# Increasing College Students' Purpose in Life

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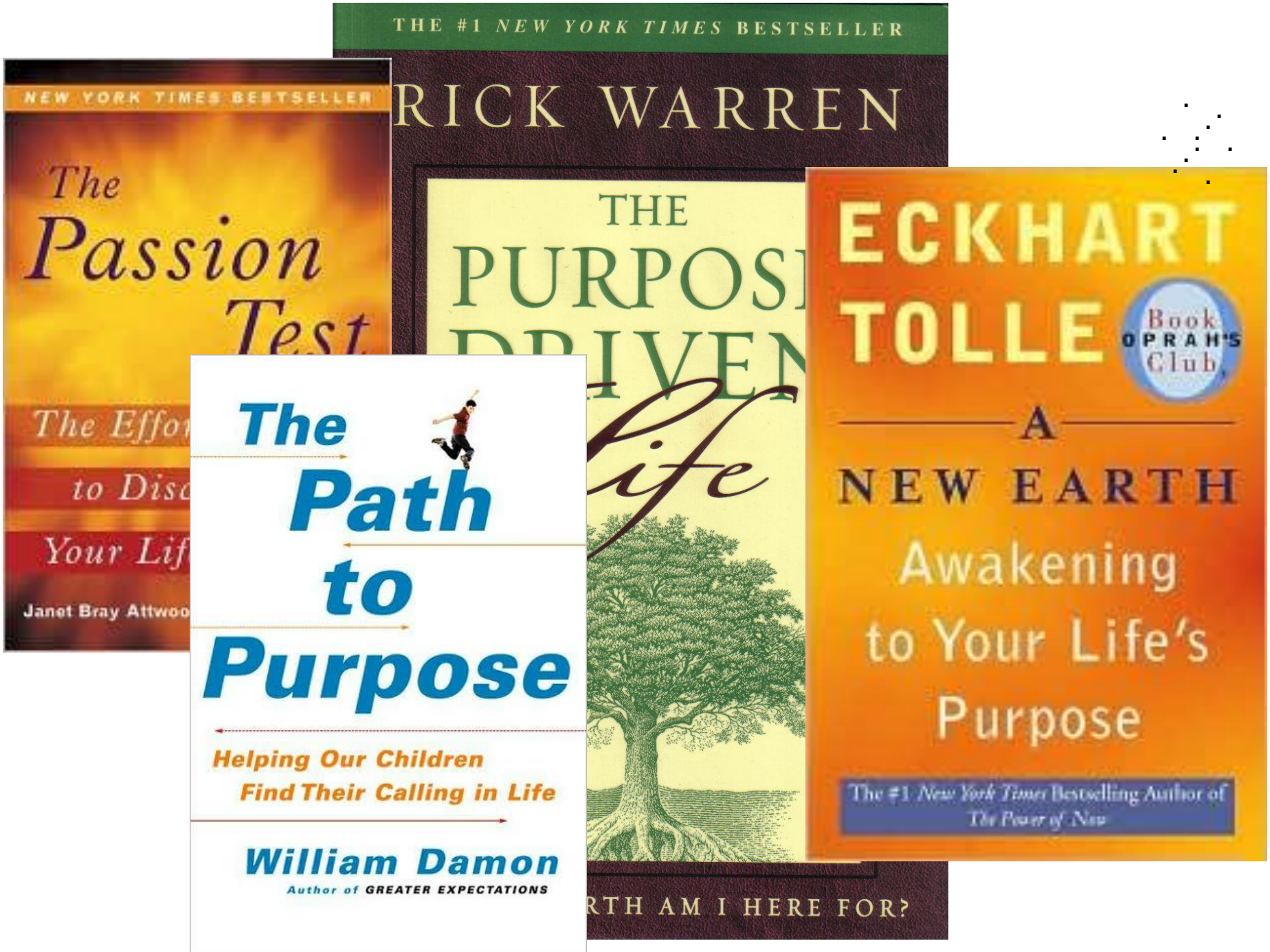
6 February 2009

Institute on College Student Values Conference

# Outline of presentation

- What is purpose in life?
  - Definitional issues
  - What kinds of purposes do college students identify?
- What are the benefits of having purpose?
  - Review of the literature
  - Original data
- How can we increase purpose in college students?
  - Key components
  - Intervention study
- Small group discussion
  - Your insights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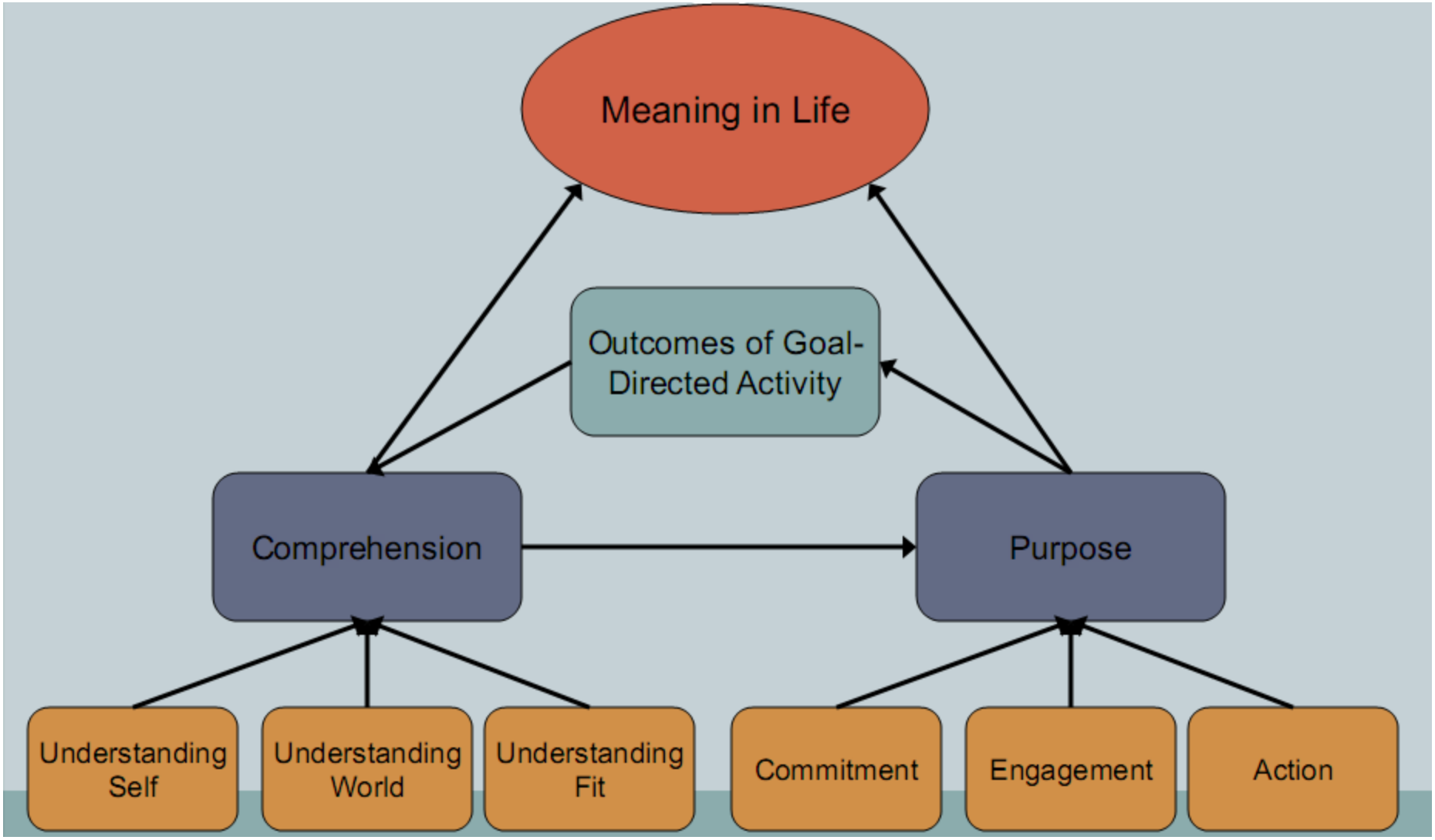
RTH AM I HERE FOR?
The Path to Purpose
Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life
William Damon
Author of GREATER EXPECTATIONS
ECKHART TOLLE
Book OPRAH'S Club
A NEW EARTH
Awakening to Your Life's Purpose
The #1 New York Times Bestselling Author of The Power of Now

