Exemplars of purpose: Reliance on moral exemplars supports college students' purpose in life

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A B S T R A C T

Using mixed-methods across two studies (Fall 2019 $n_{intervention} = 32$, $n_{control} = 42$; Fall 2021 $n_{intervention} = 35$; $n_{control} = 42$), we find that a college course featuring a moral exemplar-focused character intervention supports emerging adults' reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life. Quantitative analyses from Study 1 indicate that students in the character course (versus control group) grew in reliance on moral exemplars and purpose from pre- to post-semester. Moreover, the greater students' reliance on moral exemplars, the greater their purpose at the end of the semester. Study 2 largely replicated that pattern but found differences by students' developmental phase. Qualitative analyses underscored that students appreciated relatability and attainability in moral exemplars and moral exemplars bolstered students' finding purpose in developing their moral character. The results have important implications for the design and assessment of character interventions intended to foster purpose and reliance on moral exemplars.

1. Introduction

College is a time for many emerging adults to discern their identity, values, and purpose (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Purpose can be understood as "a stable and generalizable intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and contributes to the world beyond the self" (Damon et al. 2003, p. 121). Purpose is important for day-to-day motivation (e.g., Koshy & Mariano, 2011; Pizzolato et al., 2011) and overall wellbeing (e.g., Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Hill et al., 2013). Essential to the process of finding purpose are role models (Han, 2015), people who serve as exemplars for the goals, attitudes, or behavior of individuals who then identify with and aim to imitate the role model (APA Dictionary, 2022). Indeed, moral role models, or moral exemplars, are thought to be essential to moral character development (Zagzebski, 2017; Miller, 2018), which has been borne out empirically (e.g., Han et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2016). Character education can leverage the efficacy of moral exemplars in intervention pedagogy to support students' growth (e.g., Lamb et al., 2022,2021), including in purpose (Mendonça et al., 2023).

Our prior work suggests that a college course focusing on moral exemplars supports students' sense of purpose in life (Mendonça et al., 2023) as well as the development of specific virtues of character (Lamb et al. 2022). However, it is unclear whether and to what extent reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life are increasing in parallel or what aspects of the character course supported these changes. Accordingly, the current work takes a mixed methods approach via quantitative and qualitative data analysis to assess

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whether character pedagogy focusing on moral exemplars facilitates positive change in reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life, to what extent reliance on moral exemplars is associated with purpose, and which and how particular aspects of the character course focused on moral exemplars supports students' growth.

1.1. Purpose

Purpose has been theorized to provide direction, organize and guide people's values, and help them find supportive peers and mentors (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017). Purpose can be understood as a future-oriented disposition to accomplish some goal that is both meaningful to the self and impacts the world beyond the self (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003; Malin et al., 2014). Like other scholars (e.g., Damon et al., 2003, 2008), we conceive of purpose as having a positive valence, being quintessentially prosocial and morally good. Purpose consists of three orientations toward (1) future goals, (2) personal meaning, and (3) beyond-the-self impact (Bronk et al., 2018). Because purpose helps to provide direction in life and organize people's values in prosocial ways that promote human flourishing and is a disposition that can be developed and sustained over time through intentional effort, it can be considered a "metavirtue" that functions to guide the other virtues toward morally good goals (Han, 2015). Lending further support for the role of purpose of as a special sort of virtue, it is also associated with moral reasoning, feelings, and identity (Han, 2022).

Purpose is particularly important for emerging adults (i.e., ages 18–29). Emerging adults are typically transitioning from a life of dependence to one of independence (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016; Parks, 2011) and have the opportunity to explore and define the goals of their lives with relative freedom, for example, in regard to their careers in industrialized nations (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Purpose is essential to guiding emerging adults' formation of their identity and goals in transitioning to the independent phase of adulthood (Arnett, 2004, 2014; Bronk, 2011; Marcia, 1966, 1980). Accordingly, during this phase, individuals may engage in more intentional and effortful reflection on their purpose, values, and beliefs (Bronk, 2011; Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Lapsley & Hardy, 2017; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). Indeed, purpose and identify are mutually reinforcing: purpose supports the formation of identity, which in turn supports the importance of purpose in the lives of individuals in the adolescent and early emerging adult phase (ages 12–22, Bronk, 2011).

For emerging adults, purpose bolsters productivity and wellbeing. Emerging adults who report more purpose also report more self-efficacy during (DeWitz et al., 2009) and satisfaction with the college experience (Hill et al., 2010). During this phase, purpose is a protective factor against delinquency (Hill et al., 2016). Moreover, purpose is positively associated with wellbeing (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2009; Sumner et al., 2015), life satisfaction, happiness, and hope (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Cotton et al., 2009) in the present as well as in the future (e.g., Hill et al., 2010). Moreover, when understood as a "metavirtue" (Han, 2015), it also supports character formation and the development of other virtues (Malin et al., 2017).

1.2. Moral exemplars

A large body of literature shows that role models benefit individuals' performance, engagement, and interest in various domains (e. g., Bettinger & Long, 2005; Dee, 2007; Morgenroth et al., 2015; Rask & Bailey, 2002; Solanki & Xu, 2018). The moral domain is no different—moral role models or exemplars are thought to be essential to moral development (Zagzebski, 2017; Miller, 2018; Lamb et al., 2021). This influence has been borne out empirically as well, with research demonstrating that moral exemplars can positively benefit individuals' character development (e.g., Han et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2016). Likewise, Zagzebski (2017) argues that moral exemplars bolster moral character formation through the processes of admiration, evaluation, and, in turn, emulation. Han (2015) argues that purpose is a requisite for flourishing and the development of other moral virtues and is evident in moral exemplars (e.g., those studied in Colby and Damon, 1992; Damon, 2008). Accordingly, exemplars can also model purpose in life.

When people attend to exemplars of moral excellence, they may experience elevation, gratitude, and admiration that motivate prosocial behavior, the strengthening of social ties with benefactors, and self-improvement, respectively (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). By providing models to emulate, moral exemplars may inspire people to live morally good lives like they do (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Colby & Damon, 1992; Cox, 2010; Immordino-Yang & Sylvan, 2010; Miller, 2018; Vianello et al., 2010). Moral exemplars may also motivate and guide others by providing moral reminders, supplying evidence that moral excellence is possible, modeling ethical behavior concretely, and generating upward comparisons that can be used to evaluate one's own moral standing and character (Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon & Colby, 2015; Engelen et al., 2018; Lamb et al., 2021; Smith & Zárate, 1990, 1992).

The most successful moral exemplars may be those whose moral goodness appears "attainable" and "relevant" to the developing person (Han et al., 2017), such as parents, grandparents, and other close adults (Johnson et al., 2016). One systematic set of experiments has found that college students feel more inspired by moral exemplars who are relatable (e.g., a recent alum versus a famous moral exemplar) rather than those whose behaviors are attainable, and that relatability supports more prosocial motivation to engage in low-cost moral behaviors (i.e., donating to charity and intentions to volunteer) (Han et al., 2022). Similarly, relatability of moral exemplars may be of primary importance, with attainability positively moderating that effect (i.e., in predicting moral motivation via moral elevation and pleasantness) (Han & Dawson, 2023). Together, this research suggests that relatability is essential to catalyzing social comparison with exemplars, whereas attainability increases positive moral emotions—such as elevation and pleasantness. Furthermore, unintended effects of character interventions may emerge when the interventions feature extreme exemplars (Monin, 2007; Monin et al., 2008). For example, Monin and colleagues (2008) found that people resented moral exemplars who refused to engage in behaviors that those people engaged in; by contrast, people who merely observed the refusal liked the moral exemplars. This pattern was accounted for in part by the people's assumption that the moral exemplar would reject them.

