

Core Values and a Stanford Bucket List

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Context: First year students in a seminar series through Residential Education

Keywords: values, planning for the future, life-skills

Student Activity Time: 90 minutes in class

As part of a seminar series, students determined core values to help guide decisions and activities during their college career and beyond.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

In a seminar series led by Residential Education at Stanford University, first year students were challenged to define personal values that help scope future approaches to decision making in life. The reflection activity happened in two parts: first, students were challenged to shrink down a prepared list of personal core values such as happiness, success, and integrity, to 1-2 that were especially pertinent to their lives; second, students formulated a “Stanford Bucket List” and identified several activities or accomplishments they wanted to experience during their time at Stanford, then correlated their previously determined values to their choice of activity. The purpose of this reflection activity was to support students in preparing for a successful time at Stanford and to better understand how to make decisions aligned with their core values in their lives beyond Stanford.

The educator began with a list of about 25 pre-selected values (e.g., ethics) and presented them as possible core values that students could consider important in their lives. The educator then asked students to pick only 5 core values as guiding values for their life. After students individually picked 5 values, the educator encouraged them to select only 1-2 values that reflected the important pieces of their life—values that could drive each student’s individual life. Once students reached this point, the students paired off to discuss the process of picking only 1-2 core values, at which point, students had the option to share their values with one another if they felt comfortable.

Once students selected their values, the educator turned students’ attention intentionally away from the former exercise and towards an exercise called the “Stanford Bucket List.” As a class, students brainstormed various activities or accomplishments that they hoped to achieve during their time at Stanford. After brainstorming was complete, the students individually choose 5 of the activities for their bucket list. The educator then prompted the students to choose 3 activities, then only 1. Afterwards, students returned to connect their previously selected core values with their bucket list item. It was anticipated that this connection would be concurrent between both the values and experiences, providing a coherent picture. Students then formed pairs and discussed their experiences of choosing both core values and a bucket list item.

In terms of outcomes, students had the opportunity to become more thoughtful and conscious about their values in life and about their life after college. They had the opportunity to explore and discuss how their core values could guide them in making decisions in their time at Stanford and beyond.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Present class with a list of 25 values.
2	Have students individually choose 5 values, then 1-2.
3	Students pair and discuss the process of selecting the values.
4	Shift students' focus away from values exercise and introduce the bucket list activity.
5	Have class brainstorm various activities or experiences they want to have during their time at college.
6	Have students individually select 3 of those activities, then only 1.
7	Discuss the application of their previously selected core value to their selected activity.
8	Students pair and discuss the process of selecting the activities and connection to their values.

In the words of the Educator: Tips and Tricks

Be flexible in the formatting. When we first started using this exercise, we provided lists of values or sets of cards with a value on each card. As groups have continued to use this activity, they have become much more flexible and started having students generate those value lists. This approach works because it is important to find approaches that resonate with the students, and that way, any student can be sure that their values are represented in that list. By pre-selecting a value list and pre-determining what the categories are, the students tend to be standardized and kind of calibrated at the same level whereas when the students are generating the ideas, it can have a lot more texture to it.

Make sure the students have a reminder. Have the students write their final values down somewhere like an index card to keep them in front of them. Students will put it on their desk when they go back, or somehow keep it present. I think that's a really useful piece since we are trying to instill a habit of consciously thinking about our values.

Be mindful of the different ways students approach this. An important first step, particularly if you are in a context where students have not necessarily signed up for a reflective activity, is to be mindful of how students might approach that task differently if it was something that they had volunteered for rather than it being something that was provided to them, not necessarily voluntarily.

Consider letting students generate the list of values. Students are much more broad and aspirational so it might be good to be attentive to what are the kinds of values

these students would bring. What would they generate on their own and how could you be sure that there were some other kinds of values represented in that list?

Think about the timing because it matters. We typically allow quite a bit of time for both activities. When we do these together, the two can fill almost all of the 90 minutes. I think making sure you're paying attention to how much time you have available to do it, and can we do it in one section, are important considerations. We separate the activities deliberately to feign that we are now doing something completely different, so that students aren't already second guessing what the outcome will be – so they feel a shift in the room.

What was the inspiration for this activity? We originally found this reflection activity at Stanford's career development center as a values card sort. So the career development center had a stack of different color-coded values cards and it was something to help students identify their values to help them with career decision making. Sometimes I think they would do it with a career counselor, and sometimes would take these stacks of cards home with a little instruction sheet to do on their own.