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TEACHING ON PURPOSE: FORMING FUTURE FACULTY AS EDUCATORS OF UNDERGRADUATES

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Teaching on Purpose:
Forming Future Faculty as Educators of Undergraduates

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Introduction

Doctoral students get little to no preparation for their future roles as teachers of undergraduates. It's no surprise, then, that higher education institutions often struggle to fulfill their educational mission: they inadequately teach important thinking skills and subject matter knowledge and also neglect to help young people lead lives of meaning and purpose.[1] Where this teacher education exists, it focuses on skills and strategies to help students gain disciplinary skills and knowledge, reflecting most professional education today. It would be considered old fashioned, if not outright laughable, to talk about forming the character of the professor-to-be, despite the professor's being a main source of influence on undergraduate students.[2]

This paper presents a formative approach to doctoral teacher education, based on a program called "Teaching on Purpose." The program aims to cultivate doctoral students'

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[1] Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Robert J. Nash and Michele C. Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

[2] Richard A. Detweiler, *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs: Lives of Consequence, Inquiry, and Accomplishment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); "Great Jobs, Great Lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index (Washington DC, 2014), Gerda Hagenauer and Simone E. Volet. "Teacher-Student Relationship at University: An Important yet Under-Researched Field." *Oxford Review of Education* 40, no. 3 (2014): 370–88; Ami Rokach, "The Impact Professors Have on College Students," *International Journal of Studies in Nursing*, no. 1 (2016): 9–15.

character as educators, with a view towards helping undergraduates lead lives of meaning and purpose. Drawing on higher education research, philosophy of education, and student feedback from this program, the paper proposes the need for and strategies to cultivate the overlooked virtue of earnestness and illustrates the abstract claim that it, like all virtues, is "situated."

Teaching in American Higher Education: Historical and Cultural Context[3]

Since its beginnings in Colonial America, undergraduate education in the United States has been considered a time to prepare young people for adulthood. What is considered the appropriate scope of a college's authority, if not influence, over various aspects of students' development and the distribution of responsibility for these aspects, however, has changed dramatically. Until around the mid-1800s, American colleges, having been established by churches, saw it as their mission to shape not just students' minds but their souls.[4] Towards this end, colleges adopted the role of *in loco parentis,* and faculty were charged with the development of "the whole student" — their intellectual, moral, and spiritual development, which included supervising student conduct. A prescribed, classical liberal arts curriculum culminated in a senior-year course in moral philosophy, usually taught by the president, whose aim was to show that the various courses revealed a "unified and intelligible" world subject to a divine moral law and thereby to "integrate…

[3] This section was adapted from Katherine K. Jo, "Making the Examined Life Worth Living: The Ethics of Being a Liberal Educator," PhD diss., (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019).
[4] John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 24.

and give meaning and purpose to the student's entire college experience and the course of study."[5] The course was to have normative force and "serve as a guide to right living."[6]

Colleges now engage in almost no direct moral education or explicit character formation, with administrative leaders stepping in only when institutional policies, laws, and campus community norms with regard to tolerance and inclusion are violated. The modern university is divided into an academic side, with faculty and instructors, and a non-academic side of "student affairs" professionals who support undergraduates regarding concerns such as career counseling, mental health, and residential and social life.[7] More recently, universities have begun to extend the scope of their student affairs offices to "spirituality," a vaguely defined term, unconnected to particular religions, that could variously refer to students' search for meaning and purpose in life, their values, and their feelings of connection to a larger human community.[8]

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[5] John R. Thelin and Marybeth Gasman, "Historical Overview of American Higher Education," in *Student Services; A Handbook for the Profession*, ed. John H. Shuh, Susan R. Jones, and Shaun R. Harper (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 5.

[6] Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19.