Some scholars have proposed that purpose facilitates people's search for mentors and peers (Bronk, 2012; Bronk & Baumsteiger,

2017), who may serve as role models or moral exemplars, especially given how essential they are during emerging adulthood (Parks, 2011). We propose that having moral exemplars also helps people develop their purpose, especially as it is tied to the goal of developing their moral character or living a life of virtue. This bidirectional relationship is hinted at by Bronk and Baumsteiger (2017). "While working toward a purpose in life," they suggest, "emerging adults often encounter individuals who provide guidance and support both their personally significant aims and their development more generally" (p. 49). Furthermore, they note that "[m]entors can engage young people in conversations that help clarify their interests and aims" and "also help recognize, support, and challenge emerging adults' purposeful plans" (p. 59). By focusing on a course that features moral exemplars to support moral character development—"Commencing Character"—we are able to test that idea that reliance on moral exemplars is associated with emerging adults' purpose in life.

1.3. A curricular intervention

"Commencing Character" is an undergraduate course that joins the study of virtue theory with commencement speeches focused on character to support student flourishing and moral character development (Lamb et al., 2022). To this end, the instructor implements seven strategies for character development that bring together insights from psychology, philosophy, and education: "(1) habituation through practice, (2) reflection on personal experience, (3) engagement with virtuous exemplars, (4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy, (5) awareness of situational variables, (6) moral reminders, and (7) friendships of mutual accountability" (Lamb et al., 2021, 2022). The use of exemplars is especially prominent throughout the semester. In addition to a session devoted to the role of exemplars in character formation, students critically engage readings and speeches on other virtues and practices from exemplars such as Maya Angelou, Brené Brown, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eboo Patel, Fred Rogers, Reshma Saujani, Zadie Smith, and Bryan Stevenson, among many others. They also identify personal exemplars in their own lives in regular journal reflections and complete an essay assignment called "Profiles in Character" that requires them to interview a personal exemplar and write a profile of their character. Finally, students serve as peer exemplars when delivering their own commencement speeches at the conclusion of the course.

Overall, the course targets the development of fifteen virtues, with special attention to purpose and its relation to flourishing. Two class sessions dedicated to purpose feature structured discussions, a required journal reflection, readings about the nature and value of purpose, and critical engagement with readings from exemplars such as David Brooks, Sue Monk Kidd, Toni Morrison, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Engaging all three orientations associated with purpose (i.e., goals, meaningfulness, and beyond-the-self orientation), these sessions aim to help students consider their purpose, understand the role of purpose in a good life, and connect their personal goals and pursuit of meaningfulness with communal flourishing. Throughout the semester, the instructor reiterates the value of purpose by helping students recognize how other virtues depend on having a morally good purpose to be "virtues" and how fulfilling one's purpose requires the co-operation of other virtues such as courage, humility, and hope. Moreover, through the "Profiles in Character" assignment, students discover their personal exemplars' purpose by interviewing them. In this interview, students inquire about their exemplars' moral development and exercise of the virtues, which reveals how they see their purpose. Students are also asked to consider how the exemplar's character and exercise of the virtues, including potentially purpose, have shaped their own life and character. Further, engagement with moral exemplars, both contemporary and historical, is employed as a pedagogical strategy across these sessions. A quintessential goal of the course is to support students in finding meaning and purpose through living a virtuous life, inspired by an exploration of moral exemplars.

2. The current work

The current work leverages a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods approach to test whether a course that implements character pedagogy focusing on moral exemplars supports positive change in purpose. Specifically, across two semesters (Fall 2019 and Fall 2021), we quantitatively assessed change in reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life scores as well as to what extent reliance on moral exemplars predicts purpose in the character course (i.e., Commencing Character) compared to a control group. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H$_1$: Individuals in the Commencing Character course will grow more in their reliance on moral exemplars compared to the control group from the beginning to the end of the semester.
H$_2$: Individuals in the Commencing Character course will grow more in their purpose in life compared to the control group from the beginning to the end of the semester.
H$_3$: The extent to which students relied on moral exemplars at the end of the semester will be positively associated with the extent to which they experienced their lives as meaningful (i.e., report higher purpose).

To provide a fuller picture of which and how particular aspects of the character course focused on moral exemplars supported students' growth, we qualitatively analyzed end-of-semester student reflections. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

3. Study 1

Study 1 tested whether character pedagogy that focuses on moral exemplars supports students' reliance on moral exemplars and the growth of purpose in life.

3.1. Method

Participants. Participants were 75 first-year undergraduate students at a private university in the Southeastern United states who responded to both a pre- and post-semester surveys (M_{age} = 18.36, SD = 0.48; 54 women, 19 men; 57 people identified as White/ Caucasian, 8 Hispanic/Latinx, 8 Asian, 5 Black/African American, 5 Middle Eastern, 2 Multiracial[1]). In this and Study 2, our sample size was determined by enrollment in the character course, with an attempt to match the course size with the control group size. A little less than half of students (n = 32) were in two sections of a first-year seminar course on character (FYS-A 2019 and FYS-B 2019), and about half were in the control group (i.e., psychology students who participated for partial credit; n = 43).[2] Within the character course, 10 of the 32 were required to take the first-year seminar (FYS) as part of a co-curricular scholarship program focused on leadership and character. The remaining students in the character course elected to take the seminar. None of the students in the control group were in the co-curricular scholarship program or the character course.

Procedure. Participants responded to a 30-minute survey at the beginning and end of the Fall 2019 semester. As part of a larger survey, participants responded to questions about the extent to which they rely on moral exemplars (Moral Exemplar Scale) and experience purpose in life (Claremont Purpose Scale). As part of their course work, the character pedagogy group also responded to questions about which and how the course's moral exemplar interventions changed their understanding, behavior, or character in the context of their Final Reflection assignment. Students were required to complete the surveys and questionnaires as part of their grade, but they were given an opportunity to consent to have their data used for the research.

3.2. Measures

Moral Exemplar Scale. Participants responded to the pilot version of the Moral Exemplar Scale (MES), which included 8 items that captured the extent to which people rely on role models to support their moral character, decision making, and behavior (later expanded and systematically developed by Dykhuis et al., 2023). The scale captures people's feelings, cognitions, and motivations regarding moral exemplars. Sample items examine moral exemplars as a source of admiration/inspiration (e.g., *I feel inspired by my moral role models to become a better person*), ideation/cognition (e.g., *I look to my moral role models to understand how a particular virtue can be practiced*), emulation (e.g., *I consider what my moral role models would do in a specific situation*), and attainability (e.g., *I consider my moral role models as proof that particular ideals are possible to attain*). Participants responded on a Likert scale from *1 = Never* to *5 = Very Frequently* (pre-semester, α = 0.90, M = 3.85, SD = 0.72; post-semester, α = 0.88, M = 4.03, SD = 0.67).[3] See Appendix for full scale.

Claremont Purpose Scale. The 12-item Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS, Bronk et al., 2018) assesses three dimensions of purpose via 4 items each: goal-directedness (e.g., *How hard are you working to make your long-term aims a reality?*), personal meaning (e.g., *How clear is your sense of purpose in life?*), and a beyond-the-self orientation (e.g., *How often do you find yourself hoping that you will make a meaningful contribution to the broader world?*) Participants responded on a Likert scale with scale points from 1 = *None/Almost none, Not at all/A little bit, Never/Almost never* to 5 = *All/Almost all, Extremely, All/Almost all* (pre-semester, α = 0.80, M = 3.72, SD = 0.48; post-semester, α = 0.89, M = 3.81, SD = 0.60).

Qualitative Reflections. At the end of the course, each student completed a final course reflection, which consisted of 3 quantitative and 8 qualitative questions, that prompted reflection around the course's aims and major assignments. The Final Reflection assignment was completed outside of class and submitted through a digital learning platform. Students were aware that the assignment was graded blindly using student ID numbers rather than names to reduce the influence of biases was assessed for completion, writing quality, and depth of engagement, but not for the students' substantive assessment of the course or its components. Two questions prompted specific reflection around the use of moral exemplars in the course. A quantitative question asked students to rate the 11 exemplar interventions used in the course on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being *very ineffective* and 5 being *very effective*. A qualitative question asked students to elaborate on the exemplar interventions that they rated most highly, with the prompt: "For those exemplar interventions that were relevant or effective for you, how did they change your understanding, behavior, or character?" This paper explores the responses from the second question.

