

# Helping College Students Find Purpose



THE  
CAMPUS  
GUIDE TO  
MEANING-MAKING

ROBERT J. NASH

MICHELE C. MURRAY

Foreword by Sharon Daloz Parks

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# **Helping College Students Find Purpose**

## **The Campus Guide to Meaning- Making**

Robert J. Nash

Michele C. Murray

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## The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series

## Foreword

It has been said that the future will belong to those who can tell the best story of the twenty-first century. We human beings all dwell within stories absorbed from our culture, mediated by family, friends, and associates, and ratified by conventional media, religious faith communities, scientific inquiry, political discourse, commercial advertising, and other institutions that shape our common life. These stories are inevitably recast as we continually twist and stretch them in our efforts to make sense of self, world, cosmos—demanding ways to maintain a firm grip on reality. The stories we live and tell provide coherence and meaning and orient our sense of purpose. The master stories—our personal and cultural myths—determine what we value and whom we love.

When the narrative becomes too thin or sketchy to stand up to the task of everyday meaning-making and begins to unravel, we drift into meaninglessness and grow vulnerable to isolation and desolation—or mere unthinking busyness. On the other hand, the story may be fiercely defended, yet if it is simply too tightly woven to embrace the fullness of a larger truth, it may constrain the potential of our lives and even become dangerous to others and ourselves.

Thus in every generation, a part of growing up is the development of the capacity to reflect on the meaning-making tales given to us and to critically examine the assumptions, biases, strengths, and viability of those stories. We discover that the journey into adulthood requires us to become conscious of the individual and collective meanings we make and to learn to compose over time a worthy story to live by. This is the deep purpose of the journey from ignorance to knowledge, and every society

has a stake in whether and how our young discover and work this task.

This meaning-making is distinctively challenged in today's world. We live in a time "between stories." The great cultural myths—religious, political, economic—that have guided our societies are now under severe review as our generations are asked to live at one of those great hinge times in history. We are contending with unprecedented conditions (e.g., breaking open the human genome, climate change, a global economy), and we now stand on new moral and ethical frontiers.

Nash and Murray invite all who work in higher education to recognize that in every era the college years are a critical time in the life span for examining, testing, and re-creating the stories we live by. University students are ripe for discerning a narrative that is worthy of the potential of a young adult life and for doing so in ways that enable them to see themselves as an integral part of a larger communal reality—a shared dialogue at the heart of the human enterprise, a disciplined dialogue that must necessarily embrace both the wonderful and the terrible—a hard-headed, open-hearted, and difficult practice that has consequences for both self and world.

Providing persuasive evidence that too many of our students are bored, angry, driven, and mere consumers of courses and credentials without access to a worthy "Why?", Nash and Murray offer compelling descriptions of students' hunger for meaning and clear, practical approaches from their own teaching experience about how to respond as "meaning constructivist" educators. They make vivid the significance of the "quarter-life crises" in the lifelong journey of meaning-making, and illumine the power of the interdependent roles of faculty, administrators, and

students affairs professionals who serve by intention or default as “meaning mentors.”

At the same time, Nash and Murray know that most faculty and others who provide leadership within the academy typically do not perceive that questions of meaning lie within the domain of their personal and professional expertise. Indeed, much of today’s professional training does not prepare people for “deep-meaning education,” though the wider public could rightly presume that questions of meaning, purpose, and significance are central to the intellectual life, integral to the work of every discipline, and threaded throughout the shared life of the campus—on behalf of the wider culture. The particular approaches offered here will not be the mode for all, but the underlying principles that they make explicit will inform the imagination of every educator who embraces the dual vocation of higher education: to create and impart knowledge and to serve as a primary, privileged setting for the formation of adulthood, citizenship, and leadership.

The aspiration of this book is that we will find here a pathway into deeper reflection on the purposes of higher education and our roles within it. We are invited to rediscover our capacity to work with students in ways that do not impose a particular narrative upon them, but do create the space in which we may appropriately evoke, respond, inform, clarify, enrich, and even inspire the meaning-making process of our students—encouraging their capacity for curiosity, skepticism, and meaningful commitments.

