however, the moral philosophy course, and later ethics courses in general, largely disappeared from the curriculum as a general education requirement with the exception of certain religious schools.²³ The disappearance of the moral philosophy course stemmed partly from the rise of the objective scientific research ideal and also the professionalization and specialization that accompanied it. New disciplines, such as economics, psychology, sociology, and political science also emerged. While initially these fields built on the ethical perspective of the moral philosophy course from which they emerged, they also eventually sought to be more scientific and less freighted with moral concerns.²⁴ In this respect, the social sciences followed the natural sciences in marginalizing moral concerns from

their disciplines in order to establish themselves as more objective or scientific. The disappearance of required natural philosophy and moral philosophy courses that addressed the overall question of the good life led to fewer curricular opportunities for larger conversations about the meaning of life.

Formal ethics courses returned to scientific, social scientific, and professional disciplines starting in the 1960s and '70s, but the professional focus of these courses meant that faculty no longer focused on moral questions beyond the profession.²⁵ The ethics courses most likely taken by someone majoring in the sciences, social sciences, or related professions, such as nursing or business, would usually consist of courses such as medical ethics, business ethics, or similar professional ethics courses. Unlike earlier moral philosophy courses, which placed the emphasis on developing one's calling within an overarching ethical system, their replacements placed the primacy on the profession and limited focus to the ethical dilemmas that might arise within this bounded context.

Why the Humanities Did Not Save Meaning and Purpose

We also think a closer look at the supposed golden age of secular humanism is warranted. Unfortunately, Kronman somewhat misrepresents the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century movement of secular humanism. He downplays the fact that some of these efforts were driven less by broad humanistic concerns and more by an attempt to use the university for the national purpose of forming citizens. In Kronman's narrative, the increasing importance of the state in university life receives only a brief mention in his overall historical narrative about the importance of the research ideal for undermining attention to life's meaning and purpose. While he does make passing reference to the 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act, which transferred federal lands to the states for the purpose of creating universities devoted to the more practical agricultural and mechanical arts, he fails to follow through on the ideological implications of the nationalization of higher education. By nationalization, we simply mean that the interests and political philosophy of the state increasingly came to dominate the purposes of higher education. While Europe experienced this process before the United States,²⁶ the predominately private and religious nature of American education led to its delay along with the uniquely American belief that higher education should address the subject of life's overall meaning and purpose in general education.

Whereas before the Civil War the vast majority of students were educated in private religious colleges and state universities were the outliers, a concern with promoting the interests of common political entities instead of denominations led to the promotion of state-sponsored institutions throughout the early twentieth century. As a result, they began educating more and more of the population.²⁷ This nationalization influenced the United States and transformed the purposes of higher education. Instead of shaping the overall religious identity

and purpose of students, universities gradually focused on “education for effective citizenship in a democratic society.”²⁸ Required courses in Western civilization provided a unifying narrative for students without the metaphysical baggage of old theology or moral philosophy courses. Instead, the unity came from a focus on “this worldly” as opposed to “other worldly” citizenship.

If democratic thought provided the common framework, the question eventually emerged for faculty in these state institutions about whether it was even appropriate to address issues of meaning and purpose. In particular, as state institutions more stringently applied First Amendment admonishments to protect the free exercise of religion and avoid religious establishments—or to use the popular language, “the need to maintain a separation between church and state”—faculty became more averse to addressing meaning and purpose.²⁹ Many educators undertook these limitations with the noblest of goals. Whereas many early state institutions still supported nonsectarian forms of Christianity, educational leaders recognized (or were forced by the Courts to recognize) that America’s core principles that prohibited the establishment of religion and protected its free exercise should be applied to state-funded universities in ways that respected non-Christian religions.³⁰ In other words, the view emerged that state-funded institutions of higher education should avoid indoctrinating students in a particular religion, including specific theological conceptions of life’s purpose and meaning. Rather, they should actively recognize pluralism, including a plurality of beliefs about life’s purpose. Commonality, instead, should be found not in religious beliefs but in national purpose.³¹ As a result of this process, the particular Christian metaphysical commitments (the second of the two metaphysical foundations shared in colonial and antebellum colleges) could no longer be given institutional support in state institutions.

