

# Values and Goals of College Students

Jamie Hartley

## Faculty Introduction

Dr. Gulden Esat

When Ms. Hartley approached me to join my lab to gain experience in research methodology, I proposed this topic as a potential study. She eagerly accepted the role of a volunteer research assistant and diligently completed the procedures in a timely manner. Ms. Hartley's meticulous work in data entry and analysis was commendable. Additionally, she showed a genuine interest in exploring the values and goals of college students and gained substantial knowledge during the literature review. The findings of this study are valuable for higher education administrators and faculty. They can use these insights to create policies and academic support systems that align with student values and goals, thereby improving effectiveness. Resources can be directed to initiatives that are relevant to students, such as personal development workshops and community engagement programs.

## Abstract

Values and goals are often the motivation and driving force for people when making life choices. They are motivators for an individual's career ambitions, and they also help prioritize dealings in daily life. Students on college campuses today have many different values and goals that are important to them. The purpose of this study is to explore such values and goals. Participants were a diverse group of students attending a southern university. The data was collected via an anonymous questionnaire. The most frequently mentioned values were *respect, love, friendship, fun and enjoyment, and physical health*. The goals most frequently reported were *personal growth, giving back to society, mental health, educational aspirations, and family related goals*. The results of this study showed that there is some consistency between the values chosen by college students in this study and other studies reported in literature.

Students on college campuses today have many different values and goals that are important to them. Values serve as a blueprint for young individuals, shaping what they aspire to achieve in their lives. These value-based long-term or short-term goals guide them in monitoring their progress in life, which is the basis for life satisfaction, a well-being construct (Sun, 2011). For example, someone who values family above all else is likely to make choices and decisions that revolve around their family life. Consequently, even if they don't achieve top coursework grades, they may still be satisfied with their life if their family life is positive. Studying the values of college students is crucial for several reasons. First, understanding these values can help support students in establishing their personal well-being. Additionally, since college students will soon move into the workforce, and assume positions that influence society, their values can provide insights into future societal trends. By knowing what college students believe, we can better predict how their values will shape their contributions as members of society.

## Values and Goals of College Students

Values are defined as “beliefs pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct, that transcends specific situations, guides selection or evaluation of behavior, people, and events, and is ordered by importance relative to other values to form a system of value priorities” (Schwarz, 1994). Values are a driving force of decision-making, especially in setting and pursuing future goals (Sagiv et al., 2017). Individuals, including college students, act in ways that allow them to express their core values and attain the goals linked to those values.

Some research over the past fifteen years has explored the values most important to college students. Mercader (2006) presented 28 ethical values to college students and asked them to rate each one by their importance. The top values identified were *honesty, respect, integrity, responsibility, knowledge and learning, perseverance, love, self-motivation, and fairness* (Mercader, 2006). A more recent study by Lewis (2023) found that of the values listed, the one that students reported the highest agreement with was the value of *community*, with 90.4% of participants agreeing that it was important, and the lowest value being *inclusivity*, with only 78.4% of participants agreeing that it was internalized in the university culture and environment.

Goals are the clear objectives in one's life and can be short-term or long-term in nature (Moeller et al., 2011). Goals can often be influenced by social and cultural norms, as well as an individual's background and lived experiences, and often underlie the motivations that people have when making these goals (Sun, 2011). The values of college students are found to be positively correlated with their goals. For example, the value of *achievement* was strongly correlated with the goals of *financial success*, suggesting that values and goals are linked in importance to each other (Zhang & Yu, 2012).

As part of another study (McCollum, 2005), when college students are asked about their personal goals and their importance, *social responsibility* emerged as the most important. The other most important goal clusters were *intimacy and fun*, *belonging to a community*, *being liked and accepted by others*, and *receiving support*. A potential limitation to the study, however, is that among the sample 78.6% of the participants were female, and 91.9% of the participants reported being European American. With the sample size being the majority one gender and race, the results may not be representative of the rest of the college student population.

The purpose of this study is to explore the values and goals of college students coming from diverse backgrounds. This research will address the diversity gap in scientific literature and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the values and goals of college students.

## **Method**

This is a descriptive study, the data of which were collected during a larger project investigating the effectiveness of a mental health prevention program for college students (Esat et al., 2021).

## **Participants**

The participants consisted of 68 college students attending an urban university in the southern United States. They were recruited as a class to participate in the effectiveness study of the mental health program. As Table 1 shows, about 80% of the participants were female, with an age range 18–23. Race/ethnicity of the participants was diverse, most of them being Asian American (52%) and Hispanic/Latinx American (26%). The religious affiliation of the participants was also diverse, most of them being Christian (31%).

Table I. Participant Demographics

<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	8	11
Female	53	80
Other	2	2
Missed (Unknown)	5	7
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
European American	3	5
African American	3	5
Asian American	36	52
Hispanic/Latinx American	18	26
Other	4	6
Missed (Unknown)	4	6
<b>Religion</b>		
Christian	21	31
Muslim	11	16
Buddhist	5	7
Jewish	2	2
Hindu	3	5
Other	6	9
Prefer not to report	0	0
No religion	10	15
Missed (Unknown)	10	15
Total	68	100

## Procedures and Measures

During one of the prevention program's lessons, the students were instructed to choose ten most important values from the provided list of 51 values (Table 2). The values listed were developed by Seligman et al. (2004). Participants were also given the option to add values that were not listed.

