

Can Good Life Courses Deliver on the Promise of Student Impact?

STUDENT AND FACULTY INSIGHTS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The Arthur Vining Davis Foundation (AVDF) enlisted Lynch Research Associates (LRA) to conduct a qualitative study of Good Life courses taught at universities throughout the United States. Lynch Research Associates conducted hour-long interviews with six faculty members who teach Good Life courses and six of their students. This study provides initial insights regarding the characteristics of students and faculty who engage in this coursework, common pedagogical techniques, and impacts on students' sense of purpose and meaning.

Research Questions

The study was designed to address the following three key research questions:

1. **Who are the faculty and students?** Who are the instructors that choose to teach Good Life courses? Who enrolls in Good Life courses and what are their motivations for doing so?
2. **What are the experiences?** What is it like to be in a Good Life classroom? Are there common pedagogical techniques used in Good Life courses?
3. **What is the impact?** Do students who complete Good Life courses demonstrate observable changes in character and behavior as a result of participating in these courses? Do they report exploring and developing their sense of purpose?

Summary of Findings

The twelve hours of interview data that resulted from this study provided incredibly rich data and unexpected insights into the experiences of faculty and students who have engaged in Good Life courses. Though faculty

reported using a wide variety of theoretical approaches and selected texts, several key themes emerged suggesting that Good Life courses, while taught from various perspectives across a range of universities, possess common threads both in their pedagogical approaches and in students' lived experiences. Here, we provide a brief summary of the study's findings, which are described in greater depth in the body of this report.

Who Participates In Good Life Courses?

Generally, we found two key characteristics of faculty who choose to teach Good Life courses. First, all faculty reported embarking on their own journey to find their purpose or meaning in life. Second, the faculty universally reported a love of their students and a desire to help students find their own sense of meaning and purpose. Students reported that they enrolled in Good Life courses to find a space to ask questions related to purpose and meaning. Faculty also commonly reported that Good Life students tend to be highly engaged in the coursework and eager to apply the teachings into their lives outside the classroom.

Common Pedagogical Approaches

The study revealed five common pedagogical approaches present in each of the courses described in the interviews.

- **Reflection:** Good Life courses encourage students to engage in deep reflection on the course texts, personal experiences, and future goals.
- **Trust:** Good Life courses develop trust within the classroom environment that encourages and allows students to openly share their personal experiences and ideas.
- **New Vocabulary:** Good Life courses provide students language to help frame new and existing ideas and ways of thinking about life, work, leisure, and relationships.

- **Space:** Good Life courses provide students the space to ponder and ask questions about purpose and meaning and to prepare for life after graduation.
- **Practical Application:** Good Life courses provide students with exercises to apply learnings from the class in a practical way and connect course teachings with personal experiences and daily lives.

Student Impact

Of the numerous positive impacts of Good Life courses that faculty and students outlined, five common student outcomes emerged.

- **Finding Purpose:** Good Life courses helped students identify and work toward goals related to well-being, leading a good life, or becoming a good person.
- **Rediscovering Faith and Familial Roots:** Good Life courses prompted students to look back to the traditions of previous generations, explore their cultural heritage or reconnect with faith traditions.
- **Redefining Relationships with Leisure and Technology:** Good Life courses led students to recommit or reconnect with past hobbies, particularly leisure activities and reevaluate their relationship with technology.
- **New Friendships:** Good Life courses helped students develop new friendships centered on mutual trust and a willingness to be vulnerable.
- **Accepting Uncertainty and Failure:** Good Life courses prepared students to bear the uncertainty of life after college, accept that they will experience failure, and be optimistic about their ability to face challenges.



INTRODUCTION

Universities in the United States and abroad are increasingly offering courses that engage undergraduate students in deep questions surrounding how to lead a good life through an exploration of purpose and life's meaning. In the current report, we broadly label these courses as "Good Life courses," though they bear a variety of titles such as "Happiness and the Good Life," "Philosophy as a Way of Life," "Greek Literature and the Good Life," and "Life Worth Living." Regardless of the course title, the courses themselves share a goal of helping students explore life's purpose and meaning in order to live a happier, more fulfilling life, both in the present and after graduation.

