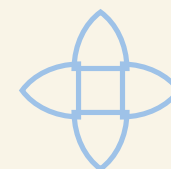
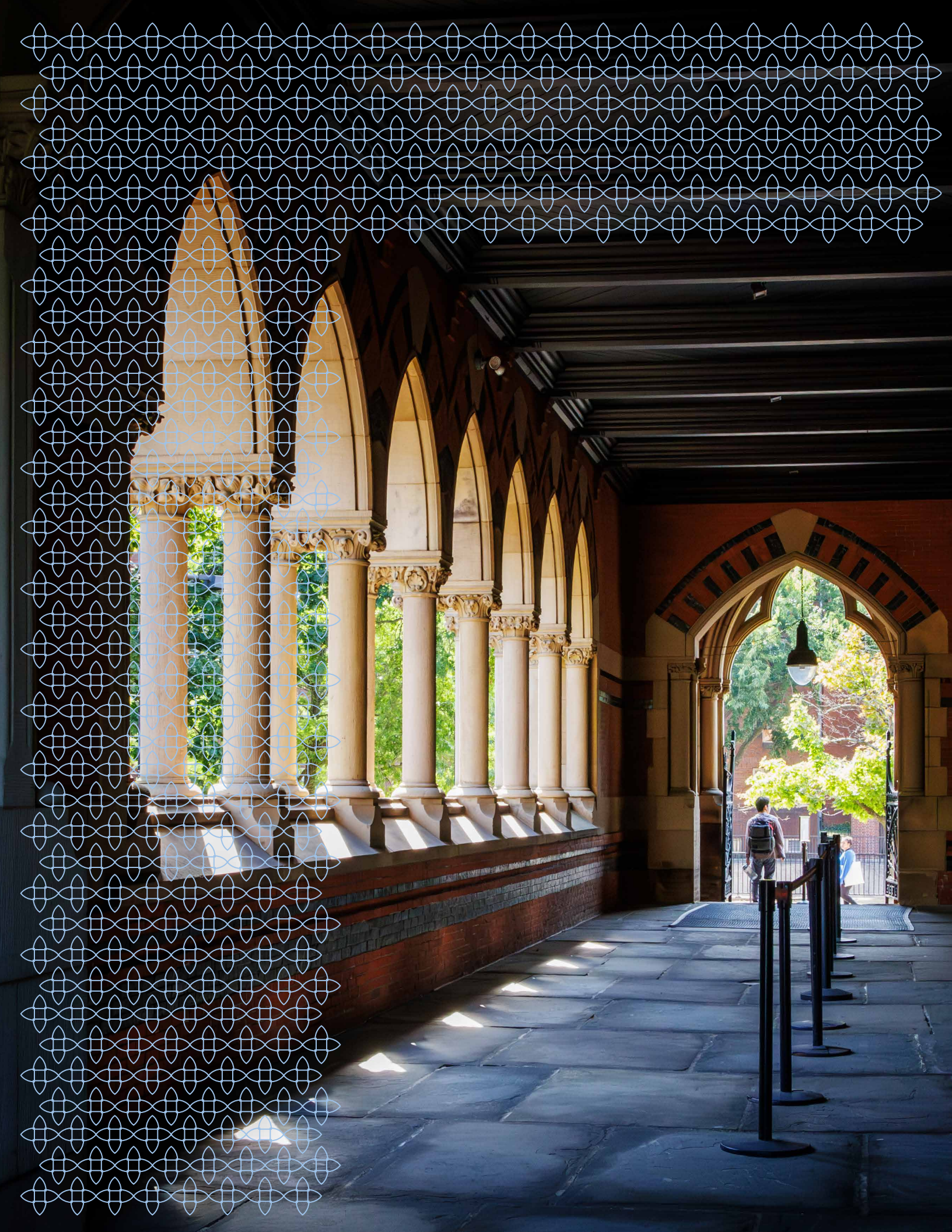


# The Academic Flourishing Initiative

Assessing how universities foster wisdom, character, and human flourishing

THE HUMAN FLOURISHING PROGRAM  
at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science





# The Academic Flourishing Initiative and the Flourishing Data Collaborative, Harvard University

Tyler J. VanderWeele, Brendan Case, Reece Brown,  
Suzanne Ouyang, and Glen Comiso

