

Institute on College Student Values, February 7, 2004

College Students' Conceptions of Vocation and the Role of the Higher Education Mentoring Community

Rodger Narloch, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology
St. John's University
Collegeville, MN 56321
(320)-363-3135
RNarloch@csbsju.edu

This research was completed with the support of a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation.

College Students' Conceptions of Vocation and the Role of the Higher Education Mentoring Community

One way in which spirituality can be expressed is through its influence on and integration with career choice. Recently, the relationship between spirituality and occupation has been promoted through the Lilly Endowment's Theological Exploration of Vocation Programs. As Parks (2000) and Fowler (2000) describe, the mentoring community can play a large role in the developmental process of students' faith and the identification of their vocation. Acknowledging the importance of mentoring, St. John's University has chosen to focus its Vocation Project initiative on programming aimed at educating faculty and administrative and support staff on the concept of vocation and how they may be able to facilitate the spiritual development and vocational discernment of their students.

It seems that higher education is experiencing a re-awakening of the concept of "vocation." While the concept is not new, over the past decades the term has often taken on a meaning synonymous with occupation and, thus, has lost its associations with identity, faith, and community. While I do not intend to argue for one definitive notion of vocation, the following are examples of the concept discussed in the fuller sense of the term:

Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership. The shaping of vocation as a total response of the self to the address of God involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God's purposes in the services of God and the neighbor. -James Fowler (2000)

The place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need. -Frederick Buechner (1993)

It is helpful to think of three aspects or levels of vocation: identity, lifestyle, and mission. -Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1983)

Student Views

The focus of the current paper is on the conceptions of vocation expressed by students ($N = 110$) as well as stratified-random samples of faculty ($N = 45$), administrative staff ($N = 44$), and support staff ($N = 30$) who comprise their mentoring community. Concerning the student assessment, we collected both qualitative and quantitative data to capture their understandings of the concept of "vocation" as well as various dimensions of their religiosity, identity, self-concept clarity, self-reflective tendencies, and a more direct measure of their sense of vocation. However, the current paper focuses specifically on students' responses on an open-ended free-write exercise where they were given five minutes to "think about and explain what is meant by the term

‘vocation.’” The sample contained students of both genders, all years in college, and a wide variety of majors to represent the general student population. Furthermore, the sample contained both students who had ($n = 37$) and had not ($n = 73$) been exposed to Vocation Project programming. After obtaining the student data, pairs of research assistants coded the responses by identifying themes that emerged from the narratives. After an iterative process of reading, discussing, and operationally defining the themes of the narratives, the coders identified three primary themes, each with an inter-rater reliability of around 90%.

One theme was the “breadth” of students’ conceptions of vocation. For this variable, most students were classified into one of three categories: *traditional*, *multiple roles*, or *life encompassing*. Responses classified as “traditional” were those that discussed vocation as synonymous with occupation. Furthermore, given St. John’s is a Catholic school, references to vocation being a religious vocation of becoming a priest, monk, or nun were also categorized as traditional. In essence, this category reflected a narrow definition of vocation, be it secular or religious. In this traditional manner, 47% of students wrote about vocation. Responses in the *multiple roles* category not only mentioned vocation in the traditional sense, but also included some other dimension of life (e.g., family, service to others, etc.). In this category were 26% of the students. Finally, the label *life encompassing* described 12% of students who discussed vocation as enveloping one’s entire self or entire life.

The second emergent theme was called “depth” and indicated whether one’s conception of vocation included being passionate or deeply intrinsically motivated. Integrating faith and work also qualified as having depth. 35% of students included this element of depth. Table 1 shows examples of responses coded according to both the breadth and depth dimensions as well as the percent of student responses that were categorized within each cell of the matrix. Clearly there is a trend toward students thinking of vocation in traditional ways that do not include an element of depth (i.e., to the bottom and left of the matrix). As we collect data nearing the end of the four-year longitudinal study, we are hoping that the percentages shift more toward the upper-right portion of the table indicating a deeper notion of a life-encompassing conception of vocation.