The origin of Good Life courses can be traced to Pierre Hadot's (1981) influential work, [Philosophy as a Way of Life](#), in which he resurfaced the ancient Greco-Roman philosophical traditions of "spiritual exercises." According to Hadot, these exercises are the practical application of a philosophical school to one's daily life to engender virtues necessary for leading a good life and, ultimately, to understand one's purpose. Hadot is credited with sparking renewed interest in philosophy as a way of life

within the academy—first as stand-alone exercises in philosophy courses and then as the main topic of entire courses. More recently, honors programs, freshman seminars, and other departments have used Hadot’s approach in Good Life courses designed to engage students in critical reflection surrounding their purpose and their goals for life after college.

Good Life Coursework Across Disciplines

Although early versions of Good Life courses were found in philosophy departments, variations now span several disciplines, including theology and psychology. Within philosophy departments, Good Life courses focus on learning to find purpose and meaning in life through ancient philosophical traditions. For example, students may be asked to spend a week living as a Confucian would and reflect on the experience. In a psychology course, students may study recent scientific evidence on the neuropsychology of happiness and explore how they can improve their own social and emotional well-being through a psychological lens.

Regardless of the discipline in which a Good Life course is being taught, faculty seem to value similar teaching techniques. First, these courses are experiential and highly personal. Second, faculty tend to blend lessons on theory—whether from ancient philosophers or modern positive psychology, for example—with assignments asking students to apply these teachings to problems in their own lives, or to establish new behaviors or habits of mind and then reflect on their experiences.

Student Impact

To the extent that we can formalize a definition for Good Life courses, there is a paucity of research on their impact on student development. In one of the few existing studies, students enrolled in Yale University’s “Life Worth Living” course were asked to complete the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)

before and after concluding the course.² Their scores on the MLQ were then compared to those of students who attempted to enroll in the course but were put on the waitlist. Students who completed the course demonstrated significantly more growth in MLQ scores than students who were put on the waitlist. In another study, researchers at Wake Forest University examined the impact of a Good Life course designed as a first-year seminar to help cultivate Aristotelian virtues. The study showed statistically significant growth in students’ scores on seven targeted virtues when comparing students in the course to a control group.³

Despite these initial promising findings, further research is needed to define the qualities of Good Life courses and examine how students are experiencing and responding to them. In spite of the growing popularity of Good Life courses and their promises to promote well-being and purpose, the ultimate question remains—can a single college course guide students through deep reflection and possibly to a more meaningful, happier life?

The Current Study

Over the past decade, there has been rapid and widespread adoption of Good Life courses, particularly among undergraduate institutions and students. However, little is known about similarities in Good Life courses across institutions and their impacts, if any, on the lives of students. Who teaches these courses and who enrolls? Do the courses share pedagogical techniques? Are there core components of these courses that are universal across universities? More generally, is there a common definition of these courses that can facilitate a shared understanding about them and their impact on student development?

We interviewed six faculty who have taught Good Life courses and six of their students. We wanted to understand why students enroll in Good Life courses and what impact these courses are having on their day-to-day lives, their long



term goals, and how they find purpose and meaning in life. From faculty, we hoped to learn about pedagogical approaches, goals when teaching these courses and how they align their teaching techniques with these goals. In all, we set out to answer three core research questions:

1. PARTICIPANTS

Who are the instructors that choose to teach Good Life courses? Who enrolls in Good Life courses and what are their motivations for doing so?

2. EXPERIENCE

What is it like to be in a Good Life classroom? Are there common pedagogical techniques used across Good Life courses?

3. IMPACT

Do students who complete Good Life courses demonstrate observable changes in character and behavior as a result of participating in these courses? Do they report exploring and developing their sense of purpose?

METHODOLOGY

In March 2022, AVDF and the LRA research team identified ten university faculty for their experience teaching Good Life courses. Of these ten faculty, six responded to our request to participate in a qualitative research study. The six faculty taught in departments of philosophy, theology and psychology. After each interview, we asked faculty to nominate students to participate in the study. In all, we interviewed six students who had taken Good Life courses. The 12 participants came from five universities, and all courses were taught at the undergraduate level, with the exception of one course that was offered as part of a Master's program.

Interviews were conducted in April and May 2022 and followed a semi-structured format, meaning the research team developed a set of questions within a predetermined thematic framework, but the participants were given space to guide the discussion within that framework or to bring up new themes as relevant to their particular lived experience. Participants were asked mostly the same interview questions, but the order of questions could vary and new questions could emerge as appropriate to each discussion.