[7] Arthur Sandeenj, "The Growing Academic Importance of Student Affairs," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 36, no. 3 (2004): 28–33; Tom McCarthy, "Developing the Whole Student: Edmund G. Williamson, Psychologist-Administrators, and The Student Affairs Movement," *Perspectives on the History of Higher Education* 31, no. Shaping the American Faculty (2015).

[8] Parker Palmer has been one of the leading figures in seeking to reintegrate spirituality into higher education. See *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). In more recent literature, see Victor H. Kazamjian and Peter L. Laurence, eds., *Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and a New Vision for Higher Education in America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); David Carr and John Haldane, eds., *Spirituality, Philosophy, and Education* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003); Alexander W Astin, "Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in Liberal Education," *Liberal Education* 90, no. 2 (2004): 34–41; Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011). Today, colleges have created positions for or modified positions to include the spiritual welfare of students, such as a job posting on the website *HigherEdJobs* for "Dean of Spiritual Engagement and Chaplain of the Colleges" at Hobart and William Smith College (posted January 17, 2019) or "Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life" at Wellesley College (posted January 16, 2019). (A search for the keyword "spiritual" will very likely produce similar contemporary positions.)

Conversely, on the academic side, faculty obligations for students are generally limited to classroom teaching in their particular discipline. To the extent that a faculty member is expected to develop character, it is limited to developing intellectual skills, such as good study habits or critical thinking about the course topic. A faculty member's explicitly attempting to form their students' moral character — even within an ethics course — would risk attracting unwanted student and administrative attention.

This academic-student affairs division of labor was a direct result of two major shifts in the intellectual and institutional culture of higher education. First, due to the influence of Enlightenment thought, intellectual inquiry came to be understood as a rationalistic, objective, and increasingly scientific enterprise[9] in which ethical questions had no place. Second, the advent of the modern research university in the mid-1800s gave birth to a new conception of the professor: faculty became professionalized as researchers in specialized fields.[10] And, while one of those fields was still ethics, as a subfield of philosophy, it, too, is an academic discipline in which faculty pursue research questions that prioritize the theoretical over the practical.[11]

Over time, normative questions about how one should live and about one's own search for meaning and purpose have given way to more descriptive questions about how various people and cultures in fact think about these questions. The practical questions

[9] Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Vintage, 1962); Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995); Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*.

[10] Jack H. Schuster and Margin J. Finkelstein, *The American Faculty: The Restucturing of Academic Work and Careers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[11] I (JS) would go so far as to say that the more theoretical questions within ethics are viewed as the "serious" ethical questions, within the discipline of philosophy, with "practical" ethics considered intellectually less rigorous, and therefore less worthy of academic respect.

have been relocated to extracurricular activities, student affairs units, independent religious and spiritual organizations on campus, and professional ethics courses for graduate and professional students, which focus narrowly on professional codes and obligations.[12] The surviving kind of character formation is largely limited to that required for open and rational inquiry: cultivating skepticism, objectivity, faithfulness to method.[13] Thus, the vocational focus of faculty shifted away from being an educator of undergraduates responsible for their holistic development to being a disciplinary expert responsible for teaching students (at most) a particular scholarly craft.

Many professors do care about teaching, and even about developing the whole student, despite their professional roles as researchers and institutional incentives. But even faculty who care about teaching or students' holistic development have been socialized at research institutions to be scholars, not "to teach nonspecialist teenagers,"[14] which leaves them unable to know how best to go about this goal, should they even recognize and endorse it as a goal of their own teaching.

In an attempt to restore unity, breadth, and a focus on the cultivation of character to the undergraduate curriculum, humanists in the 1920s advocated the "general education" curriculum, grounded in Western cultural texts that would provide students the moral guidance they would not receive through the study of science. These efforts have not successfully supplanted the moral education of the early university. Today, there is little

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[12] Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*; Douglas Sloan, "The Teaching of Ethics in the American Undergraduate Curriculum, 1876-1976," *The Hastings Center Report* 9, no. 6 (1976).

[13] Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, 63–76; Sloan, "The Teaching of Ethics in the American Undergraduate Curriculum, 1876-1976," 24.

