

# Purpose, Meaning, and Exploring Vocation in Honors Education

ERIN VANLANINGHAM

Loras College

ROBERT J. PAMPEL

Saint Louis University

JONATHAN KOTINEK AND DUSTIN J. KEMP

Texas A&M University

ARON REPPMANN

Trinity Christian College

ANNA STEWART

Valparaiso University

**Abstract:** This paper examines the importance of cultivating a sense of vocation in honors education. Through examples of coursework, program initiatives, and advising strategies, authors from across five institutions align the scholarship of vocation with best practices and principles in contemporary honors discourse, defining vocation in the context of higher education and describing how this concept works within honors curricula to enrich student experience and cultivate individual understandings of purpose. By focusing on critical reflection processes, Ignatian pedagogy, and theories of moral development and reasoning, the authors offer different models to advance the thesis that honors educators can and should address personal fulfillment in addition to intellectual talent, and they posit vocational exploration and discernment as tools for extending and deepening their students' personal sense of meaning in local and global communities.

**Keywords:** vocational discernment; civic engagement; Ignatian pedagogy; appreciative advising; Association of American Colleges & Universities, value rubrics

Honors students are challenged to think critically and deeply about intellectual questions, contemporary issues, professional goals, and community problems. However, they need also to be encouraged to turn this critical lens inward to discover what they might be called to do and what the world might need them to do. We need to provide the direction and space for honors students to consider their particular gifts, responsibilities, and limitations by examining the sorts of curricular and advising steps we should make to dissolve the boundary between personal and professional goals, the heart's desire and the mind's abilities. This article seeks to address how the scholarship and principles of vocation can inform honors education. In sum, we offer different models and entry points for opening conversations about personal fulfillment as well as intellectual talent, listening to mentors and inner voices, and framing consideration of a purposeful life.

The examples and context we provide draw from scholarship in higher education, psychology and human development, vocation, and honors education. The examples from honors programs come out of the varied frameworks of a small liberal arts college, an honors college, a Jesuit university, and a large public university. Together, we provide ways to consider the sense of vocation that can be cultivated and expanded in honors education as well as the benefits and possibilities it offers for honors student development.

## HONORS EDUCATION AND THE DISCOURSE OF VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

The language of vocation has a complex history, related to theological understandings of station or status in society on the one hand and contemporary notions of practical education and employment on the other. Vocation, from the Latin *vocare*, means “to call,” which can certainly have religious implications but in recent decades also implies discerning one's purpose and meaning in the world. As David S. Cunningham suggests, “One's vocation is one's calling in life—not simply what one ‘wants’ to do or ‘is expected’ to do, but that toward which one is drawn, and which (it is hoped) will provide one's life with meaning, purpose, and a sense of genuine fulfillment” (*Hearing* 8). In other words, vocation is more than a job or a role but a life of purpose. Cynthia Wells argues that “vocation is attentive not only to what we know but also to who we are and how we act” (63–64); it is about using talents for a common good, responding to communal needs, and balancing one's own fulfillment in relation to global and civic concerns. In what is now an iconic

definition, Frederick Buechner suggests that vocation is “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (112). The term “vocation” for our purposes, then, suggests a consideration of individual meaning within a complex framework of family, workplace, and community. Equipping students with practices they can use to reflect on and evaluate their talents and desires is part of the work of teaching vocation in higher education.

The scholarship of vocation has seen a recent resurgence and expansion, notably with three volumes by Cunningham from Oxford University Press: *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education* (2016), followed by *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education* (2017), and concluding with *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy* (2019). Other significant research about the effects of “purpose-programming” on college campuses includes Tim Clydesdale’s *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation* (2015) and a recent Op-Ed article in the *New York Times* (Perrin).

The scholarly conversation about vocation is synergistic with relevant issues in higher education and, indeed, honors education. While current cultural debate centers on the pragmatic purpose of a college degree, vocation scholarship prompts an examination of the broader demands on students during their college years and how to equip them for future fulfillment. Vocation emphasizes considering one’s own gifts in relation to academic and professional choices as well as developing ethical decision-making and understanding the needs of a pluralistic, global society. Advising students in this process and encouraging experiences beyond the classroom—especially through the lens of diversity education, civic engagement, and social justice—as well as deep listening to self and others prompt examination of vocational identity.

