



WHO ARE YOU BECOMING?

Connecting Students with Their Future Selves



Adapted with permission from Search Institute. Minneapolis, MN
©2015 by Search Institute, www.search-institute.org

©2016 Jostens, Inc. Printed in USA. 160591 (RK-221)



A few years ago, I interviewed students in a large high school. They told me that “due tomorrow, do it tomorrow” was the school’s unofficial motto. One senior contrasted this attitude with her own approach to education:

Student: I almost feel like some students aren’t looking far enough ahead. They’re just thinking about “right now.” Like, “I want to be with my friends” or “I just don’t want to do it.” But if you think about your future, why wouldn’t you do something that would benefit you in the future?

Me: Why do you think about the future?

Student: I know the future is bigger and more important than high school... The classes you take in high school, even though you might not get to spend as much time with your friends, they’ll have a huge impact on your future. Whereas, other things in high school—like taking the easy classes—won’t benefit you in the future at all.

That student has internalized what a lot of research has shown: Students become more engaged in and focused on learning when they connect it with their “future selves”—their idea of what they hope to become and their sense of purpose in life. This Renaissance Kit offers insights and tools to help educators motivate students by encouraging them to articulate their aspirations and then take actions now that help them work toward that positive future.

—Kent Pekel, Ed.D.
President and CEO, Search Institute

“(Many youth) only appear to be doing well, and far too many seem stuck, rudderless and lacking a sense of what they want to do with their lives. They may be keeping out of trouble and achieving what we ask of them, but actually they are drifting, without a clear sense of direction.”

—William Damon, Stanford University

Having hope, purpose and optimism about the future matters for student learning and development. At the same time, those hopes don’t come true on their own, and there’s a major gap between what students hope for their future and what they actually achieve. However, research highlights important strategies educators and families can use to close that gap.

Future Aspirations and a Sense of Purpose Matter

A sense of hope, purpose and optimism for the future are associated with many positive outcomes for students. As Stanford University’s William Damon concluded, “Study after study has found a person’s sense of life purpose to be closely connected to virtually all dimensions of well-being.”

For example, across a range of studies globally, a sense of hope or optimism has been found to be associated with:

- Increased academic achievement
- Greater self-confidence and self-esteem
- Increased motivation in school and other areas of life
- Reduced stress and depression levels
- Increased problem-solving abilities
- Greater life satisfaction
- Decreased emotional and behavioral problems
- Reduced risk-taking and violence