[14] Walter Kaufmann, *The Future of the Humanities: Teaching Art, Religion, Philosophy, Literature, and History* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), xxxii.

agreement on what kinds of courses general education should involve, both across and within institutions, with a few exceptions.[15] Faculty research specialization leads to intractable fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum. And, although we can encourage students to sample from this range, we know that students often choose their "gen-ed" courses according to their preferred schedule and ease of grading.[16] Still, the only virtues students are consistently encouraged to develop are some of the intellectual virtues, such as "openness to debate, a commitment to critical inquiry, attention to detail, [and] a respect for argument."[17]

In recent decades, social scientists and college student development researchers have argued that contemporary American society and the culture of contemporary American higher education are developmentally deficient environments for today's emerging adults (18–29-year-olds). Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett writes, "the social and institutional structures that once both supported and restricted people in the course of coming of age have weakened, leaving people with greater freedom but less support as

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[15] The two most prominent examples are Columbia University and St. John's College. Columbia University requires undergraduates to complete the "Core Curriculum," a "set of common courses required of all undergraduates and considered the necessary general education for students, irrespective of their choice in major." "The Core Curriculum," accessed January 30, 2019, http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/.
St. John's College has a prescribed curriculum focused on the most important books and ideas of Western civilization." "Undergraduate Program," accessed January 30, 2019, https://www.sjc.edu/academic-programs/undergraduate.

[16] Faculty and academic advisors may also contribute to students' attitudes towards general education requirements. At a seminar I (KJ) co-facilitated at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges &Universities, an undergraduate told those in attendance that some of her professors spoke dismissively about general education courses, and she suggested that faculty change their own attitudes if they want students to take these courses more seriously. Similarly, an undergraduate mentee of mine told me that his academic advisor (in the Communications department) suggested various courses according to what will enable him (my mentee) to graduate faster and with a higher GPA.

[17] Chad Wellmon, "For Moral Clarity, Don't Look to Universities," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 14, 2017, http://www.chronicle.com/article/For-Moral-Clarity-Dont-Look/240921?cid=trend_right_a.

they make their way into adulthood."[18] The sheer number of options — in nearly every area of life — with little if any instruction on how to decide which are better or "right" leaves students unable to decide which options to pursue and which to foreclose.[19] It's unsurprising, then, that they pursue goals that delay having to make any such decisions (for example, consulting as a professional goal or making money as one's motivating goal, despite the fact that money is only instrumentally valuable.) Scholarly and popular investigations into college-educated emerging adults during and after college reveal that they experience overwhelming "confusion and helplessness,"[20] remain "adrift" after graduating,[21] and suffer from a "sense of meaninglessness."[22]

Against this background, how can we help students cultivate meaning and purpose in their lives by reintegrating ethical and existential questions into the academic and intellectual realm of their college experience? An education that gives students the opportunity to consider these types of questions with faculty and fellow students is not a new proposal but is the very heart of what undergraduate liberal education historically has been, an education of and for the whole student.

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[18] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 4.
[19] Pete Davis, *Dedicated: The Case for Commitment in an Age of Infinite Browsing* (New York: Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 2022).
[20] Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* (New York: Jeffrey P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001), 8.
[21] Arum and Roksa, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*.
[22] Ibid.; Robbins and Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*; Jason Steinle, *Upload Experience: For Teens and Twentysomethings* (Evergreen, CO: Nasoj Publications, 2005); Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The Program

The program that we created, Teaching on Purpose, is a response to these concerns about emerging adults, while not being naïve about the context of today's secular, pluralistic university. Its aim is to reorient future faculty to — and form them for — their roles as educators of young people, young people who are trying to figure out how to make sense of their lives and the world, and who they want to become. Moreover, it reorients teaching in a way that makes virtue and character discussions integral to a course in any subject, instead of asking instructors to tack on ethical discussions, as can otherwise happen in higher education.