4. Analyses

Qualitative Analysis. Each course reflection was analyzed independently by two coders in two phases. In the first phase, coders identified the exemplar intervention type that students referenced as most relevant or effective. As not to be limited by preconceptions, a single coder inductively created initial codes of the exemplar intervention types. Subsequent rounds of analysis used those codes and added others as needed. Coders then conducted a frequency count of the exemplar type referenced in the responses. Coders made special designations to indicate exemplar types that were emphasized more than others.

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[1] Note that participants could select more than one ethnicity/race.

[2] For most demographics, character pedagogy and control groups did not differ. The exceptions are that the character pedagogy group had a more balanced gender distribution (55% women, 45% men) than the control group (88% women, 12% men), and there were more Black/African American students in the character pedagogy group (n = 4) than the control group (n = 1).

[3] One additional question, which we do not analyze, asks the question, *What is the most important contribution that moral role models make to your moral development? (Select one).*

Based on the research questions, three theory-driven codes related to purpose were used to deductively identify expressions of purpose in connection with course exemplars: *(P1) Personal Meaningfulness*, which indicated when a moral exemplar prompted students' intention to accomplish something meaningful to the self; *(P2) Beyond-the-Self*, which signified when a moral exemplar prompted the intention to accomplish something of consequence to the world beyond the self; *(P3) Both Personal Meaningfulness and Beyond-the-self*, which indicated that a moral exemplar prompted students' intention to accomplish something meaningful to the self and of consequence to the broader world. The coders also inductively coded for emergent themes related to the research question. Each coder went through two waves of coding before refining their codes and joining their coding systems together. The coders also kept reflective journals in which they wrote down observations, definitions, expansions, and changes to code themes. The coders used these journals to jointly refine and define codes and subcodes during the coding reconciliation process. Qualitative results from Study 1 and Study 2 will be presented jointly after Study 2's quantitative results.

5. Results

5.1. Change in reliance on moral exemplars

First, via repeated-measure ANOVA, we assessed whether students in the character course (Commencing Character) grew in their reliance on moral exemplars from the beginning to the end of the course more than the control group did. That is, we modeled how Group (Character Pedagogy or Control), Time (Pre- to Post-semester), and the Group X Time interaction predicted MES scores. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics from beginning to end of the semester for both groups. There was a significant effect of Group, $F(1, 71) = 6.45$ $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = 0.083$, such that the Control group relied less on exemplars across time as compared to the Character Pedagogy group. There was also a significant effect of Time, $F(1, 71) = 10.54$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = 0.128$, such that reliance on moral exemplars increased from pre- to post-semester when averaged across classes. Those main effects were qualified by a significant Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 71) = 11.31$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.137$. That is, on average, students who were exposed to the character pedagogy in Commencing Character report more reliance on moral exemplars at the end versus beginning of the semester, whereas students in the Control group report the same reliance on moral exemplars at the end versus beginning of the semester (see Fig. 1).

5.2. Change in purpose

We also assessed, via repeated-measure ANOVA, whether students in the Character Pedagogy group grew in their purpose in life from the beginning to the end of the course more than the Control group did. That is, we modeled how Group (Character Pedagogy or Control), Time (Pre- to Post-semester), and the Group X Time interaction predicted overall CPS scores. There was a significant effect of Group, $F(1, 71) = 2.15$ $p = .033$, $\eta^2 = 0.063$, such that the Control group experienced less purpose in life across time as compared to the Character Pedagogy group. There was also a significant effect of Time, $F(1, 71) = 4.06$, $p = .048$, $\eta^2 = 0.054$, such that perceptions of one's life as purposeful increased from pre- to post-semester when averaged across courses. Those main effects were qualified by a significant Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 71) = 6.82$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = 0.088$. That is, on average, students in Commencing Character report higher purpose at the end versus beginning of the semester, whereas students in the Control group report the same (numerically lower) purpose at the end versus beginning of the semester (see Table 2 and Fig. 2).

5.3. How reliance on moral exemplars relates to purpose

Next, we assessed to what extent students' reliance on moral exemplars is associated with their purpose in life at the end of the semester. Specifically, we conducted Pearson correlation analyses to assess the associations among scores of reliance on moral exemplars (MES) and Purpose overall (CPS) as well as subscale scores of personal meaningfulness, a beyond-the-self orientation, and goal-directedness at the end of the semester. As expected, the extent to which people relied on moral exemplars predicted the extent to which they perceived their lives as purposeful at the end of the semester. That is, the more people relied on moral exemplars at the end of the semester (i.e., higher MES score), the more they reported purposeful lives overall, meaning in life, a sense of purpose that extends beyond the self and to the community, and pursuit of their goals (i.e., higher CPS subscale scores). See Table 3.

5.4. Discussion

Character pedagogy that focused on moral exemplars in the Commencing Character course, compared to a control group, significantly and positively impacted students' reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life. Moreover, the more students relied on moral exemplars, the more strongly they perceived their lives as having meaning, including for themselves, for the world beyond themselves, and in terms of pursuing their goals. Inversely, the less students relied on moral exemplars, the less they perceived their lives as having meaning, including for themselves, for the world beyond themselves, and in terms of pursuing their goals.

6. Study 2

This study not only replicated Study 1 but also improved upon that first study in two ways. First, participants included students from all years in college in addition to first-year students, allowing for more generalizable results. Second, we implemented a more rigorously validated and psychometrically sound final version of the Moral Exemplar Scale (Dykhuis et al., 2023).

Table 1
Means of MES by group and time.

Group	Time	M	SE	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.79	.112	3.572	4.017
	Post	3.79	.093	3.600	3.972
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.94	.130	3.680	4.199
	Post	4.37	.109	4.150	4.584
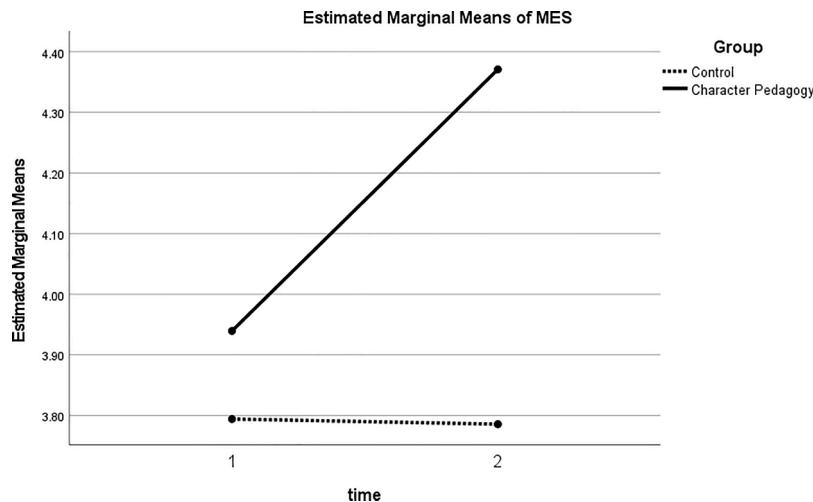
Fig. 1. Change in reliance on Moral Exemplars from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the Character Pedagogy and Control Groups.

Table 2
Means of CPS by Group and Time, Study 1.

