



Article

Purpose in Life among First-Generation College Students: Friends Make a Difference

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Abstract: Purpose in life is linked with numerous positive outcomes among adolescents and emerging adults. Peer relationships may play an important role in the cultivation of purpose, especially among first-generation college (FGC) students. The present study examined the association between the quality of peer relationships and commitment to purpose among students from three universities (N = 195). Analyses also examined whether FGC student status moderated this association. The results indicated that the quality of peer relationships significantly predicted commitment to purpose. FGC status moderated this association; high-quality relationships with peers helped close the gap in purpose commitment between FGC students and their counterparts.

Keywords: purpose in life; first-generation college students; peer relationships



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1. Introduction

According to employment rates based on educational attainment, the necessity to secure a postsecondary degree is greater than ever before [1]. Yet, while the percentage of American adults who hold a bachelor's degree has steadily increased over time, the proportion of first-generation college (FGC) students has declined. FGC students are both less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and less likely to complete their degrees than their continuing-generation peers [2]. FGC students are also less likely to enroll in private, not-for-profit institutions and more likely to enroll in private, for-profit schools than their continuing generation counterparts [3]. Not surprisingly, as tuition costs continue to rise, FGC students are also more likely to incur student debt than their peers, and 65% of FGC students hold more than USD 25,000 of debt compared to their second-generation college student peers (56%) [3,4].

In light of these formidable challenges, research is needed on factors that promote students' pursuit of postsecondary education and rates of confidence in their degrees. Purpose, "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" [5] (p. 121), is one of these promotive factors [6]. This developmental asset helps shape and organize behavior and, in turn, is linked with numerous beneficial outcomes among college students, such as greater degree commitment [7,8]. College also provides an ideal context to explore and pursue purpose through transformative experiences in and out of the classroom, such as experiential learning and meaningful relationships [9]. The present study builds on burgeoning research regarding purpose development among college students by examining the role of peer relationships [9]. Specifically, we examine associations between high-quality peer relationships and purpose among college students and the moderating effect of FGC student status using quantitative data collected from three universities in the United States.

The findings can help illuminate the benefits of peers among college students, especially for those who are first in their families to attend college. Furthermore, the study explores whether promoting purpose for FGC students through growth-fostering peer relationships may be one strategy for improving student well-being, persistence, and, in turn, future prospects (e.g., employment and earnings).

1.1. Benefits of Purpose

Research over the past two decades has shown that when young people have a clear sense of purpose (i.e., commitment to a purpose), they are more likely than their peers to have greater levels of psychological well-being, including hope, positive affect, and life satisfaction [10–12]. In addition, a strong sense of purpose is linked with traditional markers of success, such as academic achievement, degree commitment [8,13,14], and economic success (i.e., household income) [15]. Some evidence suggests that purpose also buffers against risky behaviors in adolescence, like substance use [16] and even buffers against mortality risk [17].

Although commitment to purpose is associated with these various benefits, the search for purpose appears to be associated with various challenges. Research suggests that searching for purpose is developmentally appropriate during adolescence and emerging adulthood [18,19]. However, it appears to be a stressful process; adolescents searching for purpose reported greater levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem [20]. These consequences were exacerbated for youth who reported a lack of social support (e.g., higher levels of parental alienation) during their search for purpose [20]. As research continues to elucidate the benefits of possessing purpose, scholars are increasingly examining the contexts, experiences, and relationships that support and cultivate purpose [6,21–23].

1.2. Promotion of Purpose: Contexts and Relationships

Context plays an important role in shaping purpose formation. Structured opportunities, such as extracurricular activities and service projects, may support an adolescent's burgeoning sense of purpose [23]. A growing body of research also suggests that strong, supportive relationships play a particularly significant role in cultivating purpose among adolescents during the high school years [24,25]. The Four P's of Purpose model developed by Liang and colleagues [25] underscores the importance of people in forming a sense of purpose, as influential others provide affirmation, guidance, and nurturance during the purpose development process in adolescence. Less research has examined the college years [6,9], but it stands to reason that the latter would be an especially ripe developmental period for exploring and achieving a sense of purpose given that adolescents and emerging adults are exploring and solidifying their identity [26], and reflecting on their values, goals, and purpose in life [27]. Research suggests that self-reflection of this nature may foster beneficial outcomes such as increases in goal-directedness and, in turn, life satisfaction [27].