In the United States, current professional teacher education for graduate students, when offered, is mostly limited to teaching pedagogical techniques, such as "active learning" strategies and course design.[23] Little to no attention is given to exploring the fundamental purposes of undergraduate education, the developmental needs of undergraduates, and practices that foreground and invite students to consider ethical and existential questions within any discipline and that therefore educate students holistically. Teaching graduate students to view their roles and responsibilities as educators in these terms, however, is not a matter of teaching techniques; it requires their formation into a certain kind of teacher.

[23] See, for example, the courses offered to Duke's doctoral students (https://gradschool.duke.edu/professional-development/programs/certificate-college-teaching/coursework-teaching/), Columbia University's Teaching Development Program (https://ctl.columbia.edu/graduate-instructors/programs-for-graduate-students/ctl-teaching-development-program/), and the teaching workshops offered by Yale University's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning (https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/teaching/professional-development/advanced-teaching-workshops).

In what follows, we describe the program's structure, aims, and practices in detail in terms of the virtues we seek to cultivate and discuss the philosophical and practical implications for reform in the professional education of faculty.

Structure

Teaching on Purpose was launched at Duke University as part of the Purpose Project, an initiative funded by The Duke Endowment that seeks to integrate questions of meaning, purpose, and character into university education at all levels. Teaching on Purpose targets later-stage doctoral students[24] in any discipline taught at the undergraduate level (at any institution). Established as a stipended fellowship program, eighteen Fellows are selected through a competitive application process that requires short responses to three questions. Applicants are recruited through email publicity to departments, the Duke Graduate School, and the Certificate in College Teaching program offered at Duke,[25] as well as requests for nominations from departments and individual faculty. In selecting the Fellows, we strive to have a diverse and relatively even distribution across the disciplinary areas represented at Duke (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics, and engineering) and gender. Fellows who are pursuing the Certificate in College Teaching can also earn course credit towards the certificate.

The program meets weekly for 2.5 hours for a semester (11-12 weeks), with each week's session devoted to a particular topic, similar to a graduate seminar. Fellows are assigned readings, weekly written reflections, and other assignments that ask them to put

[24] Students must have completed required courses and passed their preliminary exams. At Duke, this means they are at the dissertation writing stage.
[25] Teaching on Purpose operates separately from this program, which is offered through Duke Graduate School.

certain ideas into practice. Sessions are highly interactive and discussion-based, co-facilitated by the authors, with the participation of a handful of Duke faculty from various disciplines (new faculty invited each week). In addition, each session begins with an informal lunch (30 minutes), which the program provides.

Aims

The overall aim of the program is to form graduate students in a way that helps them be good teachers of undergraduates, keeping in mind the historically expansive sense of undergraduate education outlined above. The program is initially structured around the question, "What does it mean to be a good teacher of undergraduates?" We approach this philosophically, practically, and holistically. Our weekly sessions explore a different question intended to broaden and deepen Fellows' understanding of the purposes and roles of a professor as an educator of undergraduates. The weekly readings that inform the discussion range over philosophical, historical, social science, journalistic, and practical pieces, both academic and popular.

We situate the larger question within a historical and philosophical discussion about the role of the university and of higher education more generally. Considering what the stage of emerging adulthood is like and the developmental needs that arise from it, we think broadly about what undergraduate students want from their education, including but also moving beyond their instrumental purposes in pursuing higher education. We also explore the various kinds of influence that faculty have on their students — intentional or unintentional, academic, social, political, ethical, and otherwise — and ask how to exert

that influence responsibly, as well as the various roles a professor might play in students' development.