Table 1: Student Vocation: Breadth x Depth

| | Traditional | Multiple Roles | Life Encompassing |
|----------|--|---|---|
| Depth | <p>20%</p> <p>“A vocation is like a calling to a career. I think of priesthood as a vocation—they have been called to service and are fulfilled in that role...A vocation is like a job in the sense that it takes up a lot of time, but a person <u>likes</u> doing it.”</p> <p>“Vocation is the career you choose, or the job you do. For example, a vocation could be a plumber or a teacher or mechanic...Hopefully it is something someone is very knowledgeable about and has a passion for.”</p> <p>“To me, a vocation is something you choose to do with your life (your career). It should be something you are good at, but also something you enjoy...Some people go to college or specialty schools to receive education for their specific vocation.”</p> | <p>7%</p> <p>“Vocation is what you do with your time...some people may wish to volunteer—that’s their vocation. A person might want to live alone in the forest writing books—that is his vocation. Another may want to raise a family and have a house...vocation is that activity(ies) you exchange your time for.”</p> <p>“A vocation is a calling. The Catholic Church has many vocations: call to ordained service, a call to be married, or the often forgotten call to be a single person...Someone’s vocation (their true vocation) ought to encompass their talents, interests, and aspirations in life.”</p> | <p>3%</p> <p>“Although I don’t know a dictionary definition, I think “vocation” can be described as a mix between a career and a way of life...It is something you decide to do—but is much more whole hearted than a job. You give yourself to the profession and it is your job 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is a lot more behind it—it is something you believe in and work to represent.”</p> <p>“It means being dedicated to belief/value that is very strong and important to you. You give your all trying to live your life through your beliefs/values; specifically concerning the teachings of the Catholic church.”</p> |
| No Depth | <p>27%</p> <p>“I have always thought that the word or term vocation is a career. But more of a hands on career such as welding, painting, carpenter...Such as vocational school or vocation learning.”</p> <p>“When I hear the word vocation I think of the word job or occupation, but one in which special skills are learned and used. As I define the word, being an electrician would be defined as a vocation.”</p> <p>“I think vocation means the ability for someone to feel that they want to be a part of the monastery and be a priest or nun.”</p> | <p>18%</p> <p>“I think the term ‘vocation’ is simply put best as ‘one’s calling in life.’ A calling from God...It could be a wide range of things. Your job, your family, marriage, single life, joining the church, working w/ the poor and volunteering.”</p> <p>“Vocation is a calling in life. I hear vocation most often in the Catholic setting. Being called to priesthood or a married life or single. I think of vocation really as any calling. A calling to a particular job.”</p> <p>“Vocation is the call in life that a person has to a certain profession and way of living. Some have a vocation to teach, be single, be married, be a priest, be an engineer, be a doctor, etc., etc.”</p> | <p>9%</p> <p>“Vocation is a calling into one’s way of life. Vocation is what one decides to follow in their occupation or way of living...Along with just an occupation, it is a way to follow what one believes in and a way to live their life as a truly respectable person.”</p> <p>“Vocation refers to the life’s work of a person...what they are called to be. This is not limited to professional careers but also includes lifestyle, community involvement, social aspirations, etc.”</p> <p>“A universal call to holiness. Living out life’s call, whatever that may be.”</p> |

The final theme to emerge from the student responses was an indication of how one comes to know one's vocation, or "process of discernment." First, I find it interesting that over 75% of the students spontaneously incorporated this element into their responses without specifically being asked to do so. This indicates that vocation is viewed as much as a process as it is an end-state. Concerning the different characterizations of the process, there were three: *active*, *passive*, and *cooperative*. Active is when the process is self-determined. For example, one chooses one's vocation. To the contrary, passive is when one's vocation is determined by other forces (e.g., fate, being called by God). Finally, cooperative is a collaborative process between oneself and other forces. For example, people may be called by God to a particular vocation, but they still must choose to answer the call. See Table 2 for examples of the 25% of responses that were considered active, the 20% that were passive, and the 33% that were cooperative.