Analytic Approach

Two trained members of our research team conducted a thematic analysis of the 12 interviews first using an inductive approach, then repeating the process using a deductive approach. The researchers conducted several reviews of the interviews and themes to check for understanding and remove any biases detected in coding.

During the inductive analysis, the researchers took a “bottom up approach,” analyzing interview responses without preconceived ideas about what they would find and allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data.



From there, they developed codes for emerging themes, then reviewed the interviews again in order to clarify or consolidate themes. Next, the researchers completed a deductive analysis—a “top down” approach to qualitative data in which they again reviewed the data and interviews using the codes and themes that emerged during the inductive analysis.

RESULTS

In the section below, we describe the major themes that emerged from the interviews. First, we provide a broad overview of the Good Life courses and describe characteristics and motivations of the faculty and students who engage in them. Next, we delineate the pedagogical approaches that emerged in our interviews as essential elements of the Good Life courses. Finally, we describe the developmental impacts of these courses as described by students and faculty. Themes are punctuated throughout this section with salient quotes from the interviewees.

“There’s a deep hunger for systematic ways of trying to think about meaning and purpose and value in a way that’s not just self-help books, but that’s more philosophically rigorous.”

About the Good Life Courses

Of the six faculty we interviewed, two taught courses within a theology school; one taught a course focused on social science evidence regarding happiness; one taught a course in a philosophy department; and two taught courses designed for student development (i.e., first-year or honors seminars). Texts and readings pertained to “spiritual experiences” or philosophy as a way of life, religious perspectives on finding meaning and purpose, and social science evidence on happiness, as well as literature including plays, essays, and other supporting materials.

Both faculty and students reported that the classes are very popular; they often fill up very quickly, with large waitlists. Faculty said students who enroll in the courses are typically representative of the general student body, particularly where the courses are offered as electives. With one exception of a large lecture style course, the courses were all taught in seminars, with several including student-led discussions and peer dialogue groups.

What Are the Characteristics of Good Life Faculty?

The faculty we interviewed had divergent views regarding the typical characteristics of an individual who chooses to teach a course in Good Life. In fact, several faculty indicated that they did not believe that there was anything “special” or unique about the course instructors themselves. Rather, they expressed that instructors tended to be people who, first, believed that the texts they shared with students speak to the idea of a purposeful life and, second, had the ability to successfully facilitate conversation and dialogue around the texts.

“It’s mainly about the ideas and choice of readings and engagement with ideas and how they matter rather than the particular teacher. And, in a sense, the virtue of a good teacher is to point away from themselves.”

Although faculty had different ideas about who typically teaches Good Life courses, they did tend to agree on two key themes. First, almost all of the faculty we interviewed reported their own efforts at creating a purposeful life both prior to and while teaching the course and the importance of bringing this experience to the classroom. Faculty described that they do not act as “disinterested observers” in the classroom. Students reflected this idea too, describing how faculty set the tone for openness and honesty in the classroom by sharing their own experiences.

“We’re always beginning with narrating ourselves as particular and located. We’re not disinterested observers. These questions have to do with students. They also have to do with us. And so we’re trying to name where we come from.”

The faculty reported that their courses were successful in promoting discussion and engagement to the extent that they approached students with a sense of openness, had a willingness to share about their own life, and participated in discussions as facilitators.

“It’s a return to what the seminar is always supposed to be. The expert at the table is the author of the texts that we’re considering. I’m not the expert. I’m a facilitator of conversation. If I have expertise, I’m not going to withhold it, but others also have other sorts of expertise around the table.”

“A large testament to the nature of the class and how willing people were is how [Professor’s name] led it, and led by example. He would talk about his own life and experience with the virtue. And so I think that in a way inspired us to be honest. It wasn’t a class about just saying what we thought he wanted to hear.”

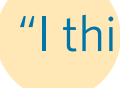
The second key theme that emerged related to how faculty viewed their students. The faculty universally expressed a love for the students they teach and a desire to share their knowledge and the course texts to help students find purpose and meaning. When asked to describe an effective instructor of a Good Life course, one faculty responded,

“I think that your own attempt at living a purposeful life married to your love of the students, married to your conviction that these texts speak to a purposeful life.”

“We felt how much [Professor’s name] cared about us and how much he cared about us thinking about these questions and not being perfect.”

