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Volume 13

Washington University
Undergraduate Research Digest

Spring 2018

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Recommended Citation

Baugh, Gemma, "50 States of Purpose: A Study of Purposeful Living in the United States" (2018). *Volume 13*. 15.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol13/15

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50 STATES OF PURPOSE: A STUDY OF PURPOSEFUL LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

Gemma Baugh

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Purpose is a higher-order construct that guides the development of goals and goal-oriented behaviors, providing individuals with a sense of meaning. Individual-level research has demonstrated the role of purpose in short- and long-term functioning, with many positive outcomes. This understanding of purpose has the potential to inform other disciplines including public policy, but first we must study purpose at the group level to understand how it functions within communities, not just within the individual.

We used survey data representing 51 different entities (the 50 U.S. states and D.C.) collected primarily in 2015 by Gallup, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the CDC. We selected three survey items from Gallup to assess the average level of purpose among citizens in each U.S. state and analyzed potential purpose correlates also aggregated at the state level by calculating zero-order correlations between purpose and each of these variables followed by partial correlations controlling for age and income.

Purpose varied from state to state, with West Virginia holding the lowest purpose score (3.68), compared to Alaska with the highest score (3.98). Many individual-level correlations were supported by our analysis, including correlations between purpose and health, affect, and financial status. Lower purpose scores were associated with more health problems and negative emotions. Higher purpose scores were associated with lower income inequality, greater numbers of high school and higher education graduates, and higher rates of happiness.

Though additional research is needed to pinpoint the directionality of our state-level purpose correlations, we have demonstrated that higher levels of purpose will be seen in tandem with other advantageous social, financial, and health conditions. These findings highlight further avenues for purpose research and suggest that public health officials or other policy-makers may seek to promote purpose as a way to increase other beneficial societal outcomes.