Additionally, the survey asked students to write their goals in life, including existential and general goals. All 68 participants completed the first part of the survey which required choosing 10 of the provided values; however, five students chose not to report their goals.

The students completed the study while together in their classroom with the other students during regularly scheduled class time. The students completed the survey at their desks, with no special changes in seating from where they typically sit during class. After the students completed

the survey, the surveys were collected by the program facilitator, and data were input by trained research assistants.

Table 2.Values Presented in the Survey

Accomplishment	Security	Interaction with the public
Fun and enjoyment	Being admired	Intimacy
Physical health	Independence	Change and variation
Acknowledgement	Self-determination	Spirituality
Freedom to choose	Being alone	Love
Power and authority	Influencing others	Stability
Adaptability	Self-expression	Status
Friendship	Being different	Success
Profit	Integrity	Competition
Artistry	Self-fulfillment	Meeting challenges
Helping society/others	Being valued	Money
Recognition	Intellectual stimulation	Time
Authenticity	Sensuality	Control over time
Honesty	Being with others	Order
Respect	Peace	Tranquility
Beauty and aesthetics	Expanding knowledge	Creativity
Humor	Personal empowerment	Excitement

## Results

### Reported Values

The values most frequently chosen were *respect, love, friendship, fun and enjoyment, health, honesty, success, helping society/ others, stability, and expanding knowledge* (Table 3). Out of the 51 values listed in the survey, the values chosen the most were rated by at least 22 or more of the 68 students, or at least 40% of the values or higher.

Table3.Values and Goals Reported by the Participants

Values	Frequency	Goals	Frequency
Respect	45	Personal Growth	71
Love	42		
Friendship	36	Give back to society	54
Fun and enjoyment	35		
Physical health	33	Happiness and mental health/stress free	29
Honesty	31		
Success	30	Graduate/continue education	23
Helping others and society	29		
Stability	26	Family Love/Family values	20
Knowledge	22		

In the section where students could write in goals and values, there were five goal categories listed most frequently by students (Table 3). These

were about *personal growth* (frequency [f]=71), *giving back to society both in material and emotional terms* (f=54), *mental wellbeing* (f=29), *educational aspirations* (f=23), and *family* (f=20).

When examining the results across gender, female participants chose the same top three values of *respect*, *love*, and *friendship*, which were the same top three values chosen by the entire group of participants. Similarly, the lowest values chosen by female participants were *expanding knowledge* and *stability*, which were the same two lowest chosen values by the entire group. So, gender did not appear to be a factor in the prioritization of values.

Another analysis was done with respect to race and ethnicity, focusing on the two biggest groups: Asian and Hispanic/Latinx Americans. The majority of the students in the sample were Asian Americans, with their most frequently selected values being *friendship* (61%), *respect* (53%), *love* (53%), *fun and enjoyment* (44%), and *honesty* (44%). The next largest group, Hispanic American students, indicated *respect* (72%), *success* (67%), *fun and enjoyment* (67%), *physical health* (61%), and *love* (61%) as their most important values. The common most selected values across the two groups were *respect*, *love*, and *fun and enjoyment*.

The results were also analyzed based on the religious affiliation of students. Interestingly, the differences between groups were mainly due to race/ethnicity and not religion. For example, except for two, all participants who were Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu were Asian Americans. The most frequently chosen values of the Muslim students were *respect* and *friendship*, the same with Asian American students in general.

## Reported Goals

In the section where students were asked to write their goals, there were five goal categories listed most frequently (Table 3). These were about *personal growth* (frequency [f]=71), *giving back to society both in material and emotional terms* (f=54), *mental well-being* (f=29), *educational aspirations* (f=23), and *family related goals* (f=20).

For males, the most frequent goals were about *family love/family values* and *personal growth*, both being mentioned by 50% of the participants. For females, the most frequently mentioned goals were about *personal growth* (75%) and *giving back to society including helping the needy, spreading love and peace, encouraging others, and contributing to social justice* (75%). While personal growth was a shared goal between males and females, family related goals were more frequently mentioned by males than females.

Table 4. Goals of the Largest Race/Ethnicity Groups in the Sample

Goals	Hispanic/Latinx American (%)	Asian American (%)
Personal Growth	72	58
Giving Back to Society	33	61
Mental Well-being	33	47
Educational Aspirations	28	36
Family Related Goals	39	30

Hispanic/Latinx students more frequently reported personal growth and family related goals, whereas Asian American students more often mentioned goals related to giving back to society, mental well-being, and educational aspirations (Table 4). No differences were found when the goal categories were analyzed based on religious affiliation.

