

How To Want Better Things

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One-Pager

How To Want Better Things is a research-backed career guide written by students at Middlebury College, Oxford University, and Harvard University. The book challenges the default career advice given to high-achieving students and offers a fundamentally different framework for navigating professional life.

The book rests on two central ideas. First, that conventional career advice is fundamentally broken. Students are told to "follow their passion," but passions shift and provide no stable framework for decision-making. In practice, high-achievers default to climbing whatever ranking system sits directly in front of them: corporate law, consulting, finance. This is not surprising. Optimizing for prestige is what got them into elite institutions in the first place. Second, that reorienting from inside-out thinking (what do I want to do, then what careers allow that) to outside-in thinking (what global problems need solving, then how can my skills contribute) produces deeper professional satisfaction. This approach attracts equally driven colleagues, generates intellectual challenge that sustains long-term engagement, and decouples personal worth from salary. Research on intrinsic motivation consistently shows that working toward goals larger than oneself correlates with greater resilience, lower burnout, and sustained commitment. The outside-in framework delivers precisely these conditions while simultaneously directing talent toward problems that will define this century.

The stakes could not be higher. This century will determine whether we prevent catastrophic pandemics, whether we reform industrial animal agriculture before it collapses public health systems and accelerates climate breakdown, and whether we successfully navigate the development of transformative artificial intelligence. These are not abstract philosophical concerns. They are practical, urgent problems that require talented people working on solutions. Yet our universities funnel graduates away from these challenges and toward work that is comfortable, lucrative, and ultimately trivial.

Our team brings institutional reach and practical credibility. Zach Chen leads Arete Fellowships at Harvard and writes for campus audiences on high-impact career planning. Lincoln Duckson directs Harvard Undergraduate Effective Altruism and co-founded the Harvard-MIT Impact Research Initiative. At Middlebury, Camiel Schroeder, Sam Loescher, and Tyler Stark have secured over 150 Giving What We Can pledges and connected students with organizations like the Good Food Institute. Alex Vellins directs EA Oxford, one of the most established university groups globally. Together, we have direct access to the student populations most likely to benefit from this intervention.

Early results validate our approach. Excerpts published in campus newspapers have generated sustained engagement that academic effective altruism literature does not achieve. The tone matters. We understand the recruitment emails, the social pressure, the genuine uncertainty about how to build a meaningful career. That insider perspective allows us to dismantle bad arguments and offer concrete alternatives that resonate with students facing real decisions.

Please check out our website at howtowantbetterthings.org. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this project further, our contact form can be found by scanning the QR code.