Group	Time	M	SE	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.67	.074	3.525	3.820
	Post	3.64	.089	3.462	3.817
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.77	.086	3.602	3.946
	Post	4.04	.104	3.828	4.242

6.1. Method

Participants. Participants were 77 undergraduate students at a private university in the Southeastern United states who responded to both a pre- and post-semester survey (M_{age} = 18.74, SD = 1.08; 53 women, 24 men; 56 people identified as White/Caucasian, 11 Hispanic/Latinx, 9 Asian, 7 Black/African-American, 1 Native American/Alaskan Native, 1 Multiracial[4]). About half of students (n_{total} = 35) were in Character Pedagogy course, which consists of two sections: a first-year seminar only for first-year students (FYS 2021, $n_{firstyears}$ = 17) and a seminar with students from all four years (AYS 2021, $n_{allyears}$ = 18). 10 of the 17 students in the FYS 2021 course were required to take the course as part of a co-curricular scholarship program focused on leadership and character. The remaining students in the FYS course were not part of the co-curricular scholarship program and elected to take the seminar. None of students in the AYS 2021 section were part of the co-curricular scholarship program; they elected to take the course. About half of the students in the study were in the Control group (i.e., psychology students who participated for partial credit; n = 42).[5] None of the students in the Control group were part of the co-curricular scholarship program or the character course.

Procedure. Again, participants responded to a 30-minute survey at the beginning and end of the Fall 2021 semester. As part of a

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[4] Note that participants could select more than one ethnicity/race.
[5] For most demographics, Character Pedagogy and Control groups did not differ. The exceptions are that the Character Pedagogy group had a more balanced gender distribution (60% women, 40% men) than the Control Group (76% women, 24% men); there are more Black/African American students in the Character Pedagogy group (n = 5) than the Control group (n = 2); and there are more Asian students in the Control group (n = 7) than the Character Pedagogy group (n = 2).
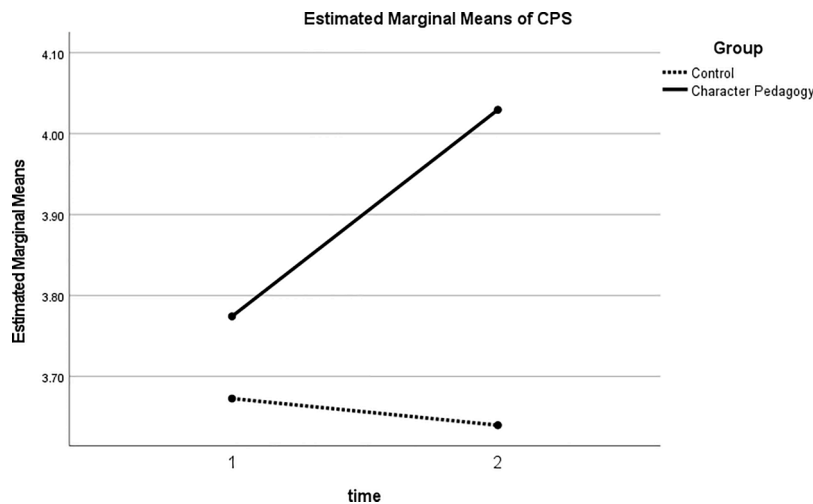
Fig. 2. Change in Purpose from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the Character Pedagogy and Control groups, Study 1.

Table 3
Correlations among Moral Exemplar Scale (MES), Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS) and its subscales of Meaning, Beyond the Self, and Goals at Time 2 (post-semester), Study 1.

	MES	CPS	CPS - Meaning	CPS - Beyond	CPS - Goals
CPS	.620***	–			
CPS - Meaning	.500***	.764**	–		
CPS - Beyond	.587***	.685**	.172	–	
CPS - Goals	.369***	.824***	.330**	.352***	–

Note: ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.

larger survey, participants responded to questions about the extent to which they rely on moral exemplars (Moral Exemplar Scale) and experience purpose in life (Claremont Purpose Scale). As in Study 1, as part of their course work, the Character Pedagogy group also responded to the same questions that were asked in Study 1 about which and how the course's moral exemplar interventions changed their understanding, behavior, or character in the context of their Final Reflection assignment. Students were required to complete the surveys and questionnaires as part of their grade, but they were given an opportunity to consent to have their data used for the research.

6.2. Measures

Moral Exemplar Scale. The final 14-item scale captures the extent to which people rely on role models to support their moral character, decision making, and behavior (Dykhuis et al., 2023). The scale captures people's feelings, cognitions, and motivations and that people rely on moral exemplars in understanding their identity/connectedness (e.g., *I identify with my moral role models*), as a source of admiration/inspiration (e.g., *I feel inspired by my moral role models to become a better person*), ideation/cognition (e.g., *I look to my moral role models to improve myself in specific ways*), emulation (e.g., *When faced with a moral decision, I consider what my moral role models would do in that specific situation*), and attainability (e.g., *When my role models do something, it shows that I can do it too*). Refer to Table 1A in the Appendix for the full scales. Note that the scales capture several similar constructs, with the final scale additionally tapping into identification with and positive social evaluations of the moral role models. Participants responded on a Likert scale from *1 = Not at all true of me* to *4 = Very true of me* (pre-semester, $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.52$; post-semester, $\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.52$).

Claremont Purpose Scale. As in Study 1, participants responded to the 12-item Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS, Bronk et al., 2018; pre-semester, $\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.54$; post-semester, $\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.49$).

Qualitative Reflection. As in Study 1, each student completed a Final Reflection assignment at the end of the course, which included a prompt that asked them to reflect on the exemplar interventions that they found most valuable.

6.2.1. Qualitative analysis

As in Study 1, each course reflection was analyzed independently by two coders in two phases. Similar to Study 1, three theory-driven codes related to purpose were used to deductively identify expressions of purpose in connection with course exemplars: *(P1) Personal Meaningfulness, (P2) Beyond-the-Self*, and *(P3) Both Personal Meaningfulness and Beyond-the-self*. Similar to Study 1, each coder went through two waves of coding before refining their codes and joining their coding systems together.

6.3. Results

6.3.1. Change in reliance on moral exemplars

First, via repeated-measure ANOVA, we assessed whether students in the Character Pedagogy group grew in their reliance on moral exemplars from the beginning to the end of the course more than did the Control group, as in Study 1. That is, we modeled how Group (Character Pedagogy or Control), Time (Pre- to Post-semester), and the Group X Time interaction predicted MES scores. There was a significant effect of Group, $F(1, 74) = 5.14$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = 0.065$, and of Time, $F(1, 74) = 8.23$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = 0.100$. Those main effects were qualified by a significant Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 74) = 15.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.172$. That is, on average, students exposed to Character Pedagogy in the Commencing Character course report more reliance on moral exemplars at the end versus beginning of the semester, whereas students in the Control group report less reliance on moral exemplars at the end versus beginning of the semester (see Table 4 and Fig. 3).

6.4. Change in purpose

Again, we assessed, via repeated-measure ANOVA, whether students in the Character Pedagogy group grew in their purpose in life from the beginning to the end of the course more than did the Control group. That is, we modeled how Group (Character Pedagogy or Control), Time (Pre- to Post-semester), and the Group X Time interaction predicted overall CPS scores. The effect of Group was significant, $F(1, 75) = 1.46$ $p = .230$, $\eta^2 = 0.019$, with the Character Pedagogy group reporting higher levels of purpose both at the beginning and of the semester. There was also a significant effect of Time, $F(1, 75) = 6.71$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = 0.082$, such that perceptions of one's life as purposeful increased from pre- to post-semester when averaged across classes. Unlike in Study 1, there was not a significant Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 75) = 0.60$, $p = .457$, $\eta^2 = 0.007$ (see Table 5 and Fig. 4).

This result differs from that in Study 1. It may be that the inclusion of students from all years sways results insofar as the experience of purpose in college is different for first years and upperclass students as they are at different points in their development. That is, by collapsing across two Character Pedagogy courses between which there may be developmental differences in exploration and understanding of purpose, we may have artificially obscured an effect of group.

