2010

The Caller and the Called: How Young Adults Understand Vocation in Their Lives

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE CALLER AND THE CALLED:
HOW YOUNG ADULTS UNDERSTAND VOCATION IN THEIR LIVES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with many aspects of life, it was through a supportive community that I was able to accomplish this project. First, I thank Dr. Jennifer Grant Haworth, my dissertation director, for believing in me and trusting that I could take her wonderfully rich data and make a story out of it. She was an amazing coach who not only taught me much about the process of research and writing, but about living a life full of meaning. I also thank my other committee members, Dr. Robert Ludwig and Dr. Leanne Kallemeyn for their support and generosity of time.

I would not have been able to do any of this without the unending love, support, and encouragement from my wife, Gina. It was through this long journey that she helped me stay positive and remember what a gift it truly was to have this opportunity. She has demonstrated the true meaning of living out multiple callings. I also thank my children, Clare and Jack, for allowing me to understand the wonderful call of fatherhood. Now, instead of going to Corner Bakery without you on weekends we can all go together!
For Clare and Jack.
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ABSTRACT

While scholarly research offers some insight into the career decision-making process, it says little about how individuals discern their callings and how the vocational discernment process affects career choice. Accordingly, this study generated baseline understandings in both of these areas that proved theoretically and practically fruitful and which have the potential to serve as a launching pad for future research. These new understandings are critical because decisions relating to career choice and vocation are of particular importance to college-aged adults.

This study was informed by a conceptual framework identifying seven key domains that were assumed to potentially shape students’ understanding of call: 1) faith/spirituality, 2) interpersonal relationships, 3) encounters with others, 4) values, 5) critical life events contributing to self-definition, 6) understanding of passion, gifts, and talents, and 7) developmental issues and one’s capacity for self-authorship (Haworth & McCruden, 2001). The following research questions informed this investigation: 1) How do young adults make sense of and construct the theme of vocation or call in their lives?; 2) What and who shapes their understandings of “calling?”; and, 3) How do these influences affect their response to “calling?”

Three semi-structured life story interviews were conducted with the participants over a three year period. Results from this investigation suggest that there are both direct
and indirect influences on how young adults make sense of what calling means to them, where the source of a calling originates, who experiences callings, and how these understandings may change over time. Additionally, a learning-centered pedagogical paradigm of practices of vocational discernment was developed focusing on students’ lived experiences.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” It is easy to recognize this question as a favorite to ask of children. Some might say they want to be firefighters, teachers, or doctors, while others will say the occupation of a parent. As life goes on, the same question gets a bit more specific, “What do you want to do with your life?” The operative word here is *do*. Now it no longer seems to be a simple or fun thing, but rather something we have to “do” for the rest of our lives. Then later down the road, someone might ask, “What are you passionate about, what brings you joy?” This is even more challenging than the last question because it requires us to self-reflect while thinking about what we enjoy “doing.” Why was this question so easy to answer as a child, but now it’s so difficult?

These questions may have their strongest gravitational pull during the college years. Not everyone answers these questions similarly. Some rely on their parents to influence them or make decisions for them, while others base their decisions on matters of money and prestige. Still others look within themselves to explore their innate or “gut” feelings about what they should “do,” sometimes even looking up to a higher or sacred power in hope of finding answers.
Even if a young adult decides on an occupation, their attitude toward it may vary. Some may simply refer to it as a job, others may call it a career, while some may refer to it as something more – perhaps a “calling” (Wrzesniewska, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997; Davidson & Caddell, 1994). A job is characterized as only having an interest in material benefits and satisfaction, where people do not aim or wish for any other rewards from it. Jobs also allow people to fulfill their desires outside of work through resources obtained through their work (i.e. money, travel opportunities). There is a focus on being paid for performing a particular service and if other opportunities present themselves in the future that pay more or offer better job security, a job change often occurs (Wrzesniewska, et. al., 1997; Davidson & Caddell, 1994).

People who believe their work is a career have a deeper investment in the work itself and strive to achieve monetary rewards as well as advancement in their occupations, both of which fuel their self-esteem. Additionally, those who view their work as a career are less likely to change the type of work performed because of a lifelong commitment to a certain occupation (Wrzesniewska, et. al., 1997; Davidson & Caddell, 1994).

Finally, there are those who view their work as a calling. These individuals cannot separate life from the work they do, and they seldom work for power, prestige, or monetary rewards. They see their work as being socially valuable, self-rewarding, and satisfying. Most believe they were put on earth with certain talents for certain purposes, and they engage wholeheartedly in these, regardless of the time commitment or financial constraints (Wrzesniewska, et. al., 1997; Davidson & Caddell, 1994). Wrzesniewska et.
al. (1997) suggest that while some fields attract people with varying motivations, there are others, such as teaching or nursing, that are more likely to attract people who feel “called.”

While the language of vocation may be foreign to them, many young adults are entering college with a significant interest in spirituality today. According to the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), the vast majority describe themselves as being on a “spiritual quest” to find purpose and meaning (2004). Indeed, scholars suggest that college students have a deep desire to find meaning in their lives and are eager to discuss faith, spirituality, and vocation with their peers, faculty, and staff (Cherry, 2001; Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; HERI, 2004).

Conceptual Framework

The overriding purpose of this study was to understand how college students make sense of the theme of calling in their lives. It was informed by a conceptual framework identifying seven key domains that were assumed to potentially shape students’ understanding of call: 1) faith/spirituality, 2) interpersonal relationships, 3) encounters with others, 4) values, 5) critical life events contributing to self-definition, 6) understanding of passion, gifts, and talents, and 7) developmental issues and one’s capacity for self-authorship. This framework, which was developed by Haworth and McCruden (2001), informed the original interview protocol upon which data for this study was collected between 2001 and 2004 (see Figure 1).
The faith/spirituality domain (Fowler, 1981; Love & Talbot, 1999; Palmer, 2000) examines students’ faith commitments and how, if at all, they connect with students’ views of a “unique purpose/calling” in life. Recognizing that parents, siblings, peers, and mentors often shape students’ understandings of themselves and their calling, these influences are explored in the interpersonal relationships domain (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1994; Leider & Shapiro, 2001; Levoy, 1997; Palmer, 2000; Parks, 2000). The third area, encounters with others (Coles, 1993; Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996; Parks, 2000; Portaro & Peluso, 1990), investigates how students, through their experiences in college, with community service, through cultures different than their own, and with nature may inform their “callings.” Values – economic, family, intellectual, occupational, and social/cultural – are explored in the fourth domain of the
conceptual framework (Bolles, 2001; Holland, 1992; Leider & Shapiro, 2001). The influences of critical life events, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or significant illness, comprise the fifth domain. These experiences often prompt self-reflection on life’s meaning and purpose (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). A sense of vocation often arises from an awareness of our unique, personal giftedness, and the desire to link these gifts and passions to serving others (Bolles, 2001; Palmer, 2000; Parks, 2000; Portaro & Peluso, 1990). These influences are expressed in the sixth domain of the conceptual framework. Finally, developmental issues and the capacity for self-authorship round out the framework. Here, students’ understandings of cognitive self-authorship (the capacity to construct, critique, and reconstruct knowledge and meaning), interpersonal self-authorship (the capacity to engage in relationships with others without losing one’s own identity), and intrapersonal self-authorship (the capacity to construct one’s own identity that is separate from external influences) are examined (Kegan, 1994).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study was informed, in part, by the lack of empirical research on how individuals develop a sense of personal call or vocation. While the literature discusses the process of career choice and how to promote effective decision-making, it is virtually silent on how people develop and respond to a sense of call or vocation. Moreover, the literature tells us little about how young adults’ faith and spiritual commitments shape their understandings of vocation, let alone the vocational discernment process.
Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore how young adults make sense of the theme of vocation and act on it in their lives. Using the conceptual framework previously discussed, it analyzed young adults’ responses to calling and meaning-making during college. Specifically, the following research questions informed this investigation:

1. How do young adults make sense of and construct the theme of vocation or call in their lives?
2. What and who shapes their understandings of “calling?”
3. How do these influences affect their response to “calling?”

In 2000, Loyola University Chicago established EVOKE (Eliciting Vocation through Knowledge and Experience), a four-year, university wide initiative that was funded through the Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV). The goal of EVOKE is to provide opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to discover and explore their vocations. In particular, EVOKE encourages college students, as Parks (2000) suggests, to explore life’s “big questions” as a path for discerning their own life callings (Loyola University Chicago, 2008).

While EVOKE offers several programs to help facilitate the exploration of vocational discernment including speakers, retreats, and career planning workshops, its OnCall program is the focus of this research. OnCall is a “program for students who have a deep interest in discovering their true passions and linking them with their talents to make a difference in the world. OnCall helps undergraduate students, in the context of
peer communities, begin to discover the person they are called to be and to authentically live” (Loyola University Chicago, 2008).

OnCall began in August 2001 as an intensive three-year program with the goal of providing students with a supportive “holding environment” (Kegan, 1994) in which they could “explore and make meaning of the theme of vocation/call by discovering their own answers to many of life’s ‘big questions’” (Haworth, McCruden, & Roy, 2006, p. 2).

Thirty-six religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse Loyola University Chicago sophomores were selected to take part in the three-year program. All students were required to engage in “learning modules” that included workshops, retreats, mentoring, and immersion trips (Haworth, et. al., 2006). Simultaneously, all were invited to participate in a longitudinal research study focusing on young adult vocational discernment, of which 22 elected to do so. This dissertation drew upon much of the interview data collected for this study. Methodological details of the study are presented in Chapter Three.

Definitions and Historical Roots of Key Terms

Several key terms guided this study, some of which are historically grounded in Biblical scripture and theology. A review of these terms is provided here.

Vocation and calling

These terms have often been used interchangeably in the literature. However, history shows us that over the course of time there have been some differing viewpoints
as to how vocations or callings are understood and enacted. At its roots, vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means "to call." Therefore, a vocation is a calling that one hears. Parker Palmer uses the Quaker phrase “let your life speak” to describe vocation. He offers: “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen from what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent” (Spohn, 2003, p. 9).

This understanding of vocation is reflected in the contemporary definition of the word calling as “a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008). In both of these instances, a vocation or a calling is understood to have some kind of divine or sacred component.

From a Biblical standpoint, vocation and calling are not differentiated. In fact, the word vocation cannot be found in the Bible – indexes refer to “calling.” Bible dictionaries simply define vocation as a calling, summons, or some other kind of divine intervention (Easton’s Bible Dictionary, 2008; King James Dictionary; 2008). Calling, on the other hand, has a more distinct Biblical definition: “An effectual call is something more than the outward message of the Word of God to men. It is internal, and is the result of the enlightening and sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit” (Easton’s Bible Dictionary, 2008). For example, in the Old Testament, God calls Moses (Exodus 3:4-15)
to bring His people out of Egypt. The New Testament also offers an example of calling in Romans 1:1-7 when Paul is called to be an Apostle and do God’s work.

Even though there are Biblical references to calling and vocation, theologians have long held differing viewpoints. There are many prominent Christian figures who have written on the topic of vocation, but three of the most widely cited are Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) believed that only those people directly working for the Church and living a contemplative life had a true vocation. He asserted that it was Christ who indicated that the religious life was the best way for people to feel and experience God’s love (Aquinas, 1952). Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) expanded and further developed this view on vocation, building on the work of one another.

Martin Luther believed that everyone had a God-appointed duty, regardless of the kind of work they were doing. Accordingly, Luther suggested that everyone, not only those in religious professions, could live out a calling. He further suggested that a vocation was inherent to all Christians and that one could serve God in all walks of life (Weber, 1958). For Luther, the important point was to engage work for the glory of God, using our time and talents to serve others (Kolden, 1994; Weber, 1958).

Similar to Luther, John Calvin recognized that all people, not just the clergy, could serve God through their work (Kolden, 1994). Calvin, however, took Luther’s view of vocation and made it more specific. Calvin focused on the work itself emphasizing that
when we applied the gifts and talents that God bestowed upon us in disciplined ways, our work became our calling (Paterson, 1998; Weber, 1958).

In this study, vocation and calling were used interchangeably and defined largely by this thought by Frederick Buechner (1992): "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (p. 185). This definition illustrates the discerning aspect of vocation and provides many aspects of definitions stated above including faith, action, joy, and self-reflection. While a guiding definition, the results of this study suggest that young adults form their own understandings of vocation (these results will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7).

**Vocational discernment**

For the purposes of this study, it was also important to be familiar with how college students define and make sense of vocational discernment. Students often limit their understandings of vocation to occupation alone, for few grasp that vocation also includes who they are and what provides meaning to their lives. Additionally, students may experience great frustration and apathy when they become aware that their vocational calling is not something that happens easily, but rather something that requires them to dig deeper, look within, and work towards (Buchko, 2004; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Molasso, 2006). With this in mind, in this study, I sought to understand vocational discernment within the context of students’ spiritual and faith development. While it is possible to view vocational discernment independent of spirituality by looking at it solely from a career development viewpoint, a benefit to examining it within a spiritual context
is that we can see how the two interact. Levoy (1997) suggests, “the purpose of calls is to summon adherents away from their daily grinds to a new level of awareness, into a sacred frame of mind, into a communion with that which is bigger than themselves” (p. 2). This sense of “awareness” gets at the heart of discernment.

While Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin had much to say about vocation, St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) remains to this day one of the most prominent voices on the subject of vocational discernment. Through his “Spiritual Exercises,” St. Ignatius discussed the importance of discerning between right and wrong. Ultimately, for him, discernment was about discovering what brings one closer to God and what pushes one away from God (Neafsey, 2006). The process of discernment involves prayer, contemplation, and listening “for echoes of truth in feelings of consolation or desolation” (White, 2005, p. 75). This self-reflective practice helps us identify our callings by inviting us to listen carefully to our lives and to what they are telling us about what does – or does not – bring us joy.

William Spohn (1989) provides a rich discussion of discernment. As a professor of theology, Spohn observes that discernment has seldom been discussed among theologians. He notes that most of the related theological discussions have focused on justifying decisions, rather than the process from which decisions are made. While Spohn suggests that discernment is a key piece in moral decision-making, he believes it should also be considered in relation to moral judgment, which is based on a person’s character. As such, discernment should be personally reflective in nature: “Is this action consistent
with who I am and want to become? What sort of person does this type of action?” (p. 30) H. Richard Neibuhr (1963) echoes Spohn’s sentiments that one’s understanding of their character needs to be understood before action is taken. He offers:

Whatever answer I give to the moral question, ‘What ought I to do?’ will be profoundly affected by my answer to the question of identity, ‘Who am I?’ Identity rests more on images and metaphors of the self than on definite ideas. They provide pictures through which the unique character of the self can be glimpsed and they organize habitual ways of responding to the world (Niebuhr, 1963, as cited in Spohn, 1989).

In light of these thoughts, vocational discernment was defined in this study as the ability to be self-reflective while paying attention to one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength (White, 2005).

*Spirituality, religion, and faith*

Young adults also often grapple with understanding terms such as *spirituality*, *religion*, and *faith*. These are sometimes used interchangeably, but each actually has specific distinctions. Nash (2008) argues that religion and spirituality cannot be separated from each other and that individuals cannot have one without the other. Others, however, suggest that the terms have separate and distinct qualities (Fowler, 1981; Love, 2001; Parks, 2000; Tisdell, 2001). Parks (2000) defines spirituality as the personal search for meaning, wholeness, and purpose in life. Tisdell suggests that spirituality involves “discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary business of life” (1999, p. 88), often through observing the interconnectedness of everyday life through physical structures (i.e. church), relationships, or an acceptance of one’s responsibility in the world (i.e. seeking justice). In contrast, religion is based on a set of “beliefs, principles, or doctrines
related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe” (Love, 2001, p. 8). Faith often has implicit ties to spirituality and religion, but can also be used in non-religious contexts. As a psychologist, Fowler (1981) argues that faith is “a person’s way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (p. 4) and that “it shapes the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties” (p. 5). As a theologian, he also believes that faith can be understood as a person’s way of “responding to transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through the forms of the cumulative tradition (religion) (p. 9).” In this study, spirituality was defined broadly to include religion and faith, unless otherwise stated.

Significance of the Study

This study was exploratory in nature and offers preliminary insights into how one cohort of young adults – over the course of their college experience and within the context of a collegiate program focused intentionally on the topic of callings – made career and life choices through the lens of vocation. It also explored how various influences prior to and during their time in college shaped their response to calling during a critical formational period in their young adult lives. While the literature offers insight into the career decision-making process, it is largely silent on how people discern their callings and how the vocational discernment process affects their career choices.
Accordingly, this study generated baseline understandings in both of these areas that have strong potential to contribute to theory and practice.

This study also provides empirical insights into how different influences – interpersonal, intrapersonal, cognitive, spiritual, and experiential – potentially contribute to young adults’ vocational decision-making processes. Additionally, given its longitudinal design, this study offers evidence of how students’ abilities to understand and make sense of vocation changes over time. Finally, as one of the first of its kind in the literature, this study provides faculty, student affairs administrators, and others with an in-depth look into how a small group of traditional-aged college students understand ‘calling’ during a very important developmental time in their lives.

In addition to the research presented above on vocation, calling, and spirituality, this study was grounded in the literature on college student development, recent trends on student spirituality, and young adult vocational discernment. The next chapter examines this literature focusing on five important areas for consideration: 1) development theory related to identity, cognitive, spirituality/faith, meaning making, and career decision-making, 2) young adults’ interest in spirituality and vocational discernment, 3) young adults’ understanding of vocation, 4) theological discussions of vocation and calling, and 5) efforts to foster young adults’ spiritual development and vocational discernment.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I explore the literature on college students’ interests in spirituality and vocational discernment and discuss it within the context of their holistic development as young adults. Specifically, I address 1) development theory related to identity, cognitive, spirituality/faith, meaning making, and career decision-making, 2) young adults’ interest in spirituality and vocational discernment, 3) young adults’ understanding of vocation, 4) theological discussions of vocation and calling, and 5) efforts to foster young adults’ spiritual development and vocational discernment.

Development Theory

Young adults face many challenges during the college years, but two are particularly significant. For many, college provides the first meaningful push for them to begin to think critically about what they believe to be true and why. This is often the first time in their lives where they are challenged to move away from a naive acceptance of knowledge in order to develop their own sophisticated perspectives and awareness. During this time, college students are also faced with the daunting challenge of deciding what they will “do” and who they want to “be” when they grow up. As a result, they are in a time of vocational discernment, whether or not they are familiar with the term. Both
of these tasks are enormously complex and demanding for young adults and one that does not come with instructions. The ambiguity they produce often generates a cognitive shift in young adults, moving them away from a dualistic way of thinking where there is a “right” answer embedded in external authority figures, to a multiplistic way of knowing where many answers are seen as equally valid (Perry, 1970). During this time, young adults also begin to shift from being “receivers” of information to “handlers” or “constructors” of information who are capable of more independent critical thought when making life choices (Magolda & Ebben, 2006; Marcia, 1966).

In light of these significant changes, in this section I explore developmental theories that relate to college students and their ability to make sense of and better understand this often tumultuous time in their lives. Specifically, I consider James Marcia’s ego identity theory, Marcia Baxter Magolda’s model of epistemological development, James Fowler’s faith development theory, Sharon Daloz Parks’ work on meaning-making, and Anna Miller-Tiedeman and David Tiedeman’s Lifecareer theory.

*James Marcia – Ego identity*

James Marcia is a developmental psychologist who established his theory of ego identity by building upon Eric Erikson’s eight stages of psychosocial development. In particular, Marcia expanded on Erikson’s fifth stage, adolescence, which focuses on identity versus role confusion. Adolescence is a time when individuals face growing pressures to find a job, become an adult, and establish romantic relationships (among other things). As a result, they have to integrate their childhood experiences and identity
with how they are supposed to be in society as an adult while attempting to figure out how to be “givers” rather than “receivers” (Marcia, 1966). In dealing with these “identity” struggles, they also examine the commitments that exist in their lives and which ones they want to embrace and discard (Marcia, 1967, 1980).

Identity can be defined as “an existential position, to an inner organization of needs, abilities, and self-perceptions” (Marcia, 1980, p. 159). Marcia adds to this by suggesting that identity is a “self-structure” where understanding one’s unique qualities, how one relates to others, and how one capitalizes on personal strengths to better connect and interact with the world is the responsibility of the individual. While some are better able to achieve this self-authorship than others, Marcia is clear to point out that this is a dynamic, rather than static, process where elements can be added and removed over a lifetime. He further elaborates on this point by suggesting individuals who are able to understand their needs, abilities, and self-perceptions will also have a better defined set of specific skills and confidence relating to work. Therefore, Marcia places an emphasis on identity related to vocational understanding and commitment (Marcia, 1980).

Marcia’s (1966) theory is best described as searching for and ultimately achieving ego identity. However, he points out that “identity formation does not happen neatly” (Marcia, 1980, p. 160). Ego identity is comprised of four identity statuses: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion. He further suggests that each developmental status is characterized by two criteria, crisis and commitment, found in relationship to occupation and ideology, especially those values relating to religion and
politics (Marcia, 1967). In defining these terms, Marcia (1967) offers that while “crisis refers to a period of decision-making, of choosing among alternatives of occupation and ideology, commitment deals with the individual’s personal investment in the alternatives chosen” (p. 250).

While Marcia’s original research on ego identity only involved men (Marcia, 1966, 1967), he later expanded it to include women (Marcia & Friedman, 1970). The four identity statuses are ranked by strength of ego identity (Marcia, 1966, 1967; Marcia & Friedman, 1970). Identity achievement, the strongest of the four statuses and the most advanced developmentally, is attained when individuals have already experienced a crisis and are committed to an occupation and ideology. These identity achievers have thought critically about their career and values, and are characterized as being autonomous in making decisions.

Individuals in moratorium are currently experiencing a crisis and are in the process of exploring questions related to occupation and ideology, but have not made a commitment. These individuals may not yet have all the answers, but they are searching deep within themselves to find the right fit.

The third status is foreclosure. Those in foreclosure have made commitments without having gone through a crisis or any kind of personal exploration. Marcia explains that foreclosures are typically tied to parental or other authorities’ commitments because young adults choose to be submissive to them. Many of these individuals are also
characterized as having traditional values and being dualistic in thought with a clear
definition of right and wrong.

The weakest and least advanced developmental status is identity diffusion. Individuals in this status have not gone through any crisis and have not made any commitments. Identity diffusers are also defined by ambivalence because they are not concerned about lacking any commitments. They may think about occupations occasionally and have certain values, but they are not tied to them. Diffusers may take on a “smorgasbord approach in which one outlook seems as good to [them] as another and [they are] not averse to sampling from all” (Marcia, 1966, p. 552).

James Marcia does not specifically reference college-aged persons in his research. However, people who work with college students will likely be able to recognize each of these statuses with a particular student. All students come to college in one of these four statuses depending on their life experiences and willingness to self-reflect.

Marcia Baxter Magolda – Model of epistemological reflection

Marcia Baxter Magolda’s (1992) model of epistemological reflection examines the processes of cognitive and intellectual development during the college years. Her model is based on epistemic assumptions that relate to the “nature, limits, and certainty of knowledge” (Baxter Magolda, 1994, p. 25). These assumptions become increasingly complex as one’s experiences in life challenge them. As a result, these challenges cause internal conflict, or cognitive dissonance. While these experiences can be frustrating for the individual, these challenges must occur in order for self-constructed opinions to be
realized (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1994, 1995). As part of constructing and making meaning of these experiences, “adult life requires the capacity for self-authorship—the ability to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (Baxter Magolda, 1998, p. 143).

Baxter Magolda’s (1992) gender inclusive research focused on 101 college students (50 men and 51 women) over a seven-year period. She allowed each participant to share their thoughts and experiences regarding their own intellectual development. Their narratives led Baxter Magolda to identify six assumptions about college students’ “ways of knowing”: 1) ways of knowing and varying patterns within them are socially constructed; 2) these ways of knowing can best be understood through the principles of naturalistic inquiry; 3) students’ use of reasoning patterns is fluid; 4) patterns are related to, but not dictated by, gender; 5) student stories are context-bound; and 6) ways of knowing are presented as “patterns.” The model of epistemological reflection, which was based on gender patterns, also contains four stages: absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing. Baxter Magolda (1995) suggests that gender patterns refer to patterns that “were used more often, but not exclusively, by one gender than by the other” and that the “patterns revealed that some students approached knowing primarily through a ‘relational’ mode characterized by attachment and connection, whereas others use an ‘impersonal’ approach marked by separation and abstraction” (p. 206).
Absolute knowing describes the developmental stage in which knowledge is viewed as definite, certain, and bound to authority figures. Professors and others in positions of influence (i.e. parents and clergy) are seen as the ultimate authorities and learning occurs through memorization and recalling facts. There are two gender patterns operational in this stage: receiving knowledge and mastering knowledge. Receiving knowledge is more private, used mostly by women, and emphasizes collaborative relationships and an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. Mastering knowing is more public, used mostly by men, and emphasizes verbal learning and challenging peers and instructors to increase learning. Baxter Magolda suggests that absolute knowing is most common in the first year of college, making up sixty-eight percent of those students.

The next stage, transitional knowing, is where students begin to question authority. This stage suggests that students recognize that knowledge is certain in some areas and uncertain in others. Authorities are no longer all-knowing and are expected to help students understand, apply, and disseminate information and knowledge. Students begin to take ownership of the knowledge they receive and try to make sense of it on their own. The two patterns that exist in this stage are interpersonal knowing and impersonal knowing. Interpersonal knowing is used mostly by women and is characterized by learning from exchanging ideas and interacting with others, and using personal judgment when problem solving. Impersonal knowing is used mostly by men and is characterized by learning from ideas that are self-generated and through debating ideas with others. Problem solving is generally based on the use of logic and research.
Baxter Magolda states that half of sophomores and nearly eighty percent of juniors and seniors are in the transitional knowing stage.

Those in the independent knowing stage see knowledge as indefinite and uncertain. Instructors are expected to encourage students to think independently and create an environment that supports the freedom to freely exchange ideas that may go against certain authorities, including that of the instructor. Interindividual knowing and individual knowing are the two patterns that exist in this stage. Interindividual knowing is made up of mostly women and is demonstrated by the ability to accept one’s own ideas and the ideas of others with an emphasis on connecting the two. Individual knowing is more common among men and is characterized by valuing one’s own ideas more than others. There is a certain degree of recognition of others’ views, but they are kept at a distance with an emphasis on keeping the two points of view separate. Baxter Magolda reports that independent knowing is most commonly seen the first year after graduation.

The final stage of Baxter Magolda’s theory is contextual knowing. Contextual knowers believe that knowledge is strictly dependent on context, where they are likely to find knowledge is more definite in certain places than in another. Instructors are to create environments that require individuals to apply their own knowledge, evaluate various perspectives, and engage in critiques. This stage, according to Baxter Magolda, is rarely seen during the undergraduate years and does not have specific gender patterns. In follow-up studies on contextual knowledge, Baxter Magolda (1994, 1995, 1998, 1999) further emphasized the importance of self-authorship. Individuals who became contextual
knowers were able to dialogue with others confidently and rely on their self-constructed knowledge and viewpoints.

Baxter Magolda’s (1992) widely sited model of epistemological reflection has provided higher education professionals with a very useful framework. That said, this empirically based research is limited in some important ways. To begin with, the longitudinal study on which the model is based draws on data restricted to an elite, four-year public institution in the rural Midwest. Second, only three of the 101 participants in Baxter Magolda’s research were from “nondominant populations.” Third, most students self-reported having done very well academically in college, were highly involved on campus, and most came from homes where one or both parents had attended college. These limitations notwithstanding, Baxter Magolda’s research has been pivotal in helping researchers understand the experiences of college students and how they attempt to construct and make meaning in their lives.

*James Fowler – Faith development*

James Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith development provides a holistic look of adult development which builds on cognitive and moral development theories and draws heavily on the work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. Fowler’s theory, which is based on studying 359 adults, also expands on the work of Eric Erikson to include spiritual and faith components. As a result, the theory consists of six stages of faith development that cover a lifespan: Intuitive-Protective, Mythic-Literal, Synthetic-Conventional, Individuative-Reflective, Conjunctive, and Universalizing. The stages
which college students are most likely to experience (and are most related to vocational discernment) are described further.

While the Mythic-Literal stage (stage 2) occurs most frequently in school-aged children, Fowler states that some people will remain in this stage for their entire life. The Mythic-Literal stage is characterized by an awareness and literal understanding of how symbols, rituals, and stories are an important and integral part of one’s beliefs. This stage is also distinguished by strong beliefs in justice and “doing what is right.” The marked emphasis on linear and literal thought processes in the mythic-literal stage can often lead people to engage in perfectionist and legalistic ways of thinking amid their religious and moral commitments (Fowler, 1981).

The next stage, synthetic-conventional faith, occurs in adolescence and prompts individuals to begin to reflect upon the symbols, rituals, and stories they readily accepted in their earlier years. Individuals in this stage tend to become more attached to significant people in their lives (especially peers, family, and other adults) and begin to feel strong commitments to certain identities, beliefs, and values – even when they contradict each other. During this stage, individuals may begin to form an intimate relationship with “the divine,” but might also begin to struggle with contradictions between different authorities (and their opinions of “the divine” and other considerations related to faith, religion, and morality) (Fowler, 1981). If this occurs, individuals usually move into the next stage of Fowler’s faith development.
During the individuative-reflective stage, people experience considerable conflict as they re-examine and compare the identities, beliefs, and values they once learned from competing authorities and take responsibility for their own beliefs, feelings, and relationships with others. Fowler observes that individuals are more likely to be in the individuative-reflective faith stage during their mid- to late-thirties, although some individuals enter this stage during their college-aged years (Fowler, 1981).

Fowler clearly states that faith is a very complex issue and one that must be approached in a holistic manner. He emphasizes the importance of relationships, imagination, and symbolic processes as they relate to knowledge and understanding. Even though Fowler's study included a sample consisting of mostly white, Christian adults, his holistic approach can help higher education professionals recognize, appreciate, and understand how students construct knowledge from a framework of faith. In recognizing how faith is relational, practitioners can develop relationships with students built on trust and loyalty. Fowler refers to imagination as the “ultimate environment” in which we can help students understand and construct their adult faith commitments. Finally, the ability to work with students in understanding and interpreting symbolic processes allows for images of the ultimate environment to come alive (Fowler, 1981).

Sharon Daloz Parks – Meaning making

Sharon Daloz Parks (1986, 2000) developed her theory by building on James Fowler’s (1981) work on faith development and other cognitive-structural theorists. Parks
most notably builds on Fowler’s work by suggesting that there is an additional
developmental stage between the adolescent and adult years called “young adult.” Her
research focused on how individuals make sense of faith and meaning in their lives. Parks
broadly defines faith as a process of meaning-making or trying to understand the “big
picture” while trying to find an overall sense of meaning and purpose in one’s life. As she
puts it, “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive
dimensions of our experience” (Parks, 2000, p. 7).

Parks outlines a four-stage model of development: adolescent/conventional,
young adult, tested adult, and mature adult. Within each stage, there are three separate
components: forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community. Forms of
knowing focus on the cognitive aspects of faith development, especially as they touch
upon the relationships the knower has with authority figures and understanding
knowledge. Forms of dependence focus on the affective aspects of faith development,
with specific attention paid to how people feel and the interpersonal interactions between
their views of knowledge and faith. Lastly, forms of community address the social
dimension of faith development, focusing on how individuals struggle between a desire
for agency and autonomy and a desire for belonging, connection, and intimacy (Parks,
2000).

Parks’ adolescent/conventional stage is characterized by a dualistic or authority-
dependent way of thinking, similar to Fowler’s mythical-literal and Perry’s dualism
stages. While most young adults enter with a dualistic worldview, the focus of this stage
is really about growing in self-awareness and testing and resisting the previous viewpoints of others. During this stage, young adults begin asking themselves deep questions such as, “why am I here?” and “what is the meaning of life?” This is a time of angst and uncertainty as individuals try to make meaning out of their faith lives. The communities and authorities that were once central are now seen as questionable and unreliable. In their wake, new communities begin to emerge that have validity and worth. Parks describes experiences such as these as “shipwrecks,” or moments in which certain experiences dramatically alter someone’s worldview. As individuals struggle with competing authorities, a growing sense of self-awareness, and multiple communities, they begin to move into what Parks labels the Young Adult stage, the most significant transition of faith development in her schema (Parks, 2000).

Parks’ focuses much of her attention on the young adult stage since it relates most commonly to college-aged individuals. According to Parks, one of the most important features of this stage is the expression of “critical self-awareness,” or a growing critical self-consciousness. As part of this developmental process, individuals might periodically regress back to an earlier, safer time when there existed a more comfortable authority. While the college years are a time when individuals will be tested and re-tested to make sense of who they are and what their purpose in life is, it is also a time when they have the ability to take ownership and responsibility for determining how they will continue to develop and make meaning of their life. They might also begin to resist being attached to
a single community (as a result of regressing) and begin to be part of a community, or communities, for which they find new appreciation (Parks, 2000).

The final two stages of Parks’ theory, tested adult and mature adult, are the least developed of the four stages. She does not do this with hesitation, however, since her emphasis is on young adults. In these stages, individuals move from a dependence on an external authority to an internal focus, or inner-dependence, to finally understanding that there is a beneficial integration of the two that leads to inter-dependence. During this process, Parks states that individuals become part of homogenized communities, where members share similar views and values. As one moves towards mature adulthood, individuals have a greater connection to, interaction with, and sense of belonging to the broader world around them (Parks, 2000).

Knowledge of this theory, especially the first two phases, has important implications for higher education professionals working with college students. In particular, it reminds them of the critical role that asking “big questions” plays in the formation of critical young adult faith. As Parks argues, big questions “reveal the gaps in our knowledge, in our social arrangements, in our ambitions and aspirations. Big questions are meaning-ful questions, ones that ultimately matter” (Parks, 2000, p. 137). Questions such as “Who do I really want to become? Who will be there for me? What are the values and limitations of my culture? and What is my religion?” (p. 137) have the potential to prompt self-reflection and growth, and are integral to the young adult faith journey.
Anna Miller-Tiedeman and David Tiedeman’s lifecareer theory was influenced by Perry’s (1970) work on intellectual and ethical development, Loevinger and Wessler’s (1970) work on ego development, and Kohlberg’s (1977) work on moral development. In order to understand lifecareer theory in context, it is important to situate it within several widely-cited career development theories. These theories tend to be linear and process-oriented, often including specific stages, while examining how structures and processes influence or impact career decision-making (Bloch, 2005).

To begin, Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma (1951) were among the earliest to argue that career development was irreversible. While often ambiguous during childhood, they suggested career choice became more specific during the high school and college years. This solidification process occurred in three stages (fantasy, tentative, and realistic) and was molded and transformed by educational experiences, values, and emotions.

Thirty years later, Donald Super (1980) developed a stage theory of vocational choice that focuses on the key role of self-concept in career decision-making. Super argued that self-concept changes and develops throughout one’s life as a result of varying life experiences. There are six stages that define Super’s theory: 1) crystallization (ages 14-18), 2) specification (18-21), 3) implementation (21-24), 4) stabilization (24-35), 5) consolidation (35-55), and 6) readiness for retirement (55+).
A career development theory grounded more on personal characteristics and an individual’s response to certain life and environmental demands is John Holland’s (1992) career typology. His theory suggests that one’s behavior is based on the interaction between personality and environment. A hexagonal diagram was developed to represent this interaction and includes the following six categories: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Holland argues that people will find an occupational environment where they can utilize and express their skills and abilities most freely.