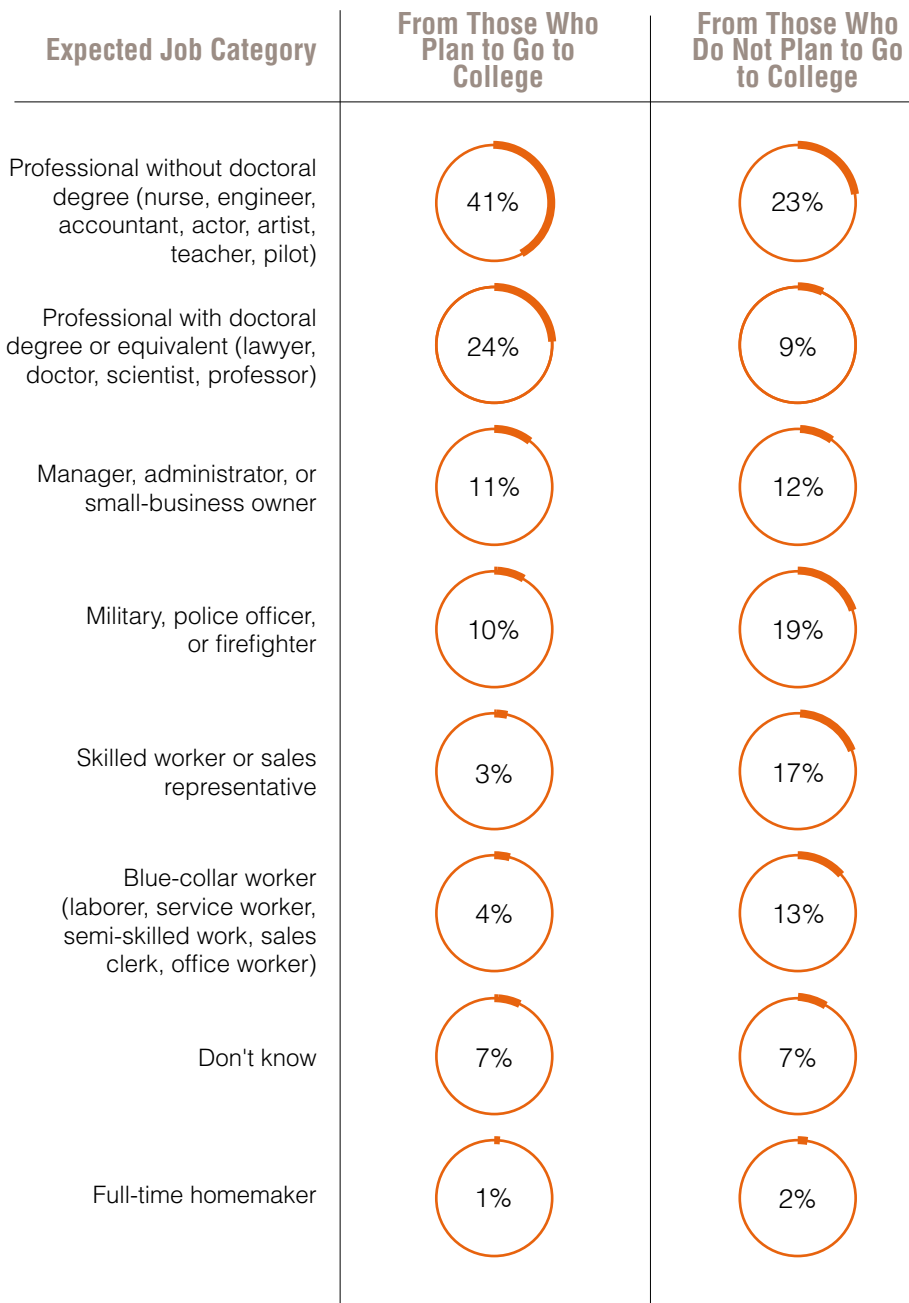
Students’ High Hopes

Most U.S. students have high aspirations and expectations for their own futures. A 2015 Gallup survey of 901,714 students in grades 5 to 12 found that the vast majority agrees or strongly agrees they will graduate from high school (93%) and believe “I have a great future ahead of me” (88%), they “will find a good job in the future (86%),” and they “have many goals” (79%).

Expectations for Working at Age 30

Most high school seniors expect to be in professional jobs when they are 30 years old, according to a 2012 national survey of 2,383 high school seniors. However, the expectations are quite different between those who do and don’t plan to go to college. Here is a comparison of the kinds of work seniors expect to be doing when they are 30 years old, depending on whether they plan to go to college.

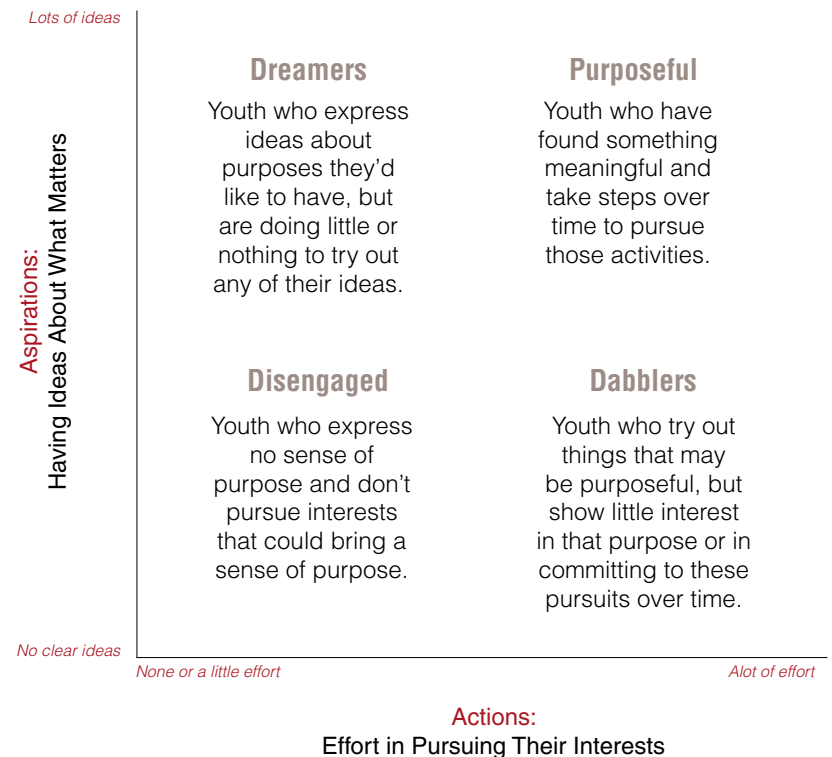
It is important to note that 82% of these high school seniors planned to go to college. Yet we know from other research (shown below), many who plan to go to college are unlikely to go to college or complete their college education.



