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Beyond Grit and GPA: The Role of Existential Academic Intent as a Mediator between Self-Concept Clarity and Meaningful Achievement in Higher Education

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Abstract

Traditional models of academic achievement emphasize cognitive skills, study habits, and non-cognitive traits like grit. Yet a growing number of university students report high grades alongside profound emptiness, raising questions about the meaning of their achievement. This paper introduces and validates the construct of Existential Academic Intent (EAI) , the degree to which a student's academic engagement is consciously aligned with their evolving sense of self and perceived life purpose. Across two mixed-method studies (N_1 = 412, N_2 = 287 longitudinal), we found that EAI mediates the relationship between self-concept clarity and what we term meaningful achievement (a composite of objective performance, subjective vitality during studying, and low regret about time spent). Notably, EAI predicts meaningful achievement beyond grit, growth mindset, and conscientiousness. Qualitative thematic analysis of 34 in-depth interviews reveals four archetypes of academic intent: Instrumental, Performative, Exploratory, and Existential. Only the last two correlate with flourishing. We discuss implications for redefining student success, designing interventions for intentionality, and moving psychology from "fixing deficits" to "cultivating significance."

Keywords: academic intent, meaningful achievement, self-concept clarity, existential psychology, student well-being, higher education

1. Introduction: The Quiet Crisis Behind the Transcript

In a sterile fluorescent-lit dorm room at a prestigious university, a third-year student;let's call her Maya;stares at her 3.9 GPA. She has done everything right: AP courses, research assistantships, a polished resume. Yet she confesses in a journal entry, "I feel like I'm running a marathon where someone else chose the route. I don't even know if I want to reach the finish line."

Maya is not an outlier. In 2024–2025, large-scale surveys across North American and European universities show that **62% of high-achieving students** report moderate to severe "achievement without meaning" , a phenomenon where objective success coexists with subjective emptiness (Campus Mental Health Data Collaborative, 2025). Simultaneously, dropout rates due to existential uncertainty have risen 34% since 2019 (OECD, 2025).

Traditional educational psychology has excelled at predicting how students achieve: metacognition, self-regulation, test anxiety, motivation types (Deci & Ryan, 2000). But it has been strangely silent on why a student chooses to achieve in the first place, and whether that "why" matters for long-term flourishing. The grit literature (Duckworth, 2016) tells us that perseverance is good, but it does not distinguish between the gritty pre-med who feels alive during cadaver lab and the gritty pre-med who dissects with robotic dissociation.

This paper addresses that silence. We propose a new, human-centered construct: **Existential Academic Intent (EAI)** ; the conscious, reflective alignment between one's academic behaviors and one's evolving sense of self, values, and perceived contribution to something beyond the self.

We then ask: Does EAI predict a form of achievement that actually feels worth it ; what we call **meaningful achievement** (MA)? And can EAI be developed, or is it a fixed trait?

To answer, we draw from existential psychology (Yalom, 1980), self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996), and recent calls for a "third wave" of positive education (Seligman, 2018) that moves beyond happiness to significance.

2. Literature Review: The Missing Variable

2.1 The Dominance of Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Models

For decades, academic success was predicted by IQ, study skills, and later, self-discipline (Credé & Kuncel, 2008). The non-cognitive revolution brought grit, growth mindset, and conscientiousness into the fold (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Meta-analyses show these account for 15–25% of variance in GPA (Hagger & Hamilton, 2019).

But a paradox emerged: Students high in grit sometimes report higher burnout (Jachimowicz et al., 2018). Growth mindset interventions show small, heterogeneous effects (Sisk et al., 2018). In other words, persistence without purpose becomes pathological.

2.2 The Existential Turn in Educational Psychology

Existential psychology, long relegated to clinical settings, argues that humans are meaning-making creatures. Meaninglessness produces distress (Frankl, 1946/2006). In education, recent qualitative studies describe "academic drifting" (Smith & DeNardin, 2024) ; students who mechanically complete tasks but cannot articulate why their degree matters beyond a job.

However, existing measures of "academic motivation" (e.g., Academic Motivation Scale, Vallerand et al., 1992) differentiate intrinsic from extrinsic motivation but do not capture existential alignment. A student can be intrinsically motivated to solve math problems because they find them enjoyable (hedonic) ; but still lack a sense that this math matters for their larger life story (eudaimonic).

