In the late 1990s, the Lilly Endowment had the kind of problem we all wish we had: too much money. In keeping with the original religious intentions of the organization's founder, and in tune with the interests of the group's leaders at the time, Lilly worried about the increasingly prosaic, utilitarian status of higher education. In post-modern America, the 'collapse of cultural authority embedded in American popular norms' had left a vacuum of meaning and purpose regarding higher education. 'A liberal arts education once constructively engaged such matters,' writes Tim Clydesdale in his new book *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*, 'but today largely focuses on deconstructing traditional sources of authority, offering in its place little more than world-weary conversation at Café Ennui.'

Lilly decided to launch an initiative, Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV), which distributed about one-quarter of a billion, with a $b.? dollars in three rounds of grants to religiously affiliated colleges and universities, starting with $50,000 grants to devise a proposal and, once approved, a $2 million grant to implement it. In all, eighty-eight colleges received the $2 million implementation grants. Clydesdale's book analyzes the results of all that money being spent to build an intentional, institutional program that would give flesh to the kinds of ideas normally reserved for speakers at commencement ceremonies, by which time it is too late to make a difference: What are these four years of college for? What lies ahead? What dreams are worth entertaining? What purposes are appropriate and feasible in a post-modern, globalized economy?

Clydesdale opens his book with anecdotal accounts of students who did and did not participate in purpose exploration programs at their colleges. We are introduced to Katie and Melody, both of whom came from middle to upper-middle class families, both were popular with their peers, and both were bright, attentive
students. Like half of all teens, they normally attended church with their parents every Sunday. Not that Melody or Katie were particularly devout. They occupied, rather, the middle ground of semi-religious American teens: those who see religion as “a nice thing” but also as something to keep on the periphery of one’s life. They also articulated similar goals in life when they started college: preparing for a good, steady career, getting married and starting a family.

Melody’s and Katie’s stories soon diverged, as Clydesdale discovered when he interview both women, once in their final semester in college and again one year after graduation. Melody’s scholarship placed her in a purpose exploration program at the small liberal arts college she attended. Katie’s scholarship merely required she maintain a 3.0 grade point average. The program assigned Melody a faculty mentor, took classes for which the professors had earned a “minigrant” to infuse vocational thought into their classroom studies, attended a social justice lecture series that brought prominent scholars and celebrities like Maya Angelou and Gustavo Gutierrez to campus, joined alternative spring break service programs and signed up for paid summer internships in the non-profit sector. In four years, time, Melody went from nibbling at these programs to devouring them, coming to see her original goals of comfortable suburban family life as insular if not selfish, and reorienting her entire future to the pursuit of international human rights and sustainable Third World development. Clydesdale writes. Katie skated through her courses, had plenty of time to party, and finished with her original goals in tact. Melody and Katie graduated from college within a few days of each other but they could not have been further apart on the educational idealism-realism continuum. But this book would not be worth reading and the initiative it evaluates not worth considering if its only product were idealistic graduates, Clydesdale explains. “Idealism for its own sake is maladaptive in this far from ideal world. Melody knew the world’s failings well, however. More important, Melody appreciated the complexities and repeated setbacks involved in attempting to repair a miniscule part of it. Melody possessed a grounded idealism.”

After graduation, the two young women’s lives continued to diverge, although both were eventful. Melody went to Uganda for the summer after graduation, having been there on a service trip during college, to undertake relief work. There she met a Dutchman engaged in similar work, they fell in love and, unexpectedly, she got pregnant. Over the objections of her parents, she insisted on keeping the child. She got married, had the baby, moved twice, applied to, and was accepted at, a graduate program at an Ivy League university. Melody managed a host of anticipated and unanticipated life events, and did so with maturity, resilience and intentionality, Clydesdale writes. Katie, on the other hand, at her father’s suggestion, spent her first post-graduation summer at the pool, relaxing before “entering the rat race.” Her job search in the autumn did not go as planned as she had trouble even getting her calls returned when seeking a job in journalism. She ended up taking a job at her father’s firm, where her intelligence and skills got her promoted quickly. Katie’s mother took ill and she assumed additional responsibilities at home. She also met a man and fell in love but he was in the armed services and she got transferred to a location closer to him, leaving her family to make other arrangements. “I really started to feel like my family was depending on me?but I had to sit and look at it from the perspective that it was my life, I have to live my life, I have to do what makes me happy,” she told Clydesdale’s interviewers. In the year after graduation, she had sought and found what she wanted, but she paid a high price in terms of both her career goals and her family commitments. Clydesdale observes: “I tell Melody’s and Katie’s stories not to praise he former or shame the latter…I tell their stories because what most differentiates these two young women [who had so many commonalities upon entering college] were the many opportunities to explore questions of purpose that Melody enjoyed [at her college] but that Katire lacked at [her college].”

An anecdote is not an argument, but Clydesdale and his team of interviewers conducted panel interviews with 125 college graduates, half of whom had participated in purpose exploration programs funded by the Lilly grants and half of whom had not. There were additional on-line interviews. There were site visits to twenty-six of the eighty-eight schools that received the grants. All that yielded additional anecdotal stories
of the kind Clydesdale uses to explain the various ways schools introduced purpose exploration programs on campus, but it yielded some real data too. And, what he found was these purpose exploration programs worked, and worked in ways the funders did not even intend. Tomorrow, I will continue examining this fascinating study. N.B. I am traveling the rest of the day so no links today.

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