In order to explore this possibility, we conducted another test via repeated-measure ANOVA modeling how Group (Character Pedagogy First-Year Students [FYS], Character Pedagogy All-Year Students [AYS], or Control), Time (Pre- to Post-semester), and the Group X Time interaction predicted overall CPS scores. Although the interaction was not significant (perhaps due to statistical power limitations), $F(1, 74) = 1.02$, $p = .367$, $\eta^2 = 0.027$, there was a significant main effect of Time, $F(1, 74) = 7.08$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = 0.087$, and an effect of group, $F(1, 74) = 3.28$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = 0.081$. See Table 6 and Fig. 5. This analysis highlights that the students who began with and ended up with the highest levels of purpose were the Character Pedagogy First-Year Students (FYS), whereas the students who began with the lowest level of purpose but who grew the most in purpose were the Character Pedagogy All-Year Students (AYS, i.e., including first-years, sophomores, juniors, and seniors).

6.5. How reliance on moral exemplars relates to purpose

As in Study 1, we assessed to what extent students' reliance on moral exemplars is associated with their purpose in life at the end of the semester. Specifically, we conducted Pearson correlation analyses to assess the associations among scores of reliance on moral exemplars (MES) and Purpose overall (CPS) as well as subscale scores of personal meaning, a beyond-the-self orientation, and goal-directedness at the end of the semester. As predicted, the extent to which students relied on moral exemplars predicted the extent to which they perceived their lives as purposeful at the end of the semester. This suggests that students who relied on moral exemplars at the end of the semester also reported more purposeful lives overall, meaning in life, a sense of purpose that extends beyond the self and to the community, and, marginally, pursuit of their goals. See Table 7.

6.6. Qualitative results

6.6.1. Value of relatability and attainability in exemplars

In Study 1 and Study 2, first-year and upperclass students valued different exemplars. However, despite a focus in the course on contemporary and historical exemplars, participants in both studies highlighted the importance of "relatability" and "attainability" in the exemplars they valued most. Refer to Table 8. In both 2019 and 2021, first-year students perceived their class peers to be the most relevant and effective exemplars in the course, followed by the person they interviewed for their Profile in Character assignment. In

Table 4
Means of MES by Group and Time, Study 2.

| Group	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.187	.081	3.025	3.349
	Post	3.133	.073	2.986	3.279
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.216	.090	3.036	3.396
	Post	3.571	.082	3.409	3.734
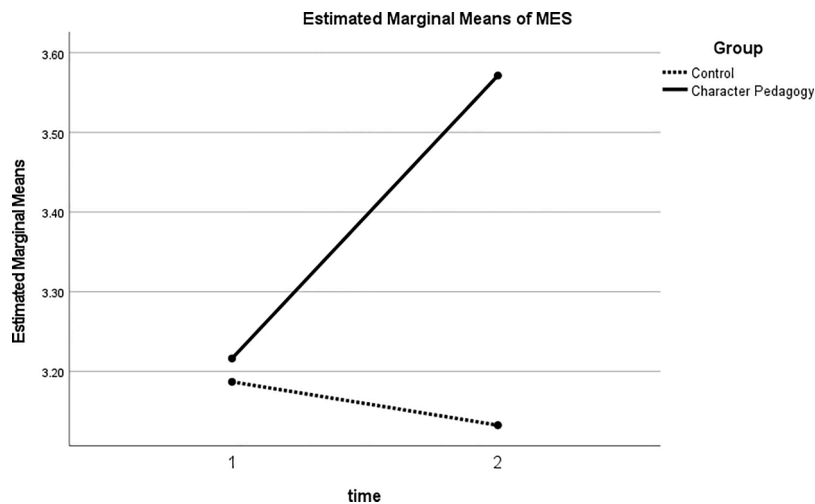
Fig. 3. Change in reliance on Moral Exemplars from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the Character Pedagogy and Control groups, Study 2.

Table 5
Means of CPS by group and time, study 2.

| Group	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.746	.083	3.580	3.912
	Post	3.847	.075	3.698	3.997
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.831	.091	3.649	4.013
	Post	4.014	.082	3.851	4.178
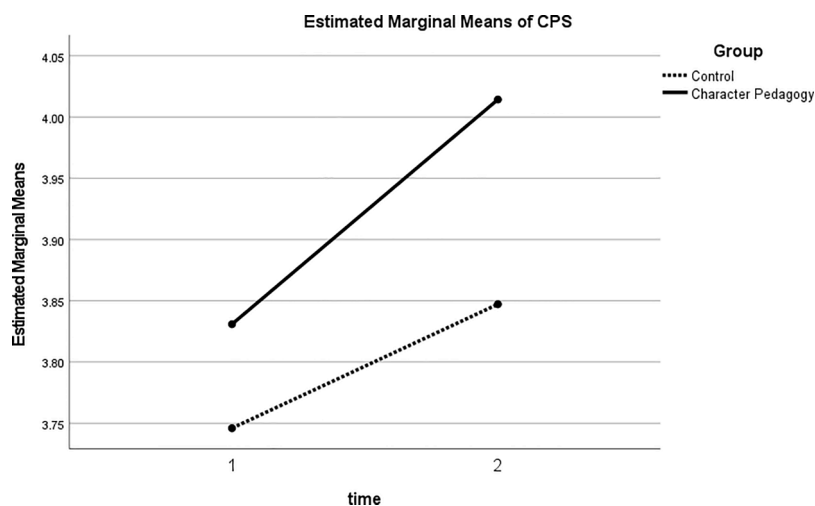
Fig. 4. Change in Purpose from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the Character Pedagogy and Control groups, Study 2.

FYS-A 2019, 68.8% of students attributed their peer exemplars as being key in course effectiveness, and an additional 37.5% referenced peer commencement speeches. In FYS-B 2019, only 6.2% noted the importance of peer exemplars, but 68.8% identified the importance of their peers' commencement speeches. The discrepancy of the importance of peers in the two classes is likely due to the cohesion and closeness created among many of the students in FYS-B 2019 through a co-curricular scholarship program focused on leadership and character offered throughout the semester specifically to this group. In FYS 2021, 21% of responses highlighted the role of peer exemplars, and an additional 14% specifically referenced their peers' commencement speeches as the most valuable moral exemplar interventions. When reflecting upon their peers, first-year students credited their peers' effectiveness as exemplars to their

Table 6
Means of CPS by Subgroup and Time, Study 2.

Subgroup	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.746	.081	3.585	3.907
	Post	3.847	.074	3.699	3.996
Character Pedagogy FYS	Pre	4.042	.123	3.796	4.288
	Post	4.130	.114	3.903	4.356
Character Pedagogy AYS	Pre	3.608	.127	3.355	3.861
	Post	3.892	.117	3.659	4.125
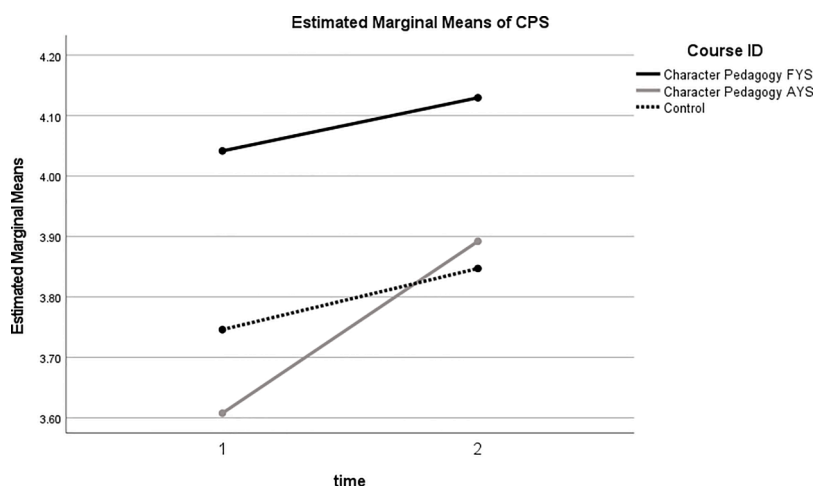
Fig. 5. Change in Purpose from the beginning to the end of the semester for the Character Pedagogy First-Year Students (FYS), Character Pedagogy All-Year Students (AYS), and Control groups, Study 2.