Similar to these traditional career development theories, early versions of lifecareer theory also included stages broken into two parts, anticipation and implementation. Anticipation included four stages: 1) exploration, 2) crystallization, 3) choice, and 4) clarification. Implementation included three stages: 5) induction, 6) reformation, and 7) reintegration. According to the authors, these were not developmental stages that clarified decision-making (Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedeman, 1985), but rather dynamic stages that can occur simultaneously or vary in direction depending on life circumstances. As such, lifecareer theory emphasizes reversibility, or the ability to go back and forth among stages (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990). As it developed further, lifecareer theory focused increasingly on the idea of “life-as-career.” By this, the authors emphasized that people should not recognize a career simply as a job, but rather see that their life is their career. They also place an emphasis on self-reflection and taking
into account the possibility for a personal vocation or calling (Miller-Tiedeman, 1988, 1997; Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990; Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedeman, 1984)

Valuing and respecting one’s intelligence and individual experience exemplifies lifecareer theory. Similarly, the theory stresses personal responsibility by taking ownership of one’s feelings and beliefs. This is often difficult for people to do, Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman (1986) observe, because many people tend to confine themselves to the “status quo” instead of breaking their personal mold to explore what other possibilities and opportunities may exist. The authors argue, however, that taking personal responsibility often reduces stress and increases motivation when it comes to decision-making. Therefore, individuals will not be afraid of change, but rather become open to and appreciate the newness that comes from change. In turn, there is less pressure on these individuals from making the “right” decision to moving forward confidently because they are able to value and understand different possibilities. Therefore, Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman suggest that trusting one’s intuition, intelligence, and values, as well as having self-confidence, the individual will be able to experience their career, or life (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990).

Lifecareer can happen at different times throughout life and can happen many times. Therefore, the authors suggest, individuals are not trapped in one lifecareer, but rather are always in personal transformation. Lifecareer theory maintains that people must be finely tuned into themselves to see where their energies and passions lie and not rely solely on others to make these decisions for them. This can be a challenging task.
Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman argue that most people are not able to enter the state of lifecareer without the assistance and encouragement of others, such as counselors and teachers (Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedeman, 1984).

Lifecareer theory also emphasizes the role of “flow.” The authors suggest that since a person’s life is their career, they should be able to flow with it and not fight against it. Simply by living their life, a person is likely doing what they want to do and not what others want them to do, again emphasizing the importance of listening to one’s self. Here, the theory differentiates between personal and common realities. “Reality” helps to describe the awareness one has about making career decisions (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990). A “personal” reality is a gut feeling that an individual has regarding a decision that seems to be the right, or appropriate, choice. For example, “I want to be a doctor.” A “common” reality, in contrast, refers to statements and opinions that others make regarding one’s decisions. Examples here might include, “You would be a great attorney” and “You won’t get a job with a philosophy major” (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1986, 1990). “Lifecareer suggests that living from personal knowledge [reality] is essential, and that life is a matter of directional shifts and corrections” (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1986).

As individuals aim to experience the wholeness of living, based on personal reflection of values, experience, and intelligence, lifecareer theory suggests they experience spirituality (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1986). Therefore, spirituality is defined by the authors as something that is developed, not innate. In other words, it is
something that people can work on and strive towards as they get to know themselves better. This, they argue, will also lead to a better ability to relate to others and live a more relaxed and confident life.

As individuals work toward having a lifecareer, they need to reflect deeply on their lives and find ways to make connections between their feelings, thoughts, values, and spirituality. While this is an applied theory that often is facilitated with the assistance of a counselor, the responsibility lies solely with the individual to work through its stages. The counselor’s role is to serve as a guide, helping individuals pull out themes while challenging and supporting the personal discovery process.

In conclusion, lifecareer theory is grounded in four assumptions:

1. Each one of us has a career theory we are using, and that theory is the only valid one for each of us.
2. Life does have a plan, even though we sometimes do not like the way it works.
3. Life’s paths veer to the left and right.
4. Life continually unfolds with new information (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1986, p. 91)

Lifecareer theory suggests that “our entire life is our career. If we become adept at listening to our own personal wisdom, rather than societal dictates, we will be prepared for whatever career changes tomorrow may bring” (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1986, p. 85).
Summary

While there are many different developmental theories pertinent to college students, those explored here highlight key issues that students encounter while negotiating questions of spirituality and vocation in their twenties. A common thread through these theories is the significance of “conflict” in a person’s life. Marcia simply names it a “crisis,” Baxter Magolda calls it the “crossroads,” Fowler refers to it as a time in dealing with “otherness,” and Parks focuses on “shipwrecks.” While Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman do not specifically address the idea of crisis, a key feature of lifecareer theory is that it should be flexible enough to respond to changes in one’s life. For these theorists, crisis offers an opportunity for individuals to recognize the importance of self-authorship and coming to an understanding of their own values and beliefs. The absence of turmoil cannot bring us to moments of “gladness,” or what Parks sees as moments when our values and beliefs become clear.

With the exception of Marcia, an additional theme that cuts across these theories is their emphasis on holistic development. Baxter Magolda, Fowler, Parks, and Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman include holistic values in their theories, which is vital when dealing with and understanding college students. The importance of holistic development is highlighted by Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward (2005):

Students, faculty, and the institution benefit when a college focuses on developing students holistically. The intellectual and spiritual growth of students cannot be viewed as separate, unique tasks. When faculty are active in linking ‘intellectual and moral purpose,’ students have opportunities to grow in their faith – to find meaning in life and seek careers and an existence that reflects who they are and
desire to become. This growth is fundamentally connected to their intellectual development (p. 4).

Holistic development, as indicated throughout the rest of this dissertation, will include cognitive, moral, and identity development, but will also specifically include spiritual development. Broken down further, I include vocational discernment as being part of spiritual development.

With Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman’s lifecareer theory as an exception, there are many gaps in the research of how student development theory, as well as career decision making and career development theory, relate to spirituality. This is especially true regarding college students. Even though some of the popular career development theories (e.g. Holland, 1992; Super, 1980) are used in college career centers, these theories focus mainly on how one chooses a profession and satisfaction related to that choice, rather than using reflective practices where a person can find personal meaning – something that vocational discernment entails.

While these theories provide a solid overview of development from a few different vantage points, gaps also emerge when questions such as the following are posed: Can spirituality be developed and, if so, what role can others play? If students are not well developed spiritually, or faithfully, can they still be well developed intellectually? What role does identity play in spiritual development? Further addressing and answering these questions has the potential to bring about additional clarity and importance on this topic.
These developmental theories suggest that it is during college when people begin to question and explore their beliefs, values, and meaning in life. What these theories do not address, however, is an understanding of how today’s college students view spirituality and their interest in it. I explore this literature in the next section.

Young Adults’ Interest in Spirituality

Beginning in the late 1980’s, there was an increase in the number of studies conducted that examined religion and spirituality in higher education. Of particular interest here, considerable research has focused on how students were engaged and involved in spirituality and religion. Some of the research focused on if students were interested and involved and other studies focused on how they were involved and what it meant to them, with more emphasis placed on the former (Cherry, De Berg, & Porterfield, 2001).

This section highlights some of the research on religion and spirituality in higher education, with a particular emphasis on students’ interest in these areas. Specifically, the topic of “spiritual quest” as illustrated by research from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles and other studies will be discussed. College students’ understanding of spirituality will be addressed highlighting research that illustrates different types of spirituality and that everyone does not equate spirituality and religion. Variations of how students express their interest in spirituality
will be explored based on factors such as race, gender, and type of institution. The section ends with a discussion of some of the limitations of the research reviewed.

*Spiritual quest*

Recent research suggests that as students enter college, they are eager to explore meaning in their lives by going on an “inward journey” (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006) or a “spiritual quest” (HERI, 2004). Definitions of spiritual quest as indicated by HERI include, “finding answers to the mystery of life,” “attaining inner harmony,” “searching for meaning/purpose in life,” and “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” Spiritual and religious beliefs are said to help students “develop identity, provide strength and support, and offer venues for seeking meaning, satisfaction and purpose in life” (Denton-Borhaug, 2004, p. 21).

In recent years, HERI has been leading the way and has been pivotal in providing research and discussion regarding students’ spiritual lives in colleges and universities. This data was gathered using the College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CBSV) survey which was administered to incoming first-year students as an addendum to the annual CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) survey. There were a total of 112,232 students from 236 colleges and universities who participated in the CBSV survey (HERI, 2004). Students were asked to respond to questions regarding how spiritual and religious matters impact their values and beliefs, as well as their educational and occupational goals. In short, the HERI project found that three-fourths of respondents were “searching for meaning/purpose in life,” nearly half considered it “essential” or “very important” to
seek opportunities to help them on their spiritual quest, and two-thirds gained strength and comfort from a “higher power.” The results also indicated that more than three-fourths of students discussed topics of religion and spirituality with family and friends on a regular basis (HERI, 2004).

Individuals with a more developed spiritual life were found to be more empathic, involved with causes that promote social justice, more ethical in their behavior, and have a keener sense of civic responsibility than those who expressed little interest in spirituality. In light of these findings, the authors of the UCLA study concluded that developing a student’s ability to access, shape, and express their spiritual life plays a key role in how they view and interact with the world (Lindholm & Astin, 2006).

Although the HERI data suggest that today’s students are strongly interested in spirituality, Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) research found that overall religiousness and participation in religious activities often declines once students enrolled in college. Congruent with the findings of developmental theorists, young adults often become less affiliated with a particular denomination, engage in prayer less often, and begin questioning their beliefs in God during the college years. While Pascarella and Terenzini’s research indicates a decrease in religiousness, there is emerging research that students become more interested in spirituality while in college. Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003), for example, use CIRP and HERI data in their examination of first-year college students. They found that even though students became less engaged religiously (i.e. lower attendance at religious services, less prayer, and fewer discussions of religion),
they became more spiritual and wanted to integrate spirituality into their lives. They also found that across most religious traditions, those who identified as highly religious also identified as being highly spiritual. Although many studies state that religious activities decline upon enrollment in college, Astin (1977) and Lee (2002) found that there was an increase in religious activities.

Naomi Schaefer Riley (2004), in her book God on the Quad, studied behaviors and attitudes of college students who attended colleges and universities with strong and deep religious roots and cultures. She interviewed faculty, staff, and students at 20 institutions, providing in-depth case studies of five: Brigham Young, Bob Jones, Notre Dame, Thomas Aquinas, and Yeshiva. Her in-depth analysis examined why students chose to attend these schools, the curricular differences and hallmarks that distinguished these schools from public universities, social life outside of the classroom, and how these colleges impacted life choices after graduation. This book supports the claim that today’s young adults are looking for religion to be a part of their lives. Schaefer Riley found that students intentionally self-selected these religiously-affiliated institutions because of their emphasis on faith and the promise they held for offering fruitful discussions on values and morality in and out of the classroom.

While the above research suggests that today’s students are actively seeking out spirituality, how they interpret and make sense of their spirituality varies widely. The next section will take a closer look at some studies that offer suggestions on how students understand and experience their spirituality.
Young adults’ understanding of spirituality

There is a growing body of research suggesting that today’s students relate differently to spirituality than to religion. Most commonly, students report that they are more closely attached to aspects of spiritually than traditional religion. Schwartz (2001) argues that this shift occurs because of the dogmatic nature of organized religion, which often turns students off. Many prefer the personal nature of spirituality and how they can make it “work” for them. Indeed, a recent HERI study found that while today’s college students are less involved in traditional religious practices (i.e., going to services), many engage regularly in spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, which they can do on their own and in their own time (HERI, 2004).

In their review of students’ interest in religion and spirituality on college campuses, Bender (2007) and Denton-Borhaug (2004) found that while there is significant debate over the definitions of religion and spirituality, students often play the terms off of each other. For instance, some students consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious.” These individuals reject organized religion and focus solely on a relationship with a divine or sacred being. Others view spirituality as the individual part of a religion, often referring to themselves as “spiritual and religious.” Finally, there are those who view spirituality as more than a religion. While these individuals stress the importance of individual religious doctrine, they emphasize that everyone can find common ground with spirituality by being connected with a “higher power.”
Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols (2006) examined student behaviors and the level of engagement in activities related to their spiritual search. In their research, they identified four types of “student spiritual seekers,” broken into two categories: religious seekers and secular seekers. Religious seekers practice spirituality within a religious context and include “faith-centered” seekers and “multi-religious” seekers. Faith-centered seekers explore spirituality only within the context of their religious tradition, while multi-religious seekers explore spirituality through interfaith dialogue and activities. Secular seekers, in contrast, practice spirituality outside of a religious context and include “mindfulness” seekers and “wellness” seekers. Mindfulness seekers focus on ways in which they can gain self-awareness and understanding by looking deep within themselves. Wellness seekers attempt to engage in spiritual activities that allow them to live a more holistic and healthy way of life.

The HERI researchers also developed different measures and sub-measures relating to spirituality and religion. Overall, they found that students who were strongly religious were also very spiritual and rated high on the sub-measures. Conversely, those who were only highly spiritual were more likely to be associated with the sub-measures of compassionate self-concept, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview, and less associated with the religiousness measures (HERI, 2004).

These frameworks are useful in general terms, but offer few insights when it comes to specific student populations. The next section highlights some of the research in these areas relating to students’ interest in spirituality.
Variations of how students express their interest in spirituality

How students understand and experience spirituality may be affected by several different variables. One factor that can influence a student’s interest in spirituality is the type of school they attend. Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield (2001) examined four different types of schools based on historical background, mission statements, regional setting, and perceived relation to religion. The four schools were 1) a large, public state university, 2) a Protestant college, 3) a Catholic university, and 4) a university that has Protestant roots, but no longer officially has ties to a denomination, which is also an HBCU (historical black college and university). Qualitative data (interviews, observations, and field notes) were collected to examine undergraduate students’ attitudes toward religion. While their results indicated strong religious interest among students at all four schools, the most interest was found at the three religiously based institutions.

Another factor that affects students’ understandings and interests in spirituality is gender. One’s personal commitment to religious faith, engagement in religious activities, endorsement of religious doctrine, and skepticism regarding religious individuals can vary depending on gender (Bryant, 2007). There is little debate that there is a difference in how men and women understand and relate to religion and spirituality, but where the debate occurs is why this is the case. Most explanations refer to sociological, psychosocial, and biological reasons similar to many developmental theories. However, there is little empirical evidence to support these explanations (Bryant, 2007). In a study of undergraduate students, Buchko (2004) studied religious beliefs and practices of men
and women. She found that compared to men, women’s religious beliefs included a stronger relationship with God (or some higher being) based on time spent in prayer, a belief that God is present and active in their lives, and a stronger feeling of reverence and devotion to God. Overall, Buchko’s results suggest that women are more relational when it comes to their religious beliefs than men.

Bryant (2007) used data from CIRP and CSBV to empirically study gender differences in spirituality among college students. Overall, her results indicated that women are significantly more spiritually and religiously inclined than men on all measures. For example, women had a higher interest in a spiritual quest, self-rated higher in overall belief of being spiritual, were more involved in religious activities, and were more committed to their beliefs. However, when broken down further, both men and women were positively associated with spiritual development and charitable involvement in college. Men, however, were more strongly tied to their religious identity (i.e. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, etc.) than women.

Another factor affecting how students understand and experience spirituality is race. As James Marcia stated, one key aspect of studying students’ interest in spirituality is that it can be related to their identity development. Stewart (2002) studied how black students at a predominantly white college viewed and relied on their spirituality as they navigated through educational experiences and attempted to develop a positive racial identity. Stewart interviewed and observed five students and found that students overall were very interested in spirituality. Four of them reported their spirituality was a key
component of their identity. However, the role spirituality played in their lives varied. Two students stated spirituality was a kind of last resort, something they had to rely on to help them understand their identity. The others suggested that spirituality was an intimate part of their lives and that they believed everything in life had a purpose determined by God. While most of these students said they found their spirituality helpful in forming their identities, all described their struggles with having to come to terms with multiple identities. They advised that appropriate space is needed to congregate and have people to listen and talk to so they can find out who they are as individuals.

The studies presented in this section provide a brief overview of how different factors can impact an individual’s interest in spirituality. Additional studies are needed to examine a wider range of factors, including how conceptions of religion and spirituality play out with students from different religious traditions.

Summary

The research presented in this topic area brings to surface some of the challenges of studying college students’ spirituality and their desire to learn more about it. According to Astin (2004), spirituality points to our affective experiences as they relate to our interior or subjective lives. However, some of the research presented has only focused on behaviors related to spirituality by examining the topic through quantitative research designs. Additionally, some of the studies have been based on small data samples (e.g. Stewart, 2002) and others on extremely large data samples (e.g. Bryant, 2007). Analyzing data from large data sets paints a broad overview of students’
behavioral experiences with spirituality, ignoring more nuanced and contextual understandings of the phenomenon studied. In much the same way, qualitative studies with fewer participants often get at the why part of spirituality, but make generalizability difficult. As interest in college students’ spirituality grows, there is, therefore, a need for more mixed-methods studies that explain questions of what, how, and why.

An additional limitation of the literature presented is the importance and difficulty of defining terms such as spirituality, faith, religion, and vocation. Because scholars and students define these terms in varying ways, working with consistent understandings of these concepts has created its own set of challenges for researchers.

Young Adults’ Understanding of Vocation

As discussed in Chapter One, vocation has been defined in many ways. From a faith standpoint, Western faith traditions have most closely adopted a definition of vocation that suggests a “call” comes from a personal or inner voice, often seen as being from the “divine.” However, other faith traditions, including many Eastern traditions, tend to view vocation as something based on impersonal beliefs that are not chosen, but rather determined by the environmental and social dynamics in which people are raised (Bogart, 1994). While these views are useful, in this study I am most interested in understanding how young adults view vocation and relate it to spirituality. How do today’s college students make sense of the theme of vocation in their lives? Situated within their own contexts, how are their understandings of vocation shaped by their faith
commitments, if at all? In this section, I review the literature that relates to young adult vocation and spirituality and what we know so far about the relationships among them.

**Views of vocation**

Narloch (2004) found that young adults’ views of vocation fall into three main themes: breadth, depth, and discernment. Within the breadth theme, the students Narloch studied viewed vocation as either traditional (vocation equates to occupation), multiple role (traditional view of vocation in addition to service to others and care for family), or life encompassing (vocation completely envelops one’s self and life). The characteristics of depth included seeing vocation as being passionate and motivated about one’s work, in addition to integrating faith and work. The theme of discernment included being active (vocation is self-determined), passive (vocation is determined by an external force – either by fate or a God-figure), and cooperative (vocation is determined through a collaboration of active and passive – called by God, but must say “yes” to the call). These definitions provide a glimpse of the complexity of vocation and how it is viewed and understood by college students.

**Relationship between spirituality and vocation/career**

Traditional methods of matching people with certain established careers has expanded to matching people with careers that allow for a lifetime of purposeful and enjoyable work (Gockel, 2004). This can be done by helping people explore their spiritual values and beliefs. Some of the literature (Biberman & Whitney, 1997; Kahnweiler & Otte, 1997) has suggested a relationship between spirituality and career
decision-making, implying that spirituality influences work behavior and the type of work chosen. These scholars define spirituality in a very broad way and do not equate it with religion. They view spirituality as a way in which people seek authenticity in their lives and desire to have “meaningful” work experiences. How one understands “meaning” is determined by personal values and beliefs (Gockel, 2004).

While the research here is limited, there are a few scholars who have empirically examined the relationship between spirituality and career decision-making. Molasso (2006), for example, examined the relationship between students’ involvements in activities on campus and their sense of purpose in life. For Molasso, purpose happens when individuals find themselves in difficult situations and must figure out a way to turn turmoil into achievement. These experiences, then, have the potential to lead to a sense of meaning in their lives. The results of Molasso’s study indicated activities that engaged students with others in the campus community were positively related to a higher purpose in life. More isolating activities, on the other hand, resulted in a lower sense of purpose.

Similarly, Lips-Wiersma (2002) found that spirituality leads to four career purposes: developing and becoming self, unity with others, expressing self, and serving others. She came to these results by examining the relationship between spirituality and career behavior, career choice, and career transition in older adults (40-50 years old) over a three-year period. The purpose of “developing and becoming self” was characterized by personal growth, self-knowledge, and maintaining integrity. An individual with a career purpose of “unity with others” aimed for sharing values with others and having a sense of
belonging. Individuals who were interested in creating, achieving, and influencing characterized the “expressing self” career purpose. Finally, the career purpose of “serving others” was about making a difference. When these purposes were expressed and understood, then participants in the study viewed their career choice as being influenced by spirituality. For Lips-Wiersma, an understanding and awareness of how students make sense of their career can help higher educational professionals better connect with students. This is especially important in mentoring relationships, something that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another study examined religion, spirituality, and career development in African American college students. Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, and Lewis-Coles (2006) identified six themes regarding students’ experiences relating to the factors of religion, spirituality, and career development: 1) degree of identification as religious and/or spiritual, 2) role of religion and spirituality in career development, 3) parents’ influence on religious and spiritual beliefs, 4) challenges in dealing with academic and career-related issues, 5) religious and spiritual strategies to deal with academic and career-related challenges, and 6) indicators of success in future career. Constantine et. al.’s results indicated that religion and spirituality were important to the career development of African American college students. They suggested that religion and spirituality motivated students to consider professions in which they could “make a difference” in the world. Similar to other researchers (see Lips-Wiersma, 2002), there was more emphasis on the role that spirituality, compared to religion, played in
understanding and making meaning in students’ lives, especially as it related to career choice. Constantine et. al.’s research stresses the need for further studies that focus on what spirituality does for students, not what spirituality is for students. Their work also highlights the importance that spirituality can play in one’s vocational discernment.

Tolliver and Tisdell (2002), in their discussion of transformative learning relating to how people construct knowledge (which will be discussed further in a later section), suggests that students choose certain careers due to their socialization (i.e. race, gender, socio-economic status), and thus, possible experiences with oppression may make decisions harder to make.

**Summary**

While the few studies described above begin to shed light on how students view and understand the relationship between vocation and spirituality, more research is needed in this area. In light of the developmental theories presented earlier, Lips-Wiersma (2002) offers an important reminder about the importance of integrating spirituality, career decision making, and development:

> Spirituality in relation to career expresses itself through an ongoing process of life development in which several career purposes are articulated, discovered, evaluated, prioritized and enacted through an ongoing process of sense-making whereby the individual also strives to maintain some form of equilibrium between the different career purposes. (p. 515)

**Theological Discussion of Vocation and Calling**

This section offers contemporary theological views of vocation and vocational discernment. While Chapter One provided definitions and historical background for the
terms vocation, calling, and vocational discernment, this section digs deeper into the theological conversations around these themes as they relate to today’s college students.

Miller (2007) suggests that while many people believe in God, vocation, and callings, many struggle with understanding where their callings are coming from and how they can determine with greater clarity what that call is. From his Christian theological viewpoint, Miller believes that everyone has a calling and that these callings come from God. The difficulty still lies, however, in determining what the call is. Is it a call to live life in a way that signifies a certain kind of holiness defined by our Christian baptism? Are we called to perform certain tasks or a particular job utilizing the skills and abilities we were given or have acquired through life experiences? Or, are we supposed to follow God’s call that leads to personal fulfillment, where we satisfy a need to serve others?

Miller simplifies these questions into three words that help define vocation: discipleship, action, and personal fulfillment.

Miller draws on several Bible passages that speak to how all humans are called to discipleship (see Gen 12:1; 1 Sam 10:1; Mark 4:18-22). This calling is an open invitation to be part of the Christian community in which individuals live out the faith they profess.

A second definition of vocation involves our call to action. Here the focus is on the specific job or work one performs. Miller differentiates this calling into the choice to serve within the church or to serve the world. There are many Biblical references that address how people are called to serve within the church; for example, leaders, preachers, and teachers (see Exod 3: 4-22; Isa 6: 1-10; Acts 9:15). But, one does not have to serve
within the church to live a life of vocation. Many are called to action, serving within the world as farmers, assembly line workers, professionals, community servants, and parents. This definition of vocation suggests that people discover their callings through the ordinary work experience.

Miller’s third definition of vocation – the call to personal fulfillment – has more modern feel to it. “This vision of vocation suggests that living a life vocationally is best seen as being and doing what makes you an authentic and complete human being” (Miller, 2007, p. 10). For Miller, discovering our personally fulfilling callings requires considerable self-reflection; a kind of digging deeper that helps us to understand what truly brings us joy. This kind of vocational exploration goes beyond mining our talents, gifts, and abilities.

While he feels each of these definitions has their importance, Miller is partial to a fourth definition. This “new” definition, which does not have a name, is an integration of the previous three with a primary focus on personal choice. Miller argues that everyone has certain gifts and talents that are part of his or her calling. But “the act of choosing itself is exactly what God wants us to do, for humans were meant to choose. Choices lead to actions and actions to habits, which in turn lead to the development of character. That is, our choice eventually make us into the persons we are” (p. 12).

William Spohn (2003) paints a view of vocation that has both internal and external components. Regarding the former, Spohn draws on the teachings of Ignatian spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola to encourage individuals
to reflect and recognize God’s “unique invitation” in their lives. From Spohn’s perspective, the Exercises help us “discover our personal calling[s] by aligning our gifts and aspirations with what we see as the deepest needs of our world. An authentic aligning goes beyond personal fulfillment to a concern for justice that asks about the fulfillment of others, even if they are strangers” (Spohn, 2003, p. 3). He adds that when a true vocation is discovered “the soul is awakened, transformed, or exalted, so that instead of dreams and presentiments from within, a summons comes from without; a portion of reality presents itself and makes a claim” (p.3).

The awakening to our interiority, Spohn invites, often is facilitated by external influences, the most significant of which is mentoring. A mentor helps an individual stay grounded in reality and be a “check against self-deception” (p.4). Spohn warns that young adults are plagued by ambition. While ambition is not necessarily a bad thing, it becomes harmful when its primary goal is material success. For Spohn, the role of the mentor is to help guide young adult ambition into a “greater and more excellent way” – what St. Ignatius referred to as “magis” – for being in and serving the world.

Michael Himes (2001), a professor of theology at Boston College, poses three questions that can help individuals clarify their vocational interests. They include: 1) Is it a source of joy?; 2) Is it something that genuinely taps your talents and is likely to continue to challenge those talents?; and 3) Is it a genuine source of service to those around you? (p.2).
Himes states that only the individual can discover the answer to the first question. That said, he stresses that it is essential to look to others for input and clarification of ideas. He also emphasizes that joy is neither happiness nor satisfaction. Rather, joy is something that continues to be exciting and enticing. For Himes, the answers to the second and third questions do not lie within the individual, but rather in the community, who set the standards on certain talents that are required for an occupation (question 2) and if an individual actually has the talents a community needs (question 3). As Himes sees it, when an individual’s joy, abilities, and others’ needs intersect, then a genuine vocation begins to reveal itself.

Summary

While several theologians have explored the theme of vocation in the literature, those discussed here have provided thoughtful commentary on vocation and vocational discernment as it often relates to young adults. Three common themes cut across the views of the theologians discussed in this section. The first is the importance of self-reflection. As Miller, Spohn, and Himes emphasize, it is essential that individuals look within and listen to what their hearts and souls are telling them about their “deep joys and hungers.” The authors also stress the importance of serving the needs of others before one’s self. From their perspective, true vocation is not only self-fulfilling, but also self-transcending, focused on meeting the world’s need. The final theme is the importance of communal discernment, or the integral role others play in helping young adults make sense of and act on their callings. This was most commonly described within the context
of mentoring relationships. The next section incorporates these themes and describes ways in which colleges and universities, and those who work at them, can help foster the spiritual development and vocational discernment of college students.

Efforts to Foster Young Adults’ Spiritual Development and Vocational Discernment

The previous sections highlight research that underscores how students are interested in becoming involved and learning more about spirituality during a time when they are forming and reshaping their values, beliefs, and opinions. Research also provides supportive evidence that fostering spiritual development enhances students' holistic development. Unfortunately, the published discourse tells us little about how this can be done. This section highlights what colleges and universities are doing and could be doing to facilitate spirituality and vocational discernment.

The institutional role in holistic development

Currently, the literature suggests that faculty and staff development, the integration of supportive campus communities (both inside and outside of the classroom), establishing a clear institutional identity, and creating a transformative learning environment often make a considerable difference in enhancing students’ holistic development.

An institution can begin its role in fostering holistic development by encouraging faculty and staff to become more involved in campus activities that specifically aim to address this goal. Based on interviews with more than 30 senior administrators and 10
site visits at faith-based institutions, Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward (2005) examined how higher education professionals help students explore meaning and purpose in their lives. Overall, they found that while faculty and staff were committed to fostering spiritual growth, most were more likely to act on this commitment when they were encouraged to do so. Specifically, many benefited from faculty and staff development. Several scholars (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Love & Talbott, 1999; Temkin & Evans, 1998) have found that raising awareness of developmental theory with faculty and staff often provides a solid framework from which they can work. Faculty and staff need training and information about spirituality and spiritual development in order to work properly with college students who are interested in exploring “big questions” (Love & Talbott, 1999). Similarly, it is important for faculty and staff to gain an awareness of religious traditions outside of Judeo-Christian traditions which can help them engage this important dimension of student diversity individually and programmatically (Temkin & Evans, 1998). Through training and development, faculty and staff will be better equipped to recognize that some crises in student’s lives have a spiritual component to them (Love & Talbott, 1999). Additionally, this awareness might also encourage them to serve as advocates for spirituality in the broader mission and culture of an institution. Ultimately, write Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward (2005), faculty and staff involvement in issues of faith and spirituality has significant promise for clarifying individual and institutional character and identity.
Colleges and universities are more likely to foster student’s spiritual and holistic development when they have taken on and successfully completed the challenge of clarifying their own institution’s character and identity. Doing this well involves developing an appropriate campus community that encourages the integration of faith and learning (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2005). The other part requires clarifying and defining terms and practices. For example, one important clarification might involve differentiating spiritual development from religious practice (Love, 2002). Even though research indicates that students are eager and want more assistance in “finding their way” and digging deeper within themselves, it is important to know how students perceive and understand terms so that they can be reached most effectively when developing programs. Cherry, De Berg, and Porterfield’s (2001) research, for example, found that students preferred the terms spirituality and spiritual, rather than religiousness and religious.

Creating supportive environments is another important role of colleges and universities (Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006). For students who are interested in seeking opportunities to develop spiritually, finding an environment that is welcoming and nurturing is especially important. Part of this includes creating or designating physical space where students can pray, meditate, and reflect. According to Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, and Echols (2006) and Denton-Borhaug (2004), the number of chapels and spiritual and religious centers has increased in recent years, in part because these spaces allow students to further develop their spiritual needs. A safe and
A supportive environment is especially important when students are looking for membership in groups and organizations because they are eager to showcase their strengths and express their values and beliefs in a comfortable and safe manner (Sergent & Sedlacek, 1990). Rogers & Dantley (2001) also discuss the benefits of community as it relates to spirituality. They believe that when true community exists students are able to look deep within themselves and offer up whatever it is they discover. Students are better able to do this through the encouragement and support of faculty and staff. When students examine and are in touch with their emotional and spiritual sides, they “bring their complete self to their life in the university” (p. 595). University departments, especially admissions and orientation staff, also have the opportunity to play a key role in creating a supportive campus environment. To do this most effectively, they must be well versed in spiritual and religious diversity. Overall, the school must appear welcoming of all faiths to foster the appropriate campus climate (Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Curricular and co-curricular changes also provide students with an opportunity to develop spiritually and holistically. Over the past decade, several scholars have suggested a number of curricular changes in order to enhance holistic campus environments. While some suggest that the curriculum become more inclusive of aspects of spirituality (Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Magolda & Ebben, 2006), others provide more specific examples (Austin, 2004; Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2005; Copeland, 2002). Service-learning and first-year seminar courses are examples of ways to help students connect who they are helping with what they are studying, often by stressing the
intentional practice of personal reflection (Astin, 2004). Incorporating service-learning into the curriculum can foster students’ spirituality through critical reflection. A challenge here is that faculty must be on board with this philosophy (Copeland, 2002). But, as indicated by Braskamp, et. al. (2005), most faculty are supportive of these types of initiatives. First-year seminar courses can also encourage holistic development by allowing students to examine their personal sense of meaning and purpose in life and how this relates to their academic career (Astin, 2004). Additionally, these courses can also allow students the opportunity to reflect on their spirituality (Braskamp, et. al., 2005).

An example of a co-curricular change is creating volunteer opportunities for students. Volunteerism often connects students to faith communities since many volunteer placements are in these communities (Copeland, 2002). There is evidence that volunteering enhances an understanding of purpose and meaning in one’s life (i.e. vocation) (Mills, Bersamina, & Plante, 2007). Another co-curricular activity that many institutions have implemented is service trips, which often help integrate faith and learning in action (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2005).

Developing holistic campus environments seldom occurs without adequate staffing. New administrative structures and titles are needed to encourage the collaboration between student life and academic deans, ministry and spiritual life offices, student leadership departments, and career centers (Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006). According to Denton-Borhaug (2004), colleges and universities committed to holistic development “continue to support religious/spiritual life student
organizations and increase opportunities for multi-faith dialogue, learning, and appreciation” while “develop[ing] a broader, more diverse panoply of spiritual growth opportunities that are non-religious specific” (p. 34).

A final effort an institution of higher education can establish to foster students’ holistic development is to emphasize transformative learning (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Transformative learning “creates a more expansive understanding of the world regarding how one sees and experiences both others and one’s self and is grounded in one’s entire being. Such learning increases one’s sense of an ability to make a difference in the world and leads to a greater sense of purpose and meaning” (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p. 37). Tolliver and Tisdell suggests that institutions can help students discover their sense of purpose and meaning by incorporating spirituality into the classroom. This process “involves authenticity, openness, acceptance, and honoring of the various dimensions of how people learn and construct knowledge by incorporating activities that include attention to the affective, somatic, imaginative, symbolic, cultural, and communal, as well as the rational” (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p. 40).

Earlier, I underscored the importance of understanding that many factors influence one’s understanding of spirituality. Tolliver and Tisdell (2002; 2006) state that culture is one such variable. While Tolliver and Tisdell agree that spirituality is constructed through one’s understanding and awareness of imagery and symbolism, they state that these processes are a result of one’s culture and therefore are interpreted differently by each person. This suggests that different groups of people will understand,
interpret, and relate differently to things. How people construct knowledge can be similar to how people understand spirituality and vocation – it depends on the “lens” with which they view the world. Therefore, colleges and universities must understand and respond to such differences.

In summary, this section highlights that encouraging faculty and staff development and involvement, clarifying institutions’ character and identity, establishing a supportive campus community, integrating curricular and co-curricular initiatives, investing in adequate staffing, and incorporating transformative learning all contribute to enhancing students’ holistic development.

A higher education professional’s role in holistic development

The previous section discussed the importance of institutional support for initiatives that enhance and foster student development. Without the additional support of faculty and staff to carry out these initiatives, however, little would be accomplished. Several scholars suggest ways in which higher education professionals can help strengthen holistic development on campus: by serving as an advocate for students, developing educational programs, encouraging dialogue, establishing mentoring relationships with students, being a spiritual model, and actively engaging students.

To begin, professionals need to be aware of opportunities to help students grow and to be advocates for their holistic growth (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006). As part of being an advocate, professionals
can alert students to resources and activities on campus that promote their learning about spirituality and vocational discernment.

One of the more common roles that professional staff can play concerns the development of appropriate educational programming. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2005) suggest that residence life can play a critical role in programmatic efforts to unite students and help foster development and inter-faith dialogue. To be most effective, it is important for staff to collaborate with other departments to establish effective educational programs. For example, student affairs might be part of ministry communities and programs, and vice versa (Temkin & Evans, 1998). Spirituality programs including speakers, retreats, student-led groups, music, and service projects, as well as spiritual practices incorporating prayer circles, guided meditation, personal retreats, and readings also provide opportunities for student growth (Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006).

Encouraging dialogue provides another way in which higher education professionals can foster the spiritual and vocational growth of students. By being available to talk to students about their spirituality and vocational discernment, faculty and staff send a clear message to students that they are open to issues of student spiritual development and are willing to talk discuss it with them. This is especially important for women, who tend to be more relational (Buchko, 2004). Dialogue can affirm “religious faith as valid and equal to non-religious spiritual and rationalistic viewpoints” (Buchko, 2004, p. 97). To be most effective, faculty and staff must first reflect on their own
spiritual development (Love & Talbott, 1999; Love, 2002) and vocational callings 
(Narloch, 2004). Dialogue does not have to only center on issues regarding spirituality 
and vocations. It can also involve interfaith dialogue and incorporate interfaith 
conversations, celebrations, and worship into the campus community. Creating dialogue 
among students, faculty, and staff is a critical step in allowing students to be more 
generated in their spiritual development (Dalton, Eberhandt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006).

