Grades, Goals, and the Good Life

An Interview with Dr. Brendan Case

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Image courtesy of Brendan Case.

Questions regarding the ethics and meaning of a "good life" have long occupied philosophers. These conversations continue today as universities strive to craft a student environment that at once is academically rigorous and allows for a "good life." One scholar working at this intersection is Brendan W. Case, Th.D., the Associate Director of Research at Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program. A theologist by training, Case investigates how moral philosophy, virtue ethics, and the role of religion in public life can inform contemporary debates about student life at Harvard via the Academic Flourishing Initiative.

Diana Nichvoloda (DN): Please tell me about yourself and the work of the Academic Flourishing Initiative. How do you define academic flourishing, and is that the same thing as academic success?

Brendan Case (BC): Broadly speaking, we at the Human Flourishing Program—housed in the Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences—study the nature, distribution, and determinants of flourishing—understood in a very expansive sense. Much of our work is organized around four institutional pathways to flourishing: marriage and family, education, workplaces, and religious communities.

Within our work on education, we've launched the Academic Flourishing Initiative, which centers on a concept we call "academic flourishing": a state in which all aspects of an academic community are going well, deliberately mirroring our broader definition of human flourishing as a state in which all aspects of a person's life are going well, including in the contexts in which they live. This is, by design, a very demanding definition. Strictly speaking, no individual or institution fully satisfies it, and so we often speak instead of the relative attainment of flourishing. Physical health offers a useful analogy: even though everyone eventually declines and dies, it still makes sense to say that some people are healthier than others. The same logic applies to flourishing more generally. When we apply this to academic institutions, we take a similarly expansive view. Success in core academic aims—teaching, learning, and research—is clearly central, but it is not the whole story. Universities exist to preserve, transmit, and generate knowledge, and that mission is essential to their identity. However, an institution that excels academically while its members are miserable, anxious, or disengaged would be deficient as a community. So, any reasonable account of academic flourishing must include the well-being of individuals. Beyond that, there are goods that belong to the community as a community—things like healthy institutional practices, effective governance, and the capacity to respond constructively to challenges. These are not reducible to individual outcomes.

Another crucial but often neglected dimension is the formative mission that many universities explicitly claim: shaping students into people of character who can contribute meaningfully to society. Mission statements from institutions like Stanford, Swarthmore, and Harvard all emphasize leadership, integrity, and contribution to the common good. If universities take these claims seriously, then their flourishing depends on whether they actually form students in these ways. Yet in practice, institutions rarely assess themselves on these dimensions. They focus heavily on academic outputs but pay far less attention to whether they are cultivating good citizens, supporting community well-being, or fostering healthy institutional cultures. A central goal of the Academic Flourishing Initiative is to bring these neglected aspects into view and encourage universities to take them seriously.

DN: That's very interesting. What are universities most invested in right now, and how should they shift their focus?

BC: Universities tend to concentrate on a fairly narrow set of metrics, which are not unimportant but are often overemphasized. They pay close attention to the academic credentials of incoming students—like GPA and standardized test scores—and to student performance through grades. Faculty are evaluated primarily through research output, including publications and citations, especially in tenure and promotion decisions. Institutions also track