Aspirations + Action = Purpose

A sense of purpose is central to positive aspirations for the future. Psychologist William Damon defines purpose as an “intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self.” Furthermore, “the pursuit of purpose can organize an entire life, imparting not only meaning and exhilaration but also motivation for learning and achievement.”

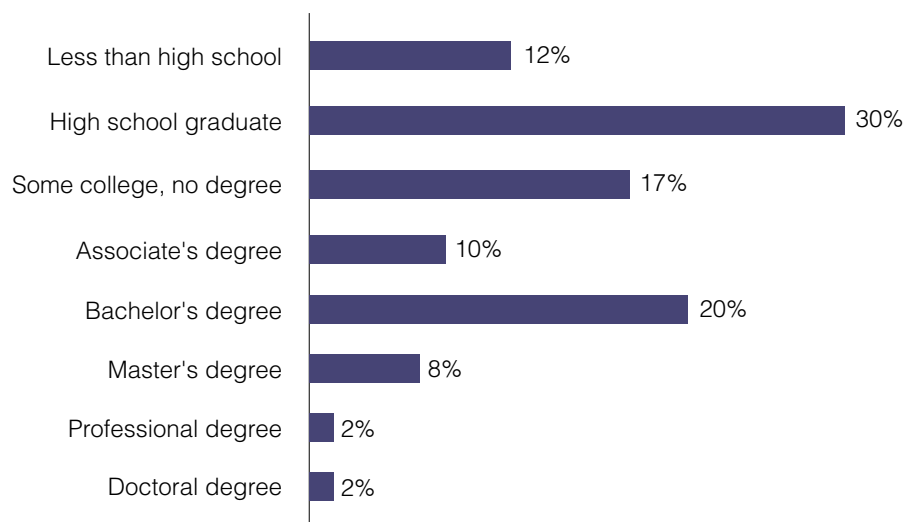
A true sense of purpose comes from having ideas about what’s important to you and taking steps to pursue those ideas or interests. After studying thousands of young people across the United States, researcher William Damon identified four profiles of young people:



Going to College: A Gap Between Expectations and Realities

At least 80% of eighth graders expect to attend college. These high expectations are held among students across race and ethnicities, income levels and types of communities. They are also high regardless of students' current academic success or whether they are taking classes that will prepare them for college.

However, many of those students are unlikely actually to attend or complete college. Currently, more than 40% of full-time students in four-year colleges fail to earn a bachelor's degree within six years. In addition, only 40% of adults older than 25 have completed a degree after high school. Here is the level of education achieved by U.S. adults ages 25 and over in 2014.



Why the Gap Between Aspirations and Actions?

It's easy to assume there's something wrong with students who don't take "the long view." However, it's important to recognize both the natural challenge of making something in the distant future a priority and the ways we reinforce a short-term view in our society and in our schools. Here are some of the reasons researchers point to for the gap between future aspirations and current actions:

- **Culture emphasizes immediate gratification.** Most of the messages students hear in the media, advertising and broader culture focus on "right now."

