Ecological Development of Purpose Among Graduating College Students: A Mixed Methods Study

Alexis McCarthy
amccarthy@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/all_doctoral

Part of the Educational Psychology Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Masters Theses and Doctoral Projects at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in West Chester University Doctoral Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.
Ecological Development of Purpose Among Graduating College Students:

A Mixed Methods Study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

College of Education & Social Work

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Doctor of Education

By,

Alexis Mary Jane McCarthy

March 2022

© Copyright 2022 Alexis Mary Jane McCarthy
Dedication

I dedicate this culminating project to my incredible parents, Lisa and Dan, who have steadfastly supported my pursuit of passion and purpose throughout my life. And to my beloved husband Quinn, who makes living purposefully a priority.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to my committee, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, Dr. Karen Dickinson, and Dr. Jackie Hodes. Your provisions of unyielding support, thoughtful feedback, and generous encouragement have made this journey possible. You have pushed me in my scholarship and enabled me to create a final product that brings me immense pride.

Thank you to my current and former colleagues at West Chester University, especially Dr. Maggie Holroyd, Dr. Jen Bacon, Dr. Lisa Montgomery, Dr. Sara Hinkle, and Devan Zgleszewski. I am blessed to have had you all alongside me as scholars and colleagues throughout this process.

Thank you to my cohort mates in the higher education track. Throughout these past few years, being in community with you has been restorative, motivating, and inspiring. I am excited to continue learning with you all for many years to come.

Thank you to my mentors, Jenny and Mike Loeffelman. You inspire me to be the professional and academic I am today, reminding me to stay true to myself and strive for excellence in all that I do.

Thank you to my extended family and dear friends, who have continued to cheer me on from the sidelines, asking questions about my study and my classes for years on end. Your continued belief in me has propelled me forward, and for that, I am so very grateful.

Finally, I extend my most heartfelt thanks to my participants. This study would not have been possible without your sharing of stories. Your vulnerability and courage are an inspiration. I hope you continue to steadfastly pursue purpose throughout your lives.
Abstract

This mixed methods study explored ecological purpose development among graduating college students at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic, focusing on the influence of college and familial contexts. Using Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model as a framework, I undertook an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2017), assigning more weight to qualitative results (quan → QUAL). I collected quantitative survey data from 110 graduating students a college of liberal arts (consisting of Art and Design, Communication and Media, English, History, Languages and Cultures, Philosophy, Theatre and Dance, and Women’s and Gender Studies majors) and then purposefully selected eight individual participants for subsequent semi-structured interviews. Quantitative survey questions addressed demographics, degree of purpose, and purpose orientation (Bundick et al., 2006). Students who demonstrated both some degree of purpose and a strong leaning toward either a self-oriented (SO) or other-oriented (OO) sense of purpose were contacted for individual semi-structured interviews, adapted from Andrews et al.’s (2006) Youth Purpose Interview protocol. Inductive and deductive analysis techniques revealed four pathways to purpose (familial, collegiate, employment, and religious contexts) and four explicit factors influencing purpose development in familial and collegiate contexts (relationships with parents, grandparents, faculty members, and on-campus employment supervisors). Connections existed between student purpose orientation collected through quantitative surveying and student stories of purpose pathways collected through qualitative interviewing. The findings of the mixed methods study provide insight into future research and higher education policy and practice.

Keywords: purpose, ecology, graduating students, mixed methods
Table of Contents

List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................ viii
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ ix

Chapter 1 .............................................................................................................................................. 1
  Purpose of Study ................................................................................................................................. 3
  Rationale for Study ............................................................................................................................ 5
  Problem Statement ............................................................................................................................ 8
  Research Questions .......................................................................................................................... 9
  Rationale for Method ......................................................................................................................... 10
  Significance of Study ....................................................................................................................... 12
  Limitations ......................................................................................................................................... 13
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................................ 14

Chapter 2 .............................................................................................................................................. 15
  Purpose as a Construct ....................................................................................................................... 15
  Historical Context of Purpose .......................................................................................................... 16
  Defining Purpose ............................................................................................................................. 18
    Purpose in the Present Study .......................................................................................................... 18
    Defining Purpose Ecologically ..................................................................................................... 19
    Purpose Orientations within the Present Study ............................................................................ 20
    Neoliberalism and Purpose ........................................................................................................... 21
    Defining Purpose Summary .......................................................................................................... 22
  Theoretical Framework ..................................................................................................................... 23
    Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) Vectors of Student Development ............................................. 23
    Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) Bioecological Model .......................................................... 27
Depicting the Theoretical Framework ................................................................. 30

Literature Review ................................................................................................. 32

Person: The Intersection of Purpose, Personality, and Human Functioning ........ 33

Process: Social Support and the Development of Purpose ................................. 39

Context: Diversity of Experiences Fostering Types of Purpose ...................... 43

Time: Purpose Development Over Time ............................................................ 47

Literature Review Summary .................................................................................. 52

Chapter Summary ................................................................................................. 53

Chapter 3 ................................................................................................................ 54

Philosophical Foundations .................................................................................... 55

Participants ............................................................................................................ 55

Participants in Quantitative Data Collection ....................................................... 56

Participants in Qualitative Data Collection ......................................................... 56

Description of the Setting ..................................................................................... 57

Instrumentation ...................................................................................................... 58

Quantitative Measures .......................................................................................... 58

Qualitative Measures ............................................................................................. 60

Threats to Validity .................................................................................................. 61

Threats to Reliability .............................................................................................. 63

Ethical Concerns ..................................................................................................... 63

Procedures ............................................................................................................... 64

Analysis and Coding Procedures ......................................................................... 65

Quantitative Analysis ............................................................................................. 65

Qualitative Analysis ............................................................................................... 66
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Bias</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Results</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Sample</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Results Summary</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Results</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Sample</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 5</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Results Summary</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Methods Results</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Methods Results Summary</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Study</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Theoretical Framework and Discussion</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Theoretical Framework and Discussion Summary</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Implications of Methodology</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Implications of Analysis</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Implications of Generalizability</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Recommendations</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Recommendations</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations Summary</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1. Demographics of Study Sample .................................................................73
Table 2. Purpose Orientation Across Sample ..........................................................74
Table 3. Degree of Purpose Differences Across Demographics (Gender, Race, and Parental Education) ........................................................................75
Table 4. Degree of Purpose Differences Across Demographics (Age) ....................76
Table 5. Purpose Orientations Across Demographics (Gender, Race, and Parental Education) ........................................................................77
Table 6. Purpose Orientations Across Demographics (Age) ....................................78
Table 7. Qualitative Participant Demographics .........................................................80
Table 8. Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Results ...............................112
List of Figures

Figure 1. Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design ......................................................... 10

Figure 2. Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) Vectors of Development ........................................ 26

Figure 3. Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) Person-Process-Context-Time Model ............ 28

Figure 4. Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................ 31

Figure 5. Example of Joint Display Representing Triangulated Results ................................. 62

Figure 6. Quantitative Research Questions and Associated Statistical Tests .......................... 66
Chapter 1

“What is my purpose?” “Why am I here?” “Is there meaning in life?” Colloquially, when these monumental life questions are raised, the construct of purpose is at the core of the discussion. As a theoretical concept, sense of purpose has deep roots in religion, philosophy, psychology, and education. Damon (2014), the leading researcher in the field of purpose development, acutely asserted, “Finding purpose in life is a pursuit that links people of all historical epochs, sociocultural backgrounds, economic and circumstances, and geographical settings. It is a timeless, universal feature of human existence” (p. vii). In addition to its universality within the human experience and its consistency as a concept mused upon by scholars and laypeople, the literature suggests that there exist significant relationships among sense of purpose, identity development, and overall well-being among adolescents, college students, and adults (Bronk, 2012; Hill et al., 2010, 2014). Additionally, prior research indicates that individuals with a strong sense of purpose live longer, happier, and healthier lives (Jackson & Erving, 2020; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Steger et al., 2009; Windsor et al., 2015), while those with a weaker sense of purpose demonstrate higher levels of depression, addiction, and other destructive behaviors (Damon et al., 2003; Lund et al., 2019). Although the literature presents a convincing case that purpose is fundamental to optimal human development, questions remain regarding how, why, and when purpose develops, particularly among graduating college students.

Arnett (2000) coined the term “emerging adults” to capture the tension experienced by traditional-aged college students (18-25 years) who exist in a liminal state between late adolescence and early adulthood. Emerging adulthood is primarily synonymous with identity exploration, instability, self-focus, revision of priorities, and endless possibilities (Arnett, 2000).
According to Damon (2008), the distinction between young people who are motivated and thriving and those who are directionless and drifting is a “wholehearted dedication to an activity or interest that stems from a serious purpose, a purpose that can give meaning and direction to life” (p. 7). College student development literature confirms the central role of purpose development during college, indicating that purpose guides motivations and goals, contributing to lifelong learning, college persistence, career success, and personal development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2009; Patton et al., 2016). Further, Astin (2004), founding director of the Higher Education Research Institute, asserted that the cultivation of purpose should be “one of the central purposes of higher education,” providing additional insight into the critical importance of its study (p. 34).

Despite the extensive evidence that purpose development is a fundamental aspect of the emerging adult and college student experience, research suggests that purpose is not often taught (or discussed) in family or educational settings (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2014; Pfund et al., 2020). In drawing attention to the current disconnect between parenting and cultivation of purpose, Damon (2008) asked, “How can we expect that young people will find meaning in what they are doing if we so rarely draw attention to the personal meaning and purpose of what we work at in our daily lives?” (p. xvi). Further, in discussing the current lack of attention paid toward the development of self-authorship and purpose in higher education, Baxter Magolda (2004) asserted, “Inviting the self into the educational process requires moving away from the traditional forms of teaching and control-oriented forms of organizing student life that prevail on many college campuses” (p. xxii). In both cases, Damon (2008) and Baxter Magolda (2004) recognized the fundamental role of purpose in the lives of young people and called for seismic cultural shifts in focus toward purpose development as a core learning outcome in families and
higher education institutions. The current study aimed to explore this call and provide recommendations for purpose-driven decision-making in these spaces by investigating the ecological development of purpose during a specific time – the months before college graduation.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study was to understand better the ecological factors that contribute to graduating college student development of purpose at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Specifically, I intended to identify the mechanisms through which familial and educational contexts cultivate purpose using Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of college student development as a theoretical framework. An ecological approach to this study is deliberate. While the literature suggests that college exists as a time for purpose commitment and refinement, much of this research has focused on the non-cognitive outcomes (e.g., well-being, happiness, and longevity) associated with student conceptualization of purpose using quantitative methods and a variety of instruments and variables (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Mariano, 2014; Pfund et al., 2020). Prior studies, while compelling, fail to provide comprehensive insight into the ecological factors that inform and shape a student’s sense of purpose while in college (Kitchen et al., 2019). Using the PPCT model as a framework, the study uniquely explored the complex ecological contexts influencing students’ understanding of their purpose, with particular attention paid to collegiate experiences and familial influences contributing to purpose development.

Investigating purpose among college students was an intentional decision. In its ideal form, higher education presents an optimal opportunity for emerging adults to explore who they
are, how they relate to others (including their families), and whom they hope to be (Arnett, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 2008). Through rigorous academic coursework, thoughtful co-curricular engagement, and meaningful connections with diverse peers, college presents traditional-aged students with endless experiences that may refine and develop their sense of purpose apart from their familiar familial units (Patton et al., 2016). Chickering and Reisser (1993) depict this developmental trajectory in terms of their seven vectors of college student development, where “college students live out recurring themes: gaining competence, and self-awareness, learning control and flexibility, balancing intimacy and freedom, finding one’s voice or vocation, refining beliefs, and making commitments” (p. 35). Further, in discussing the importance of college as a context supporting purpose development, Baxter Magolda and King (2007) asserted, “College experiences usually challenge [external formulas] by inviting learners to develop their own purposes and meaning” (p. 493). Additionally, Liang et al. (2018) suggested, “Parents can influence what purposes youth pursue and whether youth can attain them” (p. 802). In requesting that students reflect on their development of purpose in the context of their time spent in college and within their families, there exists an opportunity to explore the specific collegiate and familial experiences that promote or perhaps obstruct purpose development.

Finally, in addition to gaining insight into ecological factors influencing purpose development, the study aims to identify gaps and opportunities for more intentional purpose development within collegial and familial contexts, including curricular, co-curricular, and mentorship opportunities. Pfund et al. (2020) asserted, “Given that the university experience is a particularly important period for purpose development, faculty and administrators are in a unique position to support students in a purposeful pursuit that may have long-term implications for their well-being” (p. 104). The ecological exploration of the development of purpose among
college students within the present study is a critical first step in empowering higher education leaders to take on this vital work and develop a higher education curriculum that supports student cultivation of purpose as an essential educational outcome.

**Rationale for Study**

Prior research suggests that the college environment and associated collegiate experiences can support student development and commitment to a sense of purpose (Flowers, 2002; Lund et al., 2019; Pfund et al., 2020). However, researchers have primarily taken a narrow approach to study purpose, often failing to investigate the complex ecologies that influence a student’s sense of purpose (Kitchen et al., 2019). Overall, much of the prior literature focuses on purpose without considering the effects of ecological factors critical to development, regularly concluding with calls for future investigations to explore contextual influences and cultural implications (Hill et al., 2014; Sumner, 2017; Wang et al., 2020). Person-environment or ecological models of student development, like the PPCT model, uniquely consider the complex contexts influencing student development, impacting how they understand themselves, relate to others, and engage in the world (Long, 2012). These approaches differ from cognitive-structural and psycho-social theories that are often sequential, depicting inevitable steps students should take as they build upon past experiences and proceed toward development and enlightenment (Long, 2012). The present study leverages an ecological or contextual approach that aligns with Kitchen et al.’s (2019) depiction such that it “provides a more holistic understanding of students and recognizes that many spheres of influence shape their college experiences, development and outcomes” (p. 489). The ecological frame of reference used in the current study acknowledges the influence of these contextual factors and seeks to understand how they impact student development of purpose.
In studying the development of purpose among graduating college students with different purpose orientations, there is also an opportunity to understand better how college supports (or obstructs) a student’s understanding of their “why.” Damon (2014) asserted, “The most pressing problem in education today is a shortfall in student motivation…Working hard is not the problem - rather the problem is working without knowing why, working without a clear purpose” (p. viii). The current study addresses Damon’s (2014) notion by investigating how a public university in the Mid-Atlantic currently supports student development of purpose among graduating college students, who are the focus of the study for several reasons. First, very little research addresses ecological factors (particularly family influence) impacting graduating students’ development and understanding of purpose (Flowers, 2002; Kenny, 1990). Second, graduating students exist in a liminal state between their undergraduate education and their imminent futures; thus, they are uniquely positioned to reflect on their time in college, their next steps, and their ecological influences. Third, graduating students have experienced a prolonged time in college, so I leveraged their experience to ask questions about how the context of college has shaped their understanding of their purpose. Finally, in alignment with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of development, graduating college students have likely matured since starting their college journeys, demonstrating greater competence, management of emotions, and more autonomy from parents and families, which allows them to reflect differently on their experiences compared to their younger selves. In capturing the stories and experiences of graduating students, results provide insight into specific opportunities for higher education institutions to promote purpose development through curricular, co-curricular, and employment opportunities.
Inquiry into purpose development at the higher education level is critical given the opportunities colleges provide students to discover who they are, who they hope to be, and what they hope to accomplish (Baxter Magolda, 2004). However, these ideal outcomes may not be the reality for all students. Baxter Magolda and King (2007) asserted, “The potential for promoting self-authorship in college far exceeds the degree to which it has been prevalent among college students” (p. 493). The current study seeks to provide recommendations for future practice by exploring curricular and co-curricular pathways promoting and purpose development. Prior research draws attention to several areas of college campuses that could (or should) cultivate student refinement and commitment to purpose. Notably and perhaps most obviously, Mariano (2014) highlighted the importance of conversations about purpose alignment in career counseling, focusing on aligning career goals with sense of purpose. Further, Sharma et al. (2017) discussed the value of discussions about purpose in academic advising and civic engagement centers, where student cultivation of purpose may be a learning outcome or driving force in course enrollment or communities served. Finally, Baxter Magolda (2004) highlighted academic affairs, on-campus employment, and student affairs as spaces where a focus on purpose and self-authorship can promote identity development and support mature relationships with others and the world. While social science researchers conclude that these settings may provide purpose development opportunities within higher education, the study provides insight into whether these spaces in their current forms support the development of purpose while also exploring current gaps in conversation and curricula.

In addition to studying the influence of higher education in purpose development, the study explores the context of family as a setting that influences a sense of purpose. In warning about the implications of purposelessness among children and youth, Damon (2008) specifically
articulated the role parents and families play in supporting young people in their path to purpose. However, prior research suggests no clear correlation between parent and family engagement and positive developmental outcomes. For instance, Blatter et al.’s (2013) findings indicate that negative parent-child relationships may lead to higher levels of searching for purpose, given that lack of alignment of values may prompt personal searching for purpose. Additionally, Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) discussed the implications of negative parent-child relationships, including diminished development and decreased well-being. Given the profound impact that families have on children (positively and negatively), it is critically important to explore the role of familial influence on purpose development. In specifically requesting graduating college students to reflect upon the impact of their families, there is an opportunity to understand how students internalize or perhaps reject messages from their families and how these messages inform sense of purpose.

**Problem Statement**

The present study was guided by the concern that there exists a lack of emphasis on purpose development within educational and familial settings (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016; Damon, 2008). In discussing this problem, Baxter Magolda and King (2007) suggest that parents, mentors, and educators advising students fail to “move beyond a description of what took place to why they interpreted it the way they did” (p. 504). As a result of this lack of focus on the “why,” Damon (2008) suggested, “Today’s youth don’t believe that they can make a difference, and they haven’t thought much about the kind of difference they would like to make if they could” (p. 174). Consequently, adolescents and emerging adults are missing out on opportunities to critically connect and analyze their “goals, values, purposeful work, interconnectedness in society, and pro-social functions of various occupations” (Sharma et al., 2017, p.113). This
concern is shared by those who apply a critical lens to higher education. For instance, scholars who take up a neoliberal critique suggest that university administrators, faculty, staff, students, and their families have become entrenched in return-on-investment (ROI) logic, valuing opportunities for students to earn higher salaries upon graduation over opportunities to uncover potential and identify purpose (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014; Newfield, 2016). To address this primary concern, the present study explored the ecological pathways through which students are currently developing purpose by asking questions grounded in the “why” and “how” to identify opportunities for more intentional purpose development within the contexts of higher education and the family.

**Research Questions**

This mixed methods study aims to understand better the ecological factors that contribute to graduating student development of purpose, using Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) PPCT model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of college student development as a framework. The study focused explicitly on collegiate and familial contexts and how ecological factors influence purpose cultivation. As such, the following six questions guided the study:

1. What purpose orientations are represented among graduating participants in a college of Liberal Arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic?
2. How does degree of purpose differ across demographic markers?
3. Among participants with some degree of purpose, how does purpose orientation differ across demographic markers?
4. How do graduating college participants make meaning of their pathways to purpose?
5. How do the ecological factors of family influence and collegiate experiences inform student understanding of purpose?
In what ways do the interview data from graduating participants related to ecological pathways to purpose provide greater context for the quantitative results related to sense of purpose and purpose orientation?

**Rationale for Method**

This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design with the case selection variant (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), which involves collecting quantitative data first, and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data from purposefully selected participants (Figure 1). The flowchart in Figure 1 depicts a typical explanatory sequential mixed methods design with a case selection variant (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

**Figure 1**

*Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design*

```
Quantitative Data Collection  →  Quantitative Data Analysis  →  Purposeful Selection of Interview Participants
                                    ↓                      
Qualitative Data Collection  →  Qualitative Data Analysis  →  Integration and Convergence of Qualitative and Quantitative Results
```

The present inquiry began with a brief quantitative survey to select interview participants. The initial quantitative phase of the study leveraged measures from Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Youth Purpose Survey*, which assess the presence of purpose and purpose orientation. The second qualitative phase is a follow-up to the quantitative phase to help explain the pathways and context contributing to student conceptualization of purpose. In this exploratory follow-up, I investigated the ecological context influencing a students’ understanding of their purpose, with
particular attention paid to college experiences and familial influence through eight semi-structured, individual interviews. Conducting semi-structured interviews after quantitative surveying helped explain quantitative results using student narratives, particularly regarding how students make meaning of their purpose. After collecting qualitative data, I inductively and deductively coded transcripts to reveal themes across participants. Finally, qualitative and quantitative results were triangulated to determine areas of agreement and disagreement between quantitative and qualitative results.

A mixed methods design for this study is intentional as it fills a gap in the literature and provides an opportunity to apply a new methodological lens to understanding student purpose and its ecological underpinnings. Explicitly, this student-centered study captured narratives to offer insight into the factors that influence student development of purpose in college. According to Ivankova and colleagues (2006):

The rationale for mixing both kinds of data within one study is grounded in the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation. When used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each. (p. 3)

Likewise, the current study leveraged a mixed methods design to fully capture the experience of graduating college students at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic. Except for three recent mixed methods studies related to purpose development (Bronk et al., 2018; 2020; Linver et al., 2018), this method of investigation is currently underutilized in the field. This disparity in the use of mixed methods inquiry and current gaps related to identifying mechanisms promoting student sense of purpose informs the decision to use an explanatory sequential mixed methods
design. Ultimately, there is a need to obtain quantitative results related to purpose development and explain results in more detail using qualitative approaches.

**Significance of Study**

The contexts of higher education and the family unit have the potential to provide premier opportunities for students to cultivate and refine their sense of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2008; Kitchen et al., 2016; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020; Pfund et al., 2020). However, the research suggests that both colleges and families may be failing in this respect (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Damon, 2008; Mariano, 2014). Thus, the present study’s exploration into the role of higher education and families in cultivating student purpose is a valuable and essential endeavor. In discussing the lack of priority educational institutions place on purpose development, Damon (2008) asserted, “when it comes to guiding students toward paths they will find rewarding and meaningful, our schools fall short” (p. xv). Further, in discussing the disconnect between parenting for purpose development, Blattner et al. (2013) concluded, “Adolescents may feel they can trust their parents but still not feel close or connected enough to them to enlist their active support in their search for purpose” (p. 846). While Blattner et al. (2013) depict a family structure where students trust parental figures, first-generation college students may not rely on their parents and instead depend on mentors, academic advisors, or other trusted individuals within their college context to support their development (Petty, 2014). Overall, these complex environments within which students inhabit and engage underscore the purpose of this study, the rationale for its undertaking, the guiding problems guiding the inquiry, and the significance of potential results.

The present study uses a distinctive mixed methods approach to uncover the ecological underpinnings of purpose development among graduating students, focusing on collegiate and
familial contexts within the framework of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of identity development. Further, the study advances prior research by leveraging quantitative data to purposefully select interviewees and then prioritizing qualitative data collection using the PPCT model’s ecological components as a lens. Investigating ecological pathways to purpose among graduating college students provides greater insight into how the contexts of higher education and family support or potentially obstruct purpose development. In uniquely centering the stories of graduating college students, who have likely had time and space to reflect on their college and family experiences, the study presents the opportunity for graduating students to reflect on how their contexts contribute to their sense of purpose or not. Ultimately, insights gleaned provide opportunities for higher education institutions to analyze their curriculum to leverage specific learning opportunities to support college student development of purpose across diverse demographic groups and family structures.

Limitations

While college exists as a time when students may refine and commit to a singular purpose, prior research suggests that the years following college graduation are also fundamental for developing a self-authored voice (Baxter Magolda, 2004). In her seminal longitudinal study of college students, Baxter Magolda (2004) found that upon leaving college, many students had made limited progress towards self-authorship or the cultivation of an internal self-definition. Thus, a limitation of the current study is that graduating students may not have fully developed senses of purpose at the time of the investigation. Personally, I left college with a clue that my purpose was grounded in helping college students (who looked like myself and my classmates at my elite, predominantly White, liberal arts institution) navigate the tumultuous years of college. However, it was not until I enrolled in a social justice education graduate program that I
understood how my privileged identities (White, cis, heterosexual, continuing generation, middle class) buffered the challenges I faced within my college context. Thus, this experience forever shifted my purpose.

My purpose remains grounded in supporting college students in my late twenties, but it is now also informed by a deep understanding of my privilege. I am driven by a desire to use my privilege to support and uplift underprivileged populations of students while also advocating against marginalizing policies, practices, and decision-making in the collegiate context. My experiences align with Baxter Magolda’s (2004) findings and indicate that purpose development (or refinement) may occur after college enrollment for the traditional-aged student. However, Baxter Magolda (2004) notably concludes her study with calls for higher education to take a more active role in self-authorship development such that students may leave college with a better sense of who they are, how they relate to others, and how they will impact the world. The present study answers this call by asking graduating college students to reflect upon the collegiate and familial contexts that prompted purpose development to highlight high-impact practices while also identifying current gaps.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced sense of purpose as a fundamental aspect of optimal human development and articulated the importance of investigating the construct using an ecological lens. Next, I described the current study’s purpose, rationale, and problem statements. I also detailed the six guiding research questions and provided an overview and justification of the study’s mixed methods design. Finally, I defined the significance of the study and addressed limitations connected to my positionality and my experience of purpose refinement post-college.
Chapter 2

In this chapter, I situate the present study within theory and prior literature across three sections. First, I discuss the construct of purpose, highlighting historical context and definitional tensions to operationalize the term in the current study. The second section describes the theoretical framework that guides the present study. Specifically, I describe the use of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) developmental vector model and Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model and explain the integration of the theories through a graphic depiction. In the third section, I review the prior literature. Although it is more traditional to lead first with the literature review and then proceed to the theoretical framework, I reversed this ordering because I organized articles using the PPCT model’s person, process, context, and time components. In doing so, I bring attention to the narrow focus of prior research, which only emphasized one or two of the model’s components. The current mixed methods study fills this gap by holistically addressing all components of the PPCT model. Throughout this section, bolded and italicized words and phrases represent key terms.