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## Executive Summary

Colleges and universities put forward grand aspirations for their students and for the world in their mission and vision statements. The founding mission of Stanford University is “to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization.”<sup>1</sup> Harvard College places social leadership at the center of its aim, stating that its mission is “to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the importance of forming wise and moral leaders, many colleges and universities neglect these matters in their own internal assessments, focusing instead on (undoubtedly important) aspects of campus life such as academic achievement, mental health, or inclusion and discrimination. Without neglecting these matters, universities would do well to broaden their assessment efforts to focus on what we might call “academic flourishing,” understood as a state in which all aspects of a college or university’s life are good.<sup>3</sup>

To help fill the gap in current assessment approaches, we at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University have developed the *Academic Flourishing Survey*, which consists of an assessment of

1. Individual student flourishing
2. Students’ perceptions of university community well-being
3. Students’ perceptions of the extent to which university life has contributed to their own formation.<sup>4</sup>

The Human Flourishing Program has also launched the Flourishing Data Collaborative, a community of colleges and universities committed to assessing and promoting academic flourishing at their institutions. We assist member institutions in carrying out campus-wide assessments of academic flourishing using the Human Flourishing Program’s data collection and reporting tool, which allows us to analyze the data from each campus and generate member-specific reports on the results. Members of the collaborative gain important research insights concerning their campuses and participate in a generative environment of shared resources, convenings, and research born out of the initiative.

Education is not only a pathway to individual human flourishing, but also a pillar upon which a flourishing society stands. The Academic Flourishing Initiative exists to help colleges and universities develop a greater positive influence on their students both for their students’ flourishing, and for the greater flourishing of society as a whole.

# About the Academic Flourishing Survey

In 2024, the Human Flourishing Program began research across colleges and universities using the Academic Flourishing Survey, covering individual student flourishing, university community wellbeing, and the university's contribution to student formation.<sup>4</sup> Our own flourishing measure, focused around the six domains of happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security, has now been used on numerous campuses, including either campus-wide efforts or more specific studies at University of Michigan, Johns Hopkins, West Point, Yale University, Harvard University, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and several others.<sup>5</sup> We have also carried out assessments on whether colleges and universities are flourishing as a community, using an adaptation of our community well-being measure, in college and university contexts.<sup>6</sup> Such assessments include evaluating whether there are good relationships within the community; proficient leadership to provide vision and direction; healthy structures and practices to sustain the life of the community and to resolve conflict; a sense of belonging, welcome, and satisfaction; and a shared common mission.

Finally, in a paper on academic flourishing, we have further developed a series of questions on student formation, evaluating student perceptions of the extent to which university life has helped them to find meaning and purpose, to grow in character, to develop the capacity for critical thought and for leadership, and to flourish as a person.<sup>3</sup> The questions cover many aspects of students' lives many colleges and universities rightly strive to shape. Importantly, students are not being asked to report on their actual attainment or development in these areas, but on the extent to which they think university life has contributed to that development. The 24 questions in the measure are a framework to capture the university's contribution to 4 distinct elements: the intellectual virtues, moral virtues, citizenship and societal contribution, and meaning and growth more broadly.<sup>3</sup>

- Cognitive and Epistemic Capacities
- Virtues for Academic Flourishing
- Citizenship and Societal Contribution
- Meaning and Growth



# Academic Flourishing Survey

Please respond to the following questions on a scale from 0 to 10:

## Cognitive and Epistemic Capacities:

- 1. To what extent has university life helped you to increase your knowledge?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 2. To what extent has university life helped you to think clearly?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 3. To what extent has university life helped you to pursue truth?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 4. To what extent has university life helped you to recognize when you are in error so as to be able to change your understanding?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 5. To what extent has university life helped you understand perspectives different from your own?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 6. To what extent has university life helped you learn how to express yourself well?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped

## Virtues for Academic Flourishing:

- 7. To what extent has university life helped you to become more honest?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 8. To what extent has university life helped you to develop courage?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 9. To what extent has university life helped you to have a love of learning?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 10. To what extent has university life helped you to become more wise?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 11. To what extent has university life helped you to become more just?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 12. To what extent has university life helped you to better lead a moral life?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped

## Citizenship and Societal Contribution:

- 13. To what extent has university life helped you develop character strengths in order to make meaningful contributions to society?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped

- 14. To what extent has university life helped you understand what you can contribute to your country?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 15. To what extent has university life helped equip you to positively change the world?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 16. To what extent has university life helped you to treat everyone respectfully?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 17. To what extent has university life helped you in creative problem solving when working with others?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 18. To what extent has university life helped you to work with people with diverse political and religious beliefs?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped

## Meaning and Growth:

- 19. To what extent has university life helped you to find meaning in life?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 20. To what extent has university life helped you to appreciate beauty?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 21. To what extent has university life helped you to flourish as a person?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 22. To what extent has university life helped you to pursue your goals?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 23. To what extent has university life helped you learn how to live your life in a healthy way?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped
- 24. To what extent has university life helped you learn how to have good relationships with others?**  
0 = Has Not Helped, 10 = Has Helped

The student formation measure was evaluated and revised through cognitive interviews with students at Harvard University, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Campus Bio Medico University of Rome. Extensive campus-wide data collection has been carried out at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is underway at several other institutions. Early insight from this work suggests that while universities may generally succeed at helping their students acquire knowledge and pursue career-related outcomes, their contribution to matters of virtue, meaning and preparation for public life may be more mixed.

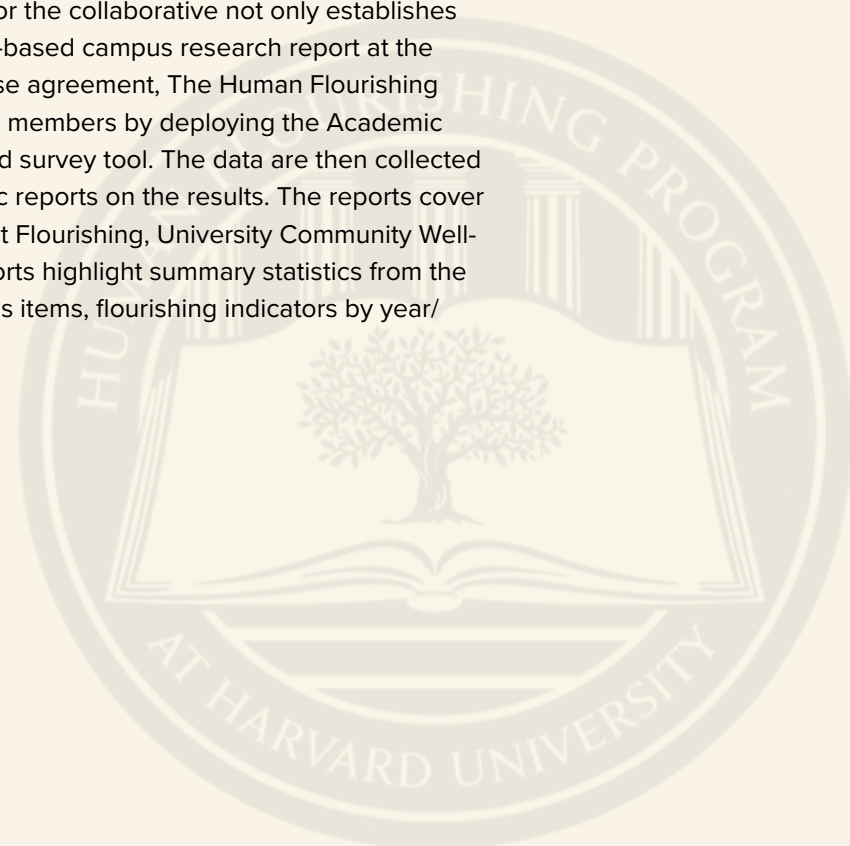
# About the Academic Flourishing Initiative

*Student formation for lifelong flourishing*

The Academic Flourishing Initiative was started at The Human Flourishing Program in 2025 and has three distinct goals:

1. Generate new research on academic flourishing and student formation
2. Improve university leaders' ability to understand, influence, and promote student flourishing and community wellbeing
3. Advance a community of practice in higher education oriented toward human flourishing.

The heart of the Academic Flourishing Initiative is the Human Flourishing Program's Data Collaborative, which is a member-sponsored research collaborative. Membership in the Data Collaborative starts at \$10,000 a year for a college or university. Registering for the collaborative not only establishes membership but also includes a survey-based campus research report at the member institution. Guided by a data use agreement, The Human Flourishing Program collects data with participating members by deploying the Academic Flourishing Survey through a web-based survey tool. The data are then collected and analyzed to create member-specific reports on the results. The reports cover four main areas: Demographics, Student Flourishing, University Community Well-being, and Student Formation. The reports highlight summary statistics from the surveys, trends and visualizations across items, flourishing indicators by year/class, and comparative benchmarks.