Margaret E. Mohrmann couches the consideration of purpose and meaning in terms of responsibility: being responsible to self and others, which includes assessing one’s abilities and understanding how to respond. She suggests that the processes students use to consider a major, a career trajectory, and life goals should include reflection on the internal and external fit for the various future roles they might encounter. She claims that “vocation is responsibility to and for the whole of reality” (41), which means a measured, holistic reflection on one’s purpose and gifts in the context of what our families, workplaces, and communities ask of us.

Further scholarship suggests that community engagement practices, hallmarks of many honors programs, are also a valuable tool in vocational

discernment. Darby Kathleen Ray claims that “civic engagement invites self-work, world-work, and their mutually transformative meeting,” which allows for a consideration of others’ needs, listening to alternative perspectives, and becoming “attuned to the world” (313). Thus, our work in civic engagement and community and service learning pedagogies can also prompt vocational reflection and evaluation.

Vocational programming on college campuses takes place in many forms and locations—ranging from curricular models of vocational formation (within majors or core curricula), spiritual life and student life offices, internship and study abroad opportunities, and developed mentorship and advising programs (see the 2015 work of Clydesdale in *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*). Models like the Colledgeville Institute (affiliated with Saint John’s University and the College of Saint Benedict) host ongoing research seminars on “Vocation and faith in the professions,” “Vocation across the lifespan,” and “Interfaith perspectives on vocation.” However, the wider conversation about vocation across the academy has not been fully integrated into honors education scholarship even though many honors programs are developing and integrating facets of vocation that could be enriched by more intentional conversation with the scholarship of vocation.

While the term “vocation” has not been widely used in honors education scholarship, honors education has developed and pursued similar aims and values in many ways. For example, honors educators have been regular advocates and leaders in civic engagement pedagogy and practice. Craig Kaplowitz, in “Helping with the ‘How’: A Role for Honors in Civic Education,” says that honors programs and colleges can aid students in connecting the dots between classroom learning and their roles in the world through this emphasis on civic participation. He states, “we need to be intentional about helping students connect the processes they learn for good, sophisticated work in the classroom or lab to the ways they think about and act in civic space” (20). Reflecting on how to think and act in civic spaces using the tools and talents they have honed in the classroom equips students with an important tool for vocational exploration. Kaplowitz continues, “When [honors students] leave us to become leaders and influencers in their fields and communities, they will be more responsible, deliberate, and process-oriented in their political activity” (21). This sort of deep consideration is the goal of vocational education.

Honors scholarship also has recently expanded to consider the ways honors attends to the development of the whole person, specifically through

the language of what it means to thrive and achieve a high level of wellbeing. A recent article suggests that colleges and universities are now measuring students' "thriving," which is "defined as academic, psychological and interpersonal wellbeing and engagement" (Cuevas et al. 79). Thriving suggests a sense of purpose and meaning within a framework that considers not only academic performance and ability but enjoyment of and flourishing in relationships. This definition of thriving obviously echoes the concerns of vocational exploration and discernment and could be brought into more direct conversation. Both vocational discernment and the language of student "thriving" have deep relevance for honors students: "Flourishing people are filled with positive emotions, display resiliency in the face of challenges, develop positive relationships, are engaged as productive citizens, and seek to make a difference in others' lives" (Cuevas et al. 83). The synergy between encouraging a process of student wellbeing and vocational discernment suggests that the two academic voices would have a fruitful dialogue.

Vocation scholarship also resonates with principles of design thinking, which has regularly surfaced in honors courses, advising, and NCHC national conference sessions. While little has been published so far on design thinking in an honors context, course descriptions and syllabi within and beyond honors education reveal that design thinking is a frequently used method for addressing the deeper and broader concerns of vocation that we are discussing here. For example, design thinking encourages thoughtful self-reflection and attentiveness to what animates and enervates us. Bill Burnett and Dave Evans's popular book *Designing Your Life* makes the point early on that design thinking is fundamentally about curiosity and having "a bias to action" (xxvi). People are generally not good at following their passions because they foreclose too quickly on an idea. Operating instead with a "beginner's mind" leads to a greater inclination to try new things and to discover one's true motivations, a process called "building a compass" and, later, "wayfinding" (31, 41). This cultivated attentiveness leads to greater joy and purpose as part of a "well-designed life" (xxx). Such an approach is not far afield from the richness of vocational discernment we offer here, and the exercises that Burnett and Evans encourage complement this discussion as we reframe conversations about facilitating discernment by reclaiming a broad and holistic view of purpose and meaningful reflection.