- **The future seems so far away.** It's hard to put energy into tasks where the benefits seem so far into the future. Students don't see connections between what they do (or don't do) now, their current successes and failures, and their future.
- **The future self is seen as different from the current self.** Many people actually think about their future self as being a different person. So what they do now will have little bearing on what happens for that "other person." In other words, it feels like giving up something now for that future person is like giving up something for someone completely different from yourself.
- **Rarely are students given a rationale for what they are studying.** That rationale or big picture helps to make learning more meaningful. Too often, the "why" teachers give for completing tasks or assignments are narrow, tactical goals, such as doing well or getting a good grade. But rarely are those immediate goals connected to a larger goal or purpose.
- **Rarely do schools connect current expectations with future aspirations.** Students are pushed to focus on short-term assignments and tests, and these are rarely connected to their goals beyond the classroom. When asked why they're doing particular assignments, students will most often say, "Because the teacher told us to." One study found that teachers only explained the purpose of fewer than 2% of assignments.

The Importance of "Possible Selves"

Researchers use the term "possible selves" to describe what we see ourselves becoming in the future. These possible selves are important parts of our self-concept and motivation. In fact, working to become our "ideal selves" is a central part of human development. It's a central way young people actively shape their own development. For example, possible academic selves are linked to better GPA, greater intention to work hard in school, and taking more math and science classes (if the student envisions a positive future math/science self).

However, possible selves do not operate the same across culturally diverse groups.

- When white students focus on possible self, they tend to emphasize personal uniqueness and independence. However, Chilean, Japanese and Japanese Americans emphasize career and education accomplishments.
- Individualism is linked to possible selves among white students. In contrast, collectivism and a positive racial/ethnic identity are more important for African American students.
- Hispanic students seem to have fewer academic-related positive possible selves, but even a brief intervention has been found to strengthen their possible academic selves and increase their attendance.

Various studies have found that strategies to strengthen possible selves, such as the activities in this Renaissance kit, can enhance motivation and change behavior.

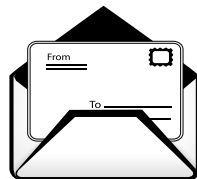
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: LETTERS TO OUR FUTURE SELVES

Who do you want to be in 10 years? Those kinds of questions are often asked of young people, sometimes with little thought about how powerful they can be. However, imagining our future possible selves and connecting them to what we can do now can motivate growth, learning and change.

This is a three-part activity. The first part invites students to imagine the kind of person they hope to be in 10 years and write a letter to that person. The second part focuses on what they're doing now, including their education, and how that relates to the "possible self" of the future. In the third part, students discuss and decide what to do with their letters.

Part 1

- Have students think about what kind of person they hope to be in 10 years. Focus on the hoped-for person, knowing that each student may have other feelings as well about the future.
- Give each a copy of the worksheet, "A Letter to My Future Self." Have them use the worksheet to make notes about this person's hoped-for qualities and accomplishments.
- Have students work in pairs or small groups and describe their "possible selves" to each other. They may ask each other clarifying questions, but remind them to keep feedback positive and respect each other's aspirations.
- Ask students to write a letter to themselves, to be saved and opened in 10 years.



Part 2

- Now have students reflect on what they have written about their possible selves. Ask them to think about what they're doing now that moves them toward their possible self. Also, what are they doing now that could move them away from their best possible self?
- Give them copies of the worksheet, "My Journey Toward My Future Self." Have them complete it on their own, then invite them to share their ideas with another student. Have students ask each other questions and identify additional steps that may be needed. Add them to the worksheet.

Part 3

- Give each student an envelope. Have them each write their name on the envelope with the following message: Open this letter on _____ [date it 10 years from now, or whatever you decide as a class]. Then seal the letter inside the envelope. Have them keep the worksheet, "My Journey Toward My Future Self," as a reminder of steps they can take to become their best possible self.
- Decide as a class what you will do with the letters. Options include:
 - » Give them back to students during the next school year so they can review and update their progress.
 - » Submit letters electronically to www.futureme.org, which will send the letter to the students as an email on the day they designate in the future. Students can decide whether to keep the letter private (seen only by you) or make it public for others to see on the website.
 - » Store them for a future class reunion.

* This activity is adapted from the School Archive Project (www.studentmotivation.org) at Quintanilla Middle School in Dallas, Texas, that has students write letters to their future selves. The letters are stored in a vault until their class reunion 10 years later.

