This book raises the question of whether or not educators can promote intrinsic motivation among college students when they seem overwhelmingly focused on grades. Indeed, can there be life beyond grades? The answer is “Yes.” A love of learning can coexist, even thrive, in the face of competing pressures from grades.

Drawing on recent groundbreaking classroom research, the authors articulate a new understanding of the causes of the stalemate between intrinsic and external motivation, so that a reconciliation between them can be achieved. Then the authors apply a powerful set of motivational and pedagogical principles to lay out a step-by-step blueprint for designing and teaching college courses that promote intrinsic motivation as a primary educational goal in its own right, above and beyond knowledge and skill acquisition. This practical blueprint draws on authentic case study examples from a variety of subject-matter disciplines.

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Life Beyond Grades

DESIGNING COLLEGE COURSES TO PROMOTE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

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Martin Covington:
To my mother and father, and for Gaga and Bangkok – who, by their examples, have nurtured my love of learning.

Linda von Hoene:
This book is dedicated to the many Berkeley graduate students whose commitment both to research and teaching has been an inspiration to me over the past 25 years.

Nic Voge:
I am more grateful than I can express to my co-authors with whom I’ve collaborated on this book and numerous other projects over these many years. To Linda for providing me the initial opportunity to help develop graduate student instructors and for her continued mentorship, support, and friendship. To Marty, a true scholar-teacher whose work transformed my understanding of the human condition, for his wise, caring, and unwavering guidance, his enduring friendship, and so much more. To Mary and Ruby, my ultimate inspiration, for their patience and love. To my parents, Margaret and Lyle Voge.
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Preface

In our office hours, we have encountered students anxious about grades who focus on achievement per se, seemingly to the exclusion of all other considerations, and for whom it feels there is no life beyond grades. We have worked with graduate student instructors worried that their authority will be challenged in the classroom and that students (or worse yet, the course professor) will find out that they are imposters with insufficient expertise to teach. We have also facilitated workshops for faculty demoralized by their inability to effectively engage their students and instill in them a deep understanding, fascination, and appreciation of their discipline and who want to be allies in learning but feel at odds with their students over grades and grading.

The common denominator in all of these scenarios is fear – the fear of failure caused by feelings of incompetence, hence worthlessness. Fear of failure obstructs learning by both inhibiting and diverting mental resources that could otherwise be devoted to mastering the knowledge and skills needed to learn and to teach. Students strongly motivated by fear may become grade obsessed, over-engaging with our grading systems, as when particularly insistent students seem to put more creative thought into arguing for a higher grade than learning the material that was examined in the first place. Fear directs students’ attention toward grades and may cause them to disengage from learning as a defensive, protective measure. We are much less likely to interact with those students who avoid our office hours. But we nonetheless still see their names on our grade sheets.

For today’s students, can there be life – that is, significant, positive motivations for learning – beyond grades? If so, it must be nurtured even in the face of worries about grades and what grades mean for their academic success, for their career plans, and even for their self-respect. For faculty, are there reasons for learning besides for grades that can be
cultivated in order to promote deep engagement among their students so that college courses do not become mere opportunities to acquire grade points?

This book considers these questions through the lens of the powerful theoretical framework of self-worth theory that remains largely unknown to many educators. This theory unearths the often counterintuitive reasons for why students disengage from learning and instead strive single-mindedly for high grades. Our analysis reveals a “hidden agenda” present in virtually every classroom and context where high achievement is sought, expected, and evaluated. We also demonstrate how to use core motivational principles derived from our research to design engaging college courses that can redress this negative agenda in favor of learning for the sake of discovery, curiosity, and self-development.

This book is written primarily for instructors who are designing or redesigning courses or for faculty developers or consultants who collaborate with them. Moreover, it can also be integrated in whole or in part into pedagogy seminars designed to benefit graduate student instructors, future faculty, postdocs, and adjunct professors. Additionally, educators and administrators at all school levels as well as parents (especially of college students and those who are college-bound) will find valuable insights in these pages because they illuminate the fundamental dynamics of the motivation to learn, and reveal obstacles to learning, that can be observed in virtually all school settings. Anyone wishing to understand the sometimes perplexing motivational dynamics of students will benefit from an understanding of the self-worth theory of motivation that lies at the heart of this book.