A rare mention of "vocation" in honors scholarship appears in an article about advising by Jeffrey P. Hause. In "Two Neglected Features of Honors Advising," Hause suggests that discussions of advising honors students have often neglected discerning a vocation as well as modeling a deep attentiveness

and questioning mindset. While we assume that honors students are well prepared for careers and future endeavors, as advisors we still need “continuing questions and scrutiny[;] . . . querying opens the door to a richer advising experience in which students have a better understanding of their career goals and how they fit into the larger scheme of the students’ life goals” (Hause 152). Like Mohrmann’s idea of internal and external “fit,” Hause suggests that advisors should seek accurate narratives of a student’s life (156), ranging from family obligations, realistic future goals, and accurate assessment of abilities and talents. Hause uses the word “vocation” to mean creating a “sufficiently complex narrative of their lives” (160). With intentional advising that incorporates questions of vocational reflection, students stand to make better informed decisions not only about classes and careers but about what their future might look like more broadly as they serve the community. In addition, we can bring into the discussion of vocational reflection some of the language of appreciative advising (see the work of Jennifer Bloom and others), which prompts students to identify talents and strengths as part of imagining a future vision for their lives.

While we might see the importance of engaging students in civic participation and holistic advising, honors students can encounter barriers in finding fulfillment and wellbeing as they try to focus on future paths. For example, “The struggle to identify career goals is not only a characteristic of perfectionism but also a psychological challenge for many honors students because of their multipotentiality or the variety of interests in which they have the potential to excel” (Cuevas et al. 82). Honors students may avoid seeking guidance for fear of appearing weak or of underachieving (Badenhausen 28), suggesting the urgent need for vocational discernment strategies, practices, and conversations in honors programs, curricula, experiences, and scholarship.

Honors educators are accustomed to saying that honors learning is not more than but different from non-honors learning. This qualitative difference is frequently described in dimensional terms; for instance, the NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education” states the following:

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education.

Including vocational reflection in students’ educational experiences can also be part of this qualitatively different, dimensionally expansive approach.

Although orienting honors students' educational experiences to vocational reflection may initially feel unfamiliar or even uncomfortable to students, faculty, and administrators, who are accustomed to framing honors learning in other terms such as intellectual intensity or social engagement, the opportunities and challenges represented by vocational reflection are very much at home in the imagery typically associated with what makes honors education distinctive.

Vocational reflection invites consideration of height and breadth. The height-dimension is a recognition that the experience of vocation involves an element of transcendence: in some way being called from outside oneself, beyond one's self-initiated purposes, desires, or plans. While those who acknowledge a specific religious context may most readily testify to an understanding of their vocation coming from "on high," this height-dimension is not exclusive to those who identify with religious faith; explicitly articulated religion does not have a monopoly on the mysterious sense that one's life purpose is initiated, at least in part, by sources or factors beyond oneself. Exploring this experience and figuring out how to respond to it is a rich element of vocational reflection, one that can be particularly helpful in challenging honors students, who have often succeeded because they learned to manage and control their educational experiences. Cunningham considers this height-dimension in his article "'Who's There?': The Dramatic Role of the 'Caller' in Vocational Discernment," pointing out that to acknowledge this "aura of mystery" does not result in giving up rational responsibility, nor does it require a specifically religious faith (152).

The breadth-dimension names another important challenge for honors students' thinking. Even when our students are impressed by the immensity of the source of their calling, they all too often default to a narrow interpretation of the domain of their calling. They may understandably think primarily of a calling in the culturally conventional sense of a vocation that is identified with career, paid work, and other social-identity markers determined by occupation. Introducing purposeful vocational reflection opens the opportunity to relocate students' sense of vocation from a narrow focus on what they do to a broader, more life-encompassing awareness of and commitment to who they are. Jerome M. Organ uses this contrast between doing and being in his article "Of Doing and Being: Broadening Our Understanding of Vocation." He writes, "Broader questions about *being* often get scant attention in the work of vocational reflection and discernment—even though these questions are, in the long run, of greater importance" (226). His account of

vocational understanding as oriented more to being than to doing is defined in the concepts of “integrity, authenticity, and faithfulness” (240).

With its emphasis on human flourishing and responsibility to others, vocation is closely aligned with the mission of many higher education institutions. Honors programs often serve as ideal venues or “laboratories” for student learning and the enactment of a university’s mission; the NCHC, in its “Definition of Honors Education,” suggests that honors experiences should be “appropriately tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission,” so at institutions that stress holistic development, civic engagement, and lifetime learning, one might expect honors programming and curricula to prominently feature vocation and discernment.