Table 2: Student Vocation: Process of Discernment

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <p>Active 25%</p> | <p>“Vocation is what you do with your time...Some people may wish to volunteer—that’s their vocation. A person might want to live alone in the forest writing books—that is his vocation. Another may want to raise a family and have a house—that’s her vocation.” “Vocation is the career you choose, or the job you do.” “A vocation should be something we feel strongly about and also put a lot of effort into choosing and actually performing. Everyone will decide how they can contribute and as long as each person puts in the required amount of effort.” “Means what a person chooses to do with their life.”</p> |
| <p>Passive 20%</p> | <p>“I believe vocation is a calling we all have that is different from an occupation...My vocation is a calling to what <u>God</u> wants me to do.” “I often hear the priest in my church talk about vocation...He just talks about how we are in such a need of people in the “vocation.” So I guess I think this means that anyone who feels that they are being “called” by God...to serve in the vocation of the Catholic church, or any other church.” “To me, the term “vocation” means a calling. Specifically a calling by God that calling is sort of what a person is meant to do in his/her life. It is what God calls this person to do.”</p> |
| <p>Cooperative 33%</p> | <p>“A person’s vocation is their call from God, it is that person’s personal answer to the question WDGW (What does God want). God has a specific vocation in mind for each person, but for various reasons not everyone recognizes or answers the call to this vocation.” “My vocation is what I am called to do. All of us are called by God to help in some way or somehow to do something with our lives to give back or to serve. We each need to figure out what that is and follow it out in our lives.” “Vocation = a calling one has to live a certain life...discerning one’s true/most correct vocation is a crucially important task.”</p> |

Views of the Higher Education Mentoring Community

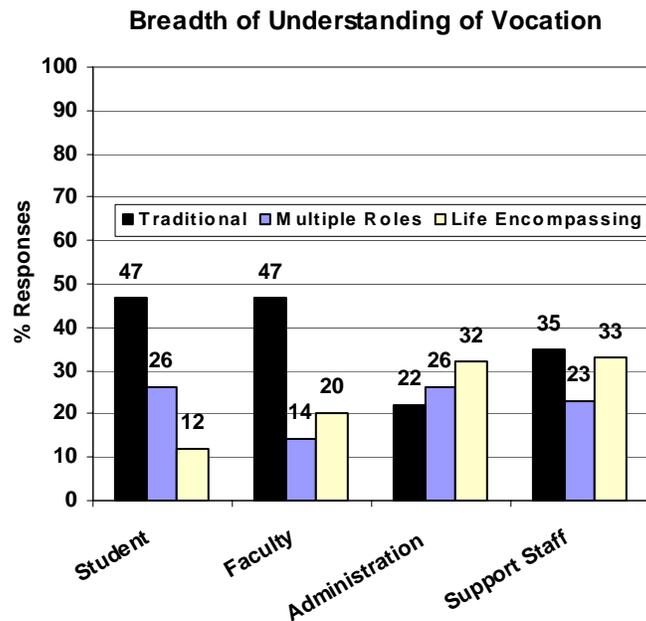
To gain knowledge of the characteristics of the mentoring community in which these students are developing, faculty, administrative staff (e.g., registrar, library, student development employees), and support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, food service employees) were interviewed using three questions: 1) What is your

understanding of the concept of “vocation”? 2) What do you do to facilitate a sense of vocation within students?, and 3) How does your faith relate to your occupation? In order to assist in getting a representative sample, individuals were contacted based on a stratified-random procedure according to their division. For example, faculty were selected in proportion to the overall number of faculty in each of our four faculty divisions (e.g., social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, and fine arts). Such sampling is only effective, however, if a high proportion of contacted individuals agree to participate. Our rates were outstanding with, for example, 89% of contacted faculty agreeing to the interview. One limitation of our faculty sample, however, is that members of the monastic community on campus were over-represented. They comprised 20% of our faculty sample, despite being only roughly 12% of the actual faculty population on our campus.