# Academic Flourishing Report EXAMPLE 1

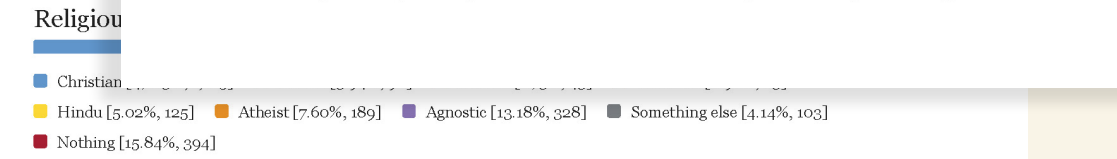
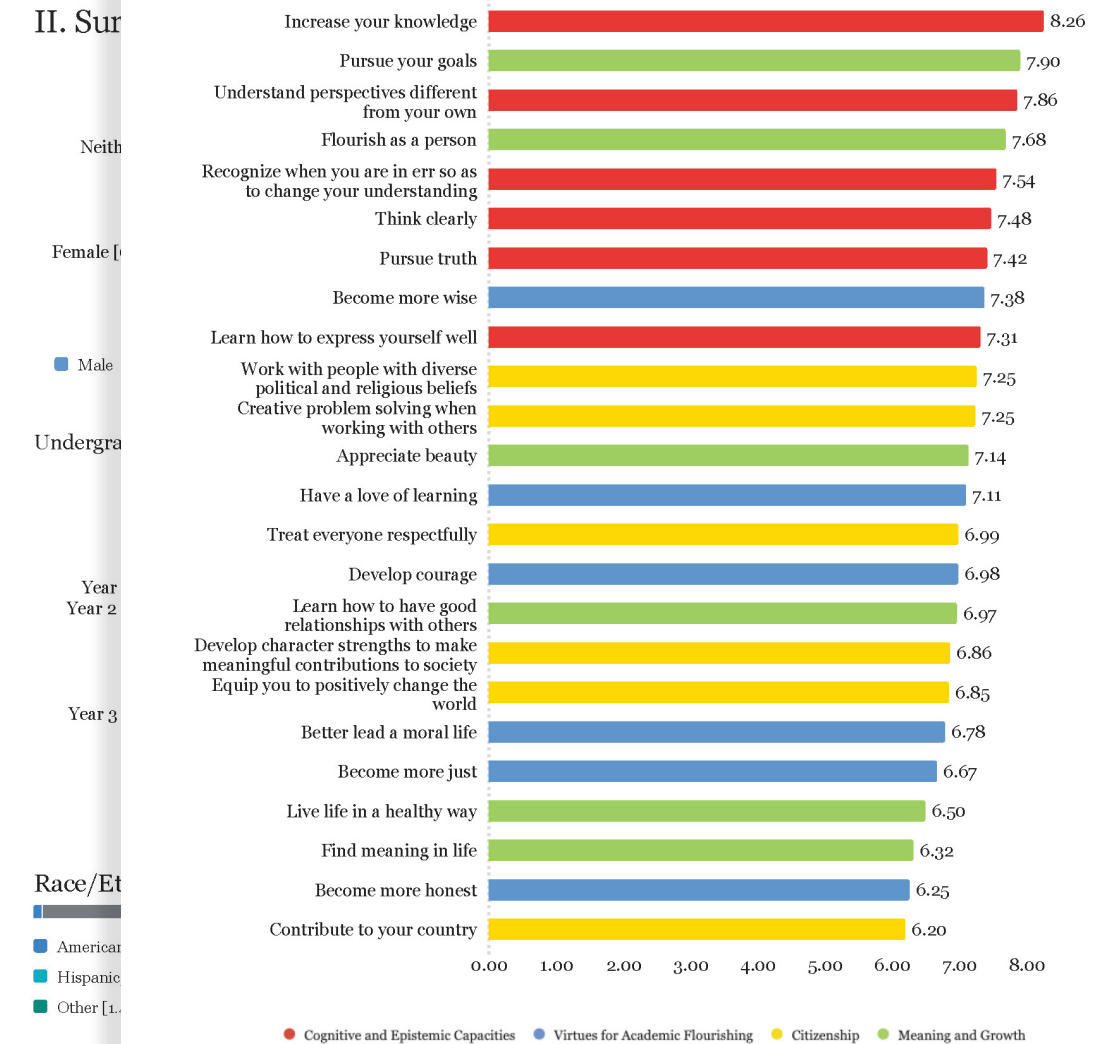
Academic Flourishing at Sample University

8

## III. Student Formation

### 1. Relative Strengths for Student Formation

To what extent has university life helped you to...