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of considering how purpose is influenced by the broader sociocultural context within which young people are embedded [21,22,28]. In particular, Gutowski and colleagues [21] identified specific ways that stress and adversity shape purpose development in adolescents who are coping with marginalization and systemic barriers, including racism and classism. For many, these barriers to success are associated with lower academic achievement and greater gaps between vocational aspirations and achievements [29]. In Gutowski et al.'s [21] qualitative analysis, stress and adversity played a critical role in adolescents' purpose development by serving both as a barrier (e.g., youth perceived goals for the future as impossible to achieve or as not a priority given their sense of being overwhelmed by other pressures), as well as a motivator (e.g., high expectations from significant people and a desire to overcome or escape contextual stressors such as financial strain). In addition, social support was found to play a pivotal role in mitigating stress and propelling youth to develop purpose.

In a similar vein, a review of the research on youth purpose has suggested that purpose in life may be an especially powerful asset for marginalized young people because

having a sense of purpose can buffer inevitable stresses by imbuing young people with coping strategies and social support, along with the skills needed to challenge systems of oppression [30]. Thus, more research is needed to examine the contextual affordances that shape the opportunities to identify, pursue, and express purpose [22,30].

In particular, relationships with adults play a critical role in promoting purpose in life among youth [19]. High-quality mentoring relationships, for example, have been associated with a greater commitment to and greater engagement in purpose among adolescents and college students [9,24]. Parents may also play an important role in the development of purpose through a variety of mechanisms, including socializing prosocial behavior, general positive parenting practices, modeling purpose, fostering trust and communication, and direct engagement with children through purposeful activities [22,23,31].

Less research, however, has examined the role that peers play in purpose development [19]. This gap in the literature is unfortunate given the rising importance of peers during the adolescent and young adulthood years [26,32]. Peer relationships during college are associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes [33–36]. For example, friendships made during the transition to college improve both academic and social adjustment and bolster ties to the institution [36]. Positive qualities of the peer relationship (e.g., trust and support) appear to confer various benefits [36,37]. Indeed, Liang and colleagues demonstrated that peer relationships characterized by growth-fostering characteristics (e.g., mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment/zest) were associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of loneliness [34].

Peers may serve as models for prosocial and purposeful behavior, more generally [38]. Moreover, peers are even more likely than parents to inhabit contexts where young people are engaging in purposeful activities (e.g., extra-curricular activities) and, thus, may have a profound impact on the development of their peers' purpose [23,39]. One study of adolescents and college students found that peer relationships mattered more than relationships with parents in fostering purpose among college students [23].

1.3. First-Generation College Students

Peer relationships may be especially relevant for first-generation college (FGC) students. Research has consistently demonstrated that FGC students may encounter more obstacles, including social isolation and lower levels of belongingness, compared to their peers [40–45]. FGC students are more likely to face financial hardship [46–49], be underprepared academically [49–52], and experience less satisfaction academically and socially at college [45,53,54]. Moreover, FGC students lack the social and cultural capital provided by parents who went to college and are familiar with various aspects of the college experience (e.g., interacting with professors, student loans, choosing a major, etc.) [37,49,52,55–58]. With less parental support available, relationships formed at school may become more influential in FGC students' successes. While much research has explored the role of mentorship for FGC students (e.g., with faculty or older students) [59–61] there has been less attention paid to the potentially critical role that friendships play through the provision of both instrumental and emotional support.

1.4. Present Study

As evidence continues to accumulate on the benefits of purpose in life for college students in and out of the classroom, more research is needed to illuminate factors that encourage purpose formation [6,25]. This is particularly important for marginalized students, such as FGC students, who often face various barriers that hinder academic success. Theory suggests that people play an important role in promoting purpose among youth, and a large body of literature has already documented the benefits of high-quality peer relationships among college students [25,34–37]. It stands to reason that these relationships may serve as critical supports in purpose development among college students, especially for those who are the first in their families to attend college [35,37,40].

The present study examined associations between peer relationships and purpose formation among a sample of college students and focused on two research questions: (1) Do college students who report higher-quality peer relationships also report greater purpose in life? (2) Do FGC students benefit more from supportive relationships with peers than their continuing generation counterparts? Based on previous research [34,36,43], we hypothesized that higher-quality peer relationships would be associated with a greater commitment to purpose in life. We also expected that the association between supportive peer relationships and commitment to purpose would be moderated by FGC student status. Given the evidence on the importance of peer relationships for positive adjustment among FGC students [37], we hypothesized that high-quality peer relationships would matter more in supporting purpose formation for those who were the first in their families to attend college.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The sample in the present study ($N = 195$) was drawn from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of purpose development conducted at three separate universities in the United States. Two universities are in the Northeast and are private, not-for-profit, religiously-affiliated institutions. The third university is a private, not-for-profit institution in the Southeast. Participants were recruited through research participant pools, introductory courses, and posted flyers. Due to the nature of our recruitment strategies, first-year students are oversampled in the present study. In fact, approximately 75% of participants were first-year students (74.9%). The sample is also primarily White (78.1%) and female (75.4%). Over one in eight students in the present sample self-identified as an FGC student. We removed non-traditional students (i.e., students over the age of 25) from the analyses to focus on traditional college students in emerging adulthood, as purpose formation has been discussed as a key developmental task of this period [6]. Only three participants (aged 45, 45, and 52) were excluded from analyses.