Purpose as a Construct

The fundamental tension in research related to sense of purpose lies in defining the term *purpose*. Colloquially, the word purpose most often elicits vague musings about self-oriented life goals realized through various venues (Moran, 2014). However, social science researchers studying sense of purpose in education, psychology, and philosophy delineate specific descriptors to be met for an individual to be deemed *purposeful*. The definitional component discussed most often is whether a true sense of purpose requires what Damon et al. (2003) refer to as a Beyond-the-Self (BTS) orientation or a purpose grounded in a desire to impact others outside of the self. This descriptor exists even though young people rarely highlight BTS
purposes when asked to reflect on their life’s meaning (Linver et al., 2018). Within the current study, I operate from the framework that one’s purpose can be either self-oriented or BTS-oriented, aligning with the definition of purpose proposed by McKnight and Kashdan (2009). In the following sections, I situate this definitional tension within the literature and historical context, discuss the relevance and importance of investigating non-BTS or self-oriented purpose, and provide insight into how I navigate this tension within the current study.

**Historical Context of Purpose**

While sense of purpose has existed as a human concern within the realms of religion and philosophy since their inception, the origin of sense of purpose as a research construct comes from the writings of psychologist Viktor Frankl (1959). As a Holocaust survivor, Frankl drew from his experience in a concentration camp in World War II and credited his survival to his ability to maintain a lasting and personally meaningful sense of purpose. Within the context of human subject research, Frankl was the first individual to assert that having a sense of purpose is of fundamental importance to the human experience and critical to human motivation, behavior, and mental health (Bronk, 2014). Frankl’s (1959) belief in the power of purpose prompted the development of Logotherapy (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), a therapeutic approach to counseling that assumes that all humans can identify a meaningful purpose. Further, practitioners of Logotherapy hold that identifying purpose will help individuals overcome depression, apathy, and other negative mental states (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Contemporary purpose research largely stems from positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), representing a shift from focusing on the adverse outcomes associated with purposelessness to the positive results of living a purposeful life. Overall, positive psychology laid the groundwork for how purpose is studied today, given the field’s conclusion that having purpose in life is
critically important to individual well-being, mental health, and optimal human development (Steger et al., 2009; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

While definitional tension exists related to the construct of purpose, three relatively irrefutable elements appear in most definitions of purpose—commitment, goal-directedness, and personal meaningfulness. Researchers may choose to focus on a specific aspect of this definition, but these three elements remain relatively consistent in historical and contemporary contexts (Bronk, 2014; Bronk & Finch, 2010; Mariano, 2014; Moran, 2014;). First, commitment relates to the necessity of a purpose to be grounded in an individual’s obligation to a sense of self, personal values, and beliefs. In a model that integrates purpose into a larger “Meaning in Life” framework, Steger et al. (2009) suggested that purposes are “highly motivating, long-term goals about which people are passionate and highly committed (p. 679). Commitment is also required for the second component of the construct – goal-directedness. According to Ryff and Singer’s (2008) well-being scale, one who demonstrates a purpose in life has “goals in life and a sense of directedness” as well as “aims and objectives for living” (p. 25). The goal-directedness component emphasizes the role of purpose as a motivating factor in behavioral change. Those compelled by a purpose change their behavior, set goals, and direct efforts to goals aligned with the purpose (Moran, 2014). Third, one’s purpose must exhibit personal meaningfulness and be central to an individual’s sense of self. Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) defined purpose as “the ontological significance of life from the point of the experiencing individual” (p. 201). Overall, the three components of commitment, goal-directedness, and personal meaningfulness exist as an understood baseline for conceptualizing purpose in the literature.
**Defining Purpose**

Across the field of purpose development literature, Damon et al.’s (2003) definition of purpose has become the most used in research with adolescents and emerging adults. Damon et al. (2003) define purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self” (p. 121). This definition includes three critical dimensions. First, the definition suggests that purpose exists as a specific type of self-motivated goal that is stable and enduring, involving small and large actions over time. Second, the definition implies that one must be actively engaged to achieve their defined purpose. Finally, and most notably within the current study’s context, the definition incorporates a central desire to act BTS to pursue a goal more significant than the individual. Examples of a BTS orientation include “doing something for one’s family, in service of one’s God, or on behalf of one’s community or one’s country” (Bronk, 2014, p. 6). In Damon et al.’s (2003) definition, it is fundamental for a purposeful individual to derive purpose from BTS goals. Researchers attempting to connect or find a correlation between sense of purpose and quantitative outcomes related to health and wellness widely accept Damon et al.’s (2003) definition (e.g., Bronk, 2014). However, the tension lies in the definition’s fundamental exclusion of individuals whose purposes are inherently self-serving, such as pursuing happiness, achieving career success, or earning money.

**Purpose in the Present Study**

In the current study, I define purpose using McKnight and Kashdan’s (2009) definition of purpose as a “central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (p. 242). This definition includes the irrefutable concepts of commitment, goal-directedness, and personal meaningfulness, as McKnight and
Kashdan (2009) viewed purpose as a symbolic compass for life that provides direction for allocating finite resources. Most notably, this definition eliminates Damon et al.’s (2003) BTS criterion connected to purpose content. Eliminating this provision allows for an investigation of purpose at the individual level and gives people the opportunity to explain the context of their purpose. Burrow et al. (2021) warned about limiting purposefulness to those with BTS aims. They suggested, “Comparing a single type of purpose to all others bundled together does not afford the nuance and complexity needed to adjudicate differences in aspirational content, and the myriad ways participants articulate them, actually matter” (Burrow et al., 2021, p. 102). This quotation reflects Burrow et al.’s (2021) delineation of purpose content and prioritization of individualized context over BTS appraisals. The current study answers Burrow et al.’s (2021) calls to contextualize purpose by focusing on individuals’ pathways to purpose and placing less emphasis on the designation of purpose as BTS or not.

**Defining Purpose Ecologically**

The present study intended to understand the ecological underpinnings of sense of purpose, which impacts definitional decision making. Within the current study, the term *ecological* refers to development as defined and conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) within their bioecological theory and Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model. According to Xia et al. (2020), bioecological theory “fits within the contextualist paradigm in which factors do not have independent effects but act synergistically” (p. 10). In contrast to ecological approaches, research related to sense of purpose within the last decade has focused on the non-cognitive outcomes associated with student conceptualization of purpose using quantitative methods and a cadre of instruments and variables (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Malin et al., 2013; Pfund et al., 2020). In these cases, it was fundamental that sense of purpose
aligned with altruism and a desire to impact the world beyond the self. Likewise, Bronk (2014) asserts, “The beyond-the-self conception of purpose is particularly useful from a developmental perspective as it is typically operationalized as a prosocial or noble commitment to an aim beyond the individual” (p. 7). Thus, using a BTS criterion supported correlational research attempting to connect a BTS purpose with positive health outcomes.

In contrast, Burrow et al. (2021) called for an ecological approach to purpose investigation that centers on individual experiences. They argued that “relegating a person’s aspirations to be purposeful solely based on external appraisals, observers may underestimate the extent to which any individual perceives their own aims as important – and as feasible or congruent within their own proximal systems of influence” (Burrow et al., 2021, p. 108). This warning guided my decision to reject the BTS criterion and focus on the context of one’s defined purpose, whether it is BTS in nature. This decision is not unprecedented, as Blattner et al. (2013) also intentionally excluded the criterion given the subjectivity required to deem a purpose BTS or not. In dismissing the BTS criterion and using a less limiting definition of purpose, I hoped to allow students to explain how they perceive their purpose and highlight the experiences that have contributed to its cultivation.

**Purpose Orientations within the Present Study**

Requiring a purpose grounded in BTS aims also contradicts my study goals, as I am specifically interested in comparing individuals with self-oriented and other-oriented purposes. I intended to gain a richer understanding of purpose at the individual level through guided interviews by investigating the bioecological factors (process, person, context, and time) that may prompt students to identify a specific purpose. In doing so, I am committed to centering the student experience and engaging in an individualized study of purpose. Hill et al. (2010)
articulated, “Researchers must take a more nuanced approach toward investigations of purpose, as measures of felt purpose provide only one facet of the construct” (p. 179). The current explanatory sequential mixed method study presents the opportunity to add depth and reveal nuance, given that I interviewed students who exhibit both self-oriented and other-oriented purposes. Doing so allowed me to understand the bioecological factors contributing to a personal sense of purpose, comparing those with different purpose orientations. Damon (2008) suggested that purpose is “the final answer to the question of why. Why are you doing this? Why does it matter to you? Why is it important?” (p. 22). In asking participants about their “why” within the qualitative phase of the current study, participants may indicate that their purpose is grounded in the pursuit of happiness, finding career success, or mere survival. While Damon et al. (2003) would not delineate these aims as purposeful using their definitional dimensions, I categorize these purposes as self-oriented within the context of this study. They have no less weight than utterances grounded in BTS purposes, as the notion that other-oriented aims are purposeful and self-oriented aims are non-purposeful is inconsequential in the context of the study. In other words, a BTS sense of purpose and a self-oriented sense of purpose exists as two different purpose orientations in the present investigation. Overall, I am interested in comparing the bioecological underpinnings that prompt a self-oriented purpose or other-oriented purpose, rather than determining whether a person is purposeful or not.

**Neoliberalism and Purpose**

As it relates to sense of purpose, Becker et al. (2021) asserted, “neoliberalism can be problematic because the individualism at its core denies people access to group life and its curative potential” (p. 3). Given the societal pressures towards individualism, it would be irresponsible for me as a researcher to discount the narratives of students who identify their
purpose as self-oriented or to assume that they are not purposeful because they have succumbed to neoliberal societal norms. Becker et al. (2021) suggested that individualism prevents individuals from finding value in the collective, so it is necessary to understand students’ experiences who ascribe to these neoliberal societal and cultural pressures and understand their purpose as connected self-oriented goals. Limiting purpose to other-oriented individuals silences experiences of self-oriented individuals, who lack the privilege to focus on anything beyond survival. Maslow’s (1954) Hierarchy of Needs highlights the necessity of fulfilling physiological needs, including food, water, shelter, before moving toward flourishing and self-actualization. In applying Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy to higher education, Petty (2014) explored the experiences of first-year, first-generation students and called upon universities to attune first to student survival needs related to food, financial, and home insecurity before attempting to fill gaps in academic and social contexts. First-generation students, who are more likely to come from low-income families (Engle & Tinto, 2008), may indicate self-oriented or non-BTS purposes given their personal and familial circumstances. To capture diversity of experience within the current study, it is necessary to center narratives of students who indicate purposes grounded in self-orientation and BTS orientation by exploring contributing bioecological factors.

**Defining Purpose Summary**

The present study captured the stories of students who indicate BTS and non-BTS purposes, which aligns with Hill et al.’s (2014) calls for research that “allows participants to more fully describe their development of purpose, to understand better what participants mean when they report following each of the pathways” (p. 233). While the sense of purpose literature leans towards defining purpose as exclusively grounded in beyond-the-self aims, the nature of the current study presents an opportunity to alter presumed norms and eliminate the BTS
criterion in determining purpose. The study’s results provide insight into the factors that prompt self-oriented purposes among students and provide direction for how educators can support students in the neoliberal age. Burrow et al. (2021) asserted, “considering how [purpose] develops in concert with contextual demands is not only important but necessary to fully understand why young people make the decisions they do” (p. 109). Consequently, the theoretical framework guiding the study utilizes a uniquely contextual approach.

**Theoretical Framework**

The current study aims to understand the contextual factors contributing to graduating college student purpose, leveraging Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector development theory and Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) bioecological model to guide data collection and analyze results. The following sections provide an overview of both theories and situate calls to investigate ecological factors within the literature on purpose. I also discuss the iteration of the bioecological model that guided my work and its implementation within the current study. Finally, I present and describe a graphic that depicts my theoretical framework and the integration of the two guiding theories.

**Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) Vectors of Student Development**

Agreement exists among student development researchers that college-going presents an opportunity for cultivating purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erickson, 1968; Kolberg, 1969; Perry, 1970). However, there is tension regarding how and when students cultivate purpose between lifespan development theorists (e.g., Erikson, 1968) and person-environment theorists (e.g., Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Researchers leveraging lifespan development theories define student development along a linear trajectory. For instance, Erickson’s (1968) identity development theory conceived purpose development as a facet of a sequential milestone to be
undertaken and ultimately achieved, rather than a lifelong process of exploration informed by context. Erikson (1968) conceptualized development in terms of the epigenetic principle with student development unfolding in distinct and predetermined stages. While many researchers ground their studies in Erickson’s (1968) stage theory of development (e.g., Bronk 2011, Hill et al., 2010, Liang et al., 2017), the current study operates from a developmental framework leveraging Chickering and Reisser’s (1994) identity development theory. I specifically selected this foundational theory given its recognition that purpose development occurs in concert with other developmental milestones rather than within the context of a specific and inevitable developmental step.

Representing a shift from lifespan development theories, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors of development are non-sequential, thus explicitly acknowledging the diversity of student experiences. The seven vectors depicted in Figure 2 include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering and Reisser (1993) described their seven vectors as “major highways for journeying towards individuation,” highlighting the non-sequential and contextual nature of the model (p. 35). Additionally, the model depicts the later years in college as instrumental in purpose and integrity development, the sixth and seventh vectors, respectively. Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model explicitly suggests that college seniors will report higher levels of vocational purpose and integrity development than first-year students given the developmental advances college students make in the other vectors of the model, including cultivation of mature relationships, movement towards autonomy, and identity establishment. In studies grounded in gaining insight into Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector model, Flowers (2002) and Hill et al.
(2010) confirmed these theoretical assumptions. Flowers (2002) found that college seniors self-reported significantly higher levels of purpose when compared to first-year students, and Hill et al. (2010) found a positive correlation between sense of purpose and perceived personal development in college.

Figure 2 denotes the way in which the current study understands the “developing purpose” vector as a unique developmental milestone requiring investigation but inherently intertwined and informed by the other vectors of the model. Chickering and Reisser (1993) specifically defined their sixth vector of developing purpose as “an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles.” (p. 209). According to Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model, development of purpose requires the intentional integration of the other vectors in the model and the coordination of beliefs, values, identity, and relationships. As such, while the sixth vector of Chickering and Reisser’s model is of primary importance to the current study, the use of the term “sense of purpose” in the larger theoretical framework of the study also encompasses the other vectors of the model.
Note. The “Developing Purpose” vector is pulled out of the larger model because the vector is critical in the current study. However, within the study’s context, the “Developing Purpose” vector is understood as inextricably connected to and informed by the other six vectors of the model.

In addition to the appropriateness of the model in analyzing the experience of graduating college students, I selected Chickering and Resiser’s (1993) model to situate the study within the college student development framework given the model’s recognition of developmental differences and the value of contextual factors. Chickering and Resiser’s (1993) identity development theory explicitly recognizes the powerful influence of environmental factors on student development, resulting in students traversing through the vectors at different rates and orders (Evans et al., 2010). Unlike Erikson’s (1968) model that requires students to move through developmental stages in the same linear fashion, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model
holds that development is the result of individual life experiences, recognizing the diversity of students and their ecologies (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005). The present study advances this work by investigating sense of purpose among college seniors using a contextual lens informed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) bioecological model.

**Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) Bioecological Model**

Ecological factors or an individual’s context have a demonstrated impact on purpose development, but questions remain related to the types of contexts that yield unique conceptualizations of purpose (Hill et al., 2014; Mariano, 2014). In their qualitative study of adolescents in early and late adolescence, Malin et al. (2014) found that ecological factors, including external supports, impact purpose development. In their discussion of results, Malin et al. (2014) asserted, “Purpose, like other indicators of thriving and positive development, manifests in the relationship between an individual and his or her environment because it is an aspiration to have a meaningful existence in the world” (p. 186). Similarly, Hill et al. (2014) quantitatively found individual differences in purpose orientation due to personality and well-being among 179 undergraduates at a large Canadian university. Thus, they called for future qualitative research to prioritize student stories and experiences that influence purpose (Hill et al., 2014). Overall, the literature suggests that additional research is required to provide greater insight into how ecological factors, including environmental systems and relationships, impact purpose development. The current study fills this gap by applying Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) bioecological model to determine pathways of purpose development.

The most current iteration of Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) bioecological model, which I leveraged as the theoretical framework for the present study, has evolved significantly since its inception in the 1970s. Rosa and Tudge (2013) suggest that the theory has shifted from
an ecological model to a *bioecological model* over three distinct phases in their description of this evolution. The delineation of the phases of the model over time and my explicit use of the third and final phase are intentional, as the improper application of the bioecological model is common (Tudge et al., 2009; 2016; Xia et al., 2020). In phase one, Bronfenbrenner (1976) coined the term “ecology of human development” to depict the role of one’s embedded environment in their development. At this time, Bronfenbrenner (1976) also introduced microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems to conceptualize human ecologies. In phase two, Bronfenbrenner (1988) began to assert the value of individual characteristics and introduced the factor of time and the notion that human development is a process of continual change. In the third and final phase, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) replaced the term “ecological” with “bioecological” and introduced the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model. The PPCT model is depicted in Figure 3; I discuss the individual components of the model in more detail below.

**Figure 3**

*Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) Person-Process-Context-Time Model*
**Person.** Within the PPCT model, person refers to the individual’s characteristics, separated into three dimensions: demand, force, and resource characteristics. **Demand characteristics** encompass age, gender, race, and appearance; **resource characteristics** include mental and emotional skills, knowledge, and experiences; and **force characteristics** include personality characteristics such as motivation, persistence, and general temperament (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

**Process.** The PPCT model refers to reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environment called **proximal processes**. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007), proximal processes are the primary mechanism through which development occurs, given that these interactions are constantly changing and become more complex over time. While Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) model assumes proximal processes positively influence development, Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) introduced the concept of **inverse proximal processes** described as increasingly complex relationships that result in dysfunction, rather than positive developmental outcomes. I investigated both proximal processes and inverse proximal processes within the current study.

**Context.** Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) reprise their nested circles metaphor in the third phase of the model to describe the influence of **context** on human development. These four levels include the **microsystem** (an individual’s immediate contexts such as family and school), **mesosystem** (relationships existing between two or more microsystems such as the interaction of a family member with the school), **exosystem** (contexts that influence the individual without their direct involvement), and **macrosystem** (values, beliefs, and practices of an individual’s culture).

**Time.** Within the PPCT model, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) segment time into three categories – **microtime** refers to the individual instances in which proximal processes
occur, *mesotime* relates to periods of development over days, weeks, months, years, and *macrot ime* refers to generational time and societal expectations of said time, mirroring the values imposed on individuals via their macrosystem (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

**Depicting the Theoretical Framework**

I frame the current study using Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of college student development and Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) PPCT model given the study’s research questions and current literature gaps calling for research connecting sense of purpose and context. While the focus of the investigation is purpose development, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) sixth vector, development of purpose, is informed by the other vectors of the model, which also align with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) PPCT model. Specifically, developing competence, managing emotions, and establishing identity align with the “person” component of the PPCT model. In contrast, the development of autonomy and mature interpersonal relationships aligns with the “process” component of the model. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), these developmental vectors occur within the college “context” and over “time” of college enrollment, demonstrating the alignment of the two guiding frameworks. Integrating the two theories provides insight into the individualized contextual factors imperative to purpose development.

The amalgamation of these two theories represents the theoretical framework for the current study (Figure 2). Figure 2 depicts the PPCT model’s components exerting influence using arrows towards the sense of purpose circle. The bidirectional arrows between the elements of the PPCT represent the reciprocal relationships between the components, which is fundamental to Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) model. While most research in the field focuses on determining whether individuals have a purpose and how their purpose orientation
connects to optimal human development (Bronk, 2008, 2012; Liang et al., 2017; White et al., 2021), Figure 4 depicts the current study’s aim to determine how bioecological factors influence a sense of purpose. The theoretical framework emphasizes the present study’s nuanced investigation of purpose and demonstrates my intention to center the student experience. Overall, the theoretical framework depicted in Figure 4 situates the inquiry within the academic landscape, provides a foundation for data analysis, and supports the possible generalizability of results.

**Figure 4**

*Theoretical Framework*

![Diagram of theoretical framework]

*Note.* Figure 4 represents the study’s aim to gain insight into the influences that person, process, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) have on sense of purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), depicted with the darker shaded arrows.
Literature Review

I organized the empirical literature review that follows using Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) PPCT model. The model provides the basis for the present study’s theoretical framework and provides insight into current gaps in the ecological investigation of purpose. This literature review provides an overview of prior research in higher education student development, positive psychology, and educational psychology related to sense of purpose. Given the study’s goals to explore sense of purpose as a function of ecological development, I excluded research related to purpose in the business or corporate sectors intended to increase productivity or employee retention.

In the following sections, I review literature related to sense of purpose in terms of the PPCT model’s person, process, context, and time components. First, I review research connecting sense of purpose to personality characteristics and subsequent human functioning outcomes to align with the PPCT model’s person component. Next, I discuss purpose development and social support research to align with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) process concept. I then overview the research related to ecological underpinnings and consequent purpose orientations to represent the model’s context component. Finally, I discuss the model’s time element by discussing purpose development across the human lifespan. The prior research related to sense of purpose related to these four individual pieces of the PPCT model undergirds my desire to pursue research on college student development of purpose by holistically focusing on all aspects of the model, rather than one individual component. This decision aligns with calls for inquiries that recognize the individuality of college students and the complex ecologies that influence their meaning making and sense of purpose (Bronk, 2012; Hill et al., 2014; Kashdan & McKnight, 2008; Mariano, 2014; Sumner, 2017; Wang et al., 2020).
Person: The Intersection of Purpose, Personality, and Human Functioning

Within the PPCT model, person refers to the individual’s characteristics, separated into three dimensions: demand, force, and resource characteristics (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Below, I review prior literature related to each of the three dimensions. While the studies reviewed below provide insight into the role of the individual, their personhood, and their previous experiences, the literature primarily utilizes a quantitative methodology to correlate demographic, personality, and cultural capital reserves with sense of purpose. Three exceptions exist (Bronk, 2011; Liang et al., 2017; Linver et al., 2018) that leveraged qualitative methods or mixed methods, but these studies are more explicit in acknowledging the importance of context as evidenced by their inclusion in several sections of the literature review.

Demand Characteristics and Sense of Purpose. Below, I review the articles focusing on demographic markers connected to purpose development. Most literature related to the person category of the PPCT model uses demand characteristics or demographic data as a reference point to determine how force characteristics impact the development of purpose. However, Lee et al.’s (2021) quantitative study sought to determine the connection between demographic markers and the six domains of flourishing, one of which was sense of purpose. In surveying 2,370 employed adults in the United States and correlating demographic characteristics with measures of importance, Lee et al. (2021) found that the degree of purpose was rated highest among registered voters and frequent volunteers, Latinx and non-Black participants, those who identified as females, married, and with fewer children, and most significantly those with daily or regular religious attendance or practices. Demographics such as education, homeownership, and age did not substantially affect the importance of a sense of purpose (Lee et al., 2012). Likewise, Steger et al. (2009) explicitly analyzed the influence of age on sense of purpose among
over 8,500 adult internet users via a surveying database. Results indicated that younger individuals were more likely to report seeking purpose, while older individuals demonstrated a more significant presence of purpose. Participants who articulated that they were seeking purpose later in life showed well-being deficits, indicating that searching for meaning is most developmentally appropriate and fruitful in emerging adulthood (Steger et al., 2009).

While demand characteristics were the focus in Lee et al.’s (2021) study, Linver et al. (2018) explicitly used these characteristics as control variables. The research team sought to correlate distinct force characteristics with sense of purpose while controlling for demographic markers (demand characteristics) such as gender, age, marital status, and socioeconomic status. In their mixed methods study with 732 Scottish adolescents, Linver et al. (2018) found that personal sense of purpose related directly to intentional self-regulation (ISR) or the ability to focus and control behaviors to achieve goals. This correlation was significant and consistent across adolescent participants' demand characteristics or demographic markers. Notably, Linver et al.’s (2018) conclusions support the current study’s decision to omit Damon et al.’s (2003) BTS criterion from the definition of purpose, given that very few participants indicated purposes that were truly beyond the self. Methodologically, Hill et al. (2014) also controlled for demand characteristics (sex and age) to determine “universal” pathways leading to purpose development using samples of emerging adults and adults.

The word pathway is commonly used in research connected to purpose development and leveraged to explain various mechanisms through which one’s life meaning or calling develops (Hill et al., 2010; Mariano, 2014; Pfund et al., 2020). Specifically, the current study operates using Malin et al.’s (2003) definition asserting, “Pathways offer both supports and obstacles, and they determine what opportunities a young person will encounter. They can influence the
education and job choices young people make and affect their direction” (p. 194). This broader definition of pathways differs fundamentally from the field of research specifically intended to identify universal purpose pathways. While Kashdan and McKnight (2009) delineate three distinct pathways to purpose (reactive, proactive, and transformative), the present study intentionally uses a more holistic definition that recognizes the individuality of paths and explicitly attunes to the components of the PPCT model. Mariano (2014) asserted, “[prior] research demonstrates how the pathway to purpose is not unitary, and it is not yet clear what types of contextual affordances promote one pathway over another” (p. 140). The present study answers this call by contextually investigating collegiate experiences and familial engagement that influence participants’ purpose orientation to identify individualized pathways to purpose.

**Force Characteristics and Sense of Purpose.** The articles reviewed below demonstrate the connection between personality characteristics and sense of purpose. Primarily, research on purpose related to Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) force characteristic category utilizes the Big Five Inventory (John et al., 2008), in which participants respond to a series of survey questions that indicate their degree of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. For instance, Hill et al.’s (2014) study utilized the Big Five Inventory, among other purpose measures, to determine three pathways to purpose, including proactive engagement, reaction to significant life events, and social learning. Specifically related to the Big Five Inventory, the research team found that proactively engaged individuals reported greater openness. In comparison, those who subscribed to a reactive pathway indicated less openness as a personality trait. Similarly, Roberts and Robins (2000) examined the relationship between Big Five personality traits and primary life goals among 672 undergraduates at a large West Coast university. The study results indicate a relationship between force characteristics and
life goals, as they determined that high extraversion and low agreeableness were the most common personality traits for those with major life goals (Roberts & Robins, 2000). Roberts and Robins (2000) also controlled for demand characteristics. The research team determined that differences based on gender exist, such that male-identified participants were more motivated by financial goals and economic purposes, whereas women were more likely to sacrifice earnings for satisfying and purposeful work (Roberts & Robins, 2000).