What is your understanding of the concept of vocation?

As with the student responses to this definitional question of vocation, the same primary dimensions emerged; however, the percentage of respondents in each category differed depending on the group. As seen in Figure 1, faculty had a highly traditional understanding of vocation (47%). Interestingly, this was very similar to the views of students, but much higher than the other employee groups who had more equivalent distributions between the traditional, multiple roles, and life-encompassing categories. Another compelling aspect of these data was actually an omission. Namely, only 8% of the faculty explicitly mentioned family or familial roles (e.g., being a good father, wife, brother, etc.) as being a facet of vocation. Furthermore, while faculty mentioned this very little, it was the most of any employee group as the family did not arise in any of the administrative or support staff interviews.

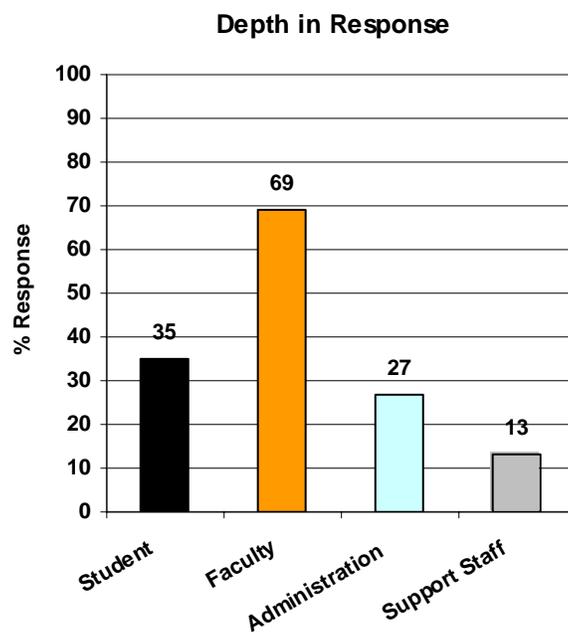
Figure 1



Concerning vocation containing an element of “depth,” faculty clearly see this as a central component of vocation as 69% spontaneously incorporated this dimension into their responses. Roughly half of the faculty that included this depth dimension did so by referring to vocation as something about which one is passionate or for which one is intrinsically motivated. The other half of the 69% introduced depth by discussing the integration of faith with occupation. This second portion of the group, again, may be a bit higher than our overall faculty population due to the over-representation of monastic community members.

When comparing the other groups to the faculty (see Figure 2), faculty stand out as most likely to view vocation with this depth component. One reason for this could be because faculty have fewer constraints in their work as compared to administrative and support staff and are therefore freer to pursue aspects of their jobs that are passionate to them. However, this explanation is purely speculative.