The result was that faculty began recommending a curricular approach that Kronman recommends universities follow today. Similar to scientists who found a substitute for religion in evolutionary ethics, scholars at both secularizing state institutions and private institutions began to view education in the great texts as a secular substitute for religion. As the 1945 Harvard Report on General Education noted:

There is a sense in which education in the great books can be looked at as a secular continuation of the spirit of Protestantism. As early Protestantism, rejecting the authority and philosophy of the medieval church, placed reliance on each man’s personal reading of the Scriptures, so this present movement, rejecting the unique authority of the Scriptures, places reliance on the reading of those books which are taken to represent the fullest revelation of the Western mind.³²

While many of the proponents of this approach grounded their appeals in references to Western civilization or the promotion of liberal democracy, there was one unique exception. The most well-known proponent of the Great Texts curriculum, University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins, grounded his appeal to the curriculum in a broader form of humanism that sought to “draw out the elements of our common human nature.”³³ Interestingly, this program was actually opposed by leading secular humanists such as John Dewey and Sydney Hook. Dewey believed that Hutchins’s reliance on Great Texts and authors such as Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas and their appeal to “ultimate first principles with their dependent hierarchy of subsidiary principles” proved problematic in that it masked a dangerous form of authoritarianism.³⁴ Not surprisingly, Kronman does not mention this point when claiming that secular humanists helped advance questions of purpose in the humanities. While there were certainly humanities faculty and programs that align closely with the secular humanist ideal that Kronman paints, the historical narrative, once again, is more complex. Secular humanists such as John Dewey and Sydney Hook did not defend the form of secular humanism that Kronman defends, especially an approach to studying meaning and purpose through the study of great books.

Kronman’s claim that humanist attempts to address the meaning of life in the curriculum were undone by the professionalization of the humanities finds wider scholarly support if one only focuses on his claim about the influence of the research ideal.³⁵ As higher education faculty professionalized, they adopted the attitude described by a contemporary professor when talking about matters of spiritual development and human purpose, “There are many of my colleagues who would say, ‘Look, we are at a university, and what I do is math; what I do is history. Moving into this other area is not my competence.’”³⁶ As humanities departments at universities adopted the modern research ideal, Kronman claims the ideal worked to undermine the values that had sustained both the classical tradition and secular humanism. The focus on original research and narrow specialization, hallmarks of the sciences, became standard procedure in the humanities. The broader goals of enriching humanity and exploring the meaning of life increasingly seemed distant from the day-to-day professional life of college and university faculty in the humanities.

The Contemporary Challenges of Growth, Pluralism, and Diversity

In the late twentieth century, three trends would make a tremendous difference in higher education. First, the number of students attending college and attaining degrees would skyrocket. In 1939 and 1940, only 186,500 bachelor

degrees were granted in the United States. After the passage of the G.I. Bill, this number jumped to 432,000 in 1949 to 1950. By 2014, this number would increase to over 1.869 million.³⁷ Second, the vast majority of these students began attending public institutions. Whereas in the early 1800s the vast majority of students attended private colleges, by 1951 public institutions began educating more Americans than private institutions.³⁸ In 2014, they educated 73 percent of all students.³⁹ Finally, the types of students graduating grew more diverse with respect to gender and race.⁴⁰ The increase in the number and diversity of students in higher education, as well as the increasingly public context of their education, would pose additional challenges for creating an educational experience addressing meaning and purpose.

With the growth in higher education and the professionalization of the faculty also came the increase in professional schools within universities. Business, engineering, computer science, education, health-related professions, and social work emerged as majors that now graduate a significant percentage of students. Today, the humanities, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences only account for a little over 40 percent of degrees.⁴¹ Unless addressed in the shrinking general education requirements, larger reflections about big questions such as life's purpose are often not a part of the curriculum for many preprofessional majors (although they could be). The new professional ethics classes alluded to earlier were also not designed to address larger questions about life's meaning and purpose. Instead, they focused on more narrow ethical dilemmas that arise in the professions. As a result, scholars concerned about meaning and purpose understandably bemoan the "career training orientation of higher education"⁴² or "business models of education"⁴³ as factors influencing the decline in attention to meaning and purpose in contemporary higher education.