As we move into the formidable challenges of the twenty-first century, it becomes increasingly evident that we have been far too naïve about the power and adequacy of the master narratives being offered to the next generations. This book invites us to reclaim the core of the intellectual

life, inviting our students into a disciplined, far-reaching dialogue that begins with “Why. . .?” “How do we know. . .?” and “For what. . .?” Here faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals are reminded that meaning-making is a domain that cannot be deferred to presumed cultural norms already in place. This call for a more adequate understanding of what we mean by higher education asks all of us to relinquish our tendency to defer the bigger questions to “experts”—be they philosophers or counselors. We are invited to a “crossover pedagogy” in which across the life of the campus, we may more effectively grapple with the reality of our students as whole persons and reclaim our necessary role in the human adventure of meaning-making—on behalf of the renewal of the vocation of higher education, its vital role in today’s global commons, and in the individual lives we serve.

Sharon Daloz Parks  
Author, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*

*To all my students over a four-decade period, whose presence in my classes and in my life has been the major inspiration for this book. To Madelyn, my partner for almost five decades, who understands the indefatigable need I have to write in order to make sense of my world, my vocation, and my own ongoing quest for meaning. To Michele C. Murray, my brilliant and talented coauthor, colleague, and dear friend, who has taught me more about meaning-making than she might have thought possible.*

*Finally, to the best senior editor I have ever had, David Brightman, along with his expert team at Jossey-Bass—without whom there would be no book on meaning-making.*

*—Robert J. Nash*

*To the students I have had the privilege to know and whose journeys to meaning have inspired me. To Robert J. Nash, who invited me into this project and who has brightened my world. To my parents, Dwight and Elodie, who were my first teachers and meaning mentors. To my husband, Chris Lewers, who brings new meaning to my life and who is a source of great blessings.*

*—Michele C. Murray*

## Preface

We wrote this book with two major audiences in mind. Because Robert is a faculty member and an Official University Scholar in the social sciences and the humanities at his university, and Michele is a student affairs vice-president and innovator at hers, we obviously want to reach *both* the professoriate and higher education administrators. We believe strongly that when it comes to teaching for meaning-making, no single group in the academy owns the meaning-making or purpose-driven life. Nor does any single group on campus own the intellectual life. Education, when done well, is cross-disciplinary, collaborative, and student-centered. Faculty and administrators need one another as active, knowledgeable, passionate collaborators if we are to be successful in helping our students to discover, and to create, in Frankl's (Frankl, 1979) words, a "meaning to live for." (See Resource B, Crossover Pedagogy, in the Resources section for a fuller treatment of this type of collaboration.)

In this day and age, the old academic and administrative silos are imploding. All the campus constituencies, including our students, are looking for creative ways to save ourselves, to save one another, to save the best that knowledge and wisdom have to offer, and to save our institutions and our planet. As Rorty (1999) has said, in the absence of any metaphysical or political certainty that all of us can agree on in a troubled, strife-filled, postmodern world, the most that we can hope for is to "huddle together against the darkness" in order to produce some light. In other words, we are all struggling to make meaning of our existence, and sometimes it is wiser for us to do this together, if we are to survive as a human species. Faculty

and administrators have unique and special contributions to make in the search for meaning, and when they make the effort to work together, everyone on a college campus benefits. For us, there is simply no alternative.

We hope that *faculty* in their individual disciplines will take away from our book a set of creative philosophical or psychological rationales, and pedagogical strategies, for teaching about meaning—in the classroom, lecture hall, and seminar room. We hope that *administrators* will discover inspiring and helpful ways to meet students where they are, anywhere on campus and beyond, in their meaning-making ventures. Most of all, though, we want faculty and student affairs administrators to collaborate actively and directly, when appropriate, both inside and outside the classroom. We are committed to the proposition that both groups have much to teach one another, and, in so doing, they will have that much more to teach students about how to make meaning.