Participants provided consent and completed an online survey via Qualtrics. Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board (or Research Review Board) approval was obtained at each institution. Approval numbers for participating institutions are included at the end of the manuscript.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Purpose

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire [62] was used to measure commitment to purpose in the present study. The Commitment to Purpose subscale has 5 items, and scores range from 5 to 35. For each item, participants rated the extent to which a statement was true of them on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Absolutely Untrue* to 7 = *Absolutely True*. A sample item from the Commitment to Purpose subscale is "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose". The Commitment to Purpose subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire has demonstrated excellent psychometrics in previous research, with good internal consistency (α 's = 0.81–0.86) and test-retest reliability (0.70) [62]. With regard to validity, the Commitment to Purpose subscale demonstrates good concurrent and convergent validity. This subscale is positively correlated with satisfaction in life and other measures of purpose, such as the Purpose in Life Test [63]. The reliability was good for the Commitment to Purpose subscale ($\alpha = 0.83$) in the present study.

2.2.2. Relational Health Indices

To measure the quality of peer relationships, we used the Relational Health Indices (RHI) [64]. This measure has been used with college students across gender and diverse identities to examine the growth-fostering characteristics of relationships, including mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment/zest [64]. While the RHI also assesses relationships with mentors and the broader community, we focused our analyses

on the peer RHI subscale in the present study. Participants answered 11 questions on the quality of their closest peer relationship using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Always*). Mean scores are computed. A sample item is: “I feel positively changed by my friend”. Previous research has demonstrated the RHI peer subscale has good reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$). This subscale also had good reliability in the present study ($\alpha = 0.83$). The RHI peer subscale has demonstrated good concurrent validity in previous studies as it is correlated with lower levels of loneliness [34]. The RHI peer subscale is also positively correlated with other measures of peer support (e.g., Quality of Relationships Questionnaire) [65].

2.2.3. Demographics

Participants answered several demographic questions, including their gender, ethnicity, year in school, age, and school. Participants also reported whether they were the first in their family to go to college and their mother’s level of education.

2.3. Analytic Plan

We conducted descriptive statistics prior to inferential testing. We conducted OLS hierarchical regression models to examine associations between peer RHI and commitment to purpose. We controlled for a number of covariates in our models as previous research has demonstrated differences in constructs of interest as a function of participant characteristics [34]. In the first block of the regression model, we entered covariates (i.e., gender, ethnicity, first-year student status, and school). Peer RHI and FGC student status were added in the second block. The interaction term was added in the third and final block. The interaction term for peer RHI \times FGC students status was computed after centering peer RHI [66].

3. Results

Descriptive statistics for our sample are displayed in Table 1. The average commitment to purpose score was $M = 24.72$ ($SD = 5.34$). The average peer relational health score was $M = 4.28$ ($SD = 0.51$). A histogram of the standardized residuals revealed a negative skew, and two outliers were identified through casewise diagnostics with residuals greater than three (in absolute value). These values were not due to coding or data entry errors. After removing the outliers, the histogram was roughly normal (i.e., no longer negatively skewed) and, consequently, results presented here do not include the outliers.

Table 1. Sample Descriptive Statistics.

Independent Variables	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)/%
School 1	7.7%
School 2	31.4%
School 3	60.8%
First-Year Students	74.9%
Gender	75.4%
White	78.1%
FGC Status	12.9%
Commitment to Purpose	24.72 (5.34)
Peer RHI	4.28 (0.51)

Our first regression model indicated that peer RHI was positively and significantly associated with commitment to purpose ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). Table 2 displays the results from regression models that examined the moderating effect of FGC student status on the association between peer relational health and commitment to purpose. The overall moderation regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.20$, $F(8, 164) = 5.26$, $p < 0.001$). The interaction term peer RHI \times FGC student status was significant ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Regression Model for the Moderating Effects of FGC Status on Peer RHI and Commitment to Purpose.