Mentoring is another critical role that higher educational professionals must take 
on (Love, 2002; Narloch, 2004; Parks, 2000). For young adults, the most powerful form 
of community that higher education professionals can assist with is the mentoring 
community (Parks, 2000). Parks (2000) states an effective community “is the 
combination of the emerging developmental stance of the young adult with the challenge 
and encouragement of the mentor, grounded in the experience of a compatible social 
group” (p. 93). Parks also emphasizes the role of a mentor. She suggests that a mentor is 
one who recognizes, supports, challenges, inspires, and engages a student in dialogue. 
Parks describes a mentoring relationship as an "intentional, mutually demanding, and 
meaningful relationship between two individuals, a young adult and an older, wiser figure 
who assists the younger person in learning the ways of life" (p. 127). When developing a 
mentoring program, however, it is important to be aware that not everyone will have the 
same understanding of the mentor-mentee relationship or a common understanding of 
goals and purpose. Narloch (2004), in his study of undergraduate students’ concepts of 
vocation, also interviewed mentors about their view and understanding of vocation. He
found that students and mentors had different definitions. Mentors viewed vocation as being the same as occupation (and only a handful of the students viewed the term similarly). As a result, most mentors helped students explore their vocation through behavioral activities such as informational interviews and internships, rather than through exploration exercises. Bearing this in mind, Narloch recommended that mentors not force their viewpoints on students. Rather, building and developing relationships with others may be a simpler and more meaningful way mentors can help foster students’ spiritual development and vocational discernment. “By becoming involved with people with similar interests inside and outside the classroom, students develop support networks that are instrumental to helping them deal effectively with academic and social challenges” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991, p. 260, as cited in Magolda & Ebben, 2006).

Spiritual modeling may be another strategy to foster holistic development (Oman & Thorseen, 2003). Spiritual modeling “expresses the idea that people may grow spiritually by imitating the life or conduct of one or more spiritual exemplars, whether the exemplar is a member of their own family or community, or the exalted founder or mystic of a world religion” (p. 150).

Maybe the simplest and most important role of all is for practitioners to actively engage students and encourage them to become involved in activities that have personal meaning. One strategy is to help create what Hagberg (1994, cited in Rogers and Dantley, 2001) calls “soul leaders.” Soul leaders are people “who commit themselves to the inward journey, do not operate out of fear or ego gratification but out of an inner power
that is based in meaning, calling, passion, courage, vulnerability, spirituality, and community” (p. 596). Higher education professionals have a challenging task at hand. To develop soul leaders, they need to be examples by taking an authentic look inward at their own spirituality in order to help students do the same (Astin, 2004). Additionally, they need to educate themselves on the rituals and traditions of major religions (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) in order to better relate to students (Temkin & Evans, 1998) and engage in significant dialogues (Rogers & Dantley, 2001).

With the support of faculty and staff, students can also play an active role in encouraging their peers to participate in spiritually related groups and programs. Wampold, Ankarlo, Mondin, Trinidad-Carillo, Baumler, and Prater (1995) offer that students will select groups and programs that are consistent with their personality types and where the physical characteristics and social climate of the environment is a good match. Therefore, other group members and the way they behave can greatly impact membership and retention. Students will likely be drawn to particular group environments because of the type of students who belong to them and how they act. Schwartz (2001) refers to this as “social norming.” He suggests that students will act and behave like their peers if they believe it will somehow be personally beneficial. Similarly, if students have friends of the same faith, they view their faith as more part of their lives and who they are (i.e. identity) (Lee, Matzkin, & Arthur, 2002; Parks, 2000). In a study examining students’ search for religion and spirituality, Lee, et. al. (2002) found that
students who had the highest self-ratings of faith and spirituality not only had friends with similar religious beliefs, but also had places on campus to practice their faith. Therefore, if campuses created places for students of various religions to worship, pray, and meditate, it might, according to these studies, result in more friendships that may well help to foster their faith development.

Considerations when developing programs

Ways in which higher education institutions and their faculty and staff can be involved in facilitating holistic development have been outlined. The literature also contains portraits of specific programmatic initiatives that specifically are designed to foster students’ holistic development. Some of these scholars make the important point that promoting students’ holistic development is not just about what programs are being offered, but also about how the programs are being developed to make a difference in students’ lives. In this section, I will highlight a few considerations gleaned from the literature to keep in mind when developing programs aimed at fostering holistic development.

Magolda and Ebben (2006) suggest that not all programmatic efforts need to be initiated by faculty and staff, but that some can come from students using a “ground-up” approach. They offer several suggestions for students who are planning and creating programs or events. Students need to be mindful of and understand the organization’s mission, develop a recruitment strategy for new members, understand and appreciate the
benefits of a small-scale organization, and offer members many ways of becoming involved.

Kazanjian and Laurence (2007) offer several governing principles when developing inter-faith programs aimed at increasing communication and collaboration between faiths. In a broader sense, these principles can be applied to many other types of programs as well. Their first principle is to emphasize that programs should be about education, not religion. They state that “the role of religion and spirituality in higher education must start and end with the question, ‘how do religion and spirituality enhance the education of our students?’ not the question, ‘how do we support religion or religious institutions on our campus’” (p. 2)? Second, they argue that programs need to move beyond the idea of tolerance:

Tolerance is not a basis for healthy human relationship, nor will it ever lead to pluralistic community, for tolerance does not allow for learning, growth or transformation, but ultimately keeps people in a state of suspended ignorance and conflict. Rather than tolerance as a goal, we choose to speak about tolerance as only a first step toward interdependence (p.5).

Kazanjian and Laurence further suggest that there must be equal representation from all faith groups, rather than having membership based only on representatives from already organized groups. They state it as “equity of voice – or more like the Senate than the House of Representatives” (p. 7). A fourth principle is to ensure that students are aware there will be growing pains and that participants of the group will not be happy. The participants who will be the least happy, they suggest, are those from dominant religious traditions (i.e. Protestants) who are only allowed one representative rather than several
from each Protestant organization. An additional point of conflict might occur because inter-faith dialogue is hard work, which will cause conflicts. A final suggestion for those involved in developing programs for students is to be aware of the importance of celebrations. How one defines a celebration varies greatly. For some, a celebration is going to Mass and for others it is spending time in prayer. Kazanjian and Laurence suggest that these celebrations are what students remember most, so it is important to give thoughtful consideration to them.

While there clearly is an interest among college students to be more spiritual, there are also many students who are struggling with their spirituality and religiosity (Astin, 2004). Therefore, programs offered at institutions can not only help feed the souls of those students wanting to explore more, but they can also help those who are struggling and yearning for more.

Specific types of programs

Programs to help foster spiritual development need not necessarily be limited by religion. Norenberg, Buckley, and Dwyer (2006), for example, describe two programs that help students make sense and meaning of their beliefs in a spiritual, not religious, context. These programs were designed to engage students in a group setting while introducing them to spiritual language and practice. The goal of the first program was to provide students with knowledge and the ability to develop a statement of belief. The second program was added based on feedback from students who expressed their interest in exploring the topics further and deeper. As a result, the second program included more
specific information on spiritual practices. While there is no empirical evidence
documenting students’ spiritual growth, anecdotal evidence appears to confirm that the
programs were effective in enhancing students’ spiritual practices.

On a much larger scale, two national foundations have recently committed
significant time and resources to the advancement of college student holistic
development: the John Templeton Foundation and the Lilly Endowment, Inc. The John
Templeton Foundation has provided colleges and universities with funding to develop
programs and support research aimed at the character development of students through its
College and Character initiative. The goal of this funding initiative is to ―encourage
colleges and universities to do as much as they can to reinforce the positive values
instilled by parents, such as honesty, compassion, self-discipline, and respect‖ (John
Templeton Foundation, 2008). Most significantly, the Templeton Foundation awarded the
University of California, Los Angeles and its Higher Education Research Institute a
$2,000,000 grant to explore spirituality in higher education. The influence and impact of
this research has been articulated throughout this paper. In addition to research grants, the
College and Character initiative supports efforts to reinforce the abilities of colleges and
universities to provide programs for students that enhance positive values, as well as
programs aimed at spiritual growth. “Programs that foster spiritual growth provide a
means to develop a vision of moral integrity that coheres and connects belief to behavior”
(John Templeton Foundation, 2008). They emphasize that a college does not have to be
church affiliated to encourage spiritual growth.
An example of a spiritual growth program funded by the Templeton Foundation is the Quaker Leadership Scholars Program (QLSP) at Guilford College, in Greensboro, North Carolina. The QLSP focuses on enriching the educational experience of Quaker students by providing opportunities for spiritual growth and social activism. This is achieved “through academic courses, small group discussions, worship, mentoring, internships, conferences, retreats, travel, and exposure to frequent Quaker visitors to campus” (Guilford College, 2008).

The Lilly Endowment focuses its support on religion, education, and community development. One of the programmatic initiatives under the support of their Religion Division is the Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV). Currently, the Lilly Endowment funds 88 PTEV initiatives across the country “that 1) help students examine the relationship between their faith and vocational choices, 2) provide opportunities for young people to explore Christian ministry as their life's work, and 3) enhance the capacity of a school’s faculty and staff to teach and mentor students effectively in this arena” (Lilly Endowment, 2008). While each institution had the freedom to make their program unique to its history, mission, and context, the programs focus on “developing or strengthening vocational reflection…by incorporating the theological exploration of vocation into courses or campus experiences” (Lilly Endowment, 2008).

One example of a Lilly funded program is EVOKE (Encouraging Vocation through Knowledge and Experience) at Loyola University Chicago. The overall goal of
EVOKE is “to strengthen Loyola’s institutional focus on vocation on campus, creating a supportive climate that is welcoming of dialogue about and deeds that arise from personal call or vocation” (Loyola University Chicago, 2008). EVOKE offers programs for students, faculty, and staff, but primarily focuses on opportunities geared toward students. In addition to the many programs, retreats, and courses EVOKE sponsors, they provide students with two vocational-related mentoring programs. One such program is the R.E.A.L. (Realizing and Exploring Your Authentic Life) program which connects juniors and seniors with first-year and sophomore students in a one-on-one mentoring relationship. Another program, and as described in great detail in Chapter One, is the OnCall Program. OnCall, is a “program for students who have a deep interest in discovering their true passions and linking them with their talents to make a difference in the world. OnCall helps undergraduate students, in the context of peer communities, to begin to discover the person they are called to be and to authentically live” (Loyola University Chicago, 2008).

Summary

While there is growing literature on ways to foster students’ holistic development, what we know thus far is limited in two important ways. First, the published discourse currently focuses far more on college student spirituality than on college student vocational discernment, suggesting a promising area for future research. Spohn (2003), in his discussion of how institutions of higher education can help foster vocational discernment in students, offered an interesting perspective on how students understand
vocation. He suggested that there are four groups of individuals that have a significant impact on young adult development: their parents, other adults, their peers, and the mass media. In light of this, examining the influence of these people on young adults’ vocational discernment may be a step in the right direction.

Second, much of the research presented in this section is not grounded in systematic, empirical study. While informative, more research is needed in two key areas. First, as students grow increasingly interested in not only “making a living” but also “making sense of their purpose and meaning” during the college years, we need to not only describe students’ vocational discernment processes, but also understand more fully what activities (internal to programs and more generally in terms of college environments) contribute to important dimensions of student’s holistic development.

Second, given that the literature also tells us that students who are involved in religious and other related activities often 1) have greater academic integrity, 2) adjust better to college, 3) have healthier social drinking habits, and 4) are in overall better health than students who are not involved in these activities (Temkin & Evans, 1998), there is more that we need to learn about the various outcomes associated with programs that focus on enhancing students’ spiritual and vocational development. As Magolda and Ebben (2006) have noted, more studies are needed to examine student perspectives of quality “out-of-class experiences” to further highlight the importance of spiritual and religious groups in college.
Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of literature on college student development and the accompanying quest for spirituality and vocational discernment, which included five topical areas: 1) development theory related to identity, cognitive, spirituality/faith, meaning making, and career decision-making, 2) young adults’ interest in spirituality and vocational discernment, 3) young adult understanding of vocation, 4) theological discussions of vocation and calling, and 5) efforts to foster young adults’ spiritual development and vocational discernment. The purpose of this chapter was to highlight research that demonstrates the importance of examining college students’ interest in spirituality and vocational discernment in line with their holistic development as young adults.

Reviewing the literature in this area has clarified what has, and has not, been studied regarding student spirituality and vocational discernment. Among others, questions such as “Can spirituality be developed and, if so, what role can others play?” and “If students are not well developed spiritually, or faithfully, can they still be well developed intellectually?” arose while writing this review. While some answers to these questions were identified on personal and programmatic levels, more empirical research is needed to examine the outcomes of these efforts.

Studying and researching spirituality can be very difficult primarily because of its subjective nature (although the same can be said for studying any dimension of student development). It is hard to quantify a subjective experience even though some of the
research presented has tried to do so. Variations in students’ spiritual experiences also make it difficult to directly address and research the topic of spirituality at large.

Focusing on a certain aspect of it, such as vocation, has the potential to differentiate the topic in part, making for more manageable and precise investigation. That said, at present the research surrounding this topic is dominated by studies that focus far more on college student spirituality than on students’ vocational discernment.

Nevertheless, the literature reviewed here illustrates that young adults are interested and eager to explore their own spirituality and to find meaning in their lives. This desire occurs at a time in their formative development when they are ready to understand and make meaning out of the broader questions of “What do I want to do with my life?” “What is my life’s purpose?” and “What will make me feel like I am living a life that is worthwhile?” From my viewpoint, and based on national data now suggesting there is a growing interest among students in spiritual and vocational questions, the time is ripe for colleges and universities to develop new (or further support existing) programs that will help facilitate students’ explorations in these important areas of holistic development. Overlooking the importance of spiritual development and vocational discernment in students’ lives has the potential to negatively affect the way students gain knowledge because they will not have the skills to look deep within themselves for their own personal truths.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline and describe the methodological approach I used to study how college students understand and make meaning of the theme of calling in their lives. The methodology for this investigation was based on a previous study from which a large portion of data were analyzed. Here, I describe the purpose of the study and its research questions, the methodological framework that guided the investigation, as well as its data collection, analysis, and trustworthiness procedures.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how young adults understand and make meaning of vocation, or call, in their lives. More specifically, it was grounded in a conceptual framework that focused on how faith/spirituality, interpersonal relationships, encounters with “other,” values, critical life events, self-awareness, and developmental issues might potentially affect young adults’ responses to call and meaning-making during their college years (Haworth & McCruden, 2001). This study was informed by the following research questions:

1. How do young adults make sense of and construct to the theme of vocation or call in their lives?
2. What and who shapes their understandings of “calling?”
3. How do these influences affect their response to “calling?”

Methodological Framework

Qualitative research was chosen for this study given its goal of understanding how young adults construct meaning and purpose in their lives and how these meanings, in turn, potentially influence human actions. Qualitative research also examines something nonnumeric (versus numeric as seen in quantitative studies) and has an ability to refer to a certain “quality” in something (Schwandt, 2007).

Crotty (1998) suggests there are four elements that need to be considered when conducting qualitative research: 1) epistemology, 2) theoretical perspective, 3) methodology, and 4) methods. Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge and how we know something to ‘be.’ In other words, it helps explain how we know what we know. Two of the most common epistemologies are objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism refers to a belief that we can know something for certain, that there is a universal truth, and only one reality exists. From this viewpoint, the knower is detached, passive, and autonomous from what is known. Subjectivism refers to a belief that there is no one universal truth or reality and that knowledge is individual and dependent on the knower (Crotty, 1998).

While there are many theoretical perspectives that could be discussed, interpretivism, philosophical hermeneutics, and social constructivism are often mentioned
in the literature on qualitative inquiry (Schwandt, 1999). Interpretivism suggests that the researcher (subject) is trying to understand the motives of something or someone (object). The role of the researcher is to observe and listen to the object to discover an understanding of knowledge, with the goal of objectifying a subjective meaning. The philosophical hermeneutics perspective implies that there is a dialogue between the subject (researcher) and object, where understanding of knowledge is negotiated. In constructionism, the focus is on how a researcher’s understanding is shaped by the lenses (viewpoint) through which he or she looks. Therefore, a researcher’s beliefs, values, gender, race/ethnicity, and education help shape their understanding of the object.

While having an understanding of what each of these mean is important, it is also necessary to be aware of how researchers recognize the role of knowledge, and more specifically, what it means to understand the object. Schwandt (1999) suggests understanding is relational. He states that “when understanding is conceived of as relational and existential, familiarity and strangeness are not simply cognitive or rational assessments of aspects of our experience, but ways in which we actually experience being in the world” (p. 457). Therefore, “when we seek to understand what others are doing and saying, we are always standing in this in-between of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 458). Schwandt asserts that researchers must recognize the object as a form of self-relatedness. Additionally, researchers must recognize the tradition(s) in which they are situated in order to fully recognize and appreciate what the object offers. In other words, researchers must understand that their values, beliefs, race, gender, and other factors
impact how they interpret the object, and they must be open to the new experiences and challenges the object offers.

The methodology of a qualitative study articulates the theory of how the research should proceed (Crotty, 1998). Creswell (1998) offers five of the most common methodologies: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. A biography is an account of an individual’s life based on their experiences as they are told to the researcher or found in documents or archival information, while a phenomenological study focuses on the lived experiences of several individuals examining a particular concept or phenomenon. The purpose of a grounded theory methodology is to develop a theory (concept, analytical schema, or model of a phenomenon) and relate it to a particular situation. An ethnography, most commonly, is based on a researcher’s first-hand observations of a group used to describe and interpret the cultural or social dimensions of the group. Finally, the case study is a methodology that focuses on a particular ‘case’ (bounded by place and time) that allows the researcher to gather data from multiple sources (i.e. observations, interviews, and documents) (Creswell, 1998).

The final element of qualitative research according to Crotty (1998) is method. These are procedures, tools, and techniques a researcher uses to generate data. Some of the most common qualitative methods are interviews, observations, and focus groups.

This qualitative study stresses a subjective epistemology and a constructionist theoretical framework. Phenomenological methodology incorporating narrative life-
stories was used to collect data. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for “a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there [was] an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the [students]” (Kvale, 1996, p. 124). Using this approach, the original research team sought to invite students to examine how they made sense of their lives in light of vocation.

Research Design and Method

Study approval

Approval for the original study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Loyola University Chicago in August 2001.

Participants

In Spring 2001, applications from 49 currently-enrolled first-year undergraduate students at Loyola University Chicago were received for the OnCall program. Thirty-six students were selected as members of Loyola's first OnCall student cohort beginning their sophomore year – September 2001. A wide variety of methods were used to inform first-year students at Loyola about the OnCall program throughout March and April, 2001.

In September 2001, all students involved in the OnCall program received an invitation, via email, to participate in a research study along with a letter of informed consent. This invitation explained the general purpose of the research study and the data collection activities that would occur throughout the three-year investigation. Prospective
participants were informed that while their participation in this research study had the potential to enhance their overall OnCall experience (because it would foster reflection, an important part of the discernment process in understanding one's calling), their involvement in it was completely voluntary. Students were informed that they would receive the same benefits associated with their participation in the OnCall program regardless of whether they choose to be a part of the research study.

Students who elected to participate were instructed to read a consent form sent along with their invitation, and to sign and return the letter via campus mail to the research team. Data collection commenced shortly after the receipt of participants' signed consent forms.

Of the 36 students participating in the OnCall program, 22 students chose to be part of the research study (18 women and 4 men; 14 white, 3 African-American, 2 Latino, 2 Asian, and 1 bi-racial; and 21 Christian and 1 Muslim). All participants were 18 years or age or older.

Consideration was given to the remote possibility that the researchers involved in collecting data for this research study (principal investigator and three graduate students) would be simultaneously engaged in a teacher-student or supervisor-employee relationship. A situation did not arise where special accommodations needed to be made.

Method

In an effort to study the influences on and development of students' understandings of "call" in their own lives, the original study employed a longitudinal
research design and a number of data collection methods intended primarily to produce richly-textured, life stories. Research on the same group of participants was conducted over three years, beginning in September 2001 and concluding in April 2004. All data collection activities were coordinated by the principal investigator (PI), Dr. Jennifer Haworth.

According to Connelly & Clandinin (1990), the “main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that human beings are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Coffey & Atkinson (1996) add that humans often “remember and order their careers or memories as a series of narrative chronicles” or as a “series of stories marked by key happenings” in their lives (p. 56). Through life story interviews and other related data collection methods that unfolded over the course of the three-year timeframe, the researchers’ intent was to learn how participants made – and continued to make – sense of their lives in relation to the broader concept of call or vocation, and to understand how various events, experiences, and relationships may have influenced their constructions of and responses to the “call stories” of their early adulthood.

Life story research invites subjects to “tell their stories” and “to take responsibility for the meaning of their own talk” (Josselson, 1995). In the specific context of this study, the research strategy required special attention to participants’ stories on their own terms over time, listening with care as they shared their emerging
understandings of what call or vocation meant to them, and the role that various influences may have played in shaping their understandings of their personal life’s calling. Data collection methods focused primarily on the collection of qualitative and quantitative data that, over time, provided a rich pool of data responsive to the study’s research questions.

Data collection

The original research team collected data through the following methods:

1. Three semi-structured life story interviews with consenting OnCall students (October 2001; February 2003; April 2004);
2. Informal written reflections in an OnCall Journal;
3. Three "artistic responses" or "portraits" (October 2001; February 2003; April 2004); and
4. Two survey questionnaires administered both at the beginning of the study (September 2001) and at its conclusion (April 2004)

For this dissertation, only the data from method 1 was analyzed. As such, only the data collection procedures for these methods will be reviewed. The interview protocol for method 1 is included in Appendix A. Interview questions explored interpersonal, intrapersonal, cognitive, experiential (before college and within-college), familial, and spiritual influences on students and how they may potentially affect students' understandings of and response to the theme of call in their lives. A portion of the interview protocol included questions from Robert Kegan's (1984) subject-object
interview, which established and monitored students' "orders of consciousness" (a construct that brought together interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive understandings of human development) throughout the study. The questions were based on the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter One. In total, there were 65 interviews conducted (two students only completed years 1 and 2).

Interviews were audio taped with the informed consent of each subject. Each interview was held in a private room on the Loyola University Chicago campus and began with an explanation of the study, followed by assurances from members of Dr. Haworth's research team regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of participants and their responses. Research team members also explained to each participant that the purpose of audio taping each interview was to ensure the accuracy of interview responses. Copies of transcribed interviews were shared directly with each study participant both to ensure further the accuracy of interview statements and to provide opportunities for reflection on and clarifications of interview responses. To facilitate this process, each study participant received a copy of his or her transcript with a cover letter indicating a two-week deadline for a response. In this letter, students were informed that if no response was received by the designated due date, the participant’s approval of the transcript would be assumed.
Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study concentrated on reading, coding, and analyzing previously transcribed interviews gathered from the original study led by Dr. Jennifer Haworth. Original transcripts were imputed into NVivo software by the original research team and partially coded based on interview question categories. In this study, NVivo was used to further code and analyze the transcripts.

As I set out to reanalyze these data, I used parts of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as well as methods of analysis proposed by Kvale (1996) to code data. Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) describe the constant comparative method as having four distinct stages: 1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) delimiting the theory, and 4) writing the theory (p. 339). Given that the goal of this research was not to create a theory, but rather provide a baseline understanding of how young adults understand vocation, only the first two stages were applicable. Kvale (1996) describes five analysis methods that include 1) meaning condensation, 2) meaning categorization, 3) narrative structuring, 4) meaning interpretation, and 5) generating meaning through ad hoc methods. These methods of analyses were appropriate for this study given the focus on trying to identify themes and relationships in the interview data, which ultimately led to a baseline understanding of how young adults make sense of the theme of vocation in their lives.
I engaged the data in different phases. Since there were pre-existing categories in the data set, in the first phase I reviewed each interview transcript in light of the study’s research questions, looking for specific themes to emerge while beginning to take notes and establish codes. For each interview subject, a separate codebook was established that included codes that were responsive to the research questions and addressed developments over time (e.g., year 1 interview, year 2 interview, year 3 interview). In the second phase, and in light of the codes I developed in phase 1, I looked across the 33 interviews in the study in an effort to determine which codes “stuck” across interviews, which ones needed to be modified in light of this cross-comparison of cases, and which ones needed to be eliminated because of their isolated nature. The goal of this phase was to compile a list of cross-case themes that were responsive to the study’s research questions. In the third phase, I revisited the themes in phase two. The goal here was to reconfirm the accuracy of these themes and whatever resulting categories that emerged, to enhance and strengthen the parsimony of the analysis by eliminating redundant themes, and to search for negative and disconfirming evidence. Finally, I analyzed the resulting themes in light of the conceptual framework and to see if its categories accurately reflected how the participants in this study had come to understand and influence their understanding of calling.

Although the analysis for this study was initially informed by the pre-existing categories articulated in the study’s conceptual framework, no other coding strategies were pre-determined.
Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

As indicated above, the original study adhered to proper ethical standards by ensuring the confidentiality of participants, obtaining informed consent, and receiving IRB approval. The IRB approval was still valid at the time I received the data set, therefore it was not necessary to seek further study approval. Additionally, confidentiality was maintained when I received the data set since the names of the original participants had been changed to pseudonyms.

Trustworthiness is a critical part of conducting qualitative research used to judge quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is defined as the “quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). It consists of four key components: 1) credibility (similar to internal validity), 2) transferability (similar to external validity), 3) dependability (similar to reliability), and 4) confirmability (similar to objectivity) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2007).

The credibility of this study was maintained through triangulation and member checking. Triangulation refers to “checking the integrity of the inferences one draws” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 298) or, in other words, ensuring that validity is upheld. Triangulation was built into this study through persistent observation, multiple data sources, and multiple researchers. The purpose of persistent observation is “to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). Persistent observation was achieved by meeting with the interviewees over time. The
three interviews allowed for the comparison of multiple data sources, while multiple
researchers reduced the chance of researcher bias percolating the interviews.

Member checking occurred at the time the data was originally collected. This
procedure allowed participants to verify their interview transcript for accuracy, as well as
provide feedback to the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As indicated above, copies
of transcribed interviews were shared directly with participants to ensure the accuracy of
interview statements and to provide opportunities for further reflection and clarification
of interview responses.

Transferability was built into this study through the use of “thick description”
(Geertz, 1973). Thick description refers to the process of gathering rich details of the
social and material world (i.e. events, rituals, and customs). The goal is to understand the
“implications of particular practices” (Hodder, 2003, p. 169). Thick description is not,
however, simply about gathering large amounts of detail. “Rather, to thickly describe
social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings,
intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode”
(Schwandt, 2007, p. 296). The use of thick description allows the reader to relate the
study’s results to his or her situation, thus increasing external validity.

To ensure the dependability and confirmability of the study, an audit trail was
developed. Audit trails act as external “checks” to verify that the procedures used in data
analysis are justifiable and that the study’s results and conclusions are confirmable
(Schwandt, 2007). In this study, interview transcripts and a research log, consisting of memos, analysis, and observations, were used for the audit trail.

Limitations

As with all research, there were limitations to this study, the foremost of which was scope. The participants in this study represented only one cohort of college students at a large, private, Catholic, Jesuit, urban university in the Midwest who participated in a co-curricular program focusing on vocational discernment. Based on the institution’s religious foundation and mission, it is possible that these factors could have influenced how the young adults in this study approached calling. For example, it might have been difficult for the participants to feel comfortable coming to a conclusion about calling that did not somehow reflect social justice and serving others, two of the core values of their university’s mission. Therefore, future research is needed to explore differences between private/public, large/small, urban/rural, and religious/non-religious institutions, and the many combinations among them.

Another limitation was the size and demographic makeup of the sample. While the original data set consisted of 22 students, only 11 were analyzed for this study. Of the 11 participants nine were female. Ethnically, six were white (all female), one Latina (female), one bi-racial (female), one African American (female), and two Asian (male). All were Christian except for one male who was Muslim. While these participants provided rich information and insight into how young adults make sense of the theme of
vocation in their lives, examining the remaining 11 participants (and, ideally going beyond them to others) would provide a more thorough description.

While I was extremely grateful to have access to pre-existing data, this also had its limitations. Because I did not collect the data myself, I was unable to form intimate relationships with those whose stories comprise the study’s data set. I did not, for example, have the opportunity to ask interviewees follow-up or clarification questions for better understanding and I was not able to take notes on any non-verbal cues. On a related note, another limitation that presented itself during the analysis was differences in skill levels among those who conducted the original interviews. As I soon learned, the more experienced interviewers were more adept at drawing more information out from participants, providing richer data. Because of this, it was difficult at times to find substantial qualitative material for all participants.

While inheriting a data set has limitations, it also has its advantages. One of these is the reduction of researcher bias. Since I did not participate in any interviews or transcribe them, I was able to avoid the insertion of bias into the research process. That said, as I analyzed data there was the possibility for bias to emerge. I was able to avoid such occurrences by being highly reflexive about my own values and beliefs as I sought to make meaning out of the sea of data included in this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

THEIR LIVES AND THEIR STORIES

For this study, eleven of the original twenty-two young adults involved in a three-year longitudinal research study are profiled. All were participants in an undergraduate vocational exploration and discernment program between 2001 and 2004. In this chapter, I provide brief vignettes of these young adults, focusing specifically on their family backgrounds, significant life experiences, and faith/spiritual beliefs. Through these vignettes, I attempt to put a “face” on the stories that will inform the findings that follow in Chapters Five and Six.

Alexandra

Alexandra grew up in a traditional Greek-American environment. Her parents worked, but neither was happy with their jobs. Growing up, Alexandra enjoyed spending time with friends and playing the flute, especially as part of her high school band.

Soon after enrolling at Loyola, Alexandra declared psychology as her major because she liked the idea of dealing with people’s “interior” lives. During her junior year she added sociology as a minor. Although she loved studying psychology, it was her parents dream that she would study biology and later become a doctor. Alexandra
believed that her parents pushed her in this direction for material reasons and status, likely because they were dissatisfied with their professions.

While in college, Alexandra had many significant moments that influenced her life. During her sophomore year, she stated that her involvement with Kairos – a faith-sharing group on campus – was influential because it prompted self-reflection that confirmed her identity as someone who wanted and needed to help people. At that time, she believed in God, but did not see God in her church. Rather, she saw God in prayer, people, and through her everyday interactions with the world. As a junior, Alexandra had significant struggles with her parents and with being a resident assistant. She experienced frustration and disappointment with her family, which she attributed to tensions over “not being Greek enough.” Because of this, Alexandra’s relationship with her parents began to deteriorate; she spoke less frequently with them and chose to become financially independent. As a resident assistant, Alexandra spoke of being “stabbed in the back” by her peers, which led her to experience a loss of community and trust in others. These negative personal relationships, especially with her parents, eventually led Alexandra to question her faith, especially during her senior year. As a senior Alexandra considered herself spiritual, but no longer religious. Although she continued to believe in God, she saw God as bigger than Christianity, as a force that was all encompassing.

After graduating from college, Alexandra hoped to work with adolescents, a desire which reflected her hopes and dreams to help others, particularly needy children and adolescents.
Cam

Cam is the only daughter of parents who divorced when she was a child and was subsequently raised by her mother. She also has a brother who is blind. Her parents were very supportive of Cam, often repeating this mantra to her, “do the best you can and keep family first.” Cam emphasized that she felt close to her parents and often went to them for support and help with decisions.

Cam’s father did not attend college, nor did he like his job. Cam’s mom, in contrast, “loved her job” as an occupational therapy assistant. In fact, Cam said that her mom felt called to her career. That knowledge, along with her parent’s dedication to hard work, inspired Cam. She lifted her family up as role models because they taught her to be true to herself and to make the most out of life.

As a sophomore, Cam declared women’s studies as a major and also considered a second major in religious studies, English, black world studies, political science, or international studies. Throughout her college years, Cam pursued many different interests. As a senior, she eventually settled on a religious studies major with a minor in women’s studies. She also had taken enough English classes to earn a secondary education endorsement in English.

Cam often spoke of her passion for working with and helping people. She was proud of her ability to speak with others, often helping them uncover and discern their true gifts. She strongly valued her family, especially her mother, and her personal faith. As a sophomore, Cam expressed a deep faith in God, saying that God was at “the core of who
I am. Faith and God go hand in hand.” Cam, however, was frustrated with the faith of her childhood, Roman Catholicism, and believed changes were needed, including the ordination of women as priests and allowing priests to marry. During her junior year, Cam completed an internship at an independent, Catholic organization that promoted justice and equality. Her time at this organization coincided with the height of the Church’s sex abuse scandal. Rather than deepening her faith, Cam’s internship experience threw it into a tailspin, making her question her childhood beliefs in unforeseen ways. She left her internship not only questioning her allegiance to the Catholic Church but also fully disgusted with how she had witnessed Church leaders handling allegations of abuse. Regarding her experience, Cam said:

I ended up having to leave [the internship] because I was being submersed in all the pitfalls of the Church and was [exposed to] all the problems and all the inappropriate ways of dealing with things. I never knew about all the behind the scenes stuff that goes on in the Church until I worked at [my internship site]. It took its toll on me and I had to get out because I would have lost any semblance of faith that I had. I already stopped going to Church because I was so sickened by everything that was going on. And I just could not handle being Catholic. I still kept my faith, but not necessarily my identification as a Catholic.

During this time, Cam also struggled with depression. Cam expressed in her junior year interview that she felt she had failed herself because she pushed her health, emotions, faith, friends, and family to the side. As a senior, however, Cam chose to come to terms with her depression and sought help. Slowly, she began a journey of self-care and discovered the importance of making her own health and happiness a priority in her life.
During the first semester of her junior year, Cam studied abroad in Rome. Cam described this as a positive experience during a rough time in her life. She said, “being in Rome was just like the most amazing experience ever. What made me happiest was just being overseas and traveling, learning, and growing. It was awesome that I didn’t have any responsibilities over there. I took naps in the middle of the day for the first time in my life.” She felt free to do what she wanted and, as a result of this experience, Cam believed she matured and learned much about herself. She described this by saying, “it was so liberating to be able to make my own decisions and not be tied down to anything…It was such a phenomenal experience. I did a lot of growing and changing there. I came back a much better and more well-rounded person. I also have more confidence in myself than I ever had before.”

As a senior, Cam described herself as a realistically grounded, and less idealistic, person. She felt she had solidified her calling as a teacher, but acknowledged she was still struggling with her faith. Reflecting back, Cam said her faith was “not as important as I want it to be. It's definitely been something that I've allowed to sit. I put it on the back burner when I really needed to focus on me and getting healthy. Although I'm doing a lot better, I'm still kind of searching.” Overall, Cam was proud of the difficulties she had overcome in college, particularly her struggle with depression. At the end of her senior year, Cam was offered a teaching position with a post-baccalaureate inner-city teaching corps on the East Coast. While she was excited to start this new adventure, she was concerned about being so far away from her family. Nevertheless, she headed East
because she felt strongly that this was the next step for her: to help and serve others by using her gifts and talents.

Carly

Raised in southern Texas, Carly is the only daughter of an Irish immigrant father and a Mexican immigrant mother. Carly is close to both of her parents and has been very influenced by them. Carly’s mother, a resilient woman of strong character who worked as a nurse, encouraged and challenged her to do what she wanted and not to concern herself with failure. “If you fail,” she told her daughter, then, “[you will] find something else to do.” Carly’s father, in contrast, was more rigid with life planning. According to Carly, her attorney father didn’t “understand why there would ever be a plan B. You just do something and stick with it.” Carly stated that her older brother had also been influential in her life, in part because he taught her how to be more open minded with others, largely a result of his stubborn and narrow-minded personality.