Who Are the Students who Enroll in Good Life Students?

Many students we interviewed acknowledged that their initial interest in the course was due to the courses’ popularity and well-regarded faculty. Other students reported that the courses were part of a track or sequence that fulfilled major or university requirements. However, intrinsic motivation—a desire to develop a stronger sense of purpose or meaning in life—was also a common motivator for enrollment in Good Life courses. Students largely sought out Good Life courses as a place to ask big questions and voice their doubts and worries about their lives.



“I think most students who take the course are motivated to really understand who they want to be, they want to grow.”

A Highly Engaged Student Body

When faculty described the students who tend to enroll in these courses, they reported that students tended to be highly engaged, a sentiment reflected in our interviews with students as well. Both faculty and students said that, on the whole, students tended to be looking for the space to have the conversations the courses encouraged. They also reflected that students get out of the class what they put in. Interviewees reported these students who were not fully engaged in the courses were either not willing to put in the work or not ready to be vulnerable and consider the sorts of deep, personal questions that the courses elicit.

"I was all in from the minute the course started. I was like 'This is exactly what I've been looking for and searching for since I've been at [University], a place to ask these questions, a place to bring my doubts, my worries, my uncertainties.'"

The Impact of COVID on Good Life Course Enrollment

Context is important to understand the motivation and engagement of the students we interviewed. These interviews took place in Spring 2022, a time when the social distancing and masking restrictions of COVID-19 were beginning to ease. For many, the timing of their Good Life course coincided with the end of COVID isolation. This meant that there was a general hunger for the class; they and their peers were looking to make connections and to ease the stress and anxiety of isolation. Some students reported that the pandemic had already brought into focus questions about how to live a good life, and so they were primed for engagement in their course.

"It seemed like some students might have been more troubled... that could have been totally overdetermined by COVID and just the general phenomenon that's going on across college campuses these days. But I was wondering whether students who were having more troubles were seeking courses like that."

Pedagogical Approaches

We asked both faculty and students to describe the key features and course assignments that made their Good Life course unique from other courses, and to provide some examples of what the students experience in the course. Interviewees were asked to reflect on what worked or did not work and what had the greatest impact on students.

Universally, students and faculty described the experience of being in the course as profound. For many students, Good Life courses represented their first opportunity to engage with life's biggest questions, including "What gives my life purpose?" and "How do I find meaning in my daily life?" Given the personal nature of these discussions, faculty must expertly build trust and provide students with the tools to engage with and reflect on deep questions. Interviewees pointed to interpersonal connections formed throughout the semester, both among faculty and students and between peers.

In all, we identified five key themes that captured the pedagogical techniques that faculty and students most frequently described. We created simple terminology to capture these themes—Reflection, Trust, New Vocabulary, Space, and Practical Application—and provide definitions of each below.

Reflection

Perhaps the most common pedagogical technique that interviewees identified as an essential component of Good Life courses was providing opportunities for personal reflection. Based on what we learned from the interviewees, Reflection within a Good Life course can be defined as providing ample and consistent opportunities to reflect on texts, personal experiences, and future goals, through techniques such as personal journaling, peer dialogue groups, and shared discussion boards.

"I think what students have valued is the consistent reflection every week, almost for every class session. And that reflection takes different

forms. It might be to reflect on an experience you had, for example, where you had to demonstrate resilience, and what did you learn in that process? Or it might be to think about a time when you gave someone a gift. How does it align with or depart from Aristotle's virtue of generosity? And what do you think about that? So reflecting but also trying to think about how it connects to course material."

Trust

Both students and faculty described how Good Life courses require an element of trust to allow students to ask questions, take risks, and feel comfortable sharing personal experiences. Positive relationships among students and between faculty and students amplified their course experiences. Interviewees described how the courses built in opportunities to establish trust among peers and between students and instructors, including atypical learning environments such as convening class outside, in a retreat, or in small peer dialogue groups. Based on what we learned from interviewees, Trust within a Good Life course is developing trust within the classroom environment that encourages and allows students to openly share their personal experiences and ideas.

"A lot of it was... about making connections with each other and just enjoying each other's company and what that means for life and happiness and what that means in the context of this class... And a lot of it also was about building trust between each other and how that would impact the experience in the class."