To what extent has university life helped you to work with people with diverse political and religious beliefs?	7.54	7.26	7.28	7.19	Overall	7.25
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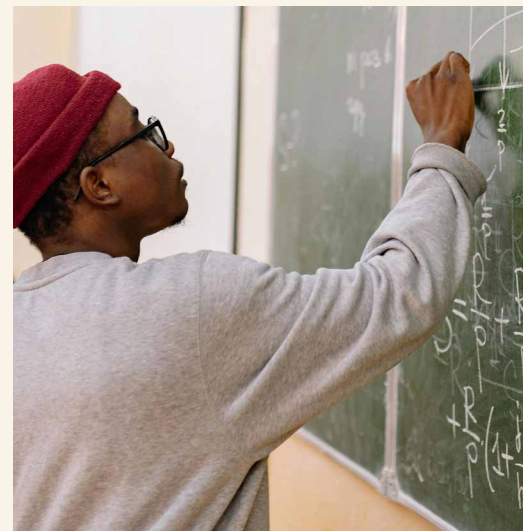
# Academic Flourishing Report EXAMPLE 2

Academic Flourishing at Sample University 24

Strong Mission	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Overall
Our university's shared purpose or mission is clear to everyone	6.48	6.00	5.53	5.03	5.36
Our university contributes to the world to make it a better place	7.53	7.01	6.37	6.19	6.47
Everyone is needed for our university to fulfil its goals and purposes	6.03	6.78	6.64	6.06	6.33
Our university is able to do more with everyone together than we could individually	8.11	8.12	7.52	7.44	7.65

Beyond the unique member reports, the research and materials produced by the initiative are a combination of insights derived from data released by participating members and high-level analyses derived from de-identified anonymous data. In addition to the insights exclusive to their campuses, members of the initiative benefit from shared resources, access to conferences and events, and research tools produced by the Human Flourishing Program on topics related to academic flourishing. The initiative is dedicated to creating a generative environment in which increased sharing of resources compounds into valuable resources for the general public. To find more information about upcoming conferences and events, please visit the Human Flourishing Program website.

The Human Flourishing Program has created a data use agreement that follows international standards and is committed to best practices for data collection, response anonymity, and research guidelines. The Human Flourishing Program has been granted IRB approval to carry out this data collection with participating members and provides member-unique survey tools using Qualtrics. The Human Flourishing Program registers members to the initiative through agreements created by the Harvard Office of the General Counsel. These instruments have been designed to be standardized and simple yet also ensure anonymity and user protection. More information about how data is stored and protected can be found in the data use agreement on our website. (<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>)



# How Universities Can Create a Movement toward Flourishing

In 2024, the Human Flourishing Program collaborated with the Oxford Character Project and The Wall Street Journal to include four of the Academic Flourishing items in The Wall Street Journal's annual college rankings survey of the top 500 colleges and universities in the United States. The items included were:

## WSJ Best Colleges in the US, Academic Flourishing items:

- To what extent has university life helped equip you to positively change the world?
- To what extent has university life helped you to become more wise?
- To what extent has university life helped you to become more just?
- At my university, I am/was encouraged to develop character strengths that will help me make a meaningful contribution to society.

Means scores of the answers to these questions results in a substantially different ordering and different strengths in comparison to standard rankings in the U.S. World and News Report or the WSJ Best Colleges Survey.

It is right that colleges and universities continue to track and improve the factors influencing the economic value of their degrees. But there are blind spots around the way we evaluate academic life. The clarion call for leaders to weigh, hold, and carefully manage their influence on student flourishing should be seen as a central responsibility. The management thought leader Peter Drucker is credited with saying, "you can't improve what you don't measure."<sup>7</sup>

Colleges and universities can't measure everything, but they can aspire to live up to their promise and make progress toward measuring student formation on the path to flourishing. The work of the Academic Flourishing Initiative is to give leaders in higher education the tools they need to positively form character, intellectual strengths, a sense of meaning and a capacity for service in their students. We at the Human Flourishing Program believe that education is a primary pathway to human flourishing and that a collaborative movement of institutions striving for academic flourishing will make the world a better place.

