The Value of a Personal Mission Statement for University Undergraduates

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Despite the developmental significance of emerging adulthood as a time for critical self reflection and clarification of values, college and university education rarely includes self-assessment in curricula. Stephen Covey's book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" is a description of the importance of formulating a personal mission and critically reflecting on personal priorities. As part of a course in organizational psychology, students read about mission statements, their importance, and completed an accompanying workbook/journal. A key component of this exercise was for students to develop a personal mission statement. Students reported that they found this activity to be very helpful—particularly regarding values clarification and how they were actually using their time. Students commented that because of the fast pace of their lives, they rarely had time to engage in this type of reflection and were appreciative of the structure provided by the reading, journal, and opportunity to discuss their goals and values.

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Psychologists and professionals in higher education recognize that the traditional college years are a distinct developmental period. Arnett (2000) has labeled the period from approximately 18 to 25 years as "emerging adulthood." This is a time of instability as young adults manage the demands of education while simultaneously attempting to formulate goals for their personal and professional lives. This period is characterized by frequent changes in place of residence, multiple close relationships, short-term jobs, and financial dependence (Arnett, 2000). Increasingly, as families become more geographically distant and the role of formal religion declines, young adults often receive little assistance in reflecting up on personal values and the components of a meaningful life. As part of an upper level undergraduate college course, "Personnel Psychology", the instructor included a structured approach to articulating values and priorities by assigning Stephen Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" and an accompanying workbook and journal. This assignment had two objectives: to expose students to a tool often employed in staff training while simultaneously addressing important developmental issues of young adults.

Developmental Tasks of Young Adulthood

Erick Erickson (1968) and later, James Marcia (2002), describe the identity statuses characterizing young adults. Most of Marcia's (2002) research was developed with college students. Both Erickson, conceptually, and Marcia (2002), through research, indicated that to establish a secure sense of identity, young adults must go through a moratorium (Berger, 2008). A moratorium is a period of active exploration around educational and occupational goals, religion and spirituality, and ultimately, developing a coherent set of values. Erickson argued that unless someone went through a period of active self-exploration, their resulting identity would be incomplete. One common pattern that appears to be increasingly prevalent among college students today is an identity status termed, "foreclosure." The foreclosure pattern involves uncritically taking on values and aspirations of others—typically one's parents—and automatically using these as a personal guide for career and relationship issues. In another problematic pattern, young adults make no decisions about important issues such as career choice and simply "drift" through life living day to day.

In order to develop meaningful personal lifetime goals as well as shorter-term personal priorities, young adults must develop their reflective capabilities. Another theorist, William Perry, emphasizes that during the college years, young adults go through a three phase process (Arnett, 2004, 2010; Perry, 1999). At the outset of their college experiences, young adults are dualists. This dualistic phase is characterized by a view that there are right and wrong answers and correct and incorrect ways of living. Dualists also believe that authorities such as college professors have the correct answer. Dualism is followed by a period of disillusionment. During this next phase, multiplicity, students come to appreciate that there indeed are multiple ways of interpreting the same event and that values are not "good or bad" but simply "are". This stage is disconcerting since it provides little direction for articulating values or beliefs. Since all perspectives are equally valid, how can one choose a set of beliefs to guide one's behavior and be confident that it is a correct one? While the anxiety and associated confusion may spur some young adults to resolve this ambiguity, others may become cynically nihilistic—a state similar to Eriksson's (1968) identity diffusion. Finally, Perry states that by the time they graduate from college or university, young adults recognize that some principles may be more or less applicable. Initially, there

is no framework to reach any firm resolution (Perry, 1999). However, with time, young adults develop a framework which may involve weighing the pros and cons of different perspectives and eventually committing to principles in the context of one's own life. The result is an endpoint that Perry termed, commitment. The committed adult has a secure mission and well articulated value system to guide their choices and actions. There is a sense of security with this framework-particularly if one has gone through a period of self-exploration.

Developing a Personal Mission Statement

In urging readers to "begin with the end in mind, "Covey (2004) uses the hypothetical experience of attending his own funeral and listening to his eulogy as presented by one of his children. In developing a mission statement, the focus should be on how the person would want to have contributed by the end of their life. However, an effective mission statement is also a type of internal compass. It should be broad enough to capture key values but specific enough to guide important life decisions. Issues such as choosing a university, a major field of study, continuing or ending a relationship, becoming a parent, or changing jobs can be made with greater security and confidence if they are guided by core principles.