# What is "purpose"?

- Viktor Frankl's (1963) *Man's Search for Meaning*
  - Clinical and counseling psychology literature (e.g. Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Reker & Wong, 2003)
- Goals/psychological needs
  - Need for meaning (Baumeister, 1991)
  - Life goals, personal strivings (Schmuck & Sheldon, 2001; Emmons, 1986)
- Positive psychology
  - Psychological well-being / Flourishing (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002)
  - Character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)
- College student and career development
  - Chickering's Seven Vectors of Psychosocial Development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993)
  - Colby and Sullivan's (2009) "developmental foundations" of AAC&U's Core Commitments
  - Work as "calling" (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Dik & Duffy, in press)
- Distinctions between meaning and purpose
  - Self- vs. Beyond-the-self || Unengaged vs. Engaged (Damon, 2008)
  - Comprehension and purpose (Steger, in press)

# Steger's Model of Meaning in Life



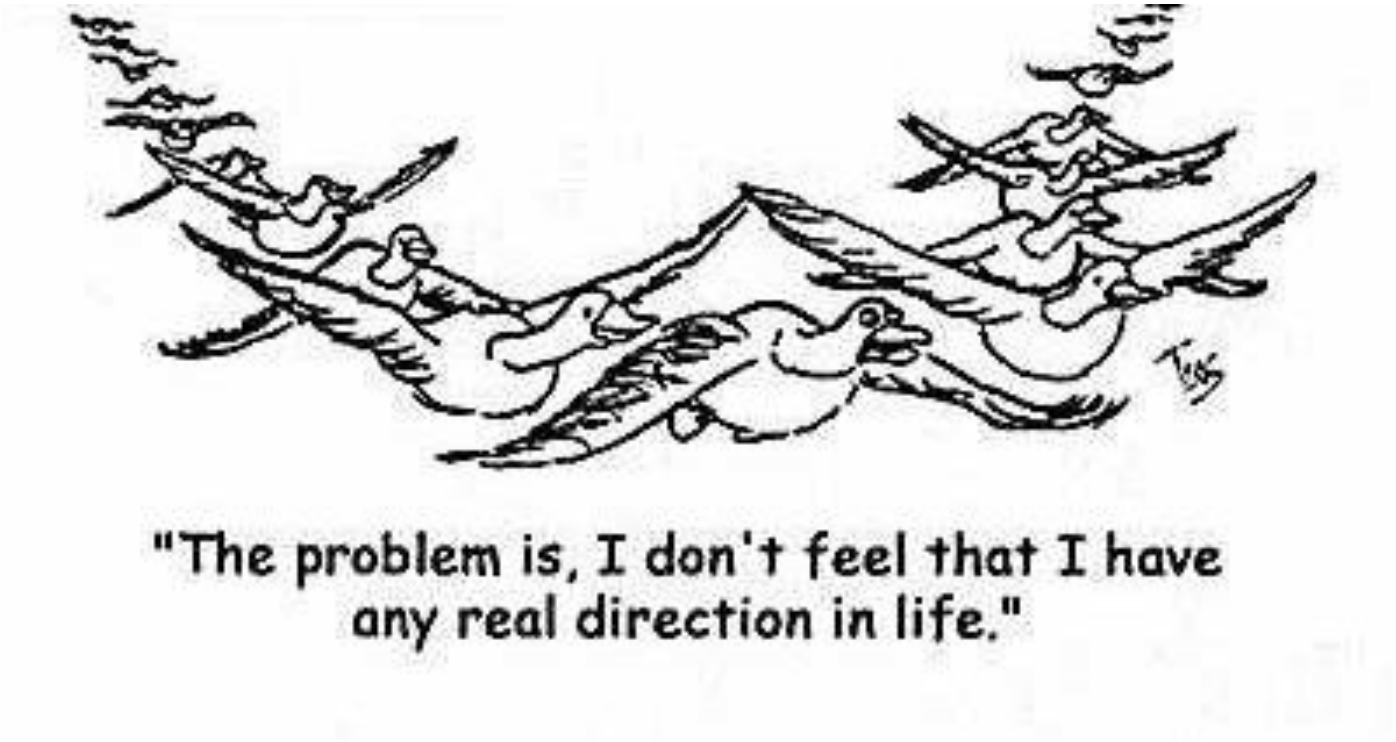

From Steger (in press)

# Current exploration of purpose

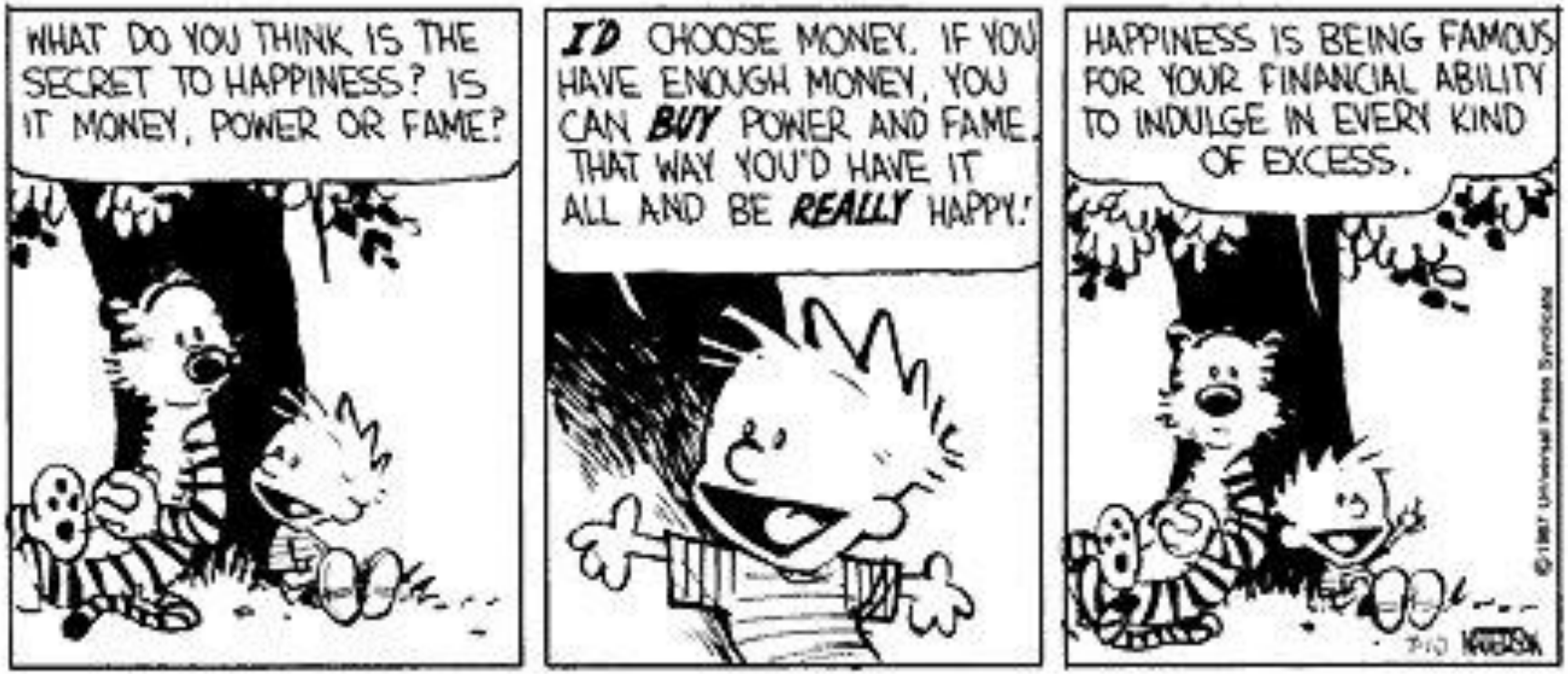
Three component structure

1. Think purposefully
   - Identification of life goal(s)
   - Orientation of life goal(s)
2. Feel purposeful
   - “Sense of purpose” (Sense of meaning, significance)
   - Goal efficacy
3. Act purposefully
   - Engagement in activities related to life goal(s)

# The Problem


"The problem is, I don't feel that I have
any real direction in life."

# The Other Problem



# The Result

# Existential vacuum

"Are you crazy ? ... You make 10 million dollars a year and you want to know the meaning of life?"