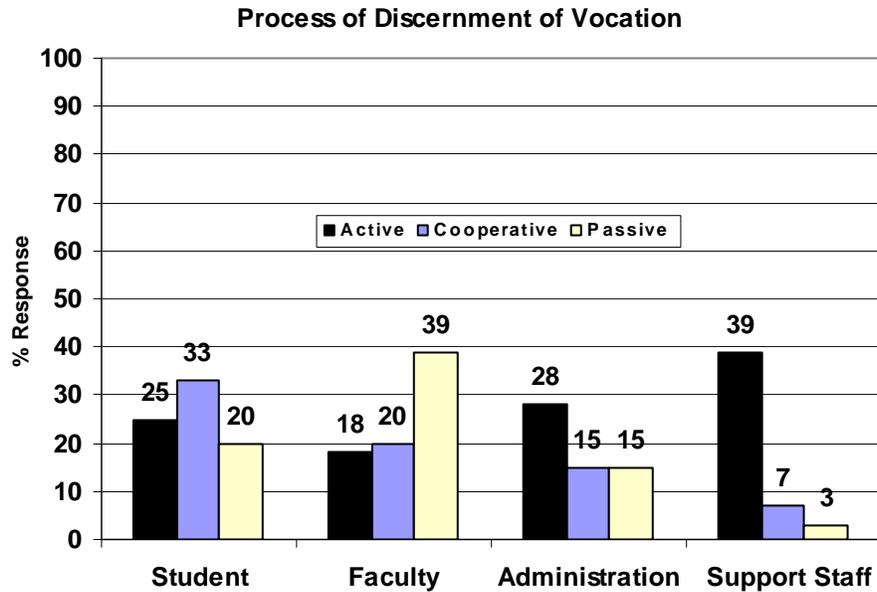
Figure 2



The final theme in the definitional question of vocation was that of the process of discernment, how one comes to know one’s vocation. When examining the percentages within the active, cooperative, and passive categories for each group (see Figure 3), it seems that faculty tend to view this process as passive whereas administrative and support staff tend to view it as active. While the data do not indicate why this pattern occurred, it is interesting to speculate about the reasons behind such striking differences. Another point about the comparison across groups was that fewer support staff discussed process of discernment at all (50%), as compared to the other groups having roughly 60-80% of their participants freely infusing this element into their descriptions of vocation. On a different note, however, 33% of support staff explicitly referred to vocation as a

process or journey, a rate much higher than that of the other employee participants who rarely addressed such an issue.

Figure 3



What do you do to facilitate a sense of vocation within students?

The good news regarding faculty is that almost all (94%) of them expressed that facilitating a sense of vocation was in fact part of their job and 90% explicitly did things to help foster it. They did so in their classes by, for example, including values clarification exercises. They did so in their advising by pointing out various career options. Furthermore, faculty felt they facilitated vocation in their students by serving as a role model in how they lived their lives.

Remember, however, that faculty tended to have a traditional concept of vocation. The theme of vocation-as-occupation definitely came through in their response to this question. While almost all did things to foster vocation in their students, the kinds of activities they described (e.g., suggesting information interviews, internships, etc.) were almost exclusively focused on helping students choose an occupation; very few mentioned activities aimed at broader conceptions of vocation. I think the last mechanism, that of fostering vocation by serving as a role model, is particularly interesting given the above finding that very few faculty viewed their familial roles as part of their vocation. If faculty are attempting to be role models of vocation to their students, one wonders about the model that students are seeing and if that view portrays an adequate balance of many facets of vocation rather than simply being totally and passionately invested in one’s career.

Among administrative staff, 90% say they do attempt to foster a sense of vocation through conversations with students, typically those who are their student employees. Some explicitly bring up vocational issues, while others, like faculty, mentioned serving as a role model.

Of the support staff that actually had contact with students, 71% said they did attempt to facilitate vocation. 20% did not see this as an explicit goal of their job, but would discuss vocation-related issue if they arose. However, 23% did mention intentionally initiating conversations of vocation, many of these focused on broad issues such as goal clarification and self-definition.

How does your faith relate to your occupation?

Overall, faculties do not view faith as highly related to their occupation. The percentage of faculty who stated that their faith does not at all relate to their jobs was 30%, with most of this group indicating that they actually go to great lengths to keep those aspects of their lives separate. Saying that their faith may come through unconsciously in their work, though not explicitly, 37% recounted a low degree of relationship. For example, many in this group discussed how their faith influenced their sense of ethics. While 25% said their faith was integrally inter-related to their occupation, that number is tempered by the fact that 20% of the faculty sample was comprised of members of the monastic community who are more likely to experience such integration.

Finally, a number of faculty commented on the influence of the campus environment or culture on their faith. While one may argue whether this is an impressive or disappointing percentage, 37% said they felt comfortable sharing their faith with others in this environment. More clearly, however, the job of a faculty member does not seem to foster faith as only 10% mentioned that it did.