Uniquely, Liang et al. (2017) used a qualitative methodology to explore force characteristics (among other components of the PPCT model). Through qualitative interviews with 10 college-bound adolescents, Liang et al. (2017) determined four Ps of purpose, two of which connect explicitly with force characteristics or personality markers – passion and propensity. In their study, passion related to students’ specific personality-specific interests, while propensity related to self-identified traits and skills relevant to the chosen purpose. These two categories, found to be significantly connected to one’s purpose development, underscore the value of exploring force characteristics in gaining insight into purpose as a broader construct. Additionally, Liang et al. (2017) notably discussed the concept of the BTS criterion of purpose proposed by Damon et al. (2003) and suggested that those who can look outside of themselves to find purpose likely have some degree of privilege. This finding informs my decision to exclude the BTS criterion within the current study to ensure I attune to all voices, not simply those who may be privileged to find purpose beyond themselves.

**Resource Characteristics and Sense of Purpose.** While demand and force characteristics connect to more surface-level characteristics of an individual’s personhood, the studies reviewed below highlight resource characteristics, representing a more ecological approach to understanding purpose development. Resource characteristics include whether an
individual identifies with groups privileged in American society (i.e., White, male, and wealthy) or marginalized (i.e., Black, Brown, female, and low-income) (Bowman, 2009). A breadth of research specifically seeks to connect individual resource characteristics, which often relate to personal social and cultural capital reserves, with purpose development. Sumner (2017) specifically investigated education as a resource characteristic and sought to determine how adults with different levels of education differed in their sense of purpose. In surveying 511 adults, the research team found no difference in the level of purpose or pathways to purpose. However, Sumner (2017) did find that education level predicted purpose orientation and personal sense of agency, indicating the importance of studying upperclassmen college students to understand the mechanisms through which college students develop differently from non-college goers. In another quantitative study, Jackson and Erving (2020) explored the resource characteristics of experience in social roles (e.g., spouse, parent, employee) and mental health and their influence on purpose development. In analyzing survey results of 12,000 adults who completed the Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiology Survey, the research team determined that individuals with many social roles had a greater sense of purpose and improved mental health. Notably, this pattern existed across ethno-racial groups. Finally, Stoddard and Pierce (2015) quantitatively investigated individual cultural capital among nearly 200 7th graders from disadvantaged neighborhoods and determined that individuals with greater collective efficacy or positive experiences in their communities had higher levels of hope and purpose. While this study connects to the student’s ecology and broader context, the efficacy variable connects explicitly to Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) concept of a resource characteristic because it references the individual’s experience in their immediate community and the associated resources bestowed.
The literature reviewed related to the person component of the PPCT model emphasizes the central role of personhood in developing purpose and highlights the importance of a bioecological lens. In addition to these studies that focus on demographic factors, researchers seek to connect a sense of purpose with identity. The identity construct falls outside the explicit designation of demand, force, and resource characteristics but centers the individual. For instance, Hill et al. (2014) sought to determine the role of purpose in predicting well-being and “developmentally relevant outcomes during emerging adulthood” (p. 1). Surveying 669 undergraduates from the United States and Canada, the research team found that purpose in life was positively associated with self-image and negatively correlated with delinquency (Hill et al., 2014). Additionally, Bronk (2011) investigated the connection between identity development as a construct and commitment to purpose and found a reciprocal relationship between the variables through three waves of qualitative interviews with eight adolescent exemplars. Interview analysis indicated that purpose fostered identity formation and that purpose and identity were overlapping constructs with synonymous characteristics and outcomes, mirroring the developmental vector model proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993). While Bronk’s (2011) study highlighted the importance of individual identity as a contributor to meaning making, the researcher clarified that personhood is just one, albeit critical, factor in purpose development. This statement aligns with Kashdan and McKnight’s (2009) calls for researchers to move beyond “person-centric approaches” to address the dynamic factors contributing to purpose development during emerging adulthood. Forthcoming sections address these calls for a more contextual approach to studying purpose development.
Process: Social Support and the Development of Purpose

In Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) bioecological model, process refers to reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environment called proximal processes. A breadth of research uses various methodologies to investigate this specific type of relationship with purpose development. In this section, I review quantitative and qualitative research on proximal processes and then discuss the concept of inverse proximal processes, which were leveraged in the study to explore dysfunctional relationships and their influence on purpose development.

Quantitative Research on Proximal Process. Researchers commonly use quantitative methods to demonstrate correlations between relationships with others and sense of purpose. Studies reviewed below provide statistically significant results but lack the nuance of qualitative or mixed methods research. Using survey research, Lund et al. (2019) surveyed 194 college students from three diverse universities in the United States to determine how mentor relationships connected to purpose. Quantitatively, they found the quality of mentorship was more critical than the number of mentors, reinforcing the notion that not all relationships can exist within the framework of Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) construct of a proximal process.). Hill et al. (2016) additionally used quantitative methods to study parent-child relationships and their influence on purpose by surveying 553 Canadian college students. Through surveying, the research team found that emerging adults with higher senses of purpose tended to have more positive attachments to parents (Hill et al., 2016).

Liang et al. (2018) also used quantitative research to explore parent-student relationships and their influence on sense of purpose. In surveying 207 adolescent girls from all-girls private schools in two major metropolitan areas, Liang et al. (2018) determined parents’ role in fostering self-oriented and other-oriented purposes. Results suggested that positive parent-adolescent
relationships contributed to developing an other-oriented purpose through prosocial behavior. Specifically, Liang et al. (2018) concluded, “prosocial behavior partially mediated the association between parental communication and other-oriented purpose and the association between parental trust and other-oriented purpose” (p. 810). These findings suggest that adolescent relationships with parents, which inherently align with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) concept of proximal processes given their dynamic nature over time, contribute to the development of a prosocial or an other-oriented sense of purpose, particularly when they are grounded in autonomy, trust, and open communication (Liang et al., 2018). Overall, quantitative inquiry into the value of proximal processes in cultivating purpose indicates the need to study this relationship in more depth using qualitative methods.

**Qualitative Research on Proximal Process.** The qualitative research exploring the relationship between proximal processes and their influence on sense of purpose provides a more in-depth and individualized perspective on this potential correlation. The articles reviewed below offer insight into the power and value of interviewing students to collect their stories. Most notably, Liang et al. (2017) denoted “people” as one of their four fundamental Ps of purpose development after interviewing the ten college-bound participants. The research team concluded, “supportive adults served as a catalyst or inspiration in initial interest in a particular purpose, as well as a scaffolding support for engaging in activities relevant to it” (Liang et al., 2017, p. 286). In the context of their study, relationships with adults (parents, extended family members, mentors, teachers) existed as proximal processes, as students indicated that these individuals provided significant affirmation, cultivation, and guidance to support their development of purpose.
Additionally, in their qualitative study of 146 adolescents from four age groups (6\textsuperscript{th} grade, 9\textsuperscript{th} grade, 12\textsuperscript{th} grade, and college sophomores), Malin et al. (2013) found that ecological factors, including external supports and influences, impact purpose development. In deciding to focus on the results of relationships, Malin et al. (2013) asserted, “Purpose, like other indicators of thriving and positive development, manifests in the relationship between an individual and his or her environment because it is an aspiration to have a meaningful existence in the world” (p. 186). Likewise, results from individual interviews indicate the importance of family influence for adolescents in identifying and refining their sense of purpose, as parents served as role models and teachers to encourage prosocial values among study participants (Malin et al., 2013). While college students are just one of the groups studied by Malin et al. (2013), their insights about pathways to purpose informed by family influence indicate the need to investigate the college student population in more detail.

Likewise, in a qualitative inquiry with 38 racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse high school juniors, White et al. (2021) explored the role of mentorship in cultivating purpose. Most notably, all students interviewed cited the influence of individuals who supported their sense of purpose, including peers, teachers, and family members. In differentiating mentorship from other relationships, White et al. (2021) determined that proper mentorship required the following three dimensions, “affirmation (e.g., the experience of emotional and appraisal support), cultivation (e.g., the experience of being challenged and obtaining skills), and guidance (e.g., the experience of receiving information and advice)” (p. 98). While not explicitly denoted in their study, White et al.’s (2021) three dimensions of mentorship align with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) conception of proximal processes given their dynamic nature and increased complexity over time. White et al.’s (2021) conclusion that mentorship is
critical in developing purpose among youth prompts future research and underscores the present study’s focus on relationships in college and familial settings that influence purpose development among emerging adults.

**Inverse Proximal Processes.** Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) original conception of proximal processes assumes positivity, suggesting that any relationship that increases in complexity over time is inherently positive. However, Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) introduced the concept of *inverse proximal processes* and asserted that some relationships are intrinsically harmful and lead to dysfunctional outcomes and reduced competency. In presenting this concept, Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) proposed a way for researchers to conceptualize and understand negative familial relationships using the PPCT model. The current study advances this research using qualitative methods to gain insight into the implications of negative parental relationships or other negative proximal processes on purpose development. While most studies focus on the relationship between functional family relationships and the resulting prosocial purposes cultivated, Blattner et al. (2013) used quantitative methodology to explore the role of parents in search for purpose and self-esteem among 207 female middle-school students from affluent metropolitan private schools. The researchers found that the process of searching for purpose elicited stress among all participants. However, participants with solid relationships with their families (proximal processes) experienced less anxiety and greater self-esteem than their peers with dysfunctional parent-child relationships. In these cases, participants experienced more stress within negative parent-child relationships (inverse proximal processes) due to lack of trust and alienation (Blattner et al., 2013). Within the current study, these conclusions indicate the importance of attuning to the quality of relationships explained by participants to determine the presence of both proximal processes *and* inverse proximal processes.
While a breadth of literature exists exploring the impact of mentorship and other relationships defined as proximal processes, the research indicates that these relationships do not exist in a cultural vacuum. Therefore, it is critically important within the current study to investigate proximal processes within an individual’s broader bioecological context. For instance, in interviewing 41 Chinese students at universities in China, Wang et al. (2020) found that family support is vital to developing BTS purpose in a pathway they describe as “reactive.” However, in discussing the role of reactivity in cultivating purpose, Wang and colleagues (2020) also emphasized the importance of social learning and considering external cultural influences. Likewise, Bronk (2012) found that mentors and like-minded peers played an essential role in supporting the development of noble purpose in interviewing nine adolescent purpose exemplars in the United States. However, Bronk (2012) concluded the study with a discussion about the significant role that ecological factors undoubtedly play in the development of young people. Bronk (2012) explicitly asserted, “Context matters” (p. 104). While focusing primarily on proximal processes within their studies, both Wang et al. (2020) and Bronk (2012) specifically call for prioritizing contextual factors, indicating their shared belief in the importance of understanding development through an ecological lens. The current study meets this requirement by investigating individual characteristics, proximal processes, contextual factors, and time collectively to understand and conceptualize an individual’s sense of purpose.

**Context: Diversity of Experiences Fostering Types of Purpose**

The third component of the PPCT model represents the influence of context on human development, separated by four levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Recognizing the current breadth of research attempting to correlate person-centered factors with purpose development and the lack of research related to
individual ecologies, Kashdan and McKnight (2009) urged the use of a contextual approach to explore a sense of purpose. Further, Hill et al. (2014) called for the need to examine contextual factors with qualitative research on purpose that prioritizes student stories and experiences that influence one’s sense of purpose. While calls for future research using a contextual approach are extensive, few researchers have accepted the challenge to explore the complex ecologies contributing to purpose development. Below, I explore a few exceptions, including a collection of studies exploring contextual influences among low-income students and research exploring culture and its impact on purpose development.

**Contextual Inquiries Among Low-Income Students.** Two relatively recent studies seeking to explore the contextual influence of purpose development come from Gutowski et al. (2018) and Bronk et al. (2020). Interestingly, both studies center the experiences of marginalized youth from low-income communities, focusing on the challenging contexts and investigating their impact on purpose development. In their qualitative study with 19 middle and high-school students of color living in an urban area in the northeastern United States, Gutowski et al.’s (2018) grounded theory approach indicated that financial, familial, academic, neighborhood, vocational, and immigration-related stressors were barriers to purpose development. Specifically, these contextual stressors acted in two unique ways: barriers or motivators. For the students who indicated that stress acted as a barrier to purpose development, youth suggested that goal realization was impossible or not a priority due to overwhelming circumstances. Among children who conceived their contextual stressors as motivating, students discussed pressure from others, high internal expectations, and strong desires to escape stressful contextual factors (Gutowski et al., 2018). Overall, Gutowski et al.’s (2018) conclusions highlight the necessity of exploring
purpose from a qualitative and contextual perspective, recognizing and investigating the diverse experiences in individual ecosystems that influence goals and future aspirations.

Likewise, Bronk et al. (2020) explored purpose development among 164 low-income adolescents living in southern California using a qualitative-forward methodology and found that contextual stressors provided a motivating and de-motivating impact. However, the research team determined that familial and other developmental assets supported purpose development, including like-minded peers and religious systems (Bronk et al., 2020). Further, Bronk et al. (2020) concluded:

Youth in this study from low-income backgrounds encountered personal hardships that could have derailed their pursuit of purpose but instead inspired it when coupled with developmental supports…developmental assets enabled the youth in this study to find purpose in working to improve for others the conditions that challenged them. (p. e1245).

Overall, results from Gutowski et al. (2018) and Bronk et al. (2020) demonstrate the value of qualitative research in exploring purpose development, given its ability to provide space for students to reflect on their environmental influences. The current study expands this field of literature by leveraging qualitative inquiry to explore college students’ experiences across socioeconomic statuses using a bioecological lens.

**Purpose and Culture in Context.** The current study provides the opportunity for graduating college students who indicate self-oriented and other-oriented purposes to discuss their purpose development. This decision runs in opposition to most of the current research in the field, which primarily investigates the underpinnings of a prosocial purpose by surveying and interviewing *exemplars* or those who outwardly demonstrate noble intentions according to teachers, mentors, and parents (Bronk, 2014). The present study, which attempts to explore
purposes that may or may not be prosocial, presents the opportunity to examine contexts that may promote a self-oriented sense of purpose, such as cultures that skew individualistic over collectivist. In their literature review, Mariano et al. (2014) suggested that individualist societies or those that value individual success may promote antisocial purpose development characteristics among their people. Likewise, they asserted that collectivist cultures might promote prosocial purpose development (Mariano et al., 2014). In alignment with this hypothesis, Kiang (2012) analyzed the diary data from 180 Asian-American high schoolers raised in collectivist contexts and found that the youths indicated greater daily purpose when serving their families. Kiang (2012) concluded that studying context is critical because culture informs familial values and likely influences purpose cultivation. The research team suggested, “Family obligation may actually provide the basis for sense of purpose or meaning which, in turn positively pervades other aspects of youth development” (Kiang, 2012, p. 186). This quotation supports the present study’s focus on the family as a culture exerting influence on sense of purpose. The current inquiry explicitly answered Kiang’s (2012) call for a focus on individual ecologies and provides insight into how contextual influences at the collegiate and familial levels influence purpose across orientations.

The articles reviewed in this section represent the current calls for a broader focus on understanding purpose development among adolescents and emerging adults contextually. However, in alignment with the PPCT model, it is also critically important to explore time at the micro and macro levels to understand how purpose is cultivated both across a lifetime and during a specific moment in time. In imploring researchers to explore purpose context, Mariano (2014) suggested, “Context provides information about the affordances of time, place, and other features of experience that can enable developmental scientists to serve the needs of all youth better, no
matter where they reside” (p. 145). Mariano (2014) specifically denoted time as a factor of context, recognizing the cultural values associated with different generations and times. For instance, they discuss the opportunities (and subsequent goals and purposes) available to women and people of color today that could never have been imagined decades prior (Mariano, 2014). Consequently, the present study is mindful of the ecologies influencing an individual’s sense of purpose, including timing and context.

**Time: Purpose Development Over Time**

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) segment time into three categories within the bioecological model: microtime, mesotime, and macrotime. The methodologically distinct articles reviewed in this section provide insight into the intersection of purpose and time. Below, I reviewed literature within two timeframes: higher education and the broader lifespan.

**Purpose Development in Higher Education.** Pfund et al. (2020) suggested that the traditional four years that students spend in college presents purpose development opportunities through two pathways: (1) purpose exploration, where students investigate goals, and (2) purpose commitment, where students identify and embrace goals that contribute to their future. The limited but monumental research on the development of purpose in the college setting has prompted researchers to consider how higher education institutions can promote purpose development. Pfund et al. (2020) specifically suggested, “Given that the university experience is a critical period for purpose development, faculty, and administrators are in a unique position to support students in a purposeful pursuit that may have long-term implications for their well-being” (p. 104). Pfund et al.’s suggestion guides the present study’s focus on a specific moment in time – the months before college graduation when a student is poised to reflect on their experience and those who supported (or obstructed) their development.
Flowers (2002) further highlighted the cultivation of purpose in higher education among a sample of 85 students at a large southeastern university. Using Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) developmental theory as a framework, Flowers (2002) quantitatively found that seniors had significantly higher levels of purpose when compared to first-year college students. Interestingly, Flowers (2002) explicitly recognized that differences between the two populations in purpose might also result from generational differences in a nod to the notion of macrotime delineated in the PPCT model. Flowers’ (2002) study indicates the critical importance of exploring purpose among college students and specifically the importance of determining mechanisms for this development using time-based samples of college seniors, the current study’s target population. Within the study, I define graduating students as undergraduate college students who will graduate in the next calendar year, either Fall 2021 or Spring 2022. Before starting the 2021-2022 school year, these students have earned more than 87 credits out of the 120-credit graduation requirement.

In studying time as a construct in purpose development among college students, trends in literature have demonstrated a focus on purpose orientations and how they result in different outcomes over an individual’s lifespan using quantitative methods. While scholars delineate purpose orientation categories differently, the current study defines purpose orientation using Bronk and Finch’s (2010) categories. Bronk and Finch’s (2010) cluster analysis revealed two primary purpose orientations: other-oriented (OO) or those who demonstrate the desire to make the world better and self-oriented (SO) or those who desire wealth and success without mention of helping others. Similarly, in two connected quantitative studies with 416 undergraduates from a private university in the Midwestern United States, Hill et al. (2010) determined that undergraduates demonstrated one of four distinct purpose orientations (creative, prosocial,
financial, and personal recognition). In middle adulthood, the research team found that only the prosocial purpose orientation yielded positive outcomes related to well-being and integrity. Overall, Hill et al. (2010) determined that individuals whose goals connected to helping others rather than themselves resulted in more adaptive psychological profiles. In a similar quantitative study, Sharma et al. (2017) also leveraged purpose orientations for correlational research on various outcomes. Although the purpose orientations were different from those identified by Hill et al. (2010), Sharma et al.’s (2017) analysis of a 2002 dataset from the Educational Longitudinal Study database also sought to determine how their identified purpose orientations (career, interpersonal, altruistic, and self-oriented) predicted behavior connected the decision to apply to college. Results indicated that only the career purpose orientation positively related to a high-school graduates’ decision to apply to college (Sharma et al., 2017). The longitudinal study’s results provide insight into how high-school students are conditioned to think about reasons for attending college and suggest that high school students across time see college attendance as synonymous with finding a career. The current study seeks to explore this notion in more depth with graduating college students such that interview questions ask participants how college has influenced their purpose and determine if responses to this question align with Sharma et al.’s (2017) findings.

**Purpose Development Across the Lifespan.** While the prior studies reviewed provide insight into microtime (purpose cultivation in college) and macrotime (purpose cultivation as a generational concept), there are also researchers studying purpose development across the lifespan or in terms of the PPCT model’s idea of *mesotime.* Using a large longitudinal quantitative sample of Australian adults, Windsor et al. (2015) surveyed 1,475 individuals over 18 years on six unique occasions. Their results indicate that those with higher levels of purpose
age better, demonstrating better cognitive results and fewer depressive symptoms. Further, Windsor et al.’s (2015) results suggest that purposeful living leads to better outcomes related to individual health and wellness across contexts. However, Windsor et al. (2015) acknowledged that their results were not reflective of “within-person variability,” indicating the need for future research to explore purpose development across time with particular attention to individual context (p. 977). Using a segmented sampling procedure, Bronk et al. (2009) also explored purpose across the lifespan by quantitatively surveying three age groups of individuals living in the midwestern United States – adolescents, emerging adults, and adults. Bronk et al. (2009) uniquely differentiated between searching for purpose and having a definitive purpose. While they found that having some degree of purpose relates to higher ratings of life satisfaction across the age groups, searching for purpose was only developmentally advantageous in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Bronk et al., 2009). Bronk et al. (2009) hypothesized that searching for purpose in adulthood is developmentally inappropriate and, thus, likely elicits feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and ultimately lack of satisfaction. This hypothesis aligns with Erikson’s (1968) seventh developmental stage of generativity vs. stagnation, which suggests that those who have a sense of purpose and usefulness (generativity) avoid feelings of disconnection (stagnation). In making sense of their findings in the larger context of the lifespan (mesotime), they asserted, “Future studies should further explore potentially significant cultural and contextual differences around the relationship among purpose, hope, and life satisfaction” (Bronk et al., 2009, p. 507). This quotation, coupled with the results from Windsor et al. (2015), underscores the value of studying purpose across time and highlights the importance of an ecological approach to purpose research in alignment with the PPCT model.
The research related to Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) concept of time varies in methodologies and conclusions. While much of the literature on purpose development calls for longitudinal studies tracking the cultivation of purpose over time, very few researchers have explored this gap. Researchers who have utilized longitudinal methodologies also rely on quantitative methods, eliminating the individual’s unique context and focusing on person-centric variables instead. The one exception comes from Barber et al. (2013) and the larger Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, which followed 30 students from 19 liberal arts institutions for three years during and after college. The qualitative study specifically investigated the concept of self-authorship, or the development of internal voice, over time through a series of interviews. Overall, Barber et al. (2013) found that those who developed inner voices had experiences in college that fostered identity development, had encounters with diverse others, worked through complex relationships, faced challenges to prior ways of thinking, and experienced support from peers and mentors.

While not explicitly studying purpose, Barber et al. (2013) connected self-authorship with the development of goals and broader values, tangentially related to purpose cultivation. They asserted, “The experiences described in this article prompted students to clarify their values and shift their perspectives accordingly. This is a skill that calls for the examination of interests, desires, and goals emblematic of a growing internal voice” (Barber et al., 2013, p. 887). The quotation emphasizes the intersection of time and context, which prompts individual development during and after college. While the current study is not longitudinal due to time constraints, the study mimics methodological decisions from Barber et al. (2013) by asking participants to reflect on micro, meso, and macro time to understand purpose development across the college experience and the lifespan. Overall, the methodologically unique literature reviewed
in this section indicates gaps that the current study fills in investigating the intersection of purpose and time in the developmentally pivotal time of college.

**Literature Review Summary**

Presenting the literature review organized by Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) PPCT model reflects efforts to study purpose from one (or more in a few cases) of the model’s four components – person, process, context, and time. Each element of the model uncovers unique findings and methodological patterns that afford insight into sense of purpose as a whole and through various lenses. Researchers have used quantitative methods to connect demographic, personality, and experience markers within the *person* category with purpose and overall well-being indicators (e.g., Lee et al., 2021; Roberts & Robins, 2000). Within the *process* component, quantitative and mixed method research indicates that purpose development can result from relationships with families, like-minded peers, and mentors that serve as proximal processes (e.g., Liang et al., 2017; Malin et al., 2013). *Contextually*, researchers used qualitative data to explore the way that communities (both supportive and marginalizing) influence (or prohibit) purpose development (e.g., Bronk et al., 2020; Kiang, 2012). Finally, research connected to the construct of *time* using qualitative and quantitative methods suggests that adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods suited for purpose development, but that purpose commitment (or lack thereof) has lasting impacts across the lifespan (e.g., Flowers, 2002; Windsor et al., 2015). These conclusions contribute to a broad understanding of purpose development at a macro level and provide insight into the importance of families and educators engaging in conversations with young people about their purpose, professionally, academically, and personally.
Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a broad overview of the construct of purpose, including historical underpinnings and an explanation of the specific definition used within the study. Next, I described the guiding theoretical framework, providing descriptions and rationales for using Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) student development vector model and Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) ecological PPCT model. Finally, I reviewed the social science literature from education and psychology, organized by the components of the PPCT model, to elucidate the breadth of studies focusing on single elements of purpose and the gap in research focusing on purpose development from a holistic or ecological perspective.
Chapter 3

The current mixed methods study explored purpose among graduating college students at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic of the United States by analyzing how the larger ecological context informed student purpose orientation. Operating within a pragmatist worldview, I undertook an explanatory sequential design with the case selection variant (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), assigning more weight to qualitative results (quan → QUAL).

The following questions guided the study:

1. What purpose orientations are represented among graduating participants in a college of liberal arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic? [QUAN]
2. How does degree of purpose differ across demographic markers? [QUAN]
3. Among participants with some degree of purpose, how does purpose orientation differ across demographic markers? [QUAN]
4. How do graduating college participants make meaning of their pathways to purpose? [QUAL]
5. How do the ecological factors of family influence and collegiate experiences inform student understanding of purpose? [QUAL]
6. In what ways do the interview data from graduating participants related to ecological pathways to purpose provide greater context for the quantitative results related to sense of purpose and purpose orientation? [MIXED METHODS]

This chapter provides an overview of the present study’s research design, including participants, setting, instrumentation, sampling, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, I discuss philosophical and ethical issues connected to my positionality as a researcher, threats to validity and reliability, and design limitations.
Philosophical Foundations

My worldview, rooted in pragmatism (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), informed my decision to answer research questions using a mixed methods approach. I am philosophically problem-centered and seek to gain insight into college student pathways to purpose using a pluralistic technique. This philosophical foundation shapes my epistemological, ontological, and axiological approaches to this study. Epistemologically, I am focused on collecting information that provides insight into how ecological factors and context inform student conceptualization of purpose. As such, I collected quantitative information using established instruments and student narratives through semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants using established interview protocols. Ontologically, I recognized that students exist within multiple realities such that they come from diverse communities and contexts that have shaped their understanding of their purpose. Collecting and prioritizing qualitative interviews allowed me to gain insight into the multiple realities of graduating students. Axiologically, this study is values-driven, as I asked participants about their values related to the conceptualization of their purpose. I was particularly interested in how contextual factors informed student understanding of purpose through the qualitative portion of the study.

