



Advancing Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

A Guide for Advisors

BMWP in Action Series

April 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

This guide along with the accompanying self-assessment tool and empathy interview protocol are designed to support professionals who are working to support young people between the ages of 16-24 as they prepare for and access college and/or navigate their college journey.

These documents are a part of the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions' BMWP in Action series, which also includes a series of case studies that help illuminate the ways in which colleges across the country are centering BMWP in their work to advance racial equity and student success.

Gratitude

The author of this guide would like to thank colleagues at the Advising Success Network (NASPA), The Clayton Christensen Institute, Motivate Lab, National Urban League, Summer Search and Dr. Amanda Tachine for feedback on an early draft of this guide.

The author has done his best to represent the BMWP constructs, and work of all organizations and efforts highlighted in the document. The author takes full responsibility for any errors.

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

The critical role of advisors

Advisors play a critical role in shaping the social and academic experiences of the young people they serve by acting as trusted resources and guides for success. By helping young people develop a sense of belonging, meaning, wellbeing, and purpose (BMWP), advisors have the potential to significantly influence their academic and life outcomes.

The purpose of this guide is to **provide advisors with a clear understanding of how they can support young people in cultivating BMWP as a means to improve racial equity and student success in higher education.**

The guide can apply to advising in a range of contexts, but has been specifically designed to inform the work of advisors who serve young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in three contexts:

1 College transition advising

Advisors that help young people make the transition from high school to college;

2 College advising

Advisors that help young people enrolled in college achieve their goals; and

3 Opportunity youth advising

Advisors that help young people who are disconnected from school and work connect (or reconnect) to a college pathway.

College still matters

In today's economy, a college degree is increasingly seen as a critical pathway to accessing living-wage jobs and economic mobility. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals with a bachelor's degree earn, on average, 65% more than those with only a high school diploma. Despite recent debates over the value of a college degree, the wage gap between those with and those without a college credential has been widening over time, as the demand for skilled workers continues to increase, particularly in sectors like healthcare and technology.

Importantly, obtaining a degree is not just about economic gain. Research has also shown that higher education contributes to better physical and mental health outcomes, greater community engagement, and overall life satisfaction.

Despite these benefits, many young people face significant barriers to success. This is particularly true for young people from historically underrepresented groups, including young people of color, first-generation college going young people and young people from low-income backgrounds. Advisors play a crucial role in helping all young people — particularly those facing additional barriers — navigate their academic journey and achieve their goals.

This guide has been developed on the basic premise that — on average — young people are better off from an economic, social and health perspective if they earn some kind of postsecondary credential (e.g., short-term certificate, associate's degree, bachelor's degree) after high school. The strategies outlined in this guide point to postsecondary education as a pathway that can improve life outcomes for young people whether they enroll directly from high school or access college from another starting point.

Cultivating Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose

A growing base of evidence points to the importance of approaches that help young people belong, have space to engage in meaning-making activities, have strong overall wellbeing and cultivate a sense of purpose in college and life. The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions believes that leaders who prioritize BMWP approaches in their work with young people can improve the likelihood that those young people will achieve their goals.

BMWP also offers a template that can guide the future of advising even as new technologies — including generative artificial intelligence — might shift the role that advisors play.

In a new study, researchers at the Christensen Institute asked leaders and advisors at thirty navigation and guidance organizations what types of support they'd like to see humans versus generative AI bots offer to students in an ideal future scenario. The researchers found that, “nearly all said bots are optimal for informational support (...defined as accurate information about education and careers), while humans are better for esteem, emotional, and motivational support (defined as expressing belief in students, addressing social-emotional challenges, and co-constructing a vision of the future).”¹

These findings suggest that technology tools have the potential to enable advisors to focus more of their time working with young people on topics like belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose. But in order to do this advisors will need to build their skills on how to effectively support students in these domains.

This section of the guide offers definitions for these four constructs — Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) — along with specific actions that college advisors can take to cultivate BMWP within the young people they work with.



Resource spotlight:

In addition to this advising guide, The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions has released two resources that provide general guidance on BMWP.

The **BMWP Primer** provides a high-level overview of the BMWP framework along with key definitions and examples of how leading organizations are integrating BMWP approaches into their work.

The **BMWP Strategies** document outlines specific approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose in one or more settings.

Belonging

Having a meaningful voice and opportunity to participate in the design of political, social and cultural structures that shape one's life.²

Recent work by john a. powell and colleagues at the Othering & Belonging Institute, positions “othering as the biggest issue of our time, and belonging as the solution to addressing othering in all its forms.” The authors maintain that belonging is important for individual and interpersonal wellbeing and an essential factor in propelling broader social change.