Independent Variables	R ²	Step 1	Step 2	ΔR^2	Step 3			
		B (SE)	R ²		B (SE)	R ²	ΔR^2	B (SE)
School 1	0.08 *	4.54 (2.13) *	0.18 ***	0.11 ***	5.87 (2.08) **	0.20 ***	0.02 *	5.31 (2.08) *
School 2		0.95 (0.89)			1.30 (0.86)			1.36 (0.85)
First-Year		1.78 (0.92) +			1.53 (0.87) +			1.39 (0.87)
Gender		0.86 (0.88)			1.27 (0.83)			1.06 (0.83)
Nonwhite		1.04 (0.96) **			1.88 (0.95) +			2.25 (0.96) *
FGC Status					−1.89 (1.17)			−2.04 (1.16) +
Peer RHI					3.23 (0.72) ***			2.70 (0.77) **
FGC × Peer RHI								4.57 (2.26) *

Note. + $p < 0.10$, * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$. School 3 is the omitted dummy variable for school. Students that identified as female = 1 for Gender. Students who did not identify as white = 1 for Nonwhite. Students who reported that they were the first in their families to attend college = 1 for FGC Status. Students who were in the first year at college = 1 for First-Year.

We also plotted the simple slopes to demonstrate the conditional relationship between peer RHI and commitment to purpose for FGC and non-FGC students (Figure 1). FGC students with lower levels of peer RHI (i.e., 1 SD below the mean) reported significantly lower levels of commitment to purpose compared to their counterparts. As peer RHI relational increased, the gap in purpose commitment between FGC and non-FGC students was eliminated.

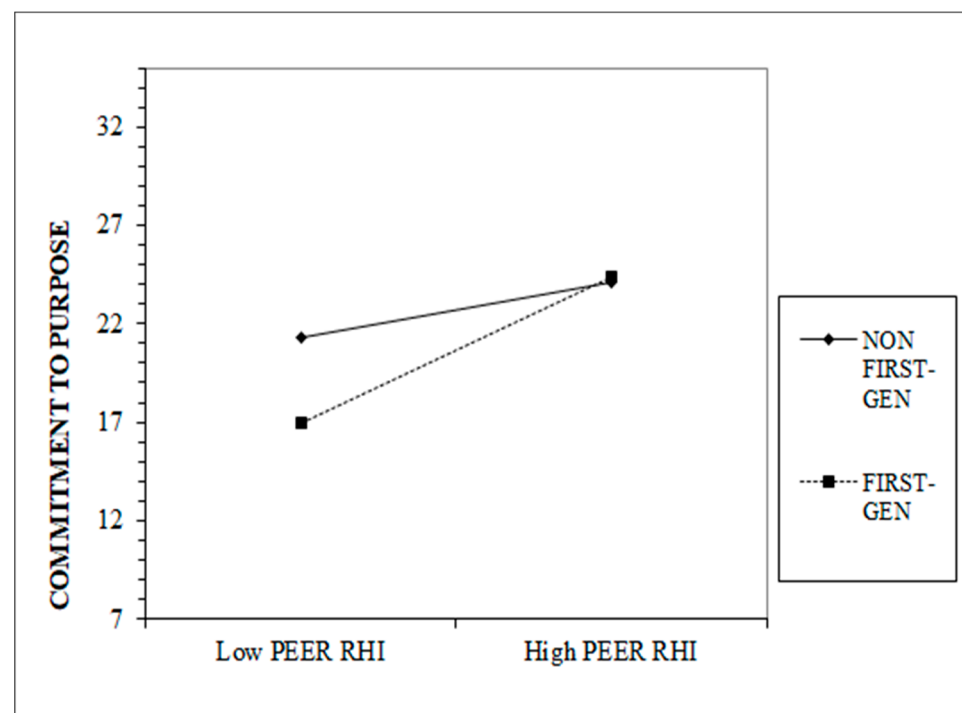


Figure 1. Simple Slopes of Association for the Interaction between Peer RHI and FGC. Differentiating the moderation effect of FGC status on the association between peer RHI and commitment to purpose. Low PEER RHI = -1 SD; High PEER RHI = 1 SD.

4. Discussion

College is a fertile context for the exploration, identification, and pursuit of purpose [6,27]. Research has shown that relationships may play an important role in cultivating

purpose [23,25]. This may be particularly true among college students, as peer relationships are linked with positive development among college students [33–36]. The present study examined whether high-quality peer relationships predicted a greater commitment to purpose among college students from three universities across the United States. We also examined whether FGC students would benefit more from relationships with peers, given that these students face greater barriers in attending college and lack the cultural capital of their peers whose parents did attend college [49,52,56–58]. Aligned with theory and research on the importance of people in the promotion of purpose [25], our findings demonstrated that higher-quality peer relationships were associated with a greater commitment to purpose. In addition, higher-quality peer relationships mattered more in purpose formation for students who were the first in their families to go to college, compared to their non-FGC student peers. These findings are consistent with evidence on the importance of peers in positive outcomes for FGC students [37].

