Exploring Opportunities for a Broader Impact During the Early Mid-Career Phase

Mesmin Destin
Department of Psychology, School of Education and Social Policy, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University

The transition to the early mid-career period just after reaching tenure provides a natural inflection point for many scholars. The potential pathways through this period and beyond are numerous; however, norms and guidance can become unclear and difficult to ascertain. For some, this period allows scholars to evaluate the broader significance and impact of their work. Despite achieving a certain level of recognition within academic circles, has the research contributed to any positive and meaningful change in people’s lives or society at large? I have found this career phase to be a unique opportunity to explore multiple potential avenues to expand the reach and scope of my work. Given that I am a researcher at the intersection of psychology and education, this has included work at the institutional level, where I can reach local student populations; collaborative work on research projects designed to answer broader questions than those that individual, small-scale studies can answer; and, finally, work at the policy level, where I can connect with influential decision makers.

My research has predominantly focused on understanding the social and institutional factors that influence how young people see themselves and pursue their goals. I have especially prioritized conducting lab and field experiments that investigate the experiences of students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and the psychological consequences of inequality. As part of a growing social psychology of education, this work has expanded insights that can be relevant for individuals navigating their lives and institutions aiming to support student success. For example, my coauthors and I have found that making financial resources feel available enhances students’ educational goals and motivation during early adolescence (Destin, 2017; Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Furthermore, when parents (Destin & Svoboda, 2017), peers (Destin, Castillo, & Meissner, 2018), and institutions (Browman & Destin, 2016) reinforce students’ perceptions that resources are available, it improves the academic trajectories of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Other research in this area has recruited large and sometimes nationally representative samples of students to demonstrate the positive effects of related psychological mechanisms such as goals, values, and mindsets on a range of students’ academic outcomes (e.g., Harackiewicz, Canning, Tibbetts, Priniski, & Hyde, 2016; Yeager et al., 2016). This growing foundation of evidence has become increasingly relevant to the lives of young people who face significant challenges in reaching their desired futures. Some of the most promising ways to leverage and amplify the potential positive impact include building institutional partnerships, expanding broader research collaborations, and reaching out to policymakers.

Institutional Partnerships

Often the most direct ways to contribute to people’s lives through scholarship is through one’s own institution. My home institution, for example, has articulated a commitment to enhancing and supporting diversity and inclusion among its student body. In many instances, our research has been aligned with this mission, which has provided opportunities to directly shape the experiences of undergraduate students. In one study that was supported by the university, my colleagues and I designed a student panel program that exposed first-year college students to the diverse stories and experiences of undergraduate students. Because these stories conveyed the message that students at the university come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and they all find success in unique ways, it activated psychological processes that eliminated the...
gap in academic achievement between first-generation and continuing-generation college students by the end of their first year (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). The university and several other institutions have used this study as a template to design similar programs for students during their orientation and throughout their academic journey. My coauthors and I have actively cultivated and sustained relationships with key university administrators and student affairs personnel while conducting our studies and beyond. We have also agreed to participate in numerous staff development initiatives and student programs and have discussed our work at presentations and panels in other formats. Maintaining these mutually beneficial relationships has led to collaborations to enhance student experiences in new ways.

Two specific initiatives at the university have been developed in coordination and partnership with our lab and program of research. First, a specific office was opened by the university to fill gaps in resources for students from low-SES backgrounds and to build community and connection. We have worked directly with the leadership at the office in their ongoing work to better serve the diverse range of students at the university, for instance, through support for a peer mentorship program. The peer mentorship program in particular has provided the opportunity to conduct an ongoing partner study with promising initial results that are likely to benefit both the university and the scientific community. Second, in collaboration with colleagues, we have developed a pre-enrollment program designed to reach and cultivate students who are poised to shape the future of the institution. It includes approximately 2 weeks of rigorous coursework, social psychological development activities, and community building aimed especially at leveraging the strengths and assets of first-generation and low-SES college students. We anticipate the opportunity to systematically measure the potential positive consequences of participating in the program as it continues to grow.

One main challenge of this work is to catalyze comprehensive and lasting institutional change. Universities are often large and traditional institutions founded within a very different historical context and for a very different student body. Psychology can provide many individual recommendations to help universities better support their students and achieve their missions. However, systematically linking multiple recommendations across several levels of the university can be much more difficult to both conceptualize and initiate. One potential way to approach this challenge is to expand investment in research–practice partnerships. Engagement between faculty and staff in long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations can require significant time and financial resources that many universities or even external funders are situated to support.

Broader Collaboration

Another avenue to expand the ways that research can have a positive influence on people’s lives is through pursuing broader collaborative research projects. One example of this approach has been my work with the Mindset Scholars Network. This group was formed to connect a multidisciplinary network of researchers whose work is relevant to the intersection of psychology and education. Their staff finds ways to elevate the individual studies of network members to better reach practitioners and policymakers while also promoting collaboration toward larger-scale and higher-impact studies. One such study, the National Study of Learning Mindsets, tests the effects of a social psychological mind-set intervention among a nationally representative sample of high school students in the United States. I accepted an invitation to join the network and to eventually serve on its scientific steering committee. This affiliation has provided valuable opportunities to collaborate with other researchers from multiple disciplinary backgrounds and analyze the relationship between SES, psychological factors, and academic outcomes on a national scale.