Not surprisingly, as the number of professional majors grew, the number of students interested in pursuing practical career goals rather than exploring life's meaning within higher education also burgeoned. One of the most commonly cited statistics documents the drop in the number of students who considered it essential or very important for college to help them develop a meaningful philosophy of life. In 1967, 79.1 percent of college students surveyed considered it essential or very important for college to help them develop a meaningful philosophy of life. By 2014, the percentage had dropped to 44.6 percent.⁴⁴

Despite these changes, Kronman does not blame the students themselves for a decline in an interest in the question of life's meaning. Instead, he focuses on the intellectual culture dominating the humanities. He laments that through the humanities' inordinate support of diversity, multiculturalism, and constructivism, what he labels as expressions of political correctness, the humanities found themselves unable to produce a justification for the necessity of Western literature and values that supported the Great Texts approach. By granting admission to these factors of correctness, professors in the humanities no

longer had the confidence to argue their ideas on truth. Now, every source has to be considered equal and pertinent, and a balance has to be achieved by compensating the formerly persecuted minority. As a result, dialogue becomes group representation. Lost, he laments, is “the notion of an old and ongoing conversation that gives each entrant a weighted and responsible sense of connection to the past.”⁴⁵

While we would agree that these forces work to undermine the authority of secular humanism, we think he is underestimating their cultural power. By labeling this “political correctness,” he fails to recognize the popular epistemological shift that has taken place. We are not suggesting that most faculty, administrators, and students became consistent radical constructivists—although some that discuss solutions to addressing issues of meaning and purpose are.⁴⁶ We are simply arguing that the academic community (and the associated foundational assumptions) that supported secular humanism was slowly dismantled over the past half century not merely on the basis of a fad but due to a new orientation to authoritative claims about knowledge.

What Kronman sees as secular humanism's support for the Western tradition was actually propped up by the dominance of liberal Protestantism through the Second World War.⁴⁷ The liberal Protestant consensus—the center of American moral and religious life—has not held. It has fallen apart, and this dramatic decline is well documented.⁴⁸ In fact, scholars argue we are now entering into a post-Protestant phase.⁴⁹ The clock cannot be turned back to when older liberal Protestant assumptions could undergird secular humanism. People, quite legitimately, ask, “Why should we give preference to a history of ideas about the good life and human purpose dominated by patriarchal, colonist, Europeans—what grounds do we have to give preference to this over moral perspectives found elsewhere?” Just because Kronman says we should? Secular humanism cannot simply stand as an authority on its own without the old cultural system that undergirded it.

We have moved from doctrinally Christian, to “ethically” Christian, to secular humanist (which maintains a distinctly liberal Protestant flavor and privileges Christian orientations and modes of thinking), to post-Christian pluralism. Each phase involves a crisis of authority that is resolved by further exorcising the religious ghost of the past. Because of this change, the previous default power and weight of the Western tradition can no longer be taken for granted. This reality can be seen in what one commentator calls the “new epistemology” among students.⁵⁰ The old authorities no longer hold sway. This is more than “political correctness.” This change involves powerful institutions and cultural narratives that propose approaching knowledge about meaning and purpose within a new epistemological tradition.

Moreover, this epistemological shift was reinforced by several sociological realities: (1) an increasing percent of young eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old Americans were going to college⁵¹; (2) more and more of these American

students were being educated at state institutions,⁵² and (3) these new students were also much more diverse with regard to gender, race, and religion.⁵³ Faced with an increasingly pluralistic student body and country, many faculty and administrative leaders teaching these students believed that subjects such as the meaning of life or spirituality fell outside the purview of a neutral liberal democracy and state institutions of higher education. In order to avoid immoral or unconstitutional forms of favoritism, professors at state institutions (which is the majority of professors) increasingly believed they must avoid matters of purpose and meaning and remain merely presenters and caretakers of an ideological buffet.⁵⁴ The environment produced by such developments is likely why Dalton and Crosby claim, “The objectivist secular ethos that is so pervasive in much of higher education makes it difficult for students to explore openly their deep concerns about spirituality, meaning, and purpose.”⁵⁵ This atmosphere is not only emerging on college campuses, of course. Evidence exists these changes are related to elements of modern Western culture as a whole. The sociologist Paul Froese finds that “modern culture increases the likelihood that an individual will lack purpose.”⁵⁶ Still, these demographic and cultural changes are often heightened in the postsecondary context, where pluralism and progressive philosophies dominate.

These cultural changes, we would offer, reinforced a uniquely American distinction between private and public. Thus, one finds a higher-education scholar commenting that “higher education is not specifically charged with enhancing adults’ ability to function in their private lives.”⁵⁷ This view could only emerge when a system of higher education becomes funded and governed largely by the state for what are seen as public purposes. When this distinction emerges, politically relevant identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation become the identities that receive significant academic attention versus other “private,” meaning-related identities and purposes. Religion and spirituality are therefore understood as topics that are “out of bounds” for professors since “the spiritual dimension of one’s life has traditionally been regarded as intensely personal and private.”⁵⁸ We find this outlook supported in some contemporary surveys. Today, among faculty at public institutions, 77 percent disagree with the statement that “colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development.”⁵⁹ Indeed, when it comes to any morally related goal, faculty at public institutions are less likely to understand such goals as very important or essential when compared to faculty at private colleges and universities, especially those at Catholic and other religious colleges (see table 1.1). Clearly, institutional type makes a significant difference.