Participants

Below, I provide an overview of the participants for both phases of the mixed methods study, which are two overlapping groups aligned with the explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Overall, qualitative participants were a purposefully selected subset of those who responded to the quantitative survey.
Participants in Quantitative Data Collection

I recruited participants for the quantitative portion of the study from the population of graduating undergraduate students within a college of liberal arts (consisting of Art and Design, Communication and Media, English, History, Languages and Cultures, Philosophy, Theatre and Dance, and Women’s and Gender Studies majors) at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The college of liberal arts studied enrolls approximately 1,500 undergraduate students. Within the College, 386 students will graduate in the next calendar year, having earned 87 credits (or more) intending to graduate in 2021 or 2022 (N=386). The unit of analysis is at the individual level, and the sample (n) equates to the number of students who responded to the request for survey participation.

The entire population of graduating students enrolled in the college of liberal arts was invited to participate in the quantitative survey hosted on Qualtrics™, a web-based survey tool. Those who did not respond received three additional reminder emails to request their survey response. All recruitment communication can be found in Appendix B. The Informed Consent Form for the quantitative phase of the study (Appendix C) was the first page of the electronic survey (Appendix D). Skip logic routed students to the end of the survey if they chose not to consent. As an incentive, students who completed the survey were entered in a raffle for one of three $20 Amazon gift cards. I selected raffle winners once the survey closed and contacted winners via email with the electronic gift card information.

Participants in Qualitative Data Collection

I employed purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase of the study. As a result of survey responses, I contacted eight participants among the sample of students who completed the initial quantitative survey for a 1-hour follow-up qualitative interview. I used stratified ranked set
sampling among participants who indicated that they had found their purpose with M≥ 5.0 on Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Finding Purpose Subscale*. I stratified cases by self-oriented purpose (SO) and other-oriented (OO) purposes and ranked participants from highest to lowest scores. Several participants had identical scores, so I purposefully selected interview participants with varied demographic characteristics to intentionally diversify the sample. Four participants with the highest scores in each category (SO and OO) were contacted via email and invited to participate in a semi-structured, 1-hour interview. The email invitation included a description of the interview, time commitment, and incentive information (Appendix B). One additional reminder email was sent to potential participants if the initial email did not elicit a response. I sent a confirmation email to students who agreed to participate in the interview, including a copy of the Informed Consent Form for the qualitative portion of the study (Appendix E).

A semi-structured interview protocol guided interviews (Appendix F), with an accompanying interview notetaking matrix (Appendix G) to take handwritten notes throughout the interview. Before commencing the interview, I reviewed the Informed Consent Form with the participant again. I utilized Zoom video conferencing to conduct and record the interviews. All students who participated in the 1-hour semi-structured interview received a $20 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time.

**Description of the Setting**

The setting for the mixed methods study was a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The University is within 25 miles of a major metropolitan city and boasts 118 undergraduate programs, 80 graduate programs, and four doctoral programs, organized within six colleges and one school. The university enrolls a total of approximately 15,000 undergraduates and 2,500 graduate students.
Instrumentation

Given the study’s mixed methods design, I employed both quantitative and qualitative instruments in the two phases of the study. Below, I explain the quantitative and qualitative measures leveraged in the present study.

Quantitative Measures

The purpose of the quantitative phase of the study was to collect demographic information to answer the first three research questions and determine students from the larger sample who skew towards SO or OO for the purposeful selection of interview participants. Specifically, I collected quantitative data via an online 10-question survey using Qualtrics™ (Appendix D), which remained open for two weeks and took participants no more than 10 minutes to complete. For participants who chose not to consent to take the survey, skip logic routed them to the end of the survey. This research used, with permission, portions of the Youth Purpose Survey from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, funded in part by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth (Bundick et al., 2008). Below, I describe the specific quantitative measures included in the survey.

Demographics. To assess demographic markers, I asked participants to identify their age, gender, race, and familial educational background (highest degree earned). While age was a fill-in-the-blank question, gender, race, and familial educational background were multiple-choice questions with an additional fill-in-the-blank option. Skip logic prevented students who indicated that they were younger than 18 years old from completing the survey. These identity markers were used in quantitative data analysis to compare groups of participants (e.g., comparing the difference between first-generation and continuing-generation participants regarding their purpose).
Youth Purpose Survey – Finding Purpose Subscale. To measure the extent to which individuals felt they had found purpose in life or degree of purpose, I asked participants to complete the Finding Purpose Subscale of the Youth Purpose Scale from the Stanford University Center on Adolescence (Bundick et al., 2008). Respondents rated the degree to which they agreed with six statements to identify if they had some sense of purpose on a seven-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Questions included: “I have discovered a satisfying life purpose,” “I understand my life’s meaning,” “I participate in one or more organizations that serve my purpose in life,” “I am always working toward accomplishing my most important goals in life,” “I have a purpose in my life what reflects who I am,” and “I have a purpose in life that says a lot about the kind of person I am.” Higher scores indicated a greater degree of purpose, and scores of 5.0 and above indicated that the respondent had some degree of purpose. Reliability is $\alpha = 0.85$.

Youth Purpose Survey – Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale. To determine how individuals found purpose in life, I asked participants to complete a modified version of Bundick et al.’s (2008) Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale of the Youth Purpose Scale from the Stanford University Center on Adolescence (Liang et al., 2018). The modified scale created by Liang et al. (2018) includes two subscales. The first 4-item subscale measured Bronk and Finch’s (2010) category of self-oriented (SO) purpose with the following statements: “The purpose of my life is to make money,” “The purpose of my life is to be successful,” “The purpose of my life is to earn the respect of others,” and “The purpose of my life is to have a good career.” The second 4-item subscale measured Bronk and Finch’s (2010) construct of other-oriented (OO) purpose with the following statements: “The purpose of my life is to help others,” “The purpose of my life is to do the right thing,” “The purpose of my life is to support my family and friends,”
and “The purpose of my life is to make the world a better place.” Respondents rated the degree
to which they agree with the eight statements to measure their purpose orientation on a seven-
point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability is $\alpha = 0.81$.

**Qualitative Measures**

The purpose of the qualitative phase of the study was to gain insight into how graduating
college students made meaning of their pathways to purpose (Research Question 4) and
understand better the influence of ecological factors on student development of purpose
(Research Question 5). Upon purposefully selecting participants who completed the quantitative
survey, I invited eight students to participate in a 1-hour semi-structured interview via Zoom
video conferencing. I chose to employ a semi-structured interview style given the inherent
flexibility to explore topics as they present themselves. In discussing the value of semi-structured
interviews, Merriam (2009) wrote:

> In this type of interview, either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the
interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is
desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the
interview…This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the
emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (p. 90)

Precisely, a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix F) guided interviews informed by an
adapted version of Andrews et al.’s (2006) *Youth Purpose Interview* protocol, used with
permission, from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, funded in part by
the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth. During the interview, I
took notes using a notetaking matrix (Appendix G).
Youth Purpose Interview. The 1-hour interview protocol was an adapted version of the Youth Purpose Interview. The first part of the interview protocol addressed what was particularly important to the individual (“Would you say you have a purpose in life? If yes, what would you say is your purpose in life?”). Moreover, the second part of the interview focused on the ecological factors that have impacted sense of purpose (“Are there experiences from college that have influenced [X]? If so, can you talk about these experiences?”). I excluded seven questions from Andrews et al.’s (2006) interview because they did not align with the current study’s research questions, and I created eight additional questions to address the research questions related to ecological factors influencing sense of purpose and a request for a pseudonym. I posed a total of 14 qualitative questions to each participant.

Threats to Validity

While I addressed validity threats connected to researcher bias and reflexivity above, Creswell and Plano Cark (2017) additionally identify several validity threats in explanatory sequential mixed methods research. First, there exists a threat related to failing to identify critical quantitative results to explain. This threat was minimized by carefully analyzing quantitative results and intentionally noting results calling for explanation, particularly regarding patterns in demographic markers. Second, there is a threat related to failing to explain surprising or contradictory quantitative results with qualitative follow-up. I constructed a semi-structured interview protocol to minimize this threat, prioritizing the probing into unexpected quantitative results (Appendix F). Finally, Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) suggest the threat of failing to integrate quantitative and qualitative results. I minimized this risk by purposefully selecting interview participants whose quantitative responses indicated that the student had a degree of
purpose of ≤5.0 and demonstrated a strong purpose orientation leaning. Next, I used qualitative follow-up to gain insight into ecological factors contributing to purpose development.

To address threats to validity in the second qualitative portion of my study, I also employed strategies suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). Specifically, I used triangulation to address qualitative validity or trustworthiness concerns. Triangulation seeks to find convergence by comparing qualitative data with quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Within the current study, it was essential to compare students’ quantitative results to the themes they discussed in their qualitative interview to describe how they made meaning of their purpose. Ideally, qualitative results would demonstrate convergence or corroboration with quantitative results. Figure 5 illustrates an example of how I depict triangulation of results graphically.

**Figure 5**

*Example of Joint Display Representing Triangulated Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Orientation</th>
<th>Category / Domain of Purpose</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andy (OO)</td>
<td>Helping Others / Career</td>
<td>“Helping others is important to me because...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan (OO)</td>
<td>Making a Difference / Service</td>
<td>“Making a difference in the world is important to me because...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan (SO)</td>
<td>Be Successful / Career</td>
<td>“Career advancement and success is important to me because...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James (SO)</td>
<td>Have a Good Career / Career</td>
<td>“Making money is important to me because...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 5 is an example of a joint display integrating the quantitative results related to purpose orientation and convergent qualitative results related to coding and illustrative quotations.
Threats to Reliability

While high alpha scores for the survey measures chosen reflect a commitment to reliability within the quantitative phase of the study, reliability in the qualitative phase is more nuanced. Merriam (2009) stated, “Reliability… is enhanced by the investigator explaining the assumptions and theory underlying the study, by triangulating data, and by leaving an audit trail” (Merriam, 2009, p. 234). Following this direction, the current study leveraged a theoretical framework grounded in Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) PPCT model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of college student development. Additionally, following Merriam’s (2009) directive, I used triangulation to support internal validity as described above, contributing to the study’s reliability. Finally, I engaged in an audit process by consistently tracking how findings and interpretations stemmed from quantitative and qualitative data collected (Merriam, 2009).

Ethical Concerns

In their reflection on ethical considerations in qualitative research, Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasized the ethical issues inherent in human subject research and qualitative inquiry. Specifically, Marshall and Rossman (2016) discussed the complicated and messy matters of being in relationship with others during interviewing. Within the present study, the questions I posed to students related to their purpose could cause an emotional response. Questions had the potential to elicit anxiety or discomfort because one’s purpose may be grounded in deeply personal and sensitive experiences. I paused the interview if the student demonstrated emotional harm. Additionally, if appropriate, I referred the participant to on-campus counseling resources. It is vital to be aware of the interview dynamics such that the student does not begin to see the interview as a therapy session, even if the questions may seem like questions posed by mental
health counselors or life coaches. Seidman (2019) warns qualitative researchers engaged in interviewing from establishing a therapeutic relationship and recommends that researchers prevent themselves from consoling or offering advice to the participant. Seidman (2019), “Let the participant work out the distress without interfering and taking inappropriate responsibility for it” (p. 115). I heeded this advice and set clear boundaries with participants by explicitly stating that I was collecting information without judgment or providing advice.

**Procedures**

The present study’s unit of analysis existed at the individual level, given the purpose of understanding individual ecological pathways promoting or impeding purpose development. Before commencing the study, I requested contact information of graduating students who would graduate within the calendar year (having earned 87 or more credits before the 2021-2022 school year) from the Dean of the college of liberal arts. All students in this population received a survey invitation and three subsequent reminder emails during the first month of the Fall 2021 semester (Appendix B). The survey included 10 questions (one fill-in-the-blank for age and the rest multiple choice) and took the student less than 10 minutes to complete. Participants who completed the survey were entered in a raffle to win one of three $20 Amazon gift cards. The drawing occurred after the survey closed, and winners were sent emails with their gift card information. Once the survey closed after two weeks, I analyzed quantitative results. Explicitly, I calculated descriptive statistics, analyses of variance, and t-tests using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

Eight participants were purposefully selected to participate in a 1-hour semi-structured follow-up interview. I used stratified ranked set sampling to select participants who indicated that they had found their purpose with $M \geq 5.0$ on Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Finding Purpose*
Subscale. I then stratified cases by SO purpose and OO and contacted those with the highest scores in each category for individual semi-structured interviews (Appendix B). Because several participants had identical scores, I selected participants with varied demographic markers to diversify the sample. If a participant did not respond to the invitation, I moved to the student with the next highest-ranked score in the strata. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix F) guided interviews with an accompanying interview notetaking matrix to take handwritten notes throughout the interview (Appendix G). I held and recorded interviews via Zoom video conferencing. Eight participants received a $20 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time after their interview.

After transcribing interviews verbatim, I used deductive and inductive coding techniques described below to analyze results and determine across-interview themes. Finally, I compared aggregated and individual quantitative responses in the first phase with qualitative responses in the second interview phase. This triangulation of data also addressed threats to validity described in more detail above.

**Analysis and Coding Procedures**

Analysis of quantitative data answered Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, while qualitative data analysis answered Research Questions 4 and 5. Together, quantitative and qualitative data analysis answered Research Question 6, which required triangulation or integration of quantitative and qualitative data. I explain analysis decisions below.

**Quantitative Analysis**

In analyzing quantitative survey data, I conducted t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA) to investigate my primary research questions and determine how the quantitative data points relate. Student purpose orientation (either SO or OO) was the dependent variable, while
demographic data was the independent variable. I used SPSS to run the appropriate statistical
tests to compare groups of students and find relationships between variables, as seen in Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

*Quantitative Research Questions and Associated Statistical Tests*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Statistical Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What purpose orientations are represented among graduating participants in a college of Liberal Arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic?</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How does degree of purpose differ across demographic markers?</td>
<td>T-tests (Groups: male/female, first-generation/continuing generation, White/Students of Color)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Independent Variables:</strong> Demographic Markers</td>
<td>ANOVA Tests (Groups: 20/21/22/23/24 years old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Dependent Variable:</strong> Sense of Purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Among participants with some degree of purpose, how does purpose orientation differ across demographic markers?</td>
<td>T-tests (Groups: male/female, first-generation/continuing generation, White/Students of Color)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Independent Variables:</strong> Demographic Markers</td>
<td>ANOVA Tests (Groups: 20/21/22/23/24 years old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Dependent Variable:</strong> Purpose Orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 6 depicts the quantitative research questions, the associated dependent and
independent variables, and the subsequent statistical tests used to answer research questions.

**Qualitative Analysis**

I used deductive (“a priori” coding) and inductive approaches to analyze data. First, I
used the Interview Coding Process developed by Malin et al. (2008) to accompany the *Youth Purpose Interview* (Andrews et al., 2006) to code participants’ category and domain of purpose (Appendix H). After using a priori coding to determine the participant’s category and domain of
purpose, I engaged in first and second-cycle inductive coding to determine more prominent themes across the PPCT model’s components of person, process, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). First-cycle coding included initial inductive coding, allowing for the emergence of conceptual codes within each interview (Miles et al., 2018). Second-cycle coding included analyzing codes to determine within-interview pattern codes. Once I created and defined pattern codes for each interview, I grouped codes by content into clusters to develop broader themes revealed across interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Researcher Bias**

Student affairs philosophies ground my professional work and educational background, which informs my thinking and values system. As a student affairs professional working in parent and family relations, I was positioned to believe that the college context (inside and outside of the classroom) and familial relationships profoundly impact student purpose. As an administrator, I have seen first-hand how families attempt (both successfully and unsuccessfully) to influence their students in profound ways. While these experiences inform my perspective, I was conscious not to make assumptions during interviews. I took strides in the interview process to use bracketing (Merriam, 2019) to separate my reactions from student utterances using a notetaking matrix (Appendix G). Further, I am aware of my privileged identities as a cis, White, heterosexual woman and how they reveal themselves in data collection. Specifically, in interviewing students and collecting their stories, I was aware of how my identities intersected with those I was interviewing. I took a reflective stance in my research. In constantly reflecting on my biases and assumptions, I was mindful not to let my lived experiences impact my accurate depiction of student stories. To maintain a reflexive stance, I engaged with the reflective memoing process to intentionally separate my reactions to qualitative data collected from
students. While I was aware of how my identities intersected with those I interviewed and intended to take a reflexive stance through the intentional practice of memoing, my professional positionality and privilege are biases that have an indelible impact on the present study.

Limitations

While the current mixed methods study uniquely provides quantitative and qualitative insight into the ecological development of purpose, design limitations present opportunities for future investigations. First, forthcoming studies should investigate purpose using longitudinal methods. While the present study addresses Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) construct of time through encouraging student reflection within the qualitative interview, reliance on memory is inherently flawed. Given the dynamic nature of context, collecting data over months and years of college would provide more accurate insight into how purpose develops across the collegiate experience. Another limitation in the current study is the sample size and the consequent lack of generalizability of findings. The singular focus on graduating students within a college of liberal arts at a large, public institution in the Mid-Atlantic prevents sweeping conclusions from being drawn about college student development of purpose. Findings would be strengthened by including participants from more diverse educational institutions, backgrounds, and academic disciplines. Finally, the present study’s correlational, qualitative design prevents the determination of causality. Although results provide insight into the collegiate experiences and familial dynamics that appear to impact students’ purpose development, the study does not yield causal results. Future studies should consider investigating purpose using an experimental design to identify specific contextual experiences and their impact on purpose development.
Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the study’s methodological design and detailed the precise explanatory sequential mixed methods inquiry I used to study purpose development among graduating college students. Specifically, I described the study’s participants, setting, instrumentation used in the quantitative and qualitative phases, and data analysis procedures. Additionally, I addressed my biases, threats to validity and reliability, and limitations connected to the study’s methodology and design. The following chapter details the results from the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews.
Chapter 4

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the results of the mixed methods study, addressing the ecological development of purpose among graduating college students. Data were collected in two phases: quantitative (phase one) and qualitative (phase two). Specifically, the research study consisted of a quantitative survey followed by semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Using this mixed methods approach allowed the initial quantitative data related to degree of purpose and purpose orientation to be explained and enriched by qualitative interview findings. Given the explanatory sequential mixed methods design of the study and the intentionality of collecting quantitative data first and following up with capturing qualitative data, I will present the results in a similar format.

The quantitative phase of the study consisted of a survey sent to all graduating students in a college of liberal arts in the Mid-Atlantic (N=386). The survey included demographic questions related to age, gender, race, and parental educational background and required students to complete two measures from the Youth Purpose Survey – the Finding Purpose Subscale and Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale. The Youth Purpose Survey was used with permission from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, funded in part by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth (Bundick et al., 2008). The gathered survey data addressed the first three research questions:

1. What purpose orientations are represented among graduating participants in a college of Liberal Arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic?

2. How does degree of purpose differ across demographic markers?

3. Among participants with some degree of purpose, how does purpose orientation differ across demographic markers?
The second qualitative phase of the study consisted of semi-structured interviews with eight purposefully selected survey respondents. I chose interview participants given their responses to the two *Youth Purpose Survey* subscales such that they demonstrated both some degree of purpose and a strong leaning towards either a self-oriented (SO) or an other-oriented sense of purpose. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, I employed deductive and inductive coding approaches to determine themes. Themes captured through the semi-structured interviews answered the second two research questions:

4. How do graduating college participants make meaning of their pathways to purpose?
5. How do the ecological factors of family influence and collegiate experiences inform student understanding of purpose?

Integration and convergence of quantitative and qualitative data represented the third phase of the mixed methods study. Using triangulation techniques, I compared students’ quantitative results to the themes they discussed in their qualitative interview to describe how they made meaning of their purposes. Ultimately, qualitative results demonstrated convergence with quantitative results. Results of this triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data answered the final research question:

6. In what ways do the interview data from graduating participants related to ecological pathways to purpose provide greater context for the quantitative results related to sense of purpose and purpose orientation?

The following sections will overview the quantitative and qualitative samples and describe the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods results. In discussing results, I will highlight significant quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods findings, drawing attention to convergence and contradictions.
Quantitative Results

Responses to the quantitative survey yielded answers to the first three research questions. Below, I provide an overview of the quantitative sample. Next, I address each quantitative research question with a graphic depiction of the answer to the question via a table and a narrative description of results related to the question.

Quantitative Sample

Within the first quantitative phase of the study, I sent an email invitation and subsequent reminders to the total population of 386 graduating students from a college of liberal arts in the Mid-Atlantic to complete the online survey. Of the 386 students invited to participate, 124 students completed the entire survey for a total response rate of 32.1%. Of the 124 survey respondents, 12 responses were eliminated because the students were older than 24 years old and beyond the scope of the study’s age parameters aligned with the traditional-aged college student (Arnett, 2000). Two additional responses were eliminated because the students identified as gender non-conforming and depicting this small group’s results in aggregate presents threats to participant confidentiality. Overall, a total of 110 participants were included in quantitative data analysis. Of the 110 respondents, 65 students (59%) indicated that they had some degree of purpose by scoring a 5.0 or greater on Bundick et al.’s (2008) Finding Purpose Subscale.

The first component of the quantitative survey requested that students answer questions related to their demographic characteristics, including age, gender, parental education background, and race. In delineating groups, I analyzed age as five separate groups (20, 21, 22, 23, and 24) and collapsed gender (female and male) and parental education (first-generation and continuing-generation) into two categories. First-generation college students are those whose parents have not earned a four-year college degree (Petty, 2014). Finally, I collapsed race into
two broad categories (White and Students of Color) given the distribution of participants across racial groups from the Predominantly White Institutional (PWI) setting and the scope of the study, which prevented in-depth analysis into the experiences of specific racial groups. Table 1 reflects the demographics of the total sample (n=110) and the group of students within the sample who indicated that they had some degree of purpose (n=65).

**Table 1**

**Demographics of Study Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baseline Characteristic</th>
<th>Full Sample n=110</th>
<th>Participants with Degree of Purpose ≥ 5.0 n=65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing-Generation</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Continuing-generation college students are defined as having at least one parent who has earned a bachelor’s degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

For the total sample of quantitative respondents, over 75% of the participants indicated that they were 21 or 22 years of age. The respondents were overwhelmingly White (81%), female (66%), and continuing generation (65%). Similar demographics were seen in the subset of the populations with an identified sense of purpose (80% White, 66% female, and 66%
continuing-generation). Sample demographics reflect the student population within the college of liberal arts at the large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic (76% White and 64% female). One exception is that none of the students who were 20 years old indicated that they had some degree of purpose. However, 20-year-olds represented a small percentage of total participants (3.6%).

**Research Question 1**

The first research question asked, *What purpose orientations are represented among graduating participants in a college of liberal arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic?* Table 2 demonstrates the results to this question, divided by the total sample (n=110) and those whose mean scores on Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Finding Purpose Subscale* (n=65) were greater than or equal to 5.0 (demonstrating that they have some degree of purpose). Delineation of groups is necessary because only those with some degree of purpose were included in the qualitative phase of the study. Notably, across both groups, participants indicated a greater affinity towards an other-oriented (OO) sense of purpose (M=6.032 and M=6.273) over a self-oriented (SO) sense of purpose (M=5.200 and M=5.250). Across the samples, the minimum statistics for SO sense of purpose were lower (Min.=2.25) than the minimum statistics for an OO sense of purpose (Min.=3.50 and Min.=4.0), indicating the skewness towards an OO sense of purpose among the sample’s participants.

**Table 2**

*Purpose Orientation Across Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baseline Characteristic</th>
<th>Full Sample n=110</th>
<th>Participants with Degree of Purpose ≥ 5.0 n=65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-oriented (OO)</td>
<td>6.032</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented (SO)</td>
<td>5.200</td>
<td>1.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results in Table 2 answer Research Question 1, such that the graduating participants in a college of liberal arts in the Mid-Atlantic demonstrate a leaning towards an OO sense of purpose as a collective group, whether or not they have purpose demonstrated by a mean score of 5.0 or greater on Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Finding Purpose Subscale*.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, *How does degree of purpose differ across demographic markers?* Table 3 depicts the t-test results across gender (female and male), race (White and Students of Color), and parental education background (first-generation and continuing generation). *T* scores and *p* values above 0.05 indicate no significant difference in degree of purpose between groups based on the demographic markers of gender, race, and parental educational background. In other words, males and females, White students and Students of Color, and first-generation and continuing-generation students demonstrated similar degrees of purpose on the Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Finding Purpose Subscale*.

**Table 3**

*Degree of Purpose Differences Across Demographics (Gender, Race, and Parental Education)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td><em>M</em></td>
<td><em>SD</em></td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td><em>M</em></td>
<td><em>SD</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Purpose</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>5.064</td>
<td>1.162</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4.887</td>
<td>1.198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Purpose</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>4.996</td>
<td>1.196</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.040</td>
<td>1.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Purpose</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4.966</td>
<td>1.159</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>5.026</td>
<td>1.187</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Equal variances assumed given significance levels on Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances were larger than 0.05.
Table 4 depicts the results of the analyses of variance (ANOVA) tests used to determine differences across the demographic marker of age (20, 21, 22, 23, and 24 years old) by degree of purpose. ANOVA testing indicated that there was a significant difference in degree of purpose between participants who were 20 years old (M=3.417, SD=0.726) and those who were 22 (M=5.115, SD=269) and 23 years old (M=5.429, SD=0.750) at the time of survey completion. The F score and p value at 0.033 demonstrate that the difference between these specific age groups is significant. ANOVA tests indicated no significant differences in degree of purpose across the other age categories.