Framed by these discussions, we focus on the need for faculty to understand and articulate to their students the "big questions" that animate their courses and even their disciplines. What these big questions are will vary by course and discipline, but every discipline and course, no matter how narrowly focused, can be made relevant to the larger human questions that fuel intellectual inquiry in the endeavor to make sense of the world and our lives in it (for example, What can we know? What do we care about, fundamentally? How do we know what we know? What kind of world do we, individually and collectively, want to live in and actually live in? What is our relationship to that world?). We teach this practice along with two other practices that support students' engagement in these kinds of questions: connecting course material to personal growth and creating a welcoming and caring learning environment.

In teaching Fellows these practices, we have at least a couple of goals. First, we want Fellows, and in turn their students, to think about their courses and educations more generally as goal-oriented — a familiar framework for them. The goals, however, are not instrumental but are instead ethical and existential; these are goals framed by questions that they understand to be meaningful to their lives. The goals of the course and the goals of living an integrated, meaningful life are, therefore, explicitly tied together. In this way, the question of what it means to be a good teacher of undergraduates is given the structure of virtue-reasoning: what kind of traits will best help my students (and me) achieve a good life, and specifically through learning? Given this context, we seek to cultivate in the Fellows, and in turn the students they will teach, a specific virtue: the virtue of earnestness.

The Importance of Teaching Earnestness

To be earnest is to attend seriously to what matters because one understands why it matters. To put it simply: it's the virtue of caring about what matters. Understanding why something matters is more than factual recall. Someone understands a subject, for example, if they know the relevant facts and also know why those facts matter to each other and why those facts matter more generally.[26] To get students to understand course material, then, they need to learn it and to appreciate why it matters — and not necessarily in that order. In fact, getting them to see why the material matters is most often the *first* step towards getting them to learn it.

As teachers, we easily forget that students do not know why what we're teaching matters for anything beyond whatever instrumental reasons led them to take the course in the first place. They know that this course fulfills a requirement or fits their schedule well, and the topic might even have sounded interesting. But we can't be upset with our students for approaching their studies instrumentally if we don't help them understand why they should approach them earnestly: we need first to show students how and why the material matters and only then can we expect them to attend to it earnestly. Moreover, students' approach to higher education has been profoundly shaped by years of prior schooling that have cultivated such instrumental attitudes — a common criticism of primary and secondary education and the competitive college admissions process — so we cannot expect that they would view college any differently. Earnestness is not the only intellectual virtue, of course, but developing earnestness also cultivates other intellectual virtues

[26] Stephen R. Grimm, "Understanding," D. Pritchard S. Berneker, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. Routledge, 2011.

because it is earnest engagement with the reading, classroom activities, and assignments that cultivates those other virtues.

This broader approach to learning, centering on the big questions of any course or discussion, helps students situate their learning within larger questions, even larger life questions about one's own meaning and purpose. While it may seem that students' instrumental attitudes toward education may preclude any interest in such questions, they are in fact hungry for opportunities to explore these aspects of their lives.[27] They want what they are doing in their lives — including learning — to matter beyond surviving the next test. This fact is borne out by the immense popularity of "happiness" courses at various institutions.

Once we've begun thinking about the goal of teaching as instilling earnestness in students, we understand why we must do more than present information for the students to copy into their notebooks. We must find ways for students to see why the course material matters not just in a general sense, but why it matters for their own lives. We must think about cultivating good relationships with and among the students, since students might be unable to appreciate the lessons if they don't feel welcomed into the learning community. These practices support students' earnest engagement in learning.

Teaching the Practices

Given the specialized nature of scholarship, we propose that a large part of the intellectual challenge for these future faculty is to articulate to themselves what these big questions are, in general and for each course, even for each part of a course. This focus on

[27] Our own teaching experiences attest to this fact, but others have also written on this topic. See Nash and Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making* and Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*.

underlying big questions is how we form future faculty to engage with their students in a way that acknowledges the disciplinary and professional pressures of the modern university: most faculty will never teach a course on the meaning of life, but faculty can foreground in every course *why* students are learning what they are, why the subject and content matters. The focus on big questions is therefore the bridge for faculty to move from thinking about their teaching instrumentally — conveying "just the facts" — to thinking about their teaching as part of a broadly meaningful life for their students. So conceived, future faculty understand their goals in teaching as not necessarily to engage in moral education in a professional sense (the theoretical physicist doesn't need to teach ethical theory) but to engage in moral education in the gentle, welcoming, and concerned way that we do with our friends, our family, those we care for more generally. We should not be indifferent to why our students learn or to their lives outside and after our courses. Thinking about why what we teach should matter for students focuses our attention squarely on this issue.