Also, the approach Kronman proposes for addressing meaning and purpose, “teaching classic works of Western civilization,” is not supported by a majority of this group. In contrast, the common moral goal held highly by the

Table 1.1. Faculty Goals for Undergraduates Noted as “Essential” or “Very Important”

	Public Universities	Colleges	Private Universities	Non- sectarian Colleges	Catholic	Other Religious
Teach students classic works of Western civilization	24.8	29.6	34.0	31.1	39.0	36.8
Help students develop personal values	56.5	64.9	69.3	67.1	76.4	78.5
Instill in students a commitment to community service	41.6	51.3	49.5	46.4	58.9	58.4
Develop moral character	61.0	65.3	70.7	67.5	79.7	78.5
Teach students tolerance and respect for different beliefs	75.4	82.5	78.9	82.9	84.1	82.4

Source: Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Berdan Lozano, J., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., and Hurtado, S. (2014). *Undergraduate Teaching Faculty: The 2013–2014 HERI Faculty Survey*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 32. Used by permission.

vast majority of educators is one associated with what Kronman calls “political correctness”—the need to teach students to tolerate and respect different beliefs. In light of the declining interest of students in this issue, the faculty’s reservations about addressing meaning and purpose and spirituality, and the decreasing interest of faculty at public institutions to even handle moral issues in general, it is not surprising that the purpose of higher education is understood as increasingly limited.

Conclusion

In light of all these factors, the challenges to addressing meaning and purpose cannot simply be addressed by reducing political correctness, downplaying the

research ideal, and encouraging universities and liberal arts colleges to support secular humanism and teach great texts. We must recognize first that some of the goods we find in the American educational system, such as the growth of a national system of higher education that opens up access for more people, may also contribute to the marginalization of meaning and purpose. Respect for pluralism and the First Amendment within the state university system is clearly important when living in an increasingly diverse society, but this respect may also make conversations about meaning and purpose more difficult (although we would suggest this also makes them even more important for students preparing to find their place within this diversity).

Second, universities in a liberal democracy do not respect the plurality of worldviews within the state system by trading the disestablishment of the old liberal Protestant order for the establishment and promotion of secular humanism. Indeed, if “secular humanism” is defined the way Kronman defines it (in privileging Western thought), then, the state system *cannot* succeed in this establishment. If we are to reinvigorate discussions about purpose without giving up these goods, we must first gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the different types of contemporary American universities have found ways to address these issues and to cultivate students’ own journey toward meaning and purpose. In some cases, we believe, some of these approaches will rely on specific religious or moral traditions that cannot be expected to be shared by all. Consequently, we must also understand to what degree various approaches are only possible within institutions with a shared moral framework and to what degree certain academic approaches to meaning and purpose are not necessarily tied to a university’s particular moral or religious culture. Students need to understand that purpose development, including addressing the identities and stories shaping one’s purpose, is not merely a private concern; however, pluralism does make discussions about it more complicated, messy, and necessary.

Finally, we should note that while many professors, particularly at public institutions, have some concerns about addressing students’ spiritual development, most American college professors still share the belief that colleges or universities should help students explore the meaning and purpose of life. In a recent survey the Higher Education Research Institute found that 69 percent of professors reported that it was essential or very important to facilitate students’ search for meaning and purpose in life.⁶⁰ If over two-thirds of professors indicate this type of support for helping students search for meaning and purpose in life, we believe it is important to discover more about what can help students find their purpose or deepen and critically evaluate their understanding of their current purpose or purposes. We will be needlessly shortsighted if we fail to listen to their stories of purpose development, which begin before even entering college.

The next chapter begins our empirical exploration of these matters by focusing on students' recollections of the various influences on their development of meaning and purpose. While social scientists have discovered quite a bit about the development of purpose in adolescents, we wanted to find out how students themselves perceive the influence of various social supports such as parents, mentors, and peers that extant research identifies as important.⁶¹ After all, in order to judge the willingness and ability of students to engage in the search for meaning and purpose, we need to know how their lives up to this point have prepared them to begin such an exploration.