Table 4

Degree of Purpose Differences Across Demographics (Age)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>20 years old</th>
<th>21 years old</th>
<th>22 years old</th>
<th>23 years old</th>
<th>24 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Purpose</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.417</td>
<td>0.726</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>5.006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Purpose</td>
<td>2.736*</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in Tables 3 and 4 answered Research Question 2. Results indicate that degree of purpose does not significantly differ across gender, race, and parental educational background demographic markers. However, degree of purpose differs significantly across age groups, specifically between those who are 20 and those who are 22 and 23 years of age.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked, *Among participants with some degree of purpose, how does purpose orientation differ across demographic markers?* Table 5 depicts the t-test results across the demographic characteristics of gender (female and male), race (White and Students of Color), and parental educational background (first-generation and continuing-generation) for
purpose orientation among the 65 participants who indicated they had some degree of purpose (mean scores of \( \geq 5.0 \) on Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Finding Purpose Subscale*). *T* scores and *p* values above 0.05 indicate no significant difference in purpose orientation (OO or SO) between groups based on the sample’s demographic markers of gender, race, and parental educational background. In other words, males and females, White students and Students of Color, and first-generation and continuing-generation students demonstrated similar OO and SO scores on the Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale*.

### Table 5

**Purpose Orientations Across Demographics (Gender, Race, Parental Education)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td><em>M</em></td>
<td><em>SD</em></td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td><em>M</em></td>
<td><em>SD</em></td>
<td><em>t</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-oriented (OO)</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6.238</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.341</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>-0.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented (SO)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.204</td>
<td>1.235</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.341</td>
<td>0.701</td>
<td>-0.483</td>
<td>0.631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6.351</td>
<td>0.677</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.962</td>
<td>0.636</td>
<td>1.875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.240</td>
<td>1.079</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.289</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>-0.142</td>
<td>0.887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.330</td>
<td>0.665</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6.244</td>
<td>0.698</td>
<td>0.474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing-Generation</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.341</td>
<td>1.192</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.203</td>
<td>1.030</td>
<td>0.483</td>
<td>0.631</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Equal variances assumed given significance levels on Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances were larger than 0.05.

Table 6 depicts the results of the ANOVA tests used to determine differences across the demographic marker of age (21, 22, 23, and 24 years old) by purpose orientation (OO and SO). None of the 20-year-old participants indicated a sense of purpose, so they are not included in Table 6. ANOVA testing showed a significant difference in OO purpose orientation between participants who were 21 years old (M=6.394, SD=0.538) and those who were 23 years old.
(M=5.700, SD=1.117) at the time of survey completion. The $F$ score and $p$ value at 0.028 demonstrate that the difference between groups is significant. ANOVA tests indicated that there were no other significant differences related to purpose orientation across age categories.

**Table 6**

*Purpose Orientations Across Demographics (Age)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>21 years old</th>
<th>22 years old</th>
<th>23 years old</th>
<th>24 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$n$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-oriented (OO)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6.394</td>
<td>0.538</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented (SO)</td>
<td>5.318</td>
<td>1.074</td>
<td>5.236</td>
<td>1.012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 20-year-old respondents are omitted because no members of this group indicated that they had a sense of purpose (M $\geq$ 5.0).

Results in Tables 5 and 6 answer Research Question 3 and suggest that purpose orientation does not significantly differ across the demographic markers of gender, race, and parental educational background. However, OO purpose orientation differs significantly across age groups, specifically between 21 and 23.

**Quantitative Results Summary**

The quantitative results of the study indicated that degree of purpose and purpose orientation did not differ significantly across the demographic markers of race, gender, and family educational background. However, overall degree of purpose and purpose orientation did differ significantly across age groups, particularly regarding participants who were 20 and 22/23 years old (sense of purpose) and 21 and 23 years of age (OO purpose orientation). This significant finding confirms the need to explore further student experiences that prompt the
development of purpose and specific purpose orientations over time. Overall, the quantitative results demonstrate the importance of studying purpose using an ecological approach, given the lack of relationship between most demographic markers and sense of purpose and purpose orientation. The second qualitative phase of the study, described below, answered this call by exploring the development of purpose through semi-structured interviews with eight purposefully selected participants.

**Qualitative Results**

Responses to the quantitative survey allowed for the purposeful selection of interview participants who indicated that they had some degree of purpose (M> 5.0 on Finding Purpose Subscale) and a strong leaning towards an OO or SO sense of purpose (via the Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale). Using stratified rank set sampling, I identified a pool of candidates for interviews who met these characteristics, and eight students responded to my request for a semi-structured interview about their sense of purpose. Below, I provide an overview of the qualitative sample participants. Next, I address the two qualitative research questions by highlighting themes revealed from qualitative interviewing and subsequent data analysis.

**Qualitative Sample**

Eight survey respondents were purposefully selected to participate based on their responses to quantitative questions related to their sense of purpose and purpose orientation. Interviewees demonstrated some degree of purpose (M> 5.0 on Finding Purpose Subscale) and a strong leaning towards either a SO or OO purpose orientation via the Categories of Purpose Subscale. Several participants had identical scores upon ranking the students by their SO and OO purpose orientations. As such, I selected a group of qualitative participants who were as demographically diverse regarding race, gender, parental education as possible while prioritizing
participants with strong leanings towards either SO or OO purpose orientation. Given the ecological grounding of the study, it was critical to diversify the voices and collect the qualitative stories of students with varied demographic experiences.

Table 7 indicates the demographic markers of the eight purposefully selected interviewees. Four interview participants were skewed towards an OO sense of purpose, while four demonstrated a SO sense of purpose. I interviewed a total of five female-identified students and three male-identified students, and there was an even distribution of first-generation and continuing-generation students. Finally, three students identified as Students of Color, while the remaining five students identified as White.

Table 7

**Qualitative Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Participant Education Level</th>
<th>Purpose Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Continuing-generation</td>
<td>OO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelica</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student of Color</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>SO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>OO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>SO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student of Color</td>
<td>Continuing-generation</td>
<td>SO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Continuing-generation</td>
<td>OO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mireia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student of Color</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>OO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Continuing-generation</td>
<td>SO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* After the semi-structured interviews, students were asked to self-select a pseudonym used in the final report to ensure confidentiality. These names are reflected in this table and throughout the report.

**Research Question 4**

The fourth research question asked, *How do graduating participants make meaning of their pathways to purpose?* The study operated from Malin et al.’s (2003) definition of pathways such that they “offer both supports and obstacles, and they determine what opportunities a young
person will encounter. They can influence the education and job choices young people make and affect their direction” (p. 194). Thus, through interviewing, I sought to identify the supports and obstacles connected to graduating college student development of purpose.

The eight qualitative participant’s interviews provided insight into four intersecting pathways to purpose, including the contexts of family, the collegiate environment, employment experiences, and religious spaces. All interview participants indicated that their families and collegiate settings somehow played a role in developing purpose. Additionally, graduating students noted the importance of both on and off-campus employment opportunities in the development of purpose, with SO participants taking on more business-related roles and OO participants taking on caregiving and helping jobs. Finally, for both OO and SO participants, religious communities presented opportunities for volunteer work and underscored the value of serving others and the community. Below, I discuss each pathway, highlighting illustrative quotes that accentuate the four pathways as uniquely formative in meaning making related to sense of purpose.

**Family Contexts.** Family environments were formative spaces prompting purpose development among all participants (OO and SO). Students recounted both positive and negative familial experiences that supported understanding of their purpose and discussed the intersection of familial race/ethnicity and its implications on purpose. Below, I highlight several student stories, connecting the family context and meaning making related to purpose.

**Positive Familial Influence.** Most of the participants spoke candidly about their families' positive impact on their sense of self and purpose, but this was particularly prevalent among the OO interviewees. For instance, when asked about her parents and their influence on her purpose of helping others, Blake simply stated, “Both my parents definitely are superheroes. I know a lot
of kids say that, but the things I have seen my parents do for others are amazing.” Likewise, in
discussing his mom’s influence on his purpose, Alfred recounted, “So my mom largely did
(volunteering), at least at first to get my brother and I involved in volunteer work to give us a
better understanding of the world at large.” Similarly, Mireia discussed her admiration for her
late father’s giving spirit:

My dad was always giving. He used to have his own business, and he always gave
everybody an opportunity for a safe place, a job, which is really important when you're
arriving here and trying to really get your resources and money. He was always giving to
them.

For Blake, Alfred, and Mireia, observing their parents as helpers and volunteers within their
familial contexts shaped their purposes grounded in helping and giving back to others and their
communities.

**Negative Familial Influence.** Two of the eight students (both SO) indicated that
challenging family circumstances and parental divorces shaped their sense of purpose. For
Rebecca, visiting her dad (diagnosed with bipolar disorder) on weekends with her brother
(diagnosed with ADHD) grounded her purpose in being a relationship builder and mediator. She
recounted:

I was in the middle, making sure that everything was fine. So, that made me mature a lot
faster than a lot of my friends. I kind of had to grow that emotional intelligence to be like,

“Okay, this is not okay, but we're here, and we have to do this, so let's figure it.” I think

that was pretty foundational for me in terms of my identity.

Similarly, Brian’s parents’ divorce was formative and seemed to ground his SO sense of purpose
and focus on personal success. He offered:
My parents got divorced when I was in middle school...I spent a lot of time, like, focusing on myself in high school. Since I had family issues in high school, I did not have a great time personally, so I had to focus on myself a lot.

For both Rebecca and Brian, challenging familial contexts revealed skills (for Rebecca) and coping mechanisms (for Brian), which served as pathways to meaning making and purpose.

**Familial Influence Among Students of Color.** For the three Students of Color within the sample, familial race and ethnicity were pivotal. In discussing her purpose, Mireia’s Latinx identity was inseparable from her goals. She stated:

> I think my purpose is to really be a positive impact, not only to youth but also to the community, and be able to help people—especially the Latinx community since I really do feel close to them. My family, I know their story and how they arrived from Mexico, and it was for the best for me and my sisters.

Similarly, Angelica referenced her Latinx family dynamic and cited her mother’s lack of English proficiency as motivating her to become an advocate and a “voice for the voiceless.” She recounted:

> [People] hear her accent, and they’re like, “Oh, she doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t speak English properly,” but literally, my mom is smart as hell...Like someone can disrespect my mom, and my mom will not challenge them. I’m not going to be passive as my mom. I’m seeing my mom as a role model for this identity that I now have.

Finally, Justin, who indicated that he was biracial within the quantitative survey and is denoted as a Student of Color within this study, discussed his family’s Armenian and Jewish heritage and how these identities connect with his purpose:
I’m half Jewish and half Armenian. And both sides are very people-oriented. We’re very family-oriented; we’re very pro-helping each other. Partially because it's just naturally ingrained in the culture, but partially because both sides endured genocide. So, it's really cool because, you know, it's just like we are so tight-knit in family, like culturally growing up, and that just kind of stuck with me morally.

Mireia’s, Angelica’s, and Justin’s stories indicate that the familial pathway to purpose is inextricably influenced by race and ethnic background. It is important to note that none of the White students discussed race or ethnicity as influencing their development of purpose, highlighting the unique experience that Students of Color have in navigating purpose within the familial pathway. This finding aligns with Yosso’s (2005) theory of Community Cultural Wealth, which affirms the cultural capital Students of Color bring to the collegiate context. Yosso (2005) specifically highlighted “familial capital,” which recognizes the personal human resources that Students of Color draw from their extended family and community networks that contribute to positive outcomes.

**Family Context Summary.** Collectively, interviews revealed that the family pathway is formative in influencing sense of purpose, whether the familial environment was positive or not. While three OO participants (Blake, Alfred, and Mireia) cited familial commitments to helping that influenced their desire to serve others, the two SO students indicated that their handling of challenging family circumstances informed their purpose by revealing skillsets and coping mechanisms. Finally, the intersection of race and ethnicity on the familial pathway was clear from the stories of the Students of Color in the qualitative sample, who each discussed the ways their family’s cultures shaped their values, goals, and purpose.
Collegiate Environment. Across identity markers and demographic factors, all graduating participants cited their college experience as influential to their purpose development. Below, I discuss the specific experiences students noted as fundamental to their meaning making and sense of purpose, including academic spaces and assignments, relationships with collegiate peers, experiences as first-generation college students, and co-curricular contexts.

Academic Coursework. Participants most readily discussed how their experiences within academic affairs refined their purpose. For instance, in discussing the way his coursework influenced his desire to help others through politics, Alfred suggested:

Taking like a wider range of courses, especially in humanities and social sciences, you do get a sort of better picture – like not only are these things systemic but there’s like mechanics to what puts people in bad positions and how those mechanics work.

Similarly, in discussing how she found purpose in education rather than political science, Angelica cited coursework:

There were classes where I was like, “Bro, I have to get into the schools.” I realized that if I want to make a change in this world, it starts in the classroom because, quite frankly, teachers are the ones that really have an impact on how kids develop…So, if I want to make that change, and I want to break those barriers, and I want to challenge authority or whatever I want to do – that's where I start.

Likewise, in discussing how her major change from sociology to women and gender studies impacted her purpose, Mireia suggested, “That has really helped me move into my purpose of helping people, especially through the courses I’ve taken. They have really impacted that and really helped me shape and mold my future, my dreams, and my purpose.” Collectively, it was
clear that the college educational environment presented the opportunity for participants to refine their purpose due to their academic coursework and exposure to new ideas and possibilities.

**Academic Assignments.** In discussing the importance of the collegiate environment as a pathway to purpose, four of the eight participants discussed specific academic assignments that changed their thinking and influenced their purpose development. All the assignments cited included the opportunity for students to select an area of interest and explore and reflect on that topic for course credit. For instance, Rebecca specifically mentioned ongoing reflection exercises in a small-group communication course where her professor asked her to consider how the course topics applied to her life. Through these assignments that encouraged her to analyze her relationships, she realized the importance of earning respect from others as a primary purpose and value. Likewise, Mireia discussed a sociology assignment where she was allowed to explore a passion area – the impact of the pandemic on Latinx families. In reflecting on the project, Mireia asserted, “It also helped me discover, and it really opened my eyes about how families were affected and how possibly I could help.” Finally, Angelica similarly discussed a writing assignment that strengthened her purpose of reforming educational spaces. She specifically discusses her concerns about military recruitment in high schools and the research about the military’s exploitation of financially insecure high school students within low-income communities (Furumoto, 2005):

I was taking a writing course, and we were able to choose whatever topic we wanted, so I chose to talk about the military and, interestingly enough, I found out that the military and school districts literally have a business contract … So it's just kind of like little things like that, little loopholes that I found and I said “No, we're not going to continue
with this. It is wrong, and I’m going to make sure that whatever school I’m in charge of that this doesn't happen because it's unacceptable.

Collectively, this recounting of meaningful assignments indicated that opportunities for students to choose topics personal to them within their coursework served as a pathway to purpose refinement and development.

**Influence of Collegiate Peers.** In addition to discussing the critical role of academic affairs within the collegiate experience, several participants cited opportunities to interact with different types of people whose diverse backgrounds introduced them to new ideas. For instance, Blake offered:

> A lot of my [college] friends are not from my hometown, so it's nice getting that different perspective of where they grew up, like how they value their friendships and just seeing like how we can like grow together and like help support each other into our future endeavors.

Likewise, Justin discussed how he enjoyed being surrounded by college peers who have a variety of skill sets that he can lean on to help him reach his goals. He indicated, “I always have somebody that can help me with something if I have an issue. If I can’t solve it myself, I know somebody who can.” Similarly, Rebecca discussed how introductions to new peers made her reconsider and refine her purpose of earning respect from others. She asserted:

> I started making really, really true friends and devoting time to people who lifted me up instead of making me feel bad about myself. And I think that was probably the turning point in college… So, it made me more selective about the people I wanted to spend my time with because I was thinking more about what I was getting out of a relationship and not just putting into it.
Interestingly, Brian indicated that his friends shared similar values (rather than introducing him to new perspectives) and discussed his goal to make friends with *different* values systems. He stated:

> My closest friend definitely is motivated by money, and we both really want to go into business together…I would like to have more friends who are as focused on helping other people. I think, like everyone wants to be a good person, but we are in college and preoccupied.

Overall, the qualitative interviews suggested that being surrounded by like-minded and diverse peers allowed students to reconsider how they relate to others and who they hope to be.

*First-Generation College Students.* Notably, all four first-generation college participants discussed the challenge of navigating the college context without prior familial educational knowledge. However, these students each cited college as formative to their purpose development, regardless of their challenges. For instance, Brian and Blake noted that their parents did not understand the rigor of college and discussed the conversations they had with family to help them understand the new experiences they were having and the pressures they were facing. Additionally, Mireia specifically cited her experience as a first-generation college student as foundational to her purpose of supporting other Latinx first-generation college students. She asserted:

> So, at the end of the day, I was kind of left alone to navigate around and try to discover what I really wanted to do, who I was, and what exactly it is to be a college student… I started realizing that if I’m struggling, I can only imagine other students, other Latinx students, that are also struggling who are first-generation trying to get into college.
Likewise, Angelica’s status as a first-generation college motivated her to go into education and pursue her purpose of helping others as a teacher. She stated:

My dad dropped out of school at sixth grade… so my family overall definitely told me like, “Yeah, we're not doing that. You’re going to do the complete opposite.” So, guess what, I am going to go into education. I’m going to go to school. I’m going to find something that's going to allow me to go into a career path and actually, you know, not have to settle for less because I’m not going to settle for less.

Collectively, the first-generation participants indicated that their purposes were influenced by their college experience as they navigated and overcame challenges and gained exposure to new ideas through coursework and diverse peers.

Co-Curricular Involvement. Participants made an essential distinction between experiences in academic affairs and student affairs without naming them as such. When asked to discuss the collegiate experiences (if any) that influenced their sense of purpose, all participants began by discussing their experiences in class within academic spaces with faculty members and academic advisors. Some students also discussed co-curricular experiences when probed, but these experiences were primarily grounded in student affairs employment experiences, not within involvement in student organizations or programming. Lack of participation for Mireia and Blake may have been the result of their commuter status. For instance, Mireia stated, “It is a little hard for me to be a part of [student affairs activities] since I am a commuter. I sometimes feel like I don't get to really enjoy the resources and everything that [the University] provides.” One exception came from Angelica, who discussed her involvement within a national Latinx sorority, which was foundational to her decision to pursue education as a feasible career choice, despite her parents’ disapproval. She asserted:
I am in a sorority and these women – let me tell you something, the women in this organization are literally mainly educators like I have principals, I have teachers, I have special education teachers, I have school counselors, I have social workers, I have everything…So, these women further like push me into my thing of being a teacher.

Except for Angelica’s discussion about this involvement experience within student affairs, the other mentions of student affairs came in employment opportunities which I discuss as a unique pathway below.

**Collegiate Environment Summary.** Overall, graduating students within the college of liberal arts indicated that the collegiate context was fundamental as a pathway to purpose development, both within academic and student affairs spaces. The experiences revealed the importance of specific coursework and assignments, involvement with student organizations, interactions with diverse and like-minded peers, and being mindful of the unique experiences of commuting and first-generation college students.

**Employment Experiences.** Graduating students overwhelmingly cited employment opportunities on and off campus as spaces that refined or cultivated their sense of purpose. Interestingly, the students aligned with an OO purpose orientation tended to take on caregiving and helping employment roles, whereas the SO participants indicated business-related opportunities. Specifically, among the OO students, Blake discussed her work at a senior living facility and an after-school program, Mireia discussed working for a community center and a non-profit providing pandemic relief, and Maggie discussed private tutoring and babysitting. Among the SO participants, Rebecca discussed her role in supporting operations of the student union, Brian discussed his full-time role as a paid marketing intern, and Angelica discussed her crafting entrepreneurial endeavors. Overall, there was a clear division in employment
opportunities among the SO and OO participants, indicating that employment opportunities aligned with purpose orientation and served as a pathway to the development of purpose and subsequent purposeful living. Below, I provide an overview of the on and off-campus employment opportunities discussed among participants, highlighting student stories and quotations, highlighting how these experiences served as a pathway to purpose and meaning making.

*Off-Campus Employment.* Three OO participants referenced their off-campus employment and made specific connections between their work and purpose. Maggie specifically discussed her passion for nannying and her fulfillment in supporting children and their families through the pandemic. She explained that this experience strengthened her commitment to pursuing a career in education. Likewise, Blake discussed her experience working at an after-school program and how she lives her purpose of helping others in this work. Blake specifically discussed her commitment to being a teacher who prioritizes student health and wellness over academic content. She asserted, “It isn’t even about teaching the content. Do they feel comfortable talking to me as people? Do they have somebody at home they can talk to? Again, I want to be a role model for them.” Similarly, Mireia discussed her two jobs and how the roles fulfilled her purpose. She offered:

I just help students with their homework and pretty much just encourage them to their fullest ability for their academics and be a support system for them. Especially because a lot of them are first-generation, or they have recently arrived from Latin America or Mexico.
This employment experience explicitly connects with Mireia’s ultimate purpose and desire to affect change in the Latinx community. For Maggie, Blake, and Mireia, their off-campus employment supported their sense of purpose and validated their future career pursuits.

**On-Campus Employment.** On-campus, most of the employment opportunities held by students were paraprofessional roles in co-curricular or student affairs spaces. Three of the eight students worked as Orientation Leaders at some point in their college careers (2 SO, 1 OO). Brian, an SO participant, reflected on both employment in student affairs opportunities and his specific orientation experience:

Most people in student affairs are there because they want students to thrive and like, you know, reach their goals, and do whatever. So, like being an Orientation Leader, I felt like I had both sides of the coin. Like I had like the professional staff wanting us to do the best we can, be the best people we can…But then also, as an Orientation Leader, I really wanted to show the first-year students what our school is and how they can thrive.

Brian’s quotation highlights how student affairs employment supported his desire to help others. Likewise, an OO participant, Maggie, suggested that being an Orientation Leader aligned with her purpose of helping others, and the supervisory staff modeled how she wanted to lead in the future. She stated, “I think being an Orientation Leader was one of the best things I ever did. I loved [my supervisor] incredibly and seeing everything she did as a leader.” Similarly, Justin recounted his positive experience as an Orientation Leader and in other employment roles in student affairs and described how these experiences connected to his purpose of making other people happy. He asserted:

This past year, I worked as an Orientation Leader, so obviously, I was helping orient the newbies, and I thought that was really cool… I worked for a different office every year,
but it was a consistent sense of making other people happy, making other people feel like they belong, and making sure everything runs smoothly… I think being a positive presence really helped everybody else, you know. Even on the worst of days, I always try to make someone smile at least once a day.

The Orientation Leader on-campus employment experience, which was notably over-represented among participants, clearly served as a space where students refined what was essential to them in determining purpose-aligned career paths. Orientation Leaders may have been over-represented because they were familiar with the principal investigator’s name through their on-campus employment interactions and thus more likely to respond to requests for interviews.

Employment Experiences Summary. Overall, employment opportunities, both on and off-campus and among OO and SO participants, existed as a contextual pathway promoting student refinement and development of purpose. Notably, while on and off-campus work served as a pathway to purpose, students most often commented on the people and supervisors who made their work meaningful on their college campus. I highlight these relationships as ecological factors in discussing Research Question 5.

Religious Spaces. Six of the eight participants (3 OO and 3 SO) referenced religious communities in their formative years when describing their purpose development, whether these religious communities remained an active part of their lives as college students. Below, I discuss the role of religious communities as a pathway supporting meaning making and purpose development.

Commentary on Religion. Interestingly, it was necessary to participants that they were not portrayed as religious conservatives. For instance, Rebecca stated:
I grew up in the Church. I am not Catholic or anything like that. My family is very non-denominational, kind of progressive Christian, like my pastor is a female, and we married gay couples in my church. You know that kind of progressive Christianity.

Likewise, Alfred uttered, “And I still go down [to church] for holidays or to help out, but not nearly as frequently as I did like 10 years ago. There's a number of reasons for that…” Similarly, Maggie indicated, “I grew up religious, but not like super religious,” and Justin made it clear that he was “not religious at all.” Regardless, for these students, religious spaces were highlighted as places where they developed purpose and refined their values, whether currently religious or not.

**Religious Spaces and Values.** When responding to the interview question related to when their purpose first developed, four participants indicated that some of their earliest memories stemmed from experiences in religious communities, mainly guided by parents or grandparents. For instance, Alfred stated, “I helped out with some minor things at church because growing up, I went a fair bit…The church was sort of early exposure to like volunteer stuff, through that community.” Similarly, Maggie reflected on the role her religious community had on her purpose, “I’ve always had the idea of just giving back to others, which has always been something positive.” Likewise, Rebecca indicated that her exposure to networking began at church. She offered:

I grew up with very progressive grandparents and parents who just wanted me to get out in front of people and learn things and be part of things. My grandfather was very involved in the church that I grew up in. He was in choir, he worked on the finance team, he was a deacon, he was doing all this stuff, and since my mom was always at work, he would bring us with him to go and volunteer at the soup kitchen and the Salvation...
Army… so he was always telling us, like “Alright, come on. Let's go. We're going to meet people, and we're going to go out there, and you're going to do stuff.”

Finally, Justin, who indicated that his family was not religious, suggested that his purpose of making others happy connected to church involvement and spiritual practices. He stated:

We would go to the churches, and we would go to the synagogues, and we would be there, despite not necessarily sharing the same beliefs, as the family. In the Armenian tradition, 40 days after a funeral, we meet up again, just to reevaluate, stay connected with the family, and we would always go to those.

For Alfred, Maggie, Rebecca, and Justin, religious communities provided foundational values connected to their purpose, regardless of whether the student identified as OO or SO.

Religion-Adjacent Experiences. Interestingly, two participants discussed religious communities that impacted their belief systems without being a part of them or connected to them by family. For instance, Brian indicated that his lack of religion informed how he thought about his identity. He asserted:

I don't know what happens in the afterlife, so I just try to be a good person, like I’m not a very religious person, so the afterlife is just a mystery to me. I just want to help [people] achieve what they think they need to do in this life because I don't see a point in being anything but a good person trying to help other people.

