Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work: The Role of Higher Education

Purposeful Work at Bates

In 2014, Bates College began to develop a framework, built on the strengths of the liberal arts, to better prepare students to navigate the evolving world of work. The Purposeful Work program, now fully established, represents a fundamental rethinking of how a college should work with students over the arc of their undergraduate years to think about life after college. It builds on the core skills students are gaining from the liberal arts, links to the curriculum in various ways, and provides students with a set of concrete experiences that will prepare them for a life of effectiveness, adaptability, and fulfillment in work. Now in its fifth year, Purposeful Work has engaged more than 2,800 Bates students to-date.

Partnering with Gallup on a national study examining the role that purpose plays in the work lives of college graduates afforded Bates the opportunity to pressure test the premises of the Purposeful Work program. The report findings confirmed that a focus on helping students find purpose in work is a powerful way of developing the kind of agency and adaptability they need to thrive in today’s world.
Key Findings of the Gallup Survey

Bridging the Gap

80% Four Out of Five College Graduates Affirm the Importance of Finding Purpose in Their Work

Four out of five college graduates say it is very important (37%) or extremely important (43%) to derive a sense of purpose from their work.

<50% However, Less Than Half of College Graduates Succeed in Finding Purposeful Work

Despite its importance to college graduates, less than half strongly agree to any of the items that define high levels of purpose in work.

Four Key Undergraduate Experiences Align With Graduates Finding Purpose in Work

High levels of graduates’ purpose in work are strongly and significantly related to four key college experiences (controlling for all other factors):

+ Having an applied internship or job (56% yes)
+ Having someone who encourages students’ goals and dreams (39% strongly agree)
+ Being given realistic expectations for post-graduation employment prospects (23% strongly agree)
+ Participating in a class/program that helps students think about pursuing meaning in work (28% strongly agree)
Reflection and Understanding Interests, Values and Strengths Are Central to Finding Purpose in Work

+ Graduates who align their work with their interests, values and strengths are roughly three times more likely to experience high purpose in work.
+ Graduates who are highly reflective are 67% more likely to have high purpose in work.

Purposeful Work Is Particularly Important to the Younger Workforce

Compared to previous generations:
+ Millennials are more likely to derive purpose from their work than from other sources.
+ Millennials are more likely to regret not having had real-life work experiences in college, like internships and job shadowing, compared to older graduates.

Graduates With High Purpose in Work Are Almost 10x More Likely to Have High Overall Wellbeing

Whereas only 6% of those who have low levels of purpose in their work have high levels of overall wellbeing, fully 59% of those with high purpose in work have high wellbeing.
+ Hiring managers widely endorse the attributes of job candidates who find purpose in their work when evaluating their employability.

Employers Endorse the Fundamental Pillars of a Liberal Arts Education and Find These Skills and Habits of Mind Desirable

In response to open-ended questions, hiring managers place a high value on the hallmarks of a liberal arts education. Managers cite the following as qualities they look for when evaluating a job candidate’s readiness for the workforce, and feel these should be priorities for colleges to focus on developing in their students:
+ Critical thinking
+ Effective communication
+ Collaboration and working effectively on a team
Purposeful Work in Action

Internships

454 students and counting have received Bates-funding Purposeful Work Internships since the program’s inception

125 students composed the summer 2018 cohort of Purposeful Work interns

51% of the 2018 cohort were awarded funding through the Purposeful Work Internship program. The remaining 49% were paid by the core employer or had an unpaid internship
When Students Were Asked...

82% agree or strongly agree that the Purposeful Work Internship program is a critical component of their pursuit of post-graduate purposeful work.

39% said that their academic plans had changed as a result of their Purposeful Work Internship.

When Employers Were Asked...

89% agree or strongly agree that their Bates intern added value to their organization.

Infusion Courses

Purposeful Work Infusion Courses help students identify their strengths and interests by, among other things, connecting their coursework to exploration of career outcomes. The fall 2018 Purposeful Work Infusion courses include:

+ Global Change
+ Health Psychology
+ Environmental Economics
+ Teaching Through the Arts
+ Gender Matters: US Women and Politics
+ Islamic Civilization
+ Hydrogeology

Many infusion courses include alumni guest speakers discussing how Bates coursework shaped their career aspirations, while others offer students hands-on practice in fields of interest.

Student Response

31 infusion courses were taught in fall 2017

629 students took an infusion course in fall 2017

49 sections of 45 infusion courses were taught in winter 2018

1,124 students took an infusion course in winter 2018
Job Shadows

The Purposeful Work Job Shadow Program offers students an opportunity to participate in a one- or two-day experience, hosted by a Bates alum or parent, at that person’s place of employment. Job Shadows are open to students of all four years and do not require any previous work experience. Matches are made based on the level of interest and the impact the experience will have on a student’s career exploration.

“Purposeful Work at Bates is about helping students align who they are and what they do. The more students are able to match their work with their authentic interests and talents, the less work feels like work, and the more it simply feels like a natural part of a satisfying and meaningful life.”

— Bates President CLAYTON SPENCER

249 students participated in 348 job shadow experiences in winter 2018

394 alumni and parents offered 1,214 opportunities in winter 2018

55 local opportunities offered, and 33 states were represented
Finding **purposeful work** in our lives is not icing on the cake. It is not even the cake. It is the meal; it is the sustenance.”

— Lecturer in Psychology and Director of Program Design for Purposeful Work REBECCA FRASER-THILL

Working in this environment **makes me even more confident** that this is the realm I want to be in.”

— GERALD NELSON ’18 on his time at Sports Illustrated Kids, an internship connection made possible by Matt Gagne ’04

I realized I could work at an amazing company like Google next year without a background in software engineering. **It was an amazing experience.**

— STUDENT LUCY FAUST ’19 on her Purposeful Work Job Shadow