

Life goals and their changes drive success, says study

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"Where is my life going?" "Who do I want to be?" As future-thinkers, adolescents spend significant time contemplating these types of questions about their life goals. A new study from the University of Houston shows that as people grow from teenagers to young adults, they

tend to change the importance they place on certain life goals, but one thing is certain: The existence of high-prestige and education goals, as well as their positive development, can drive success.

"Adolescents who endorsed higher levels of prestige and education goals tended to have higher [educational attainment](#), income, occupational creativity, occupational prestige, and job complexity after 12 years," reports Rodica Damian, associate professor of psychology in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

The paper's first author, Andreea Sutu, is a former graduate student of Damian's. Also on the team are former UH assistant professor Kevin Hoff and Sif Einarsdóttir of the University of Iceland.

No prior studies have investigated associations between life goal development and educational or occupational outcomes.

Damian and colleagues found that goals fluctuate—some dreams and goals of youth fall away while some are related to family (like being close to your relatives), relationships (like having good friendships or a [romantic partner](#)), and community (like being involved in your neighborhood or helping others) stay strong. These goals might become even more significant as people get older.

"Life goals are expected to change over time, and these changes are expected to have consequences for future life outcomes, including occupational outcomes," said Damian. "By understanding how changes in life goals relate to educational and occupational outcomes (above and beyond adolescent levels), we show how changes within individuals may also predict desired educational and occupational attainment."

The study examined how life goals developed with age and how adolescent levels of goals and their development through young

adulthood related to educational attainment and occupational outcomes in young adulthood. The study used two nationally representative samples of Icelandic youth followed longitudinally across 12 years from late adolescence to young adulthood.

"For educational attainment, the strongest effects were found for education goals. Both initial levels and slopes of education goals were positively associated with educational attainment in both samples," said Damian. "This indicates that [adolescents](#) with higher education goals, and those who showed a more positive change pattern in [education goals](#), had higher educational attainment in young adulthood."

Education and prestige goals emerged as the most consistent predictors of later income, and changes in these goals across time were the most consistent predictors of later occupational prestige and complexity.

"Our work highlights the importance of better understanding sources of goal development in adolescence and young adulthood. Overall, our focus on life goal development, educational attainment and occupational outcomes informs theoretical and practical understanding about the importance of life goals for real-world outcomes," said Damian.

More information: Andreea Sutu et al, Life goal development, educational attainment, and occupational outcomes: A 12-year, multisample longitudinal study., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000499](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000499)

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