## Questions of Meaning

We are impressed with this quotation from Frankl (1979): “The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged—survival for what? Ever more people today have the *means* to live, but no *meaning* to live for” (p. 77). As university educators, we witness firsthand every day the need for our students of all ages, both traditional and nontraditional, to have something coherent to believe in, some centering values and goals to strive for. They, like us, need strong background beliefs and ideals to shore them up during these times when religious and political wars plague entire societies; when the natural environment continues to deteriorate; and when the fluctuations of the global economy result in recession, inflation, and the inequitable distribution of scarce

resources. On a more personal level, students need to make sense of the turmoil that results when their personal relationships get turned upside-down, or their work grows tedious and unsatisfying, or they become disillusioned by a sense of being unfulfilled; or when they face a life-altering decision, or they learn that the person who means the most to them in the whole world no longer loves them; or especially on a dreaded occasion when they hear that someone they love suffers from the ravages of a metastatic malignancy. Sadly, there are few opportunities on most college campuses—either inside or outside the conventional classroom, and as curricula become more vocational and professionally driven—for students to develop these strong background beliefs and ideals.

Today's college students are asking their own existential questions of meaning. As Frankl suggested, they are in search of a "meaning to live for." Their questions are timeless, yet they reflect the age in which they live. These questions are a fascinating admixture of the abstract and the practical, the universal and the particular. They represent well the tensions that exist for so many college students who seek to find the delicate balance that exists in the difficult space between idealism and realism, between macro- and micro-meaning. Here is a sample of some of these questions:

- What does it mean to be successful?
- Is it bad to want to make a lot of money?
- How will I know what type of career is best for me?
- Why do I hurt so much when a relationship ends?
- How do I tell my parents that the career they have chosen for me is not the one I want?
- Why do innocent people have to suffer?

- Will the lifestyles I see reflected in popular culture really make me happy?
- Can I be a good person without religion?
- Is religion only a set of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”?
- Where do my deepest passions lie, and can I really carve out a career that reflects these?
- Why am I so vulnerable?
- Why do I worry about the future so much?
- Why am I here in school when I could be doing something far more constructive in the world beyond my campus?
- How, if at all, can I clean up all the messes in the world caused by wars, environmental decay, corporate greed, social injustice, political corruption, and irrelevant education?
- Is it any use even to try, because, after all, I am only one person?

In response to these types of questions, and many others that come up in the book, we attempt to provide a series of concrete classroom and cross-campus strategies to help students successfully navigate their diverse meaning-making activities. We do this even as we admit, openly and honestly, that there is no magic bullet that will meet everyone’s need for meaning-making. We address this caveat to all those students, faculty, and administrators who may be reading this book looking for the all-purpose blueprint. Meaning-making—as even this brief sample of questions suggests—is as multidimensional and complex as are each of the individual meaning-makers who pursue this

quest throughout their lives. There is no one-size-fits-all template for meaning-making.

## **The Quarterlife Generation and the Malady of Meaninglessness**

At one time in the academy, thinkers believed that the problem of meaninglessness required a strictly philosophical solution. During existentialism's heyday between the world wars, and for a long while thereafter, philosophers such as Sartre, Camus, Jaspers, and Marcel wrote frequently about the human struggle to make or find meaning amidst meaninglessness; to live a life of authentic freedom at a time when choices seemed limited. In an apparently absurd world—where hundreds of thousands of individuals lost their lives in two major wars, the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Nazi holocaust wiped out almost an entire generation of Jews and others—the loss of any credible meaning in life that could make sense of the human slaughter dominated many philosophical agendas.

Soon enough, though, meaninglessness got psychologized, and rightly so. It was not long before the clinicians got involved. Psychotherapists like Jung, Frankl, and Allport wrote many books on the topic. Existential therapists set up shop throughout the United States, especially in colleges and university settings. Today, however, meaninglessness has become the reigning malady of the medical profession. The loss of any sustainable meaning in many patients is now understood to be the result of a serotonin-depleted brain chemistry, and antidepressant medications are the solutions. All well and good, as far as they go, and they do go far for many. But do they go far enough?

Most of us—and this certainly includes the current quarterlife generation of students—experience, at the very least, intermittent reminders of life’s meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980, 2002, 2008). Meaninglessness is the state of mind that says nothing we do really counts for anything lasting or worthwhile. A sense of meaninglessness, for so many of our quarterlife students, is an entering wedge for overwhelming feelings of dread, anxiety, and sadness. It can sometimes result in a sense of nihilism, fatalism, or ennui.