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

— Howard Thurman, author and civil rights activist

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH PEOPLE WHO INSPIRE THEM

It's common for schools to put up posters and quotes from famous people to inspire students. But sometimes the best inspiration is closer to home—people in students' families, the school, the community, or even you.

Use this activity to help students identify people who may already be helping students see more clearly their future possible selves. Then have students connect with these people to shape their own aspirations—and strategies for working toward them.

Step 1

Have students brainstorm people in their families, school, or community who they know (or someone they know knows) who help them see more clearly what kind of people they aspire to be as adults. It could be someone in a job they think they'd like, someone who teaches a subject or leads an activity they're interested in, or someone who lives the values that are important to them.



Step 2

Have the student interview this person about what he or she has done in life to help them become who they are. They can use the questions in the box as a starting point for designing their interview.

Questions Students Can Ask

- Why do they do what they do?
- What makes them most excited or energized about what they do?
- Who are people who motivated and mentored them to get where they are today?
- What have they done or experienced, starting when they were kids, that prepared them for what they do today?

Step 3

Have students share the results of their interview with the class.

Additional Opportunities

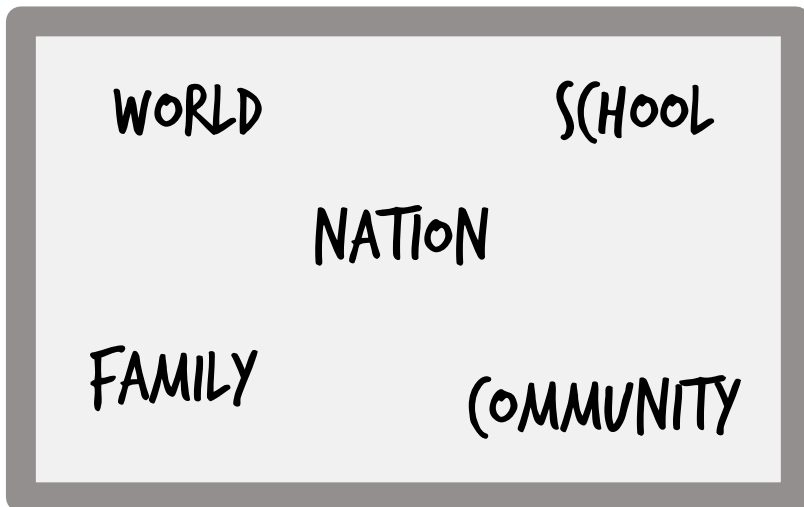
- Have them do interviews in pairs so they are less intimidated.
- Videotape the interviews.
- Encourage students to take a selfie with their interviewee and share it on social media.
- Remind students to send the subject a thank-you note for being an inspiration and for giving their time.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: STUDYING PEOPLE WITH PURPOSE

An important way to help students explore who they are becoming is to inspire them with role models. This activity focuses on identifying people with purpose who students admire—people who are making a difference in your school or community and the broader world. In the process, students can articulate concerns or interests they have as well as the knowledge, skills and connections they will need to develop to make the kind of difference they want to make.

Step 1

Write the following categories on the board: World, Nation, Community, School, Family.



Step 2

Have students brainstorm issues they're concerned about in each category until there are several issues for each. They don't all need to agree on the issues and they don't need to debate them.

Step 3

Have students brainstorm people they know or have heard of who are working on these issues in ways that inspire them. Write these names in a different color near each issue.

Step 4

Ask students to choose someone they'd like to know more about, then form a group with 2-3 other students who are also interested in this person.

Step 5

Assign students to investigate how this person got interested in and committed to this issue. If the person is local, they might interview her or him, or invite her or him to visit the classroom. If it's a national or international figure, they would do research in the library or on the Web.

Key questions to ask during their research are:

What motivated the person to get so involved?

What steps did this person take to prepare her or him to be effective in addressing this issue?

Step 6

Have students share what they learned with the class.

Step 7

Ask students to write brief essays about what they could do, starting now, that would help them make a difference on an issue they care about.