When Carly was 14, she traveled to Ireland to visit her extended family. This trip, by her own admission, completely changed her life. While abroad, Carly realized how big the world was around her and decided that someday she would leave her “small town” life. She elaborated:

I realized that there was this huge world out there and I was living in this little itty-bitty backward city where people end up marrying their third cousin, and it gets really strange. And, I never realized this until I was older, but my parents were outsiders because neither of them were from that city. My dad’s not even from this country. And the cultures were different, even though my mom’s culture was the same. But, the way she raised me was different because she didn’t like the
way the Mexican culture generally tends to raise their children. So the whole thing was this huge conflict of ideas and emotions, and I just sort of got lost and I thought, well, I don’t want to live in this city for the rest of my life, because my kids are going to grow up just as confused as I am.

Carly’s mom recognized and supported her courage, but her dad did not.

At Loyola, Carly chose to major in English because she loved to read and saw it as an all-encompassing major. Although she stuck with English throughout her time in college – also picking up a history major – she burned out toward the end of her studies. In this space, she found herself longing to study creative writing. Although she had entered Loyola anticipating a future career as an attorney or family court judge, by the time she graduated Carly was far more interested in following her passion as a writer.

During her junior year in college, Carly experienced several events that challenged her current way of thinking and led to significant self-discoveries. The first took place during her internship at a law firm. There, Carly realized she could be a good attorney because of her strong relational skills (something she pointed out was rare among the attorneys with whom she worked). Another significant self-discovery moment involved Carly’s understanding of social justice. The war in Iraq had just begun and there were many anti-war protests on campus. This challenged her thoughts and views of social justice because she had differing views on the war. It made Carly re-examine her thoughts, values, and callings. She reflected, “I guess I’m conflicted on how I feel about where social justice fits into the world right now. Any other time I would say that social justice is a big influence on me and I want to be able to incorporate that into my future career, but right now I’ve kind of lost sight of it.” Ultimately, she realized she needed to
trust her own voice and not be swayed by others. In addition to those already noted, Carly experienced two significant personal events during this time. Shortly after her brother got married – something Carly described as a wonderfully positive event in her life – she learned that her sister-in-law had multiple sclerosis. This shocking news made Carly take stock of just how important her family was to her. Around the same time, Carly began dating someone that sparked some jealousy issues with her friends, creating tensions she did not anticipate or welcome.

Throughout these difficulties, Carly’s faith remained solid. As a sophomore, Carly described her faith as “bigger than myself; it helps establish boundaries for what I should and should not do.” As a senior she affirmed her faith in God, emphasizing that it was not only the source of her inner voice, but also the source of hope in her life.

Carly regarded herself as a private and guarded person. She did not like to show her flaws or confess her faults to anyone. As she approached her college graduation, however, Carly admitted that with the help of her boyfriend, she had begun to put more faith and trust in other people and was open to learning from them. She also ended college the same way she began – full of hopes, dreams, and optimism.

Carmen

Carmen is from a Mexican immigrant family. Both of her parents worked very hard to provide for Carmen and to help others. This work ethic inspired Carmen and helped her realize that whatever she might encounter in life was “small potatoes”
compared to her parents’ struggles. Although Carmen was aware of some of her father’s regrets, she emphasized that her mom’s positive outlook on life and her father’s character as a father and a man had been constant sources of inspiration for her.

Carmen began college as a biology pre-med major and wanted to become a pediatrician because it combined two of her greatest joys: kids and science. During her sophomore year in college, however, her less than stellar science grades and lack of interest in medicine led her to declare a social work major. Carmen said she came to this decision through prayer, reflection, and talking with pre-med students and her mom. She mentioned that while it was initially difficult for her parents to accept her decision because they were very excited about having a “doctor in the family,” they supported her nonetheless, proud of her accomplishments as a college student.

As she began to learn more about social work and the good she could do for other people, Carmen developed a desire to work in a Hispanic community center in Chicago. During her sophomore year, Carmen went on a service trip to Kentucky that helped her see how she might “fit” in the field of social work. On this same trip, however, a childhood passion of hers – art – bubbled to the surface as she worked side-by-side with high school students. While not under estimating her desire to help others, Carmen had long dreamed of becoming an artist. She fantasized about earning an art degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which often made her question her interest in social work. She was, however, scared of “taking the next step” with art because she did not want to fail. She explained, “The fact that I could be serious and could actually try
producing some art is scary. Then, if I realize that I am good enough, what if I find out that I’m good enough to get into the Art Institute? Then I have a burden. I’m afraid because I’ve always been afraid of failing.” Failure was a significant barrier for Carmen and kept her from pursuing her art dreams.

There were several events that took place in Carmen’s life that helped shape and form her identity. Carmen’s paternal grandmother did not particularly like Carmen or her mother, despite the many things that Carmen’s mother did for her later in life. Upon her grandmother’s death, Carmen’s mother offered this important lesson to her: “Love people despite how badly they may treat you.” Carmen took this lesson to heart as she struggled to cope with her father’s alcoholism. Her dad’s drinking problem often led to family arguments, and, on many occasions, Carmen retreated into isolation where she prayed, wrote in her journal, and drew in her sketch book. These reflective activities proved to be valuable to Carmen in college, where she used these same reflective tools to discern her path in life.

As a senior, Carmen went through a difficult transition with her family as she began to distance herself from them to gain more independence. This was not well received by her family because it went against the traditional Mexican culture. However, out of this and other difficult experiences, Carmen came to a better understanding of herself and what she wanted out of life. Just prior to graduating from Loyola, Carmen was excited to accept a job as a social service coordinator at a senior housing center and begin the next chapter of her life.
Chico

Chico is the youngest of five children from a large Indian family. His father and brother own and manage several fast food businesses, and his mother is a homemaker. Chico described his parents as hard working and happy. Labeled by his family as the “smart one,” Chico aspired to go to medical school and become a cardiologist – something which his family supported unequivocally.

Not surprisingly, Chico entered college as a biology/pre-med major. He was passionate about helping others, but also liked that doctors were valued and respected members of society. He emphasized that he wanted to be a doctor so that he “could live for others,” a lesson he learned from his mom.

From as far back as he could remember, Chico always enjoyed volunteering and helping others in need. He believed that he possessed a special gift for relating to and communicating with others. Chico also valued his involvement with his Islamic religious groups, which included activities such as volunteering, spiritual enrichment, helping others in need, and teaching young children about the faith. As a child, he enjoyed these activities so much, in fact, that he would often choose to do religious activities instead of playing with his friends. Chico’s faith was very important to him, and he mentioned often how he took pleasure in using his faith as a way to seek out truth in the world.

Chico spoke of many people who had challenged and supported him throughout his lifetime. Although he often offered words of praise for his family, Chico’s appreciation for his mother was palpable. He described her as the most influential person
in his life. He cherished her as a motivational force who helped him realize that he is a leader who is respected widely in his faith community. As a senior he explained:

My mother has always been there for me. She keeps me motivated, and I'm happy that she does, because it's been really hard to study knowing that you're going to be graduating in three weeks. She's always been there for me and has helped me emotionally as well as spiritually. For example, a couple times a week before I go to sleep we talk about what's going on because I'm at school pretty much all day long. I don't know what's going on at home, either, so she gives me updates on what's happening around the house.... She's always been supportive, optimistic and positive, which helps me stay positive as well. If I start thinking about the negatives, that affects how I do in school and my mood. She's always been there for me.

Chico also spoke appreciatively about his Imam, an Islamic spiritual leader. He attributed his strong faith, in part, to this relationship. Chico explained that his faith was personal and secretive, which is characteristic of the Islamic faith, as well as spiritual. As he saw it, since “everything is temporal...what matters is spiritual and that’s eternal life.” Chico often engaged his spirituality through writing poetry, a practice that made him more aware of his many blessings and strengthened his commitments to give back to others. He desired to leave a “spark” in others that might ignite a fire in them to do great things. This was a lesson taught to Chico by his mother who once told him, “everyone lives for themselves to make money, but only a true human being would live for others.”

As Chico prepared for his college graduation, he was deep in thought about his next step. Although he had been waitlisted at several medical schools, Chico remained optimistic about his calling and confident in his future.
Chiquita

A first generation college student, Chiquita lived at home with her mom, dad, and her older college-aged sister. She expressed genuine love and respect for her family and was inspired by their support. She spoke lovingly of her father, a laborer, whom she noted enjoyed his work because it provided well for his family.

Positive and upbeat, Chiquita believed a special gift of hers was the happiness she shared with others. This gift was tested during her freshman year in college, however, when Chiquita’s grandfather became seriously ill and later died. This was particularly difficult for Chiquita, who was very close to both of her grandparents. During the illness, Chiquita observed the help her grandfather received from his nurses, and just how much he appreciated and loved them. This experience inspired Chiquita to study nursing in college. Up until that point, she had been considering transferring to another school to study physical therapy. Although she experienced some bumps along the way with difficult classes and nagging self-doubt, Chiquita completed a rotation in geriatric nursing during her junior year that affirmed that nursing was her calling. Here she discovered her passion for working with less able-bodied people and taking special care of them. During this time, Chiquita also developed an interest in working at a long-term care facility so that she could develop meaningful relationships with her patients.

Chiquita’s grandfather’s death also taught her an important lesson about selflessness. During her freshman year in college, Chiquita had applied for an internship at Disney World. Although she had dreamed about this for a long time, when Chiquita
received word that she had been selected as an intern, she turned the opportunity down so that she could spend more time with her grandfather. She did not regret her decision, noting that she was proud of her actions because this was the first time she had to sacrifice something in her life. In her words:

[My decision] showed me [that I had] the capacity to love and give up things for love, which I’d never done before. Everything I wanted to do in life, I pretty much did. I never really had to give up anything to do something. So this was the first time I gave up something and [demonstrated] selflessness. It completely reaffirmed who I was and put me in check with my morals and who I wanted to be.

Growing up, Chiquita’s Catholic faith was a very important part of her life. Her beliefs made her want to be a better person. She often found God in people, or relationships, rather than in places, or institutions. While in college, Chiquita became unsure of where she fell along a continuum between “being religious” and “being spiritual.” As a college student, Chiquita found herself praying more often and with greater intentionality. As she continued to drift further away from organized religion, her belief in God and spirituality remained steady, even though she remained confused about her faith life. As she put it:

I’ve learned you can build on your spirituality and not have to maybe be a part of one church, or one set of beliefs, and believe in all of that. And that’s been good. I’ve gone back to praying and I found out that I don’t have to agree with everything in the Catholic Church, but I believe in God. I’ve also realized that it’s not right then to stop praying because it’s not God I have an issue with.
Chiquita acknowledged that she might be missing out on “something” and that she feels like a “cop-out” because she is waiting for a sort of sign that will give her clear direction regarding her faith.

A reflective young adult, Chiquita recognized and appreciated the hard work and sacrifices of others. Chiquita’s appreciation for the education she received and the sacrifices her parents made to ensure it helped her clearly to see her many blessings. As college graduation loomed for Chiquita, she underscored that the things that mattered most to her were her friends, family, and life. These, along with her passion for nursing, prompted her to say, “although my future is uncertain, I could not ask for more.” Clearly, Chiquita’s time in college ended the same way that it began: on a positive, upbeat, and enthusiastic note. Chiquita was still waiting to find out about job opportunities at the time of her graduation.

Dorothy

Born into a loving and affectionate family, Dorothy grew up in a small town in Ohio. Throughout her childhood, Dorothy benefited from caring and supportive relationships with her parents and older brother and sister. As the daughter of two successful attorneys, Dorothy was always challenged to think critically. More importantly, however, Dorothy stressed that her parents’ first priority was always their children’s happiness. She spoke appreciatively of her parent’s encouragement and support, and noted that they never pressured her about specific career or life choices. Like
so many of the students interviewed for this study, Dorothy strongly valued family, noting how her college years had shown her “how important my family is [to me] and how I don't spend enough time with them.” As evidence of her strong family ties, Dorothy said that she had begun to make decisions based on how they would affect her family. As a senior she was contemplating teaching English as a second language in another country, but reflected, “Do I really want to spend another year away from them? [My family] definitely influences my thinking about next year.”

Growing up, Dorothy was passionate about animals, cooking, theater, and writing. Her love for the latter two found expression in college through her involvement in the school newspaper and its theatrical productions. When Dorothy began college, she wanted to use her Classics major to inform her career as a professional writer and journalist. Her work at the school newspaper led her to rethink her interests in journalism, however, and moved her more in the direction of “writing for fun.” As she explained, “when [writing] becomes work, it becomes less fun. So, when I’m thinking about what I am going to do with my gifts, I have to like what I am doing.”

As a college student, Dorothy discovered that she enjoyed volunteer work that involved helping and teaching others. As she did more of this, Dorothy began to consider teaching as a possible career. For Dorothy, life lacked meaning if she could not be doing something that made an impact on the world. In her words, “life’s just a lot less fun if you’re not making a difference in somebody else’s life.”
College was a time of tremendous growth for Dorothy, in part because of the range of experiences she encountered during it. One of these involved the ups and downs of friendship, prompting Dorothy to develop a deepened sense of independence and confidence. Another was the loss of Dorothy’s grandfather, which fostered a fruitful re-examination of Dorothy’s relationship with her father and the important role he played in her life. But perhaps the most significant experience Dorothy had in college was when she studied abroad in Rome. Here Dorothy developed a number of meaningful relationships that taught her what love, friendship, respect, and valuing others as individuals was all about. She explained, “I would say the most important friends that I’ve made were in Rome. They are lifelong friendships.”

When asked about her faith life, Dorothy stressed that spirituality had always been an important part of her life, but religion was something with which she struggled. Her belief in God was grounded in her Catholic upbringing. Although Dorothy valued the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings on love and social justice, she struggled mightily with its historical teachings on and views of women. Nevertheless, Dorothy believed that her faith was intentionally tied to her service work because it led to reflection and prayer. She participated in certain activities, in her words, to become “spiritually satisfied.”

During her senior year interview, Dorothy observed that her time in Rome, along with the assistance of friends, had helped her to become less critical of the Catholic Church and more appreciative of all that the church had to offer. In fact, by the time of graduation,
she considered herself a “practicing Catholic” – a label she had not identified with for many years.

As graduation neared for Dorothy, she became even more aware of how her faith and spirituality were shaping her desire to teach. As she considered her options, Dorothy hoped either to be part of the JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) program, to volunteer in Latin America, or to teach ESL at a local community center. Regardless of which path she followed, Dorothy’s clear desire was to better the lives of others by teaching them English.

Elise

An intelligent, tough, and strong willed individual, Elise was born to Polish-American parents in Chicago. Although her parents were encouraging and supportive, Elise knew that they were concerned that her psychology major might not “pay the bills.” Not to be held back, Elise continued to follow her dream of becoming a counselor.

Influenced by an ex-boyfriend’s troubled past and the Columbine High School shootings, Elise felt drawn to working with adolescents. During her junior year, Elise added English and French minors to her psychology major. As she put it, English was an easy addition because she loved to read and write; French entered the mix because “it sounded cool.”

Elise experienced several significant life events during her high school and college years. As a teenager, Elise was forced to deal with two significant losses: the death of her grandmother and her mother’s unexpected unemployment. Despite these
negative occurrences, Else was inspired by her mother’s ability to cope with life and remain positive during hard times, as well as her mother’s continued dedication to family and living life to its fullest. Throughout her late teens, Elise also observed her ex-boyfriend battle the legal system. Although they remained close during college and were supportive of each other, Elise’s relationship with her ex-boyfriend cast more shadow than light in her life, causing her great sadness. College for Elise was filled with ups and downs. Although she found pleasure in the vocational exploration program of which she was a part, she often felt overwhelmed by her schoolwork and commitments. Elise also struggled with depression throughout her college years.

Entering college, Elise said that she believed in God, but considered herself more “spiritual than religious.” She did not rely on any faith tradition to help her make decisions, choosing instead to make them based on her own “gut feelings.” During her sophomore year, Elise attended a retreat and later became friends with a couple of guys who challenged her to get back into her faith. She began attending Mass and tried to apply teachings from scripture and what she heard in homilies to her everyday life. In time, Elise became more disciplined in her spiritual practices and more aware of how her faith and spirituality informed her life. By the time of her senior year interview, Elise had embraced Roman Catholicism as her faith tradition and was committed to marrying only a Roman Catholic man in the future.

At the time of graduation, her future plans were not determined.
Kana

Kana is an African-American female from Gary, Indiana and is the oldest of five children. She was very proud to have two wonderful parents whom she described as “strong role models” for a loving marriage. She stressed that her parents encouraged all of their children to “do their best” holding them to high standards. Their hopes for their children were grounded mainly in their own life disappointments. Kana’s father dropped out of college and her mother stopped going to school after graduating from high school. Kana said she was strongly motivated to finish college because she did not want to have regrets in her life like she witnessed especially in her father.

As a child, Kana said she enjoyed writing, acting, singing, working with others, and being involved with her church and faith community. As a teenager, Kana and a friend started the “Jesus Club” for adolescents at her church. Kana was very proud that the group continued to thrive to this day. Although she had dreams of becoming an actress or a writer after graduating from college, Kana’s deeper passions focused on becoming a counselor who worked with children. Her artistic dreams, she said, could be satisfied through community theater and freelance writing, but her passion for making a difference in the lives of children meant that she would need to study social work now, which she did.

Going to college was a significant event for Kana. She began as a commuter student, driving daily back and forth to Gary. Commuting took a toll on Kana’s energy level, and also made it difficult for her to make friends and get involved on campus.
Fortunately, Kana had a strong support network and encouragement from many different sources. She acknowledged that her family, a particular professor, and mentor all played important roles in helping her learn more about herself and the type of woman she wanted to become.

During her junior year, Kana went on an Alternative Break Immersion (ABI) trip to Memphis, Tennessee to work with children who were afflicted with HIV. The experience of working with the children further confirmed her decision to study social work.

Kana was quick to point out that her faith and belief in God had been a constant in her life, noting that, “without God,” she had “nothing.” As a college student, Kana wondered about religions other than her own, and, for a time explored the teachings and spiritual practices of Islam. Her discoveries, however, brought her back to Christianity, in part because she could not see Jesus as anything other than the Son of God. The experience of exploring other faith traditions ignited a spark in Kana to learn more about her Christian faith, and eventually deepened her own relationship with God.

During her senior year, Kana learned that she had been accepted into a master’s program in social work. Kana was excited to begin her studies, taking her one step closer to living out her passion to work as a youth counselor.
Patch

The youngest of three children, and the only son, Patch grew up in a divorced household in Dallas, Texas. Although, Patch had very little contact with his father, whom he described as an abusive husband, he enjoyed a rich and loving relationship with his mother. Patch’s mother, a nurse, worked hard to provide for him and his sisters. He recalled fondly the long hours he spent as a child at the hospital while his mother completed her shift, noting that she had no other options for childcare. Patch’s mother was very supportive of her children, but also held them to high standards. Patch was happy to oblige his mother’s expectations, excelling as both a student and leader in high school. By his own admission, Patch recognized his own arrogance as a teenager, and admitted that he had to make some “adjustments” to his ego and ambitions as a college student.

As a youngster, Patch had a number of medical problems that contributed further to the many hours he spent in a hospital. Patch developed a number of memorable relationships with doctors and nurses during this time. These early experiences sparked Patch’s desire to study medicine. As he explained:

Growing up I spent a lot of time in the hospital as a patient and with my mom when she worked. When I was really young I was sick a lot just because I was very premature when I was born… Then, growing up [my siblings and I] went the hospital with my mom. We didn’t go to the day care. So, we stayed in the hospital and it was a huge part of my childhood and was something I enjoyed. I remember as a child my mother would have medical magazines or books or whatever, and I’d sit there and read them and she would teach me. And I would ask her questions and that’s how I kind of realized, okay, I’ll be in medicine. I’ll be a doctor.
Patch entered college as a pre-med student, declaring psychology as his major during his sophomore year. His interest in psychology was grounded in a desire to learn about people’s behaviors and psyche.

Patch attended a Jesuit high school that heavily influenced how he viewed the world. In particular, he valued service, personal integrity, social justice, and being a “person for others.” As a teenager, Patch enthusiastically embraced the label of being a “good guy,” and enjoyed doing volunteer work and helping others. These passions and values accompanied him to college, where Patch continued to be a tolerant, community-centered person who cared about social justice. Unlike in high school, however, Patch struggled with finding the right balance between volunteer and school work, and his grades reflected this tension. Patch’s strong desire to engage his interests in community service, political action, and social justice often led him to question his interest in medicine, noting how he often felt “boxed in” by his pre-med curriculum.

Patch identified his mother and “everyone” as the most significant people in life. He stressed that his mother taught him the importance of hard work and helping others. Unfortunately, his mother’s hard work took a toll on her health. When Patch was in college she was diagnosed with cancer. Instead of working less and focusing on her health, Patch’s mother worked herself to exhaustion. Patch learned an important lesson here about work/life balance. Eventually, her illness forced his mother to stop working.
Besides his mother, Patch had other positive influences in his life, but he did not see any of these people as mentors. This helps explain his comment that “everyone” influenced him. Patch respected peoples’ qualities and traits, but he did not want to be like any one person. He chose instead to identify qualities in others that spoke to his values and then tried to incorporate them into his personality. He took full advantage of the experiences and relationships he had in life to learn as much as he could to become the person he most wanted to be.

Patch regarded God as a generic or transcendental power. He believed God was in “everything – it can be you and me.” He did not equate God with a particular religion, despite his Catholic upbringing. He saw all religions as basically the same, offering a collection of stories that gave answers to some of life’s big questions. Patch said that his background in theology had led him to prefer spirituality to religion, seeing spirituality as a broader, unifying force that was based on ideas that can change. He felt that religion – with its emphasis on doctrine and dogma – was too constraining and was often used as a “crutch” to legitimate a worldview or way of life. With this all said, Patch did appreciate what his Catholic upbringing taught him about social justice and ethics. He believed everyone was on Earth to make a difference; “If we’re not making a difference, why bother being here?” This connection between work and spirituality strongly informed Patch’s worldview and animated his desire to become a doctor.

At the time of his graduation, Patch was still unsure of his future plans. He had not yet been accepted by any medical schools.
Patty

Patty could be described as a dreamer. One of her dreams was to become a performer, preferably one of the singers in “Riverdance” or some other musical production. She also dreamt of going to medical school, getting an MBA, going to graduate school for physical therapy, and traveling throughout Europe. When Patty reflected on her dreams, she began to see that what she really desired was a way to combine her passions for music, healing, and people.

Patty was aware that she possessed many talents outside of her musical abilities. She related well to others, had a good sense of humor, and genuinely wanted to help others in need. Alongside her gifts, Patty also was aware of her limitations. During high school, Patty had struggled with bouts of depression. This difficult time taught her that she needed people in her life and had to be more vulnerable with and open to them. This was a major self-discovery for Patty who admitted that she often “put up walls” to protect herself from being hurt by others. Fortunately, Patty had the strong, loving support of her family to lean against during these emotionally demanding years.

Patty’s family consisted of her three sisters and her parents. Patty spoke lovingly of her mom and dad, whom she described as encouraging, supportive of education, and committed to their children’s happiness. Patty’s parents completed their college degrees later in life; her mom studied education and her dad nursing. Their hard work, dedication to learning, and enjoyment of work was inspiring to Patty.
Patty started college as a music major on the pre-med track. Near the end of her sophomore year, Patty dropped pre-med, but picked up biology and women’s studies minors.

Introspective and articulate, Patty recognized that she spent some of her college years battling her own insecurities and taming her own inner critic. She became increasingly aware that her biggest obstacle in pursuing her hopes and dreams was herself. Two experiences in college helped Patty to get a handle on and eventually deal constructively with her insecurities: a youth band/fine arts camp she worked at during the summer and an international ABI (alternative break immersion) she took during her senior year. The camp experience helped Patty recognize and name the hurdles she put up for herself and challenged her to break out of her shell, take risks, and trust others. In her words, “being at band camp really made me aware of the walls I put up because of feeling unsafe and afraid of getting hurt by putting myself out there. This [discovery] gave me a new reason to explore music and to remind myself why I really like being involved in music.” The ABI in Costa Rica taught Patty how to better relate to others, open up to them, and listen and learn from people different from herself. For example, she recognized and learned “the joys of nonverbal communication and how actions speak louder than words. This is especially true when you have a language barrier. I’ve never felt so connected to people than on that trip.” Additionally, Patty credited her two best friends in college with helping her to be less negative and critical of herself.
Patty believed in a higher power that she called God, but was not confident that this was the appropriate word to use to describe her beliefs. She felt that God could either mean many different things or the same thing – a testament to Patty’s belief that all religions are pretty much the same. While she attended Mass, she did so mainly for the community rather than for any religious reason. Through a retreat experience and conversations with others, especially a Jesuit, Patty became more spiritual and prayerful. This helped her engage in conversations with God that prompted meaningful self-reflection.

As Patty neared graduation, her future was still largely up in the air. She was having a difficult time deciding what she wanted to do, in part because her family was experiencing difficult times. One sister was pregnant, which was a blessing, but another was struggling with an eating disorder while the third was coping with depression. As a result, Patty was strongly putting her future plans on hold temporarily and tending to her family.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have offered a brief description of the 11 young adults in this study. In the chapters that follow, I will explore the various factors in their lives that led them on their journey of personal growth, self-discovery, and ultimately a personal understanding of calling.
In Chapter Five, I will revisit the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter One, honing in on how its seven domains influenced these young adults’ personal self-discoveries and understandings of their callings. In Chapter Six, I will direct my attention specifically to how these young adults understand and make meaning of the theme of calling in their lives, and what this has meant for their own vocational discernment process.
CHAPTER FIVE

INFLUENCES ON CALLING

As outlined in Chapter One, this study’s conceptual framework identified seven key domains that could potentially influence young adults’ understanding of call: 1) faith/spirituality, 2) interpersonal relationships, 3) encounters with other, 4) values, 5) critical life events contributing to self-definition, 6) understanding of passions, gifts, and talents, and 7) developmental issues and one’s capacity for self-authorship. In this chapter, I draw upon the experiences of the 11 participants in this study to explore how these domains have helped them come to a better understanding of who they are and what their calling is through self-discovery and self-reflection. Since this framework was developed to focus on how these domains may influence calling, vocation is frequently referenced in this chapter. That said, in Chapter Six a specific discussion of how this framework applies to young adults’ understanding of vocation and calling will be fully explored.

As I analyzed the extensive interview data for this study, it became clear that the seven domains that comprise the conceptual framework are interactive, often influencing students’ understandings of themselves and calling simultaneously. As a result, some domains surfaced as more directly influencing calling, while others played more indirect,
supporting roles. The four domains that had a more direct influence on calling are faith/spirituality, interpersonal relationships, encounters with other, and developmental issues. The remaining three domains – values, critical life events, and understanding of passions, gifts, and talents – are woven into the other domains to highlight their indirect influence and strong interconnectedness.

**Faith/Spirituality**

The faith/spirituality domain suggests a connection between young adults’ commitments to their faith, spiritual, or religious beliefs and their views of a unique purpose or calling in their lives (Fowler, 1981; Love & Talbot, 1999; Palmer, 2000). This domain also recognizes that faith/spirituality can influence how young adults understand and make meaning in their lives. Kana explained that she valued her relationship with God above all else because “without that, things would just be too confusing.” Chico also put it simply when asked what he valued in life: “First of all it would be God, of course. He comes first and foremost. Because without him and his blessings, I wouldn't be here.” Despite the conviction that faith reigned supreme within their value systems, for many interviewees these systems were nebulous or uncertain. As highlighted in the vignettes in Chapter Four, the participants in this study expressed varied faith beliefs. These included 1) a belief in God that was spiritual, not religious, 2) a belief in God that was not spiritual or religious, 3) a belief in God that was religious, and, 4) a sense of spirituality that was not tied to a belief in God. Accompanying these views was a belief among some that God
existed outside of a formal religious institution or church. Many, for instance, said that they experienced God in others, through service, and through social justice.

Notwithstanding these variations in beliefs, in this study faith/spirituality shaped young adults’ perspectives on the meaning and purpose of their lives in two ways. First, many chose to separate religion from spirituality and explored why this distinction was important to them. Second, most experienced changes in their faith/spirituality during their college years that affected their emerging views on vocation.

**Religion vs. spirituality**

The young adults in this study were forthright about how they viewed religion and spirituality. First, most intentionally separated religion from spirituality in their discussions of faith. Second, most suggested that they made this distinction because religion “carried a lot of baggage,” and they believed their spirituality transcended any organized religion. From this perspective, this separation allowed them to connect more authentically and intimately with a belief or power that gave meaning and purpose to their lives. Third, the relational ties young adults constructed between religion/spirituality and vocation varied, with some emphasizing spiritual ties and others secular bonds.

Many of the participants in this study expressed concerns about organized religion as an “institution.” Chiquita, for instance, made a distinction between spirituality and religiosity, but admitted she was still trying to figure out which fit her best. Chiquita said she believed in God, but had a hard time with the Catholic Church. She was also beginning to recognize herself as a spiritual person, and not just a follower of a specific
religion. Her deepening spirituality had led her to pray more often and to get better acquainted with God, especially outside of formal religious structures. As she put it:

I had these beliefs, but with everything [going on] with the Catholic Church (e.g., sex abuse scandals), I was struggling. I wanted to cut off the whole God idea. I believed in God, but I didn’t want to give credit to him. I had so many issues with my Roman Catholic background. By cutting church out [of my life], I kind of cut God out. And I didn’t really pray, either. I believe in God, but I kind of stopped praying and just focused on my life. But then one thing I loved [learning about] was with the whole idea of calling. That is spiritual. So for a while I would just think, well, God is a spiritual thing. Like your church tradition is spiritual. And I think what I’ve come to learn this year is that spirituality encompasses more than just the religion you were brought up in. And then I think in terms of calling, and I’m like, what am I called to do? All of this has a spiritual aspect, because otherwise I think it’s just a career. But if you see it as life’s work and calling, I find there’s a spiritual element in that.

In much the same way, Carmen described her struggles with organized religion, but also recognized that her decision to bypass participating in a church community had potential drawbacks:

I personally believe in God. I believe in a higher power, that higher strength. Am I exercising that faith in any way or shape or form? No. It's been that way for a while. I think it's going to be that way for a while, too. I don't think I'm at a place yet where I'm ready to go back into a church. I don't know how I'm really going to be living out my faith. But, it may not always be that way. I don't know. I'm okay with that and it's been something that I'm struggling with...I'm definitely not religious at all. I don't prescribe to any religion. I don't call myself anything. But, if you want to be technical, do you believe in Christ, a Christian, something like that? Yes. But I don't go to any specific church or anything like that. But I know that I'm missing something there.

Carmen is struggling with finding where and how faith fits into her life. In simpler terms, she is saying “I’m okay, but struggling,” and “I know I might be missing something, but I definitely don’t want religion in my life right now.” Yet at the same
time, Carmen remains open that this narrative may change, recognizing that her views toward a religion “may not always be that way.” These internal struggles, which often found expression in contradictory statements, were common among the participants in this study.

Alexandra offered more insight into the “spiritual, but not religious” theme when she described her own changes in thinking on the topic:

I was very…religious. My senior year in high school, I gave a talk about God and things like that. And then freshman year and little bit of sophomore year, I [began to] think religion was problematic. I think people don’t see whole pictures because they’re very focused on their own beliefs and their own ideologies. In terms of religion, it’s not really that important, but in terms of spirituality, it is important. I think spirituality is who you are and what drives you and what motivates you. So, I think my spirituality is important because I’m motivated to really live out the Christian ideas and [the ideals] of the other religions. And do things social justice oriented. Spirituality is really who you are and the impacts that you choose to make and it encompasses the whole person.

In contrast, Chico discussed the interplay between spirituality and religion in his own life. For him, the two were inseparable elements of his faith:

I am more spiritually based largely because we have secrets in our [Muslim] religion… Muslims believe that we come from Allah and we return to him. And so this thought about returning to him is where the thought about whether you’re pure or whether you’ve committed sins comes into play. Personally, I think that in order to return to him you either return to him the same way you came into the world or you become a better person and return to him. Meditation is one of the ways that I can become a better person, because it [helps me return to God].

Chico elaborated on some of his spiritual practices, including writing poetry, in which he reflected on and expressed his spiritual separation from God, a key part of his Muslim faith. When Chico was asked how he would describe his faith or spiritual beliefs
to a friend, however, he focused more on describing his religion, noting that he felt less comfortable talking about his spirituality. While he did not go into detail here, perhaps the secretive nature of his faith led him to guard the mystical spirituality that was at the foundation of his religious spiritual story.

As noted above, the relational ties young adults construct between faith/spirituality and vocation vary, with some emphasizing spiritual ties and others, secular bonds. On the one hand, participants who had a spiritual construction of faith and vocation viewed God as a non-judgmental cosmic spiritual or transcendent force. They saw vocation as an individualized passion or great joy given to every human being, and often described it as a spiritually cosmic “calling,” although the source – and the purpose – of the call was ill-defined. Patty illustrated this view well, describing calling as “using your gifts in a way that leaves you spiritually satisfied at the end of the day…and looking forward to doing it again the next day.”

On the other hand, participants who articulated a secular construction of spirituality and vocation viewed God as a mythical figure or non-entity, and understood vocation as something they were interested in, good at, and found enjoyable. For these young adults, vocation was not necessarily inspired by a larger “cosmic plan.” Alexandra and Patch offered examples of this view:

[Alexandra]: I’m not very spiritual – I don’t believe in a higher power. I don’t think God is directing me on where to go. But, I do have a belief that some things are meant to be. I do believe that some people are meant to go certain places. And so I’ve always viewed my life and my career path like, “you end up where you’re supposed to be.” And things suck sometimes, but they suck for a reason because
you need to get to a different place. I believe that there is something directing me, that I will make the right decision.

[Patch]: Call and vocation hold a lot of baggage, especially from the Judeo-Christian point-of-view. I would just say that vocation is looking at what you’re doing, what you’re good at, what gives you energy, what helps you to be the most productive being you can be…So vocation is, I guess, about understanding self and then using that understanding…to come to grips with who you are and what your goals in life are. How you fit in the picture…How you can become the best person you can be.

The ways in which these young adults fully understood vocation and calling will be discussed in length in the next chapter.

Experiences of change during college

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the emerging adults in this study experienced a shift in their religio-spiritual beliefs and the value they placed on them during their time in college. Some of these changes were inspired by specific experiences, while others simply unfolded as part of their growth and maturation.

Cam offered an interesting case-in-point. In her sophomore year, Cam described her belief system in this way: “Of course I believe in God. And that belief just comes from the core of me. I don’t even understand it. It’s liberating to have God in my life…and to know I’m going to be ok. And this feeling just makes me a much stronger person. [I’m] ready to take on anything.” She acknowledged, however, that she did not always feel this way.

Before I came to college, I was one of those Catholics that went to church on Easter and Christmas. And then I came to a Jesuit university where spirituality is everywhere. And I just started listening and realized I was not whole. Then God came and filled it. I always knew something was missing and God came and it’s important to me to keep that relationship strong and true and keep that love
around me, because only from there can I go out and be who I am. Because God makes me who I am. And I owe Him so much. And so that is the number one priority in my life. The most important thing.

During her junior year, however, Cam interned at an independent, Catholic organization and came face-to-face with how church officials were dealing with the Catholic Church’s sex abuse scandals. This experience significantly rocked her faith. In March of that year, Cam reflected:

I’m not very involved in the Church…I feel like such a cop-out. But, I’m still a spiritual person. I very much believe in a higher power and in a God and, in a sense, service. I think that, unfortunately, it’s been more of a structural installation of Jesuit ideals of social justice and serving others that has really helped me. I believe in the Jesuit mission and to be there for others and for social justice. I very much treasure [this] as part of the Catholic faith.

Similarly, Alexandra’s comments illustrated the faith struggles many study participants faced during college. During her sophomore year, Alexandra offered this perspective on her faith:

I believe in God. I mean, right now I don’t really see God in church. I see God in prayer. But I think where God is the most vivid is in people and the interactions. I think that’s where God is like strings [on an instrument], playing a melody. It’s different for everybody and some people might find that in church there’s God. But, for other people it might be something different. So that’s right now where I am. [I see] God in other people and everyone.