As noted above, a useful exercise to begin reflection on a mission statement is to encourage students to imagine that they are attending their own funeral. They are asked to imagine their own eulogy and whether it reflects the values and goals that they wish to embody. Additionally, students are asked to consider the multiple roles they occupy such as spouse/intimate partner, child of their parents, friend, and community member. in addition to their vocation, students are encouraged to consider they legacy that they would like to leave in each of these positions. For those students who find this task challenging, a few characteristics ("respected, trusted, dependable, loyal, committed to excellence, etc".) often will help students articulate their own values.

As part of the course, the instructor presented formal information about the content and importance of a personal mission statement. To assist students, they were presented with three radically different mission statements by distinct personalities: Gandhi, Sesame Street's Cookie Monster, and the heavy metal band, Metallica.

Gandhi's mission statement and values are as follows:

Let the first act every morning be to make the following result for the day:

I shall not fear anyone on earth.

I shall fear only God

I shall not bear ill will toward anyone.

I shall not submit to injustice from anyone.

I shall conquer untruth by truth.

And in resisting untruth, I shall put up with all suffering.

As a pronounced contrast and to engage students, the mission statement of the Cookie Monster was also shared:

Rule the world

Get lots of cookies

Eat the cookies

Get more cookies

Eat those cookies too

In a further illustration of the diversity of mission statements,

students viewed the documentary, "Some Kind of Monster" depicting the heavy metal band, Metallica, as they came together to make a new recording. Despite multiple conflicts between members, the band was ultimately successful in producing one their most acclaimed recordings, "St. Anger." As part of the process, one of the members generates a mission statement for the band:

We come now to create our album of life…throughout our individual and collective journeys- sometimes through pain and conflict—we have discovered the true meaning of family. As we accomplish ultimate togetherness, we become healers of ourselves and the countless who embrace us and our message. We have learned and we understand. Now we must share.

Covey (2004) points out that the day-to-day demands and distractions of modern life—"the thick of thin things"—often interfere with being able to access and implement a personal mission statement. Covey also emphasizes that while our lives are in constant flux, a congruent mission statement provides an inner sense of stability amidst rapid social change.

Covey (2004) describes several other principles that are introduced to students. The concept of being proactive is often difficult for many young adults, who view their immediate life circumstances being controlled by faculty, parents, or even, romantic partners, to initially grasp. Covey's (2004) principle that there is a psychological "space" between external stimuli and our behavioral response is often a powerful realization. This internal experience is under personal control and can lead to valued behavior reflecting one's personal mission. In sum, while students cannot control others' actions, they can control their own reactions.

Application of the Principles to the Classroom

Increasingly, university students enter higher education with a strong career focus. Many of them, recognizing the competitiveness of Western culture, believe that one needs to make a decision about important life issues early and quickly. Critics have argued that higher education, itself, is increasingly moving away from the moratorium that Erickson recommends and also towards education that has practical application (Saunders, 1982). Computer skills are increasingly emphasized over grappling with philosophy or the symbolic meaning of a novel. One unfortunate casualty of the move towards greater careerism is that young adults often do not have any stimulus or framework for developing a meaningful and consistent value system.

The original intent of the assignment was to have the students experience the type of staff education and training provided by some large organizations as part of their human resources program. In the first author's previous experience as a director of a nonprofit organization, managers were regularly assigned a book that was the focus of discussion for multiple meetings. Both because of the benefits of Covey's framework for working towards goals as well as to give the students a "taste" of a tool used for management training, they were asked to keep a workbook and log of their reading. Since the course was in human resources and personnel training, this exercise had the added benefit of providing the students with direct experience of staff training.

The workbook is a step-by-step process which includes helping the reader to articulate and organize core values, con-

sider priorities, consider their interpersonal skills and being proactive in relationships. Other exercises emphasized the importance of having a balanced life which includes adequate sleep, and physical activity, nutrition, and social support.

Students' Response

Students completing the journal and book found the experience to be very helpful. For many students, this was their first experience of systematically examining beliefs and values, honestly appraising the quality of their relationships, and prioritizing aspects of their lives. Students spontaneously reported that they often had little time to reflect on these issues and that having a reflective process of this type assigned as a course requirement was a unique experience. They also indicated that unless the development of a personal mission statement had been class assignment with a grade attached, they would be unlikely to engage in such a process. Students spontaneously indicated that they had reconsidered their career goals as well as intimate relationships in light of this educational activity.

Conclusion

Academic course content often neglects the reality that university students are at a developmental stage in which they are struggling with identity and self-definition. Attention to personal values and goals in the form of a personal mission statement helps students in this process. Conceptually, encouraging students to consider their lives from the perspective of their death heightens awareness of their immediate personal responsibility for their choices and accompanying actions. This type of multi-week exercise can be incorporated into education and social-behavioral science curricula. For future teachers, this exercise helps them consider the personal qualities that make for an effective educator as well as for living a meaningful, value-driven life.

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