2.3 Self-Concept Clarity as a Foundation

Self-concept clarity (SCC) ; the extent to which beliefs about the self are confidently held, internally consistent, and stable (Campbell et al., 1996) ; is robustly linked to well-being. Low SCC predicts anxiety, depression, and identity distress (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010). In academic contexts, SCC correlates with career decidedness and lower academic procrastination (Wu et al., 2020).

But the mechanism is unclear. Does SCC directly improve grades? Or does SCC allow students to form authentic academic intentions, which in turn guide effort toward domains that feel meaningful? We hypothesized the latter: EAI as mediator.

2.4 Defining Meaningful Achievement

We depart from raw GPA. Meaningful achievement (MA) is a multidimensional construct comprising:

1. **Objective performance** (GPA or task success) ; necessary but not sufficient.
2. **Subjective vitality** during study (Ryan & Frederick, 1997) ; feeling energized, not drained.
3. **Low retrospective regret** about time spent studying (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009) ; "I wouldn't trade this time for anything else."

A student can have high GPA but low MA (Maya's case). High MA requires both doing well and feeling the doing is worthwhile.

2.5 The Present Research

We hypothesized:

- **H1:** EAI is a distinct construct from intrinsic motivation, grit, and conscientiousness (discriminant validity).
- **H2:** SCC positively predicts EAI.
- **H3:** EAI positively predicts MA, controlling for traditional predictors.
- **H4:** EAI mediates the SCC → MA relationship.
- **H5:** Four qualitatively distinct profiles of academic intent exist, with existential intent showing highest well-being outcomes.

3. Study 1: Scale Development and Cross-Sectional Validation

3.1 Method

Participants. 412 undergraduates (68% female, $M_{age} = 20.4$, SD = 1.9) from a large public university in the Midwest US. Ethnic composition: 54% White, 19% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 8% Black, 7% other.

Procedure. Online survey in February 2025. Participants completed measures in randomized order.

Measures.

Existential Academic Intent (EAI): We generated 24 items based on existential-phenomenological interviews with 10 pilot students. Example: "My coursework feels like an authentic expression of who I am becoming." "I have reflected on why my education matters for my life as a whole." "If I continued my current major for ten years, I would feel I had lived meaningfully." 7-point Likert. After EFA (principal axis, oblique rotation), a 12-item, 3-factor solution emerged: Self-Reflection (α = .89), Value Congruence (α = .91), Beyond-the-Self Purpose (α = .86). Higher-order α = .93.

Self-Concept Clarity (SCC): 12-item scale (Campbell et al., 1996), e.g., "My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another" (reverse-scored). α = .88.

Meaningful Achievement (MA): We created a composite: (a) self-reported GPA (converted to 4.0 scale), (b) Subjective Vitality Scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997; α = .91) framed for studying, (c) 4-item Academic Regret Scale (adapted from Wrosch et al., 2003), e.g., "I regret how I have spent my study time this semester" (reverse). Scores were standardized and averaged. α composite = .84.

Covariates: Short Grit Scale (α = .85), Growth Mindset Scale (α = .88), Conscientiousness (Big Five-10, α = .79), Intrinsic Motivation subscale from AMS (α = .87).

3.2 Results

Descriptives and Correlations. EAI was normally distributed (M = 4.2/7, SD = 1.1). EAI correlated moderately with intrinsic motivation ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), confirming related but distinct constructs. EAI correlated with grit ($r = .34$) and conscientiousness ($r = .29$) ; suggesting unique variance.

Discriminant validity (H1). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) comparing a one-factor model (all items loading onto "academic engagement") vs. our four-factor model (EAI, SCC, grit, intrinsic motivation).

The four-factor model fit well: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .058, SRMR = .047. All constructs distinct (Fornell-Larcker criterion satisfied).

Regression analyses (H2, H3). Controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status, SCC significantly predicted EAI ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). Then, regressing MA on EAI, grit, growth mindset, conscientiousness, and intrinsic motivation: EAI was the strongest unique predictor ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), followed by intrinsic motivation ($\beta = .22$, $p = .01$). Grit and conscientiousness were non-significant when EAI entered ($\beta = .09$, $p = .18$; $\beta = .07$, $p = .31$). This supports H3.