We will talk at length about the quarterlife generation in Chapter One. But, for now, let us say that, in our experience in higher education collectively spanning over sixty years of service to students, the term *quarterlife generation* describes a transitional period between two developmental stages. This period can start as early as the years from age seventeen to twenty and last as long as into the early to mid-thirties. It is a transitional period of profoundly unsettling philosophical and existential questions, and in some ways it is age-independent. These vexing questions come up again and again for adults of all ages and stages, as well as for all ethnicities, races, religions, and other important types of differences (see Steinle, 2005). These quarterlife questions are universal (see Cupitt, 2005). Moreover, it is important to understand that these questions result in tasks that must be completed in order for adults to move on to other transitional periods in their lives. If the tasks do not get completed, then they continue on into the next transitional period and then into the next period after that. Both of us have seen traditional and nontraditional students who wrestle with these tasks throughout the age and life stage continuum. These questions tend to get recycled until they find answers, and if they do not, they follow us to the grave (see Baggini, 2005; de la Chaumiere, 2004; Yalom, 2008).

The quarterlife period is frequently a tumultuous time for most of our students, because it triggers an overwhelming anxiety about the past, present, and future. So many of our quarterlife students are plagued with worry about failure—living up to others' expectations, letting go of the comfortable securities of childhood, coming to terms with the growing tension between freedom and responsibility, and constantly comparing themselves to peers and coming up short (Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Robbins, 2004).

We often hear the lament from quarterlife students in our classrooms, offices, and residence halls, as well as in our consultancies throughout the country, that they are restless and unfulfilled, or that life seems empty and/or boring, or that they never seem able to find a lasting satisfaction even in their most worthy accomplishments. Some students complain about being caught up in the academic or career rat race. Others admit openly that they are suffering from the incurable disease of "influenza," an illness characterized by conspicuous and obsessive consumption (de Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2001). Some openly admit that they just do not want to grow up yet, but what they dread even more is having to return to the domestic nest to live with their parents after they graduate.

As debilitating as the quarterlifer's lament of meaninglessness is, many quarterlifers are surprisingly articulate about the conditions that are disturbing their equilibrium. Unfortunately, they do not seem to recognize that these conditions are the source of their malaise. In a follow-up to the Pew Research Center (2007) poll, Jayson (2007) asked young people in their twenties about their top goals in life. To a person, they said they wanted to be rich and famous, replicating the Pew findings that 81 percent of young people list being rich as their top goal, while 51 percent list being famous.

One young woman reported to Jayson, “When you open a celebrity magazine, it’s all about the money and being rich and famous. The TV shows we watch—anything from *The Apprentice*...to *Us Weekly* magazine...We see reality TV shows with Jessica [Simpson] and Nick [Lachey] living the life. We see Britney [Spears] and Paris [Hilton]. The people we relate to outside our friends are those people.” This young woman’s comments speak volumes about who and what influences quarterlifers today, and they give helpful clues about the rise of meaning questions that deal with intimacy, success, and relationships.

Most quarterlifers we know wonder out loud why, increasingly, they experience so many of their successes as failures (there is really no ceiling on success for quarterlifers, because the self-induced pressure to achieve more and more can be so intense), and why their failures, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future, have to be so immobilizing to them. For these particular students—who tend to live their daily lives at perfectionist, career-driven, achievement-obsessed extremes—normal fears can often lead to crushing anxiety or debilitating depression. Although medication and talk therapy can help to allay these more severe psychological symptoms, a sense of meaninglessness lingers among many quarterlifers—often throughout their lifetimes.

## **The Meaning of Meaning**

Here is how we, the authors, understand the term *meaning* that we will be using throughout this book. First, it is important to distinguish between the terms *meaning* and *purpose*. At times we will use these words interchangeably, but we also recognize that they differ in some fundamental ways. Here is Marinoff’s (Marinoff, 1999) distinction: “Purpose is an ultimate object or end to be attained. It is a

goal. Meaning has to do with how you understand your life on an ongoing basis” (p. 210). We think of meaning along these lines as well. For us, *meaning* is all about those interpretations, narrative frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith or belief systems that each of us brings to the various worlds in which we live, love, learn, work, and worship. *Purpose* has to do with pursuing certain goals, reaching resolutions, seeking results, and realizing particular objectives and ends in those worlds.

Thus what makes our purposes worthwhile or justifiable (or both) depends on those meanings that we attach to them and that drive our behaviors. Unfortunately, too often in the academy, we insist that our students pursue and achieve a whole host of academic and career purposes without first helping them to formulate systems of meanings to inform these purposes. To paraphrase Kant, purpose without meaning is empty, yet meaning without purpose goes nowhere. Finding the balance is the key to melding meaning and purpose, but, for us, it all starts with meaning-making. Without our meanings, our purposes are, sadly, meaningless.

We believe that meaning is, in the words of Yalom (1980), an “anxiety emollient.” Sometimes it can have a soothing effect. At other times, meaning can be the midwife that helps all of us to give birth (at times, a difficult birth) to our core values—connections, commitments, joys, and loves. For Yalom, core values such as these prepare us to face, and overcome, our deepest anxieties regarding the challenges of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. We agree also with Sharon Daloz Parks (Parks, 2000) who says that meaning involves the “search for a sense of connection, pattern, order, and significance . . . it is a way to understand our experience that makes sense of both the expected and unexpected . . .” (p. 14)

(See also Parks, 1991, for an earlier take on meaning-making.) Meaning therefore helps us to make cosmos out of chaos; it gives us choice in place of chance. Most of all, it gets us out of bed in the morning and off to face life's inevitable daily mixtures of pleasure and pain.

For us, a sense of meaning is what sustains us during those hard, perplexing times when everything seems to be up in the air and there are no certain answers anywhere to the most confounding questions that perplex us throughout our lives. Moreover, we agree with the psychologist Baumeister (1991), who claims that all of us, without exception, strive to make sense of our lives in four basic ways: purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. These are what he calls the "four needs for meaning—an existential shopping list" (p. 29). Unless all four of these needs get met, human beings are doomed to experience a serious, often irrevocable, loss of meaning.

For Baumeister, a sense of *purpose* acts as a major meaning-incentive. Human beings experience two types of purpose: "goal orientations" and "fulfillment." Goals are usually extrinsic, whereas fulfillment is intrinsic. We experience a sense of meaning when ever our goals are clearly understood and actively pursued and our fulfillments are genuine. And, following the example of Frankl (1963), Baumeister posits that all of us need *values*, because we are strongly motivated to draw upon morally defensible notions of right and wrong in our actions. Having a value base justifies our behavior; even more, it provides us with a guideline for making ethical judgments.

Baumeister also believes that we each have a need for *efficacy*. It is essential that we feel in charge of our lives, and that we can, at least to some extent, exert control over the events that befall us. Whether we are actually able to exert the power necessary to give us a feeling of control or

it is simply the illusion of control that we experience—either way, our needs for efficacy can be met. Regardless, we need a sense of our own agency—that we are actors in charge of our own lives, and that life is not just an endless series of freak happenstances that render us helpless victims. Finally, each of us has an indefatigable need for *self-worth*. It is important to all of us that others respect, value, and trust us. Without a feeling of self-worth, Baumeister believes, human beings will experience a pervasive insecurity and self-doubt, and meaninglessness will be the tragic result. Self-worth goes beyond external sources of evaluation; rather, an internal sense of “what I do matters and has meaning” is key to a genuine sense of self-value.

Moreover, to paraphrase Nietzsche in talking about meaning from a philosophical perspective, we believe that those people who have a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*. This is the aphorism that enabled Viktor Frankl to survive several nightmarish years in the Nazi death camps during the Holocaust (1963). In our work with a variety of constituencies on college campuses, we realize that without our *whys for living*, the *hows* can often be deceiving. Admittedly, among some students there appears to be a growing interest in volunteerism, service learning projects, the Peace Corps, semesters abroad and at sea, campus ministry programs, and environmental and social justice initiatives on campuses throughout the United States. But without developing sound and enduring *whys*—philosophical compasses that result in an integration of lived values—students often find their well-intended *hows* to be short-lived and directionless. Some eventually lose their enthusiasm for service to others because the real-world, career payoffs seem incommensurate with their volunteer efforts. In the long run, it is the *whys* that will help students to experience the genuine satisfactions of

making a palpable difference in the lives of real people residing in the larger communities that exist outside their campuses.