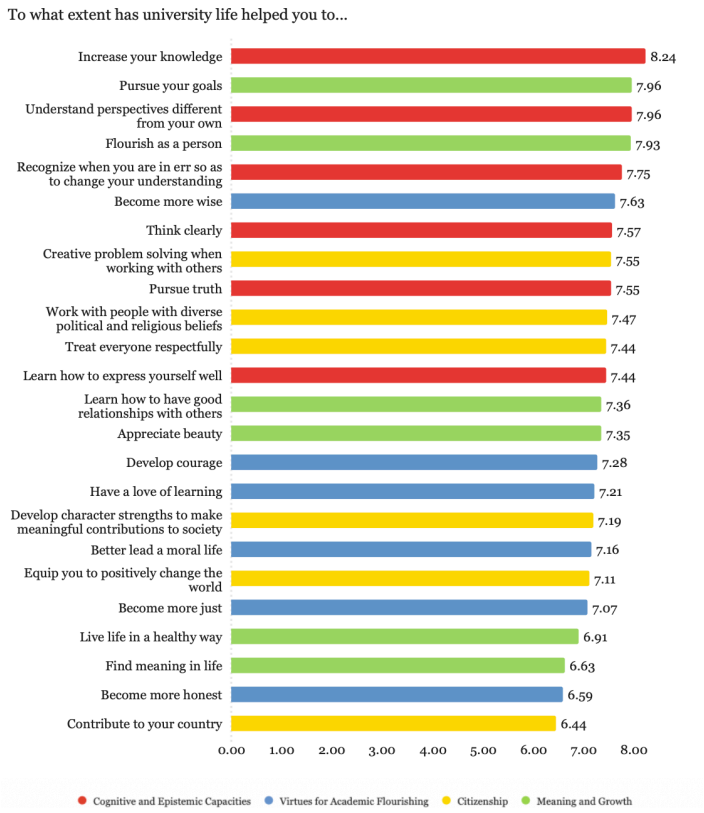


Figure 1. Across two sample universities, students reported that university life most enhanced their cognitive and epistemic capacities (e.g., increasing knowledge) and, to a lesser degree, citizenship (e.g., contributing to their country) and virtues for academic flourishing (e.g., becoming more honest). (Source: 2024-2025 Academic Flourishing Report)

alumni outcomes, particularly career success, partly because of its relevance for fundraising. In recent years, they have also focused heavily on student mental health, given the well-documented rise in anxiety, depression, and related conditions.

All of these areas matter, but there are problems with how they are measured and weighted. For example, citation counts and publication metrics are crude proxies for intellectual contribution and often create perverse incentives, encouraging quantity over quality. Similarly, while tracking mental health is important, the approach is typically deficit-focused: universities measure distress but rarely measure thriving. They do not systematically ask what leads students to feel engaged, fulfilled, and purposeful. As a result, they miss a large part of what matters. A better approach would not abandon these existing metrics but would broaden them, incorporating measures of positive development, community well-being, and institutional health. In other words, universities should complement their current focus on performance and problems with a more holistic understanding of what it means for a community to flourish.

DN: Is student mental health more of an individual responsibility than an institutional one? Some argue that students are voluntarily stretching themselves too thin—participating in too many classes and extracurriculars, and that this is the reason for their poor mental health. How do you see this debate?

BC: I think we should conceptualize a spectrum from individual responsibility at one end to structural influence at the other, and most cases of student mental health fall somewhere in between. At the individual level, there are always personal decisions, circumstances, and predispositions—including genetic factors—that shape outcomes. But when we observe large-scale changes, like the widespread rise in anxiety and depression among young people, it's unlikely that these are simply the result of individuals making poor choices. Human nature hasn't changed dramatically in the past fifteen years, so structural factors must be playing a significant role.

That said, universities are not solely responsible for these broader trends. What they do is shape the incentives that students respond to. At places like Harvard, there is what people often call a "hidden curriculum"—a set of informal expectations that push students toward intensive extracurricular involvement as a form of professional development. Many students believe that clubs, leadership roles, and networking opportunities are essential for future success, sometimes even more important than coursework. This can create a disconnect with faculty, who prioritize academic work. At the same time, grade inflation has made GPA less effective as a signal of distinction, which further encourages students to seek differentiation through other activities. These dynamics contribute to a high-pressure environment in which students feel compelled to do more and more. Many arrive already socialized from a very young age into a "resume-building" mindset, where every activity is evaluated in terms of its future payoff. While this produces highly driven individuals, it also creates a stressful and instrumental way of living. So, while individual choices matter, they are shaped by a broader system of incentives that universities help sustain.

DN: I agree; it seems that Harvard students are simply one component in the broader machine of social change. Still, what would the Academic Flourishing Initiative recommend that students do to lessen this pressure?

BC: One of our core ideas is that measurement itself can function as an intervention. The first step is simply recognizing the problem. To that end, we've developed the Academic Flourishing Survey, which measures a wide range of outcomes related to student development and institutional life. We've partnered with universities across the country, and we have also been able to include some of our questions in a Wall Street Journal survey of 500 colleges. These questions ask students to reflect on whether their university experience has helped them become wiser, more just, or better able to contribute to the world.

The results show substantial variation across institutions, even among peers. For instance, within the Ivy League, some schools perform much better than others on these dimensions; Harvard, interestingly, ranks lower than one might expect on measures like becoming wiser. These findings are open to interpretation, but they suggest that students do care about these broader aspects of their development. If universities made these goals more explicit and incorporated them into how they evaluate themselves, it could help shift institutional culture. For students, however, the challenge is that many of these pressures reflect a collective action problem. If

everyone else is optimizing for credentials—joining multiple clubs, building networks—it is difficult for any one individual to opt out without feeling disadvantaged. Similarly, in an environment of grade inflation and increasing reliance on AI tools, genuine engagement and superficial performance can appear indistinguishable. This creates strong incentives to prioritize appearances over substance. I sometimes describe this using Gresham's law: when bad money circulates alongside good money, it tends to drive the good money out. In a similar way, when low-effort strategies yield the same visible rewards as genuine effort, people are naturally drawn toward them.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.