Op Ed

# What College Rankings Are Missing

Op Ed, in *The Harvard Crimson* | October 20, 2025

By Brendan W. Case and Tyler J. VanderWeele, Contributing Opinion Writers

Tyler J. VanderWeele is the John H. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of Epidemiology at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Brendan W. Case is the Associate Director for Research at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science. They are members of the Council of Academic Freedom at Harvard.

Inscribed upon the exterior of Harvard Yard's Dexter Gate are the words, "Enter to grow in wisdom," while the gate's interior admonishes those leaving: "Depart to serve better thy country and thy kind."

Such aspirations are evident in the mission statements of many colleges and universities across the country. The mission of Harvard College is "to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society." Swarthmore College describes part of its mission as "provid[ing]... a transformative liberal arts education... and empower[ing] all who share in our community to flourish and contribute to a better world." The University of Wisconsin-Madison aspires towards "creating a welcoming, empowered, and inclusive community; and preparing current and future generations to live satisfying, useful, and ethical lives."

These are beautiful aspirations, which our institutions of higher learning are right to strive for. Nonetheless, our evaluations and rankings of colleges and universities frequently neglect these matters.

For example, the U.S. News and World Report lists the following as factors receiving at least a 5 percent weight in its annual rankings of colleges and universities: graduation rates, retention rates, graduation rate performance, borrower debt, earnings, peer assessment, faculty salaries, financial resources per student, and standardized tests. These things are undoubtedly important. However, such rankings seem to entirely miss the broader matters of wisdom, leadership, integrity, or indeed overall flourishing. **If colleges and universities aspire to form students for public-spirited flourishing lives, then surely it would be worth knowing whether their students think they are succeeding.**

Of course, evaluating students in terms of their wisdom or leadership is no simple matter. A more straightforward approach is to assess how students perceive university life as contributing, or not, to these pursuits. For instance, the Wall Street Journal incorporated questions related to students' character into its 2025 rankings of U.S. Colleges and Universities. While these questions received only 4 percent of the weight in the resulting ranking, they still signify a beginning.



Four of these six questions that we helped develop specifically concern whether students perceive their institution as having contributed to their character development and their capacity for leadership and citizenship (central to Harvard College's mission, and its gates). The four questions, self-rated from zero ("Has not helped") to 10 ("Has helped a lot") concern the University's assistance in helping students become wiser, more just, more equipped to "positively change the world," and "develop character strengths" that contribute to societal change.

These questions are part of an assessment of a broader Academic Flourishing Initiative that we at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University have begun using in campus-wide initiatives, ranging from assessments of individual and community flourishing, to student formation questions about the institution's contributions to student knowledge, critical thinking, meaning in life, relationships, capacity to work across differences, honesty, and courage, among others. One might thus quantify how students perceive their institution contributing to their own growth in wisdom, or justice, or leadership, or citizenship.

In a chart we have prepared, one can take a glance at how students at the 429 institutions providing at least 50 respondents each see their college's contributions. Harvard falls about in the middle of the pack for average scores on these four questions. While this is a far cry from Harvard's dominant place in conventional rankings of colleges, it is nonetheless considerably better than we do in the Foundation for Individual Rights of Expression's annual free speech rankings. The two issues — student formation and academic freedom — are also closely linked. As we have argued at length elsewhere, **virtues such as patience, courage, justice, and humility are not only important in their own right, but are also crucial for achieving the University's primary academic goals of education and research.** Without courage, students will struggle to express controversial views in or out of class, while without patience, justice, or humility, they will struggle to give those they disagree with a fair and impartial hearing.

Some qualifications are in order. The relative ordering of schools is different across the four questions: different institutions have different strengths and weaknesses. Also, despite weighting by gender, race, and year, the samples are not necessarily representative. All of the data is, moreover, self-reported, though the fact that it is a self-report of perceptions of a university's contribution arguably renders this more reliable than would be assessments of one's own character. It might also be easier for certain institutions, for example religious institutions with a shared vision, to have their students feel that college life is contributing in these ways, since each such institution may be comparatively more homogeneous than its secular counterparts. Institutions embracing a plurality of different perspectives may be rightly more reticent in proposing a shared vision of the good life. It might thus be reasonable to analyze religious and secular institutions separately, and in the table below we accordingly report separately on some of the highest weighted means of perceptions concerning growth in wisdom.