By her senior year, however, Alexandra had experienced some very difficult interpersonal tensions with her friends in college. Given that she had previously found God in others, these tensions muddied her belief system and led to an altered view of religion.

I really had a very strong faith and religion in my life [when I started college], but I feel as if it has in a sense dissipated…because the tradition I was brought up on
has proven to be, in my mind, very hypocritical and it’s not really Christian-like in embracing people. And even Catholicism, other forms of Christianity, and other religions are problematic [for me now]. But I do definitely believe in a higher power and spirituality. And a God. Now I don’t think it’s the same God that it was when I first came to college. But I think God shows itself in many different ways.

Chiquita also began college with a strong belief in God and attended a Catholic church regularly. At the time, she noted: “My beliefs make me want to be a better person.” However, by her senior year, she no longer felt a connection to the Catholic Church but still believed and placed value in God.

Not all participants experienced a loss of faith, however. Dorothy, for instance, experienced an increase in her religio-spiritual beliefs in college. As a sophomore, she struggled with how Roman Catholic leaders viewed the role of women in the church. As she put it:

I don’t exactly know where I stand in terms of faith, but I have a very deep belief in something beyond what we are. But, I have a beef with the Catholic Church [because] I don’t think Jesus would have been very cool with the idea that women aren’t really allowed [to be in] leadership roles in the Church. He was such a counter-cultural sort of revolutionary type of person and he hung out with the lepers and the prostitutes. And he gave women leadership roles in his ministry.

Through her experience of studying abroad in Rome and the assistance of friends, Dorothy became less critical of the Catholic Church and began to accept it “as it is.” As a junior she offered, “I know in the past I’ve said that women can’t have leadership roles in the Church, which really isn’t the case. Women just have different leadership roles in the Church.” By the end of college, Dorothy was increasingly involved in her church and
appreciated “belonging to a church family where you know the fundamentals of everyone's beliefs are the same.”

Similarly, Dorothy believed in God but struggled with religion early in college; by her senior year, she was a practicing Catholic. She acknowledged her boyfriend and other friends as significant influences, referencing their encouragement to continue developing her faith as integral to her wholeness. At graduation, the value Dorothy placed on her faith/spirituality was at an all-time high.

For many participants in this study, the struggle of identifying a personal belief system was common and often resulted in an ebb-and-flow of personal beliefs. Although challenging, the exploration of faith/spirituality engaged them in a transformative process in their quest to find meaning and purpose in their lives. For these young adults, the search for “purpose” in life proved to be a catalyst for self-exploration that they acknowledged and embraced.

Summary

This domain brought to life the struggles young adults in this study experienced with understanding the role of faith and spirituality in their lives, and how these understandings affected their emerging views of “self.” It also underscored the complexities of self-exploration, particularly as participants struggled to find connections between faith/spirituality and their personal vocation or call. Overall, this section highlighted how participants’ views and understandings of spirituality and religion often changed during their college.
Interpersonal Relationships

The interpersonal relationships domain recognizes that parents, siblings, peers, mentors, and others often shape young adults’ understandings of themselves and their calling (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1994; Leider & Shapiro, 2001; Levoy, 1997; Palmer, 2000; Parks, 2000). The relationships that study participants experienced greatly influenced all of the other domains in the framework and, as such, significantly shaped how they began to make meaning of their own lives and calling. Within this domain, three major themes emerged: 1) the critical role of family members in young adults’ lives; 2) the salience of friends and other close non-familial relationships; and 3) the importance of student groups and activities, especially EVOKE and OnCall, on participants’ understandings of self and vocation.

Family

The influence of family relationships on the young adults in this study cannot be overstated. Whether between siblings, parent and child, or grandparent and grandchild, these relationships influenced, motivated, and challenged participants to reflect on how they felt about themselves, how their values affected their view of self and the world, and what they wanted from their lives.

Growing up, Chiquita was often compared to her “smart” older sister. Although she found this difficult, Chiquita explained that as she got older, she began to see more fully the truth of her talents:
It was very hard for me growing up because people thought I was the dumb one. I would cry because I would think I was not smart like my sister [even though] I always got B’s and she got A’s in grammar school. Then we got to high school and my GPA ended up being higher than hers. I know it’s terrible that I had to see my sister score less than me to make me feel smart, but it’s definitely what made me realize that I’m not dumb. Growing up, I was always overshadowed by all of her medals and certificates and awards. But when we got to high school, I blew her out of the water. It helped me to realize I was smart and I became more confident in my abilities.

In contrast, Cam discussed how her relationship with her brother had influenced her life:

My brother’s struggle has really influenced the way I view myself because he’s legally blind. He’s struggled his whole life with this disability. He’s suffered from discrimination and depression. But his will to live the life that he deserves, despite his disability, is so admirable. He has risen above so much [opposition] and continues to always be optimistic… People will point at him and I get so mad! But, he’s like, it’s alright. I don’t care… I wonder, can I be like that? Is it possible for me to do that, even though I don’t have a disability? It’s really opened my eyes. I have learned so much about myself from him. It’s been a good source of inspiration for me.

Many young adults spoke of the support and encouragement they received from their families as a specific reason for valuing and being influenced by them. As Chico put it: “One thing I know that’s very important to me is my family. They have given me support ever since I was little, in whatever I wanted to do. So they play a big role. My parents have not only acted as parents but also as friends for me at hard times. And they’ve given me advice and almost every time that advice worked.”

As participants expressed their passions and dreams, it was often their families who provided the most support and encouragement. Patty, for example, had dreams of
one day writing a book. It was not until her cousin encouraged her to pursue it further that she began to consider this as a real possibility.

I’ve also been battling with the concept of [writing] a children’s book because my cousin Sue thinks I’m hilarious for some reason. And she’s told me that I should write a book about my life. And I’m like, “that’s just crazy.” And she’s like, “no, it would be really funny and I want you to get published.” After [thinking about it], I thought it would be fun. And so I’d write a children’s book. I can do it on the side.

Parents, especially mothers, were often singled out by both male and female participants as sources of inspiration. Some mentioned how their parents worked tirelessly and made many sacrifices so that they could provide for them, while others discussed the adversity their mothers faced and how they overcame it. During his junior year, for instance, Chico reiterated the influence his mother had on his life, serving as a source of motivation for him:

I can still say that [my mom is] the primary influence [in my life], along with my family, of course. The reason why she is my primary influence is because like even now, when I’m not doing as great as I should be on the MCAT practice exams, she still motivates me and tells me that as long as you put in hard work, you’ll get the benefit for it. She is there whenever I need help. She’s just a great motivation source for anything that I do.

Elise told a similar story:

[My mom] has been unemployed since mid-February. She hasn’t lost her job, but she just doesn’t work. She has no work to do. But, she spent the past year just making the most out of her life and we know she works when she can. Even when she can work, sometimes she doesn’t want to…[because] she’s really dedicated to my family. She’s done everything that she’s ever wanted to do with her life and she’s very happy with where she is right now. So I kind of use her as a model for what I’m looking for [in life].
Patch often referred to his mother as a source of inspiration, admiring the values she embodied: “If my mom saw others that didn’t necessarily have certain things, like if she could help them in whatever way, [she would]…If someone was sick or maybe they didn’t know as much about health care and medicine, she was the first one that would explain to them what’s going on.” Patch noted that his mother’s passion for her own calling, and the tangible impact it had on others, was a major reason why he was considering a vocation in medicine.

Sometimes parents teach best through what they do not do well. As inspirational as his mother was, Patch also recognized areas in her life that he did not want to emulate. He raised this point when he discussed his mother’s poor work-life balance:

My mother has always helped me through a lot [of tough times]. I mean, I don’t necessarily agree with her all the time or enjoy her thought processing, but certain pieces of who she is have contributed to my life…[Her illness] really puts things in perspective for me about what’s important, what’s not. It makes me realize the importance of taking time [for yourself]. I mean, she doesn’t, she works all the time and she’s constantly going. [She] doesn’t take care of herself. Enjoy yourself, that’s what it’s all about. [By] working all the time you don’t get many of life’s rewards.

Chico offered a glimpse of how strongly he valued the relationships he had with his family in this way:

I don't know why, but I'm really attached to my family for some reason. They are another reason why I wish to be a physician. My mother also had the dream of me becoming a physician. She did push me towards it, but it's not like I had to be a physician, though. It was just another option. Looking back, I see all the sacrifices that they have made for me... For example, I'm just studying and going to school because my parents know how hard sciences are. And they said, no, it's okay, you don’t have to work. Just focus, we understand it's hard. Just basic things like that are what I really value…and I take it to heart. And [in the future, I want to] look
back and say, okay, how can I turn this around, give it back to them? And I see that by being a doctor.

Whether it was through their hard work, values, encouragement, or a difficult experience, the family members that surrounded these young adults strongly influenced how they began to recognize meaning in their lives.

**Friendships**

Participants also underscored the role that their friends played in deepening their faith or spirituality, enhancing their self-understanding, and supporting them during times of need. As they made clear, friends often helped the young adults in this study better understand who they were and who they were becoming. Dorothy offered an interesting perspective here, discussing how through conversations and companionship, she and her friends explored questions of faith, religion, and spirituality in ways that deepened their friendships with each other and their God:

There's been a huge shift in a couple relationships I've had. When I first met Paul and Steve, Steve was a lapsed Catholic who really had serious problems with the Church, and Paul had grown up Calvinist and was like borderline agnostic when I met him. And now, Paul’s converting to Catholicism, Steve’s back in the Church, and they're both bolstering my faith. It's like they had their weak points when I was at like this apex of super Catholicism, and now I'm sort of sliding back down and they're holding me up. And I think it's part of the reason that our friendships are so strong, because we're open about talking on issues of faith, and we're okay to talk about our doubts and the things we're having trouble with. And I think they represent Christ-like behavior to me in such a good way. They help my faith just as much by being able to sit down and talk about theological concepts as they do with their actions. Their supportive and loving nature has demonstrated the communal experience the Church talks about. It's not about floating along on your own. It's about being with other people and rituals are all communal, and it's all about sharing in a group the religious experience. And I think they do that for me. They act like my little community here [since] I don't really have a parish right now. But I have sort of my own little church buddies, if I can say that.
In much the same way, Elise shared how one of her close friends brought faith back into her life, largely through the example he provided for her.

I went on the Connect Retreat the first year as a leader. And, the really funny thing about the connect retreat is I connected with someone, and he was my co-leader. And his name is P and he's known here on campus as Jesus P. In terms of my spirituality, when I started going to church, it was to go to church to kind of listen to the homily and ponder it. And now I go to church and I listen to all the readings and I listen to the homily and I ponder about [them both]. One of the things that I really respect about P is that he's so grounded in his faith and he takes it seriously and he applies it to his life every day. And that's definitely allowed me, especially in my spirituality, to take what you read in the Bible and what you study about your religion and apply it to your life, much as he's done. It was definitely an eye-opener to like go out for a night of drinking and then come home, wake up in the morning with a hangover and like P just happens to call. I don't want to go out, I don't feel good. “What did you do last night?” “Went out drinking.” “Elise, you know you shouldn't do things like that.” He believes that. He doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, he doesn't do drugs. He's very respectful of himself as a person. And I've come from the other end of the perspective where I used to not respect myself at all. [Because of him] I'm able to sit down the next day and say, “Okay, that wasn't the smartest move. I should have done this, I could have done this instead.” And whereas prior to that I would just say, “Okay, today's a new day, let's just move on.” But now I'm making a more conscious effort to look at those actions and say, “Okay, that was the consequence. What can I do to change the consequence next time? How can I better respect myself and consider what direction God might be pushing me?”

But friends were not only influential in fostering reflection on matters of faith. As Alexandra illustrated, friends also influenced and challenged the assumptions young adults held about their nation and world:

[My friend] G has very much opened my eyes to many different things. [I have learned] how social, economic, historical, [and] political factors all integrate and all form the local, national and global communities. I mean, I think that's really what I'm passionate about finding out more about, and really trying to influence.
Friends also played an important role in helping participants come to understand themselves better. This often occurred when friends, within an open and trusting relationship, challenged one another to reflect on who they were and who they wanted to become. As Carly said of one of her friends:

He’s one of the few people that I’ll allow to point out my faults. And I’ll get angry, but I’ll stop and I think, “he is right.” And I know he’s not doing it to belittle me. He’s doing it so that I can feel better about myself. So that, in turn, makes me realize that well, there are a lot of problems that I have that I need to fix and that people will still like me anyway...Now, I’ll stop and I’ll think before I feel a certain way or anything and wonder, “well, [my friends] told me that I tend to exaggerate on this point, or I tend to get overemotional about this, so maybe I should stop and think about it first.” [My friendship with O has made] me a little bit more rational; [it has kept] me from flying over the edge, boiling over and stuff like that.

Many students experienced adversity, failure, and other difficult times during their college years. One way, among others, that they made it through the tough times was to rely on friendships. Dorothy, for instance, said this about the importance of having people around her and how they helped her to get back on her feet: “This is the thing that I found in my life. Any time that there have been huge setbacks and I’ve been phenomenally depressed or crushed or something, it’s been reaching out to other people that has taken me along. You can’t spend your whole life alone, because you’re not gonna feel anything.” Likewise, Carmen said that she often “leaned” on one of her college friends “because she’s been able to validate a lot of stuff that I’m feeling, like when everything seems to be going downhill. We’re sort of in the same boat [because we both have similar problems] and so we kind of hold each other up.” Finally, Cam, during
her senior year interview, discussed the influential role that her college friends had played in helping her to understand herself:

The friendships that I've made in college have truly shaped me into who I am. I never knew how much fun it was to be a feminist until I met my core group of four girlfriends. They're just an amazing, amazing group of women. And I feel truly blessed to be recipients of their friendship because I've learned so much about life and about laughter and about tears and just about girls and interactions through them, and they like complete me. They have just made me have so much fun and, and they bring out some of the best parts of me and I know that I will always have them and that truly shapes the rest of my life, because I know that I will always have them to count on. And I think it's great to have a core group of friends that you solidly know will last a lifetime. So that's really going to influence and shape who I am in the future and who I am now.

**Student groups**

It should not come as a surprise that the young adults in this study underscored that their involvement with various student activities or groups, particularly EVOKE and the OnCall program, played a significant role in their lives. In particular, these experiences helped them either discover their passions and callings or led to new self-discoveries. While some had an easier time than others exploring their callings, they all valued the opportunities they had to talk with others about “big questions” related to faith, vocation, and “living a life of meaning and purpose.” The interpersonal relationships that developed through these student groups – and the meaningful conversations that marked them – left a lasting impression on study participants in part because, as Carly put it, they “opened [us] up to a whole new world.”

Cam was one of many study participants that identified EVOKE as having a significant impact on her life:
An experience that I would say has shaped me into who I am would be EVOKE. Never before have I known the importance of following your passion. And I've always thought that you find a job and if you like it, that's great. But I never knew how important it was to me to really find something that truly spoke to me. It made me choose my major. It made me really listen to my call to volunteer after graduation. And it's really focused my life into being a person for others and to doing things for others. I know that eventually I would have been led there, but I don't know if it would have been this soon or this early in my life. And I just am so grateful to have been able – not that I'm set in stone and I know exactly what I'm doing – to really have a true grasp of what is important to me and where I want to go with my life. And, I mean, being truly a person for others is infiltrated into every single relationship I have, whether it's with a class or a friend or a parent. Like, I'm truly working for others and [learning how to] be there for myself.

For Chiquita, it was her OnCall mentor who challenged her to dig deep and reflect on her life's meaning:

I'm so thankful for [my OnCall mentor]. When I was thinking about changing majors, he just sat me down in his office and was like, “we need to talk about this.” I cried in his office for an hour. He was like, “why do you want to be a nurse, why don't you want to be a nurse?” I also had big issues with failure and he helped me conquer that…What I liked about him was that even as he got to know me, he didn't have expectations for me. And I think it really helped not having a person who's thinking about college loans, how much a certain profession pays, and this and that; because I know my parents are. He was more like, “No, what do you want to do? This is your life. This is your calling.”

Similarly, Patch’s relationship with his OnCall mentor helped him solidify his calling to be a doctor. As he explained it:

[My mentor] in the program and some of his doctor friends met with us not too long ago. We were just having dinner and talking about what it was like to go to med school and be a doctor. We talked about what they did and it just kind of reminded me of, hey, that’s what it’s about, that’s what I want to do…It was hearing about the patient relationships and serving people that connected with me.
Summary

Within the interpersonal relationships domain family, friends, and student groups played a significant role in shaping study participants’ understandings and interpretations of themselves and the world in which they found themselves. These newly discovered self-understandings helped many of these emerging adults begin to make connections between who they are and their callings. As we shall see in the next section, however, these relationships were not the only influences that shaped these students’ sense of vocation.

Encounters with Other

The next domain discussed in this chapter, encounters with others (Coles, 1993; Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996; Parks, 2000; Portaro & Peluso, 1990), investigates how experiences with community service, different cultures, and nature often inform young adults’ callings. Whether positive or negative, these encounters provided rich learning opportunities for the participants in this study, frequently prompting them to look deeply into and discover new understandings of themselves. The most prominent encounters that led to new self-discoveries included going to college, cross-cultural experiences, and working with others in community service. Within each, participants stressed that their experiences challenged their thinking, helped to clarify their values, and often led to a deeper awareness of their gifts and passions.
For most young adults, going to college can be an exciting, scary, and challenging time. Some participants in this study experienced college as commuter students, magnifying the social and academic rigors of college while growing increasingly independent as emerging adults within a familiar (and sometimes inflexible) home environment. Others experienced college as a time of tremendous transition, moving out of their family home (which sometimes entailed moving across the country), living on-campus, and joining a brand new community of learners whose values, beliefs, and ideals may– or may not – have been congruent with their own. Throughout this research, young adults candidly reflected on how entering the culture of college challenged and helped them to grow intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, as well how this experience affected their self-confidence and self-worth.

As a sophomore, Alexandra spoke of the influence college had on her maturation as an emerging adult. Part of her discovery was a newly found confidence and independence that helped her understand that she was called to helping others.

Going to college helped me to realize I can’t rely on others anymore. I’m on my own. I have to do things that I want to be doing…I’m happy that I am studying what I want to be studying…[College] has helped me realize that what I want to do is help other people, whether it’s working in a poor area or with children who don’t have that great of a home life.

Through each experience in college, Alexandra’s views and understandings of what it meant to help others began to take shape. In her senior year interview, Alexandra
collectively reflected on her college experience and the impact it had on informing her views of self and the world:

I have learned how many social, economic, historical, and political factors all integrate and all inform the local, national and global communities. I’ve learned that’s really what I'm passionate about finding more about and how I’m really trying to influence something…I have stopped thinking with my own White, middle class perspective and really started looking at the world in many different ways and recognizing the many different influences that are played out in the world. So I think those experiences are what I will not only hold on to, but also continue to take action on throughout my commitment to myself and commitment to what I choose to do in the future.

During their sophomore year, study participants were asked to discuss some of the greatest influences on their life to that point in time. Cam’s response to this question was spontaneous and direct:

[Greatest influence?] College, of course! Who knew that I could get myself up every morning and go to class. I also proved that I could burn tacos in my apartment…It’s been so exciting. I’ve found God and if that is not life changing, what is? I’ve come into my own these last two years. I came back [this] year…and instead of saying what am I going to do, I said what am I going to do now? [This was] a big change from the past. And I came back very focused and determined…I love learning. I love going to class and even if my professors suck, I love going anyway, because I’m going to learn something from them and my classmates. And I’ve learned so much about myself and my beliefs and where they come from. And college encouraged and emphasized so much growth.

In this statement, Cam describes how college, and more specifically living on her own, attending classes, and learning from professors and peers, prompted significant growth in understanding who she was as a person. In her senior year interview, Cam reflected on how her college experience affected her self-definition:

College has taught me to be responsible for me. Like to be responsible for my feelings, be responsible for my classes, and be more aware of everything because
I’m on my own out here…And college has taught me the importance of my family. I took my mom for granted when I was at home. And it’s taught me, I keep coming back to this, but it’s really taught me the importance of me.

In a very heart-felt manner, Carly described an encounter with college peers that challenged her to reflect deeply on her own views of social justice. The time was March, 2003, and the Iraq War had just begun. By her own admission, Carly was confused about where she stood on the war and was quite uncomfortable with the strongly anti-war sentiment on campus during this time. In this context, Carly referenced a retreat she had gone on in late March of that year, noting how her confusion swelled during that weekend.

I was sitting there and I just said, I don’t think I’m ready to be here. I just felt that a lot of the focus was on what was going on now. And I know that a lot of the people are very interested in social justice. I think what kind of set me off and made me very uncomfortable was when they mentioned that [a Loyola student] was supposed to be at the retreat, but wasn’t because she was arrested for protesting. And everybody started clapping. And right there I felt that they shouldn’t be clapping. And I questioned if this is the time for me to be interested in social justice. Not because I’m not interested, but because I’m very confused about it… I think I’ve just closed myself off to it right now because of how social justice is viewed on this campus. I don’t feel that I would fit in with the social justice views on this campus. And it kind of makes me feel very alienated and kind of makes me push it aside and not want to think about it and say, I’ll wait until things calm down. And then maybe I’ll address it.

Carly then explained that she was conflicted at the time over whether she was pro-war, anti-war, or somewhere in between. She was concerned that by sharing a conflicting opinion on a campus that was so strongly anti-war, she would come across as being disinterested in issues of social justice or morality. She elaborated:

When I was in high school I thought college would be an opportunity for me to learn more about things, especially things that are going on in this world that
shouldn’t be. I thought I can protest and get arrested and stuff like that. And I’m thinking, well, this is my opportunity, but I don’t feel it’s right. I don’t feel that I should be protesting. But I feel that on this campus, if you’re not protesting, then where are your social justice ideals? I feel that on this campus I can’t be interested in social justice and not protest the war. So that kind of makes me question my views on social justice. Maybe I’m not interested in social justice? I know I shouldn’t be so much influenced by what goes on on-campus, because everybody’s opinion is different. [I am interested in] promoting Jesuit ideals and Jesuit values. [They] have a great history in social justice. So I feel that if I don’t agree with them, then maybe I am wrong. But at the same time, I’m not willing to let go. I don’t think I am wrong, but sometimes I feel that maybe I am….It’s teaching me to not let people have so much of an influence on me as they should. I shouldn’t necessarily hold someone’s values as my own. That maybe I need to march to a different beat….Trust my own voice, my own instincts and act on that and not worry about what other people are gonna think, because I’m sure the protestors go out and they don’t worry about what other people think, so I shouldn’t worry about what they’re thinking. So it’s just kind of hard when you view these people and you admire them for their beliefs, but when their beliefs conflict with your own, it’s kind of a clash. It takes a whole lot of courage to find your own feet and move off on your own.

These few examples show that going to college was a time of significant growth, learning, and refreshing independence. It was through encountering a new community of educators and learners, and peers with varying beliefs and ideals, that the participants had new self-discoveries. These new revelations, which sometimes came as a result of negative or difficult experiences, often led to more confidence and a stronger sense of self-worth.

Cross-cultural experiences

Studying and traveling abroad also proved to be a significant experience for many participants. The impact of these experiences varied, but through their encounters with other cultures and people who were different from them, participants’ views on the world and, maybe more importantly themselves, expanded.
Several international trips during college provided Dorothy with enriching learning opportunities. She was studying abroad when the 9/11 attacks occurred her sophomore year and she described it as a strange, scary, and emotional time. While she experienced a rush of defensive American patriotism, similar to what was happening in the States, she “wasn’t wearing an American flag and running around singing the national anthem. I was just being respectful and I was treated with respect in return.” This turned out to be “a lesson in itself”:

Just learning how to deal with people not as an American first, but as a human first. And realizing that if you do that, you generally are treated like a human in return. It’s very rare that you treat someone with respect and they’ll treat you like dirt. And they would have probably treated you like dirt anyway, no matter what your nationality.

During her senior year, Dorothy traveled with an OnCall group to Ecuador over spring break. Although she was excited by the service orientation of this trip, the reality of it was “disheartening.” As she recalled:

It’s still been so recent since we got back from Ecuador, but I feel like that taught me a lot about how not to do things. Whoever [ran the mission we visited] has the wrong idea [of how to run it effectively]. I mean, I just don’t see how isolating a few families and helping only them is a Christian way to do things. So that experience made me reflect on and critically examine any program that I would go [on]…[It also made me realize] I need to consider how I go about whatever I do. Is it motivated by faith? And, who is it really helping? Is it just making me feel good about myself, or is it actually helping someone who's marginalized or impoverished? It made me think a lot. It also made me think a lot about the people who were in our group. [It] was a group of very strong, and for the most part positive, people who really wanted to do the right thing. Our interests were all so varied, but I think we all want to go out into the world and make a positive change. And it was a great group to be with. It made me think a lot about the people in my life, and the people I want to be around for a long period of time.
Through both of these experiences, Dorothy was challenged to think more broadly about how she viewed self and neighbor, and how she wanted to interact with both. Her reflections led her to develop new understandings of respect and how she best wanted to work with and serve others.

In her first interview as a sophomore, Carly described her experience of growing up in a very small, close knit community. She explained how traveling to Ireland opened her eyes and prompted reflection on what she wanted out of life:

When I was 14, my parents sent me to Ireland [to stay with extended family]. I realized right away that there was this huge world out there and I was living in this little itty-bitty backward city where the same families are marrying – they end up marrying their third cousin, and it gets really strange. It was also hard because my parents were outsiders since neither one of them were from that city. My dad’s not even from the same country. And the cultures, although my mom’s culture was the same as that culture, the way she raised me was different, because she didn’t like the way the Mexican culture generally tends to raise their children. So the whole thing was this huge conflict of ideas and emotions, and I just sort of got lost and I thought, “well, I don’t want to live in this city for the rest of my life, because my kids are going to grow up just as confused as I am.” And I see my friends, their families have been there for generations. And it’s almost like they don’t seem to aspire to much more. Well, okay, I’ll go to college and I’ll get my job. I’ll go back, I’ll work, I’ll have kids, I’ll have grandkids. They’ll grow up and they’ll end up in the same boat that I’m in, and I don’t want that. I just want to be able to see the world, see what there is, and find a place where it didn’t matter if I didn’t have the same ideas as everybody else or if I didn’t have the same ideas as anyone else. So, going to Ireland helped me realize all that.

The cross-cultural experiences described by study participants shed light on how they unearthed new self-discoveries. Simply by being around “different” people, participants learned about themselves and how they interact with others, the importance of respecting all people, and an appreciation for the world around them. These new
discoveries, often realized after periods of critical reflection, commonly led to a clearer understanding of a personal call, as demonstrated by Dorothy’s call to serve others.

**Community service**

Many study participants also indicated that working with others in their communities led to new self-discoveries. Although they valued service, volunteering, and social justice before coming college, these values intensified during their time on campus. Many stressed that their experiences with service helped them to feel a deeper sense of purpose in their lives and, often, helped them to identify their passions for making their community, city, country, or world a better place. Alexandra offered a glimpse into this desire:

I know I talked a lot about helping others… I really think it's more about sharing. Sharing of oneself and learning. I think what's really important to me is to continue to learn about people, about cultures, about life experiences, and you continue to share that. And many social justice issues are very important to me: global inequalities, discrimination, immigrant policies. I mean, there are many flaws in our government and the way it conducts itself not only nationally, but globally. It's very oppressive and I think I'm very passionate about continuing to learn more about that. I don't really know if there are many changes that I could do, obviously, right now. It’s very hard to take on something like that. But, [I] continue to be aware of that and see what I can do in the global world. Where I fit into it – that’s important to me.

Alexandra also recalled a volunteer experience where she first understood the impact that one’s environment can have on decision making. She reflected:

I think it started when I was working at [the social service agency] with youth who were on probation and in gangs. I really started to see the social impact of how they made the decisions they made and realized that it’s not always the person’s fault, but that their situation can be blamed. I also [began to see] the
effects of the environment and the effects on different policies that made their lives the way they are.

Some interviewees connected their interest in working with others specifically to their passions and dreams. It was through volunteering at a homeless shelter, for instance, where Kana realized the importance of being satisfied with what she had in life. She said this experience changed her as a person “because I realized that it’s not materialistic objects that make you happy. It’s those who are around you and how you feel about yourself.” Through similar experiences like this, Kana discovered her passion for working with children and her calling to work at a community agency in her hometown of Gary, Indiana. As she explained:

I want to go back there and try to do something with the children in Gary because I think if you start with the children, you can definitely make a difference. Sometimes adults, they’re too far gone for you to try to set them on the straight path, so to speak. But I think if I do something with the children, I could definitely make a difference there in Gary and show the country, show the world, that everything in Gary is not bad. You could still come from Gary and still make good [of yourself] and be successful. And just by me being here at Loyola, it’s showing a lot of people that everything that comes from Gary is not bad.

Engaging their communities through service and interacting with different people also allowed the study participants to connect their work to their passion. As Cam put it, “I’m passionate and genuinely want to give all of myself…to help others. [I hope] that passion and enthusiasm [will] carry through in everything I do.” This passion for serving others echoed throughout all of the interviews in this study. The most common types of service mentioned included teaching, volunteering, medicine, counseling, advocacy
work, and working in local communities to promote social justice. Dorothy fervently described a favorite volunteer experience of hers:

I love tutoring at the Literacy Center. I love it. Every night when I leave there I'm like jumping up and down because I've had a great experience. I just love it. I get really excited about it. And the learner I have now is just amazing. I hope that she and I will be able to stay in touch. I'm hoping we can write letters to each other in English so she can work on her writing. Because that's really what she has to work on.

Other young adults were able to connect serving others to different aspects of their lives. During his sophomore year, Chico described how he connected his passion for helping others to his spirituality: “I want to help others in whatever capacity I can because everything is, well, to bring a bit of poetry here…everything is temporal. So, it’s all going to go away. It’s all going to decay away. What matters is spiritual and that’s eternal life, and that’s why I want to help.” In his senior year interview, he continued to recognize that spirituality and religion were important to him in choosing a vocation and that he believed he had special gifts and talents in relating to and communicating with people. He offered these insights into how he had reflected on his gifts and talents when deciding whether to be a doctor or a “holy man” in his Muslim faith:

Instead of asking myself, “what talents do I have through which I can help the world,” I asked myself, “what would be the most effective way for me to help the world?” I don't want to sound arrogant, but I believe I have many talents. And I could have gone down many paths. Being a holy man, not a problem. Could have done it. But, I don't think I would have had a better effect on the world than if I was a doctor. Becoming a doctor is where I feel I can most impact the world.

Chico, and many other interviewees, shared a desire to choose a vocation that would allow them to be most effective in helping others. One way for interviewees to
identify this chief contribution, as Chico illustrated, was to examine their innate gifts and talents, while another was to invest in intensive knowledge and skill development.

Participants expressed a desire to identify themselves as masters of their disciplines, validating themselves as true contributors in their field. In the end, they hoped to have something tangible, either expertise or experience, that others would recognize as legitimate and valuable. These discoveries were intensified as the participants engaged in experiences with people different from themselves.

In their service to others, many of this study’s participants also recognized an opportunity to be a positive influence on others. Chico spoke to this point well:

I really don't care about the fact that people remember me or not after I die. But what I've learned through my [Islamic Center] is that you will also want to leave a spark or influence, and that spark is what keeps you going. So I want to ignite that spark in other people. I want to make it grow if they already have it. And so I want to meet others who think like me...who want to change things for the better. It doesn't really matter what means I do it through, but as long as I reach that goal where I can have some kid looking up to me and saying “thank you,” something where I can see that I was helpful. I always try to put myself in [other people’s] shoes and see what I would want. That's why I [want to] become a doctor, so I can go in that community. That's where I see the most need.

Dorothy also shared the desire to have a positive influence on others, stating that she wanted to make a difference “if not globally, at least on an individual basis. One of the best feelings that I’ve had is when somebody has told me ‘I’m so glad you were there, because nobody else was.’ I think that’s really a big reason we’re here, to be there for each other. And life’s just a lot less fun if you’re not making a difference in somebody else’s life.” Relating her thoughts to her mother, Elise echoed Chico’s and Dorothy’s
desire to be influential: “I kind of hope to be the type of person that my mother is now. Someone that will guide people and have them look up to you and honestly listen to for advice.”

While serving others might have started as a passion, it also prompted a desire in many participants to learn more about issues of social justice. As Alexandra explained:

I've always been geared toward continued understanding, self-growth, and learning about social justice issues. I have always loved to volunteer and do service work… I've always been passionate about meeting people and learning about different social justice movements and issues. Learning what my role is within those issues and continuing to learn and grow from those experiences [is important to me].

As a result of their service, many participants recognized they were acquiring new knowledge of themselves and others. This self-discovery, they learned, was just as, if not more, important than serving the specific needs of others. To illustrate this point, Kana noted the following: “I want to do community activism, but my hopes rely on learning more about different cultures and how I can play a role in that, creating awareness for others, and creating awareness for myself.”

Stories about the impact of community service on the lives of young adults in this study were numerous. As referenced time and again, these young adults valued, were influenced by, and were passionate about their experiences with serving others. In turn, many were motivated to share their gifts and talents with their communities. These experiences played a strongly influential role in shaping participants’ callings to “feed the world’s deep hungers.”
Summary

This domain suggests that the callings of young adults are often influenced by their encounters and experiences with others in college, cultures different from their own, and community service. Participants repeatedly underscored that these encounters were significant in challenging their thinking, clarifying their values, and shedding light on their passions and what they found meaningful and purposeful in life.

Development

In this section, I discuss the development domain. This domain provided the glue that brought the conceptual framework together. As such, it allows for a final examination of how each domain influenced participants’ understandings of vocation in their lives.

The development domain focuses on self-authorship from cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal viewpoints. Kegan (1994) describes cognitive self-authorship as the capacity to construct, critique, and reconstruct knowledge and meaning. He purports that interpersonal self-authorship is the capacity to engage in relationships with others without losing one’s own identity, while intrapersonal self-authorship is the capacity to construct identity that is separate from external influences. The vignettes in Chapter Four and the discussion of the other domains in this chapter provide examples of how the experiences, life events, and personal growth of the young adults in this study have led to self-authorship.
Time and again, participants in this study demonstrated their emerging reflective abilities throughout their time in college. The purpose of reflection is to develop a better understanding of something. Perhaps more than any other skill, this capacity for critical reflection prompted significant growth in participants’ self-authorship. To be sure, reflective inquiry was often spurred by retreats, coursework, conversations with friends, mentors or family members, or experiences with adversity or failure. But while these experiences provided a trigger, students had to make the choice themselves to engage in reflection. Such self-reflection proved to be a necessary step for vocational discernment and decision-making. Alexandra offered a glimpse of this when she said:

I applied to be an RA my freshman year but I didn't get that and it really crushed me. It really made me reflect on myself and on my developmental state. Although it was a failure in my eyes, I feel like it was best. I needed that year to grow and to engage in different experiences like Big Brother/Big Sister and Communities Dare to Care in order to become an RA. And so even though it was a failure in my mind, it became a winning experience.

The way I look at things is that through a negative experience there are positive things that come out of it, even though you may not see it right away. I don't really know right now what my goal is, but those failures play a role, whatever that is. I really like change and learning, [having] experiences with others, sharing, things like that. That's my larger goal. And I think that motivates me, so those failures have helped me.

Kana experienced a kind of uncertainty and developmental growth during college that prompted critical reflection. She focused on making sense of the significant roles that her faith and her identity as an African-American woman played in her life. As Kana put it:

Since I’ve been at Loyola, I’ve questioned my faith a lot. I’ve never said, “Oh, I don’t know if there’s a God.” I know that there is God, but I’ve been asking
myself, “Am I doing the right thing?” I’ve been looking at other religions. I’m not sure if I’m going to convert, but I’ve just been looking at [other religions] and [trying to figure out] how they coincide with my goals, my beliefs in life, and basically that’s important to me. Because without God I really don’t have anything. And then another thing that’s important is my identity. I have to know who I am before I can try to tell somebody else what to do or try to help somebody else. And I’ve been learning about that. I’ve been taking a Black women’s studies course. It’s really been showing me and teaching me what it is to be Black… It just helps my identity in showing me who I am and what my full potential is. God and my identity definitely make up who I am. And that’s the foundation of every other relationship that I have with anybody else. My relationship with God has to be strong. My relationship with myself has to be strong. Because if not, then any other relationship that I have with anybody else isn’t. It wouldn’t be to its full potential.