# You can’t buy happiness

“You got the job, the family and now the fancy car. But it’s not enough, is it? No, my friend, it’s never enough.”

# Why should we care about purpose?

- Psychological benefits
  - Greater subjective well-being
  - Lower psychological problems
  - Component of psychological well-being

# Research question #1

- How is purpose related to other indicators of positive youth development?

# Methods

- Study design
  - Online survey w/ battery of questionnaire items
- Sample (N=418)
  - One large state university, one mid-sized community college in Northern California
  - Gender
    - 39% Male, 61% Female
  - Ethnicity
    - 42% White, 28% Asian American, 14% Latino, 12% Pacific Islander, 4% African-American

# Measures

- Purpose-related measures
  - THINK
    - Purpose identification (MLQ-P; Steger et al, 2006)
    - Categories of life goals (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1983; Roberts & Robins, 2000)
  - FEEL
    - Sense of purpose (PIL subscale of Ryff's PWB measure; Ryff, 1989)
    - Goal efficacy
  - ACT
    - Purpose engagement
- Indicators of Positive Youth Development
  - Life satisfaction (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985)
  - Fulfillment of potential
  - Academic achievement (self-reported GPA)
- Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale
- Demographic variables

# Correlations Among Purpose Scales and Indicators of PYD

| Scale | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Purpose Identification | (.88) | | | | |
| (2) Sense of Purpose | .64*** | (.84) | | | |
| (3) Goal Efficacy | .51*** | .62*** | (.88) | | |
| (4) Life Satisfaction | .47*** | .41*** | .57*** | (.85) | |
| (5) Fulfillment of Potential | .45*** | .45*** | .48*** | .59*** | (.73) |
| (6) Academic Achievement | .12* | .11* | .08 | .15** | .22*** |

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

**Multiple regression analyses show all three purpose related scales explain unique variance in Life Satisfaction and Fulfillment of Potential . . . however, only Sense of Purpose explains unique variance in Academic Achievement**

# Why should we care about purpose?

- Psychological benefits
- Work-related benefits
  - Higher job satisfaction
  - More effective team players
  - Feel more deeply engaged with their jobs

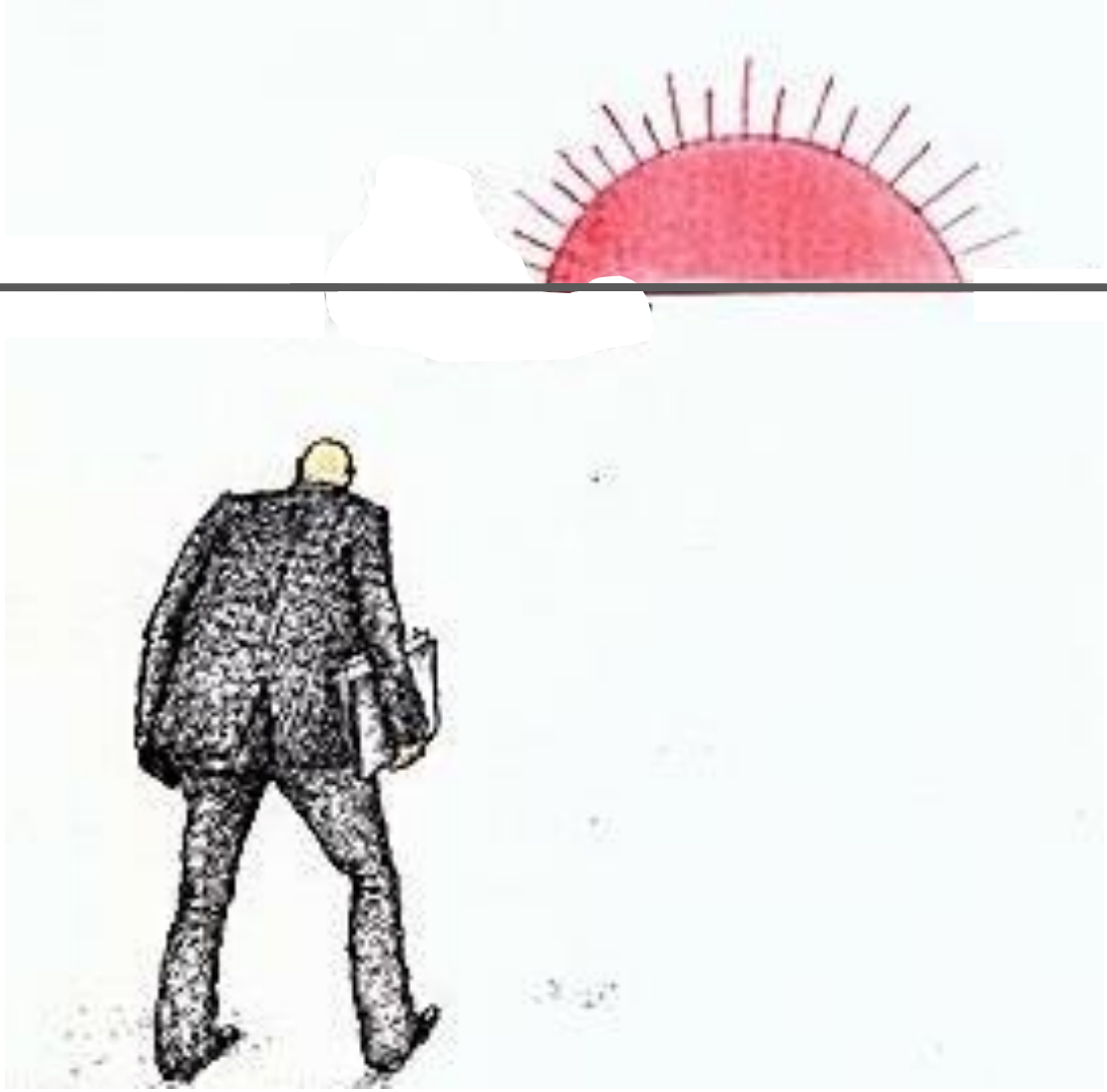
# Why should we care about purpose?

- Psychological benefits
- Work-related benefits
- Societal benefits
  - Contribution to the common good
  - More productive in their jobs
  - Physical health, esp. in old age

# Why should we care about purpose?

- Psychological benefits
- Work-related benefits
- Societal benefits
- Purpose as motivator
  - Goal pursuit
  - College retention
  - Protective in face of adversity