While Brian was not a part of a religious community, he seemed to be questioning his belief system and how being a good person in this life may affect him in a future life or afterlife. Also mentioning a religious space as tangentially related to her purpose, Angelica discussed a formative service opportunity offered by a church in her community. She recounted:
There was a church that just needed help sorting things out to send over to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, so [my high school] chose the White kids to go. And I put an emphasis on their identity because Puerto Rico is not a home to them. Puerto Rico is a vacation spot, so I was incredibly offended and incredibly emotional about the fact that [my teachers] who made the decision to send these other kids [to Puerto Rico] knew me. They knew how distressed I was after the hurricane. They know Puerto Rico is my home, and the fact that they chose [my White classmates] over people that see the country as a home was a big problem, so I called them out on it.

Angelica indicated that this experience, which occurred within a church community (albeit not her own), “changed her life.” The experience of not being chosen for this church volunteer opportunity made her realize her purpose of being a “voice for the voiceless.” For both Brian and Angelica, religious experiences or church communities played a role in supporting meaning making and purpose development, even though neither student indicated that they were actively engaged in a church community.

*Religious Spaces Summary.* As a pathway to purpose development, religious spaces provided students with access to a values system that they incorporated into their self-concept, mainly when guided by parents or grandparents into and through these communities. Although many graduating students were quick to separate themselves from conservative religious values, their childhood religious experience nevertheless served as a pathway to purpose and meaning making.

*Research Question 5*

The fifth research question asked, *How do the ecological factors of family influence and collegiate experiences inform student understanding of purpose?* Across interview participants,
the ecological factor most prevalently discussed in their purpose development was dynamic and formative relationships, described as proximal processes by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007). Qualitative analysis revealed four distinct relationship groups informing student understanding of purpose, two within the familial context (parents and grandparents) and two in the collegiate context (faculty and on-campus employment supervisors). Below, I discuss each of the four relationship groups and how they informed the interviewees’ understanding of purpose.

Parents. The influence of individual relationships with parental figures was fundamental to graduating student development of purpose, with students discussing their parents' role in their understanding of purpose before being probed about familial influence across every interview. While some of the participants discussed their parents as a collective, recognizing their mutual impact on personhood and development of purpose, many students focused on one parent (either a mother or father) who was particularly influential. Below, I provide examples of both cases, highlighting the significant role of relationships with parents on graduating student development of purpose within functional and dysfunctional family units.

Parents as a Collective. Two of the eight participants candidly described their relationships with parents in the collective, rather than explicitly discussing their mother and father as separate entities. Blake, who depicted her parents as “superheroes” and “role models,” highlighted the way her parents would “stop whatever they’re doing to be there for other people.” While Blake describes her parents as exerting a joint positive influence on her understanding of her purpose, Angelica depicted how her parents collectively attempted to influence her career path and purpose. She recounted:

So, my parents are strict. When I was in high school, they were guiding me in life, but they weren’t allowing me to get off that path to explore. It was like I had to be on this
path, and it was like a straight path… So, I went [to college], and sophomore year, I was like, “Yo, this really is not for me.” And I was like, I want to change to education, and I couldn't find a way to tell my parents.

Blake and Angelica’s cases indicate how relationships with parents (referred to as a collective) influence student understanding of purpose as an ecological factor in both supportive and challenging ways.

**Maternal Influence.** Several participants highlighted their relationships with their mothers in informing their sense of purpose. Both Maggie and Alfred discussed their moms' value of volunteer work, which encouraged them to get involved in projects that would impact their communities meaningfully. In addition, they acknowledged their mothers' role modeling this behavior within educational and church communities. Both OO and motivated by helping others, Alfred and Maggie indicated that their mothers were highly influential in their current focus on supporting and serving their communities. Justin, an SO participant, also highlighted his relationship with his mom in informing his purpose. However, instead of valuing helping others, Justin’s mom emphasized individualism and personal happiness. He recounted:

> My mom always told me to pursue my own happiness, and I think that allowed me to realize that everyone should be living their lives the same way. So, I think I wanted to help others, raise others up not necessarily because of something that she said, but having me focused on me, realizing that other people should also be focusing on them.

Relationships with mothers across OO and SO participants were formative, but their influence inspired different purpose orientations. The same was true for relationships with fathers, as described below.
**Paternal Influence.** Relationships with fathers also had an innumerable impact on student understanding of purpose. Most notably, Mireia discussed her admiration of her father’s charitable spirit and how his memory informs her purpose. She asserted:

I also really admired my dad...he would always look out for other people, and I think that really impacted how I decided to help other people and be a part of the community. I just wanted to pretty much make him proud, make my family proud and be an asset to the community, and be able to help other families out who experienced the same thing that I did.

Alternatively, Maggie and Brian discussed their fathers’ financial motivations. Maggie, OO, decidedly wanted a different life than the one she saw her father leading. She stated, “Seeing my dad working in like finance and business and just stressing over the stock market, I think I had always kind of known that I’d never really wanted to go into something with business.” In contrast, SO Brian indicated that his relationship with his father informed his purpose of striving for career and financial success. He offered:

But [my dad] doesn't seem like he's really motivated by money, but he always really emphasized the value of like education and like making sure you have a good career, obviously like hopefully it leads to money too.

Overall, for Mireia, Maggie, and Brian, relationships with fathers inextricably influenced how they understood their sense of purpose, informing their purpose orientation and future career goals.

**Influence of Divorce.** The two participants who experienced parental divorce described how the experience influenced their relationship with their parents and how these relationships
informed their sense of purpose. Rebecca, who was raised by a busy single mother and visited her bipolar father on weekends, described:

> Looking at my mom, who was very relational and will sell her soul for anyone, and my dad, who is incredibly analytical and smart and very intelligent but has no people skills at all, I try and take what's good out of both of them, so that I’m able to network and talk to people. But also stay intelligent enough to know that when I need my time, I can't give time to someone else.

Rebecca’s statement underscores her ability to reconcile relationships with her family (albeit dysfunctional) and how they informed her purpose of networking and earning respect from others. Similarly, in discussing his parents’ divorce, Brian discussed how the dynamic relationships with his parents (and mother specifically) shaped his purpose. He asserted:

> I didn't talk to my mom for like two years. Now, I think I’m pretty close with her again and like the fact that we can come back together. Well, it’s different, you know. But I’m good with everyone in my family now, so the fact that I know they all cared about me, even though they were all struggling too. I guess that kind of plays into why I want to help people.

For both Rebecca and Brian, relationships with parents, stemming from the adverse experience of divorce, prompted reflection of how these connections influenced how they saw themselves, others, and the world. Ultimately, parental divorce and the relationship fallout uniquely informed Rebecca and Brian’s understanding of their purpose.

**Grandparents.** Relationships with grandparents (both living and passed) were common themes across interviews, inspiring participant understanding of purpose and identity
development. Below, I include illustrative examples of the role of grandparents as well as the experience students had with grandparents passing that contributed to sense of purpose.

**Grandparents and Values.** When Rebecca’s family moved in with her “progressive” grandparents following her parents’ divorce, she indicated that her grandmother and grandfather demonstrated the value of networking and volunteering within their church community. Rebecca described these early church networking opportunities as fundamental to her purpose development and distinctly recognized her grandfather’s role in encouraging her to engage in these communities. Likewise, in discussing his grandparents, Alfred suggested, “They're probably some of the closest family I have in terms of the amount of time spent over the years.” Alfred talked in detail about one of his grandmothers, who lived a block away and inspired in him a commitment to “politics and local involvement,” both of which are fundamental to his sense of purpose.

**Influence of Grandparent Loss.** Two participants discussed the loss of their grandparents as exceptionally fundamental in their understanding of purpose. Maggie began discussing her grandmother by describing their similarities, “Everybody loved this woman, she was like the same as me, like she was just so chatty, like everyone had a funny story with her.” Upon her grandmother’s death amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Maggie’s family received cards that reinforced Maggie’s understanding of her purpose in helping others through teaching, which her grandmother modeled. She offered, “It was really nice to know like what an impact she had on everyone…She really was always going above and beyond. She was really good at making connections with people, and she was a teacher actually, too.” In a similarly fundamental role, Blake discussed the strong relationships she had with her grandparents and the guilt she felt at
her inability to care for them when they passed during her time in college. In the initial questions about the development of purpose, Blake offered:

Through my college experience, I’ve lost grandparents, and they were a big part of my adult development….When I lost [my grandmother]. I kind of reflected how much was I really there for her when she was declining….I feel like I didn't really do a lot or as much as I should have with helping, so I feel like because I wasn't really there for them, or what I feel would have been enough, I want to be there for others.

For both Maggie and Blake, grandparent losses shaped their purpose, as they reflected on the impact these individuals had on their development and how losses led to the refinement of purpose.

**Faculty Members.** All eight interviewees indicated that relationships with faculty members were critical to understanding purpose. In most cases, the faculty member who informed the student’s purpose development also served as their Academic Advisor. Below, I provide examples and quotations highlighting the critical role faculty members played as ecological factors contributing to graduating students' sense of purpose.

**Positive Faculty Actions.** Several students gave examples of faculty members going above and beyond to support student success, demonstrating actions that the graduating students wanted to role model in the future. Interestingly, the pandemic framed these experiences and indicated how professors had extended grace and flexibility during this difficult time. For instance, Justin shared a story during one of the university’s remote semesters when he shared his struggles with his professor. He shared:

I told her, “I’m not getting any of your assignments in this semester. I can't do this. I don't even have the motivation to shop for food.” She drove to my apartment and brought me a
month's worth of food, and she said, “Hand in your assignments when you can,” and that is just like the kind of energy that I want to reflect on to the world.”

Similarly, Blake discussed her advisor’s provision of grace when she had fallen behind in her coursework over the past semester and her appreciation for her professor’s outreach. She recounted:

My advisor had a really big influence. It's just remarkable watching her. I was falling a little bit behind with my schoolwork for her class, and I just said, “Listen, I feel comfortable being transparent with you. I was having a very rough week. It was my fault. I will do everything I can to get back on track, but I really appreciate you reaching out to me.” Most professors, in that case, would just be like, “Here's a big fat zero. Tough luck,” but she was just like, “Get it in when you can. Let me know if you need anything else.”

In both cases, faculty members showed students grace and kindness, which inspired them to give back in similar ways. These experiences shaped both students’ understanding of their purpose and role modeled actions that students hoped to emulate in their careers and lives. These positive experiences may have resulted from the covid environment and align with Kono and Taylor’s (2021) finding that faculty members operated from a heightened ethos of care during the pandemic.

**Faculty Career Support.** Interviewees also indicated that their faculty members were critical in suggesting and encouraging the pursuit of career paths that aligned with student passion and purpose. For instance, Mireia discussed a specific professor who helped her connect her purpose and a future career path. She asserted, “Dr. X really helped me discover what field of work would work best for me. And I always expressed to her what I wanted to do, who I wanted
to be, and she always encouraged that and said, ‘Yeah, go for it.’” Similarly, Angelica recounted an experience she had during her first semester that changed her academic and life trajectory. She shared:

I have an advisor, and she's my advisor, and my first semester freshman year, she told me, “You're going to be a teacher.” I said, “No, I’m not. I don't want to be a teacher,” she said, “You're gonna be a teacher.” So, when I finally made the switch, and I told her I switched my major and I’m majoring in teacher education, she was so ecstatic… I have a really deep connection with her, and I like I’m forever grateful for her. Because if it weren't for her, like literally planting that seed in my head freshman year, it probably would have taken me a little longer to get into education.

Likewise, Maggie recounted an instance where a faculty member encouraged her to align her passions with her career path:

But [specific professor] is an absolutely incredible woman. I adore her…She is just somebody who's very good at explaining things simply but not making you feel stupid about it. I remember when I was thinking about the Spanish double major. I don’t want to say she convinced me per se, but like I remember when I was telling her about everything I wanted to do, and she like really sat down with me and was just like, “Well, why don't you change your major to Spanish education?”

Across these cases, graduating students shared stories of faculty members investing in them and encouraging them to consider how their purpose aligned with a career path that would be fulfilling. Without these pivotal individuals, students indicated that they would have lacked clarity around purposeful post-graduation plans.
**Faculty Career Trajectory Influence.** Additionally, interviewees indicated that their professors’ career trajectories inspired them as they considered how their purposes would align with their career paths. For instance, when considering a future career in teaching, Alfred mused on how his professors applied their values to their work. He reflected:

> You know, it can be a personal experience. It can be a lot of fun. You can learn different things in different ways with different people that have interesting personalities...You can really make something out of that, and it's a much better experience.

Similarly, Rebecca discussed how her professors modeled a personal and professional balance that she hoped to role model. She offered:

> I love [specific professor]. She is one of the most like intellectual people I’ve ever met my entire life. She's one of the ones who's inspired me to go more into a corporate world before getting my doctorate degree… [Another professor] is the same way. Both of them are so analytical and prescribed and very technical, and all those kinds of ways in the best way, but also have like family life and children and relationships with people… I so admire that so much because you have that balance, and that's what I want.

For both Alfred and Rebecca, becoming faculty members exists as a possible career path, so these graduating students were inspired by seeing their faculty members pursue purpose in ways that felt relatable. Consequently, the faculty members modeled the career trajectories that students hope to emulate, influencing student understanding of their purpose.

**On-Campus Employment Supervisors.** Within the collegiate context, many of the interviewees highlighted the role of on-campus supervisors in influencing understanding of purpose. As articulated by Burnside et al. (2019), “In addition to playing a professional managerial role, supervisors often serve as mentors and advisors to students” (p. 36). Likewise,
while on-campus roles existed as paid employment opportunities, participants indicated that their supervisors were committed to their development, career readiness, and purpose. In discussing the attributes she looked for in an on-campus supervisor, Maggie suggested, “I’m not gonna talk to my advisor about a Friday night, but I should be comfortable enough that we can talk about stuff that’s going on in our lives.” This sentiment was consistent across participants who discussed the supervisors who influenced their understanding of purpose across student affairs and academic affairs contexts detailed below.

**Co-Curricular Supervisors.** Many student interviewees discussed their employment within different co-curricular or typical student affairs departments and shared stories about their supervisors’ influence on their development. Two interviewees highlighted their supervisors’ role in supporting their self-oriented purpose orientation. In discussing his role as a Resident Assistant, Justin talked about values imparted on him by his Resident Director that he incorporated into his self-concept and sense of purpose. He stated:

[My Resident Director] was awesome and always said, ‘Look, put yourselves first. Live.’

He would always tell us, ‘Live your life.’ In our specific meetings, he said, ‘You need to put you first,’ and there was just a very heavy emphasis on individual first.

As one of the SO participants, it was clear that Justin’s supervisor heavily influenced Justin’s purpose grounded in living life to the fullest. Similarly, Rebecca, also SO, discussed the emphasis her supervisor within the university’s student union placed on prioritizing the self. She recounted:

[My supervisor] has kind of been trying to teach me this year how to say “no” to things…I am definitely someone who overextends because I enjoy doing [the work], but then I overcommit to things, and I get tired. I’m like, “Oh, but I really enjoy the things
"I'm doing.” She's like, “Yeah, but you're going to enjoy them less when you're exhausted.” So, she's been a mentor for me in that way.

In both cases, student affairs supervisors encouraged students to consider their own needs first before attuning to the needs of others, which aligned with the students’ self-oriented sense of purpose.

**Other Campus Paraprofessional Work.** Outside of student affairs, students also shared stories of instances when their supervisors invested in their personal development within academic affairs. For example, Brian discussed an on-campus marketing and communications internship and his strong relationship with his supervisor, who became a “mentor” for him. He recalled, “Since I interned with her, we meet up every like couple weeks, and I just update her about life and like work and everything, and yeah, she's definitely has been there for me.” Like the reflections from students discussing their supervisors in student affairs, Brian emphasized the importance of his supervisor’s investment in him and his life. Likewise, Rebecca, who worked within an academic college, discussed the support she received from her supervisors. She offered:

> The Dean’s office administrative staff took me under their wings once I started in the ambassador program, and they were always really good about saying like, “Oh, how are classes going? How’re things going with that?” But I started to run into roommate issues and problems with my health and with my family and all kinds of things like that, and they were always here to be like, “Listen, if you need time, take time, if you need to talk to somebody, talk to me.” So, that's always been something that I’ve looked up to.
For both Brian and Rebecca, having supervisors who engaged with them about their personal lives and goals was fundamental to their understanding of their purpose and more important than their work in the role itself.

**Qualitative Results Summary**

The qualitative results of the study indicated that graduating students within the college of liberal arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic developed purpose through four pathways and because of relationships with four distinct groups of people within their familial and collegiate contexts. While experiences and outcomes differed across purpose orientations (OO and SO), the four intersecting pathways of family contexts, the collegiate environment, employment experiences, and religious spaces, and the four relationship groups of parents, grandparents, faculty, and on-campus supervisors remained consistent. Overall, the qualitative results highlight the rich experiences that inform graduating student sense of purpose and convey the importance of employing an ecological mixed method approach.

**Mixed Methods Results**

The final phase of the study represents the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data within the study’s explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Overall, triangulating data from the primary quantitative phase and the second qualitative phase demonstrated convergence. However, upon triangulation, some cases required additional investigation as results revealed some level of contradiction. Below, I answer the sixth research question with triangulated data, representing results in a joint display, highlighting convergence and surprising results.

**Research Question 6**

The sixth and final research question asked, *In what ways do the interview data from graduating participants related to ecological pathways to purpose provide greater context for*
the quantitative results related to sense of purpose and purpose orientation? This mixed methods question called for the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings, which resulted in comparing qualitative findings and significant quantitative results, assessing the quantitative survey given qualitative findings, and connecting purpose orientation with interview responses related to sense of purpose. I address each of these areas below.

**Triangulating Significant Quantitative Findings.** The only statistically significant quantitative finding indicated that older graduating students had higher degrees of purpose and purpose orientations when compared to younger graduating students within the sample, particularly among participants who were 20 and 22/23 years old (sense of purpose) and 21 and 23 years of age (OO purpose orientation). Of the eight students interviewed, six were 21 years old, and two were 22 years old at survey completion. In the qualitative phase of the study, the eight participants primarily focused on significant shifts in purpose that occurred in adolescence (pre-college) rather than during their time in college. While there appeared to be a consensus among participants that purpose refinement occurred in college through engagement with diverse peers, coursework, and relationships with faculty and supervisors, the qualitative findings did not provide further context into experiences that specifically occurred between the ages of 20 and 22/23 that led to significant shifts in degree of purpose or purpose orientation.

**Triangulating Quantitative Survey and Qualitative Findings.** Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings provides insight into the appropriateness and usefulness of survey measures. Within the current study, qualitative results broadly provided anticipated context to quantitative survey responses. However, many students surprisingly discussed the role of religion and faith within their semi-structured interview, a domain that was notably absent from the quantitative measure. While “faith” and “service to a higher power” are clearly defined
categories and domains of purpose within Malin et al.’s (2008) *Youth Purpose Interview* Codebook, Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale* is void of references to religion. Given that engagement in religious contexts played a significant role in the lives of the graduating students and served as a primary pathway supporting purpose development, future use of Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale* should include “Serve God/a Higher Power” as an option to align with the findings of the current study and Malin et al.’s (2008) *Youth Purpose Interview* Codebook. In doing so, researchers may find greater convergence in triangulating quantitative and qualitative findings.

**Triangulating Quantitative and Qualitative Purpose Orientation.** Overall, the qualitative responses informed the quantitative results related to purpose orientation. However, interview responses provided unique insight into the student experiences that informed their purpose orientation, which were not as definitive as they initially appeared in the quantitative data. Probing into seemingly contradictory remarks provided insight into the nuance of purpose orientation, demonstrating the importance of giving students space to share their stories and offer ecological context for quantitative survey responses. The following sections depict triangulation graphically using a joint display and describe contradictory and surprising results.

Table 8 represents the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. The first column shows purpose orientation gleaned from responses to the quantitative survey, and the second column displays the a priori deductive coding of category and domain of purpose based on Malin et al.’s (2008) *Youth Purpose Interview* Codebook (Appendix H). The third column includes an illustrative quote from the participant’s semi-structured interview to justify my determination of the student’s category and domain of purpose. Applying Malin et al.’s (2008) categories and domains of purpose revealed patterns that provide additional insight into the qualitative sample.
Whereas all participants who demonstrated an OO purpose orientation via the quantitative survey indicated that their purposes were grounded in helping others, just one of the interviewees with a self-oriented purpose via the quantitative survey indicated that their purpose was grounded in helping others. Most interviewees (six of eight) indicated that they would fulfill their purpose within the domain of their future careers. The two exceptions, Alfred and Justin, demonstrated a lack of clarity around career goals. Finally, triangulation led to surprises in three cases described below.
Table 8

Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Orientation</th>
<th>Category / Domain</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred (OO)</td>
<td>Help others / Political</td>
<td>“[I’m interested in] trying to help folks and trying to do work, that means something…and that extends to my political preferences and activities as well.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake (OO)</td>
<td>Help others / Career</td>
<td>“However, I can have a positive impact on people, helping them, or teaching them, something, without being like a traditional teacher, that's something I’ve always been shooting for.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie (OO)</td>
<td>Help others / Career</td>
<td>“Something I’ve found is I like making others feel welcome. I guess to say as a “purpose” sounds weird, but then I guess it also kind of influences like why I want to go into education.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mireia (OO)</td>
<td>Help others / Career</td>
<td>“I do have one goal in the future that I wish to achieve is to create a nonprofit organization, where I help children in Mexico and Latin America get their education, so I think that is my biggest goal and purpose in life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelica (SO)</td>
<td>Help others AND Earn respect of others/ Career</td>
<td>“Education is incredibly important to me, so I believe that my purpose is to ensure quality education for black and brown students… So, as I go up the ladder, I want to be able to start introducing policies, start introducing agendas, start introducing anything that I can to ensure that students are getting the quality education that they deserve.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian (SO)</td>
<td>Be successful / Career</td>
<td>“I think money is really important, and success is important… you have to be comfortable yourself before you can help other people... I definitely think the more success that I have personally and more money I have personally, the more I can help other people.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin (SO)</td>
<td>Live life to fullest / Values</td>
<td>“Making other people happy makes me happy, so it's kind of almost a selfish thing…my internal dialogue always ends up with me [thinking] if I help people, it'll make me happy, you know I get that dopamine release when I see other people. I think it's just mutually beneficial. There's this like symbiosis where I’m staying happy, other people are happy, and it just keeps the world turning.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca (SO)</td>
<td>Earn respect of others / Career</td>
<td>“I think building relationships with people who value me and my work is the most important thing to me in my life.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Contradictory Results.** For two participants, initial qualitative replies indicated that there may have been a lack of convergence between SO quantitative responses and OO qualitative responses. Brian’s and Justin’s quantitative surveys revealed that they were SO with purposes grounded in financial success. However, upon the first request for a description of their purposes within the qualitative interviews, both participants indicated that they wished to “help others,” a distinctly OO purpose. It was not until later in their interviews that the participants provided additional insight into their purpose and motivations, revealing their purposes more firmly situated within the SO realm. For Brian, helping others came second to helping himself, ensuring that he had career success that enabled him to build wealth and be “financially comfortable.” Likewise, in Justin’s case, making others happy came second to ensuring his happiness and living his life to the fullest. In both cases, the first portions of the qualitative phase of the study suggested that the quantitative and qualitative data were not convergent. However, the ecological and semi-structured approach to the interview revealed more accurate responses through detailed follow-up questions and references to survey responses in question three. It is possible that the students felt pressure to respond to interview questions with an OO purpose given the social desirability bias or the tendency to answer questions in a way that will be viewed favorably by others (Edwards, 1957). This limitation and others are discussed further in Chapter 5. Overall, while Brian and Justin initially referenced OO purposes, their primary purposes of success and living life to the fullest became clearer throughout their interviews. The illustrative quotations selected for Brian and Justin and depicted in Table 8 reflect this OO/SO nuance.

**Surprising Results.** While Brian and Justin’s quantitative and qualitative responses converged (albeit non-linearly), Angelica’s quantitative and qualitative responses were non-convergent. Angelica’s quantitative survey responses indicated that she had a SO purpose
orientation, with her highest scores on the SO items of Bundick et al.’s (2008) *Categories of Identified Purpose Subscale*. Expressly, Angelica indicated that having a successful career and earning respect were more important than helping others or supporting family and friends. However, within the qualitative interview, it became clear that career success and earning respect were connected to her primary purpose of helping others, particularly within the Latinx community. Angelica discussed an instance when she stood up for the Latinx members of her community post-Hurricane Maria. She recalled:

I was the only Latina who spoke up about it. And I said, “You know what, this is what I want to do.” I want to be in people’s faces and be like, “Look at me. I need you to see me, and I need you to respect me.”

This quotation underscores Angelica’s dual purpose of helping others and earning respect for herself and her community. Similarly, when discussing how she would change the world, Angelica offered:

I wish I could use a little wand to wake people up and influence people to use their privilege to speak up for us because I’m included in that. To speak up for us, because we don’t have the same respect as them…Just because we don't have the same skin tone, just because we don't look the same, just because we don’t talk the same language, we don't eat the same food… we're going to respect each other.

This quotation emphasizes the extent of Angelica’s dual purpose, as she was guided by both a desire to earn respect and help others in her community. It is possible that being a Student of Color from a marginalized cultural group informed this dual purpose, a finding that aligns with Yosso’s (2005) work related to Community Cultural Wealth and requires future research to compare how navigation towards a single purpose differs among White college students. A
mixed methods approach provided critical insight into how Angelica straddles SO and OO purposes. Ultimately, Angelica’s responses within the interview indicated that she was informed and motivated by the SO quality of earning respect and driven by an OO purpose of helping others.