Faith did seem to be more integrated into the work lives of administrative and support staff. For administrative staff, 20-30% indicated such integration in various ways. For example, some indicated that their faith influenced everything in their occupation. Others said that they constantly demonstrated their faith on the job by displaying their personal values. Finally, several claimed that it was their faith that made their job more than just a job. As compared to faculty, administrative staff also indicated a stronger relationship to the religious nature of this institution as reflected by 13% saying that their faith was the reason they chose to work at this particular university. Taken together, then, it seems that administrative staff have a stronger inter-relationship between their faith and occupation than do faculty. While one certainly cannot rule out that faculty also have strong connections in this regard, it is telling that their explicit responses to this question did not display the quality of integration as was reflected in the nature of the administrative responses.

Of the employee groups, support staff emphasized their faith-occupation integration the most. 80% made comments reflecting that they had thought about ways in which the two aspects of their lives were

connected. Consistent with the administrative responses, many in the support staff group expressed that this integration played out in how they treated people on the job. Finally, 25% reported that the campus environment and culture was conducive to their faith. For example, one support staff member said, “The setting out here at St. John’s is so quiet... I think everyday I say a prayer at my desk. I don’t know if I’d do that anywhere else.”

Implications

While all of these data are from the initial wave of a longitudinal study ultimately aimed at examining change across the four-year period of the Vocation Project initiative, they provide a valuable baseline assessment of students’ understandings of vocation, a concept which may be at the juncture of their spirituality and their occupation. Furthermore, these data can be used to understand better the knowledge and actions of the higher education employees in their attempts to create a mentoring community for the spiritual development and vocational discernment of their students. Certainly there is a wealth of issues and questions generated by these data. I have chosen four of them to discuss below.

First, we see in the students’ conceptions of vocation that the majority hold at least a partially active view of the process of discernment. I conclude this based on 58% of the students spontaneously including comments which indicated either an active view or a cooperative view (which has an active element). Clearly, students understand that *they* need to *do* something. They seem to be aware that their vocation is not something that simply falls into place or that others create for them, but that they need to make choices in pursuing it. My suggestion then is that we as higher education professionals ask ourselves how we are taking advantage of this view that students possess. What are we doing to help guide them in their active search for vocation? I certainly do not mean to suggest that we are not doing this to some extent already. Certainly the above data reflect that most groups, especially faculty, do see the facilitation of vocation as part of their jobs. However, I urge each person to think more explicitly about what they might do to take advantage of students’ motivation to pursue their vocation. In my own thinking on this issue, I developed a handout (see Appendix A) to give to my advisees as a tool in generating thoughts and discussions about a vocation approach to career decision-making. I initially envisioned this as being part of a systematic sequential process of having my advisees explore their vocation at various steps throughout their undergraduate careers. However, I have found that approach to be too rigid, and now I present this to advisees when I perceive that they are “ready” to think about their careers and lives from the perspective of vocation. So far there are two key times I have identified as indicating their readiness for this concept. One is when they realize that they do not like their major or their proposed career. This can happen for a variety of reasons: a job-shadowing experience, a bad grade in a key course, a realization of their parents’ influence on their career choice, etc. It is at these times in the shattered view of their career

path that they may be more open to an alternative perspective on the entire approach to career, that is, vocation. The second opportunity where I have seen a readiness for the concept is when students are in competition with others for internships, graduate school, etc. In particular, some students seem freed when reading the themes on the handout indicating that their own vocation is in fact unique to their gifts and that someone else is not going to “take” it from them. While I do not use this handout universally with my advisees, I have found it beneficial to have available when I sense a student is “ready.”