Jesuit higher education is particularly receptive to the vocabulary of vocation and discernment. The Society of Jesus, founded in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius Loyola, was the first Catholic teaching order. Since its inception, the Society has established a vast network of educational institutions around the world that today includes twenty-seven members of the Association of Jesuit Colleges & Universities (AJCU), with honors education a flourishing component at most of these institutions. A brief examination of Ignatian pedagogy reveals its connection with the vocabulary of vocation. Gallagher and Musso describe the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm as “the art of teaching and learning cut from the fabric of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola” (1). Ignatius created and revised the *Spiritual Exercises* after his initial conversion to the Christian faith, and he used this highly reflective model to guide others toward similar ends. The *Exercises* were a means of communion with God, who would “lead men and women to decisions about how they would live their lives, employ their talents, and direct their resources” (Gray 65). Korth describes Ignatian pedagogy as a process involving five key elements: context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. She explains the interplay of these five elements, providing a helpful overview of Ignatian pedagogy:

Through consideration of the factors and context of students’ lives, faculty create an environment in which students recollect their past experience and assimilate information from newly provided experiences. Faculty help students learn the skills and techniques of reflection, which shapes their consciousness, and they challenge students to action in service to others. The evaluation process includes academic mastery as well as ongoing assessments of students’ well-rounded growth as persons for others. (Korth 281)

As a general approach, Ignatian pedagogy is dynamic, student-centered, and integrated, i.e., the five elements “function not as discrete segments or stages of a linear process, but as interdependent facets of any deep learning experience” (Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning).

The Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities views honors programs at member colleges and universities as “catalysts” for their institutions with respect to pedagogy and extracurricular activities (AJCU Honors Consortium). Jesuit honors programs intentionally promote a spirit of discernment and an attention to students’ vocational identity. In many cases, the development of self-image or self-ideal is not simply the result of a learning experience, e.g., a course on ethical behavior or post-graduate fellowship opportunities, but is instead the aim of these courses. For instance, a first-year colloquium might address concepts like joy and mindfulness with an eye toward students’ professional development. Using the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm as a guide, the course might encourage students to reflect critically on how they can craft experiences as an undergraduate to achieve post-graduate outcomes that bring satisfaction and joy. At Saint Louis University, for example, several of the honors program’s experiential learning credits require intentional self-reflection crafted in this mold, calling for students to “recollect past experiences and assimilate information from newly provided experiences” (Korth 281) so that students learn how to attend to their own interests, intellectual gifts, and callings.

Protestant colleges and universities still tied to their religious traditions can also find support within those traditions for vocational discernment and development. Valparaiso University, for example, demonstrates the Lutheran contribution to this discussion. Martin Luther, as an early reformer, was concerned with developing a sense of divinely ordained earthly callings outside of the priesthood, in opposition to a medieval monastic ideal of spiritual separation from worldly pursuits. Within a church structure sometimes imagined as a universal priesthood, Luther described numerous vocational roles as being directly related to God’s special intention and calling for individuals. Because the life of faith and service to neighbors was a universal calling, all manner of earthly endeavors could be pursued as authentic vocations. Valparaiso University, which is as religiously and demographically diverse as other schools in the area, explores vocation in numerous other ways as well; however, the Lutheran tradition contributes to our wider conversations, and many Protestant institutions have similar notions about a broader spirituality underpinning the processes of vocational development. Indeed, one of the

most typical descriptions of vocation comes from Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner, who defined it as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (112).

Regardless of cultural context or religious tradition, Clydesdale’s research reveals compelling student-level data on the effectiveness of vocational exploration experiences. For example, compared to their non-engaged peers, students who participated in some kind of “purpose exploration program” while in college reported higher levels of post-graduate life satisfaction. As Clydesdale says, “Those who had participated in purpose exploration during college . . . expressed broader satisfaction with life after college than those who did not participate” (“Purposeful” 121–22). Clydesdale further observes that these participants weren’t just more satisfied with their lives but were “flourishing,” which he defines as reporting positive goals for the short and long term and demonstrating independence, responsibility, and active engagement in the community (122).