**Mixed Methods Results Summary**

The study’s mixed methods results enrich independent quantitative and qualitative findings and provide direction for future research. In this section, I specifically discussed how triangulation of data prompted a comparison of statistically significant quantitative results with qualitative results, assessment of quantitative measures, and contextualization of graduating student purpose orientation, noting both convergent and contradictory results. Broadly, results indicated convergence such that qualitative findings provided critical context for quantitative findings, demonstrating the value of using mixed methods in the investigation of purpose development.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarized the quantitative and qualitative results from the first and second phases of the study’s explanatory sequential mixed methods design. I provided quantitative results to answer the first three research questions using descriptive statistics, t-tests, and analyses of variance. The quantitative results suggested that the demographic markers of race, gender, and parental educational background did not lead to significant differences in sense of purpose or purpose orientation. The only statistically significant quantitative finding showed that older students had a stronger sense of purpose and purpose orientation, indicating that experiences incurred over time provide insight into sense of purpose and purpose orientation. This finding underscored the value of a mixed methods approach to the study of purpose. Next, I
addressed the two qualitative research questions (4 and 5), centering student voices by sharing their verbatim quotations. Inductive and deductive coding revealed four specific pathways to purpose (family, collegiate, employment, and religious contexts) and four formative relationship groups within the familial and collegiate contexts (parents, grandparents, faculty members, and on-campus supervisors). I triangulated quantitative and qualitative results to answer the final mixed methods research question. While qualitative results did not provide context for significant quantitative findings, triangulation indicated direction for future research and provided context for better understanding student purpose orientation. The next chapter will discuss the results and situate them within the study’s theoretical framework. I will also consider limitations and recommend future research, policy, and practice.
Chapter 5

This study investigated the ecological development of purpose among graduating college students enrolled in a college of liberal arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic. The study’s mixed methods design included a primary quantitative survey and semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight purposefully selected participants. Using this mixed methods design, I gained insight into the ecological development of purpose among eight participants demonstrating self-oriented (SO) and other-oriented (OO) purposes. This chapter will summarize the results, apply findings to the theoretical framework, address limitations, and propose recommendations for future research, policy, and practice within families and higher education.

Summary of Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the ecological factors that contribute to graduating college student purpose development. In employing an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, I leveraged the life experiences of graduating college students and encouraged them to reflect on their lives and opportunities that contributed to their meaning making and pursuit of purpose. Chapter 4 presented the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods findings, providing answers to the study’s six guiding research questions:

1. What purpose orientations are represented among graduating participants in a college of Liberal Arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic?

2. How does degree of purpose differ across demographic markers?

3. Among participants with some degree of purpose, how does purpose orientation differ across demographic markers?

4. How do graduating college participants make meaning of their pathways to purpose?
5. How do the ecological factors of family influence and collegiate experiences inform student understanding of purpose?

6. In what ways do the interview data from graduating participants related to ecological pathways to purpose provide greater context for the quantitative results related to sense of purpose and purpose orientation?

Overall, the study results provide insight into purpose development among graduating college students in a particular context. In response to Research Question 1, findings indicated that graduating college students in a college of liberal arts at a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic leaned towards an OO purpose orientation. Concerning Research Questions 1 and 2, there was no significant difference in sense of purpose or purpose orientation across the demographic markers of race, gender, or parental education background. This finding is hopeful because students across these three demographic markers demonstrated an equal likelihood of developing purpose, regardless of their racial, gender, or parental educational identities. However, there were significant differences across the demographic marker of age, indicating that older students with more life experience had stronger purpose orientations and senses of purpose. This finding supported the study’s mixed methods design and intention to investigate specific student experiences that contribute to the development of purpose over their time in college and their lifetimes. The study’s quan → QUAL design informed the prioritization of qualitative data analysis (Research Questions 4 and 5), which revealed four pathways to purpose (family, collegiate, employment, and religious contexts) and four relationship groups within the collegiate and familial environments that supported purpose development (parents, grandparents, faculty members, and on-campus supervisors). Finally, Research Question 6 required the
triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results, which broadly demonstrated the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings.

Overall, findings indicate the importance of using a mixed methods design to explore the ecological student experience and fully understand the underpinnings of graduating student purpose orientation. Specifically, I intended to identify the mechanisms through which familial and educational contexts cultivate purpose using Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of college student development as a theoretical framework. Below, I discuss the study’s key findings mapped onto the conceptual framework, highlighting alignment and drawing attention to patterns within results.

**Application of Theoretical Framework and Discussion**

In Chapter 2, I presented a student-centered theoretical framework, which integrated Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) PPCT model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector of purpose development to recognize the influence of the other six vectors of the model. The model answered prior calls in the literature to apply an ecological lens to the study of purpose development. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007), understanding development requires investigation into an individual’s ecological systems, including personhood, relational processes, environmental contexts, and evolution over time. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), purpose development is a developmental milestone requiring the careful coordination of beliefs, identity, and relationships to clarify personal and professional goals. The study’s theoretical framework reinforces the necessity of an ecological approach to the study of purpose to understand how contextual influences contribute to meaning making. Broadly, the study’s quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods findings demonstrated alignment with the
study’s theoretical framework. However, the results highlighted the framework’s components of process and context and their strong influence on purpose development among graduating college students in the sample. Below, I will highlight each of the model’s five components (person, process, context, time, and sense of purpose) and discuss key findings.

**Person**

Within the study’s theoretical framework and the broader PPCT model, *person* refers to the individual’s characteristics which interact with the other ecological factors (process, context, and time) to influence purpose. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) specifically delineated three categories within the construct of person: demand characteristics encompassing age, gender, race, and appearance; resource characteristics including mental and emotional skills, knowledge, and experiences; and force characteristics including personality characteristics such as motivation, persistence, and general temperament. Below, I discuss the quantitative and qualitative findings that provided insight into the three elements of person and their influence on purpose.

**Quantitative Phase.** In the quantitative phase of the study, findings indicated that the demand characteristics of race and gender and the resource characteristic of parental educational background did not lead to significant differences in overall sense of purpose or purpose orientation. However, the demand characteristic of age did, in fact, significantly influence both sense of purpose and purpose orientation, indicating that age and accumulated experiences over time influence sense of purpose. The significant quantitative findings demonstrated the interaction of the person’s construct with the additional constructs; over time, individuals interact with different people (processes) and environments (contexts) which leads to refinement and development of purpose and purpose orientation. Overall, quantitative results indicated that
demand characteristics had no significant impact on purpose, whereas force and resource characteristics may profoundly influence purpose development. I discuss the qualitative findings that align with the quantitative conclusions connected to person below.

**Qualitative Phase.** Within the qualitative phase of the study, students alluded to demand, force, and resource characteristics when reflecting on their sense of purpose. Participants were least likely to discuss demand characteristics, with just one student discussing her female identity and only Students of Color discussing their ethnicity as influencing their sense of purpose. Among all discussions of demand characteristics, most were couched within the context of family identity rather than personal identity. In contrast, nearly all students discussed force characteristics or personality traits that they believed connected to their purpose. The SO participants specifically used personality descriptors such as “strategic,” “analytical,” and “extroverted,” whereas the OO participants were more likely to use words like “caring,” “kind,” and “friendly” to describe themselves. Finally, within the qualitative interviews, students were most likely to discuss resource characteristics connected to their privileged identities and mental health as separate and intersecting entities. Regardless of their identities (privileged and marginalized racially and economically), all students noted that they had some degree of privilege that they wanted to leverage to live out their intended purposes. However, most students also recounted times when they struggled and overcame mental health challenges that motivated them to live purposefully. Overall, the qualitative interviews provided keen insight into the person construct and its influence on purpose development.

Although qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that the person construct of the study’s theoretical framework influences the development of purpose and purpose orientation, results suggest that person characteristics did not exist as a primary pathway to purpose when
compared with the more salient impacts of process, context, and time among graduating participants. The following sections will discuss the more notable effect of process, context, and time on purpose development among participants.

**Process**

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007), proximal processes are the primary mechanism through which development occurs, given that these positive interactions are constantly changing and become more complex over time. Among participants in the current study, this assertion held. However, two participants alluded to Merçon-Vargas et al.’s (2020) construct of inverse proximal processes. Below, I will highlight participant references to both proximal processes and inverse proximal processes within the qualitative phase of the study.

**Proximal Processes.** All students eagerly shared stories about the people and relationships that influenced their purpose and purpose orientation. As highlighted discussing Research Question 5 within Chapter 2, relationships with parents, grandparents, faculty, and paraprofessional advisors were the primary mechanisms within the context of families and colleges influencing the development of purpose among participants. Regarding the intersecting influence of process on the other constructs of the PPCT model, participants specifically noted the contexts within which relationships existed and the timing of these relationships in their lives. For instance, students described relationships with parents and grandparents in their childhood and specifically highlighted the role of faculty members and paraprofessional supervisors who played a role in their later years of college. Overall, it was clear that Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) component of proximal processes played a fundamental role in developing purpose and purpose orientation while also influencing the other components of person, context, and time.
**Inverse Proximal Processes.** While Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) model assumes proximal processes positively influence development, Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020) introduced the concept of inverse proximal processes, which are described as increasingly complex relationships that result in dysfunction, rather than positive developmental outcomes. While I investigated both proximal processes and inverse proximal processes within the current study, students more readily discussed the proximal processes that positively influenced their sense of purpose and purpose orientation. However, two SO students specifically highlighted dysfunctional familial relationships that led to negative implications. For instance, within Rebecca’s interview, she specifically noted her dysfunctional relationship with her father, who lives with bipolar disorder. In alignment with Merçon-Vargas et al.’s (2020) assertion, Rebecca noted how her challenging relationship with her father prevented him from positively influencing her life. Similarly, Brian discussed the divorce of his parents and the emotional pain that he and his family experienced because of the family fracturing during his adolescence. His feelings of isolation from his parents and experienced loneliness led to the negative developmental outcome of selfishness. Overall, within the small sample of graduating college participants, Merçon-Vargas et al.’s (2020) concept of inverse proximal processes informed developmental outcomes of two participants, indicating the need for researchers to continue studying inverse proximal processes influencing purpose development in the future.

Among study participants, the theoretical framework’s process construct demonstrated the critical influence of relationships on graduating student purpose development, particularly within the family and collegiate environments. The following section will discuss the construct of context and its impact on purpose development among graduating participants.
Context

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) depict an individual’s context as nested circles encompassing their Microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. When allowed to reflect upon their purposes and purpose orientation within the qualitative phase of the study, students most readily reflected on their Microsystems or contexts where they were active participants. Denoted within Chapter 4 as pathways to purpose, students highlighted the contexts of family, college, employment environments, and religious spaces as particularly formative to their purpose development. As discussed in the previous section, students highlighted the influence of proximal processes, consisting of specific relationships within their Microsystems. Specifically, students acknowledged the impact of their parents and grandparents within their familial Microsystem and the role of faculty and supervisors within their collegiate Microsystem. While students primarily focused on the immediate influences of their familial and academic Microsystems, several participants also discussed their broader Macrosystems and the effect of capitalistic ideals within their wider cultural ethos. Although students did not explicitly use the term “neoliberalism” to discuss these influences, it was clear that neoliberal pressures were present in their Macrosystem and impacted graduating students’ purpose development. As such, I will discuss this intersection of neoliberalism and purpose below.

Neoliberalism and Purpose. As an ideology, neoliberalism describes an economic ideology that prioritizes market rationality, individualism, and return on investment (ROI) (Brown; 2015; Harvey, 2007; Newfield, 2016). Consequently, neoliberalism urges individuals to act as entrepreneurs who constantly invest in themselves to build their brand, increase their capital, and compete in the global marketplace. Critical university scholar Wendy Brown (2015) suggests that higher education is saturated by this neoliberal “market rationality,” where students
are encouraged to act as consumers capitalizing on their educational opportunity to invest in future earning potential. These cultural ideals grounded in individualism, financial success, and competition align with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) macrosystem construct because they exist within the ethos and influence a student’s development and sense of self. Within the study, all four SO participants alluded to their enmeshment in neoliberalism related to their purpose development. In contrast, three OO participants discussed their opposition to neoliberalism in reflecting on their purpose. Below, I will highlight these instances and discuss participant references to a neoliberal macrosystem influencing purpose.

**SO Participants and Neoliberalism.** Notably, there were discussions about neoliberal cultural values among all the SO participants. Both Justin and Brian discussed their enmeshment in individualism. Specifically, Brian discussed his primary goal of ensuring his comfort and then moving to help others. Justin discussed the important individualistic values he learned from a former supervisor and his mother. For both Justin and Brian, neoliberalism materialized in the way that they thought about their future goals and career success. Similarly, Angelica discussed the neoliberal values instilled in her by her parents, particularly regarding her college major and career choice. She stated, “In high school, I did not think about being a teacher because all my life I was told that teachers don't make money, that the career path is a waste of time because you do so much for so little money.” These neoliberal messages received from society, parents, and college counselors prevented Angelica from pursuing her passion for education until later in her college career. Finally, Rebecca, who grew up in a low-income family, believed everyone shared the goal of accumulating financial wealth. In emphasizing her enmeshment in neoliberal ideology, she stated, “I wanted to make millions… I think that’s everyone’s dream.” For all the
SO participants, cultural values grounded in neoliberalism influenced their purpose development and likely connected to their ultimate SO purpose orientation.

**OO Participants and Neoliberalism.** For three OO participants, recognizing neoliberal messages in the contextual ethos was essential to address and dismantle. Alfred specifically questioned assumptions of neoliberalism and discussed his frustration with the neoliberal narrative of scarcity. He stated:

We’re a rich country. We have a lot of money and a lot of resources, but a lot of people get screwed out of what they need. A lot of times, it’s not their fault. In fact, most of the time, it’s not their fault.

Similarly, Maggie acknowledged that her college operated from a “business model,” questioned their notably neoliberal motives, and suggested a more humanistic approach to education and practice. She stated, “Obviously, you need money to operate, but remembering that people are involved in something that could be improved.” This statement underscores Maggie’s understanding of her neoliberal context and her critical analysis of its impact on her experience and development. Finally, in discussing her hopes for a more equitable people-oriented world, Blake asked, “Is money really going to matter in the end? Is that the legacy you want?” Alfred, Maggie, and Blake collectively acknowledged and questioned the neoliberal messages imposed upon them from their macrosystem as they reconciled their OO purposes with career decisions.

Overall, context served as a primary mechanism for graduating students to develop purpose, both through interactions with people in their microsystems and through their neoliberal macrosystem. Context exerted influence on purpose and purpose orientation among participants, but it is important to understand context in terms of its relationship with the other components of
the PPCT model. Below, I will discuss the role of time in influencing purpose development among participants.

**Time**

Participants were asked to reflect on purpose development throughout their lives and time in college within the semi-structured interviews. Broadly, results suggest that purpose among participants developed in adolescence within family through relationships with parents and grandparents and within the collegiate context through relationships with faculty, advisors, and paraprofessional supervisors. Nearly all participants explained specific points in their adolescence (pre-college) when they experienced inklings of purpose and then described college experiences that refined their purposes. Notably, seven of the eight participants acknowledged that they had become less selfish and self-interested over their lifetime, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section related to Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of development. Below, I will highlight how participants discussed time regarding the current global health pandemic and related to purposeful career paths in the future tense.

**Covid-19 Pandemic.** I collected data amidst a global health pandemic during the first semester of in-person coursework and after a year of remote learning. Experiences during this time fell into three categories: personally positive, personally negative, or globally illuminating. Students readily discussed their year of “lockdown” (2020) and how these experiences influenced their sense of purpose. Two students (Blake and Justin) specifically addressed how the pandemic gave them time to reflect, spend time with family, and connect with their goals. In this way, the pandemic positively influenced their sense of purpose. Alternatively, three participants discussed how the pandemic negatively impacted their sense of purpose. For instance, Rebecca discussed the challenge of being an extrovert and a natural networker in a time
when an in-person connection was so limited. Additionally, in discussing the negative influence of the pandemic on her sense of purpose, Angelica offered:

    The Covid-19 pandemic definitely made me lose my purpose – being home, taking online classes, not being able to have that interaction with other Latinos, made me be like, “Yo, I don’t want to do school anymore, I just want to stay home, I don’t want to do anything.” I definitely lost my passion. I definitely lost my vision.

For these students, the pandemic existed as a time when they lost sight of their purpose and goals, preventing them from taking actionable steps towards realizing and living out their purpose. Finally, for three participants, the global pandemic provided them with a new lens on the world. Alfred and Maggie expressly indicated that the pandemic revealed human interconnectedness and systemic inequities that prompted them to help others in their communities. For Mireia, the pandemic was uniquely formative, providing insight into a career serving families impacted by local and global emergencies. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic affected participant development of purpose in unique ways, revealing the importance of an ecological investigation of purpose and the diverse experiences students may have when exposed to similar events at the same time.

**Considering the Future.** Discussing the future as a specific period was a frequent conversation topic among participants. Notably, seven of the eight participants discussed the future in their purpose-driven career goals. In contrast, only one participant (Blake) discussed the future regarding her familial roles as a wife and mother. The remaining participants discussed the future in terms of career aspirations, in both specific and abstract terms. For instance, Brian asserted, “In the future, I want to make most of my money in real estate investing.” Mireia indicated, “I do have one goal in the future that I wish to achieve is to create a nonprofit
organization, where I help children in Mexico and Latin America get their education.”

Alternatively, Alfred discussed the future more abstractly suggested that he wanted to “pontificate” as a historian or a political writer 60 years from now, while Justin simply stated that he wanted to continue learning something new every day of his life. Overall, discussions of time in the future tense indicated a sense of hope and desire among participants to pursue careers aligned with their purpose.

Collectively, the construct of time provided insight into participant understanding of their positionality as emerging adolescents, both aware of their purpose and mindful of impending change as they neared graduation from college. Reflection on time across the lifetime, within the context of college, during the global health pandemic, and in the future indicated the importance of exploring the development of purpose and purpose orientation from an ecological perspective.

**Sense of Purpose**

Results of the study indicate that purpose development requires investigation using an ecological lens such that participants provided insight into the way their identities (person), relationships (processes), environments (contexts) contributed to their development over time. While sense of purpose exists as the center of the study’s theoretical framework, the individual purpose development vector exists within Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) broader student development model and requires coordination of other developmental milestones. The specific development of purpose vector is uniquely informed by the additional vectors of the model, including developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature relationships, establishing identity, and developing integrity. While the eight participants alluded to each of the vectors throughout the interviews, there appeared to be a clear focus among OO participants on the vectors of developing mature
relationships and integrity. In contrast, SO participants highlighted vectors connected to
developing competence and moving through autonomy toward interdependence. Below, I will
draw attention to this distinction with illustrative examples.

**OO Participant Vectors.** Among interviews with OO participants who indicated a
purpose grounded in helping, supporting, and being in community with others, students
discussed the development of mature relationships and the development of integrity connected
with their development of purpose. Both Maggie and Blake alluded to their cultivation of mature
interpersonal relationships. Specifically, Maggie discussed her recent role reversal and how she
had become a caregiver for her visually impaired mother. Likewise, Blake indicated how her
relationship with her boyfriend, who she met in college, supported her development. She stated,
“He pushes me to be my best self, and it’s nice seeing that I can help him be his best self as
well.” Further, in discussing their purpose development, both Mireia and Alfred highlighted
opportunities and experiences that supported the vector of integrity development, emphasizing
congruence of their values and beliefs. For instance, when Alfred discussed his political interests,
he indicated that his values and purpose aligned with his chosen political candidate’s platform. In
similarly highlighting congruence, Mireia addressed the alignment of family values, educational
and research interests, and career goals. For both Alfred and Mireia, purpose development was
inextricably intertwined with their development of integrity and the unity of their values, goals,
and actions. Collectively, among OO participants, cultivation of purpose connected to
Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of development of mature relationships and integrity
development.

**SO Participant Vectors.** Alternatively, the SO participants highlighted the vectors of
moving through autonomy towards interdependence and development of competence. These
vectors might be significant because they align with a more self-oriented approach to purpose development, where the self is prioritized. For both Rebecca and Angelica, earning respect from others was of primary importance in living a purposeful life. As such, it was unsurprising that they acknowledged experiences where they practiced self-direction and emotional independence from their families. For instance, Rebecca specifically discussed the importance of going to a college far from home and the opportunity that the physical distance provided her to develop independence and create community among like-minded peers. Similarly, Angelica discussed a formative moment when she discussed changing her major to education with her parents, who had hoped she would pursue a career in politics or law. In both cases, the students’ stories recognized how they were separating from their families, developing self-direction, and learning to navigate interdependent relationships. Further, both Brian and Justin discussed the development of competence vector in reflecting on their sense of purpose. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), developing competence connects with the knowledge that one can overcome adverse circumstances to achieve goals. Both Brian and Justin’s interviews focused on stories of personal triumphs over adversity and how these experiences informed their sense of purpose. For Brian, coping with loneliness following his parents’ divorce was formative, and for Justin, finding an affirming community in college brought him immense pride. Overall, SO participants specifically highlighted developmental vectors that centered the self in reflecting on their purpose development and purpose orientation.

Overall, the vector of sense of purpose, which is at the epicenter of the study’s theoretical framework, is inseparable and informed by the other six vectors of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) student development model. Although I encouraged students to consider experiences that influenced their sense of purpose within the qualitative phase of the study, both OO and SO
participants alluded to their development across the additional vectors of the model, emphasizing the importance of studying purpose within the larger ecological context of student development.

**Application of Theoretical Framework and Discussion Summary**

Synthesizing Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2007) PPCT model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors of student development within the study’s theoretical framework supported an ecological approach to the study of purpose. Collectively, participants described how person, process, context, and time influenced their purpose while also alluding to their development across the other vectors of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model. Overall, findings indicate that Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2007) components of process and context were exceptionally fundamental in developing purpose, aligning with the PPCT’s prioritization of proximal processes. In conclusion, the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 validates the study results, supporting an ecological approach to the study of purpose development among graduating college students.

**Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

As with any research project, there were limitations to the present study that could be addressed and improved in future research endeavors. In the following sections, I will specifically address the study’s limitations in methodology, analysis, and generalizability and make recommendations that will advance the literature and provide additional insight into the critical role that families and colleges can play in supporting graduating student development of purpose.

**Limitations and Implications of Methodology**

While the study’s design filled a current gap given a lack of mixed methods studies investigating sense of purpose, the study demonstrated limitations in methodology. Specifically,
the study relied on student reflection to recall how their purpose developed throughout their lifetime and college experience. While student stories provided insight into ecologies influencing student sense of purpose and purpose orientation, future studies should consider employing a longitudinal design to explore refinement and development of purpose across time (over the lifetime or across a student’s time in college). A longitudinal design would capture real-time changes in student values, beliefs, and purpose from the beginning of the college journey, after each year, and upon graduation. Likewise, future researchers could consider holding a series of interviews with qualitative participants. The first interview might focus on rapport-building, the second interview might address purpose development in adolescence, and the third interview might specifically concern the development of purpose in college. In doing so, researchers may also combat the influence of social desirability bias, as participants may be more likely to respond accurately (rather than in a manner to be viewed favorably) when they have a stronger rapport with the interviewer (Edwards, 1957). Finally, the current study’s correlational design allowed for the collection of pathways and mechanisms related to purpose development, but an experimental design would provide researchers with data that directly contribute to (or impede) purpose development among graduating students. Specifically, researchers could employ a purpose development curriculum within schools and families and then investigate students’ purpose and orientation development. Overall, using a longitudinal design, implementing a multiple-interview approach, and considering an experimental methodology will advance the purpose development literature and address the present study’s methodological limitations.

Limitations and Implications of Analysis

The most salient analytic limitation is the primary investigator serving as the sole data analyst. While independent data analysis within the quantitative phase of the study presents
limited concerns given the use of the SPSS statistical package, a single qualitative data analyst exists as a limitation. The present study’s qualitative findings result from my subjective interpretation and theming decisions, representing my unique perspective, biases, positionality, and worldview. While I made concerted attempts to be as objective as possible through memoing and bracketing (discussed in Chapter 3), researcher bias and positionality unequivocally influenced analysis and findings. Future research should include additional qualitative data analysts to strengthen conclusions and contribute to the quantitative research notion of interrater reliability. In having different voices and perspectives in qualitative data analysis, researchers will independently review transcripts and bolster conclusions by comparing determined themes.

**Limitations and Implications of Generalizability**

Although results of the study provide insight into the ecological development of purpose among graduating college students, these findings cannot be generalized given that the present study explored the cultivation of purpose among a small group of graduating students within a college of liberal arts at a single large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic. While results indicate that familial, collegiate, employment, and religious spaces serve as contexts providing pathways to purpose through the mechanisms of relationships with parents, grandparents, faculty, and paraprofessional supervisors, these conclusions are specific to the experiences of the eight students who participated in the qualitative phase of the study. To increase the generalizability of graduating college students as a collective, future researchers should explore students’ experiences with different backgrounds and academic disciplines at more diverse educational institutions that vary by size and demographic profiles (Hispanic-serving institutions, community colleges, Historically Black Colleges/Universities, etc.). Additionally, to address generalizability across specific demographic groups, future research may consider specifically
investigating the experiences of graduating students from individual racial and ethnic groups. The study results and the interviews with the two Latinx women indicate that additional research is required to understand better the development of purpose among this specific population across different collegiate settings. Collectively, future research can add both depth and breadth to the study of purpose development with intentional diversification of the participant pool.

**Recommendations**

The study’s results begin to answer questions related to the *how, why, and when* of purpose development among graduating college students. The findings, which suggest that purpose develops within specific contextual pathways and through relationships with key individuals, provide insight into policy and practice decisions that may support student development of purpose within families and higher education settings. Given that prior literature suggests that individuals with a strong sense of purpose live longer, happier, and healthier lives (Jackson & Erving, 2020; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Steger et al., 2009; Windsor et al., 2015), making strides towards greater integration of purpose development in homes and schools is an essential and necessary endeavor. This work is particularly important amidst a global health pandemic leading to adverse outcomes in college student mental health related to anxiety, depression, and stress (Wang et al., 2021). Below, I will present recommendations for practice in universities and families and policy modifications in higher education due to critical findings.

**Practice Recommendations**

Although the study’s findings are specific to the experiences of eight graduating students within a particular institutional context, their collective experiences provide insight into contexts and relationships that broadly influence purpose development in the familial and higher
education contexts. Below, I discuss recommendations for practice in higher education and families to encourage purpose development.

**Higher Education Practice.** Recommendations for higher education practice stem from three specific results. Notably, participants highlighted the value of assignments that gave them the freedom to explore passion areas, the vital role of faculty members in supporting career development, and the formative influence of paraprofessional supervisors in refining sense of purpose. I will discuss recommendations for practice related to these three key findings in the following sections.