The second issue I want to probe is the role of faculty in fostering students’ vocation. Remember again that almost all faculty do attempt to facilitate vocation in some way. But we should consider how faculty are approaching this task given their traditional view of vocation as synonymous with occupation. For example, many faculty stated that they attempt to foster vocation by being a role model for students. While this certainly seems valuable given the extent to which faculty are passionate about their jobs, they may also be portraying an unbalanced lifestyle. If faculty view vocation as being passionate toward one’s career, but not encompassing family or other more holistic elements of life, we should consider if such a model might be inconsistent with the liberal arts notion of living a balanced, educated life. My intention is not to place any blame here, for there are several possible reasons for this narrowly defined faculty view of vocation. Perhaps faculty have a balanced personal notion of vocation, but feel their job is to only deal with students’ occupational pursuits. Or perhaps faculty would like to mentor students in a broader conception of vocation but do not know how to go about doing so. Or maybe their lives really are unbalanced in a way where their job consumes their identity and we need to look more carefully at the responsibilities of their job. Regardless of the cause, we should consider the implications of being mentored by faculty who tend to think of vocation solely as occupation.

The third issue I would like to pose as a result of these data is how the higher education system is failing to support the integration of the spiritual and intellectual lives of faculty. While a dichotomy between faith and reason is certainly not new, these data provide evidence that it may continue to be a hindrance to some faculty in their attempts to lead fully integrated lives. Furthermore, I would like to speculate that this lack of integration may be due to more than just the faith vs. reason tension. More discussion needs to occur regarding how faculty may be more supported in this regard. Whatever they are, these same obstacles do not seem to be present in other segments of higher education since both administrative and support staff tended to report both a greater integration and more support from the campus/culture for the connection of these elements in their lives.

Finally, I would like to encourage the involvement of undergraduate students themselves in these discussions and investigations of vocation. For example, undergraduate research assistants¹ have been integrally involved in the collection, coding, and analysis of the data presented in this paper. If our goal is to encourage students to reflect on the concept of vocation, I have most likely accomplished more of this by incorporating students in my research on this topic than through any other mechanism. This research

involvement has made an impression on my student assistants in several ways. For instance, they were able to witness the time, effort, and money devoted to the concept of vocation in higher education. As another example, by coding the employee interview responses, these students were able to intensively study the views of higher educational professionals on this topic.

¹ I would like to thank the following undergraduate research assistants for their valuable help in this project: Julie Carvelli, Matthew Clark, Amanda Creed, Stephanie Ebner, Ryan Engdahl, Michaela Fettig, Laura Fitzsimmons, Sarah Gillis, Matthew Hoffman, Barb Kilzer, Shayne Kusler, Kari Laliberte, Emily Link, Amanda Macht, Arthur Morrissey, Amy Nordstrand, Erin O'Neil, Meghan Orgeman, Nicole Slavik, Amy Stocker, Jessica Tierney, Stephanie Wiegand, and Sara Wonderlich.

References

- Bernardin, Cardinal J. (1983). *Chicago Catholic*, January 7, 1983, found at
<http://www.dioceseofscranton.org/vocation/parent-theofvoc.htm>.
- Buechner, F. (1993). *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Fowler, J. W. (2000). *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development & Christian Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Parks, S. D. (2000). *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Appendix A

Finding Your Vocation

Eight questions to help orient you to a faith-based vocation:

- 1) What seem to be your gifts?
- 2) What kinds of things do you do well?
- 3) What kinds of activities and contributions really give you a sense of worthiness?
- 4) What kinds of things do you find most challenging and fulfilling to do?
- 5) In what kinds of activities do you feel that you are most yourself?
- 6) What kind of people do you most admire and would you particularly like to count as your associates?
- 7) Do you feel an inner nudge or call that seems to be pointing you in some particular direction?
- 8) What kinds of things do you feel that you and God can do with your life that will make a difference for good in the world?

If you develop a faith-based vocation, you will be:

- ...called to an excellence that is not based in competition with others.
- ...freed from anxiety about whether someone else will fulfill your particular destiny.
- ...freed to rejoice in the gifts and graces of others.
- ...freed from the sense of having to be all things to all people.
- ...called and freed to seek a responsible balance in the investment of your time and energy.

Adapted from:

Fowler, J. W. (2000). *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development & Christian Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.