New Vocabulary

Faculty described the need to give students language, vocabulary, or structure to ask questions and think about ideas that they have already been considering but do not have the tools to address. Based on what we learned from interviewees, New Vocabulary within a Good Life course can be

described as giving students language to help frame new and existing ideas and ways of thinking about life, work, leisure, and relationships.

"It seems like what we're often doing is offering students language for questions they've always had, intuitions maybe they've toyed with, or they've been mulling over in one way or another."

"I have had anxiety for most of my life and go to therapy and, [the course] really gave language to the philosophical side of it that I hadn't really considered."

Space

The idea of providing Space to consider purpose within the classroom, course discussions, and assignments came up frequently among the interviewees. Faculty described how their students have been very focused on getting into a university, without considering their purpose or how their education and future goals fit holistically within their lives. The Good Life courses provide students the space to ponder and ask questions about purpose and meaning and to prepare for the future. Students are challenged to think about their purpose and what they truly desire rather than what their skills or talents are.

"They have been shepherded through the process of getting into, at least in our case, it's a major prestigious university, and ... they have never asked or very infrequently have asked a question, 'what's that really

for?’ It’s almost like, let me win this rather than let me be prepared existentially into where I’m going to go, so that I know what to do with this education in the entirety of my life...And that’s what they don’t have often. So, we’re providing that for them in many ways, maybe for the first time.”

Practical Application

Students and faculty described the importance of actually applying what they learned in class to their lives and forming new habits and daily practices. Participants discussed having the opportunity to put theoretical ideas into practice, to gain some muscle memory around Good Life habits, and to have a place and space to actually live the philosophical traditions they learned about. Within Good Life courses, Practical Applications can be seen as exercises to apply learnings from the class in a practical way and connect course teachings with personal experiences and daily lives.

“You have to put things into practice. Just like if you said, “I’ve read a book about golf but I’m still a crummy golfer.” I’d say, “Guess what? You’ve actually got to play golf, too.” And so you have to take these ideas and translate them into real life.”

“As important as the heavy stuff that they’re encountering in the course, are the patterns and practices that you’re trying to get them to adopt. That has to happen during the semester ... for the course to really take root.”

What Doesn’t Work?

Above, we identified five pedagogical features common across Good Life courses. But are there pedagogical techniques that faculty should perhaps avoid? We asked faculty and students to reflect on whether any of the teaching techniques or course assignments seemed to be less impactful or created a sense of disengagement among the students. Although each of the Good Life courses in our interview sample have been refined over many semesters, faculty and students point to the following areas where engagement falls off:

- **Too abstract:** Faculty discussed situations where engagement falls off because students are discussing in the abstract rather than focused on application to their own lives.
- **Too specific:** Faculty described that sometimes students are hung up on taking small pieces of what they learn to fix a particular problem, rather than applying what they learn to their whole self.
- **Too esoteric:** Students mentioned engagement fell a bit when the readings were more intense or heavy.

Student Impact

Faculty and students discussed several ways in which Good Life courses impacted students’ lives. Faculty were asked specifically about students’ sense of purpose and whether they believed student purpose evolved throughout the course. Faculty were asked to reflect on the developmental changes they expected or hoped for in terms of students’ behaviors or perspectives as a result of taking the course and what changes they observed.

Students were also asked about whether their sense of purpose had evolved as a result of taking the Good Life course. We asked students to give examples of the ways in which the course changed their thoughts, behaviors, or perspectives.

Finding Purpose

In the current study, we were particularly interested in the extent to which the courses impacted students' purpose orientation. Following the now widely used definition of purpose proposed by Bill Damon in his 2003 book, *Noble Purpose: Joy of Living a Meaningful Life*,⁴ purpose consists of three parts: future goals, meaningful engagement in activities to realize those goals, and connecting with and contributing to something beyond one's self. In our interviews with students and faculty, we shared this definition of purpose and asked them to reflect on whether the course helped students develop or evolve their sense of purpose. As described below, we did not find strong support in our interview data for student purpose development along all three dimensions of purpose: many students discussed long-term goals and meaning across different domains, but beyond-the-self orientation did not emerge as a theme in the interviews.