In higher education settings, a growing base of evidence highlights the critical role of belonging in student retention and completion, particularly for young people from marginalized backgrounds. When young people feel isolated or disconnected, they are at higher risk of disengagement and dropout. Creating an environment where young people feel supported and valued leads to better academic performance and emotional wellbeing.

Advisors can help cultivate belonging by...

- Proactively reaching out to engage students and fostering an inclusive environment where young people feel safe to express their identities;
- Making sure students are aware of programs and activities where they can connect with students with similar interests and backgrounds to foster greater sense of belonging;
- Creating opportunities for young people to co-create physical spaces (including the advising environment), programs, events and initiatives that are designed to support them;
- Regularly checking in with young people to establish rapport, validate their experiences and agency in the institution and offer support if they express feelings of isolation; and
- Creating opportunities for young people to connect with faculty, staff, and peers through clubs, mentoring programs, and campus events. These connection points can help young people understand that, “no one is an island” and practice, “moving towards each other with curiosity and a willingness to be transformed, rather than away from each other.”³

Centering belonging - examples from the field



Motivate Lab works with K-12 districts and institutions of higher education to translate research on motivation into impactful practices. Their Mindset GPS framework helps students develop a sense of belonging (other constructs), which research has established as critical factors linked to postsecondary access. The organization also manages an interactive Navigator Toolkit which points practitioners to evidence-based practices to help students cultivate a sense of belonging.



The Connected Scholars Program provides K-12 and higher ed educators with access to a research-informed course that helps their students, “understand the value of building their social capital and then, learn and practice networking and relationship-building skills to expand their social networks.” While not explicitly anchored in belonging, the course supports adjacent topics (e.g., identifying supportive adults within a student’s network) and topics that relate to purpose (e.g., identifying life goals and developing plans to achieve them). The course is available in two versions: one for high school students making the transition to college and another for students in their first year of college.



With support from the Joyce and Raikes Foundations, The Project for Education Research That Scales (PERTS) developed Social Belonging for College Students — “a free, evidence-based program designed to support a sense of belonging on campus to improve engagement, retention, and achievement for students at four-year colleges and universities.” With this program, educators can embed a brief online module into college transition activities that guides students through activities that have been proven to boost, “social and academic engagement on campus as well as improved academic outcomes—including higher GPAs and greater student retention—among students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.”⁴ PERTS has other offerings for college educators including a similar program focused on growth mindset and a professional learning program called Ascend.



BMWP constructs are inter-related and often operate alongside to related constructs (e.g., social capital). Examples highlighted in this guide sometimes involve multiple BMWP constructs and/or utilize approaches focused on one construct to bring about others. Mindset GPS, for example, includes a focus on growth mindset, purpose and relevance and sense of belonging.

Just because an approach is highlighted in association with one BMWP construct does not mean it does not include elements of others.



Meaning

The ways in which people make sense of themselves, others and social situations.⁵

Helping first-generation young people and young people from historically underrepresented groups connect their education to their identity and their unique connection to their world can be transformative. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Arnold Chandler shows that meaning-making interventions — programs or other supports that helped students connect their academic work and their cultural identity, personal life and/or professional aspirations — have demonstrated positive impacts on a wide range of student outcomes including school absences, grades (middle and high school), high school graduation, 4-year college enrollment and attending a selective college.⁶

Advisors can facilitate meaning-making by...

- Making sure that young people see examples of students like them experiencing success at the institution;
- Ensuring young people have access to multiple modes of therapy provided by trained mental health professionals to help them manage and understand their emotions and behavior;
- Creating opportunities for young people to actively reflect on key challenges that they have faced in their lives and strategies they used to overcome them;
- Encouraging young people to reflect on why they chose their program of study and how it connects to their identity, values, interests and long-term goals; and
- Engaging in focused planning activities that allow students to consider the practical impact of their education and imagine “future, possible selves.”

Centering meaning-making - examples from the field



College access and success nonprofit Summer Search uses a “Depth Mentoring” framework that includes four lenses. Two of the four lenses in their framework — (1) Human Development and Identity Formation and (2) Critical Consciousness — support meaning-making which the organization views as a critical level for increasing student success.



The Advising Success Network (operated by NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) has created a series of case studies that illuminate holistic advising practices which include strategies for helping students make meaning of their journey. The network also maintains a robust resource library for leaders looking to go deeper in holistic advising practices, including this summary of the evidence base for holistic advising practices and this series of free, asynchronous courses that go deep into specific holistic advising practices.