# “Horizonal goal”



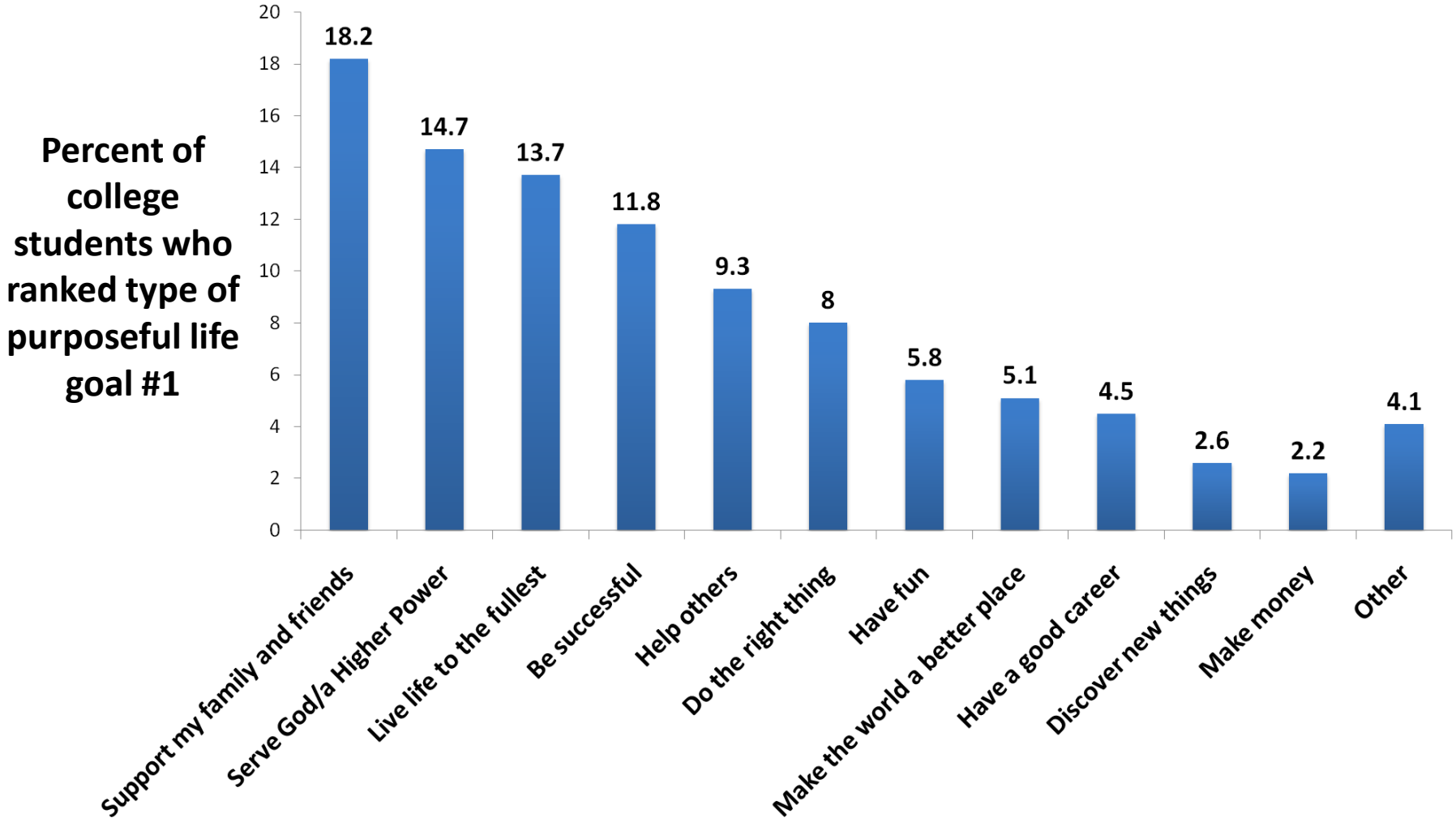
# Research question #2

- What types purposes do young people identify?

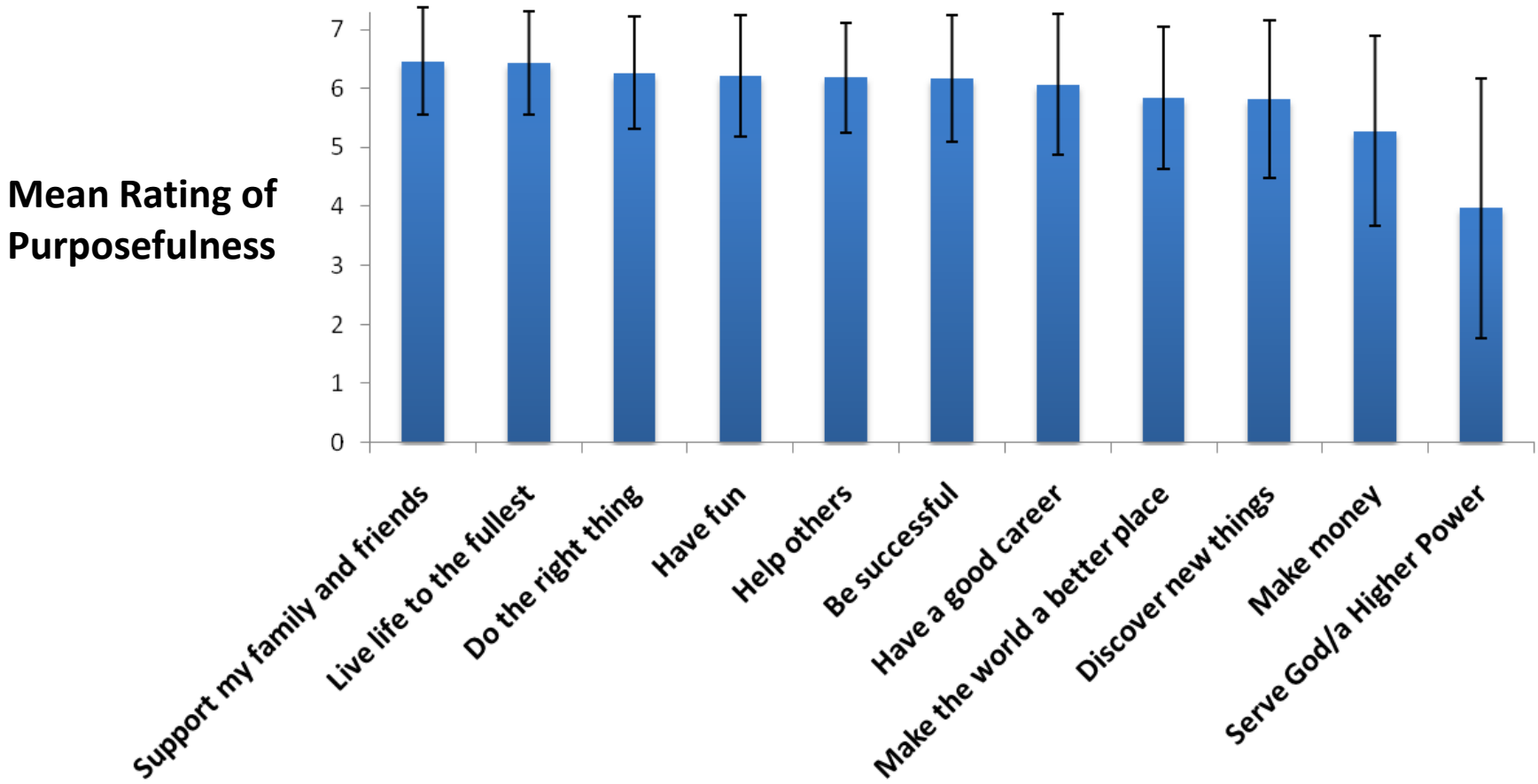
**<u>Eleven Categories of Purposeful Life Goals</u>**

- Support my family and friends
- Serve God/a Higher Power
- Help others
- Do the right thing
- Make the world a better place
- Discover new things
- Live life to the fullest
- Be successful
- Have fun
- Have a good career
- Make money
- Other (write-in)

# College students' *rankings* of types of purposeful life goals



# College students' *ratings* of types of purposeful life goals



# How do we increase purpose in college students?

- Responsibility to contribute
  - Experiential/service-learning, civic education
- Goal setting
  - Goal and implementation intentions
- Self-regulation
  - Emotional competence
- Social support
- Identity development/Self-understanding
  - **Reflection**

# Self-understanding?

"OK, Mr. Hook. Seems you're trying to decide between a career in pirating or massage therapy. Well, maybe we can help you narrow it down."

# Research question #3

- Can purpose be increased through engaging in an in-depth discussion of and reflection on one's life purpose(s)?
  - Purpose identification
  - Sense of purpose
  - Goal efficacy
  - Purpose engagement
  - Self- vs. Beyond-the-self orientation of life goals
- Are there other benefits of engaging in purposeful reflection?
  - Life satisfaction
  - Fulfillment of potential
  - Academic achievement

