

# ***Evidence Suggests Good Character and Ethical Behavior Promotes Both Individual and Collective Wellbeing***

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**Executive Summary.** There is ample evidence from multiple sources that an array of attitudes, dispositions, and habits correlate well with wellbeing in life, both for individuals and for societies. The characteristics are not surprising, and include such examples as gratitude, generosity toward others, forgiveness, humility, integrity, honesty and trustworthiness. In many cases the evidence comes from research in positive psychology, but other fields are also involved, including medicine, political science, economics, sociology, public safety, and other fields. While this evidence is largely from correlation and may not necessarily be causative, it indicates that there are perhaps many potential educational experiences capable of producing enhancement to lifelong wellbeing beyond enhancements to a sense of belonging, agency, purpose and meaning. However, this only intensifies the need for experimentation with different pedagogical interventions to determine if and how these characteristics may be successfully “taught” or inspired in student populations in ways that result in lasting wellbeing long after the college experience. In general, this will require diligent assessment over several decades with reliable metrics that are nationally normed. This is the central work of the LearningWell Coalition.

**Considering Life Goals.** A recent survey of millennials found that over 80% list becoming rich is among their major life goals, and another 50% of those same millennials said that another major life goal is to become famous (Waldinger). Apparently, there is a strong belief among college students today that becoming rich and famous will lead to a good life. This is not new.



*A popular bumper sticker from the 1980s*

But scientific evidence from the Harvard Study of Adult Development—one of the most comprehensive studies in history—indicates that people who invest in long-term relationships based on trust, respect, and compassion have the highest levels of wellbeing throughout life— independent of wealth, fame, or other measures of success. On the other hand, wealth and fame are actually orthogonal to happiness<sup>1</sup>. They don’t make you happy or unhappy. However, the *pursuit* of those things at the expense of investing in human connections makes people less happy and less healthy.

As a result, promoting *early* conversations with college students about what it means to create a “good life” with long-term wellbeing is likely an important preliminary step in developing educational experiences that result in improvements in long term outcomes for alumni. Educating students about the difference between dedicating oneself to accumulating wealth and fame—or on the other hand, seeking life-long wellbeing, which has more dimensions—may be

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<sup>1</sup> Except, perhaps, for those living at or below the poverty level.