Students and faculty both described an expansion of purpose in terms of future goals and evaluating the habits, roles, and relationships that give life meaning. One motivation among faculty for creating Good Life courses was the concern that a population of young people in the United States students are increasingly focused on admission to an elite university without considering their purpose or the holistic role of education in their lives. The Good Life courses gave students the chance to ask those questions and prepare for their futures with a broader lens than just achievement or career focus. Faculty were intentional about designing courses that ask students to examine their values and habits and to consider the origins of their ideas about who they ought to be and what the world should be like.

Students and faculty attributed the success of the class in helping students explore purpose to extensive opportunities for personal reflection on meaning and desires, rather than skills or talents. For many students, the course provided a seminal opportunity to engage in these conversations,

starting from the perspective of diverse scholars and then reflecting on the importance of those philosophical perspectives in their own lives. Students discussed how the course led them to be more intentional about their lives and the choices they made in work, relationships, and leisure. For many, the Good Life course helped them identify and work toward goals related to well-being, leading a good life, or becoming a good person.

"A lot of them come into the course thinking they know their purpose, and then they quickly realize they don't. Because what they thought was their purpose is what they're really good at and what everybody told them they should want ... And they learn much, much more about what they like and what they want and the nature of their desires they never had before. It's super exciting for them."

Several students discussed the impact of Good Life courses on purpose in relation to their future career plans. Some students used the philosophical frameworks to evaluate what they wanted to do with their lives, while others took the traditions they learned and applied them to how they approached their existing future plans. Faculty also shared anecdotal stories about students changing career paths or rethinking their futures in the job market.

"It just wasn't what I wanted to do. It didn't fulfill me. It didn't feel right. Really high-paying job, it was in New York. And so I was like, 'I take this job and then I'll figure something out from there.' But there's one of the chapters of the book, there's a series of exercises that you have to do, and so one of them was [to] imagine your hypothetical future. I was able to sit down and I ultimately decided to reject the offer ... It's very scary, but I felt really good about it."

On the other hand, the course helped some students focus and even double down on their current path.

"I think this course really went with kind of my own journey about like my own life that I think I would've gone on anyway."

Rediscovering Faith and Familial Roots

The Good Life courses prompted some students to look back to the traditions of previous generations and explore their cultural heritage. Students reported sharing what was learned in the courses with parents and grandparents as a way to connect back to their roots.

"I've had students whose grandparents had a connection to a religious community that perhaps even their parents don't have. They will sometimes find their way back toward the traditions of their grandparents. And that can happen to cultural traditions as well. There's a lot of turning to roots and trying to think about rootedness and history."

A few students talked about how the course led them to recommit to their faith or to adopt a new religious tradition; one student recommitted herself to her Catholic faith and another student committed himself to Buddhism.

"A big part of the worldview that we were learning about, at least with Buddhism and Stoicism, was that ... life kind of sucks but it doesn't have to like that, doesn't have to dictate your mind ... it really put me on a path of reading a lot and learning more and more about Buddhism ... I had my therapy and I had my anxiety, but I never connected philosophical thinking and teaching with actual practical internal work ... but [the course] was the first that said 'here's how it can be in your life' ... I didn't think that it was gonna be so transformative."

Redefining Relationships with Leisure and Technology

Students and faculty discussed how the courses led students to recommit or reconnect with past hobbies, particularly leisure activities that they really enjoyed but had quit for other priorities. They discussed how an intense focus on getting into college or, once in college, choosing the right career had led

them to stop participating in activities that brought them joy.

"They used to do these activities. Some of them used to paint. Some of them used to write music. Others used to play basketball outside. They have these activities that they had sort of developed as children, that college life kind of beat out of them because they don't have time for them. And so, that aspect of the course helps them rehabilitate these kind of forgotten activities or establish new ones, but activities that are going to fill your tank rather than leave you more depleted."

Students talked about attempting to be more intentional with leisure, making time for leisure activities, and, in particular, rethinking their relationship with technology and how it impacts their leisure activities. Some students practiced new habits such as taking social media breaks, which allowed them space for more mindful leisure. Many students came to recognize the value of leisure activities, such as walking, cooking, or playing an instrument, for their own sake rather than as achievement objectives.

"Growing up, I used to play piano a lot. And it was things like that that was like, 'Okay, that's a good leisure activity. You should make time and put that in your schedule to do because it's good.' Or even just walking, not for the sake of exercise, for a mental reset, hit home with me."