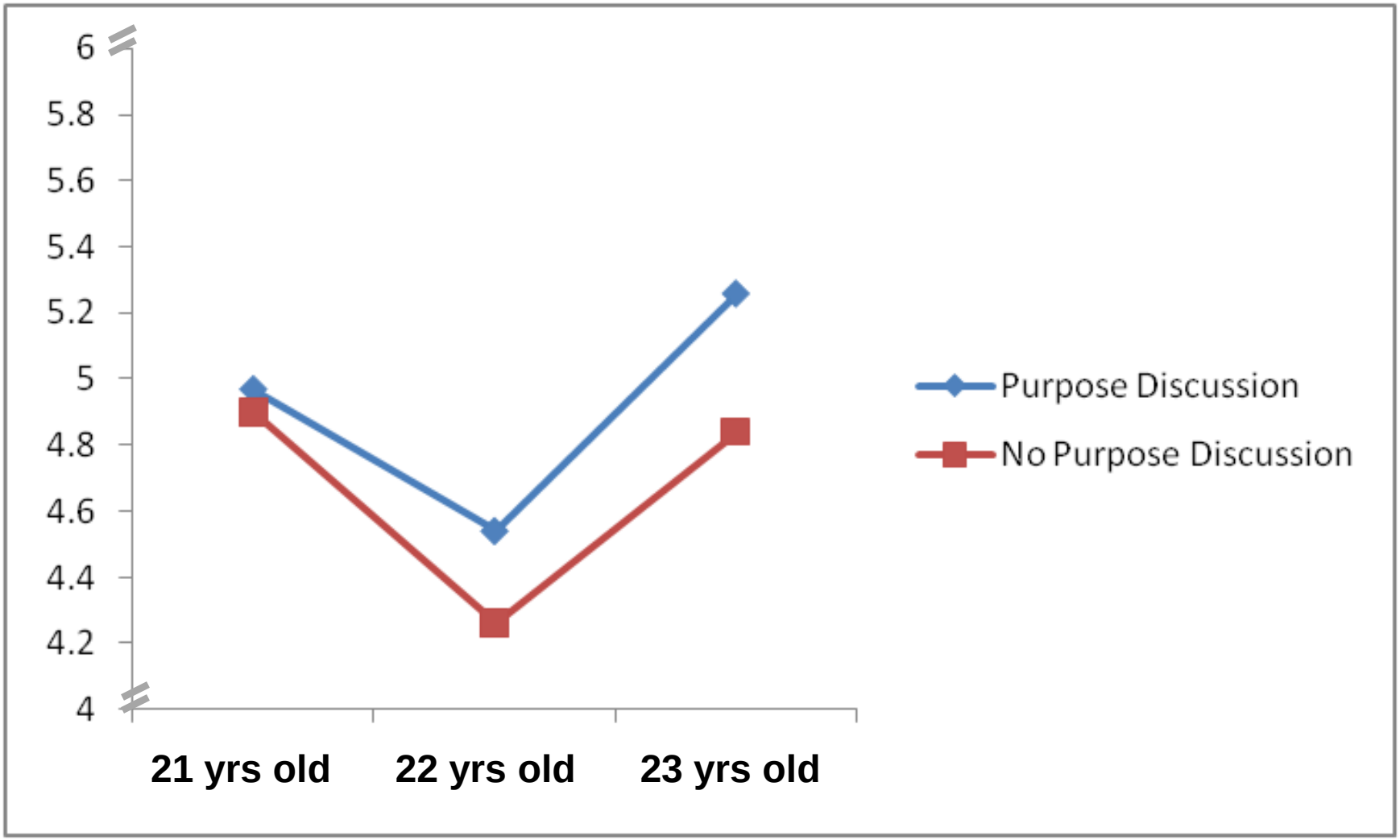
# Methods

- Sub-sample of larger study (N=79)
  - No demographic differences from larger sample
- Study design
  - Random assignment
    - "Experimental" group: 45 min. purpose interview
    - Control group: no interview
  - Pre-test / post-test / follow-up post-test
    - 10-12 month intervals

# Demographic differences

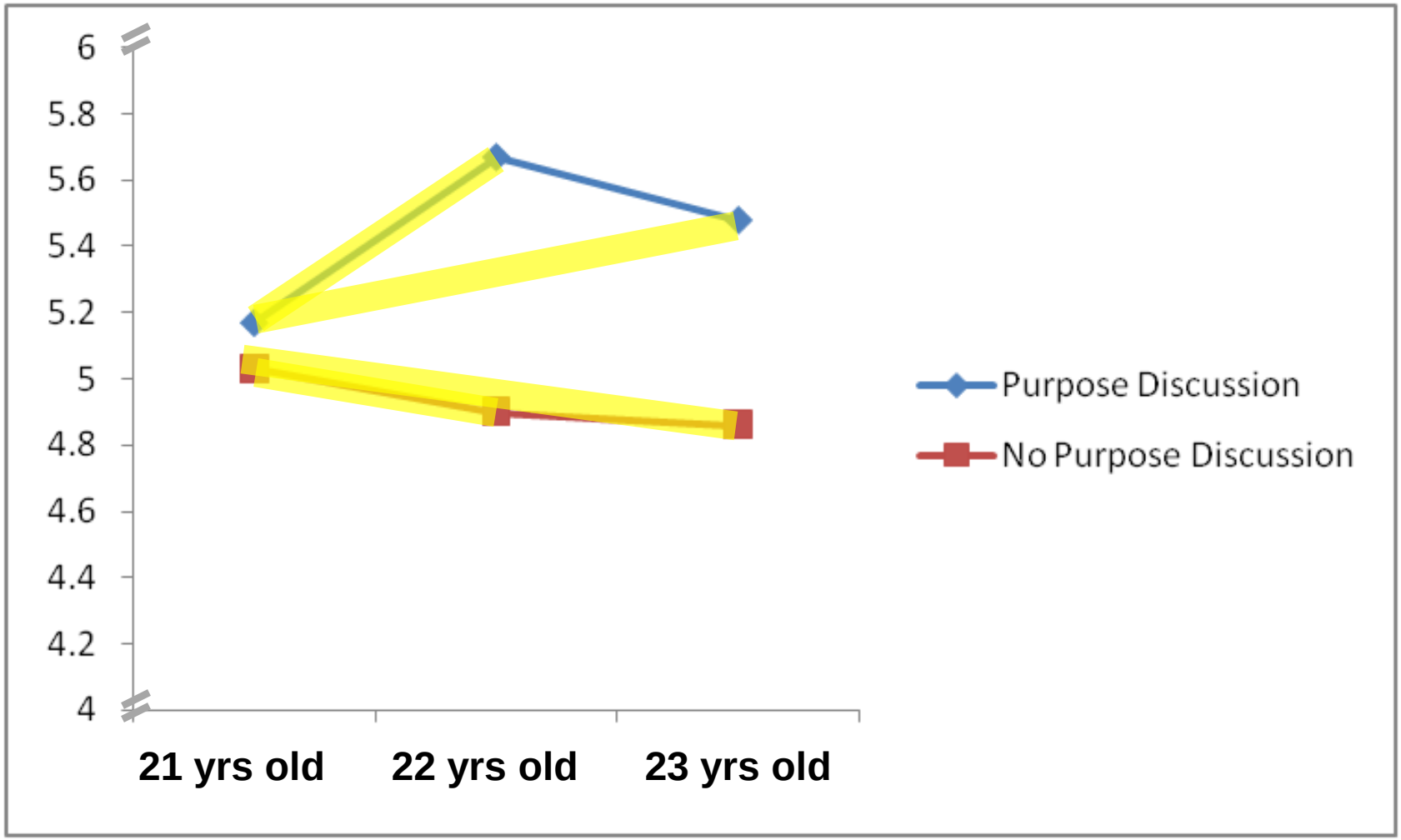
- Gender differences
  - Of those who have identified a purpose, females are higher in engagement
  - Females higher in fulfillment of potential
  - Females more likely to have community and religious life goals
- Ethnic differences
  - Asian-Americans lower in goal efficacy
  - Latinos and Native Americans more likely to have community life goals
  - African-Americans and Asian Americans more likely to have economic life goals
  - Pacific Islanders more likely to have religious life goals