**Self-Guided Assignments.** As discussed in Chapter 4, half of the interviewees specifically discussed academic assignments that gave them the freedom to explore passion areas for course credit. Participants excitedly discussed their projects and findings within interviews and explained how these collegiate experiences explicitly supported exploring passion areas and refining purposes. In each case, participants were allowed to investigate a topic of interest tangentially related to their academic coursework and were encouraged to emerge themselves in prior research and current events. Students relished these experiences and reflected on how the assignments exposed them to diverse people and ideas while supporting purpose development. Results indicate that these projects fulfilled the academic outcomes of critical thinking, diversity, and inclusion while encouraging students to become lifelong learners equipped to apply theory to practice. Consequently, it is recommended that faculty members across disciplines include self-guided assignments within their courses. This recommendation aligns with findings from Muhammad et al. (2021), who determined that self-guided capstone courses and projects supported integrative learning and career readiness, particularly among students from underrepresented and underserved groups. Overall, the practice of integrating self-guided
projects within the academic curriculum may provide students intentional space to do the critical work of exploring their purpose while also fulfilling degree requirements.

**Career Development.** In discussing the career advice and support they received in the collegiate setting, none of the eight participants indicated that they had visited their university’s career center. Instead, they highlighted interactions with their faculty members who afforded them career advisement or discussed specific career trajectories that inspired their goals. While faculty members can serve as valuable resources for students, they often do not receive the same access to career development training as professionals working in collegiate career development centers (Sharma et al., 2017). Career centers may consider hosting training with faculty members to support the development of these skills and expertise. Further, students discussed the sincere investment they felt from their faculty members in their career development and their appreciation for their faculty members, suggesting career paths aligned with their passions and purposes. As such, it seems that university career development centers could partner with faculty members to support purpose development and more intentionally increase their focus on purpose and passion in career advisement. Sharma et al. (2017) articulated this distinction in suggesting that career counselors engage in purpose-centered techniques that focus on “the nature of students’ life’s purpose” rather than discrete career paths (p. 112). If implemented, universities may consider requiring a visit to the career development office for all students before graduation to engage in this purposeful work. Overall, results indicate that students are seeking more purpose-driven career support, which strengthens the recommendation to incorporate purpose and passion in career development practice.

**Mentorship in Employment.** A primary factor contributing to participant purpose development within the collegiate context was strong relationships with on-campus employment
supervisors across both student affairs and academic affairs roles. Notably, these connections went beyond the typical supervisee/supervisor relationship with supervisors acting as mentors and supporters for students. As a result of these mentorship relationships, students felt a strong sense of belonging to the institution and refined their values and purposes. While many of the participants in the study stated that they benefited from the privilege of a supervisor who provided mentorship, leadership development, and advisement connected to purpose, it is unlikely that all students working in on-campus employment roles experience these transformative benefits. In researching positive outcomes of campus employment, Gott (2019) indicated, “Higher education practitioners must catalyze learning and development by incorporating leadership development tools in employment” (p. 16). My recommendations are in alignment with this sentiment. Given the valuable lessons on-campus employment opportunities can provide students through intentional mentorship from supervisors, I recommend that all on-campus supervisors receive training and resources to adequately support students in providing purposeful supervision and leadership development coaching. Unfortunately, prior research suggests that while students benefit from intentional supervision grounded in mentorship, universities do not often offer supervisors adequate training or resources (Frock, 2015). However, results of the present study indicate that providing student employment supervisors with additional training and resources is an essential endeavor to support college student development of purpose and success.

**Family Practice.** Providing recommendations for practice within the familial unit aligns with the study's primary purpose to explore purpose development in both colleges and families. Recommendations for practice within the family stem from two specific results. First, participants highlighted the role of their parents as role models in modeling fulfillment of
purpose, mainly through their service to others. Second, throughout interviews, students indicated the critical role of their grandparents in modeling the alignment of values and purposeful living. In the following sections, I will discuss recommendations for familial practice related to these two key findings.

**Purpose in the Nuclear Family.** Among all interviewees, parents significantly influenced overall sense of purpose and purpose orientation in both active and passive ways. In describing their parents’ role in purpose development, some students discussed their observations of parents serving others or doing purposeful work in the community and religious spaces. In other instances, students described specific advice from their parents around values and purpose that influenced their meaning making. In both cases, it was clear that the nuclear family had a fundamental role in fostering purpose development. As such, I recommend that families intentionally incorporate discussions about purpose in regular family conversation by deliberately modeling purposeful living and discussing their purposes readily. Findings indicate that these conversations may be particularly valuable when coupled with engagement in religious spaces. Additionally, parents should consciously attune to their children’s utterances about passions and purpose, which often arise in adolescence. In similarly articulating the vital role of parents in supporting purpose development, Damon (2008) recommends that parents regularly pose questions from Andrews et al.’s (2006) *Youth Purpose Interview* to their children. These pointed questions, which were also adapted and leveraged within the current study (Appendix F), are a helpful template to encourage children to reflect on purpose while supporting them in determining their life’s calling. To support these endeavors in the college context, university departments focused on helping parents and families of students might consider offering
purpose-grounded discussion guides for families to engage with their students regularly about purpose development.

**Role of Grandparents.** When responding to questions about the influence of family on purpose, nearly all participants referenced the role their grandparents played in modeling purposeful living and values alignment. Participants found value in intergenerational relationships. Consequently, I recommend that parents prioritize opportunities for their children to spend meaningful time with grandparents and other older relatives to support their child’s purpose development in adolescence. Prior research suggests that intergenerational relationships with grandchildren and grandparents may have a reciprocal effect. Thiele and Whelan (2008) determined that grandparenting also provides meaning and a sense of purpose for individuals in later life. Notably, they found that a sense of purpose for the grandparents is “not achieved simply through childcare contact with grandchildren. Meaning must be derived, and age-related developmental needs must be met” (Thiele & Whelan, 2008, p. 45). Therefore, in recommending that parents prioritize grandparent time, Thiele and Whelan’s (2008) conclusions indicate that it is also crucial that these intergenerational experiences are developmentally appropriate to support positive purpose outcomes in both parties. The K-12 education system might consider training parents and guardians on the importance of intergenerational childrearing and the value and positive impacts these relationships have on grandparents and students. Likewise, universities might provide intentional programming specifically for the grandparents of college students, offering classes and support to this critical constituent group to strengthen the commitment to purpose development in the higher education setting.

**Policy Recommendations**
Although the study’s findings more readily provide insight into recommendations for practice, the collective experiences of the eight participants also elucidate specific policy recommendations that may contribute to more significant development of purpose among college students. Two key findings inform policy recommendations – faculty academic advisors played a fundamental role in supporting the development of purpose, and general education coursework grounded in the liberal arts contributed to shifts in perspective and refinement of purpose. Below, I discuss policy recommendations within higher education connected to these conclusions.

**Academic Advising.** In discussing the experiences in college that most supported their purpose development, participants quickly addressed the influence of their faculty advisors and other faculty serving in advising capacities. Students indicated that they relied on their advisors for direction in their personal lives and career paths, in addition to their academic coursework. At the large, public university in the mid-Atlantic where I collected data, student reliance on academic advisors seemed to extend beyond the traditional academic advisor job description, resulting in increased demands among already overtasked advisors. According to Fosnacht et al. (2017), academic advisors at public institutions have twice the caseload compared to their peers at private institutions, and first-year students at private institutions meet nearly 15% more often with their advisors compared to peers at public institutions. This data, coupled with the results from participants within the study, indicate the need for policy revisions regarding academic advising resources, particularly at public institutions that are more likely to serve students from underserved communities. In devoting additional resources to academic advising by hiring additional staff, decreasing caseloads, and providing training that will support equitable advising beyond academic course loads, Mu and Fosnacht (2019) suggest that students will have higher grades and self-perceived gains in effective communication, critical thinking, career
development, teamwork, and citizenship. These self-perceived gains experienced among participants connect to the development of purpose as growth in these areas requires the alignment of values, relationships, and actions in alignment with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) student development model. Together, the prior research and the positive outcomes experienced by the participants regarding academic advising indicate the critical need for policy work in higher education to address the current lack of academic advising resources, particularly among public institutions serving marginalized populations.

**General Education.** In their discussions about the specific collegiate experiences that contributed to their sense of purpose, mentions of the value of diverse courses were prevalent among graduating participants. While the college of liberal arts students did not specifically recognize or articulate the value of their general education curriculum, references to coursework indicated that they had appreciated the variety of courses they had taken across diverse disciplines. Specifically, students highlighted how their coursework in the humanities offered new perspectives, made them think differently, and provided opportunities to explore new passion areas. While the large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic that served as the setting for the present study has a robust general education curriculum, scholars within the field of Critical University Studies are concerned that the neoliberalism of higher education will lead to the demise of general education curricula and emergence of vocation specific academic tracks. In discussing this concern, Brown (2015) argued:

> Liberal arts is eroding from all sides – cultural values spurn it, capital is not interested in it, debt-burdened families anxious about the future do not demand it, neoliberal liberal rationality does not index it, and, of course, states no longer invest it in. (p. 181).
Brown (2015) astutely articulated and identified the constituents interested in eliminating general education curricula and colleges of liberal arts. The study results and the correlation that the participants drew between their diverse coursework and their development of purpose oppose this neoliberal argument. Together, findings suggest that colleges and universities ardently defend their general education curricula and implement policies to protect its erosion to support student development of purpose.

**Recommendations Summary**

In this section, I presented recommendations for practice and policy within the contexts of families and institutions of higher education. Results provided keen insight into practices and policies promoting purpose development across broader populations. Given that the interviewees collectively indicated they had a strong sense of purpose (via the quantitative survey), their stories and experiences show the existing experiences and channels within the home and school environments that support purpose development. Perhaps more importantly, participant interviews revealed opportunities to extend and improve *existing* practices and policies such that students with less familial and educational privilege will have equitable access to purpose-promoting experiences.

**Chapter Summary**

The ecological exploration of purpose development among graduating college students is an essential and valuable endeavor given the insight that study results provide into future research, practice, and policy. In this chapter, I offered a summary of the study, discussed results according to the study’s theoretical framework, addressed methodological, analytical, and generalizability limitations, discussed specific directions for future research, and provided policy and practice recommendations to researchers and educators, and families. Given the inextricable
connection between purposeful living, life satisfaction, and overall wellbeing, scholars need to continue studying the ecological development of purpose to determine additional ways families and higher education institutions can support purpose cultivation among young people.
References


https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469


https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2013.11777313


https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.426

https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411412958


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271439

https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1484942

https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13434


https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2011.00767.x

https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2019.0043


https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25i1.2484

https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1716050

https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1225118


[https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006](https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006)
Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Jun 30, 2021, 10:57:43 AM EDT

To: Alexis McCarthy
Parents & Family Relations, Educational Found. & Policy St

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2021-183 Ecological Development of Purpose Among Fourth-Year College Students: A Mixed Methods Study

Dear Alexis McCarthy:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Ecological Development of Purpose Among Fourth-Year College Students: A Mixed Methods Study.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155
Appendix B

Recruitment Communication

Survey Invitation

From: Alexis McCarthy
Subject: Got 10 minutes to spare? Help a doctoral student!

Dear [Name],

My name is Alexis McCarthy, and I am a doctoral student at West Chester University. I am conducting a research study about college students’ sense of purpose for my doctoral dissertation. The study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. I would like to invite you to participate in my study by completing a brief survey.

Participation in the survey will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your sense of purpose.

If you are interested in participating, completion of the survey will take no more than 10 minutes. To participate:

- Click here [Link]
- Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser: [Survey URL]

As a token of my appreciation, all students who complete the survey will be entered in a drawing for one of three $20 Amazon gift cards.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University
AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
Survey Reminder 1

From: Alexis McCarthy  
Subject: Your experience matters to me…a lot

Hi [Name],

Earlier this week, I sent you a survey link to share insight into your sense of purpose for my dissertation study. Your experience is so important to me because I want to better understand sense of purpose among graduating students like you.

If you are interested in participating, completion of the survey will take **no more than 10 minutes**. To participate:

- Click here [Link]
- Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser: [Survey URL]

*As a token of my appreciation, all students who complete the survey will be entered in a drawing for one of three $20 Amazon gift cards.*

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Please know the study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy  
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University  
AMcCarthya@wcupa.edu
Survey Reminder 2

From: Alexis McCarthy
Subject: What’s your purpose?

Hi [Name],

As you come to the end of your time at West Chester University, why not take 10 minutes of your time to reflect on your sense of purpose? Your response will support my dissertation project related to sense of purpose among graduating college students and provide an opportunity for you to reflect.

To participate:

- Click here [Link]
- Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser: [Survey URL]

As a token of my appreciation, all students who complete the survey will be entered in a drawing for one of three $20 Amazon gift cards.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Please know the study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University
AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
Survey Reminder 3

From: Alexis McCarthy  
Subject: Requesting just 10 minutes of your time!

Hello [Name],

This is your LAST chance to reflect on your sense of purpose through the completion of a brief 10-minute survey. Your response to the survey will support the completion of my dissertation project and for that, I am most appreciative.

If you are interested in participating, completion of the survey will take no more than 10 minutes. To participate:

- Click here [Link]
- Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser: [Survey URL]

As a token of my appreciation, all students who complete the survey will be entered in a drawing for one of three $20 Amazon gift cards.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Please know the study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy  
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University  
AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
Interview Invitation

From: Alexis McCarthy
Subject: 1-hour interview. Get $20 Amazon gift card.

Hello [Name],

Remember that survey you filled out about purpose a few weeks ago? I have some follow-up questions for you about your purpose! The conversation will take about 1 hour and will be via Zoom, and the study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. As a token of appreciation, I will provide you with a $20 Amazon gift card in exchange for your time.

If you want to participate, please select an interview time using the following link: [LINK]

Attached, you will find an Informed Consent Form to review should you choose to participate in the 1-hour interview. We will review this again before starting our recorded conversation. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University
AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
Interview Reminder 1

From: Alexis McCarthy
Subject: Share your story and make $20. It’s that simple.

Hello [Name],

I just wanted to extend another invitation to you to participate in a brief 1-hour interview in exchange for a $20 Amazon gift card. The interview will take place via Zoom, and I will ask you questions about what’s important to you and give you the opportunity to reflect on your purpose. Sounds fun, right?

If you are interested, please select an interview time using the following link [insert link] before [date].

Attached, you will find an Informed Consent Form to review should you choose to participate in the 1-hour interview. We will review this again before starting our recorded conversation.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Please know the study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University
AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
Interview Confirmation

From: Alexis McCarthy
Subject: Interview Confirmation – [Date and Time]

Hello [Name],

This is a friendly reminder that you have signed up to participate in an interview with me about your sense of purpose next week. You are scheduled to complete your interview on [date] at [time]. Our conversation will be conducted via Zoom using the link and password below:

- [Zoom link]
- Password: [Zoom password]

Please come to the interview having reviewed and signed the attached Informed Consent Form and email it to me at Amccarthy@wcupa.edu. We will review it again before we begin recording, and I will provide you with the link to the $20 Amazon gift card at the end of the interview.

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule for this interview. As a reminder, the study has been reviewed and approved by the WCU IRB Protocol # FY2021-183. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. I am really looking forward to our conversation!

Sincerely,

Alexis McCarthy
Doctoral Candidate, West Chester University
AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form – Quantitative Survey

Project Title: Ecological Development of Purpose Among Graduating College Students: A Mixed Methods Study

Investigator(s): Alexis McCarthy; Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Alexis McCarthy as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose. Your participation will take about 10 minutes to complete the survey.

There is a minimal risk of survey questions related to sense of purpose eliciting anxiety or discomfort from participants. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Alexis McCarthy. Overall, benefits outweigh the minimal risks. Participation in the study will present an opportunity for you to reflect on your personal sense of purpose, and this research will provide insight into fourth-year college student purpose.

The research project is being done by Alexis McCarthy as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this Informed Consent Form.

You may ask Alexis McCarthy any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
   - The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Complete survey.
   - Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer several questions.
   - Your total time commitment will be approximately ten minutes.
   - You may be contacted for a 1-hour follow-up interview as a result of your responses, which will have a separate Informed Consent Form.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No
4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   - The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. Survey questions related to sense of purpose may elicit anxiety or discomfort from participants.
   - To minimize these risks, participation is voluntary, and we will allow you to opt to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.
   - If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Alexis McCarthy.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - There are no significant benefits to participants. However, participants may enjoy the opportunity to reflect on their sense of purpose in completing the survey.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - Your records will be private. Only Alexis McCarthy, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (faculty advisor at WCU), and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will **not** be used in any reports.
   - Records will be stored in a password protected external hard drive to be kept in a locked cabinet in 212 Lawrence Hall, West Chester University.
   - Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   - To show appreciation for your time, upon completion of the survey, you will be entered in a drawing for a chance to receive one of three $20 Amazon gift cards. Drawing winners will be notified after the survey’s closure.

8. **Who do I contact in case of research related injury?**
   - For any questions with this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Alexis McCarthy at 610-283-6533 or AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or OMohajeri@wcupa.edu

9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
   - Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information and after removal, the information may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or the legally authorized representative.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I have read this Informed Consent Form, and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

   - Yes, I agree to participate in this study
   - No, I do not wish to participate in this study
Appendix D

Survey Questions

Q1 Informed Consent Form

Project Title: Ecological Development of Purpose Among Graduating College Students: A Mixed Methods Study

Investigator(s): Alexis McCarthy; Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Alexis McCarthy as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose. Your participation will take about 10 minutes to complete the survey.

There is a minimal risk of survey questions related to sense of purpose eliciting anxiety or discomfort from participants. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Alexis McCarthy. Overall, benefits outweigh the minimal risks. Participation in the study will present an opportunity for you to reflect on your personal sense of purpose, and this research will provide insight into fourth-year college student purpose.

The research project is being done by Alexis McCarthy as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this Informed Consent Form.

You may ask Alexis McCarthy any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study? The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose.

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following: Complete survey. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer several questions. Your total time commitment will be approximately ten minutes. You may be contacted for a 1-hour follow-up interview as a result of your responses, which will have a separate Informed Consent Form.

Are there any experimental medical treatments? No

Is there any risk to me? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. Survey questions related to sense of purpose may elicit anxiety or discomfort from participants. To minimize these risks, participation is voluntary, and we will allow you to opt to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Alexis McCarthy.
Is there any benefit to me? There are no direct benefits to participants. However, participants may appreciate the opportunity to reflect on their personal sense of purpose as a result of completing the survey.

How will you protect my privacy? Your records will be private. Only Alexis McCarthy, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (faculty advisor at WCU), and the IRB will have access to your name and responses. Your name will not be used in any reports. Records will be stored in a password protected external hard drive to be kept in a locked cabinet in 212 Lawrence Hall, West Chester University. Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

Do I get paid to take part in this study? To show appreciation for your time, upon completion of the survey, you will be entered in a drawing for a chance to receive one of three $20 Amazon gift cards. Drawing winners will be notified after the survey’s closure.

Who do I contact in case of research related injury? For any questions with this study, contact:

Primary Investigator: Alexis McCarthy at 610-283-6533 or AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or OMohajeri@wcupa.edu

What will you do with my Identifiable Information? Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information and after removal, the information may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or the legally authorized representative.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

Q2 I have read this Informed Consent Form, and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

- Yes, I agree to participate in this study.
- No, I do not wish to participate in this study.

Q3 Please specify your age:

Q4 How do you describe yourself? (Please select **ALL** that apply):

- [ ] American Indian or Native Alaskan
- [ ] Asian or Asian American
- [ ] Biracial or Multiracial
- [ ] Black or African American
- [ ] Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- [ ] Middle Eastern or Arab Origin
- [ ] Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander Native
- [ ] White

- [ ] My identity is not listed above (please specify):

______________________________
Q5 Which term do you use to describe your gender identity?

- Agender
- Genderfluid
- Genderqueer
- Intersex
- Man or Male
- Non-binary
- Trans Man
- Trans Woman
- Woman or Female

- My identity is not listed above (please specify):
  __________________________________________________
Q6 What is the **highest level of education** earned by **any** of your parents (including biological, adoptive, step, foster, guardian, etc.)?

- Some high school credits, but no high school degree
- High School Degree or Equivalent (GED)
- Trade/Technical/Vocational Training
- Some college credits, but no college degree
- Associate’s Degree
- Bachelor’s Degree
- Master’s Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree (MD or JD.)
- Other (please specify):

__________________________________________________________
Q7* Please indicate your **degree of agreement** with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand my life’s meaning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participate in one or more organizations that serve my purpose in life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am always working toward accomplishing my most important goals in life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a purpose in my life that reflects who I am.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a life purpose that says a lot about the kind of person I am.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q8* The **purpose of my life** is to...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help others</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the right thing</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make money</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be successful</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the world a better place</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earn the respect of others</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a good career</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support family and friends</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q9 Are you interested in participating in a **1-hour follow-up interview** in exchange for a $20 Amazon gift card?

○ Yes

○ No

*Question blocks 7 and 8 (Q7 and Q8) were adapted from the Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al., 2008) and used with permission from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, funded in part by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth.*
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form – Qualitative Interview

Project Title: Ecological Development of Purpose Among Graduating College Students: A Mixed Methods Study

Investigator(s): Alexis McCarthy; Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri

Project Overview:
Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Alexis McCarthy as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose. Your participation will take about 1 hour to complete the interview, and you will receive a $20 Amazon gift card as compensation for your time.

There is a minimal risk of interview questions related to sense of purpose and contextual influence eliciting anxiety or discomfort from participants. Students will be referred to on-campus resources if necessary. Overall, benefits outweigh the minimal risks outlined for the proposed study. As a result of participation in the interview, there is an opportunity to reflect on personal sense of purpose. The research project is being done by Alexis McCarthy as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this Informed Consent Form.

You may ask Alexis McCarthy any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
   - The purpose of this mixed methods study is to develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to fourth-year student development of purpose.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Complete interview.
   - Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer several questions.
   - This study will take about 1 hour of your time.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   - The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. Interview questions related to sense of purpose and contextual influence may elicit anxiety or discomfort from participants. Students will be referred to on-campus resources if necessary. Overall, benefits outweigh the minimal risks outlined for the proposed study. If you
become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Alexis McCarthy. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - There are no significant benefits to participants. However, participants may enjoy the opportunity to reflect on ecological factors that have contributed to their purpose in participating in the interview. The opportunity to share insights and stories with an attentive and interested listener may help students reflect further on their own experiences and better understand their sense of purpose and its underpinnings.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - Interviews will be recorded via Zoom and transcribed verbatim for future analyses. Your records will be private. Only Alexis McCarthy, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (faculty advisor at WCU), and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will **not** be used in any reports, and you will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be used in reports at the end of the interview.
   - Records will be stored: Password Protected File/Computer. Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   - To show appreciation for your time, upon completion of the interview, you will receive a $20 Amazon gift card.

8. **Who do I contact in case of research related injury?**
   - For any questions with this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Alexis McCarthy at 610-436-2698 or AMcCarthy@wcupa.edu
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or OMohajeri@wcupa.edu

9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
   - Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information and after removal, the information may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or the legally authorized representative.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

Subject/Participant Signature: _______________________________ Date: ________________

Witness Signature: __________________________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix F

Interview Protocol

1) Can you start by telling me a little about yourself? How do you spend your time these days?
   * 
2) Would you say you have a purpose in life? If yes, what would you say is your purpose in life? *
3) In the survey you completed last month, you indicated that (purpose orientation) was important to you. Does this still feel accurate?
4) Is there anything else that really matters to you in terms of your life purpose? *
5) Let’s talk a little more about each of the things you just mentioned. Can you talk about why [X] is important? [Ask about each one separately] *
6) You’ve been talking about things that are important to you, such as [X, Y, and Z]. Of these, can you say which is most important to you? *
7) How did [X] first become important to you? When was that? *
8) Has the Covid-19 pandemic changed or influenced your sense of purpose?
9) What role did your family play [X’s] importance, if any?
   - Are there any relationships within your family that stand out?
10) Are there experiences from college that have influenced [X]? If so, can you talk about these experiences?
   - Are there any relationships from your college experience that stand out?
11) How has the importance of [X] changed over your time in college?
12) How has the importance of [X] changed over your lifetime?
13) If you could wave a magic wand and change the world, how would it look?
14) In the Informed Consent Form for this interview, you read about choosing a pseudonym to protect your privacy. Do you have a pretend name in mind that I can use in my final report?

*Questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 were adapted from the Youth Purpose Interview (Andrews et al., 2006) and used with permission from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, funded in part by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth.
Appendix G

Interview Notetaking Matrix

- Participant Name:
- Participant Pseudonym:
- Date and Time:
- Location:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Responses – Clarification and requests for examples</th>
<th>Observations – Sensory data</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix G. The notetaking matrix assisted with bracketing of researcher reactions from student utterances.
### Appendix H

**A Priori Codes from Malin et al. (2008)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Purpose</th>
<th>Domains of Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Help others</td>
<td>1. Family and friends (immediate or extended family, family of origin or future family, individual family members, close friends, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Serve God/a Higher Power</td>
<td>2. Academic achievement (doing well in school, getting good grades, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Make the world a better place</td>
<td>3. Values, beliefs, faith (spirituality, religiosity, guiding belief(s), etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Change the way people think</td>
<td>4. Career (work, job, future career, or present job, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Create something new</td>
<td>5. Country (USA or other countries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Fulfill my obligations</td>
<td>7. Arts (theater, ceramics, painting, singing, playing an instrument, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do the right thing</td>
<td>8. Service (community service, helping others, helping the community, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Live life to the fullest</td>
<td>9. Political/social issues (women’s rights, gay rights, anti-war interests, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Make money</td>
<td>10. Other hobbies or leisure activities (gaming, gardening, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Discover new things about the world</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Earn the respect of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Support my family and friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Serve my country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Have fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Be successful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Have a good career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix H. Categories and Domains of purpose derived from the *Youth Purpose Interview Codebook* (Malin et al., 2008) and used with permission from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, funded in part by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth.