

Jennifer Grant Haworth, Kerry McCrudden, & Lucien Roy

On Call: An Institutional Initiative to Explore Students' Understandings of and Responses to Vocation

Jennifer Grant Haworth is Associate Professor and Faculty Scholar in the Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Counseling Psychology at Loyola University Chicago.

Kerry McCrudden and **Lucien Roy** are from Loyola University Chicago.

What do I love to do? What am I passionate about? What do I really want to do with my life? Who do I really want to be in this world? What will make me truly happy? Am I the only one asking these questions?

Who among us has not, at one time or another, asked ourselves these questions? For many students, these questions persist throughout their college years as they seek to explore, identify, and clarify what they want to do with the remainder of their adult lives. Students' responses to these questions vary widely: some let their parents answer them, others respond more to the promise of financial and social rewards than to the questions themselves, and still others chose to ignore the questions altogether. Some college students, however, take these questions seriously, trying, in the words of St. Ignatius Loyola, to remember that "only one thing is important - to seek and find what God calls me to at this point in life." These students - however rare or common - are interested in understanding and following their calling or vocation, what Frederick Buechner (1973) has defined as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

At Loyola University Chicago, we understand that these questions are among some of the most important queries students surface during their college years. Inspired by the teachings of Ignatius and rooted in the university's 130 year Jesuit tradition to assist others in pursuing their callings, we have recently established EVOKE (Eliciting Vocation through Knowledge and Engagement), a four-year, university-wide initiative made possible through the generous financial support of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Although EVOKE is designed to provide students, faculty, and staff with opportunities to discover and examine the theme of vocation in their lives, we are especially interested in helping students to identify their own life's calling by encouraging them to explore some of life's big questions alone and with others, to pause and listen carefully to their responses, and to make future commitments that fit well with who they are and what they do well.

EVOKE offers several programs designed to facilitate this vocational discernment in students, including a speaker series, an undergraduate mentoring program, the inclusion of vocational readings and themes in career planning workshops and academic advising services, focused retreats, and several intensive immersion experiences (including Alternative Spring Break trips). The On Call program, in particular, represents a sustained and concentrated effort by EVOKE to engage students in exploring their response to their "life's calling."

On Call: An Overview

On Call is an intensive three-year program that began in August 2001 with a pilot group of 35 religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse Loyola sophomores. In brief, the goal of the On Call program is to provide students with a supportive "holding environment" (Kegan,

1994) in which they can explore and make meaning of the theme of vocation/call by discovering their own answers to many of life's "big questions." The 35 students who have chosen to go On Call will explore these questions in dialogue with their On Call peers and mentors through a combination of required "learning modules" during each of their remaining three years at Loyola. Each module reflects a unique workshop, mentoring, retreat, or immersion learning experience. Through each of these experiences, the goal of the On Call program is to help provide students with a foundation for making a lifetime of good choices.

A separate theme - explore, commit, and engage - shapes programming efforts during each year of On Call. Each of these themes, and their relationship to the program's required learning modules, is described below.

Explore

Although my major is undeclared, that is not to say that I don't have thoughts or fears concerning my future. I don't know what I want to be doing as a career, but I still think about my future almost constantly. (On Call participant)

Exploration is the theme for the first year of the On Call program. Students will participate in a week long intensive LeaderShape seminar, through which they will explore their own emerging talents as leaders; discover their own personal priorities and values during a Spring Break Alternative Break Immersion trip to rural Appalachia, inner-city Washington D.C., or a Native American reservation in South Dakota; clarify their interests, talents, values, and gifts through two career interest workshops; gather together for a weekend retreat to examine the concept of vocation and to reflect meaningfully on the question, "If I followed my heart, what would I do with my life?"; and, throughout the year, meet with their mentoring groups (consisting of 1 faculty/staff mentor and 6 On Call students) to make sense of what these learning experiences may mean for their personal lives and future professional commitments. During the first year, On Call students will also participate in a number of other voluntary activities (including private gatherings with national speakers brought on campus through EVOKE and a local service project) and begin their involvement in the On Call longitudinal research project.

Commit

"The things I am passionate about constantly take a back seat to the things I am good at because I am told that it is more practical to cultivate my talents rather than my passions. However, I struggle with this idea. I want to cultivate both!" (On Call participant)

During their junior year, the On Call program will focus on offering reflective and experiential opportunities for students to further clarify their vocational options. Students will continue to meet monthly with their peers and mentors in their small mentoring groups, as well as participate in the On Call longitudinal research project. In addition, they will take part in a "making good choices" workshop, learning various discernment practices associated with St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. The perspectives and practices that students will learn here will help them to puzzle meaningfully through key decisions related to their future professional and personal commitments. Students will once again attend a weekend retreat. The goal of this experience - and, indeed, the entire second year of On Call - is to focus students' decision-making process around the central themes of "who do I wish to be" and "what kind of life do I wish to lead," hopefully strengthening their

commitments to pursue their unique callings. Students will conclude the year with a week-long international immersion experience in Guatemala, El Salvador, Cuba, or Haiti.