# Results: Purpose Identification



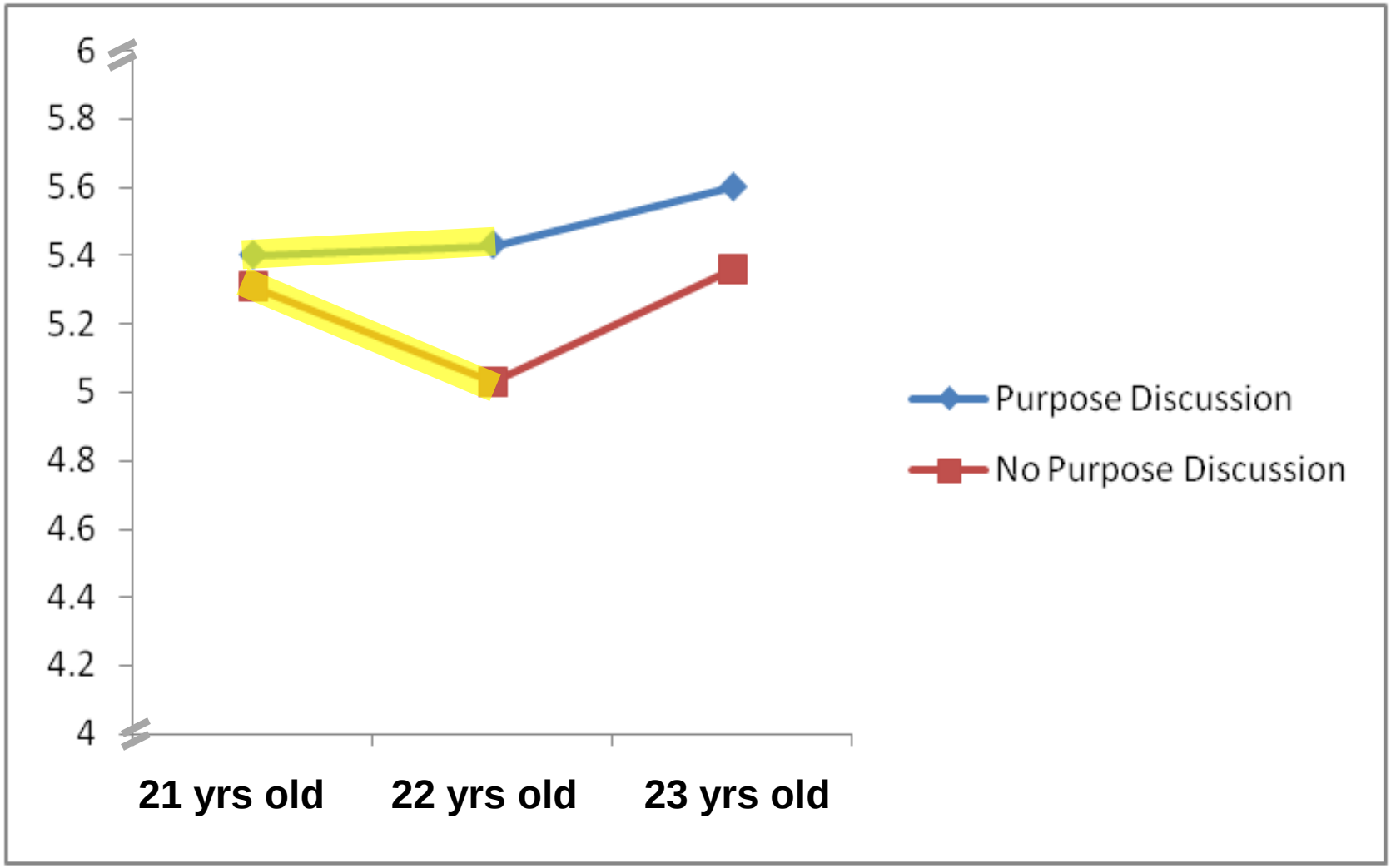

* p≤.10, ** p≤.05, *** p≤.01

# Results: Sense of purpose




* p≤.10, ** p≤.05, *** p≤.01 (yellow bars indicate significant differences in slopes)

# Results: Goal Efficacy

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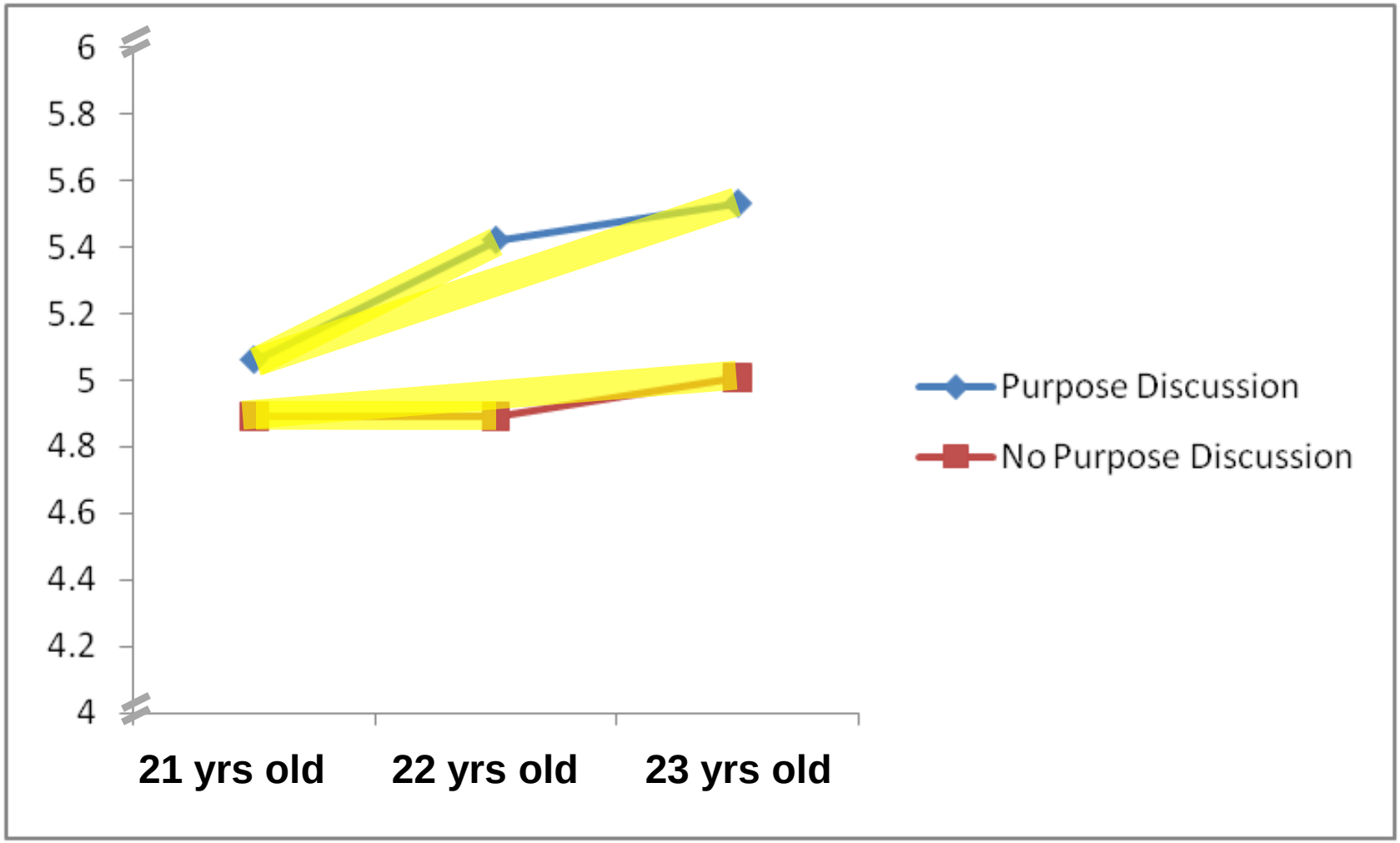
# Results: Purposeful Engagement