An aspect of the developmental process that the participants often acknowledged was the challenge of integrating a passion or calling into their lives, especially if the calling was more avocational in nature. Carmen described her passion for art and how she dreamed of being able to find a way to incorporate it into her life:

I think what keeps springing up in me is art, especially drawing. For me art has always been sort of my relaxation, my outlet. And I just keep thinking of it more and more seriously. I’ve mentioned that I’d love one day to have a degree in fine arts. I think if somehow, some way along the whole path of life, I can figure out a way to get art into my life, then I’ll be happy. That’s probably the big dream I have right now.

Another example of how reflection impacted participants’ abilities to author their own life stories was by examining their personal well-being. Bombarded by so many outside pressures, influences, and life circumstances, many emerging adults find it challenging to take time to focus on their personal needs. Making a commitment to personal well-being was evident within many interviews and, for those who actively sought a healthy balance in their lives, the value of focusing on “self” had become clear.
Having been knocked off-center earlier in college and battling through a debilitating depression, Cam discussed how she had come to value the call to self-care and wholeness during her senior year:

"I'm really excited to be able to say this: I'm important to me. For the first time in my young adult life that I can recall, I'm focusing on myself. I've never been a priority in my life. I've always focused on other people's happiness and being there for them, even people who I'm not very well acquainted with. It's always been so important to me to project this image. But, I matter now. And my emotions matter. And my physical well-being matters. And my health matters. And I'm allowed to feel how I feel and I don't get mad at myself for not feeling the way I should be feeling. For the first time I'm a priority, and it's really changed the way everything works in my life. Not that I'm self-centered now; that's not what it is. By me being in a healthy place, I can be that much better for everyone around me. So I'm my number one priority, but not like in a getting myself to the top of a ladder, a power hungry lady, but my personal well-being is important to me now, and I think I'm going to treasure that and the lesson that I've learned.

Similarly, Carmen looked back on what her time in college had taught her about personal happiness and wellbeing:

"Now, I'm more at peace with myself. And what's important is to be happy. The definition of happy is yet to be defined, but I know it isn't necessarily found within the material possessions. Not that I wanted material possessions as a freshman, but I would think if I didn't have to worry about money issues, then I would be happier. I think now I realize that even if I have to struggle a bit...hopefully I'm [going to be] doing something that I really love. Being surrounded by the people that I really care about is very important to me. I understand that I don't have to fit anybody else's mold. Sometimes people tell me to be yourself. But they don't get it. They don't get that it's a whole transition of figuring out who you are. And I'm still figuring out [who I am]. But, I’m at the point where I can say, What kind of person am I? And then you start feeling more comfortable in your own skin. Which, I think, means everything. Makes you kind of calm down, too."
Although some of the young adults struggled to take care of themselves while balancing their lives as college students, others found motivation in anchoring their efforts in an appreciation of personal well-being. Many of the participants, regardless of circumstances, were able to recognize the importance of self-care toward the end of their college years, helping many to construct more authentically their own identity.

As Kegan (1994) purports, self-authorship is based on the ability to use newly constructed knowledge to engage in relationships and develop an identity based on self-discovery. Through whatever self-discovery process they used (e.g., reflection, talking with others, experience), many of the emerging adults in this study discovered their passions and callings. Yet some recognized that their newly found interests would not become a reality because of real or perceived barriers. While often disappointing, these participants developed a self-awareness of their limitations. A more detailed discussed of barriers will be address in Chapter Six.

The development domain illustrates the interconnectedness of the conceptual framework. Through the influences of faith/spirituality, interpersonal relationships, encounters with other, values, critical life events contributing to self-definition, and self-awareness and understanding of passions, gifts, and talents, participants began to examine more critically the meaning and purpose of their lives, often fostering in them significant growth and development.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how the domains articulated in this study’s conceptual framework offer insights into young adults’ understandings of who they are and their emerging callings. As I analyzed interview after interview, it became increasingly clear that these domains were interrelated, shaping each other to varying degrees. Four of the seven domains, in particular, appeared to be explicitly distinct, while the remainder – critical life events, values, and passions, gifts, and talents – seemed thoroughly integrated throughout the framework. Further, it became evident that the critical life events domain manifested itself so strongly in the other domains that it became redundant and unable to stand on its own as a separate category. Further explanation of this discovery, along with a revised conceptual framework, will be provided in the final chapter. In the next chapter, my discussion of calling continues with more specific attention drawn to how this study’s conceptual framework applies to young adults’ understanding of vocation and calling.
CHAPTER SIX

YOUNG ADULTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF CALLING

Building on the discussion presented in the previous chapter, I now explore how the self-discoveries young adults experienced during their college years began to shape their understandings of vocation. Specifically, in this chapter I seek to do five things. First, I explore how the young adults interviewed for this research defined calling, who or what they saw as the source of the call, and whom they believed received callings. Second, I examine how study participants understood vocational discernment within the context of their everyday life and career choices. Third, I trace how participants’ views of their callings emerged over the course of their sophomore, junior, and senior years in college. Fourth, I identify and discuss several impediments, or barriers, to vocational discernment that the participants often voiced in their interviews. And, fifth, I offer some concluding remarks on the topic of young adults’ understanding of calling.

The Caller and the Called

In this section, I draw on this study’s rich collection of interview data to answer three questions: What is a calling? Where does it come from? And, who has a calling?
What is a calling?

As discussed in Chapter Two, the literature offers many definitions and understandings of calling or vocation. While important, the focus of this study was on how emergent adults at one university defined calling. After reading through the interviews, three primary definitions of calling emerged: vocation as a gut feeling, or a sense of being drawn to something; vocation as what the world needs; and vocation as an expression of passions, giftedness, or talents. In addition to these definitions, participants used metaphors to make sense of calling, including vocation as “my niche,” a “home, and pair of pants that “just fit.”

To begin, several participants understood calling as a kind of gut feeling, or something they were drawn to or brought them happiness. Alexandra, for instance, believed that a calling was something that came from deep inside, simply stating that a “calling is what I feel I’m supposed to do with the rest of my life.” For Carmen, calling had more to do with being drawn to something and “doing that one thing that seems really crazy, in spite of what most people say – still going for it.” And for Chico, vocation was as simple as identifying what might provide a feeling of happiness: “Having a calling almost always requires you to do something you like. And for you to like something you have to be happy about it.”

Other participants viewed calling as following a path that satisfied some of the world’s needs. As a sophomore, Cam suggested that a calling was about “doing something you love and where you will make a difference and help people.” As a senior,
she offered much the same perspective: “I might love being a circus entertainer and really feel like that’s what I need to do, but is that really what the world needs from me?”

Although an argument could be made that the world is in need of the contributions made by circus entertainers, it would not convince Cam, who has a different definition of satisfying the world’s needs.

During her junior year, Carly defined calling as “being happy with what you’re doing while actually helping people.” As a senior, she further developed her definition, suggesting a calling was fulfilled “when you feel complete….It all depends on how you feel at the end of the day. If you feel that there’s no void inside of you, no little person inside you screaming, ‘what the hell are you doing?’, but you’re just happy when you go home and are satisfied with what you’ve done, then you know you’ve found your calling.” “It’s pretty simple,” Chico said of vocation. “It’s just what makes you wake up in the morning. It’s what makes you tick. It’s what makes you go on. It’s what your talents are. It’s what makes you motivated to go out into the world…so you can leave the world a better place. Knowing what these instincts are is your calling.” Consistent with the theme of helping others, many young adults quoted Frederick Buechner’s definition to their interviewers, which describes vocation as that “place where your deep gladness meets the world’s needs” (a definition presented to them during the OnCall program).

For still others, calling was an expression of their passions, gifts, and talents. Patch, who wrestled with the notion of calling during his college years, provided a rather common definition as a sophomore, suggesting “a calling means doing something you
like to do, something that you’re talented in or good at, and something where you really feel you can make a difference.” As a junior Patch became more introspective, noting that vocation is about “understanding self.” This view was illustrated through the connections he made between calling and spirituality. “Your job or vocation, whatever you want to call it,” he said, “is kind of like an outward response to how one thinks about their spirituality. Spirituality contributes to how one thinks about their life and how they respond to it. Therefore, their job is the focus of that.” During Patch’s senior year, however, he stated that he did not like the terminology of “calling” because it “sounded very deterministic.” With that said, he recognized that calling would be something he would probe over the next few years. He added, “I think it’s important that you learn about yourself…I don’t believe, though, there’s one thing that you’re destined to do. I think the key is you need to know yourself and know what you care about and then live by that.” During his college experience, it appears that Patch came to believe that reflection was central, then, to developing an understanding of one’s passions, rather than a specific calling.

A few of the young adults used metaphors to help articulate their understanding of calling. During her sophomore year, Dorothy introduced the phrase “spiritually satisfied,” saying, “I think you’ve found your calling when you’re doing something you are good at, and you are using your gifts in a way that leaves you at the end of the day being spiritually satisfied and looking forward to doing it again the next day.” As a junior, she shared that a calling should “feel like being at home. But for me I’m still doing a lot of
wondering around, looking for a niche, or a home kind of place.” For Dorothy, using words and phrases like “spiritually satisfied,” “home,” and “niche” identified her need to find a calling that was comforting and a good fit. Patty likewise saw calling as being about “finding that niche, that place that is going to be there when you wake up in the morning.” Along these same lines, Elise compared “finding the right pair of pants” to discovering her calling: “Some pants are going to be too baggy and some won’t look quite right, even though they may be cute. And then you find the perfect pair of pants that fit well and you look good. They’re not going to shrink in the wash and they don’t require dry cleaning.”

Participants offered a variety of definitions of vocation in this study, almost all of which underscore the importance of reflection. No matter how they defined or understood calling, however, all believed that our callings emerge from within the lived experiences of our lives. As Chico put it, “[a calling] can’t just be a theoretical idea that you thought of, but somehow you have to put it into practice.”

**Where do callings come from?**

What did the young adults in this study see as the source of their callings? Did they believe there was a caller? Participants described three sources for their callings: their experience, their intuition or gut, and a higher power or force, such as God.

Almost every participant noted that his or her life experience was an important source of information about his or her callings. Experience, for many, was defined in different ways, including relationships, work, and critical life events. Alexandra shared,
“I think that by reflecting upon your experiences, by asking questions, it will change how you think about what makes you happy. I think a calling is what makes you happy or how you can create change in the world.” She added that it was through “interactions and bonds with people” that she was coming to understand her calling. Carmen echoed the influence that others had on her understanding of calling:

In my volunteer experiences, I’ve met people who are very passionate about what they do. I love seeing the progression of their lives and how they got [to be where they are today], especially the people who are professionals and are already in the field. Seeing everything they’ve gone through to get to that point [provides clarity]. I think that’s probably helped me gain a greater understanding of what calling really is.

Other participants believed that callings were a matter of fate or destiny, or something that emerged from their gut. “There really is no one source to my call,” Elise said. “It’s a little voice inside me that says, ‘yes, do that,’ or ‘no, please don’t do that…’. I believe that we are destined to do something….I think we are all meant to be something, and how we get there is our own choice. I think one of the first things [to do] is to listen for your call and think about what makes you happy. What do you feel compelled to do?”

A third group of young adults saw God, or a higher power, as the source of their callings. Cam expressed her view in this way: “we are put on this earth for a reason, and I believe that God has a plan for all of us and that God put us here to do his work. And searching for or trying to find my calling is really trying to find this inner voice that God has instilled in me. I’m trying to find the voice of where my passion and my heart lie, and where I can be myself.” Cam recognized that she may have been able to get help from
family and friends in discerning her calling, but “the final piece…has to come from something beyond yourself. Otherwise, how will you ever be comfortable with the decision you make? So I think it’s a relationship between the higher power and yourself and truly listening to yourself and listening to where the forces are guiding you.”

While still not certain as a senior, Patty believed there was some higher power, probably God, who was the source of her calling. “I believe that there’s a purpose. There’s something that makes me a perfect whole,” she said. “So I feel there are different parts of the circle that need to be completed. I think there’s definitely a higher power working, and I say everything happens for a reason.”

As a sophomore, Carmen also found that the source of her calling was God:

I truly think that it’s part of my spiritual beliefs and the fact that God calls me to be [something]. I am called to serve Him in a spiritual manner and, too, to be a witness for Him. And I think that means your vocation comes from God. I truly believe that it’s through vocation, or whatever it is that He’s called me to do, I will be a witness for Him. I will end up serving others because by serving others I serve Him.

Carly echoed this perspective relating that “even for someone who doesn’t believe in God, there is something, maybe not God, but a higher power, that is saying ‘this is what you should be doing.’”

While the “callers” varied among participants, they repeated mentioned experience, intuition, and God or some other higher power as the sources of their callings. It should be noted, however, that these young adults seldom viewed these sources in isolation. For example, Dorothy acknowledged a combination of God and
experience as the source of her calling. As she explained it, “the ultimate source I suppose is God, but that's the Catholic in me talking about vocation. I think there is a reason why I've had the experiences I've had over the last few years and that that reason ultimately comes from God. But I think God has provided me with certain interests and certain qualities that the different experiences in my life have shaped.” In this way, Dorothy’s caller became an incarnational God, a higher power actively at work in the world through the events, people, and experiences of her life.

Who has a calling?

In their discussion of callings and vocation, participants discussed their beliefs about who “had callings” and if it was possible to have “many callings.” Chico, like others interviewed, felt strongly that “everyone has a calling. It’s just a matter of finding out what that calling is. Everyone is unique and everyone has a talent. And there’s some way that they can help out in the world that I can’t.” In much the same spirit, Carly shared, “I think everybody has a calling. Maybe I’m wrong, but I personally think that everybody has a place and a role they’re going to play. But I also think that you can change your role.” Alexandra agreed: “I think everybody has unique calls.” Later, Alexandra qualified her statement suggesting that while everyone can have a calling, she thought a vocation was “limited to people who have opportunities.” She recognized that she was fortunate to have had experiences in her life that had allowed her to explore her passions and callings. Dorothy echoed this feeling:
I think we are in a really fortunate position that we can, and have the luxury of, actually being able to sit down and think about what we are called to do. A lot of the world's population doesn't have that option. A lot of people are just surviving and not thinking about what it is that they’re passionate about because they're too busy keeping themselves alive. It's not that individuals in that situation don't have a calling. I believe that everyone does. I think a lot of them just don't have the luxury of being able to discern it.

Kana added her voice to this discussion, saying, “I think everybody has something that they were born to do. But, I don’t think everybody has a chance to really figure it out or get a chance to do it, for whatever reason.”

Chiquita believed that everyone had the ability to find a calling, and that life is an unfolding journey to discover our calling. In her words:

I definitely think everybody has [a calling] and they make it what they want to make it. It has no restrictions on it, and that's what I like about calling because to me it's like a world of opportunity where there are no restrictions. There may be restrictions in the world that can inhibit your calling, that you might have to get over, but I just think that discovering your calling is a journey you choose to go on. But you don’t have to if you don’t want to. Your calling can change and it can mature and can just go in so many different directions. I think we all have one and life is a journey.

Although Patty believed that everyone was called to do something, she thought “people have more than one [calling]. Kind of like the whole true love thing. I think there is more than one out there.” Alexandra concurred with Patty, offering this perspective:

I think it’s very difficult to find something that you’re suited to do or what you see yourself doing for the rest of your life. I don’t think a call is that limited. I think call is many aspects of a person’s life. And it’s about finding what you’re good at or what you might be interested in or what you don’t really know much about, but you think that maybe you’ll enjoy it. So it’s all about experience and about learning.
As a senior, Alexandra elaborated further on this view, stating that a “calling is ongoing and it changes all the time. I think I’m called to do many things in life and have many passions that won’t be the same over time. It will always be changing.”

Putting a slightly different twist on things, Cam expressed that although she knew what a calling should be, she recognized that it was exploring her callings was “going to be hard”:

And it’s going to be tough to even realize what that vocation is. Right now I think that education is my vocation, or my calling, and I’ll get into it. But maybe I’ll be ten years into it, and I’ll be like, you know what? Actually [my calling] is to work with needy children. So I’ll quit that and I’ll go and work in homeless shelters. I think that what I feel called to now will eventually lead me to what my ultimate purpose on this earth is.

Overall, the young adults interviewed for this study believed that everyone has a calling. However, not all participants believed they had only one calling or that it would remain constant over time. Additionally, some recognized that even having a conversation about calling was based on opportunity. Many demonstrated a nuanced understanding of what vocation meant to them by looking beyond themselves and their regular college experiences. Last, some participants alluded to differences in how people discover their callings.

Summary

This section on the “caller and the called” presented participants’ understandings of calling. Overall, the young adults in this study were able to articulate what calling meant to them, what they believed the source of their callings to be, and who they
believed were recipients of callings. As sophomores, all had a general understanding of what “calling” or “vocation” meant. As seniors, 10 of the 11 young adults articulated a very clear understanding, even as most continued to explore and discern their own unique vocations.

Vocational Discernment

How did the young adults in this study begin to discern and understand their callings? Three themes emerged time and again across interviews. First, actual experiences of doing often proved influential in helping young adults realize their calling. Second, conversations with family and other individuals likewise played an important role. Third, engaging in self-reflection, prayer, and other self-discovery methods further helped young adults to discern their callings. As with other themes in this research, those presented here relate and interconnect with each other, suggesting that several factors influence the discernment process.

One of the most common influences on young adult discernment was lived experience. Alexandra spoke to this point directly: “I think that different experiences, like going to Appalachia and other immersion trips, working with other people in homeless shelters, serving others, and just going to different classes, have taught me about what I want to do. I think they all helped shape my call and what I want to do.”

Carmen described how her openness to different life experiences was helping her to discern her calling:
It’s about just being open to new opportunities. Everything that I’ve done up to this point in time has taken me in different directions and has shown me a little bit more and has opened me up a little more to what I’d love to do. At one point in time, I started thinking about being a social work major, but did not want to do research. But by being a research assistant I realize that I’m open to other things that I had been too quick to dismiss. So I think that this job is really just one of those experiences that’s taken me and opened me up a little more. I’m trying to just be open to what comes along. I’m not exactly sure what my calling is right now, but I think it’s to be with young people and to help them out. And maybe that’s the general theme of it. But, how it’s going to work out or how it’s going to play out, I have no idea. But I think by just being open and enjoying life I will become more open to the signs that come along.

Experience not only helped some participants discern their calling, but it also fed their hungers for learning and putting their callings into action. Although Dorothy felt a calling to teach, she did not necessarily know if her vocation would lead her into a classroom. As a way to discern this, she secured an internship working with children who were in protective custody. As she described it:

My job was to work with investigators. It was a very hard job because we dealt with a lot of cases of abuse and neglect. That summer helped me realize that (a) there are a lot of kids who are not in very good homes, and (b) I don’t think I could be a social services investigator. I spent a summer doing it and it didn’t depress me out of my mind, but I think if I was doing it for 20 years I would probably lose it after a while. So, I did that sort of to see if maybe social services were something I was interested in.

As it turned out, this was not something Dorothy pursued any further, but it was an experience that helped her discover that she was not called to be a community educator.

Conversations with others emerged as a second important discernment tool for the young adults in this study. Carly, for instance, told this story about how a conversation with one of her friends had challenged her to continue exploring her calling:
So I’m asking this kid who’s my age, who’s so sure about what he wanted to do, [about why] he wanted to become a priest. He said, “I can’t give you an answer why. All I can say is that I feel that this is what’s right for me.” He said, “I owe it to myself to find out if I’m right. If I have the right calling, if I’m not reading the signals wrong [then I will be happy]. I don’t know if this is what I want to do, but it’s what I feel I should do. I might as well just try it.” And that impressed me so much because it’s such a huge decision for him.

After this conversation, Carly was inspired to look deep within herself and began talking with her friends more about what makes her happy and what she could see herself doing for the rest of her life.

Cam described her discernment process as one that involved conversation with others and self-reflection. “The thing is,” she said, “I’m not sitting back and waiting for a calling to just hit me in the face. I’m doing research and I’ve talked to people, asking them about what they do. I also go to the career center and I talk to advisors. I just listen to what these people have to say. I’m trying to keep an open mind.” She also believed that it was important “to listen to your heart, faith, and other people and understand [what] they think you would be good at.” While Cam was being pro-active in her search for her calling, she was also realizing that discernment was a demanding process. As she explained:

There are millions of options of what I could be called to do. I can’t even start to name all of them. And so how can I be expected as a 19-year-old to be able to narrow these, like oh, this is what I’m called to do? I’m not ready yet. I am amazed by other people [who] know they’re going to be a doctor. That’s awesome and I’m so happy for them. But I can’t reach out and just grab that one thing yet. So I’m just learning and opening my heart and my mind and waiting and praying for help.
For Chico, his family was “the number one factor” that helped him discern his calling to medicine. He recognized that he had many opportunities to explore his talents and passions, which was a direct result of the support and encouragement he received from his family. Chico believed he was fortunate to be able to ask himself the question, “What are my choices and how can I better myself with the skills that I have?” During his senior year, Chico also recognized the importance of his OnCall program and mentor in helping him discern his calling. “Participating in the OnCall program has been very beneficial,” he said. “I’ve met people like [my mentor] who know how to ask the right questions and make me think about why I want to do what I want to do.”

As Elise was trying to figure out if social work was the best major for her, she sought advice and assistance from people in her department and field.

I made an appointment with the graduate assistant for the dean of undergraduate social work so that she can show me what social workers do. This way I will have some idea of what I’m dealing with. I’ve also chosen to take a step ahead of the On Call program and shadow somebody [in the field] early. So just in case I meet this girl and I decide that maybe this isn’t my thing after all, we can hopefully find a new shadow. I would rather not deal with somebody I don’t like or do something I’m not going to be happy with.

Experience and talking with others play an important role in helping young adults discern their callings. But as Alexandra pointed out, self-reflection and prayer are also critical discernment tools. “I think it’s important for [people] to reach inside themselves and reflect upon their experiences,” she stressed. “They need to think about and ask themselves ‘is there anything [I have done] that has changed how I think, or is there
anything that makes me incredibly happy?’ I think a call is what makes you happy or understanding how you can create change in the world.”

As a senior, Carly stated that it was finally time for her to start taking a more serious approach to discerning her calling. “I [need to] start taking time for myself and do a pro and the con list,” she explained. “I always used to think they were really stupid. But now I'm beginning to think maybe it's beneficial…I think it’s going to need to be a year of self-reflection, where I take time to just stop and think [about what my calling is].”

For some of the young adults in the study, the process of self-reflection led to a realization that their callings may never be clearly defined. Carmen reflected the views of others on this point:

I realize now that a calling may never really be clear to you. I think that you feel a pull in a certain direction. Now, how you follow along that path once you’re there is a whole other thing you have to deal with. That’s when it all gets interesting. I mean, let’s say you know you’re supposed to go north, but how? You can’t see ahead. You don’t know what on earth is in front of you. You don’t know if there’s a swamp, icy terrain, or a desert. You just don’t know what’s ahead of you. That’s the big part that you don’t realize sometimes at first. But, that’s what life is. It’s trying to navigate through all that. Nothing is ever quite clear. The sun comes up and you can see ahead for a hundred miles, but then night comes and you can’t see any more. And that’s the cycle of every single day. And sometimes you take a wrong turn, but you get on the path again. Eventually, you reach your way and find your calling. But, I don’t know if it’s so great to know exactly what you’re supposed to do in life. Because then what else is there? You did it. I mean, the moment that I say that I know and I’ve done everything that I wanted to do in my life, is the moment that I’m dying, basically. And even when I’m on my deathbed, I still want to be thinking, life is open. And, hopefully, then at least I’ve done everything that I think I’ve wanted to do and was supposed to do. But, I don’t know if there’s ever a good time to say that you know exactly what you’re supposed to be doing with your life.
In her reflection, Carmen recognized that discernment is an ongoing process and one that has many ups and downs. Although this can be frustrating, Carmen accepted this simply as “a part of life.” A calling for her was not as concrete to her as it was to some of her peers.

Vocational discernment, at least for participants in this study, was facilitated through concrete experiences, conversation with others, and self-reflection. While some of the young adults identified a single method of discernment, the majority discerned their calling through a combination of these factors. Patch summarized the perspective of many of his peers on this point when he offered, “[Discernment] is a constant process – reevaluating where you’re at, what you want to do. At this point, I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m doing. [But] I enjoy hearing what other people have to say and reflecting on it.”

Current Callings

What specific callings did participants in this study identify during their sophomore, junior, and senior years in college? How “normal” was it for their callings to change over time? How did participants emotionally cope with the often cloudy question of vocation in their lives? In this section, these questions are explored. Specifically, I focus on the issue of vocational clarity – or lack thereof – among study participants. First, I describe those young adults who experienced growth, confirmation, and clarity in their calling. I then move to a discussion of those participants who did not experience any
change in their calling during their college years. I conclude with a discussion of those young adults who experienced confusion and a lack of clarity in their calling, and the impact this had on their lives.

*Increased clarity in calling*

Cam wanted to help people and make a difference in the world. However, she was unsure of any specific calling. “I know that I am called to help people and I know that I’m called to make a difference, but I don’t know how,” Cam said as a sophomore. “I know that I enjoy women’s studies and I know that I have interest in religious studies, but that’s just an interest. I’m drawn to them, but that doesn’t mean that that’s necessarily a calling. It’s just something I enjoy learning about. So I am still searching.” During her junior year, she began to recognize a possible calling as a teacher, but was not confident that it was her specific calling at first. She also had developed a strong interest in volunteering and became aware of her passion for continuous learning:

I’m thinking I’d like to go on to grad school and get my master’s in secondary education. But I’ve also been looking at post-graduate volunteer programs, like Teach for America, where you go to school and teach at the same time. But I also just kind of want to get my degree and be able to teach… I think eventually I’d like to work in administration at the secondary ed level, as a principal or eventually as a superintendent. And then I wouldn’t even mind eventually teaching teachers how to teach. You know, like going and getting a Ph.D. I love learning and I think that I could see myself continuing my education until I’m like 60, and then just seeing where it takes me. But really, I’ve always kind of felt called for education.

Feeling passionate and secure with her calling in education, Cam offered this thought in her final interview as a senior:
I very strongly believe that I have a calling towards education and towards a lifetime of learning. And it has become a lot clearer through my experiences throughout college, such as EVOKE and On Call, and through [talking with] family and friends. So I very much feel that I am called to help other people through education and through my continuous learning that I hope to be involved in.

Sharing a similar experience, Carmen did not believe she had a calling during her sophomore year. Although she had been considering going to medical school, law school, and working with community agencies, she mentioned that she needed a “flashlight to help [her] find [her] way. I wish someone would show me some direction of where I’m supposed to be going. I mean, can’t I drop down from a parachute onto a spot? But I guess I’m going to have to work through it.” As Carmen reflected back as a junior, she acknowledged her uncertainty, but also recognized she was beginning to discover a calling in life. She said, “I was very much questioning the directions I could go because I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do medicine or if I wanted to do social work. That hurdle has been crossed. I now know that social work is the direction that I really need to be going.” As a senior, Carmen had become even more confident in her calling. “I think I’m on my way,” she said. She had begun to embrace and understand her calling as working in the capacity of social services. Referring back to an interest of hers as a sophomore, Carmen noted:

As I said a couple years ago, I’d eventually like to go to law school. Or if that isn’t the route that ends up opening up for me, I can still use my social work degree working in community organizing, ideally within the City of Chicago, somehow working with communities to advocate for certain policy or community development. Even if I get my law degree, I see myself working in that area. With a law degree I’d also be able to concentrate on immigration issues.
As a sophomore, Chico talked to a great extent about his interest in becoming a doctor. As previously discussed, Chico was hesitant to refer to his interest in the medical field as a “calling.” He said, “I want to become a doctor so that I can help people. That is my motivation.” Chico also believed that through his experiences he could find other ways to help people. This remained true during his junior year, when Chico said that, although he was still interested in becoming a doctor, he had broadened his interests. Having found clarity, Chico had this to say:

It’s a little clearer now because at first I used to just think about being a physician. Now I’m actually thinking about doing a dual degree, if possible, with either MD/MBA or MD/MPH. It would just be an extra year of my life, but I guess by having those degrees, I’ll have more respect and authority by which I will have a better chance of influencing policies and procedures, which I’ll use to help others. So I only want to expand on what I can do and invest in myself for the future. And I guess one way of looking at it is that I’ve made my calling more clear.

However, as a senior, Chico struggled with weighing the choice of helping people through work as a doctor or a “holy man” in his Muslim faith. As he looked back on his time in college, he reflected:

As I look at my talents, I guess one thing that I’ve learned through my college career is that I’m a people person. I've [also] learned that I like the sciences and I'm really into religion. So there were many options available to me in which you could pretty much "better the world." But I guess sciences appealed to me the most. I could have gotten into religious services as a holy man, but I just think that you need a more practical approach to touch people and be a part of them. And that's why the sciences became so interesting to me.

Although Chico had stated as a sophomore that he felt called to the medical field, he also realized that he had many other interests and opportunities. At the time of
graduation, however, he was more secure with his calling and had a stronger conviction that he should become a doctor.

Kana also found clarity in her calling during college. Although she felt called to help people, Kana was unsure about how this would manifest itself as a career. During her sophomore year, she noted that she wanted “to work with children and to make a difference in the Black community. Basically, that’s it. But, I don’t know exactly what shape or form that will take. It could be teaching or writing, or some other way.”

Kana’s calling became even more focused as a junior, when she offered:

I still think my calling is to help people, [maybe] not so much teaching, though, but definitely working in the Black community and working with children. I don’t know necessarily how that’s going to work out. Even though I mentioned earlier about wanting to do school social work, it could be something totally different. But I think working in the Black community is really what my focus is supposed to be…I think that’s my main calling. Like I said before, it might not necessarily be, oh, you’re going to be a social worker, or, you’re going to be a teacher. But I think whatever I do, it should be focusing on the community.

Between her junior and senior year interviews, Kana was accepted into a five-year BSW/MSW program at Loyola. She continued to stay motivated about pursuing her calling and said “the transition between undergraduate and graduate [classes] was easy.”

She added that she was enjoying the classes and wanted to focus on “the community and trying to help people,” rather than in private practice. As a senior, she found herself on solid ground and looked forward to the path ahead of her as a social worker.
Lack of clarity or no change in calling

There were also participants who did not experience clarity or conviction in their calling during college. Some of the young adults were not aware of a calling, while others had difficulty in making a decision. As a sophomore, Alexandra said of her calling, “Well, I feel that I want to help people. That’s simply what I feel called to do.” As a junior, Alexandra emphatically said that of course she “still want[ed] to help people” because it was “the foundation of who I am.” But she also “want[ed] to focus on broader issues, like creating awareness for people, change in terms of homelessness and affordable housing, and maybe [helping] teenagers in the juvenile centers.”

Like Alexandra, Dorothy was aware that she wanted to help people, but found it difficult to pinpoint her specific calling. She offered this perspective during her sophomore year:

I have a lot of ideas about what I want to do. I know that I definitely want to have some sort of positive impact with people, which narrows it down to about, what, 6 million jobs? So I obviously need to narrow it down a little bit more. But I just think I would feel best in a position where I could deal with people and forge some close relationships and make a positive difference.

As a junior, Dorothy wrestled with her calling, although she acknowledged that she was developing a growing comfort level with the unknown:

I think that my calling or long-term career plan changes all the time. One of the ideas that I thought of while I was in Europe was that I should learn German and then move to Germany and teach English as a foreign language. But I think there’s still so many things that I could do. I’m even more comfortable now with not knowing what I’m going to do after I graduate…I guess I’ve gotten used to it. I feel like I’m going to be okay, even if I don’t have a solid career plan when I graduate. I know myself intimately enough that I’ll come up with something.
Uncertainty still accompanied Dorothy as a senior, but this did not keep her from being optimistic about her calling and “enjoying the ride” of trying to “figure it all out.” Dorothy said that although she thought it would help if her passions and gifts would eventually directly relate to her life’s work, she believed this did not always have to be the case. This sentiment was largely based on her father’s avocation for farmland preservation, even though his vocation was an attorney.

My dad has been passionate about the stuff he does outside of work with farmland preservation – something he’s been doing for 30 years. And it's as much his life's work as him being an attorney. I think if you're doing life's work that is necessary, but it’s not particularly exciting, then you should do something you're passionate about the rest of the time. But, it would be really nice if they’re the same thing. That's the ideal I'm striving for.

As a sophomore, Elise had deduced that her calling was “something related to psychology” because of how comfortable people were talking with her. It also made her feel good about herself when people sought her out for guidance. She explained:

Part of why I find my calling with psychology, social work, and counseling is because I like listening to people and they enjoy talking to me. I’m able to distance myself from everything and just focus [on the person]. There are times when I’m busy and people call me because they have something important to talk about….I’ll always dedicate time to help [people] whether or not I can actually do anything to fix it. It makes me feel kind of, I hate to say it, I feel important. It’s kind of like a privilege when someone sits down and talks to you about whatever is on their mind.

As a junior, Elise believed that she was still being “called to do something with psychology and social work.” She continued, “I feel like it’s something that I should be doing with my life. So, I’m going to try and keep pursuing it and hopefully I will find a job when I get out of school.” To learn more about the field of social work, Elise
participated in a shadowing program at the start of her senior year. She noted that she knew it was the right decision “when I did my shadowing and it felt like it fit. I went [to the agency] and I said, ‘I could do this every day.’”

Although Patch did not fully embrace the idea of calling, as a sophomore he said he felt called to be a doctor or to get a Ph.D. in a medical related field. Most important to Patch, however, was “making a difference,” and he believed that either of these degrees would help him answer that calling. It became clear during Patch’s junior year that he was less focused on the job aspect of calling and more on living out his values with others, including his commitments to “service and social justice.” “But,” Patch stressed, this “doesn’t necessarily mean that I have to [live those out] through my job or whatever I may become. It could be in other ways, too. But certainly whatever I chose to do will likely include components of [those values].” As a senior, Patch still resisted referring to anything he was interested in as a “calling” and said that he would continue to “self-reflect and learn more about [himself]” as he pursued his goal of becoming a doctor.

*Decreased clarity in calling*

A third group of young adults experienced a lack of clarity pertaining to their calling during their college years. While many of them were confused about their vocational paths and choices, all spoke of the growth they had experienced while exploring the “big questions” of calling, service, and how they could “make a difference” in others’ lives.
As a sophomore, Carly described a calling to become involved in social advocacy. As she put it:

I feel called to go to law school, but I don’t actually want to be a practicing lawyer… I want to do social advocacy. I want the knowledge and the power [of being a lawyer] … Ideally, if I could do anything, I would be a judge in family court because that is a place in law where you can affect so many people. You influence so many people and you can help make their lives better.

When asked as a junior if Carly still felt that she was called to do social advocacy, she replied “yes, I still want to do it. I’m even more determined than I was last year.”

During her senior year, however, Carly became less convinced of her calling, noting the following:

I'm really lost. Last semester when I started applying to law school, I began thinking to myself, do I really want to go to law school, or is that something I just told myself I want to do? I’ve realized it's easier to tell yourself you want to do something when it's not impending. So then I started to think maybe I want to do something else. And, maybe I'm being called to do something else. But then I thought to myself, well, I've spent three years exploring the idea of what it means to have a vocation, and now I feel like I have to have a vocation. I'm lost and I don't want to start something new, and I don't want to start doing something that doesn't mean anything to me. There's a lot of pressure. I mean, I guess it would be okay to do something without really being aware if it’s the right place for you, but now I feel as though I need to find a place, I need to find my vocation. I need to find my call, but right now I feel like I haven't.