Engage

"I believe that each of us is brought on earth to show our talents and gifts to others and make a difference in the world. I want to make a small difference in this world and I think On Call can help me learn who I truly am, what I am called to do with my time here on earth, and what impact I can make in this world" (On Call participant)

In the final year of the program, On Call students will participate in a number of structured learning experiences designed to "engage" their interests in living out their calling. The first of these will pair individual On Call students with alumni mentors, providing students with opportunities to "shadow" and learn from professionals in their chosen fields who live out the concept of "call" in their daily lives. While not required, students will also be encouraged at this time to enroll in either a senior capstone course that combines the literature on vocation/calling with service learning or a senior-level course that explores vocation/calling within the context of a specific profession (e.g., business, education, nursing, social work). As in the sophomore and junior years, students will attend monthly mentor group gatherings and complete their involvement in the On Call longitudinal research project. The year will close with a spring weekend retreat that will build upon and bring together what students have learned from their previous two retreat experiences. As part of the weekend, students will listen to the stories of recent Loyola alumni who have followed their passions, learning directly from them about the rewards and challenges that have accompanied their quests.

On Call Longitudinal Research Project

As part of On Call, we have invited students to participate in a three-year longitudinal investigation that will explore how they make meaning of the theme of vocation, or call, in their lives. This study, among the first of its kind in the literature, is likely to provide faculty, student affairs administrators, and others with keen insights into how traditionally-aged college students understand "call," as well as shed light on how various influences prior to and during students' time in college affect their responses to it during a critical formational time in their young adult lives.

Although the theme of "calling" or "vocation" is a common one in our society, we know surprisingly little about how individuals - let alone college students - come to understand and respond to a sense of call in their own lives (Brown, 2001; Strange, 2000). The literature currently teaches us much about the process of career decision-making and how to promote effective decision-making in students, but it offers us little guidance on how adults - and, more specifically, traditionally-aged college students - develop and respond to a sense of call in their lives. This study represents an attempt to begin to fill that void.

Our investigation is guided by a conceptual framework that identifies seven relevant influences that may potentially affect how students construct and respond to the theme of call during their college years (see Figure I). These "categories of influence" include faith/spirituality; interpersonal relationships; encounters with "other"; personal values; critical life events that contribute to self-definition; self-awareness and understanding of individual passions, gifts, and talents; and developmental issues.

This framework integrates what we have learned from the popular and scholarly literature on call and vocation about how parental views on work, for instance, may shape a student's response to work as a job or a calling (Leider and Shapiro, 2001), or how an awareness of personal passions and talents may contribute to the desire to link both in pursuit of a lifelong vocation (Bolles, 2001). The work of Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) likewise suggests that mentors and peers can be influential in helping college students make sense of the theme of vocation, while the writings of Robert Coles (1993) and Laurent Parks Daloz and his colleagues underscore the impact that "encounters with the other" (often through community service) can have on student's eventual life and career choices. Similarly, Robert Kegan's (1994) "orders of consciousness" and Marcia Baxter-Magolda's (1999) writings on self-authorship have informed our view that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive influences are likely to play an important role in how college students make meaning of the theme of vocation in their lives.

We plan to use this conceptual framework as a "conceptual entree - a beginning logic, however simple or obvious" to help us make "sense out of what would otherwise be disparate bits of information" in the data we will collect throughout this investigation (Neumann and Bensimon, 1990, p. 681). As a "beginning logic," this framework will most likely undergo several revisions as we listen to On Call students and attempt to understand and unravel the complexity associated with their accounts.

Over the next three years, we will conduct annual "life story" interviews and use several other related data collection methods (e.g., reflection essays, participant-constructed artistic renderings, questionnaires) to learn how On Call participants make sense of their lives in relation to the broader concept of call, as well as to understand how different events, experiences, and relationships influence their constructions of and responses to the "call stories" of their early adulthood (see Figure 2 for an overview of the study's data collection methods). At the beginning and conclusion of the study, we will also interview students using Kegan's (1994) subject-object interview to establish and monitor each participant's "order of consciousness," a construct that provides insights into an individual's interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive development. The "Faithful Change Questionnaire" will also be administered at the beginning and end of the study to provide information on each student's stage of faith development. This extensive questionnaire is grounded in Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development and is currently being administered to students at several Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities institutions as part of a national study focused on faith development in college students.

We anticipate that findings from this study could be significant in at least four important ways. First, it will provide valuable baseline understandings of how one cohort of college students - over the course of their college experience and within the context of a program focused intentionally on call - makes meaning of their lives in terms of the theme of vocation. Such understandings are conspicuously absent in the literature on college students. Second, the study is likely to identify empirically for the first time a variety of interpersonal, intrapersonal, cognitive, spiritual, and experiential influences that shape this vocational meaning-making process in college students. The potential value of this contribution is noteworthy, since decisions related to career and vocation are central in the lives of college students. Third, the students who participate in this study are quite likely to benefit in practical terms from the reflection activities that accompany their participation. While not firmly established empirically, there is widespread agreement in the literatures on vocation/call and career decision-making that discernment and reflection on one's talents, skills, experiences, and relationships enriches and clarifies an individual's understanding of his or her "calling." Finally, because of the longitudinal nature of this research, this study

has the potential to help researchers understand how students' constructions of and responses to the theme of vocation or call may change over time. While this particular investigation will only examine these changes between students' sophomore and senior years in college, it is possible that this particular group of subjects may have an interest in participating in future studies that explore and track their understandings of vocation/call after their graduation from college. The potential significance of that future research is noteworthy, and could quite likely benefit a number of populations far beyond those included in this investigation.