We fully recognize that the *whys for living* are virtually infinite in number. There is no bottom line or final word on the meaning of existence in general or of one's personal existence in particular. Some students will look to religion and spirituality for transcendent meaning; others will look to politics or human service careers for secular meaning. Still others will look to friendships and intimate relationships for intrinsic meaning, or to the creative arts, science, and the natural environment for extrinsic meaning. And still others will commit themselves to a variety of social justice issues in order to create activist forms of meaning. Although we are more than willing to acknowledge that certain existential questions about meaning that come up throughout people's lives are universal in nature, we are also realists in contending that the answers regarding *how* we are to live are endlessly subjective—and they are many.

## **Scope and Structure**

We wanted this book on meaning to be succinct, accessible, and, most of all, engaging and informative. Our intention was to make our chapters easy to read, with an ideal blend of both explanation and example. We include some personal narrative writing along the way, while still paying scrupulous attention to the relevant scholarship and appropriate resources on the topic of meaning (Nash, 2004). This book attempts to accomplish the following:

- Develop a powerful rationale for challenging and encouraging faculty and administrators to see

themselves as mentors of meaning-making to all campus constituencies

- Equip all members of the campus community with the background knowledge and the tools necessary to create communities of meaning-making
- Provide a series of concrete steps for applying the theory and practice of meaning-making to teaching, leading, administering, and advising
- Use a number of student vignettes to point out the centrality of meaning-making on college campuses

We begin each chapter with a preview of its goals, purposes, and procedures, and in some cases a relevant scenario or case study. We end each chapter with a series of concrete recommendations for faculty, administrators, and students regarding the theory and practice of meaning-making. Some of our chapters are, of necessity, more conceptual than practical, and some more practical than conceptual. The first half of the book, in addition to including a number of real-life scenarios, spells out our philosophy of meaning-making. The second half of the book offers a number of real-world strategies that faculty, administrators, and staff can use to foster what we are calling “deep-meaning learning” on the topic of meaning-making.

Here is a brief overview of how we frame the book. In Part I, *Making Meaning in the Quarterlife*, we begin with a chapter on the quarterlife generation and its special challenges in making meaning. We follow this with a chapter delineating the existential and postmodern sources of meaning-making. We end this part with a chapter on the role of religion and spirituality in making meaning.

In Part II, *Putting Meaning-Making to Work: Tools of the Trade*, we apply the pedagogy of constructivism to

meaning-making in college classrooms, alternative campus-wide learning settings, and off-campus sites. We include a series of practical, meaning-making tips for use inside and outside the classroom—for teachers, administrators, and staff throughout the campus. In this part, we feature chapters on the ethics of meaning-making and how to use meaning-making maxims throughout the campus.

In Part III, *Our Own Attempts to Make Meaning*, we, the authors, talk very honestly—in the form of two personal reflections addressed directly to our readers—about the ups and downs of meaning-making in our own work, and about what gives our own lives meaning.

We have also included a Resources section, *Resources for Meaning-Making Educators*. The first, *Resource A: Four Therapeutic Approaches to Meaning-Making*, examines four contemporary ways of thinking about, and educating for, meaning-making: logotherapy, narrative therapy, philosophical counseling, and positive psychology. All four frameworks—which, for us, are the conceptual heart and soul of meaning-making education—are united in the sense that their overall goal is to promote healthy, self-determining, first-person, here-and-now meaning-construction. *Resource B: Crossover Pedagogy*, develops a rationale, as well as recommendations for implementation, for what we call “crossover pedagogy.” Crossover pedagogy is our attempt to spell out in greater detail the various ways that faculty and student affairs professionals can work together to advance the meaning-making agenda for higher education.