Addressing longitudinal effects, Clydesdale reported that alumni of exploration programs tended to marry four times as often as non-participants; he says, “exploration participants, having spent time as undergraduates reflecting on the long-term direction of their lives, were ready to make a variety of long-term commitments—including marriage” (125). Clydesdale also says that statistics indicate the effectiveness of purpose exploration programs across racial, gender, and disciplinary lines (127). Vocational reflection during college “holds value over time” (125), strengthening the argument that honors education can benefit from further engagement with the scholarship of vocation and its various principles and methods.

## **STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND CULTIVATING VOCATION**

College students typically find themselves at a crossroads. Many of them are young adults experiencing independence for the first time. In honors coursework that inspires students to analyze “weighty human concerns” (Kass 87), they are likely to meet many new friends and classmates who both validate and challenge their worldview. In addition, they are likely to experience an academic culture that challenges them with new ways of reading, writing, and articulating their ideas with evidence. Furthermore, as VanLaningham notes, these students “walk a tightrope between pragmatism and curious learning” as they try to determine how much of their intellectual energies to give to their vocational and avocational goals (“Exploring Vocation”). Amid these challenges, students are charting their course for a future in medicine,

law, business, the academy, or other professional fields. In short, these students are enmeshed in a culture that often sends them mixed signals about what they should do and who they should become in their lives after college.

Over the history of higher education, psychologists and student affairs professionals have developed a compendium of research on the developmental changes experienced by college students. Erik Erikson, for example, posited stages of psychosocial development across a person's lifespan from infancy to adolescence to adulthood. The two stages that correspond to the time students traditionally spend in college and are most relevant to vocational discernment are stages 5 (identity versus identity diffusion) and 6 (intimacy versus isolation). At these stages, Erikson suggested that students begin to solidify their value system and to understand their identities as distinct from parents or other authoritative figures in their lives. As Evans et al. summarize these stages, adolescents "become more independent, begin to deal with the complexities of life, and seek answers to the question, 'Who am I?'" (50). Students also begin to form mature relationships with others, which can affect decisions they make about where to attend graduate school, whether to enter the workforce, and how to allocate their emotional and financial resources after graduation.

Whereas Erikson's model was mostly social in nature, William G. Perry advanced an intellectual and ethical model that defines a student's progression in college. He argued that students develop intellectually by moving from a dualistic state of mind (in which right and wrong are two ends of a clear dichotomy) to one that is marked more by multiplicity or relativity. He asserted that college students would gradually learn to shed simple right/wrong thinking in favor of a more nuanced understanding of the world, one that increasingly relies on evidence-based conclusions instead of unsupported opinions derived from a parent's or other authoritative figure's point of view. While students navigate the tension from dualism to multiplicity or relativity, they may become more receptive to the idea that they have agency in deciding what they can and will become from a vocational standpoint.

Theories of moral development and reasoning inform important questions about student readiness for vocational exploration. The prefrontal cortex of the human brain controls the values-based decision-making related to seeking vocation (Miller and Cohen; Miller et al.). A growing body of neuroscience research suggests that much of the executive function related to planning, organizing, and moderating social behavior does not fully mature until early adulthood. This understanding should guide how we ask traditional-aged college students to make life-changing decisions, how we know

if a student is ready to undertake this task, and what traits demonstrate readiness to consider and cultivate vocational identities.

Moral reasoning, defined as determining right from wrong using logic, is key to the process of considering vocation since some attractive options will be rejected on the basis of ethics. While moral reasoning is an ability that develops early in life, students come to the task of considering vocation with differing levels of experience, depending on how egocentric their thinking is and how much practice they have had thinking through ethical questions. Traditional-aged students from white, upper-to-middle-class backgrounds (the majority of students in honors programs) are likely to arrive at college during what Lawrence Kohlberg et al. describe as the conventional stage of moral development. At this stage, students have internalized conventional social norms, have typically benefitted from a law-and-order mentality, and have defined the good by social consensus. An important role of the college experience in general and the honors experience in particular should be to complicate these students' perspectives by introducing them to viewpoints of others who come from different backgrounds of wealth, education, and opportunity. Post-conventional moral reasoning, according to Kohlberg et al., develops through a process of assimilation and accommodation (described by Vygotsky) that occurs as students experience conflicts between their principles and the lived experience of others. Students engaged in vocational reflection and discernment should be encouraged to work toward this post-conventional moral reasoning as part of a process to connect their values to the kind of work they want to do and the impact they want to have.