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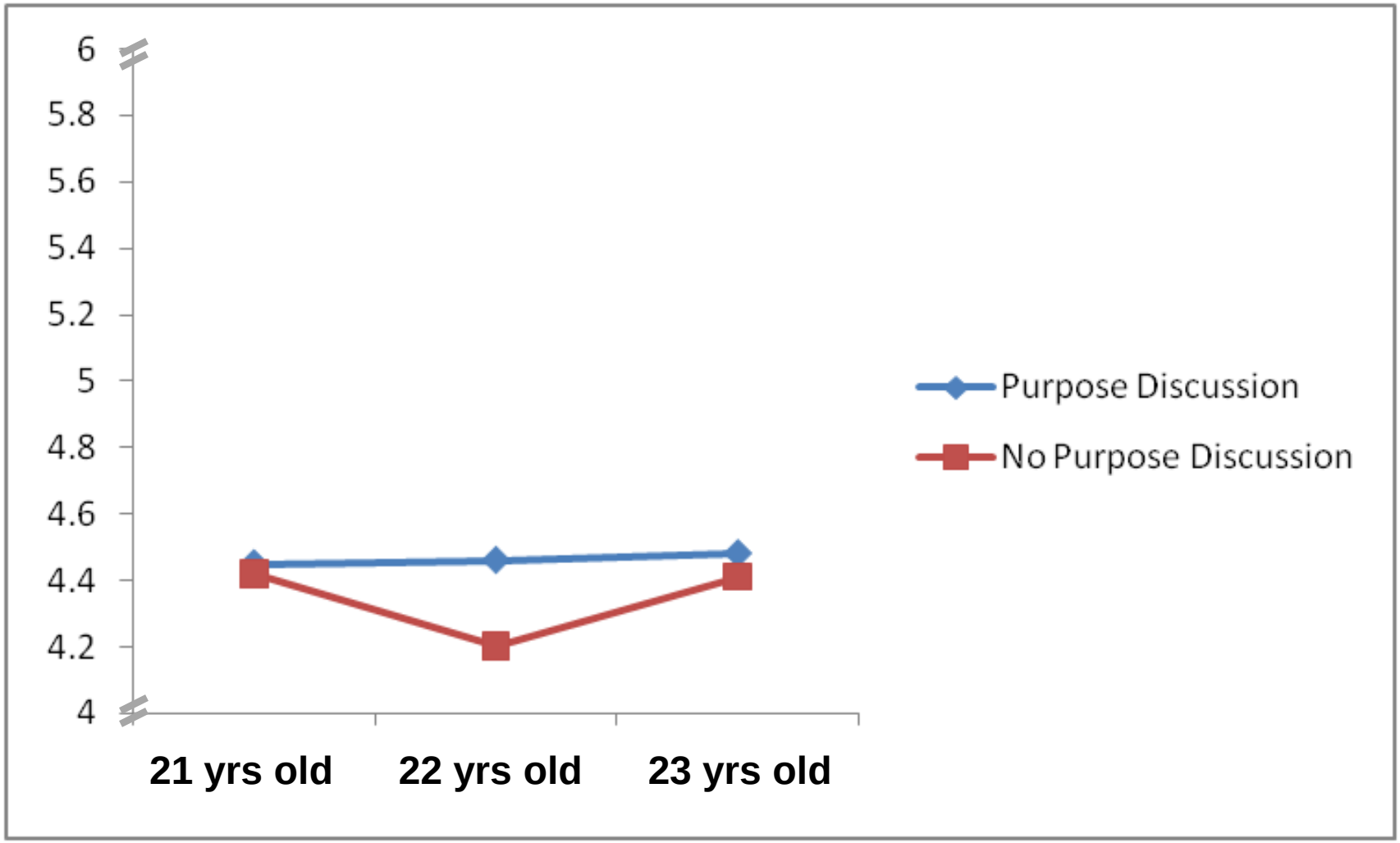
# Results : Life Satisfaction

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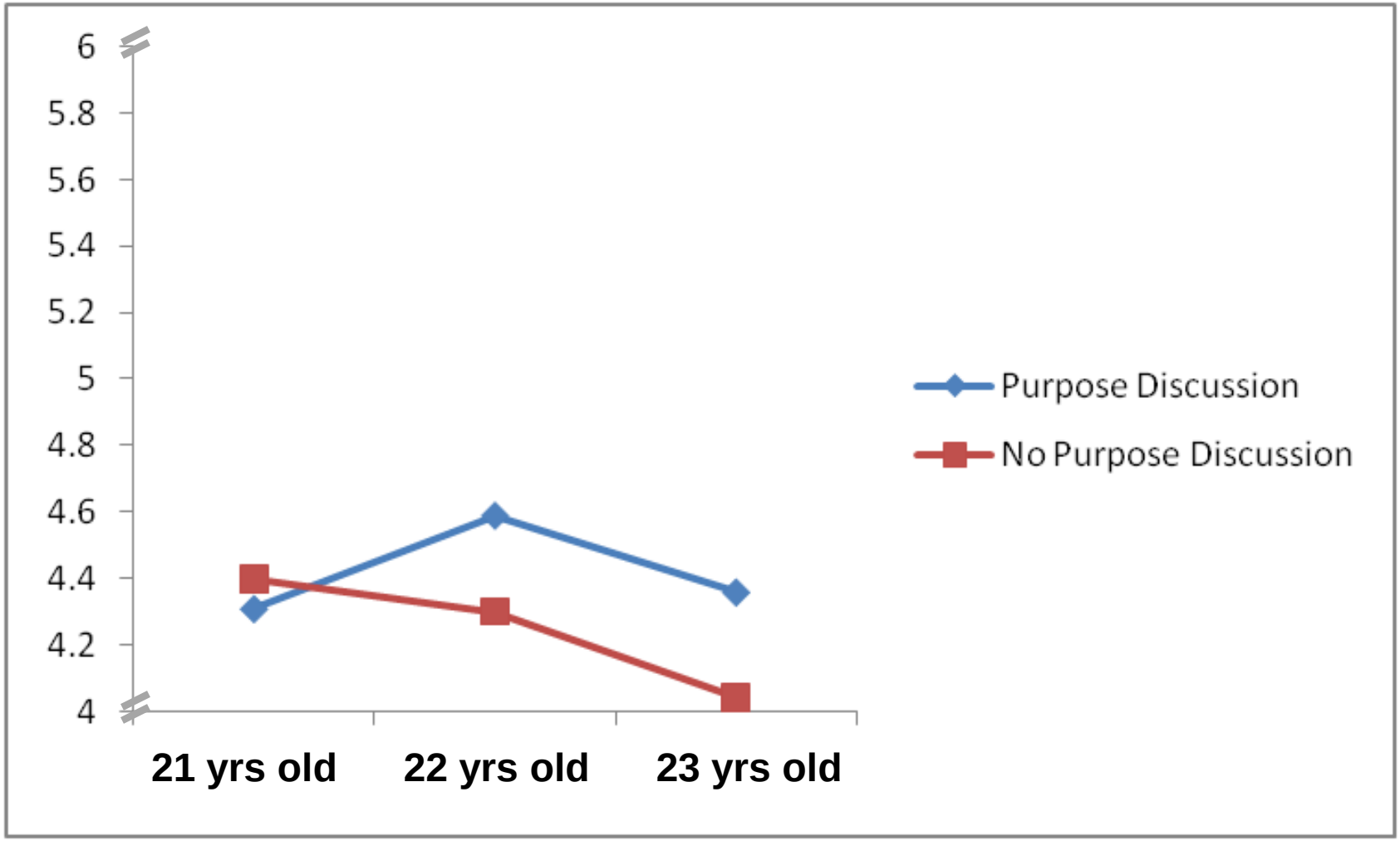
# Results : Fulfillment of Potential