SCHOOL-WIDE ACTIVITY: "I WILL . . ." SELFIES

To highlight students' aspirations, invite a student leadership group to set up a booth in the school where students can write down and capture a key aspiration they have for themselves in 10 years. (Sharing your aspirations publicly can increase your commitment to working toward those dreams.)

NOTE: Encourage teachers, staff and administrators to participate in this activity, too!

Supplies:

- Lots of letter-size paper (heavy paper stock is better)
- Colorful markers
- Masking tape
- Cameras or smart phones

Step 1

Recruit volunteers to staff the booth and train them on the purpose of the activity.

Step 2

Make one or several signs to promote the booth. Suggestions:

- What are your dreams for the future?
- Who do you want to be?
- Selfies with a Purpose

Step 3

Have students create signs that describe what they will do in the next 10 years. Have them write "I will..." and then use 3-5 words to describe their aspiration.

Step 4

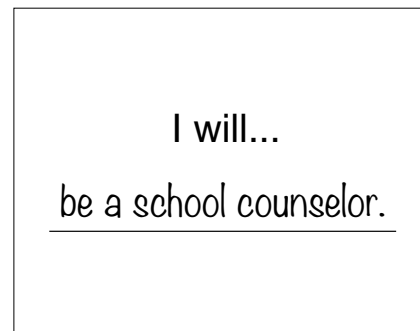
Let them take pictures of themselves holding their sign, perhaps with a selfie stick. Use a school camera to take pictures of them as well.

Step 5

Encourage them to post pictures on Twitter tagging @J_Renaissance or Instagram tagging @JostensRenaissance. Use #In10YearsIWill to share with other schools.

Step 6

Print the photos and use them to create a collage in a hallway. If you wish, sort the pictures into different themes, such as education, making a difference, career, home and family, adventure, health, etc.



Additional Opportunities

Have students make and share short videos to represent their aspirations. Show them on the school TV channel and save a copy to show at their 10-year reunion.

In leadership or advisory classes, discuss these critical thinking questions:

- What is one thing you can do this year to get you closer to your dream?
- Are you doing anything that could keep you from reaching your dream? How are you going to change that?
- Did "going public" with your aspirations make you more likely to want to achieve them?
- Did any of your friends' signs surprise you? How can you help them reach their dreams?

Let's Talk About Our Aspirations

These discussion-starters can be used with students or shared with families to use at home. Teachers, parents and students can all answer these questions, and hearing others' responses is as valuable as considering our own answers.

- 1 Imagine yourself in 10 years. If everything goes well, what would you be doing? What would you look like? Who would you be with and what would you talk about with them?
- 2 If you could do one thing better, what would you most wish to improve? How would improving it make your life better?
- 3 Who are people from your family's past who have had dreams or aspirations that changed the course of their lives? How might your life be different if they hadn't reached for their goals?
- 4 When have you encountered a key decision—a fork in the road—that set you in a new direction in one area of your life? What happened and how did you make that decision?
- 5 What have been major roadblocks that have made it hard for you to become the best you could be? How have you coped with or overcome these obstacles?
- 6 What is one thing you do now to help yourself be ready for something you hope to be good at in five years?
- 7 If you could study just one thing for three months, what would you study? Why?
- 8 If you could do one thing to make the world a better place, what would you want to do? What steps could you take now to pursue making that kind of difference?
- 9 What really motivates you to work toward your dreams?
- 10 What obstacles or challenges do you see between you and your hopes for the future? What are things you can do now to make it more likely that you'll overcome those challenges?

Cultivating Your Students' Possible Selves

Aside from making assignments that encourage students to explore their future possible selves, how can teachers nurture students' sense of purpose and their plans for becoming their best selves? Here are some ideas that can become part of everyday teaching practices.

Connect

The foundation of helping students cultivate their possible selves is to build a strong relationship with them that helps them trust you and open up to you. Then they're more likely to share their aspirations with you.

Describe

Regularly explain to students how what they are learning will help them lead better lives in the future, including how they will use the knowledge and skills in later learning.

Reveal

Share your own sense of purpose and passion for teaching, your subject matter and other things you are passionate about.

Notice

Pay attention to the things students are interested in. This lets them know that you see and support their aspirations for the future. Ask what they enjoy. How does it relate to their hopes or goals for the next few years?