Myriad student development theories account for specific populations of students as well as factors such as gender, race, and class, attributes that are often confounding variables for vocational exploration and discernment. Caryn D. Riswold argues that such categories affect individual identity, permeating every aspect of the student experience. Although Riswold is concerned about the dehumanizing hierarchical structures and cultural norms that inhibit students' identity formation among marginalized or underrepresented groups, she is optimistic that "by exploring their various callings and by discerning the ways they might live a more meaningful life," students can recover their humanity and combat these odious influences (74). Although "vocation" represents a "complex narrative of [students'] lives" (Hause 160), attending to these narratives enables faculty and advisors to help students negotiate the dynamic and sometimes tumultuous developmental process of adapting to college.

Fortunately, just as the field of student development theory frames the problem, it provides an optimistic outlook for students' future, particularly beyond their first year of college. Student development theorists suggest that students come to greater self-awareness and moral reasoning during the traditional college-going years as they learn from more seasoned thinkers. Walker described this process as "exposure to higher stage thinking" and characterized the feeling as one of "disequilibrium" (qtd. in Evans et al. 102). Professors, upperclassmen, and staff members model for students what nuanced thinking on specific topics looks like, ideally leading to intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth.

Just as we must understand students' contextual factors in order to assess readiness, we must also account for institutional context in developing vocational awareness programming. Sociologist Tim Clydesdale underscores this point in his thorough exploration of "purposeful" education on college campuses, *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation* (2015). Although his work concerns Christian institutions, many of his case studies address institutions that have a pronounced secular culture on campus. His conclusions can be helpful in the discussion of honors-based vocational programming in any context. He concludes that "programs that targeted undergraduates during their sophomore and junior years, when they were less distracted by entering and exiting processes, accomplished disproportionately more of their goals" (82).

The honors commitment to the practice of co-curricular integration at all grade levels is particularly well suited to the challenges of students' developmental readiness for intensive educational experiences. The importance of this integral approach is the subject of research on emerging adulthood. The idea of "emerging adulthood" as a distinct life phase is a recent concept first explicitly proposed by psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in 2000, and more fully presented in his definitive 2004 monograph, *Emerging Adulthood*. Perhaps the most pervasive theme in the recent scholarship on emerging adulthood is that of transition. One of the profound social changes that have given rise to emerging adulthood as a recognizable life phase is the sharp increase in, access to, and expectations regarding higher education. Clydesdale brings these elements together in a sustained investigation of one increasingly crucial life transition: exploring new life patterns and possibilities immediately after high school. In his 2007 book *The First Year Out*, Clydesdale focuses on the transition from the typically structured and predictable environment of high school to the more personally challenging demands of life after high school graduation.

In his analysis, which draws together both quantitative data based on extensive surveys and intensive qualitative surveys and case studies, Clydesdale highlights two key strategies that he finds culturally mainstream American teenagers rely on for navigating the transition of the first year out. The first strategy is focusing most of their energy and attention on what he calls “daily life management”: managing “personal relationships,” “personal gratifications,” and “economic lives” with a goal of keeping life in balance (*The First Year Out* 2). What is not in focus in this project of “daily life management” is the key to the second strategy, in which critical matters of personal identity—including religious beliefs and political loyalties—are placed in what Clydesdale calls an “identity lockbox,” where they are safe from challenge but also largely inaccessible and unattended to (39). Most emerging adults in the first year out are not proactively involved in exploring and evaluating crucial matters of identity because too much else is going on to occupy their attention and energy.

For those who enter college during this first year out, the combination of “daily life management” and an “identity lockbox” has a significant effect on how education does and does not influence them. The strategy of daily life management, when applied to their educational demands, says: do your work, meet the requirements that authorities set out for you, and don’t question too deeply the potential implications of that work. The result, in Clydesdale’s analysis, is that the majority of students at the end of the first year out “have become cognitively sharper and more skilled in adapting to new organizations, but are largely immune to intellectual curiosity and creative engagement” (*The First Year Out* 153). That is to say, the first year of college is effective for these students but not necessarily in terms of the big questions that include vocational reflection.

Honors programs across the country are well positioned to address the gap between students’ daily concerns and the ideas that educators want them to encounter; this advantage typically results from a variety of social and cultural engagement outside of class, with a wide variety of rationales offered for such activities.