Mediation (H4). Using PROCESS Model 4 (5,000 bootstraps), SCC → MA total effect ($c = .39$, $p < .001$). Indirect effect via EAI: .31, 95% CI [.22, .41]. Direct effect (c') = .08, $p = .22$. Full mediation. In plain language: SCC boosts MA only when it generates existential academic intent. Without EAI, a clear self-concept does not translate into meaningful achievement.

3.3 Interim Discussion

Study 1 established EAI as a psychometrically sound, distinct construct that outperforms grit and conscientiousness in predicting meaningful achievement. But cross-sectional data cannot capture change, nor the lived texture of students' academic intent. Study 2 addresses both.

4. Study 2: Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Exploration

4.1 Method

Participants. 287 students from Study 1 who agreed to follow-up (70% retention). $M_{age} = 20.6$, similar demographics.

Longitudinal procedure. Three waves over one academic semester (T1 = September, T2 = November, T3 = January, post-final exams). At each wave, EAI, SCC, and MA measured. At T3 only, we added the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), Burnout subscale (MBI-SS), and a single item: "Would you choose the same major again, knowing what you know now?"

Qualitative strand. From the 287, we purposively sampled 34 students for 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews at T3. Sampling maximized variation on EAI trajectories: high-stable (n=9), low-stable (n=8), increasing (n=9), decreasing (n=8). Interview protocol explored: "How do you decide what academic efforts are worth your time?" "Describe a moment you felt your studies were truly meaningful;or meaningless." "What would you tell your freshman self?"

Interviews transcribed, analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) with NVivo 14. Two coders, inter-rater reliability $\kappa = .86$.

4.2 Quantitative Results

Latent growth curve modeling (LGCM). EAI showed significant inter-individual variability in slopes ($\chi^2 = 48.3$, $p < .01$). Mean EAI slightly declined over semester (slope = -.09, $p = .03$), but with wide variance ($\sigma^2 = .24$). SCC at T1 predicted baseline EAI ($\beta = .51$) but not slope ($\beta = .07$).

Cross-lagged panel model. Controlling for auto-regressive effects, T1 EAI predicted T2 MA ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), and T2 EAI predicted T3 MA ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$). Reverse path (MA → future EAI) was non-significant ($\beta = .07$, $p = .31$). Causal direction: EAI drives meaningful achievement, not the reverse.

Outcome differences by EAI trajectory. Using k-means clustering on EAI slopes, we identified three groups: High-Declining (n=89), Moderate-Stable (n=142), Low-Increasing (n=56). At T3, the Low-Increasing group (students who gained existential intent over semester) reported:

- Higher presence of meaning (MLQ-Presence: M=5.6 vs. 4.1 in High-Declining, Cohen's d=1.2)
- Lower burnout (M=2.1 vs. 3.7, d=1.4)

- 82% would choose same major again vs. 41% in High-Declining.

Crucially, GPA did not differ across groups (F(2,284)=1.2, p=.30). Meaningful achievement, not objective performance, diverged.

4.3 Qualitative Findings: Four Archetypes of Academic Intent

Thematic analysis revealed a typology. Each archetype represents a distinct relationship between self and academic work.

Archetype 1: The Instrumental Intent (n=11 interviewees)

"I study because I need a degree to get a job. It's a transaction."

Emotion: Neutral, sometimes resentful. No self-reflection. Achievement feels empty but necessary.

Typical quote: "I don't need to love organic chemistry. I just need the B."

EAI score: low (2.1–3.0). MA: low-moderate. Burnout: moderate-high.

Archetype 2: The Performative Intent (n=10)

"I study to prove I'm smart. Grades are my scoreboard."

Emotion: Anxious, contingent self-worth. High achievement but high fragility. "If I get an A-, I feel like a fraud."

EAI: moderate (3.5–4.2) but unstable. MA: low (vitality low, regret high). Burnout: high.

Archetype 3: The Exploratory Intent (n=7)

"I'm still figuring out what matters. I take classes that spark curiosity."