Wellbeing

Having the support, confidence, and resources needed to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights.⁷

Wellbeing is a broad category that encompasses emotional, physical, and psychological health. According to the latest report from the [National College Health Assessment](#) (NCHA), almost half of undergraduate young people report experiencing some level of food insecurity and 20% of undergraduate young people cite depression as a factor impeding their academic performance.⁸ Young people of color, LGBTQIA+ young people, and those from lower-income backgrounds often face additional structural and institutional barriers that can lead to mental health challenges that can affect their academic performance and sense of wellbeing.

Advisors can help cultivate student wellbeing by...

- Utilizing the student intake process to identify specific barriers to student aspirations using that information to identify and remove (or reduce) as many barriers as possible;
- Regularly checking in with young people about their mental health and wellbeing, and proactively connecting them to appropriate resources such as counseling services or wellness programs;
- Helping young people balance academic demands with self-care by encouraging healthy habits and advocating to ensure all students have access to healthy food, stable housing, health care and other essential needs;
- Ensuring young people know that seeking help for the challenges they are facing is not a sign of weakness, but a proactive step toward academic and personal success; and
- Proactively engaging with any relevant college committees or working groups that are focused on student wellbeing to share policy and program improvement ideas that are informed by specific student experiences and interactions.

Centering wellbeing - examples from the field



The Aspen Institute's Fresh Tracks program supported a youth-led participatory action research project that supported young people to “define, collect, and make meaning of data about their well-being.” The project led to the publication of the [Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing](#) report that highlights themes and findings contributing to youth and young adult wellbeing that emerged from the work of three design teams organized into cultural affinity groups: American Indian/Alaska Native, Black Expressions, and Latine Bienestar. The Wellbeing Project is now in the process of piloting surveys “designed to empower their communities to better understand and support wellbeing.” The group has also produced an accompanying guide — [Centering Youth in Well-Being Research and Programming](#) — developed by research navigators and adult allies involved in the project.



The College Mental Health Toolkit provides college students with, “the resources, services, and support needed to thrive as they transition into the beginning of adult life.” The toolkit is designed with a student audience in mind and provides easy to digest information including mental health facts, tips for maintaining good mental health on a daily basis, strategies for advancing mental health support on campus and other resources to support student mental health.



Researchers at the Center for Equitable Higher Education (CEHE) at California State University, Long Beach are using an adapted version of the Kessler K6 psychological screening tool to understand student wellbeing. Researchers used this six item survey as one way to assess student mental health during their participation in College-Focused Rapid Rehousing — a state-funded student homelessness prevention program. The Center also recently published a framework that advances a “socio-ecological” approach to student wellbeing and recommends practical strategies to ensure student needs are met at the individual, interpersonal, college, community and societal levels.

Purpose

One’s desire and intention to achieve something that is significant to one’s life and of consequence to the world in which one lives.⁹

Young people with a strong sense of purpose are better able to navigate challenges and engage in their coursework with a sense of commitment. A sense of purpose also ties into wellbeing, as young people with clear goals tend to experience less stress and greater satisfaction in their academic and personal lives.

Dr. Anthony Burrow of Cornell University conducts research on purpose helps to curate and translate the evidence base showing the strong link between purpose and physical and mental health outcomes. His work is continuing to build the evidence base by testing new approaches to help young people build a deeper sense of purpose in their lives as a strategy to improve their academic and life outcomes.

Advisors can help cultivate purpose by...

- Creating opportunities for young people to reflect, explore and write about their personal values, strengths, passions, and long-term goals;
- Encouraging students to take brief pauses throughout the day to check in with their values and search for ways to integrate them into their actions;
- Offering advising support in a way that researchers at the Community College Research Center call sustained, strategic, intrusive and integrated, and personalized (SSIP) can ensure support is available when needed helping to cultivate purpose (and other constructs);
- Connecting young people to role models and mentors — or sharing examples of previous students — who exemplify a strong sense of purpose, whether through academic success, social impact, or community engagement.

Centering purpose - examples from the field



Dr. Anthony Burrow of Cornell University recently founded the Purpose Commons as, “a dynamic learning network where collaborators across the youth development ecosystem work together on projects that put the science of purpose to work for young people.” Their first project — The Contribution Project — provides young people with \$400 to make a contribution to their community with, “the belief that contribution is a powerhouse for both givers and receivers.”



nXu - short for nexus - encourages, “educators, funders, and parents to move beyond the singular focus on ‘college’ and instead anchor each child’s education around their unique sense of purpose.” They provide education and nonprofit organizations with practical, research-backed curriculum and professional development to help them integrate purpose at the heart of their work. Findings from self-published research suggest the program leads to dramatic growth in student sense of purpose and durable skills for high school students.