## Discussion

In this study, 68 college students were asked to choose 10 values of importance to them out of a list of 51 given on a survey. The top values chosen most often by the students were *expanding knowledge, stability, helping society, success, honesty, physical health, fun/enjoyment, friendship, love, and respect*. *Knowledge* and *community* were the values found among the top in Lewis' (2023) and Mercader's (2006) studies. The other values common with Mercader's (2006) results were *honesty, respect, and love*. Notably, while *honesty* was the most frequently chosen value in the Mercader (2006) study, it ranked sixth in this study. The most chosen value in this study, however, was *respect*, which was the second most frequently chosen value in the Mercader (2006) study. In comparison to this study, the Mercader (2006) study included students that were older, up to the age of 35. However, similar to this study, the majority of students were 26 and younger down to the age of 18, and this age range accounted for 56% of students. The gender distribution of the participants in

Mercader's (2006) study was even, whereas this study predominantly consisted of female students.

The results concerning the goals also match the literature. *Giving back to society* was also one of highest rated goals in a previous study of college students (McCollum, 2005). McCollum's (2005) sample composition matches the present study's sample with majority being female. However, the majority of participants in both Mercader's (2006) and McCollum's (2005) samples were mostly European Americans, considerably different from this study's demographics, where the majority of participants were Asian American and Hispanic/Latinx American, with 52% and 36%, with only 5% of participants reporting being European American.

In addition to the values, the participants were also asked to report their goals in life. Most frequently reported goals were *personal growth*, *giving back to society*, *mental well-being*, *educational aspirations*, and *family related values*, the first two of those goal categories being important to the majority of the sample, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, or religion. This highlights the dual importance college students place on their personal development and the betterment of society. The emphasis on personal growth underscores their desire for self-improvement, while the focus on societal contribution reflects a strong commitment to making a positive impact on their communities and the world at large. These findings suggest that college students represented in this sample are not only driven by individual success but also by a collective sense of responsibility and altruism, indicating a comprehensive and caring understanding of life.

Despite these demographic differences, the consistency of key values and goals over two decades underscores commonalities across ethnicities, highlighting the enduring importance of these values to college students. Higher education administrators and faculty can develop policies and academic support systems that match the values and goals of students to boost effectiveness of the health and academic interventions and prevention efforts offered to the students. Resources can be allocated to areas that align with student values and goals, such as personal development workshops and community engagement programs.

## Strengths and Limitations

While the diversity of the sample is a strength, in terms of generalizability,

it can also be considered a limitation as the majority of the US population is European American. Therefore, additional studies with larger and more varied samples are necessary to generalize the results to the wider college student population.

Another limitation of this study is the small sample size, which makes it difficult to determine whether the findings can be generalized to the rest of the student population. The sample of participants in this study was taken from those enrolled in the College of Education, the majority of which were female, raising questions about whether these results are representative of all college students or specific to those in education colleges.

### **Future Studies**

The Mercader (2006) study found that what students reported as important were not necessarily the values that they applied most often in life. This is significant because it suggests that people may not always live by the values they believe are important. This leaves many unanswered questions about beliefs versus actions, and further study on this topic would be beneficial.

Finally, further research can explore the underlying reasons for the differences in values among ethnic groups, providing deeper insights that can inform more tailored interventions. ■

## References

- Esat, G., Rizvi, S., Mousa, C., Smoots, K. D., Shaw, E., Phillip, C. R., & Smith, B. H. (2021). Mindful Ambassador Program: An acceptable and feasible universal intervention for college students. *Journal of Yoga & Physiotherapy*, 8(5). <https://doi.org/10.19080/JYP.2021.08.555748>.
- Lewis, R. D. (2023). Core values in higher education: Students, faculty, staff, and the administrator alignment at a midwestern research university. [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Dakota]. *Theses and Dissertations. 5311*. <https://commons.und.edu/theses/5311>.
- McCollum, D. L. (2005). What are the social values of college students?: A social goals approach. *Journal of College and Character*, 6(6). <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1469>.
- Mercader, V. (2006). *Study of the ethical values of college students* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida]. <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/2629>.
- Moeller, A. J., Theiler, J. M., & Wu, C. (2011). Goal setting and student achievement: A longitudinal study. *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2), 153–169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01231.x>.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1994). Are there universal aspects in the structure and contents of human values? *Journal of Social Issues*, 50(4), 19–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1994.tb01196.x>.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2004). The Values in Action (VIA) classification of character strengths. *Ricerche di Psicologia*, 27(1), 63–78.
- Sun, J. (2011, May 25). *Major life goals of college students: An investigation of personality traits, vocational interests, and values* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign]. <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/24693>.
- Zhang, K. C., & Yu, E. D. (2014). Quest for a good life: spiritual values, life goals, and college students. *Asia-Pacific Psychiatry*, 6(1).

## Student Biography

Jamie Hartley currently holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Sam Houston State University, and is a senior at Sam Houston State University working on a second Bachelor's degree in Victim Studies. She currently works at a mental health facility, and hopes to eventually earn a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology, and to become a Licensed Professional Counselor, with a focus on victims of trauma.