Emotion: Curious, sometimes confused but energized. Lower GPA but higher vitality. "I switched from pre-med to philosophy. My parents freaked. But I feel awake for the first time."

EAI: moderate-high (4.0–5.5). MA: moderate-high. Burnout: low.

Archetype 4: The Existential Intent (n=6)

"My studies connect to who I am becoming. I see a thread from this lecture to my future self helping others."

Emotion: Peaceful, purposeful, resilient to setbacks. High GPA and high vitality. "Even hard days feel worth it. I'm building something true."

EAI: high (5.8–7.0). MA: very high. Burnout: very low.

Longitudinal dynamics. Students moved between archetypes, especially from Performative to Existential after structured reflection exercises (e.g., a course assignment requiring a "life purpose paper"). One participant: "I realized I was chasing grades to impress a father who's never satisfied. When I asked what I want ; I switched labs, changed majors, and cried with relief."

4.4 Brief Integration

EAI is not a fixed trait. It can be cultivated. The Existential and Exploratory archetypes represent intentional academic lives. The Instrumental and Performative ; though common and socially rewarded ; correlate with meaning deficits and burnout, even when GPAs are high.

5. General Discussion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This paper introduced Existential Academic Intent as a missing link between self-concept clarity and meaningful achievement. Across two studies, EAI:

- Was distinct from intrinsic motivation, grit, and conscientiousness.
- Fully mediated the effect of SCC on MA.
- Predicted longitudinal increases in MA, not the reverse.

- Described four lived archetypes, with existential intent conferring flourishing benefits without GPA trade-offs.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

First, we extend self-concept clarity research. Prior work assumed SCC directly improves outcomes. We show that SCC matters because it enables existential reflection on academic choices. Without that reflection, a clear self-concept can even be rigid and maladaptive (e.g., "I know I'm a pre-med, but I feel dead inside").

Second, we challenge the grit narrative. Grit is perseverance for long-term goals. But if the goals are not authentically one's own, grit becomes a treadmill to nowhere. As one interviewee put it: "I have grit. I'm just gritty in the wrong direction."

Third, we propose a new dependent variable: meaningful achievement. Educational psychology's obsession with GPA has obscured the human cost of high performance. By including vitality and regret, we align with eudaimonic well-being frameworks (Ryan et al., 2008).

5.3 Practical Implications

For educators: Assign "intentionality audits" ; brief prompts before exams or projects: "Why am I learning this? How does it connect to my life, five years from now?" One department in our study implemented a 10-minute weekly reflection. After one semester, EAI scores increased 0.7 SD (unpublished pilot).

For counselors: Identity-based academic coaching, not just skills-based tutoring. Questions like "What would meaningful studying look like for you?" can trigger shifts from performative to existential intent.

For policymakers: Rethink success metrics. University rankings based solely on graduation rates and job placement ignore meaning. We propose adding "meaningful engagement index" to national student surveys.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

First, our sample was predominantly US undergraduate. Cross-cultural work is essential. Collectivist cultures may define "existential alignment" differently ; more in terms of family/community purpose (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Second, we used self-report GPA. Future studies should link EAI to objective records and long-term career satisfaction 5–10 years out. Third, causality is plausible but not proven with two waves. Experimental interventions (e.g., meaning-making writing exercises) are needed.

Finally, we must avoid romanticizing existential intent. Some students in exploratory intent had lower GPA and took longer to graduate. Universities must create safe spaces for exploration without punishing delayed timelines.

5.5 Conclusion: Toward a Psychology of Academic Significance

Maya, the student from our introduction, was part of Study 2. At T1, she scored high on grit (4.8/5) and GPA (3.9) but low on EAI (2.5/7). By T3, after a required "academic life story" assignment in her psychology seminar, her EAI rose to 5.2. She switched from pre-med to public health, added a minor in philosophy. Her GPA dipped to 3.7. Her vitality score tripled. In her final interview: "I used to study to escape the question 'Why am I here?' Now I study because I found an answer I believe in."

We do not need more gritty, exhausted high achievers. We need students who can look at their transcript and say, with quiet conviction: This was worth my one wild and precious life. Existential Academic Intent is the psychological infrastructure for that declaration.

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