Table 7
Correlations among Moral Exemplar Scale (MES), Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS) and its subscales of Meaning, Beyond the Self, and Goals at Time 2 (post-semester), Study 2.

	MES	CPS	CPS - Meaning	CPS - Beyond	CPS - Goals
CPS	.436***	–			
CPS - Meaning	.285*	.764**	–		
CPS - Beyond	.468***	.742**	.240*	–	
CPS - Goals	.216†	.767***	.399***	.464***	–

Note: ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, $^{†}p = .081$.

Table 8
Most relevant or effective course exemplar type according to qualitative analysis.

Moral Exemplar Intervention Type	FYS-A 2019	% of Total (*n* = 16)	FYS-B 2019	% of Total (*n* = 16)	FYS 2021	% of Total (*n* = 17)	AYS 2021	% of Total (*n* = 20)
Class Peers	11	68.8 %	1	6.2 %	11	64.7 %	6	30 %
Peers' Commencement Speeches	6	37.5 %	11	68.8 %	7	41.2 %	6	30 %
Profile in Character Assignment	9	56.2 %	7	43.8 %	7	41.2 %	8	40 %
Course Professor	8	50.0 %	3	18.8 %	7	41.2 %	3	15 %
Films	5	31.2 %	4	25.0 %	6	35.3 %	8	40 %

Note. FYS = first year students. AYS = all years students. Of the 10 codes applied to analyze the qualitative data, these 5 sources were cited by students most often. The following were the initial eight a priori codes:1) Visiting Faculty Speakers, 2) Commencement Speaker address (non-peer), 3) Film, 4) Profile in Character Assignment/Interviewee, 5) Sit-In Experience, 6) Class peers, 7) Course readings on historical exemplars, 8) Other. During the coding process, we added "Dr. [Name Redacted]" and "Students' commencement speaker address" as two additional codes.

perceived relatability and attainability. For example, one FYS 2021 student wrote:

> "[H]aving my peers as intellectual and personal mentors has also been incredibly important to my formation because they are each such attainable exemplars. With the respect and adoration I have for my peers and their commencement words comes a comfort in the fact that we are all working through formation together."

The importance of attainability was echoed in another first-year student's reflection:

> "The idea of attainability in exemplars has been a very important one for me to recognize as I strive for growth, because I have found myself to be significantly more receptive when I feel connected to something or someone personally."

Upperclass students perceived their class peers and their speeches to be less valuable as exemplars; however, they perceived the Profile in Character assignment to be one of the most relevant or effective ways of engaging exemplars also due to their relatability and attainability. A student from AYS 2021 described the Profile in Character assignment as "incredibly impactful because this provided me with an exemplar I was familiar with and a seemingly attainable path to cultivate character." One AYS 2021 student described the exemplar they interviewed as someone whom they "related to" and "understood how they felt because I either had a similar experience or shared personal experiences."

6.6.2. Exemplars foster goals of character development

Participants in both Study 1 and Study 2 highlighted how exemplars in the course helped them to identify or make progress towards personally meaningful goals. Refer to Table 9. One FYS 2021 respondent wrote that a moral exemplar from the course "helped [him] understand what purpose really is." Another respondent emphasized the instructor's example: "Learning about my professor's sense of purpose and how he found fulfillment in life makes me believe that I can do so as well because he is someone close to me." For example, one FYS-B 2019 participant wrote:

> "Interviewing my personal exemplar was amazing as well. Although I always admired my teacher, I never truly sat down and asked him how he became such a virtuous person. I never had the chance to truly ask him these deep, meaningful questions. Talking to Mr. [Name Redacted] for an hour and a half was so valuable and I learned so much from our conversation. It helped me learn more about his life and emulate him even more than I had before. He told me, 'the key is to not make the worst moments in your life the defining moments,' and I hold that with me each day to remember steps to being resilient."

Another FYS 2021 participant wrote:

> "Visiting speaker Dr. [Name Redacted] has been an inspiration to me because it's always great to see another African American male excel in their perspective field of interest. I already knew about [redacted] because I saw his speech a few years ago while scrolling through Youtube. It was amazing to see someone like me doing an amazing graduation speech at Harvard University, a university I still strive to attend today. Being able to talk with him in person and hear his perspective on the subjects of public speaking, African American culture, and more has been a highlight of Commencing [Character]. I hope to keep in contact with Dr. [Name Redacted] throughout my years at [institution redacted] and beyond and will strive to achieve great things like him."

Very few participants specifically referenced moral exemplars as helping them identify goals that are not related to personal growth explicitly. However, participants regularly referenced moral exemplars as important "guiding forces" that inspired and motivated their character or virtue development, which they perceived to promote both personal meaningfulness and communal flourishing. For example, one FYS-B 2019 participant wrote:

> "Peer commencement speeches changed my understanding of what these virtues truly mean and I constantly find myself trying to emulate these and live a little more virtuously as my classmates taught me."

One FYS 2021 participant echoed this finding when writing:

> "Learning from my peers showed me these examples to follow and I can emulate the virtues where I might miss the [virtuous] mean. Seeing these examples in my fellow classmates also helped me have a concrete understanding of what the virtues should look like, which went along with what I was learning from the commencement speeches. Journal reflections also forced me to

Table 9
Purpose themes type according to qualitative analysis.

Purpose Code	FYS-A 2019	% (n = 16)	FYS-B 2019	% (n = 16)	FYS 2021	% (n = 17)	AYS 2021	% (n = 20)
P1a: Exemplars as Promoting Personally-Meaningful Purpose	0	0 %	0	0 %	7	41.2 %	6	30 %
P1b: Exemplars as Promoting Character Development	7	43.8 %	3	18.8 %	8	47.1 %	7	35 %
P2: Exemplars as Promoting Beyond-the-Self Purpose	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	5.9 %	2	10 %
P3: Both Personal Meaningfulness and Beyond-the-Self	0	0 %	0	0 %	1	5.9 %	2	10 %

consciously think about who I am and what I can do in relation to others. By slowing down and thinking about myself, it stopped these peer exemplars from becoming a comparison and feeling unhappy with who I was and instead allowed it to be a goal for me to reach and aim for."

This finding is significant because it highlights that students perceived their interaction with moral exemplars as facilitating the search for a goal or aim leading to a purpose that may allow them to lead a life of personal flourishing while at the same time considering how that may relate to others. This allows us to see how students' engagement with moral exemplars fostered increases in students' sense of purpose. It also further reinforced the value of relatability and attainability, which prevented students from experiencing the resentment that led to negative effects in other studies (Monin, 2007; Monin et al., 2008).

6.7. Discussion

Study 2 largely replicated the pattern of results found in Study 1. Students in the Commencing Character course relied more on moral exemplars at the end versus the beginning of the semester compared to the Control group. Moreover, the more students relied on moral exemplars at the end of the semester, the more they experienced overall purpose, meaning in life, a sense of purpose that extends beyond the self and to the community, and the more they pursue their goals. Results with respect to purpose add important nuance: in the Character Pedagogy group, first-year students began and ended the semester with the highest levels of purpose, while all-year students (i.e., including first-years, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) began with the lowest level of purpose but grew the most in purpose, obscuring the effect of group. On average, both Character Pedagogy groups reported more purpose than did the Control group. This suggests that character pedagogy that leverages moral exemplars appears efficacious in increasing students' sense of purpose, but the effects depend on students' moral developmental phase (i.e., first versus later years of college).