New Friendships

Trust was both an important feature for Good Life courses, as well as an outcome. Students reported that one positive impact of the course was the development of friendships and bonds with their classmates that were maintained after the course ended. They discussed the development of trust and the ability to open up and be vulnerable within these relationships. Students who led peer dialogue groups also discussed the relationships they developed with other peer dialogue leaders and the new friendships they saw develop in their groups.

"Watching the friendships form brought so much joy to me, because it felt like that was kind of part of the purpose of this whole thing ... Part of a good life is making connections and having friendships. It was cool to see that in action."

Accepting Uncertainty and Failure

Students described the Good Life courses as useful preparation for bearing the uncertainty of life after college, accepting that they experience failures, and being optimistic about their ability to face challenges. In practicing spiritual exercises and learning new habits, students reported that they felt more comfortable about facing failure and not knowing exactly what their future will hold.

Students frequently described a variety of ways in which they came to understand acceptance:

- Acceptance of uncertainty about how their life might play out
- Acceptance of moving on to the next phase of life, especially post-college life
- Acceptance of challenging circumstances, and acknowledgement that hard times will pass
- Acceptance that failures happen

"There was a meditation I think monks do where they're like, "I'm going to die, death," like all this stuff. But what [Professor's name] talked a lot about is that you're actually not really afraid of failing. You're afraid of how you're going to feel when you fail. So if you just come to terms with that, you recognize even if you fail, it's actually going to be fine. It's going to feel like crap, but you're not going to die..."

"I'm such a social person. I was worried I was going to be so lonely [after college]. Something that this course really emphasizes is there are times that you're going to be alone after graduating college. You're never going to live with all of your friends in the same way again, but that's great, actually. You have to learn how to be alone and to connect with yourself, and enjoy doing things with yourself, right?"

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

In relation to the three original research questions—*who are the faculty and students; what are the experiences; and what is the impact*—we found that our student and faculty interviewees offered rich insights, unexpected observations, and ultimately an essential foundation from which to build further research. Nearly all students reported that the short-term impacts of the courses—the behavioral and mindset changes practiced within the context of philosophical frameworks—were life-changing.

The key outcome of interest explored in the current report was students' purpose orientation, and we found strong evidence to suggest that Good Life courses provide important opportunities for students to explore and build a sense of purpose. We did not find strong support in our interview data for student purpose development along all three dimensions of purpose: many students discussed long-term goals and meaning across different domains, but beyond-the-self orientation did not emerge as a theme in the interviews. Perhaps that purpose dimension does not align with the lived experiences of students and faculty in the context of Good Life courses, or perhaps the researchers did not ask the right questions to elicit responses specifically about beyond-the-self orientation. Future research should include more targeted questions about all three purpose dimensions.

We were also encouraged to learn that students and faculty reported additional outcomes, including rediscovering faith and familial roots, redefining relationships with leisure and technology, new friendships, and accepting uncertainty and failure. Future research should include questions about these areas of student development.

As with many qualitative studies, our findings are limited by the small and fairly homogenous sample. Most of the participants were white; among the faculty, all but one were male and among the students, all but one were female. Future research in this area may benefit from a quantitative approach, which would allow researchers to capture a larger and more diverse sample of undergraduate students to better understand, for example, whether specific course features or student background characteristics differentially impact student outcomes.

In all, the qualitative findings that emerged from our interviews with faculty and students provide an essential foundation and key insights that bolster our understanding of Good Life courses and shed light on exciting next steps for research. With a clearer understanding of the key pedagogical features of the courses—Reflection, Trust, New Vocabulary, Space, and Practical Application—as well as the characteristics and motivations of faculty and students who engage with these courses, researchers can begin more rigorous empirical work to understand the short- and longer-term impacts of Good Life courses on student development.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Hadot, P., & Davidson, A. I. (1995). *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- 2 Yale Center for Faith and Culture (2021, October 13). *Brief: Life Worth Living and Presence of Meaning in Life*. Report available upon request to info@lynchresearchassociates.com.
- 3 Michael Lamb, Elise M. Dykhuis, Sara E. Mendonça & Eranda Jayawickreme (2021): Commencing character: A case study of character development in college, *Journal of Moral Education*, 51(2): 238-60, DOI: [10.1080/03057240.2021.1953451](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2021.1953451)
- 4 Damon, W. (2003). *Noble Purpose: Joy of living a meaningful life*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.



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