For two of their assignments, Teaching on Purpose Fellows are asked to identify and articulate the big questions that animate their disciplines and the courses they would like to teach. Readings provide examples of how some scholars have framed their disciplines in such terms and of various types of philosophical questions. We ask our faculty guests to share their perspective on the big questions they see animating their disciplines during a session. We then have our Fellows prepare and present an introduction to either an introductory course in their discipline or to a course they'd like to teach where they frame the subject matter in terms of fundamental big questions that they believe will help

students understand why the course or discipline matters—for their own lives and for humanity.

We also ask Fellows to develop an assignment that provides students the opportunity to connect personally to the material from a course they would teach. The intellectual culture of modern higher education generally requires "critical distance" from the subject matter we are studying, a mode of engagement that is meant to enable skepticism and impartiality, and to preserve our autonomy.[28] This distanced way of engaging with course material, along with a lack of understanding of why learning the material matters, can make learning feel like a mere exercise or a game, which further justifies their view that the point of education is instrumental. When students are given an opportunity to engage with course material on a personal level, though, it makes the intellectual work and the subject matter itself personally meaningful. For example, Harvey Mudd College Professor of Mathematics Francis Su asks his students to offer a written reflection on an interesting idea they learned in the class and "what it tells you about doing or creating mathematics."[29] Having talked to them about the importance of struggling through mathematics problems, he also asks them to reflect on a time when "struggling and trying something was valuable to you."[30]

Such assignments do not replace more typical assignments designed to help students understand course material and develop skills. Alongside many other types of

[28] Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming and Individual in an Age of Detachment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 137–38; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 21; Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, and Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), chap. 2.
[29] Francis Su, *Mathematics for Human Flourishing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 123.
[30] Ibid., 124.

assignments, they provide periodic and important opportunities for students to see the meaningfulness of the material and the learning experience. These kinds of questions can be adapted for any course and modified to help students consider the value of what they've learned for various aspects of their development. Teaching on Purpose Fellows are asked to create such an assignment for a course they would teach.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of creating a welcoming and caring learning environment, a practice that extends beyond what one does in the classroom. Studies show that students' sense of belonging is a critical factor in their academic engagement and overall success in college.[31] In their pre-pandemic study of American colleges students, Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner found that one-third of college students expressed a sense of alienation, both academic and social.[32] Numerous factors can contribute to a students' feeling alienated, but it is not difficult to grasp that if a student does not feel they belong in the classroom, then they are less likely to engage in the course.

Through case studies, Fellows consider how they can compassionately yet appropriately respond to students who come to them with difficult personal situations. They explore what it means practically to extend hospitality to students, to cultivate trust, and to see their students, as well as themselves, as human beings who are vulnerable and seek to be valued as individuals. Thus, we consider the educational purposes of grading and practices that genuinely support students' learning. When students feel a sense of

[31] Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017. *Supporting students' college success: The role of assessment of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies*. National Academies Press.

[32] Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner, "Students are Missing the Point of College," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 25, 2022, https://www.chronicle.com/article/students-are-missing-the-point-of-college.

belonging and feel cared for as growing individuals, apart from their academic performance, they can appreciate learning and the classroom community as part of a whole, meaningful life.

Beyond teaching Fellows about these practices through discussions, readings, and assignments, we strive to have them experience for themselves the "moral phenomenology" of this kind of education.[33] That is, we want participants to experience what it is like to be a student in an educational environment where earnestness is exercised. They explore big questions that shape educational practices and that they would address in their courses, they reflect personally on the readings and topics discussed, and the camaraderie built between and among facilitators and participants in the program generates personal investment in the learning community.