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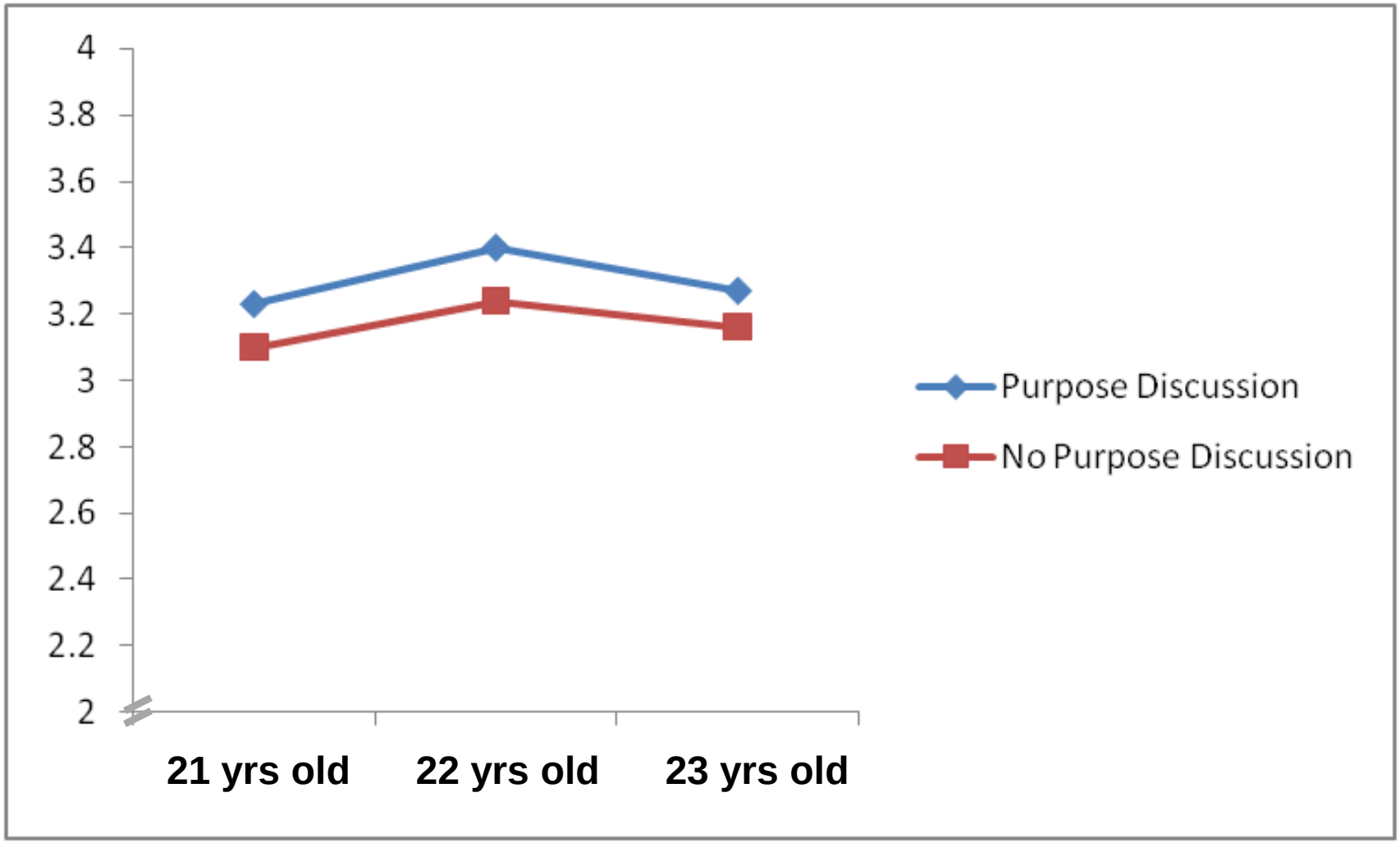
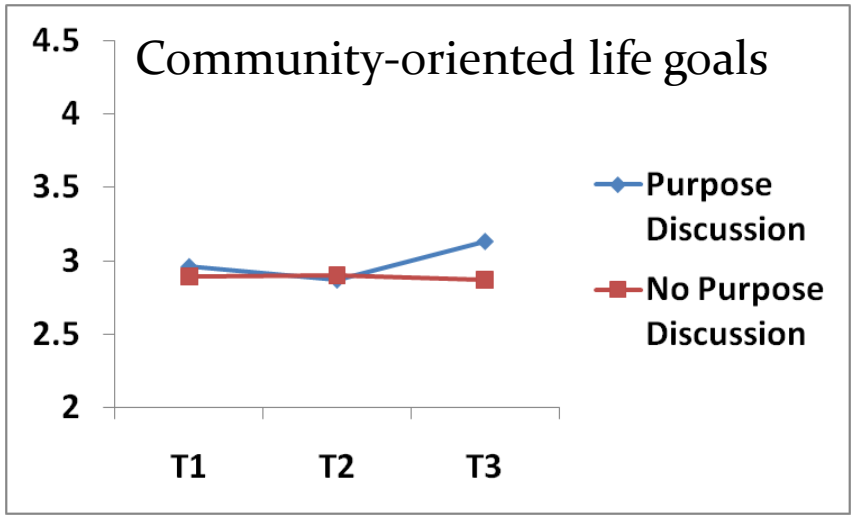
# Results : Academic Achievement

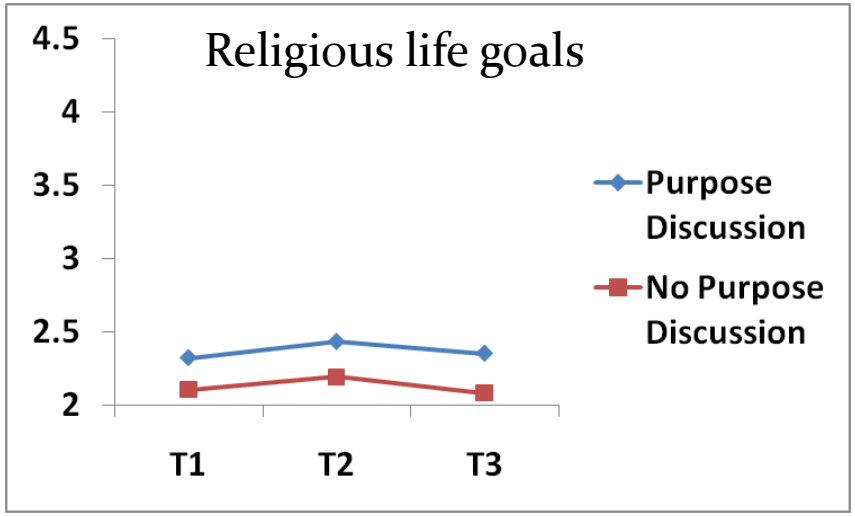



* p≤.10, ** p≤.05, *** p≤.01

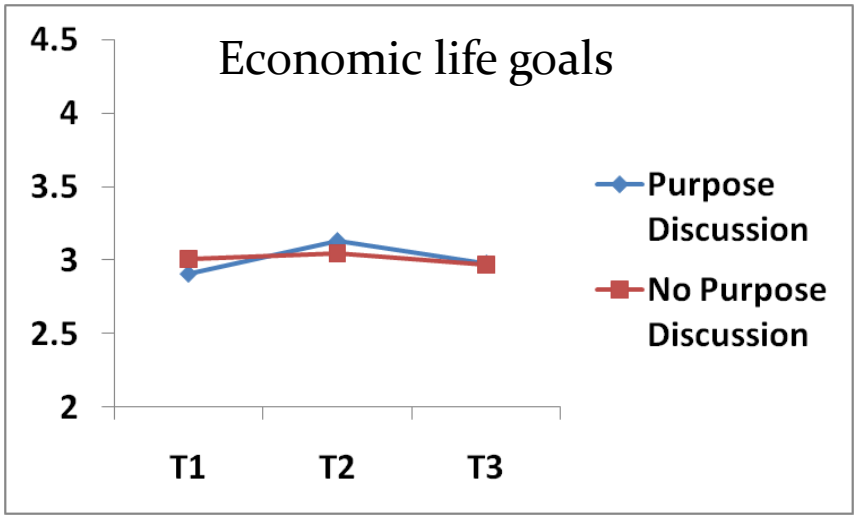
# Results: Orientation of Life Goals

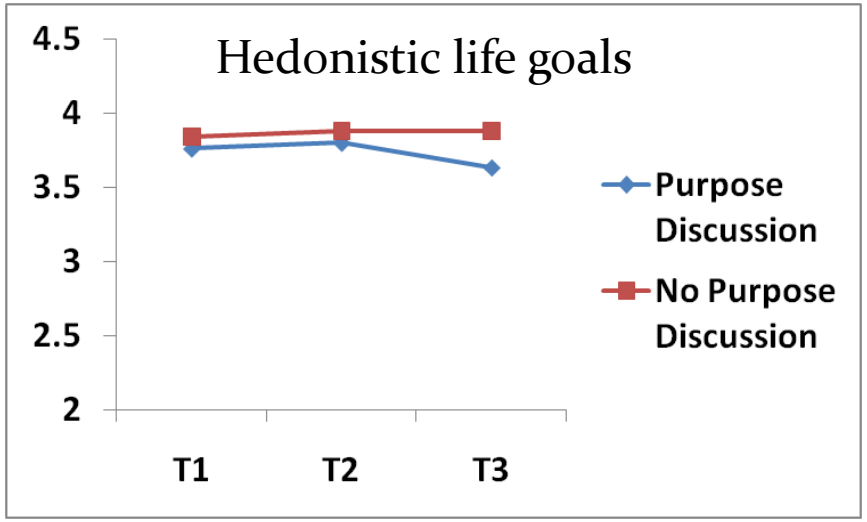
## Beyond-the-self-oriented




## Self-oriented



# Purpose Discussion

- What matters to you most in life?
  - *Why*?
- What are some of your personal strengths?
- What would you like to see different about the world?
  - *Why*?
- Are you doing anything about this problem? What?
  - If no, *why* not?
- How might your personal strengths equip you to deal with this problem?
- What do you want to be remembered for?
  - What are you doing now to make sure that happens?

# Small Group Purpose Discussions

- Your insights…

# If it were only this easy…

# Special Thanks

John Templeton Foundation

Thrive Foundation for Youth

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Dr. William Damon
Stanford Center on Adolescence

Dr. S. Shirley Feldman
Seana Moran
Matt Andrews
David Yeager
Tim Reilly
Heather Malin
Brandy Quinn
Elissa Hirsh
Lisa Staton
Jim Sirianni
Kendall Cotton Bronk
Jenni Menon Mariano
Norma Arce
Amina Jones