Over the course of three years, Carly’s determination and excitement toward advocacy and law dwindled and left her at a crossroads during her senior year. At the time of graduation, she felt pressured to find a calling, rather than to be open to exploring options and letting her callings find her.
Chiquita began her college years with excitement and certainty about her calling as a nurse. “My calling is absolutely nursing,” she said as a sophomore. “It’s my life. It exemplifies my calling.” Despite experiencing difficult events in her life, especially the death of her grandfather, Chiquita remained enthusiastic and confident in her future as a nurse. During her junior year she offered the following:

One thing I am grateful for is my calling has been reaffirmed. In my last interview I know I said I wanted to be a nurse. But I think with some of the hardships I experienced, I’ve just become much more passionate about it. I was always happy about my career choice and I pursued it like this is what I want to do. But I think having failure and getting through the hard times and sticking it out just made me more confident in my calling. It’s been reaffirmed.

As a senior, however, Chiquita became confused as she recognized her many interests and career opportunities. All the while, however, she continued to believe that nursing was her calling. As she explained it:

I know OnCall is supposed to help you find your calling, and I know my calling’s nursing, but I think it makes you think so much and makes you realize that you have so many opportunities. When I came into college I was very focused because I knew what I wanted to do after graduation – I’m going to go work with geriatric patients. On Call has made me like see a bigger picture, which at times has made me a little more confused. But I know that I need to be a nurse.

Patty also experienced confusion in discerning her calling during college. “I think I’m being called to be in the medical field in some way, shape, or form,” she said as a sophomore. As a junior, Patty had discovered music therapy as her calling. Similar to how she felt as a sophomore, she said, “I definitely feel I belong in the health field.” But, when asked if she felt confident about her calling, Patty stopped short of agreement.

“Well, actually I wouldn’t say that,” she said. “Part of me feels like I’m still drawn to the
health field, but I have these moments where I’m like, am I messing up my life?… I’m wondering if I totally just messed it up with the whole music therapy thing. I stopped and thought, did I just do something really dumb? Am I supposed to be a doctor? I don’t know right now.” As a senior, Patty still wrestled with her calling. “I’m not even sure what type of music therapy I want to go into.” As she teetered back and forth between her options in the health field and music therapy, she became noticeably frustrated with her indecisiveness.

Summary

In this section, I examined how participants made sense of their callings during their college years. Four of the 11 clarified their callings, suggesting either that they began the study unsure of their vocation and then later identified it, or their calling was confirmed and became clearer as time went on. Another four did not experience any change in their calling during their college years. This was most commonly identified as recognizing a general theme in their calling, but nothing specific was ever identified. In two such cases, the young adults were “ok” with the unknown. The remaining three participants experienced greater confusion about their callings. These young adults identified a calling as a sophomore, but later became confused with their path in life.

Impediments to Calling

While every young adult interviewed for this study talked about their callings, not everyone believed they actually would see their callings come to fruition. Pragmatic
beyond their years, many discussed obstacles that stood in their way. Three of the most common were time, money, and themselves.

Cam, who felt called to teaching, knew that time and money often worked against her. When she discovered her passion for teaching her junior year, Cam soon learned that she was already behind in taking the appropriate courses that would allow her to complete her secondary education major requirements. Cam said of the barriers she faced in pursuing her call:

I can see a ton of obstacles right now. One would be financial, especially if I stayed here two more years and get my BA in secondary education. I would also have to change my major over to English, which means I’d need a lot more time because I’d have to restart a major. Then, I’d have to do student teaching. Also my mom wants to go back to school, which would cause major financial constraints. If we are both going to school, I might need to take off a year and work so we can pay for rent.

Carly shared that she worried about financial constraints, as well as a lack of confidence:

Besides insecurities, I worry about how I’ll pay for law school... So, money would definitely be an obstacle. And, I think even though I do really well in school, there’s just such a huge amount of people wanting to go to law school, which might reduce the chances of me getting into as good a law school as I really want. But a better school means it’s probably more expensive.

In addition to possible financial obstacles, Kana, like Carly, also recognized her insecurities as a barrier. “I think the main obstacle that I need to overcome would be myself,” she admitted. “I hope that I don’t let myself get lazy and say, ‘oh, I’m not going to do this anymore.’ Or, ‘this isn’t working out. I can’t afford it, so never mind.’”

Similarly, Alexandra added, “I think a barrier is not being confident in myself, my skills,
and if I'm qualified compared to other people. Also, the unknown – just to not be comfortable anymore.” Alternatively, Patch wondered if his own sense of worth, as defined by a society focused on salary, could mislead him. “People’s worth, just to be very Marxist, is very much based on how much money you make,” he offered. “It’s not level of education. It’s how marketable education is that’s important.” Patch went on to note that although he might feel better about himself if he was in a profession that made a lot of money, it bothered him to admit this. He saw this “as a barrier – sort of an ego thing created by society.”

Throughout her interviews, Carmen expressed her passion for art. When asked about possible barriers that could get in her way, Carmen had this to say:

I have about two portfolios filled with art, but I’ve never submitted it anywhere. I’ve never tried to go further than my room. I’m at the point where I keep wondering if my stuff is good enough. It’s great for me to draw stuff for fun and to show my family and friends, and for them to say, ‘you’re a great artist.’ But, part of me keeps wondering, can I make this my career? What if I am good enough? What then? Then I have a responsibility to do something about it. And I’m afraid that somebody will tell me I’m good enough to go out [and be a professional artist]. I’m afraid that if I go down that route I will fail. Going into art is such an unstable and impractical career move.

While some of the young adults expected to experience barriers along the way, others felt they were simply part of life. For example, Dorothy mused “there’s always going to be the money issue,” when referring to her desire to attend graduate school. But, she added, “I don’t foresee any obstacles that would be impossible to get across. I know that there will always be tough spots in life, but if there’s a certain net of people that you
can depend on to catch you when you’re falling, then you can overcome just about anything.”

Overall, participants said that time, money, and their own shortcomings were potential impediments to answering their callings. Barriers that were presented by them were rarely presented alone; rather they were often paired together.

Conclusion

This chapter presented findings on how participants understood and defined callings, what they believed their calling was, and how they discerned their calling. The interview data from this study falls in line with that of previous research. For instance, in Chapter Two, literature was presented that showcased the complexities and differences in understanding and defining calling. In a discussion of vocation and calling, three themes emerged that were essential in helping young adults understand their callings (Himes, 2001; Miller, 2007; Spohn, 2003). The first theme, self-reflection, was noted as essential because it requires that individuals look within themselves and listen to what their inner voice is telling them about their “deep joys and hungers.” This theme was highlighted throughout this chapter through participants’ understandings of “the caller and the call,” the vocational discernment process, their current callings, and their views on obstacles to realizing their callings.

The second theme stressed the importance of serving the needs of others before one’s self. From this perspective, participants believed an authentic vocation was not only
self-fulfilling, but also self-transcending, focused on meeting the world’s needs. The desire to serve others was most evident in how these young adults defined calling and in their current callings. The third theme was the importance of communal discernment, or the integral role others played in helping young adults make sense of and act on their callings. This was most commonly described within the context of mentoring relationships (Himes, 2001; Miller, 2007; Spohn, 2003), and was illustrated through identifying the source of call (i.e., relationships and experiences) and through the discernment process.

The findings presented in this chapter also align with the work of Narloch (2004). In his study of young adults, views of vocation fell into three main themes: breadth, depth, and discernment. The breadth theme identified vocation as either traditional (vocation equates to occupation), multiple role (traditional view of vocation in addition to service to others and care for family), or life encompassing (vocation completely envelops one’s self and life). Many of this study’s participants exhibited a tendency toward this multiple role subtheme. Narloch’s characteristics of depth included seeing vocation as being passionate and motivated about one’s work, in addition to integrating faith and work. Although only a handful of young adults in this study focused on calling as an integration of faith and work, most who had a clear sense of their calling were passionate and motivated to act on it.

The final theme that Narloch presented was discernment, which included active (vocation is self-determined), passive (vocation is determined by an external force –
either by fate or a God-figure), and cooperative (vocation is determined through a collaboration of active and passive – called by God, but the individual must say “yes” to the call) approaches. These definitions mirror how the participants in this study understood vocation. While not specifically addressed, several domains from this study’s conceptual framework also were present in this chapter. Most prominent were references to encounters with other, faith/spirituality, values, interpersonal relationships, and self-awareness of passions, gifts, and talents. Through this description of young adults’ callings in college, the developmental domain became apparent by showcasing how their callings evolved over time.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

Exploratory in nature, the purpose of this study was to offer preliminary insights into how one cohort of young adults made career and life choices through the lens of vocation. Concurrently, the study examined how influences prior to and during participants’ time in college shaped their vocational choices during the critical, formational time of emerging adulthood.

While the literature offers some insight into the career decision-making process, it says little about how individuals discern their callings and how the vocational discernment process affects career choice. Accordingly, this study generated baseline understandings in both of these areas that proved theoretically and practically fruitful and which have the potential to serve as a launching pad for future research. These new understandings are critical because decisions relating to career choice and vocation are of particular importance to college-aged adults.

This study was informed by a conceptual framework identifying seven key domains that previous scholars suggested had the potential to influence young adults’ understanding of call: 1) faith/spirituality; 2) interpersonal relationships; 3) encounters with other; 4) values; 5) critical life events contributing to self-definition; 6) self-awareness and understanding of passion, gifts, and talents; and 7) developmental issues
and one’s capacity for self-authorship. The research questions that guided the study included:

1. How do young adults make sense of and construct the theme of vocation or call in their lives?
2. What and who shapes their understandings of “calling”?
3. How do these influences affect their response to “calling”?

In this chapter, I present the overarching conclusions that emerged from this study, explore their implications for practice, and offer a set of recommendations for future research. I conclude with some of my own observations and final remarks.

Overarching Conclusions

Four overarching conclusions gleaned from this research are presented in this section. First, I review the study’s conceptual framework, discuss its implications, and offer an alternate framework that more accurately reflects actual findings that emerged from this investigation. Second, I revisit an earlier claim that young adulthood is developmentally a “ripe” time for vocational discernment. Third, I present a pedagogical paradigm of vocational discernment practice that grew out of an analysis of the interviews completed for this study. Fourth, I provide evidence on how life experiences and a supportive community influenced young adults’ understanding of vocation. These conclusions are responsive to the major research questions that shaped this study. They also underscore the importance of the ongoing development of young adults as they try to
discover who they are and what their purpose in life is in the midst of writing their own life story.

Review of the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework developed by Haworth and McCruden (2001) defined the many factors that may influence how young adults understand, define and make meaning of calling in their lives. In this section, I review this framework and then present a revised framework that more accurately reflects findings gleaned from this study.

After analyzing nearly three dozen participant interviews, I reached two key conclusions regarding the conceptual framework that guided this investigation. First, all of the domains outlined in the framework significantly influenced participants’ fundamental understandings of themselves. Because of this, in composing Chapters Five and Six, I found a proper analysis necessitated that I not only identify outcomes for how participants further understood or defined calling, but also how they further understood and defined themselves. In fact, it became apparent to me that when participants discussed these influences and reflected on how they impacted their views of self and the world, they displayed the ability to construct new self-knowledge. As a result, I have come to understand that the various domains of the conceptual framework, first and foremost, had a formative impact on shaping participants’ self-awareness. These self-understandings were important because from them participants came to understand more fully their callings. Evidence for this conclusion was offered in Chapter Six when I explored participants’ changing views (or lack thereof) of their callings. Regardless of
how, or if, these young adults’ understandings of calling changed, they all demonstrated greater clarity in self-awareness and growth. Indeed, some of the participants who had either “no change” or “decreased clarity” in their calling struggled with this newly discovered self-awareness because it caused confusion in the vocational discernment process.

The second conclusion, and one that was articulated in Chapter Five, is that although all seven domains were interwoven, the way in which they influenced participants’ understandings of self and calling differed. Three of the domains – critical life events, values, and an understanding of passions, gifts, and talents – were woven so tightly into the remaining four domains that it was not possible to separate them meaningfully from the others. This indicated that the influence of these domains was strong, both indirectly and dynamically. More specifically, the influence of critical life events in the lives of the study participants was so seamlessly embedded throughout the other domains that I could not effectively isolate it as a domain unto itself, thus reducing the number of domains to six. This does not, however, indicate it was not a key influence on participants’ understanding of calling. Rather, in many cases a critical life event was a central component in the other domains. A more detailed discussion of the importance of life experiences is offered later in this chapter. The other two domains – values and an understanding of passions, gifts, and talents – are still part of the framework, but are now represented as indirect influences. The other four domains, and ones that were specifically described in Chapter Five – faith/spirituality, interpersonal relationships,
encounters with others, and development – emerged as more direct and less interdependent influences on self-awareness and calling.

With that said, the results of this study indicate that no one domain was more influential than another. Rather, it was the integration of all the domains that led to a better awareness of self and understanding of calling. Accordingly, I have revised the framework to represent these new understandings. As Figure 2 illustrates, each of the four domains directly influence calling and each other. Simultaneously, the outer two domains – values and passions, gifts, and talents – shape the others because of their strong but indirect relational ties with each of the domains in the framework.

Figure 2: Revised Conceptual Framework
Young adulthood: A “ripe” time for vocational discernment?

In Chapter One, I suggested that emerging adulthood is developmentally a “ripe” time for engaging in vocational discernment and exploring life’s meaning and purpose. As many developmental theorists purport, it is during these years when individuals become aware of who they are and what they believe and value, engage in dialogue with others to develop an awareness of those “truths” in which they desire to stake a claim, and begin to learn how to deal with difficult experiences in life. Young adulthood, especially during the college years, is a time for exploring, discovering, understanding, and negotiating relationships between self and others, self and the world, and self and beliefs (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Braskamp (2007) argues that it is during the college years when “students develop as whole persons, develop their cognitive skills, and learn how to think with more complexity in conjunction with developing emotional and social maturity, a sense of self-identity and moral purpose, and through relationships with others” (p. 13).

Part of vocational discernment emphasizes the process of discovering meaning in life. Parks (2000) accentuates this point when she offers: “We human beings seem unable to survive, and certainly cannot thrive, unless we can make meaning” (p. 7). This sentiment was evident through the narratives of the young adults in this study; many were eager to begin their journey of self-discovery through exploration. There was deep and sincere consideration given to what they believed and valued, and what and how they came to understand and construct new knowledge. Although the participants experienced
many difficult life events during college, they were open to examining these events critically, which often led to important insights about what they valued, where they felt comfortable (and uncomfortable), and who they were “deep down inside.” These findings echo those of other scholars who have argued that purpose is discovered when individuals find themselves in difficult situations – sometimes by experiencing cognitive dissonance or “shipwrecks” – and must figure out a way to turn turmoil into achievement (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Marcia, 1966; Molasso, 2006; Parks, 2000). Discovering their personal sense of authority was part of the process by which many of these participants became mature, wise, and intellectually developed young adults.

According to the participants in this study, emerging adulthood was an opportune time for development in many different areas – emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and sexually. Thanks to these competing developmental initiatives, however, the process of vocational discernment proved to be a difficult task for many of them. While often up to the challenge, most of these emerging adults found it overwhelming to discern their callings (which many limited to the question of “what do I want to do with my life?”) when they were developmentally struggling to make sense of their own authenticity and identity (or the vocational question of “who do I want to be?”). The good news here is that these young adults were very much engaged in the vocational discernment process – even if they may have been confused about which questions they were attempting to discern. As I have reflected on this finding, I have become persuaded that perhaps part of this struggle can be attributed to the linear – rather than dynamic – way in which
participants chose to make sense of the theme of vocation, as well as the process of vocational discernment.

Although there is no one best way to discern our callings, vocation always invites us to think about and discern our wants and desires (including vocational questions that relate to whether to marry or remain single and what career to pursue) and ponder how to weave our various values and life commitments (including those that relate to faith/spirituality) into the fabric of our daily lives. These discernments are made within the dynamic movements of our lived experiences with and emerging understandings of our responses to the questions of “who am I?”, “what best fits me?” and “what makes me feel alive?”

Bearing this in mind, a key question that emerged from this research for me was “Why did these young adults find it so challenging to engage the vocational discernment process in a dynamic, rather than a linear, way?” My own reading of the data offered three potential explanations. First, perhaps because they had limited life experience, college may have offered these young adults their first meaningful opportunity to explore and develop some self-awareness around the questions of “who am I” and “what best fits me.” Second, these young adults adopted a definition of vocation and calling that was limited to only the discernment of a specific career, thus inhibiting their ability to grasp the dynamism central to vocation. Third, many of the participants in this study were confronted with significant familial and societal pressure to make several significant life decisions (e.g., career, marriage/partnership, parenthood). Many were “scared to death”
that if they made a mistake in one decision arena (e.g., career), this mistake would affect their success or happiness in another arena (e.g., marriage and family). Accordingly, these emerging adults expressed a deep desire to “get it right the first time” in hopes that other decisions “down the line” would fall into place.

Building on the evidence that participants were scared to “commit” to a calling, many also expressed concern that they may never find their calling. For instance, some study participants grew weary and discouraged as they explored vocational questions from their sophomore to senior year in college. Although initially excited, when these young adults began to doubt the existence of a call or experienced a roadblock to it, they often became frustrated because they felt they were “back to square one” in the discernment process. Although experiences like these can be frustrating, “shipwrecks” (Parks, 2000) of this sort often spur young adult development and are an essential part of the self-discovery process. That said, if a young adult has to ponder to the point of insecurity what she is called to do, I cannot help but wonder if that individual has lost sight of the broader concept of calling. My point here is simple: as educators, we must emphasize the importance of helping young adults expand their view of calling, helping them to see it as a dynamic, unfolding process that seldom unfolds in a linear fashion.

To be sure, there were some study participants who remained uncertain regarding their career choices post-college, but who were secure that a calling awaited them because they had just spent several years honing in on their joys, talents, passions, and growth. Their occupational calling might not have been clarified by graduation, but they
had confidence that they could go forth and live a life of purpose. These two groups of young adults – those who were immobilized by the unknown and those who embraced it – underscore the critical role that educators can play in encouraging college-aged youth to engage in the discernment process, as well as the need for more research devoted to identifying ways young adults understand calling.

The young adult years often foster the clarification of values, beliefs, gifts/talents and identity and represent a critical developmental time in most individuals’ lives. At the center of this developmental process is an understanding of the self. When a person knows him or her “self,” he or she has a clearer sense of his or her core values, beliefs, gifts/talents, and identity. The reverse is also true – understanding his or her values, beliefs, gifts/talents, and identity often instills a confidence in personal authenticity. The spiral-like, dynamic nature of discerning our authentic selves often helps us to better answer the important vocational questions of “who am I,” “what do I want to do,” and “how do I want to live?” For most emerging adults, these questions first begin to tug at them during their twenties, making it even more imperative that, at this critical time in their development, they be provided with opportunities to see calling and vocational discernment as a dynamic process that lasts throughout their lifetime.

*The practices of vocational discernment: A pedagogical paradigm*

A newly developed pedagogical paradigm of the practices of vocational discernment is a third major conclusion resulting from this research. After reviewing the nearly three dozen interviews from this study, I began to notice a pattern of practices that
promoted young adult vocational discernment. Based on these patterns, I have constructed a learning-centered pedagogical paradigm that takes students’ lived experiences seriously, focusing on three elements: 1) the formation of a safe community within which vocational discernment can successfully thrive; 2) catalytic experiences which propel the learner toward discernment outcomes; and, 3) the presence of four discernment practices – dialogue, listening, reflection, and engagement. This cyclic and dynamic pedagogical paradigm (see Figure 3) mirrors similar paradigms and models such as Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning and O’Toole and O’Toole’s (1991) service learning cycle.

Figure 3: Pedagogical Paradigm

Community. Discussions of vocational discernment can be scary. Therefore, it is essential to create an intentional community or “holding environment” (Parks, 2000) in
which young adults feel safe to explore life’s big questions. A supportive but challenging space affords students the freedom to express their doubts, raises questions that allow young adults to challenge beliefs passed down to them from authority figures, and fosters the necessary critical reflection to prompt young people to become responsible for authoring their own lives. Fittingly then, it is through community that this pedagogical paradigm of vocational discernment practices can be fully realized.

As Sharon Daloz Parks argued in her book ―Big Questions, Worthy Dreams,‖ young adults are more likely to ask the big questions that accompany vocational discernment if they have a supportive and safe environment in which to do so. Community serves as an anchor that allows young adults to be authentic and not worry about drifting too far off course. If crafted well, a supportive community can also provide an environment in which young adults can make connections between themselves and others. Existing in many different forms, community may be as specific as a relationship (e.g., friendship, mentorship), a peer group, a particular class, or a student organization. Sometimes a community may be as broad as the entire institution providing the necessary support for its members.

Like Parks, Braskamp (2007) has argued that community is particularly important to a student’s “journey toward self-authorship” because the “challenge and support of fellow travelers is essential” (p. 13). Similarly, Himes (2001) maintains that it is through community that many of our vocational questions get answered, such as, “Is [my vocation] something that genuinely taps my talents and is it likely to continue to
challenge those talents?” and “Is [my vocation] a genuine source of service to those around me?”

In the context of this study, the OnCall program served as a community of support in which young adults were able to transition from thinking and believing what others on the “outside” told them to thinking and believing for themselves what they discovered to be true from the “inside.” This community offered “a network of belonging in which young adults [felt] recognized as who they really [were], and as who they [were] becoming. It offer[ed] both challenge and support, and thus offer[ed] good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adults” (Parks, 2000, p. 95). Being in a community allowed participants the opportunity to dialogue and listen to others as they shared reflections and stories of engagement about experiences they encountered.

For Parks (2000), the most important type of vocational community is the mentoring community. It is here where “the emerging developmental stance of the young adult” can be combined “with the challenge and encouragement of the mentor . . . [and] the experience of a compatible social group . . . ignit[ing] the transforming power of the young adult era” (p. 93). The role of the mentor is clearly a critical piece in establishing a mentoring community, and much could be written about the responsibility of the mentor. But the focus in this pedagogical paradigm is on the mentoring community itself. This community must be committed to creating a safe space in which members can ask scary
and secure questions in ways that emphasize hospitality and belonging, encourage vulnerability and transparency, and promote honest and trusting relationships.

**Experience.** While a supportive environment was needed for the participants in this study to feel safe to explore life’s big questions, it was the variety of experiences they encountered that provided them with the raw material to reflect on and understand themselves, their world, and who – and what – they wanted to do and be in it. Among others, participants described experiences that included college, study and traveling abroad, service and volunteer immersions, the loss of a loved one, war, love, heartache, family strife, family relationships, and friendships. All of these influenced their development as individuals.

Baxter Magolda (1992, 1994) offers that experience fosters cognitive and intellectual development, especially as individuals reflect on challenging situations that cause internal conflict, or cognitive dissonance. Although some experiences may be difficult to process, she argues that for self-authorship to occur, one must collect, interpret, analyze, and reflect on new knowledge in order to create self-constructed opinions. This formation of knowledge best occurs as a result of life experiences.

Experience is at the center of the paradigm because it either was the stimulus that prompted or was an outcome of the four practices of vocational discernment for the participants in this study. Any investigation of experience has the promise to help answer three key vocational questions: What brings us joy? What are we good at? What do
others need us to do? In this way, experience was a driving force in how these young adults came to understand their callings.

David Kolb (1984) underscores the importance of experience in his theory of experiential learning. He defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 209). This same learning took place in the lives of the young adults in this study. Many participants underscored that experiences had been “transformative” for them, in part, because they had been given opportunities to dialogue, reflect, and engage life in meaningful ways.

In college, participation in the OnCall program was not only a significant experience unto itself, but was also a vehicle that brought other experiences (past and current) to light. The annual interviews that participants completed challenged them to reflect on their passions, gifts, talents, values, relationships, and experiences. Through these discussions and other purposeful experiences, these young adults were drawn into an intentional exploration of their callings. Perhaps not surprisingly, the OnCall program – in part by design and in part by chance – fostered in these young adults a lived understanding of how the practices of dialogue, listening, reflection, and engagement were central to any meaningful vocational discernment process. The document “Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience,” co-authored by the National Association for Student Personal Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personal Association (ACPA) (2004), focuses on the importance of
transformative learning and offers this comment on the importance of life experience and programmatic efforts such as OnCall:

The most important factor is that transformative learning always occurs in the active context of students’ lives. Students learn what they need to know to accomplish a particular task such as resolving a conflict, confronting or counseling another student, or taking leadership responsibility. The complex experiences in which students engage are related to issues of concern to them and these programs typically include opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss how they plan to use what they have learned. (p. 13)

Whether an experience was the outcome or stimulus that prompted further exploration, four discernment practices were repeatedly used by young adults in this study to understand and make meaning of vocation. These practices of vocational discernment (which are described below) often challenged and supported the participants to “act” their way into new ways of thinking and being.

Dialogue. The practice of dialogue was central to how these young adults began to discern their calling and understand their identity and place in the world. Dialogue unfolded in many different ways. For some, it was a spontaneous conversation with a friend, while for others it was a choreographed discussion with a moderator. Regardless of the format, dialogue prompted these young adults to begin talking about topics meaningful to them, such as life’s “big questions.” Parks (2000) has written that “dialogue is not just talk. It is a way of being in conversation with others that involves a good deal of listening, desire to understand, and willingness to be affected – to be moved and informed, and to change one’s mind” (p. 142). Meaningful dialogue, therefore, allows individuals to be active participants in constructing their own beliefs and values as
they attempt to become more self-reliant in understanding the meaning and purpose of their lives (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

*Listening.* Fundamental to any conversation and critical to learning is listening. The role that this practice played in vocational discernment was revealed when young adults underscored the value they placed on listening to and learning from mentors, parents, and peers whom they deeply respected. These encounters, many participants stressed, helped them to take a hard look at themselves as a way to make sense of their lives.

The practice of listening, while always relational, does not necessarily always have to involve two or more people. This practice often bears important fruit when it involves solitude and listening to our own hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Such an “inside-out” practice helps individuals listen to their “lives speak” (Palmer, 2003; White, 2005). In this space, we are invited to listen for the “real” or “true self.” Noting the difficulty that many people experience with listening, Neafsey (2006) offers that “it takes practice and hard work to develop ‘eyes to see’ and ‘ears to hear.’ To do so, we must commit ourselves to cultivating the art and skill of what William Least Heat Moon has called ‘the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention’” (p. 11). Just as we are to listen to others to help discern our own and others’ callings, we must take the time to listen for what Howard Thurman calls “the sound of the genuine” in ourselves if we are to discern our life’s purpose and calling with authenticity and integrity.
Reflection. The practice of reflection is an ongoing process that requires individuals to examine their beliefs, values, and experiences as they attempt to better understand themselves and the world around them. Continuous reflection allows for individuals to make the connections needed – often times between knowledge and experience – to discern their calling. This is often a self-initiated process, but it is done most effectively through the coaching and mentoring of others. As evidenced in this study, engaging in reflective practice can foster personal development by allowing for opportunities to learn from experience. The young adults in this study actively reflected on their lived experiences by way of a community of support and mentors. One of the most important outcomes of self-reflection in the vocational discernment process is authenticity. The study participants reflected with the hope of being able to answer the question, “who is the real me?” Many developmental theorists (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1992; Parks, 2000; Perry, 1970) emphasize that fine tuning the practice of reflection can play a critical role in helping young adults transition from accepting knowledge from authority figures to beginning to create knowledge and make judgments for themselves.

Reflection requires looking deep inside to discover what path lies ahead. There is no “one size fits all” version of reflection; instead, it is a very personal process – a matter of “feeling right” (Neafsey, 2006). If successful, reflection challenges individuals to examine their inner thoughts more deeply than before. Because many individuals are often initially uncomfortable with the process of vocational discernment, young adults should be encouraged to practice reflection regularly. Ideally, a comfort with the process
of reflecting will foster a better sense of self, allowing young adults to thrive in their
efforts to discern their path, while being open to new self-discoveries that may surface.

*Engagement.* The practice of engagement proved important in the discernment
process of the young adults in this study, prompting them to take action to uncover their
callings. This practice brings to life the critical “doing” part of the paradigm. Chickering
(1969), in his “developing purpose” vector of college student development, defined
engagement as “developing clear vocational goals, making meaningful commitments to
specific personal interests and activities, and establishing strong interpersonal
commitments” (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 48). In the context
of this paradigm, this signifies the critical time when an individual is actively engaged in
the decision-making process. The participants in this study focused on engagement in two
ways: 1) choosing to participate actively in an experience (other than listening or
dialoguing), and 2) choosing to make a decision. For instance, in this study, engagement
often led young adults into lived experiences of community service, leadership
development, internship/fieldwork, and study abroad, all of which allowed them to test
out the various callings they were hearing in their lives. The practice of engagement is
critical to this pedagogical paradigm of vocational discernment as it allows individuals to
learn more about themselves and provides an opportunity for them to begin living a more
authentic life of purpose and meaning.

The pedagogical paradigm presented here has the potential to serve as a guide for
practitioners, faculty, and administrators as they develop vocation-infused programs,
curricula, and institutional policies. It holds strong promise of providing young adults with a clearer sense of their callings and a more authentic view of self. This paradigm supports the theologians’ viewpoints discussed in Chapter Two (Himes, 2001; Miller, 2007; Spohn, 2003) who suggested that two critical components of vocational discernment are self-reflection and communal discernment.

It is critical that young adults find their own pathways instead of blindly following those of others. While it may be very important for them to have an experience of job shadowing, for example, they must chart their own course through dialogue, reflection, engagement, and listening. It is here where the pedagogical process that emerged from this study can be of immeasurable value to young adults. Unfortunately, for many participants in this study, too often the reflection process was hampered by fears or other insecurities that were the result of participants attempting to conform to perceived external expectations. As educators, we need to help young adults understand both the importance of listening to their hearts and doing so with confidence and conviction, and the need for practicality. Although difficult, Neasfey (2006) asserts “the true self is grounded in our personal emotional truth, our true feelings, what we actually think and feel about things. It is rooted in the emotional reality of what is, rather than in what we think we should be feeling” (p. 54). In other words, it is rooted in self-authorship, choosing to live the lives that we know are at our core, rather than those which have been assumed for us by others. When young adults are provided with safe and welcoming communities of support in which they can dialogue about, reflect on,
engage in, and listen to their own and others’ big questions and lived experiences, they are given an opportunity to begin to walk a path toward greater vocational freedom, integration, and authenticity.

**Impact of life experiences and a supportive community**

In my review of the interviews from this study, it became increasingly clear that life experiences, particularly those that involved “crisis,” strongly influenced how the emerging adults in this study understood vocation. As I stated earlier in this chapter, critical life events played an important role in shaping what these young adults learned about themselves and their callings – regardless of the conceptual domain in which they appeared. Often times, these experiences involved crisis. These moments of crisis not only included traumatic experiences, such as the death of a loved one, but also those angst-ridden times during which participants struggled with trying to make sense of newly discovered knowledge and freedoms that conflicted with external authorities. Each of these “crisis” experiences had the possibility of influencing how participants came to understand themselves and their callings more fully during the college years. The developmental theorists presented in Chapter Two underscored the importance of these crisis moments in the lives of individuals and the influences they had on development (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Fowler, 1981; Marcia, 1967; Parks, 2000). All suggested that experiencing crisis often led to a better understanding of the self because it forced young adults to engage in critical self-reflection.
Participants in this study experienced crisis both before they came to college as well as during it. These conflicts led many to wrestle with the beliefs and values of their families of origin, often leading them to take more responsibility for forming their own self-authored views (Fowler, 1981).

While the examples of crisis in the lives of these young adults were many, a time of critical decision making for all participants came as a result of the OnCall program. Their involvement in the program prompted them to begin to take seriously questions of purpose, meaning, and vocation in their lives (Marcia, 1984; Parks, 2000). There was a focus on growing in self-awareness and integrating the origins of previous beliefs, values, and perspectives, often through questions such as, “why am I here?” “why do I believe that?”, and “why am I doing this – because I want to or because I feel others are telling me to do so?” While angst and uncertainty often accompanied these young adults’ attempts to make meaning, OnCall provided a supportive community in which they could grapple with their old “ways of thinking” freely and without judgment. As a result, many began to develop insights and understandings of life and themselves that dramatically altered their world view, epiphanies to which Parks (2000) has referred to as “shipwrecks.”

As noted earlier in this chapter, the young adults in this study demonstrated a need to discover themselves before embarking on a journey of vocational discernment. Marcia (1980) claimed that identity development (and the ultimate goal of achieving self-authorship) is a process where individuals learn how to make sense of their needs,
abilities, and self-perceptions through experience (which often involves moments of crisis). Accordingly, many participants exemplified some of Marcia’s “identity statuses.” For example, by engaging in reflective practices, many participants moved into “identity moratorium,” which is characterized by experiencing a crisis regarding career choice, but not feeling like they must solve the crisis immediately. Instead, these students chose to explore options in an effort to clarify their values, gifts, and interests in order to “sort out” what careers might best “fit” their newly clarified understandings of “self.”

Although the emerging adults in this study were searching deep within themselves to discern their callings, this often proved to be a struggle, since many for the first time came face to face with the challenging big questions of “who am I,” “whose am I,” and “how do I want to be in this world?” At the conclusion of their years in college, many of the young adults in this study remained in identity moratorium; indeed, only a handful showed signs of identity achievement, which Marcia (1984) defined as someone who had experienced a crisis and committed to an occupation. Perhaps this is to be expected, however, since it can be reasonably argued that identity achievement likely involves some actual participation in a given occupation for some time and, as such, may be more likely to appear in the first few years after college.

While difficult, crises challenged participants to come to a better understanding of their own values, beliefs, passions, gifts, and talents as they attempted to discern their callings. It is questionable whether they would have developed these insights and
authored their own understandings had they not experienced the support of a safe community in which they could dialogue and reflect on these crises with others.

Recommendations for Practice

This study offers faculty, student affairs administrators, and others a fresh, new, and in-depth view into how a small group of traditional-aged college students understand calling during a very important developmental time in their lives. Based on the claim that vocational discernment should play a central role in the lives of college students, there are many positive implications that flow from the findings of this study. This section outlines ways in which I believe institutions of higher education can provide effective and engaging opportunities for students to learn about their purpose in life. Specifically, I will present recommendations for institutions as a whole, as well as for those who work in them.

Institutional practices

Four institutional practices seem particularly relevant given the findings of this study. They include: 1) establishing a community and culture that supports discernment, 2) developing and expanding curricular and co-curricular opportunities, 3) increasing faculty and staff involvement in discernment initiatives, and 4) promoting more intentional collaboration between departments.

To begin, and as illustrated in this study’s conclusions, one of the most critical roles an institution can play in fostering young adult vocational formation is to create a
“community” and a culture that supports vocational discernment. This often starts with a mission that emphasizes holistic development, but, more specifically, supports curricular and co-curricular initiatives that foster critical self-reflection. Because discussions of vocation and faith can be intimidating for young adults, creating an intentional community or “holding environment” in which they can feel safe to explore life’s big questions is essential. A supportive but challenging space affords young adults the freedom to express their doubts, raise questions that challenge beliefs passed down to them by authority figures, and to do the necessary critical reflection to move into authoring their own lives. Additionally, peer support also can develop from exploring these questions when young adults realize that they are not alone in discerning meaning and purpose in their lives.

Another institutional practice is to develop or expand curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students. To start, there are several ways in which institutions can support vocational discernment through the curriculum. Just as service learning, civic engagement, and first-year seminar courses provide students with opportunities to engage in reflective practice, institutions can participate equally in intentional efforts to teach students discernment practices through the formal curriculum. These courses are critical for discernment because they allow students to encounter others who are different from them as well as foster interpersonal relationships and faith/spiritual growth opportunities that lead to holistic development. Currently, many courses already exist that help students with career development, which may include aspects of self-exploration, career planning
and decision-making, and methods for identifying talents, skills, and passions. Because these are often offered by the career center, students may only see them as job related and nothing broader. Courses offered in academic disciplines, especially within the humanities, that focus on topics such as the “pursuit of happiness” and “the real me” might be a way to engage students and help them think about a life full of meaning and purpose. Introductory and capstone courses – particularly in the professions – that help students explore their interests, passions, talents, and skills within a given field may also serve as important crucibles for assisting students in discerning their professional calling.