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/10/20/case-vanderweele-harvard-rankings-flourishing/>

## FAQs

### What makes the Academic Flourishing Initiative unique?

The Academic Flourishing Initiative was conceived with one clear purpose: to give colleges and universities data that could help them guide their students and campuses toward greater flourishing and student formation. Our goal is to provide research that cuts through the noise and removes guesswork around the elusive aspirations and visions that are valued in principle – but too often neglected in practice – by institutions of higher learning.

### What exactly is the Flourishing Data Collaborative?

The Flourishing Data Collaborative is the central data collection and research production engine at the Human Flourishing Program. It is a research consortium made up of participating members that support ongoing research into academic flourishing in a genuine community of practice.

### What is the cost?

The cost to participate as a member for the 2025-2026 academic year in the Data Collaborative begins at \$10,000 per institution. Institutions which require further tailoring of agreements or reports may incur higher costs.

### What do members get?

Members will receive a link to the Academic Flourishing Survey, hosted by the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, for use in on-campus data collection. The Program will receive and analyze those data, and will return a research report to campus leadership that provides a summary of the findings (with scores broken down by student year and along demographic lines), guides to interpretation, and benchmarking for some indicators against norms at other institutions. Membership in the Data Collective also includes the right to publish the results of the report for any non-commercial purpose. Members also receive invitations to exclusive conferences and events and access to resources published within the Data Collaborative community.

### Can institutions pre-pay for multiple years of membership in the collaborative?

Yes, because colleges and universities may prefer to see the impact of their work on the lifecycle of a student from matriculation to graduation, membership can be renewed annually or pre-established for multiple years.

### When does data collection happen?

We recommend that data collection take place in the second semester of the academic year so that freshman students will have had at least one semester of college life. The Data Collaborative will provide guidance on strategies for maximizing response rates.

### Can graduate and professional schools participate in the Data Collaborative?

Yes, the initiative encompasses institutions at the graduate level. Membership in the Data Collaborative is at the school-wide level, thus sub-units such as concentrations, cohorts, or career tracks will not be eligible. Please write to us to inquire about cost of membership for graduate and professional schools in the collaborative.

### What data is being used and shared?

All survey responses collected from the Academic Flourishing Survey are fully anonymous. The Flourishing Data Collaborative houses a database that compiles data collected from participating members. The program retains the right to publish deidentified analyses and research from data in the collective dataset. More information about data use and security can be found in the data use agreement.

### Where can I find the data use agreement?

To obtain a copy of the data use agreement visit us at <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/academicflourishing> or write to [academicflourishing@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:academicflourishing@fas.harvard.edu)

### Can I participate in this work if I am not part of an institution in the collaborative?

Yes, individuals, scholars, and professors at universities who are interested in this work can participate by referring university leaders to the Data Collaborative, requesting invitations to events, working with Human Flourishing Program staff on publication and dissemination efforts, and writing about the results of our work.

### Where can I learn more?

More discussion of the conceptualization of academic flourishing, and its assessment, can be found in: VanderWeele, T.J., and Case, B. (2025). Academic Flourishing and Student Formation. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 15(2), 5003, 1-29.

## About the Program

Founded in 2016, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science has a twofold mission **to study and promote human flourishing, and to develop systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines.**

Many topics that are fundamental to human well-being such as happiness itself, virtue, religious community, meaning, and purpose have traditionally been viewed as principally falling within the purview of the humanities, often of philosophy or theology. However, a robust empirical research literature on these topics has now developed from sociology, political science, economics, education, psychology, medicine, public health, and other empirical sciences. The program's research contributes to the broad question of how knowledge from the quantitative social sciences can be integrated with that of the humanities on questions of human flourishing and how best to carry out this synthesis of knowledge across disciplines.

The program produces research publications and sponsors educational activities, such as courses, seminars, and conferences, for the Harvard University community and beyond. The Program has helped lead the Global Flourishing Study which is a worldwide longitudinal study of over 200,000 individuals spanning 22 countries. The program has a range of initiatives designed to increase public awareness of the science of human flourishing and the adoption of practices that can improve it throughout society.

### Suggested Citation

VanderWeele, T.J., Case, B., Brown, R., Ouyang, S., and Comiso, G. (2025). The Academic Flourishing Initiative. Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University.