Coach

When you learn about students' aspirations or sources of purpose, coach them to identify actions they can take and people who they can connect with in order to work toward that aspiration.

Highlight

Find and share stories and examples of people from your community who are using the knowledge and skills that are related to your class to make a difference in their communities.

Dig Deeper

When students are disengaged in the classroom, don't immediately dismiss their behavior as evidence that they don't care. Try some strategies in this guide to try to connect with their aspirations, which can help to re-engage them in learning.

In the end, a student's possible self must come from within; teachers and parents can't impose it or create it for him or her. However, adults can open up opportunities, create and nurture relationships, and be available and supportive as young people explore and discover their aspirations and sense of purpose.

REFERENCES

FROM KENT'S DESK

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. New York, NY: Free Press.

INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

Future Aspirations and a Sense of Purpose Matter

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (2004). Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development (2nd Ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Sun, R. C., & Shek, D. T. (2012). Beliefs in the future as a positive youth development construct: A conceptual review. *The Scientific World Journal* (ID 527038), 1-8.

Students' High Hopes

Gallup, Inc. (2015). Gallup Student Poll: Engaged today — Ready For tomorrow: U.S. overall fall 2015 scorecard. Omaha, NE: Author. Accessed from www.gallupstudentpoll.com.

Expectations for Working at Age 30

Bachman, J. G., Johnston, L. D., & O'Malley, P. M. (2014). *Monitoring the future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors—2012*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. Downloaded from www.monitoringthefuture.org/datavolumes/2012/2012dv.pdf

Aspirations + Action = Purpose

Adapted from: Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Going to College: A Gap Between Expectations and Realities

Oyserman, D. (2013). Not just any path: Implication of identity-based motivation for disparities in school outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 33, 179-190.

U.S. Census Bureau (2015). *Current population survey: 2014 annual social and economic supplement*. Washington DC: Author. Accessed from www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2014/tables.html

Velez, E. D. (2014). *America's college drop-out epidemic: Understanding the college drop-out population (working paper)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, American Institutes for Research. Accessed from www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/AIR-CALDER-Understanding-the-College-Dropout-Population-Jan14.pdf

Why the Gap Between Aspirations and Actions?

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Hershfield, H. E., Goldstein, D. G., Sharpe, W. F., Fox, J., Yeykelis, L., Carstensen, L. L., & Bailenson, J. N. (2011). Increasing saving behavior through age-progressed renderings of the future self. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48(SPL), S23-S37.

Oyserman, D. (2013). Not just any path: Implication of identity-based motivation for disparities in school outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 33, 179-190.

Stipek, D., & Seal, K. (2001). *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning*. New York, NY: Holt.

Yeager, D. S., Henderson, M. D., D'Mello, S., Paunesku, D., Walton, G. M., Spitzer, B. J., et al. (2014). Boring but important: A self-transcendent purpose for learning fosters academic self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107(4), 559-580.

The Importance of “Possible Selves”

Elmore, K. C., & Oyserman, D. (2012). If 'we' can succeed, 'I' can too: Identity-based motivation and gender in the classroom. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 37(3), 176-185.

Landau, M. J., Oyserman, D., Keffer, L. A., & Smith, G. C. (2014). The college journey and academic engagement: How metaphor use enhances identity-based motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, 679-698.

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954-969.

Oyserman, D., Terry, K., & Bybee, D. (2002). A possible selves intervention to enhance school involvement. *Journal of Adolescence*, 25, 313-326.

Oyserman, D., & Fryberg, S. (2006). The possible selves of diverse adolescents: Content and function across gender, race, and national origin. In C. Dunkel & J. Kerpelman (Eds.), *Possible selves: Theory, research, and application* (pp. 17-39). New York, NY: Nova Science.

Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(2), 73-82.

Unemon, P., Omoregie, H., & Markus, H. R. (2004). Self-portraits: Possible selves in European-American, Chilean, Japanese, and Japanese-American cultural contexts. *Self and Identity*, 3(4), 321-338.

Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal contents in self-determination theory: Another look at the quality of academic motivation. *Educational psychologist*, 41(1), 19-31.