Results

Program feedback provides initial confirmation that, in this earnest and relational learning environment, participants experience, enjoy, and come to develop a commitment to pursuing this particular way of being, first as a learner and then as an educator whose practices can better shape the intellectual and ethical lives of students. The Fellows enthusiastically praise the program in person and in the anonymous evaluations, particularly for the opportunity to explore the big questions in teaching and their own disciplines that are rarely discussed in their departments or any pedagogy-focused training they have pursued. The second offering of the fellowship attracted large numbers of applicants due to the recommendation of those in the first cohort.

[33] Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

In anonymous program evaluation questionnaires, almost every single Fellow has reported greater understanding of "how to connect what I teach to underlying big questions in my field," as well as a greater likelihood to do so; to a "deeper commitment to connecting teaching to questions that help students make/find meaning," and "to engage students with the course on a personal level." Similarly, the Fellows report changes in the importance they place on the relational aspects of teaching, indicating that they are more likely to "create a sense of classroom community," to "get to know my students," and to "making students feel welcomed." They have a better understanding of "what students need to flourish as learners" and of the "roles I can play in addressing/meeting students' needs." And, perhaps most importantly, the Fellows report that they "feel more confident about my purpose as a college teacher."

Overall, the Fellows come to understand their purpose, roles, and responsibilities as educators of undergraduates more holistically. Learning to frame their own material in terms of what's meaningful for their students and about the priority of the relational aspects of teaching, they come to care about more than students' intellectual development. One Fellow, in response to a question about whether or not they would recommend the program, replied: "Definitely! I'd recommend it to anyone working with undergrads in any capacity because at the very least the seminar helps us see undergrads as 'people' with goals and needs that may not be our own (and not as stressed, grade-focused, 5-major consumers)." In an interview (for an article about the program), another Fellow stated, "I feel like in the past I've focused on comprehension and 'critical thinking,' but without really asking the students, 'How can this help you live your life? … How can this transform the

way that you think about yourself, or think about the world, or think about what you want to do?'"[34]

Ultimately, we aim to teach Fellows how to shape their students' intellectual and ethical lives by shaping the intellectual and ethical lives of the Fellows themselves. Much to our encouragement, one Fellow even reported (anonymously) that the program not only provided a "unique perspective on the teaching profession from across the disciplines," but that it "is equally effective at helping us think about how we live and or want to live meaningful lives." We suspect that our Fellows, who are often themselves emerging adults educated at modern higher education institutions, have not had much opportunity to deeply reflect on questions of meaning and purpose. In support of this view, one Fellow wrote in the evaluation questionnaire, "I hope there's more stuff like this. Not only at Duke, but really on a broader 'societal' level. I personally feel like there's a lot of 'demand' among young people (and older?) for abstract inquiry about how we live and learn." This sentiment echoes requests by several Fellows for us to run university-wide discussions like those held in Teaching on Purpose for graduate students outside of the program, and so that they themselves can continue participating in these conversations.

As an additional benefit to the program, the faculty participants who join us each week get to experience enough of a taste of the program that they, too, are often inspired to think deeply about what motivates their own teaching in ways they have had little opportunity to do, particularly in conversation with others. Faculty who have participated

[34] Sarah Rogers, "Teaching on Purpose: Program Preps Graduate Students to Explore Questions of Meaning in the Classroom," *The Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University*, May 6, 2022, https://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/teaching-on-purpose-program-preps-graduate-students-to-explore-questions-of-meaning-in-the-classroom/.

in only one session regularly reach out to tell us how impactful that single discussion has been for them and that they wish a program like this were available for faculty.[35] This creates a broader, somewhat informal learning community beyond the students in the program.