7. General discussion

In college, emerging adults are given the time and space to explore and determine their identity, values, and purpose (Bronk & Baumsteiger, 2017; Lapsley & Hardy, 2017; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). Character education in higher education supports students' moral formation, especially that which applies the seven strategies for supporting character formation (Lamb et al., 2021, 2022). Moreover, moral exemplars help guide individuals' development of character, including virtue and purpose in life, such that character pedagogy with a focus on moral exemplars is particularly well-suited to facilitate students' moral character development. Using mixed-methods across two semesters, we tested whether a college course implementing a moral exemplar-focused character pedagogy supports emerging adults' reliance on moral exemplars and development of purpose.

Study 1 quantitative analyses indicate that students in the Character Pedagogy courses grew in reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life from pre- to post-semester compared to a Control group. Furthermore, the greater students' reliance on moral exemplars, the greater their purpose, including personal meaningfulness, goal orientation, and beyond-the-self orientation, at the end of the semester. Study 2 largely replicated this pattern but also suggests that the impact of this intervention may differ for emerging adults of different developmental stages. That is, developmentally earlier emerging adults (i.e., first-year students) began and ended the semester with the highest levels of purpose in life, whereas developmentally later emerging adults (i.e., students from all years) began with the lowest levels of purpose in life but grew the most across the semester. Both groups scored higher in purpose than did the Control group at the end of the semester. Exploratory analyses underscore that students in the Character Pedagogy group grew especially in the beyond the self dimension of purpose, as in our research group's prior work (Mendonça et al., 2023). This finding makes sense in light of the beyond-the-self dimension's ability to capture an important motivational drive and its associations with moral functioning, including moral reasoning, moral identity (both internalization and symbolization), empathic concern, and cognitive perspective taking (Han, 2022).

Study 1 and Study 2 qualitative analyses of responses to a reflection question about the efficacy of pedagogical practices focused on moral exemplars suggest that students appreciated relatability and attainability in moral exemplars and that moral exemplars bolstered students' goals to develop their moral character. Importantly, this finding suggests that exemplars known to students, such as peers and family members, are effective in promoting movement towards flourishing. Although beneficial as role models, exemplars famous for their moral worth may not always be the most successful in reaching students. Considering the implications for pedagogical practice, this pattern of results suggests that character education that incorporates relevant and attainable moral exemplars can support individuals' reliance on moral exemplars to guide growth in character and purpose.

7.1. Implications

The results of the current investigation suggest that there is value in incorporating moral exemplars into character education to support students' sense of purpose, particularly with respect to the goal of developing their moral character. Because purpose is essential for living a goal-oriented, healthy, and happy life (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2011; DeWitz et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2009; Sumner et al., 2015), supporting purpose development in college is especially important. Existing purpose interventions have been shown to help build planning and coping skills (Pizzolato et al., 2011), and interviews that prompt students to consider their purpose, values, and goals (Bundick, 2011) have been shown to support students' development of purpose in life. These types of interventions can be further strengthened by incorporating a focus on one or more moral exemplars that support character development through the individual's admiration, evaluation, and, in turn, emulation.

Qualitative results suggest that certain pedagogical strategies may bolster the purposeful pursuit of virtuous character, particularly college student engagement with relatable and attainable exemplars. Across both studies and grade levels, participants found interviewing a person of their choice whom they believe possesses character traits a valuable pedagogical exercise that impacted their understanding and/or behavior. First-year students' engagement with peer exemplars may facilitate more purposeful growth, while upperclass students may find engagement with exemplars whom they already know and admire more beneficial.

7.2. Limitations and future directions

Notwithstanding the strength of the current work in terms of leveraging both quantitative and qualitative methods with a control group and testing hypotheses across multiple semesters, a few factors limit our conclusions. First, although the Commencing Character courses were more diverse than courses at many private universities in the Southeast, the majority of students were White, and this work is being done in the United States. It may be the case that more ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse students have different experiences of purpose and are inspired by different aspects of character pedagogy focusing on moral exemplars. Character education has a history of relying on Western conceptualizations of morality (Johnson & Hinton III, 2018), and students from marginalized groups particularly benefit from moral mentors and role models that are attitudinally and demographically similar to them (e.g., Ensher et al., 2002). To anticipate and address this concern, the Commencing Character courses exposed students to a diverse range of readings and exemplars from different races, genders, cultures, professions, and traditions, two guest speakers with identities different from the instructor, and explicit discussions of how character relates to justice and equity (the 2021 section also included a class session on critically engaging character across cultures, with readings on character in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam). In addition, the course empowered students to choose their own exemplars for key assignments, which gave them the opportunity to select exemplars most relevant to them. We add our voices to those that call for culturally consonant character education (Johnson & Hinton, 2016, 2019).

Second, our assessment of outcomes was at the end of the semester, right after the semester-long intervention course, such that we cannot make conclusions about the longevity of effects. Relatedly, the measures of reliance on moral exemplars and purpose employed in the current research entail self-report, which is susceptible to responding per social desirability concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, the fact that the Final Reflection assignment on which qualitative assessment was based was graded, even if blindly and primarily for completion, writing quality, and depth of engagement rather than substantive assessment of the course, may have contributed to social desirability concerns. However, given that the quantitative question before it reminds students of the historical and contemporary exemplars and narratives from myths and poems used in the course, and given that students still highlight peer exemplars as being more important than other exemplars, including the professor's own modeling, it is unlikely the responses are elicited merely by a desire to please the professor. Furthermore, the review of this assignment is meant to encourage real reflection rather than filling space for the sake of mere completion. Still, for future work, we plan to assess students' moral character growth and purpose multiple years after their exposure to the character pedagogy that incorporates moral exemplars in Commencing Character to understand their growth in a context with fewer social desirability concerns as well as to employ diverse measures in ongoing assessments.

Finally, the sample sizes are relatively small such that our ability to detect effects in the generalizability of results is limited. We aimed to increase confidence in results by replicating them across courses with different make-ups (first-year and all-year), but the samples are still limited to a private university in the Southeast United States. In the context of assessing the extent to which our pedagogical interventions supported students' reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life, the courses provided ecologically appropriate samples, but results should be replicated in larger samples in different contexts to generate more generalizable results.

8. Conclusion

College students have a special opportunity to explore and define what is important to them, the sort of character they want to have, and their purpose in life. Moral exemplars can model moral character and guide the process of identifying purpose for these emerging adults. To test that idea, we examined change in reliance on moral exemplars, change in purpose, and the association between the two constructs at time two across two semesters in a character pedagogy course that combines the study of virtue theory with commencement speeches and moral exemplars. As expected, we found that the course, Commencing Character, supported students' growth in reliance on moral exemplars and purpose in life. Furthermore, and crucially, the more students relied on moral exemplars, the more they experienced their lives as purposeful—personally, in their goal-pursuit, and in a way that benefited the world beyond themselves. While more empirical work is needed to replicate and extend these findings, these studies suggest that integrating moral exemplars into pedagogical interventions may be valuable in promoting the development of purpose.

Appendix

Table 1A
Moral Exemplar Scale across studies.

Study 1 Items	Study 2 Items
I ask my moral role models for advice about how to live.	I often seek out moral role models for advice about how to live.
I feel inspired by my moral role models to become a better person.	I am motivated by my moral role models to be a better person.
	I feel inspired by my moral role models to become a better person.
I see situations in new ways by considering the perspective of my moral role models.	I try to see situations the way my moral role models would see them.
I look to my moral role models to understand how a particular virtue can be practiced.	I look to my moral role models to improve myself in specific ways.
I am reminded of the importance of specific values when I consider my moral role models.	
I consider my moral role models as proof that particular ideals are possible to attain.	When my moral role models do something, it shows that I can do it too.
I consider what my moral role models would do in a specific situation.	When I think about a decision I might make, I wonder what my moral role model would think of me.
I try to emulate my moral role models.	I look to moral role models as examples of how to live a generally good life.
	I like my moral role models.
	I respect my moral role models.
	I admire my moral role models.
	My moral role models help me make sense of my identity.
	I see my moral role models as personal mentors.
	I identify with my moral role models.