Why Go On Call?

During a recent conversation with Mark Albion, the New York Times best-selling author of *Making A Living, Making A Life* (2000), Jennifer asked Mark if he had had a chance to visit the EVOKE and On Call websites (<http://evoke.luc.edu>). "Yes, I have," he responded enthusiastically. "And I want to know why we didn't have programs like this when I was in college!" That response is one we have heard frequently as more and more individuals have learned about EVOKE. It is also the kind of response that, as we learned during our selection of On Call students last spring, motivated many students to commit the next three years of their lives to the On Call program.

Why go On Call? The most popular reason students gave us was also the most sensible: they wanted to explore some of life's "big questions" - and hopefully find some answers - within a supportive, peer community. As one On Call student told us, "I am interested in being a part of community with people my age who are also trying to find their passion. It is an opportunity not only for me to find my passion but to communicate with people who are also searching for their role in life." Another saw On Call as an exciting program, in part, because she was constantly asking herself:

"Am I doing the right thing?" "Is this what I'm supposed to do for the rest of my life?" In high school, I was in a program . . . called Health Tech. . . It was a lot of work, but I was able to find out how much I love working in the health field. It also helped having that support group of friends that were going through the same questions. That's what I envision On Call giving me. . . . I envision the On Call participants becoming a support system for each other as we discover our callings.

Students offered other reasons for their interest in On Call as well. Some, for instance, were excited about having an assigned mentor with whom they could interact and share their hopes, dreams, concerns, and worries. "I think being involved with this program will encourage me to examine my life and my future," an On Call student wrote on her application. "I find the idea of being able to do that with a faculty mentor exciting." Other students were attracted to On Call because of their deep interests in using their talents to "make a difference in the world." One student, for instance, said that she liked how the program connected the idea of call to various initiatives emphasizing service to others: "I believe On Call will give me the opportunity to do service and to learn more about myself, my talents and, ultimately, how I can make a real contribution to the world. . . . Through this experience, I think that I'll become a person who uses her talents wisely, to her benefit and to the benefit of others." Similarly, another student stated simply, "The most obvious or truthful answer [for why I want to participate in On Call] is that there is nothing I enjoy more than working in the service of others."

Of those students who applied, most offered yet one other reason for wanting to go "on call." Although motivated to figure out their life's passion within a supportive peer and

mentoring community, many repeatedly emphasized how important it was to them to grow spiritually by taking time to listen to, explore, understand, and respond to whatever "call" they were hearing from a transcendent "caller." As this On Call student wrote thoughtfully on her application:

My faith is a very important part of my life and I am still growing in my spirituality. . . . Something Father [Mike] said in mass a few weeks ago struck me as exactly why I am taking this step in my life [applying to the On Call program]. I have felt called: this is what the Lord has in store for me. I am always questioning what I am supposed to be when I grow up and this is a chance, along with my peers, to truly find out what I am and what I can do in this life to change the world. I see On Call as a unique chance to spend time with my classmates who are also on a quest to find their passion and purpose while at the same time learning more about themselves, others, and Christ.

Why go On Call? These students' reasons circle back to the questions we raised at the beginning of this essay. They want to explore and understand their passions and discover ways to use them constructively to make a difference in their small corner of the world. They believe that On Call will provide them with a supportive community in which to ask important questions that will provide them with a strong foundation of insights, perspectives, and discernment practices for a lifetime of good choices. These students, like so many of us, are simply looking for a way to bring their selves, their world, and their calling together. They are, through the various learning and research-related experiences that define the On Call program, seeking to develop a personally meaningful understanding of where their own "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

References

- Albion, M. (2000). *Making a living, making a life*. New York: Warner.
- Bolles, R. N. (2001). *What color is your parachute?* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Brown, S. (July 7, 2001). Personal communication.
- Buechner, F. (1973). *Wishful thinking: A theological ABC*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Coles, R. (1993). *The call of service*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Baxter-Magolda, M. (1999). *Creating contexts for learning and self-authorship*. Nashville: Vanderbilt.
- Daloz, L. P., Keen, C. H., Keen, J. P., and Parks, S. D. (1996). *Common fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world*. Boston: Beacon.
- Leider, R. J., & Shapiro, D. A. (2001). *Whistle while you work: Heeding your life's calling*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Neumann, A., & Bensimon, E. M. (1990). Constructing the presidency: College presidents' images of their leadership roles: A comparative study. *Journal of Higher Education* 61: 678-701.

Parks, S.D. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Strange, C. (March, 2000). Personal communication.