In addition to specific courses being offered to address vocational discernment, existing courses should incorporate more components that foster self-reflection. For example, simply listening to or reading about the stories of others can be very influential in helping students to tap into the voice of vocation in their lives. Furthermore, stories that bring up ethics or moral issues, or those that challenge one’s values, may allow students to reflect and engage in dialogue with peers. Because these stories could be fictional or biographical, this method could be used in many different disciplines.

Critical to the efficacy of these courses is faculty buy-in and support. As such, another key role of the institution is to encourage faculty and staff involvement. For those who are interested, it is crucial that they be properly trained both in theories of student development and the core practices of vocational discernment (both of which are likely to be new to them). This training should not only involve a broad understanding of these topics, but also concrete applications regarding 1) how to create “safe and welcoming
spaces” for the exploration of “big questions,” 2) practical activities for promoting vocational exploration, self-reflection, and discernment, and 3) hands-on training in group facilitation and more one-on-one vocational “coaching” practices. These efforts support findings from this study that emphasize that developmental issues and interpersonal relationships are critical dimensions of promoting vocational exploration and discernment. If an institution is going to be committed to student development, it should also be committed to faculty and staff development. Doing so will help provide effective resources for our students.

To foster vocational exploration in college students, there must also be purposeful and engaging co-curricular opportunities. Many institutions of higher learning have programs that allow these processes to take place. For example, the OnCall program, as well as any of the number of Lilly Endowment funded Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation, intentionally engage young adults through self-reflection, experiential learning, self-assessment, and community. Additionally, volunteer opportunities and other experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad and spring break immersion trips, should be infused with vocational content to provide students with a wide array of enriching opportunities to explore the world and themselves.

It is also important to support initiatives that focus on the spiritual development of college students. As the results of this study indicate, matters of faith/spirituality are a key influence on calling. While not all young adults will equate spirituality with
vocational discernment, many do. Focusing on the holistic development (including spiritual development) of young adults will undoubtedly enhance their opportunity to explore purpose and meaning in life. Time and again, young adults express their strong desire for these kinds of discussions and want their colleges and universities to provide opportunities to explore them further (HERI, 2004).

Providing and creating opportunities for young adults to explore matters relating to a meaningful life seldom can occur in isolation. Therefore, beyond specific programs there is a need for more collaboration between departments within a college or university to be most effective. These relationships already occur within most student affairs divisions. It is common, for example, for the career development center to focus on decision making as it relates to life after college and the campus ministry office to provide assistance with spiritual growth. Where collaborative efforts can be strengthened is in the partnering of student and academic affairs programming. If these and other partnerships can be intentionally forged, it is far more likely that more comprehensive and meaningful approaches to fostering vocational discernment in a systematic manner can occur within our institutions. Doing this, of course, will require greater collaboration (and a relaxing of unnecessary hierarchical boundaries) between faculty and staff, something that has been problematic on many college campuses for decades.

*Individual practices*

Given that individuals make up institutions, what specific practices could help faculty and staff to better promote vocational exploration and discernment with college
students? The items presented here are based largely on the results of this study but also include personal observations and scholars’ advice.

An important first practice is to encourage faculty and staff to pause and turn the mirror on themselves, reflecting on their own life stories and the callings they have heard within. Until faculty and staff have explored their own depths they cannot effectively help students to explore their own. Personal reflection and storytelling often helps individuals to recognize what “calling” means to them, and how their callings have unfolded dynamically over time. This knowledge is often invaluable when faculty and staff seek to explore the theme of vocation with emerging adults, encouraging them to make sense of it for themselves. It is a mistake to assume that those of us working in higher education are following our calling. After all, how can we expect our students to embark on the challenging path of self-discovery if we have not made the journey ourselves?

In much the same way, faculty and staff can do young adults a great service by sharing the ways in which they approached and made sense of key decisions in their lives. Discernment is the act of reflective decision-making, and there are many practical tools that can assist us in making good decisions. Introducing faculty and staff to these tools is an important first step, and workshops should be offered to help them become familiar with these practices. But stopping there is not enough; faculty and staff should then be encouraged to reflect on the decisions they’ve made and identify how they have engaged the discernment process in their lives. Making these connections and then telling
their stories to others will not only help faculty and staff to encourage college students to ask good questions as they approach important decisions, but it will also give them the practical confidence to share various discernment tools with young adults. Additionally, by applying these vocational tools to themselves and their story, faculty and staff are likely to feel more comfortable about discussing vocation with students. When this occurs, faculty and staff may be more open and present to engaging the “big questions” with young adults, sending an important message to them that others care about their holistic development.

The most effective way of conversing with a young adult is through a mentoring relationship. Many scholars (e.g. Love, 2002; Narloch, 2004; Parks, 2000) stress the importance of developing mentoring relationships with young adults. The support, challenge, and inspiration a mentor can provide aids in the development of young adults. In addition to dialogue, mentors can incorporate or demonstrate the other practices of the vocational discernment model, such as reflection and listening, and they can encourage engagement in experiences, which is critical. Mentors, and others who work in higher education, can also help young adults think more dynamically about vocation. Part of this involves helping them expand their view of vocation and calling beyond a “job.” In other words, following a calling does not have to be something monumental. Rather, ordinary people doing ordinary things can live out callings in ordinary places (Miller, 2007). Neafsey (2006) reminds us that “vocation is less about the particular things we do and more about the spirit with which we do them…Our fundamental human vocation is to
become just, loving, and humble persons during our short lives here on earth” (p. 5).

Mentors must help young adults grasp that they can live out their callings in what may initially appear to be “ordinary jobs” and “ordinary roles.” As Schuster (2003) has argued:

Calls draw us to the depth level of whatever roles we may already have. They turn insurance policy peddlers into advisors of needed financial security, grocery store employees into health and nutrition suppliers, doctors into healers, secretaries into stewards, business people into entrepreneurs, bureaucrats into civil servants, writers into dream weavers, parents into co-creators of life (p. 15).

In other words, whether or not a “job” or a life role is vocationally “extraordinary” is a matter of perspective and, I believe, passionate commitment. Our role as educators is to help the emerging adults with whom we work develop this perspective, encouraging them to live passionately and understand their deepest longings, whatever they may be. Encouraging young adults to broaden their conceptions of vocation is one of the most important things mentors can do to foster and promote self-authorship in young adults. Doing so will expand their occupational and avocational possibilities in ways that will promote more life and light in the world.

Yet another individual practice for higher education professionals is to support and encourage each other and put forth the energy to push for what is best for students and their development. As a non-faculty administrator, I recognize the importance of “staff” positions on college campuses. However, I also recognize the critical nature that faculty play not only in educating students in the traditional sense, but also in helping them develop holistically – something that student affairs personnel often like to claim as
their responsibility. Because of the undeniable amount of interaction faculty have with students, they need to be the guide in helping young adults in exploring vocation and finding meaning in life. They should be part of the community that helps students learn more about themselves and their world. This can happen through the course curriculum and by establishing the classroom as a safe community where numerous thoughts, ideals, and beliefs can be safely shared and challenged. For this to occur, however, the faculty must take time to look deep within themselves and ask life’s big questions.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study begins to fill a gap in the literature on how young adults understand and make meaning of vocation in their lives, there remains a deep need for more research in this area. In this section, I outline several opportunities for future research.

Overall, there simply needs to be more empirical research done on the topic of vocational discernment in the lives of college students. Most of the related literature focuses on the religious and spiritual development of college students. Given that young adults are increasingly interested in going on a “spiritual quest” to discover meaning and purpose in life, studies should also focus on matters of vocational discernment because of the centrality it often plays in their lives. Questions that could guide these studies are “how do young adults make key decisions in their lives?” and “what kinds of vocational practices seem to promote self-awareness and meaningful vocational discernment?”
Similar to methodologies used for understanding religiosity and spirituality, survey data would allow for benchmarking how young adults understand and construct vocation. For a more descriptive understanding, case study methods would also appropriately address these questions.

Similarly, there is an important need to investigate vocational discernment in later emerging adulthood, in the mid to late 20’s. Some important guiding questions are: “What factors contribute to the clarification or confusion of vocation in emerging adults?” “What crises emerge that impact their understanding of calling?” “What new developmental tasks arise?” “How, if at all, does their understanding of vocation change?” Investigating these questions has the potential to generate a more robust understanding of how vocation and calling is comprehended by “older” emerging adults – something that could be quite beneficial since most will have experienced developmental crises that could strongly shape their views of themselves, the purpose and meaning of their lives, and their various callings.

The pedagogical paradigm for vocational discernment practices presented earlier in this chapter needs to be put to the test, offering a promising area of future research. Analyzing this paradigm may help answer questions such as, “Is experience, within the context of a supportive community, really the central crucible for fostering of vocational discernment?” and “Are reflection, dialogue, listening, and engagement the primary practices that best promote vocational discernment?” Qualitative research methodologies, such as interviews and participant observation, are needed to understand how the
different practices of the model influence calling. Additionally, quantitative research could be developed to further understand how each of the practices, and the framework as a whole, interact. Similar to how Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle provided a context for a number of theories related to learning styles, so too can this framework provide a context for further understanding of the practices of vocational discernment.

Longitudinal studies are also needed to further explore vocation and calling. One promising possibility would be to continue this current study by revisiting the participants as they near their 30’s. This inquiry could test the vocational discernment process more closely, examine how callings may change over time, as well as look at factors that contribute to these changes. Finally, given that the original conceptual framework of this study has been modified, further investigation of it is needed to develop and enhance its validity. Ideally, the latter investigation would be conducted at several institutions, in a variety of settings, and completed over time.

Final Remarks

I believe that the purpose of a higher education is to provide students with the tools they need to succeed – defined in many different ways – in the world. Therefore, one outcome of higher education is to look at who our students become. Graduates must have an awareness of society, culture, and the world around them, in addition to an understanding of who they are as human beings. And, as human beings, I believe we are more human if we live a life of meaning and purpose. Developing an authentic sense of
our purpose is often only facilitated through critical reflection and discernment. Therefore, making sense of our meaning and purpose – possibly understood as our “callings” – is central to living a life of purpose.

Young adults are going through their critical college years with the hope and goal of discovering something more about themselves. They want to be called to something (or, better yet, some things). They want to impact the world. Few want to just go through the motions. Many are paying attention to their faith, their spirituality, and their religious beliefs. Many are critiquing their limitations in life and thriving on their gifts. Most are excited for the future and have begun to comb through their lives, past and present, to prepare for whatever lies ahead. It is our responsibility as educators to help equip emerging adults with the skills and experiences they will need to live full and meaningful lives. It is imperative that young adults reflect deeply on their lives and find ways to make connections between their feelings, thoughts, values, and spirituality. As a community of mentors and educators, we can help them search meaningfully for the “sound of the genuine” in themselves. We can also help them to develop their skills and gifts so that they may give genuinely of themselves to others. As educators, I firmly believe that one of the most important responsibilities we have to young adults is to help them discern those places where, in time, they can draw upon their “deep gladness” to feed the “deep hungers” of their families, communities, and world.
APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Baseline/Entry Interview Guide

Part I: Background and Family “Story”

1. Thanks for filling out a brief survey on yourself and your family background. Is there anything distinctive I should know about your family or background – something that will help me to better understand your story and who you are?

2. I’m very interested in the story behind why you chose to go “OnCall.” What attracted you to this program and why did you eventually choose to apply?

3. What is your current major? How did you come to decide on (name of major)? Did anything influence your decision? Did you consider any other fields? What do you find attractive about (name of major)?

4. What are your current thoughts on what you’d like to do after you graduate from college? Why this and not something else? Another way to think about this is what has influenced you to select this major over another?

5. Most parents have hopes for their kids – things they like to see them do, experience, be. Have you ever felt like your parents had hopes, or held plans, for you? If so, what were they? How do you feel about those plans (probe especially if the student’s plans are very different from those of his or her parents)? How do your parents feel about your choice of major, and your plans for your future?

5. Since we’re talking about your parents, how would you describe their attitudes toward their work, or career?

Part II: Baseline Understanding of “Call”/Vocation

1. What does it mean to you, at this time, to search for, listen to, or follow a personal calling? If it will make it easier, pretend I’m your best friend and you’re trying to help me understand what you mean by “searching for and following your call.”

2. Based on what you just shared with me, it sounds like you do/do not buy this notion that everyone has a unique purpose, or calling, in this life. If yes, ask: Hearing or responding to a call necessarily implies that someone or something is calling, right? From your own perspective, who or what is the source of that call?

3. Sitting here today, do you have any ideas about what you believe you’re being called to do with your life?
For those who identify a concrete call or hints about a calling:
Some people discover their calling in dramatic ways: they hear an inner voice or have a
dream or stumble upon an experience that leads them to exclaim, “Eureka! That’s what
my life is all about!” Others discover their call in more subtle ways, over time. Reflect
for a few minutes on what you believe is your calling – or what you believe you might be
being called to do or be. Then, think about how you have discovered or learned about
your call. Can you give me some examples of how you discovered or picked up on hints
about your calling?
Of course, it’s one thing to feel called – or to have an inkling that maybe you’re being
called – to something, and quite another to ACT on that call. How have you responded
so far to the “calling” you’ve heard or identified in your life? Put differently, have you
chosen to act on or answer this call in any way? If so, what have you done? If not, why
have you chosen to keep the call “waiting?”
Right now, can you think of any obstacles or barriers that might prevent you from
following or responding to your call in the way you’d like? What might some of these
obstacles be?

For those who do not identify a concrete call:
If you haven’t yet identified your “calling,” what are you doing to discover more fully a
sense of call in your life? If you are/are not doing something/anything in particular, can
you help me to understand why you’re making that choice?

Part III: Critical Life Events, Educational Experiences, Encounters with Other, and
Relationships that Have Shaped Self-Definition

1. What has been the most important event in the last two or three years of your life that,
you believe, has really helped to shape who you are as “your own person” and how you
think about yourself? How about before that? Why do you think these events were so
influential? What did they teach you about your own identity, about your own “true
self?”

2. Recall an educational experience or two that had a significant impact on how you
came to view yourself as a person. Describe the experience(s) for me and the impact it
had on you. What was it about this experience that made it meaningful for you?

3. Can you recall an experience outside of school that you have not already mentioned
that had a significant impact on how you came to view yourself? (If necessary, we may
need to use a probe similar to this: It might be an experience you had in a community
very different from the one you grew up in, or in nature, or simply in solitude). Describe
the experience(s) for me and the impact it had on you. What was it about this experience
that made it meaningful for you?
4. Have you experienced losses or some other forms of suffering that have shaped your life in an important way? Similarly, have you experienced moments of joy or “peak” experiences that have had an important influence on your life? How have these experiences — and maybe others — affected you and what you find meaningful in life? Put differently, how have these experiences helped you to make sense of “this is who I am and what I think my life should be about?”

5. Of all of the people you know, who would you most like to be like? (Can choose more than one person.) Why? What is it about this person (these individuals) that appeals to you?

6. Who have been the most important people in your life so far? Why? What have they taught you about yourself?

7. A mentor is someone who “cares for your soul”; he or she recognizes your potential, supports your development, challenges you to become more than you think you can be at the time, inspires you — sometimes through example, and is someone with whom you feel very comfortable having a conversation. If you’ve had a mentor (or mentors), I’d like to hear more about them. How would you describe your mentor(s)? What did you like about him/her/them? What did he/she/they help you to see in yourself that, perhaps, you didn’t see in yourself before? In what ways do you think your mentor(s) have influenced you (especially probe for influences on “call”).

Part IV: Self-Understanding of Current Passions, Talents/Gifts, and Values

1. Rewind to your childhood. Can you remember loving to do -- or spending lots of time doing -- something? What was it and how did you feel when you were doing it? Why do you enjoy it so much? Now fast forward a bit to your high school years. Did you love to do, or spend time on, something during this time that came close to your childhood love? What was it and how did you feel when you were doing it? Again, why did you enjoy it so much? How about now? Is there something you love to do or spend time on? How do you feel when you’re doing it? What makes it so enjoyable?

2. Have you ever had the experience of being so “wrapped up” in thinking or doing something that you lost all track of time? If so, what were you doing at the time?

3. Richard Leider has written that one definition of calling is an “inner urge to give your gifts away.” Do you feel like you have a special gift or talent that you can share with others? What is it? How do you feel about that gift, and how do you feel when you “give it away?”
4. I’d like you to take a few minutes to think about what’s really important to you, what really matters, what you care deeply about. What comes to mind? Why are these things important to you? Can you provide me with a few examples of how you act on these values in your daily life?

5. When you have an important decision to make in your life, how do you go about making that decision? Maybe you could recall a recent important decision you made, and lead me through the steps you took in making that decision. What influenced your decision-making process? (people, context, values, talents, other).

Part V: Faith/Spirituality and “Making Meaning” of the Purpose and Meaning of Life

1. Do you believe in God or something that is larger and transcends yourself? How would you describe that belief? How does it change how you live your life?

2. I’d like you to recall a time when you were doing something that you really enjoyed and, wham, failure hit. How did you respond to that failure? What, if anything, sustained you in the wake of this failure? Put another way, what kept you going in the face of adversity? Did you learn anything from this experience that may be currently influencing how you’re thinking about what you want out of your life and life’s work?

4. Is it important to you that your “life make a difference?” If so, what kind of difference would you like it to make? (Or, alternatively, how will you know if it has? What criteria would you use to measure a life well-lived?)

Part VI: Hopes, Dreams, Fears: Responses to Call

1. If you could be or do anything with your life, what would you do? In a broader, more general sense, would you like to do some version of this as your life’s work? Have you ever thought seriously about doing so? Why or why not? What’s standing in your way? (probe for potential factors influencing decision to respond or not respond).

2. All of us have hopes and dreams; it’s part of our human condition. What are some of your hopes and dreams? Do you have a hope or a dream that you think about consistently, something that your mind skips to when you’re alone, or listening to music, or just hanging out? Are you doing anything right now to act on this hope or dream? Why or why not? What’s standing in your way? (probe for potential factors influencing decision to respond or not respond)

3. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “Most people go to their graves with their music still inside of them.” If you had to describe what you think your “music” is, what would you say? Is your music playing loud and clear in your life, or is muffled or playing so
quietly that only you can hear it? (If playing aloud, ask: What do you think has helped you to “let your music” out? If the music is silent, ask: What would help you to “let your music” out to others more fully?)

Conclusion

1. Is there anything you thought we might discuss today that we did not? Is there anything else you’d like to share that you believe is important for me to know about you, and how you are making meaning of the theme of vocation or call in your life?

Mid-Program Interview Guide

Part I: Current “Story”

1. When we spoke over a year ago, you indicated that you were thinking about/had declared (name of major) as your major. Is this still the case? 
   If yes: What do you continue to find attractive about the field?
   If no: What influenced your decision to consider another major? What do you currently find attractive about your new major?

2. What are your current thoughts on what you’d like to do after you graduate from college? Why this and not something else? What do you think is influencing this particular choice?

3. How do your parents feel about your choice of major, and your plans for your future? Your siblings? How do you feel about their feelings about your choices?

4. Has anything important happened in your family this year that has affected how you’ve come to think about who you are and what you’d like to do with your life and life’s work? If so, what happened and how do you believe it’s influenced you?

Part II: Understanding of “Call”/Vocation

1. As you might recall, last year I asked you to talk a bit about what “call” or “vocation” meant to you personally. I’d like to revisit that question with you this year, because I’m interested in learning how your understandings of call or vocation may change over time. With that in mind, what does it mean to you, at this moment, to search for, listen to, or follow a personal calling? Like last year, if it will be easier for you, feel free to pretend that I’m your best friend and you’re trying to help me understand what you mean by “searching for and following your call.”
2. Based on what you just shared with me, it sounds like you do/do not buy this notion that everyone has a unique purpose, or calling, in this life. 
   If yes, ask: Hearing or responding to a call necessarily implies that someone or something is calling, right? From your own perspective, have your thoughts changed at all -- or become clearer -- about who or what is the source of that call?

3. Last year I asked you if you had any ideas about what you believe you were being called to do with your life. At that time, you indicated (__________). Have you thoughts changed any on this over the past year or so? Do you still believe that (____) is your calling, or have you begun to pick up on other “hints” about a different “calling?”

For those who identify a concrete call:
Some people discover their calling in dramatic ways: they hear an inner voice or have a dream or stumble upon an experience that leads them to exclaim, “Eureka! That’s what my life is all about!” Others discover their call in more subtle ways, over time. Reflect for a few minutes on what you believe is your calling. Then, think about how you have discovered or learned about your call. Can you give me some examples of how you discovered or picked up on hints about your calling?
How have you responded so far to the “calling” you’ve heard or identified in your life? Particularly over the course of the past year, how have you chosen to act on or answer this call? What, specifically, have you done? If you haven’t done anything, why have you chosen to keep the call “waiting?”
Right now, can you think of any obstacles or barriers that might prevent you from following or responding to your call in the way you’d like? What might some of these obstacles be?

For those who identify that their original “call” has changed since last year:
What led you to reconsider your “calling” over the past year? Were there certain people or experiences you had that made you question that calling and, perhaps, helping you to pick up on hints about this new calling you’ve described to me?
Particularly over the course of the past year, how have you chosen to act on or answer this new calling in your life? What, specifically, have you done? If you haven’t done anything, why have you chosen to keep the call “waiting?”
Right now, can you think of any obstacles or barriers that might prevent you from following or responding to your call in the way you’d like? What might some of these obstacles be?

For those who do not identify a concrete call:
If you haven’t yet identified your “calling,” what are you doing to discover more fully a sense of call in your life? If you are/are not doing something/anything in particular, can you help me to understand why you’re making that choice?
Part III: Critical Life Events, Educational Experiences, Encounters with Other, and Relationships that Have Shaped Self-Definition

1. What has been the most important event in the last year of your life that, you believe, has really helped to shape who you are as “your own person” and how you think about yourself? Why do you think this event (or events) has been so influential? What did it teach you about your own identity, about your own “true self?”

2. Recall an educational experience or two that you’ve had since we last spoke that has had a significant impact on how you came to view yourself as a person. Describe the experience(s) for me and the impact it had on you. What was it about this experience that made it meaningful for you?

3. Looking back over the past year, can you recall an experience outside of school that you have not already mentioned that had a significant impact on how you came to view yourself as a person? (If necessary, we may need to use a probe similar to this: It might be an experience you had in a community very different from the one you grew up in, or in nature, or simply in solitude). Describe the experience(s) for me and the impact it had on you. What was it about this experience that made it meaningful for you?

4. When you think about your involvement in the OnCall program, has any one or more learning experiences had an important impact on how you have come to think about yourself as a person? How so? Has this experience(s) influenced in any way how you view your life and life’s work, or who you should be and what you should do?

5. Who have been the two to three most influential persons in your life this year? Why? How have you changed because of their influence (especially probe for influences on “call”)? Did they help you to see something in yourself that, perhaps, you had not seen previously?

Part IV: Self-Understanding of Current Passions, Talents/Gifts, and Values

1. Think back over the past year. When have you been the happiest? What were you doing? What made this experience so enjoyable? Let’s put the shoe on the other foot now: Over the past year, when have you been the unhappiest? What were you doing? What made this experience so unenjoyable?

2. During the past year, have you had the experience of being so “wrapped up” in thinking or doing something that you lost all track of time? If so, what were you doing and how did you feel when you were doing it?
3. Last year, I shared with you Richard Leider’s definition of calling as our “inner urge to give our gifts away.” Over the past year, have you become more attuned to a special gift or talent that you share with others? What is it? How do you feel about that gift, and how do you feel when you “give it away?”

4. I’d like you to take a few minutes to think about what’s really important to you, what really matters, what you care deeply about. What comes to mind? Why are these things important to you? Can you provide me with a few examples of how you act on these values in your daily life?

5. When you have an important decision to make in your life, how do you go about making that decision? Maybe you could recall an important decision you made sometime within the last 6 to 12 months, and lead me through the steps you took in making that decision. What influenced your decision-making process? (people, context, values, talents, other).

Part V: Faith/Spirituality and “Making Meaning” of the Purpose and Meaning of Life

1. Last year you told us that you believed/did not believe in God or some larger power that transcended self. Do you still believe that? How important is your faith or spirituality to you now? Do you believe your faith or spiritual beliefs have changed in any way over the past year? If so, what do you think has prompted the change?

2. Earlier I asked you about your major and what you were considering doing after you graduated from college. Lately we’ve been exploring broader issues about experiences you’ve had in your life this year that have -- or have not -- affected how you view your life and life’s work and what you believe your life should be about. How important have your faith or spiritual beliefs been in shaping these views?

3. Have you had any encounters with significant failure this year? How did you respond to that failure? What, if anything, sustained you in the wake of this failure? Put another way, what kept you going in the face of adversity? Did you learn anything from this experience that may be currently influencing how you’re thinking about what you want out of your life and life’s work?

4. Last year, you told me that it was/ was not important to you that your “life make a difference?” Do you still believe this? Do you believe your life has made any kind of difference this past year? How? In your mind’s eye right now, what kind of difference do you really hope your life will make?

Part VI: Hopes, Dreams, Fears: Responses to Call
1. Let’s daydream again, just like we did last year. If you could be or do anything with your life, what would you do? In a broader, more general sense, would you like to do some version of this as your life’s work? Have you ever thought seriously about doing so? Why or why not? What’s standing in your way? (probe for potential factors influencing decision to respond or not respond).

2. All of us have hopes and dreams; it’s part of our human condition. Last year your hopes and dreams focused on (__________). But, as you know, a lot can happen in a year. What are some of your hopes and dreams now, at this very moment? Do you have a hope or a dream that you think about consistently, something that your mind skips to when you’re alone, or listening to music, or just hanging out? Are you doing anything right now to act on this hope or dream? Why or why not? What’s standing in your way? (probe for potential factors influencing decision to respond or not respond)

3. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “Most people go to their graves with their music still inside of them.” Last year you described your music as (________) and indicated that your music was/was not playing loud and clear in your life. Would you offer the same description today?
   If yes: What do you think has helped or is helping you to “let your music” out?
   If no: What’s different? If you were to describe the “music inside of you today,” what would you say? What do you think has led you to sing this new tune, so to speak, and to share this new tune with others?
   If the music is silent, ask: What would help you to “let your music” out to others more fully?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything you thought we might discuss today that we did not? Is there anything else you’d like to share that you believe is important for me to know about you, and how you are making meaning of the theme of vocation or call in your life?

Exit Interview Guide

Part I: Current “Story”

1. When we spoke over a year ago, you indicated that your were thinking about/had declared (name of major) as your major. Is this still the case?
   If yes: What do you continue to find attractive about the field?
   If no: What influenced your decision to consider another major? What do you currently find attractive about your new major?
2. You’re now a senior. Graduation isn’t far away. What plans do you have for yourself after graduation? Why this and not something else? What do you think is influencing this particular choice?

3. How do your parents feel about your choice of major, and your plans for your future? Your siblings? How do you feel about their feelings about your choices?

4. Has anything important happened in your family during your time in college that has affected how you’ve come to think about who you are and what you’d like to do with your life and life’s work? If so, what happened and how do you believe it’s influenced you?

Part II: Understanding of “Call”/Vocation

1. Over the past two years I have asked you to talk a bit about what “call” or “vocation” means to you personally. I’d like to revisit that question with you one final time. Think back to when you first applied to go “OnCall.” Do you remember how you thought of, or made sense of, “call” or vocation at that time? Now fast forward to today. When you hear someone talk about “searching for” or “following” their “calling,” what does that mean to you now?

*If there has been a change in how individual thinks of call, ask: It sounds like your understanding of “calling” or “vocation” has changed over the past few years. What do you think has prompted this change in perspective?*

2. This is our third interview now, and its clear to me that you do/do not believe that everyone has a unique purpose, or calling, in this life.

*If yes, ask: Over the course of your college experience, have your thoughts changed at all -- or become clearer -- about who or what is the source of that call?*

3. We began our conversations almost three years ago by discussing your ideas about calling, and what you believe you were being called to do with your life. At that time, you indicated (__________). A lot can happen in three years. If someone were to ask you today about your calling, what would you tell him or her? Do you feel you have a calling, or have you begun to become more clear about your personal “call” in this world?

*For those who identify a concrete call:*

As you can well imagine, a lot of people search for years and never discover their calling. These folks would probably like to know how you discovered or learned about your call -- how you “figured it out,” so to speak. Can you give me some concrete examples of how you discovered or picked up on hints about your calling during your college experience?
How are you responding to the “calling” you’ve heard or identified in your life? Could you give me some specific examples of how you’ve chosen to follow and act on your call, especially in the last few years? If you haven’t done anything, why have you chosen to keep the call “waiting?”

Right now, can you think of any obstacles or barriers that might prevent you from following or responding to your call in the way you’d like? What might some of these obstacles be?

For those who identify that their “call” has changed since last year:
What led you to reconsider your “calling” over the past year? Were there certain people or experiences you had that made you question that calling and, perhaps, helping you to pick up on hints about this new calling you’ve described to me?
Particularly over the course of the past year or two, how have you chosen to act on or answer this new calling in your life? What, specifically, have you done? If you haven’t done anything, why have you chosen to keep the call “waiting?”
Right now, can you think of any obstacles or barriers that might prevent you from following or responding to your call in the way you’d like? What might some of these obstacles be?

For those who do not identify a concrete call:
If you haven’t yet identified your “calling,” what are you doing to discover more fully a sense of call in your life? Do you feel like you’ve done anything over the course of the past year to help you move closer to understanding your vocation? If you are/are not doing something/anything in particular, can you help me to understand why you’re making that choice?

Part III: Critical Life Events, Educational Experiences, Encounters with Other, and Relationships that Have Shaped Self-Definition

1. What has been the most important event over the past three years that, you believe, has really helped to shape who you are as “your own person” and how you think about yourself? Why do you think this event (or events) has been so influential? What did it teach you about your own identity, about your own “true self?”

2. What college-related experience has had the greatest impact on how you have come to view yourself as a person? Describe the experience(s) for me and the impact it has had on you. What had made this experience so meaningful for you?

3. When you think about your involvement in the OnCall program, has any one or more learning experiences had an important impact on how you have come to think about yourself as a person? How so? Has this experience(s) influenced in any way how you view your life and life’s work, or who you should be and what you should do?
4. Who have been the two to three most influential persons in your life during your college years? Why? How have you changed because of their influence (especially probe for influences on “call”)? Did they help you to see something in yourself that, perhaps, you had not seen previously?

5. During our first interview, I explained that a mentor is someone who “cares for your soul”; he or she recognizes your potential, supports your development, challenges you to become more than you think you can be at the time, inspires you -- sometimes through example, and is someone with whom you feel very comfortable having a conversation. Have you had a mentor (or mentors) during your college experience? Could you describe your mentor to me? What do you like about him or her? What did he or she help you to see in yourself that, perhaps, you didn’t see in yourself before? In what ways do you think your mentor has influenced you (especially probe for influences on “call”).

Part IV: Self-Understanding of Current Passions, Talents/Gifts, and Values

1. Let’s rewind and then fast forward through your college experience at Loyola. When have you been the happiest during your college experience? What were you doing? What made this experience so enjoyable? Similarly, when have you been the unhappiest during your years at Loyola? What were you doing? What made this experience so unenjoyable?

2. During your college experience, have you had the experience of being so “wrapped up” in thinking or doing something that you lost all track of time? If so, what were you doing and how did you feel when you were doing it?

3. During our past two interviews, I shared with you Richard Leider’s definition of calling as our “inner urge to give our gifts away.” Since coming to Loyola, have you become more attuned to a special gift or talent that you know you can do or can share with others? What is it? How do you feel about that gift, and how do you feel when you “give it away?”

4. I’d like you to take a few minutes to think about what was really important to you, what really mattered, or what you cared deeply about when you first set foot on Loyola’s campus a few years ago. Now think about what’s really important to you, what really matters, and what you care deeply about today. Do different things come to mind? If yes: What’s different? Why are these things important to you? What do you think has influenced these changes? Can you provide me with a few examples of how you act on these values in your daily life? If not: Why do these things continue to be important to you? Can you provide me with a few examples of how you act on these values in your daily life?
5. I’d like you to recall an important decision you have made during the past 6 to 9 months. What was the decision? Could you lead me through the steps you took in making that decision? What influenced your decision-making process? (people, context, values, talents, other).

Part V: Faith/Spirituality and “Making Meaning” of the Purpose and Meaning of Life

1. When I first interviewed you, you told me that you believed/did not believe in God or some larger power that transcended self. Do you still believe that? How important is your faith or spirituality to you now, near the end of your college experience? Do you believe your faith or spiritual beliefs have changed in any way over the course of your college experience? If so, what do you think has prompted the change?

2. Earlier I asked you about what you were considering doing after you graduated from college. Lately we’ve been exploring broader issues about experiences you’ve had in college and how they have -- or have not -- affected how you view your life and life’s work and what you believe your life should be about. How important have your faith or spiritual beliefs been in shaping these views?

3. During your college experience, have you had any significant encounters with failure? How did you respond to that failure? What kept you going in the face of adversity? Did you learn anything from this experience that has influenced -- or may currently be influencing -- how you’re thinking about what you want out of your life and life’s work?

4. Last year, you told me that it was/was not important to you that your “life make a difference?” Do you still believe this? Do you believe your life has made any kind of difference this past year? How? In your mind’s eye right now, what kind of difference do you really hope your life will make?

Part VI: Hopes, Dreams, Fears: Responses to Call

1. Let’s daydream again, just like we’ve done every year. During our first interview, I asked you, “If you could be or do anything with your life, what would you do?” You responded that you would (__________). It’s three years later now. Would you answer this question in the same way? Why or why not? In a broader, more general sense, would you like to do some version of this as your life’s work? Have you ever thought seriously about doing so? Why or why not? What’s standing in your way? (probe for potential factors influencing decision to respond or not respond).

2. You’re about to graduate. I’m sure you have hopes and dreams for your future. We’ve talked about some of these in the past. When I first interviewed you, your hopes
and dreams focused on (______________). Last year they focused on (__________).

Now you’re about to graduate. What are some of your hopes and dreams for your future? Do you have a hope or a dream that you think about consistently, something that your mind skips to when you’re alone, or listening to music, or just hanging out? Are you doing anything right now to act on this hope or dream? Why or why not? What’s standing in your way? (probe for potential factors influencing decision to respond or not respond)

3. I’d like to conclude – almost! – our last interview with the same question I’ve been asking you for the past two years. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “Most people go to their graves with their music still inside of them.” In the past, you’ve described your music as (_______) and indicated that your music was/was not playing loud and clear in your life. You’re now about to graduate, and you have four years of college experience under your belt. Would you offer the same description today?

If yes: What do you think has helped or is helping you to “let your music” out?
If no: What’s different? If you were to describe the “music inside of you today,” what would you say? What do you think has led you to sing this new tune, so to speak, and to share this new tune with others?
If the music is silent, ask: What would help you to “let your music” out to others more fully?

Conclusion

1. You’re not done yet. You’ve had the benefit of participating in the OnCall program, and of sitting in interviews like this one over the past three years. You’ve also written reflection essays in which you’ve had to think about and reflect on the meaning of your own calling. If you could give three pieces of advice to a Loyola freshman who really wants to discover or learn more about his or her unique calling in life, what bits of advice would you offer?

2. If you had to summarize the two or three things that, in your experience, most influenced you in learning more about your vocation or calling, what would you highlight? Why?

3. Finally, is there anything you thought we might discuss today that we did not? Is there anything else you’d like to share that you believe is important for me to know about you, and how you are making meaning of the theme of vocation or call in your life
REFERENCES


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VITA

John Dahlstrand was born and raised in Elmhurst, Illinois. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, he attended Denison University, Granville, Ohio, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, in 1999. From 2000 to 2002, he also attended Loyola University Chicago where he received a Master of Arts in Community Counseling.

Prior to his work in higher education administration, John was a counselor in therapeutic school and group-home settings for children and adolescents. For the past eight years he has worked in higher education in the areas of career development and student academic services. He is currently the Manager of Student Academic Services at Loyola University Chicago. He lives in Highland Park, Illinois with his wife and two young children.