This book is organized in two complimentary parts. The first four chapters that comprise the first half of the book can be read on their own. Chapter 1 articulates a fundamental tension in the college classroom, which is not always fully appreciated, regarding students’ motivations to learn and achieve. Chapter 2 introduces a theoretical lens that not only reveals this hidden agenda but also unravels its often perplexing complications. Chapters 3 and 4 explore several additional obstacles to student engagement, including mismatches in the respective roles and responsibilities of instructors and their students.

In the second part of the book, the remaining chapters provide a blueprint or road map for developing college courses that are designed specifically to offset these obstacles to true learning as revealed through self-worth theory, as well as to promote positive motivational dynamics that enhance an appreciation for learning while simultaneously ensuring
Preface

traditional achievement goals and the mastery of subject matter content. Readers can follow this blueprint, step by step, through several real-life case study examples drawn from a diversity of subject matter domains ranging from neurophysiology to anthropology and the social sciences. Appendices provide resources to guide workshops and seminars in modular form.

Undoubtedly, readers will recognize many of their own students in these pages, and perhaps even themselves in the roles of instructors, and even of parents. But in addition to recognizing such familiarities, we are confident that readers will also come to see issues and problems more fully, and from this new perspective design more motivationally engaging and effective college courses.
Acknowledgments

A number of individuals and groups have contributed to the birth of this book, and in many cases have continued to shape the evolution of its writing. First and foremost, we are deeply indebted to those Berkeley undergraduates (now numbering in the thousands) who have participated as informants over the years. Their candidly shared personal stories regarding their academic experiences constitute much of the data reported in these pages.

Equally critical, and also greatly appreciated, was the cooperation of those Berkeley faculty members who allowed their classrooms to become real-life, authentic laboratories for our data collection, as well as the welcoming support and endorsement of dozens of graduate student instructors (GSIs) who also participated in data collection and numerous fruitful discussions about the theory and practice of intrinsic motivation. We are also indebted to the staff of Berkeley’s GSI Teaching & Resource Center, who contributed to our research and provided inspiration and unfailing support for our work over many years.

The collection of empirical data was followed by a second step of creating practical, real-world applications of our findings. For this task, we were once again blessed, this time by the enthusiastic commitment of some 200 advanced Ph.D. candidates from some 50 different academic departments and programs on campus, who contributed their time and energies as members of a special graduate seminar we offered during 12 different semesters over the previous decade. The purpose of the seminar was to craft the insights gathered from our research into a practical blueprint or road map for designing college courses whose structure is based on motivational principles that engage a love of learning. The challenge for seminar members was to address the question: What would a course in your discipline look like based on motivational principles
intended to enhance a love of learning and intrinsic engagement, above and beyond subject matter mastery and performance goals?

For us, the greatest personal and professional satisfaction to emerge from this collaborative experience was that several hundred young, promising scholars who have now launched their academic careers literally throughout the world and across virtually every subject matter discipline are armed with the pedagogical tools that will elevate their teaching horizons to encompass a love and appreciation for learning.

We wish to acknowledge several individuals who deserve special mention for their contributions to the success of these seminars, including Drs. Chris Gade and Matt Gingo for taking charge of various administrative aspects of the seminar and managing the course website. Special recognition goes to Dr. Leah Byrne who deserves our deepest gratitude for her emerging role, beginning initially as a seminar participant herself, to becoming a co-instructor of the seminar over the past five semesters. In addition to being a superb researcher and teacher, Dr. Byrne modeled for us what it means to be a truly supportive colleague. We also would like to extend our gratitude to Dr. Kim Starr-Reid who assisted us in facilitating mock job interviews with seminar participants, the culminating activity of the course, and to Benjamin Krupicka for assisting us with research. Our thanks also go to Dr. Keith Jacoby for his wise counsel, technical expertise, and enthusiastic encouragement from the conception of the project down to the present.

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Finally, we extend our gratitude and best wishes to those readers who, for benefit of their students, embrace the educational challenges and proposed solutions presented in this book.