For more information, visit:  
<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>



The Human Flourishing Program  
at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Who we are. (n.d.). Stanford University. <https://www.stanford.edu/about/>

<sup>2</sup>Harvard College Mission, vision, & history. Harvard College. (n.d.). <https://college.harvard.edu/about/mission-vision-history#:~:text=The%20mission%20of%20Harvard%20College,liberal%20arts%20and%20sciences%20education>

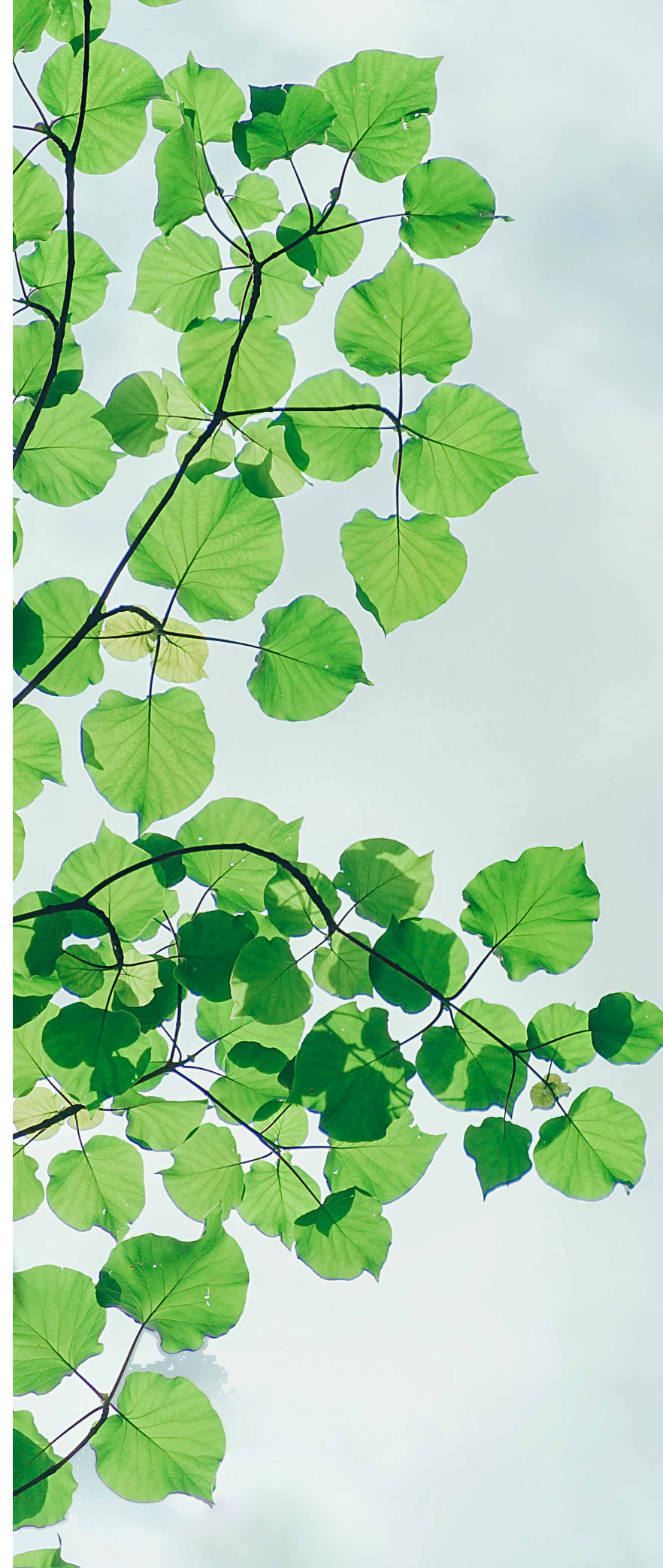
<sup>3</sup>VanderWeele, T. J., & Case, B. (2025). Academic flourishing and student formation. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 15(2).

<sup>4</sup>VanderWeele, T.J., PhD. (2024, October 4). Restoring mission in higher education. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/human-flourishing/202410/assessing-academic-flourishing>

<sup>5</sup>VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(31), 8148-8156. <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>

<sup>6</sup>VanderWeele, T. J. (2019). Measures of community well-being: A template. *International Journal of Community Well-Being*, 2(3), 253-275. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42413-019-00036-8>

<sup>7</sup>Wolcott, Robert C. 2016. "Don't Be Tyrannized by Old Metrics." Harvard Business Review Digital Articles, September, 2-6. <https://research-ebSCO-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=1b0962c8-3774-3a73-af48-636ff9eda496>.





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