Implications

Those of us who teach in higher education often bemoan our students' instrumentality, the way that they view their time at the university as simply a stepping-stone to a job, their courses as something to finish in order to get the necessary credentials, and grades as the only reasonable goal of studying. While we could ask why, sociologically, this is true, we can also ask why, pedagogically, this is true. What do we do in our courses to convey to students why the material we're teaching matters? How do we connect the course — from the readings we choose and the prompts we set for papers to the way we arrange the chairs and the questions we ask our students after class — to things that they find meaningful? If we're asking them to care about the course without conveying to them why it matters, that is, if we're asking them to learn without giving them reasons to be earnest, verbally and experientially, then we should not be surprised by their purely instrumental motivation. If, on the other hand, we want students to be earnest, to care about the material and learning itself, because of the value they see in it, then we have to demonstrate to them what that value is.

[35] While there certainly would be interest in such a program directed towards current faculty, we suspect that, at a research-intensive university like Duke, we will have a greater influence by inviting a wide range of faculty to join in the program as partial facilitators for one week, rather than developing an entire cohort of faculty who are committed to a semester's worth of participation. It is possible that a shorter version of the program, tailored to the realities of faculty demands, could be a viable future offering.

There's a larger benefit to thinking about our teaching in this way. We can talk to students about the virtues we would like them to develop in our courses: honesty and resilience, for example. But, if we have failed to motivate what we're doing in our courses as genuinely meaningful, then, by extension, we cannot motivate why the virtues we might extol in our courses are any more meaningful. Why be honest? Is it because, instrumentally, the student should worry about getting caught cheating, being punished, and therefore getting a worse grade and not getting their dream job? Or is it because they understand the point of the course is to engage earnestly in something genuinely meaningful, and being dishonest will in fact interfere with finding that meaning?

If the point of education is to engage students holistically, to treat them as growing human beings who are committed to understanding themselves and the world as they make their way through it, then the conversations about how best to succeed in a course are the same conversations as those that are about how to lead a good and meaningful life. Which are the same as the conversations about how to be virtuous, about which traits of character best lead to a good and meaningful life. And this holds whether we're teaching an ethics student thinking directly about what the good life is or the physics student thinking about a newly presented formula. If we center our teaching on the ways that make the teaching meaningful, we can push our students to be earnest and, by extension, more virtuous.

Beyond how we each think about our teaching and broader roles as educators, our experience with Teaching on Purpose strongly suggests that formative professional education of faculty is possible, highly desired, and desirable. Graduate teacher education should focus on the formation of the character and vocational purpose of future faculty,

prior to and in conjunction with teaching pedagogical skills. Working to form the character and purposes of doctoral students before they step into a full-time faculty role is not only the most viable path for reforming professional education of faculty, but it is the most responsible approach. Doctoral students should be educated to have a holistic understanding of what it means to be, to cultivate the virtues for being, and to engage in the practices of a good teacher of undergraduates *before* they are put in positions of potentially enormous influence in their students' lives.

This kind of formative teacher education is also essential for current faculty of a given institution, but it is much more difficult to create a sustained learning community for faculty around issues related to teaching, given the current institutional culture of higher education and the professional demands on faculty. Certainly, the consultation and workshops offered to faculty by university teaching and learning centers could and should take a more holistic approach, but these are generally not highly attended. Although not all doctoral students seek out teacher training during their programs, the growth of graduate teacher training offerings suggests that there is greater interest in them.[36] We believe Teaching on Purpose provides a model for educating and forming future faculty to revive higher education's foundational mission of cultivating in young people the knowledge, skills, and virtues that will enable them to live meaningful and purposeful lives, as students in our classrooms and as thoughtful adults contributing to the flourishing of our communities.

[36] Doctoral students' interest is likely fueled by the intense competition for tenure-track positions at research institutions, which is leading many to pursue positions at teaching-focused institutions. In a given academic year, Duke's Certificate in College Teaching program has around 500 students enrolled.