We are grateful to the works that have preceded ours and influenced our thinking about teaching for meaning. We recognize five volumes in particular. Sharon Daloz Parks’s (Parks, 2000) *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, addresses mentoring communities that foster faith development and

meaning-making for young adults. In their empirical work, Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward (2006) make a case for “putting students first,” based on a concept they call “holistic student development.” These authors discuss the changes that will be necessary in the classroom, in the larger campus, and in the external community in order to foster, and deliver, a holistic education—one centered in faith development. Fink’s (Fink, 2003) latest work presents us with a “taxonomy of significant learning” as well as a model of “integrated course design,” which includes a compendium of charts, graphs, and figures designed to get students fully engaged in their learning. We also appreciate Sullivan, Rosin, Shulman, and Fenstermacher’s (2008) *A New Agenda for Higher Education*, a work that originated in the Life of the Mind for Practice seminars. They outline a rationale, and a plan, for teaching “practical reasoning and responsible judgment.”

Finally, we have turned to an old standby in the literature for characterizing student development, particularly the ethical and intellectual growth of college students. In many ways, Perry’s (1970/1999) nine-stage model of cognitive development holds up well today, forty years after it first appeared. We have been informed again and again by Perry’s research whenever we tried to frame the moral, philosophical, and epistemological cycles of quarterlife choice-making. Quarterlifers today still grapple with dualistic, relativistic, and universalistic-committed ways of thinking about the meaning of their lives. We are grateful to Perry for the term *transition* to explain the developmental passages that students in the quarterlife need to negotiate before they can build a sustainable set of meanings to guide their life’s purpose. Transitions and cycles best explain our own approach to quarterlife choice-making rather than the language of linear or chronological stages.

These previous works have helped shape our thoughts about meaning-making as a cross-campus venture. We have created *our* book to speak to university faculty and administrators as *educators, meaning-makers, and mentors* of students' meaning-making.

Although it is true that higher education writings dealing with the topic of spirituality have been appearing in the student services literature increasingly in recent years, few, if any, treat the subject of meaning-making on as many levels as we do. (One exception is Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006.) Our specific goal is to provide a theory-into-practice model of meaning-making for the entire college campus—one that will enable all constituencies to engage in this important process.

## **Caveats**

A spate of recent literature on current millennial/quarterlife students criticizes them because they are anti-intellectual, addicted to the Internet, suffering from incurable attention deficit problems because the Google culture has made them “stupid [*sic*]”—that is, unable to concentrate, and distracted. What is more, critics accuse students today of being relativistic, politically correct, suffering from excessive doses of positive self-esteem, mesmerized by reality television shows, and celebrity-obsessed (see Baron, 2008, Carr, 2008, and Bauerlein, 2008).

Although some of these concerns are undoubtedly important, most are predictably hyperbolic. Every younger generation for hundreds, even thousands, of years has provoked handwringing from its cultural elders. In contrast to the latest round of critics, however, we respect and admire this new generation of “digital natives.” In truth, they are far better adapted to contemporary cultural

currents than are most of us who come from earlier generations. They will be the future high-tech “cosmopolites” that the new global order will need in order to function effectively (see National Leadership Council, 2008). Most of all, though, we experience every day the enormous potential of our millennial students to be intelligent, ethical, humanitarian, and productive persons (for a similar take, see Benton, 2008). In fact, the majority of them are there already.

We are often asked by skeptical faculty and administrators throughout the country if we think college students are mature enough to engage in serious thinking about meaning-making. They question whether college students have sufficient life experiences to have anything worth questioning, examining, or contributing. After all, their reasoning goes, college students have a lot more on their minds than thinking about unanswerable philosophical questions. Besides, these critics argue, the primary function of higher education in the early years of the third millennium ought to be about preparing young adults for graduate school training and professional careers. For these critics, meaning-making feels too much like what ought to go on in the counseling center, or with campus ministry, or in a career services workshop. It has no justifiable place in the formal academic curriculum (see Walvoord, 2008).

These critics frequently charge that nobody really knows what meaning is about. Furthermore, they ask, to what disciplines does the subject matter belong? The humanities? The social sciences? The natural sciences? The arts? Or the professional schools? They also raise the question that if the concept of meaning requires an interdisciplinary approach, then where are the genuine interdisciplinary programs, and scholars, on the college campus to examine it? Too often, faculty believe that the