Another collaboration to expand the contribution of my scholarship has included considering a broader range of outcomes for young people. Recent collaborations with colleagues have led to an investigation of connections between academic motivation and outcomes relevant to physical health. These directions were initially inspired and eventually supported by efforts to receive external funding from foundations such as the William T. Grant Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation. We have since initiated longitudinal experimental studies in an effort to build upon research demonstrating the potential unexpected negative consequences of academic persistence and achievement for the health of individuals from low-SES backgrounds (e.g., Miller, Yu, Chen, & Brody, 2015). My coauthors and I have also published articles in an attempt to generate more interest in this area of research on the challenges of upward socioeconomic mobility for health and well-being (Destin, 2018b; Destin & Debrosse, 2017; Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017). These efforts to broaden research through collaboration can generate scholarship that is more relevant to people’s complex, lived experiences, specifically by including representative samples and by considering a more holistic range of life outcomes.

One main challenge of our work to positively shape student experiences is to link work in postsecondary
education to our work in schools that serve students in kindergarten through the 12th grade. In many productive partnerships with middle schools and high schools in our community and throughout the country, we have studied important ways to connect with student identities and support motivation toward their goals. However, research from the two developmental periods often occurs separately, and it can be difficult to carry out projects and provide support that follows the same students before and after the key transition out of high school. My recent contributions to a National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine committee report on adolescent development is one example of a collaboration aimed at covering experiences that span from early adolescence through young adulthood. This has required the collaboration of a group of scholars from an especially broad range of disciplines and areas of expertise.

Social Policy

Finally, a third way to expand the contribution of scholarship to people’s lives is through its connection to social policy. As scholars who are not trained as experts in the complex processes surrounding the development of local, state, and federal policies, entering this domain can be daunting. However, many organizations and professionals devote their work and careers to linking research and researchers with policymakers and various parts of the policymaking process. My work and affiliation with groups such as the Mindset Scholars Network has expanded my professional network to include greater connections to individuals who occupy the spaces between research and policy. As one result of these connections, I was recruited to contribute my expertise to an effort that was led by two D.C. think tanks to draw policymakers’ attention to the issue of college completion. They commissioned a series of five articles that provided different perspectives on why college completion matters above and beyond simply increasing access to college and what can be done to better support college students to reach their goals.

My contribution to this “Elevating College Completion” series provided a psychological perspective on how institutions can improve their efforts to support college students (Destin, 2018a). I drew from my own research regarding how institutional actions influence student motivation and academic outcomes (e.g., Browman & Destin, 2016; Destin, Manzo, & Townsend, 2018; Destin et al., 2017; Destin & Svoboda, 2017) in addition to strong evidence from the field on social psychological factors that are shaped by institutional contexts and affect student trajectories (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2016). The article also incorporated a broader framework that included examples of specific actions at multiple levels of a university’s ecological context (i.e., institutional resources, faculty/classroom, peer interactions) that can support or suppress student motivation and academic success. The release of the article series was accompanied by events connecting the authors with a wide array of legislative staffers and professionals working in the area of education policy. The greatest challenge in writing the article and interacting with its receptive audience was working to frame the main messages in a clear and simple way while also including all of the nuance necessary to help policymakers develop strategies to help support students at a wide range of institutions across the country. Researchers can also find it challenging to quantify the potential impact of a given policy contribution that may not be immediately connected to any specific piece of legislation but more likely to influence the thinking and actions of policymakers and legislative staff in unexpected ways.

Conclusion

The process of finding ways for one’s research to have a positive and meaningful difference in the world can continue to develop, transform, and unfold throughout a scholar’s entire career. One thing that I might have done differently would be to lean more heavily on available mentors earlier and more often when considering questions of broader career impact. However, I have valued the opportunity to explore and sample a range of possibilities during the early mid-career period. One common theme across these opportunities is that they emerged in response to or in coordination with my own primary line of research. That is, a keen focus on engaging in the best work possible is likely to afford unanticipated occasions to expand its impact, especially if the work is in any way connected to an important social issue. At the same time, open exploration of multiple avenues of work is not always sustainable and will likely lead toward a deeper commitment to a particular strategy or more targeted combination of approaches in the years to come. Furthermore, in order for psychological scientists to make a tangible and lasting difference in the world, we will need to enhance our commitment to addressing multiple levels of broader social and historical forces, such as structural discrimination and inequality, that exert consistent and overarching influences on people’s lives.

Action Editor

Marjorie Rhodes served as action editor and June Gruber as interim editor-in-chief for this article.
ORCID iD
Mesmin Destin https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5091-6306

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

References