The results of the present study constitute an important addition to the growing literature on the role people play in cultivating purpose among adolescents and emerging adults [9,22,23,25]. Our results supported our first hypothesis; high-quality relationships with peers at college may aid in purpose formation. These findings align with both theory on the importance of relationships in purpose cultivation [6,25] and previous research that has demonstrated that peer friendships contribute to positive development during the college years [34,36,58,67]. In fact, when compared to family support, peer support has been a more consistent predictor of adjustment in college students. This is not surprising given that most students who attend a residential college live away from home, where peer friendships are more accessible.

The present findings also suggest that the quality of friendships is important. Indeed, even one mutual and intimate friendship can make a significant difference in a young person's sense of belonging [68–70]. Specifically, when a close friendship in emerging adulthood is characterized by a sense of mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment, it has the potential to play an increasingly significant role in many aspects of psychological growth, including the development of a sense of purpose (e.g., how they can best contribute to the world around them) [19].

Furthermore, the results of the present study also suggest that the benefits of close friendships during emerging adulthood may be more impactful for FGC students compared to their counterparts. Building on existing research that demonstrates the importance of non-parental adults for FGC students [60,61], our findings indicate that high-quality peer relationships confer greater benefits for FGC students by providing the critical support and capital important for a valuable college experience [37]. In other words, when there is an absence of quality peer friendships, there is a greater difference in the purpose scores of FGC vs. non-FGC students; high-quality peer friendships help close that gap. This is particularly important for FGC students as previous research has indicated that purpose is linked with numerous beneficial academic outcomes, such as degree commitment [8].

These results are consistent with previous findings that suggested that social support provided young people who experienced consistent overwhelm with a resource that helped them cope and, ultimately, develop purpose [21]. Previous research also indicates that while FGC students are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities with their peers and have peer interactions outside of course work, these experiences may be more beneficial for them compared to their non-FGC counterparts [42]. Peers may participate alongside FGC students in purposeful activities at school (e.g., community service) and help FGC students reflect on their goals and aspirations beyond college. Similarly, extant evidence suggests that participation in high-impact activities such as service-learning may foster peer belongingness [43]. More research is needed, however, to unpack the processes through which peers during the college years help students develop purpose.

Conclusions, Future Directions, & Limitations

Possessing a sense of purpose is correlated with numerous positive outcomes among college students, and research regarding the experiences and relationships that help cultivate this developmental asset remains limited. The present study offers evidence that high-quality peer relationships among college students are predictive of a greater sense of purpose. The benefits of these relationships are especially important for FGC students, who may experience various barriers compared to their continuing generation counterparts. Peers may help promote purpose for these students and, ultimately, contribute to improved FGC student outcomes in school and beyond.

While the present study addresses notable voids in the literature on purpose development among college students, this research has several limitations. First, the present study was cross-sectional and unable to demonstrate temporal ordering among our variables of interest. High-quality peer relationships may foster purpose; on the other hand, purposeful students may cultivate better relationships with friends. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand how peers promote purpose among college students.

Future research could also examine the specific ways in which high-quality peer relationships confer their benefits to FGC students. Our measure in the present study assessed relationship qualities such as mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment. These aspects of relationship quality are reflective of emotional support. Future research should examine other aspects of support, including informational and instrumental types of support, to ascertain the relative benefits of different kinds of support for this population.

Additionally, the sample in the present study was drawn from three private institutions. Two of the three participating schools are religiously-affiliated institutions, and the final school has strong historical ties to a faith tradition and describes faith as a leading institutional value. Future research should be done to examine the generalizability of these findings in non-faith based/religiously-oriented institutions. The sample was also fairly homogeneous with respect to race and academic standing—the majority of the sample self-identified as white and first-year students. However, a sizable percentage of the sample self-identified as first-generation college students (13%). Future research should include even more diverse samples to better understand the connection between peer relationships and purpose.

Despite its limitations, the present study represents an important first step in investigating associations between peer relationships and purpose in life among college students. Additional research is needed to delineate the mechanisms through which high-quality peer relationships confer their benefits to purpose formation during college. Research should also examine the critical role peer relationships play for FGC students who face numerous challenges and explore how to better foster these valuable connections. Our results suggest that peer relationships are linked with a greater commitment to purpose in life, and the benefits of peer relationships matter more for FGC students.

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