Exploratory Analyses: Change in Subscales of Purpose

For both Studies 1 and 2, we assessed change over time in each subscale of purpose for both the Character Pedagogy and Control groups via repeated-measure ANOVA: Group (Character Pedagogy or Control), Time (Pre- to Post-semester), and the Group X Time interaction predicting the subscale scores.

Study 1

Change in purpose: Meaning. There was no main effect of Group, $F(1, 71) = 0.30$, $p = .584$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$, a significant main effect of Time, $F(1, 71) = 10.82$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = 0.131$, suggesting that all students grew in meaning across the semester. The Group X Time interaction was not significant, $F(1, 71) = 3.05$, $p = .085$, $\eta^2 = 0.041$. Refer to Table 2A for descriptive statistics.

Table 2A
Means of CPS Meaning by Group and Time, Study 1.

Group	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.134	.108	2.918	3.349
	Post	3.233	.104	3.025	3.440
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.105	.127	2.851	3.359
	Post	3.427	.122	3.183	3.671

Change in purpose: Beyond the self. There was a main effect of Group, $F(1, 71) = 5.87$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = 0.075$, but not of Time, $F(1, 71) = 0.25$, $p = .620$, $\eta^2 = 0.003$. Main effects were qualified by a Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 71) = 12.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.143$. Refer to Table 3A for descriptive statistics and Fig. 1A for graphical representation of the interaction.

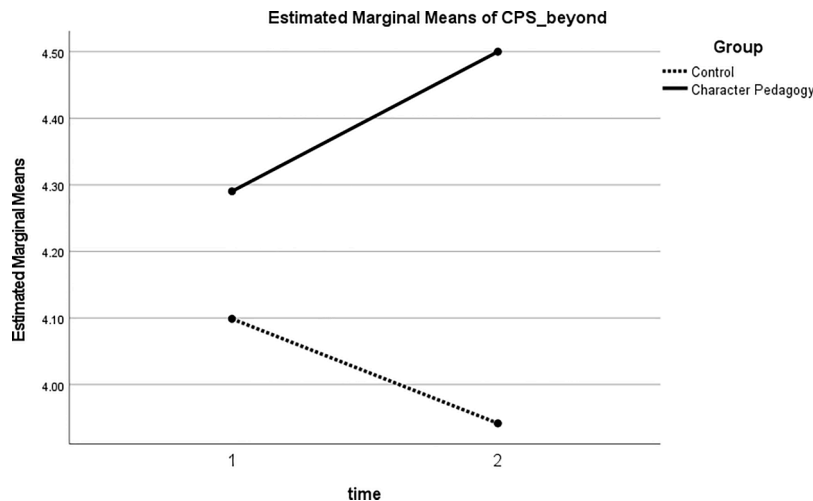**Table 3A**
Means of CPS Beyond by Group and Time, Study 1.

Group	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	4.099	.112	3.875	4.322

Table 3A (*continued*)

Group	Time	M	SE	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
	Post	3.942	.099	3.744	4.140
Character Pedagogy	Pre	4.290	.132	4.027	4.554
	Post	4.500	.117	4.267	4.733

Fig. 1A. Change in Purpose Beyond-the-self subscale from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the Character Pedagogy and Control groups, Study 1.

Change in purpose: Goal orientation. None of the effects were significant: Group, $F(1, 71) = 1.48, p = .228, \eta^2 = 0.020$; Time, $F(1, 71) = 0.231, p = .632, \eta^2 = 0.003$; Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 71) = 0.33, p = .566, \eta^2 = 0.005$. Refer to Table 4A for descriptive statistics.

Table 4A
Means of CPS Goals by Group and Time, Study 1.

Group	Time	M	SE	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.791	.091	3.610	3.972
	Post	3.785	.108	3.570	4.000
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.927	.107	3.714	4.141
	Post	3.992	.127	3.739	4.245

Study 2

Change in purpose: Meaning. As for Study 1, here was no main effect of Group, $F(1, 75) = 0.91, p = .342, \eta^2 = 0.012$; but there was a significant main effect of Time, $F(1, 75) = 11.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.137$, indicating that students across classes grew in meaning across the semester. The Group X Time interaction was not significant, $F(1, 75) = 0.06, p = .816, \eta^2 = 0.001$. Refer to Table 5A for descriptive statistics.

Table 5A
Means of CPS Meaning by Group and Time, Study 2.

| Group	Time	M	SE	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.286	.136	3.015	3.556
	Post	3.548	.117	3.315	3.781
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.429	.149	3.132	3.725
	Post	3.729	.128	3.473	3.984

Change in purpose: Beyond the self. There was no main effect of Group, $F(1, 75) = 2.07, p = .154, \eta^2 = 0.027$, or Time, $F(1, 75) = 0.04, p$

= .853, $\eta^2 = 0.000$. The Group X Time interaction was significant, $F(1, 75) = 4.20$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = 0.053$. Refer to Table 6A for descriptive statistics. The Character Pedagogy group grew in the beyond-the-self subscale of Purpose, whereas the Control group decreased across the semester.

Table 6A
Means of CPS Beyond by Group and Time, Study 2.

Group	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	4.155	.111	3.934	4.375
	Post	4.030	.101	3.829	4.230
Character Pedagogy	Pre	4.221	.121	3.980	4.463
	Post	4.371	.110	4.152	4.591
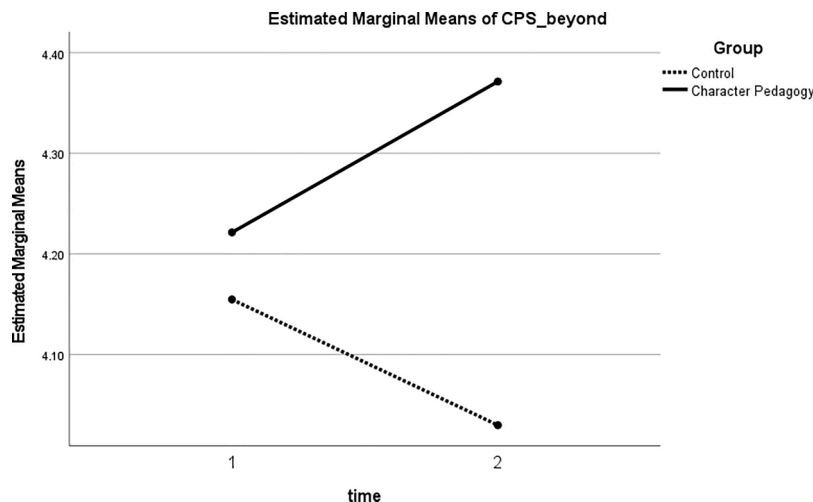
Fig. 2A. Change in Purpose Beyond-the-self subscale from the beginning to the end of the semester for both the Character Pedagogy and Control groups, Study 2.

Change in purpose: Goal orientation. There was no main effect of Group, $F(1, 75) = 0.014$, $p = .906$, $\eta^2 = 0.000$, but there was a main effect of Time, $F(1, 75) = 4.29$, $p = .042$, $\eta^2 = 0.054$, suggesting that all students increased in goal orientation factor of purpose across the semester. There was no Group X Time interaction, $F(1, 75) = 0.27$, $p = .606$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$. Refer to Table 7A for descriptive statistics.

Table 7A
Means of CPS Goals by Group and Time, Study 1.

Group	Time	*M*	*SE*	95 % Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Control	Pre	3.798	.081	3.636	3.959
	Post	3.964	.080	3.805	4.123
Character Pedagogy	Pre	3.843	.089	3.666	4.020
	Post	3.943	.087	3.769	4.117

Together, these results suggest that effects may be driven by growth in meaning and beyond-the-self purpose constructs for the Character group over the Control group. It may be that all students are growing in their goals via a similar process of exploration as part of their liberal arts college education. Similar results emerged in past work (e.g., Mendonça et al., 2023). Many students reevaluate past choices once they have actually begun college.

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