Getting started

The role of advisors extends far beyond helping young people navigate financial aid, the college enrollment process, and their class schedules. By utilizing approaches that center and cultivate belonging, meaning, wellbeing, and purpose, advisors make critical contributions to institutional and societal goals to improve racial equity and student success. By taking intentional steps to foster BMWP, advisors can make a profound difference in the lives of young people, helping them access college, achieve their goals and thrive.

Advisors ready to take action can start by taking these two steps:

1

Complete this self-assessment to explore your organization’s understanding of and commitment to BMWP and identify opportunities for improvement.

2

Use this interview protocol to build empathy with your students and understand their current feelings related to belonging.



Photo: Youth participants at the Fall 2024 Opportunity Youth Forum convening in Aspen, CO learn about local wildlife

Citations

- ¹ Freeland Fisher (2025). The Troubling Rise of the Self-Help Bot. Published in Workshift.
- ² The definition of belonging advanced in this guide is informed by the work of John A. Powell and colleagues at the Othering and Belonging Institute.
- ³ Othering and Belonging Institute (2023). Belonging Design Principles.
- ⁴ See this document on the course for more information.
- ⁵ Walton and Wilson (2018). Wise interventions: Psychological remedies for social and personal problems.
- ⁶ Chandler, Arnold (2024). The Promise of Meaning-Based Interventions and Opportunities for Philanthropy. Presentation to the Grantmakers of Thriving Youth.
- ⁷ Ross et al. (2020). Adolescent Well-Being: A Definition and Conceptual Framework.
- ⁸ American College Health Association (2024). NCHA Undergraduate Student Reference Group - Executive Summary.
- ⁹ Damon, Menon, & Bronk (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. Applied Developmental Science, Vol. 7, No. 3 (119–128).
- ¹⁰ Learning Well (2024). Find Your Purpose, if You Know What That Means. Purpose researchers Todd Kashdan and Patrick McKnight have used the compass metaphor.

Further reading

The BMWP movement builds upon and draws inspiration from a growing body of evidence. Below is a non-exhaustive list of resources for those interested in reading more.

- Advising Success Network (2025). Resources.
- Allen et al. (2022). The Need to Belong: a Deep Dive into the Origins, Implications, and Future of a Foundational Construct.
- American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2021). Senior Leadership Guidebook for Holistic Advising Redesign.
- American Indian College Fund (2019). Declaration of Native Purpose in Higher Education: An Indigenous Higher Education Equity Initiative.
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- Burrow et al. (2018). Exploring Purpose as a Resource for Promoting Youth Program Engagement.
- Community College Research Center (2019). A Framework for Advising Reform.
- MDRC (2020). Advising as a Strategy for Achieving Equitable Student Outcomes.
- Mindset Scholars Network (2025). Wise Interventions Database.
- NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2022). (Mis)Understanding young people: Approaches to Affirming Student Identities.
- Nunn, Lisa M. (2019). College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life.
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- Pfund and Bono (2020). A Higher Goal During Higher Education: The Power of Purpose in Life During University.
- US Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences (2021). Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students — Practice Guide.
- van Kessel, et al. (2025). Relationship between university belonging and student outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis.
- Walton & Wilson (2018). Wise interventions: Psychological remedies for social and personal problems.
- Walton & Crum (2022). A Handbook of Wise Interventions.
- Yeager, et al (2016). Teaching a lay theory before college narrows achievement gaps at scale.

Like-minded efforts

BMWP is inspired by the work of many other organizations and individuals. Below is a non-exhaustive list of organizations and initiatives that surfaced during the creation of this guide that may be relevant for those in an advising role. Click the logos to access more information.

 ADVISING **SUCCESS** NETWORK

**Purpose
Commons**

connected
CS **cholars**
program

 **FRESH TRACKS**

N C H A
NATIONAL COLLEGE HEALTH ASSESSMENT

) I E B C (
INSTITUTE *for* EVIDENCE-BASED CHANGE

n X u

 Othering
& Belonging
Institute

 **Motivate Lab**

 **NACCC**
NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF
COLLEGIATE CAMPUS CLIMATES

**SUMMER
SEARCH** 

#DESIGN *FOR* BELONGING

 **PERTS**