In the NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education,” the opening line offers a parallel pride of place to “in-class” and “extracurricular” activities; the document also emphasizes “a close community of students and faculty.” The scholarly research and professional presentations on honors education fostered in NCHC’s national conferences and journals are also replete with the dynamics of community life; as one sample, an issue of *Honors in Practice* (Volume 5, 2009) included a section on “Programmatic Designs” in which all five of the articles are framed by the centrality of community in

the design of honors programs and colleges. The research on emerging adulthood provides an important reason for extending student engagement with one another, with ideas, and with faculty members outside the boundaries of course requirements. For all its intentional engagement of personal identity, a curricular emphasis on vocational reflection, to the extent that it is merely an academic course requirement, can still be open to the criticism that it is just part of the task of daily life management rather than a more significant element of grappling with personal identity. Co-curricular programming can fill that gap.

Although researchers Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, like Clydesdale, find that emerging adults typically engage only the “instrumental value” of education (54), they also point to the crucial role of significant personal relationships (209), especially with nonparental adults who display genuine interest in them and in deepening their religious and spiritual engagement (285). Shannon Dean explores the significance of this relation to honors education in her article “Understanding the Development of Honors Students’ Connections with Faculty.” The particular challenges for development of personal identity in college students that is described by the research on emerging adulthood turn out to lead precisely to what honors programs have been doing all along: emphasizing the need for intentional integration of curricular and co-curricular experiences, including the fostering of intergenerational care between faculty and students.

## **INTEGRATING VOCATION THROUGHOUT THE LIFESPAN OF HONORS**

### **Individual Reflection and Cultivating Community in the First Year**

Vocation often manifests as an individualistic pursuit, and we can all lose sight of the fact that we cannot understand who we are without fully acknowledging those around us. Exercises in honors programming that facilitate or require collaborative work can prove especially valuable for spurring reflection on vocation as something that is always communal and mediated; for students who have been conditioned toward individual academic pursuits, this collaboration is critical.

NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education” reflects the tradition of commitment to communal experiences in its description of “learning communities” as a distinctive “mode of honors learning”:

Outcomes include connecting members to one another for the pursuit of common goals through interdependence and mutual obligation.

This orientation to communal learning offers a crucial point of connection between honors education and current work on fostering vocational reflection in higher education. Recent scholarship on vocation has highlighted the dominant tendency within our culture to think of vocation in highly interiorized and privatized ways (Cunningham, “Who’s There?” 147); this tendency leads to a conception of vocation that is individualistic and fragmented. Cunningham has also pointed out the harmfully limiting effects of a merely individualistic understanding of vocation in “Colleges Have Callings, Too: Vocational Reflections at the Institutional Level”; in this limited conception, community is considered primarily as input to or output for an individual’s vocational discernment, “input” being the wider context that feeds into a person’s vocation and “output” being the field for living out one’s calling.

In contrast to this set of dominant cultural assumptions, leading recent scholars on vocation have taken a decidedly countercultural approach, raising questions of communal personhood: a sense of shared, mutual vocation. Thinking of a community as not only a setting for vocation but a vocation itself, a communal vocation, can reshape the conversation about vocation. In addition to Cunningham’s article “Colleges Have Callings, Too,” other recent work uses this more expansive, communal understanding of vocation to consider the extension of vocational questions to communities beyond educational ones and across the life spans of those who inhabit and make up such communities. This work includes Kathleen Cahalan’s *The Stories We Live: Finding God’s Calling All around Us* and a collection edited by McLemore and Cahalan titled *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life’s Seasons*. The rich tradition of communally conducted education in honors programs and colleges has much to contribute to this still-developing work on communal conceptions of vocation.

Perhaps the most distinctive community-building activity in Christ College, Valparaiso University’s interdisciplinary honors college, takes place every fall when the entire first-year class creates and stages an original theatrical production, typically a musical that draws on the themes of the first-year program’s readings and discussions. Every component of the production must come from that cohort so that, for instance, the music composition committee can’t score for a saxophone if no one in their cohort plays the instrument. On its face, the endeavor seems far removed from questions of vocation and purpose. Certainly, few students in any given cohort will go into the theatre

professionally, but the collaboration itself—in all its creative, frustrating, and exhilarating manifestations—becomes a critical space for students to discover who they are in relation to a larger community with a shared goal and purpose. The rest of the college—sophomores, juniors, seniors, faculty, and staff, not to mention parents, friends, and more than a few alumni—turns up for the mid-November performances, eager to see what this year’s class will pull off. In the week after the production, the honors community convenes again for a “talkback.” A faculty member or administrator offers a review, and a panel of first-year students answer questions and make observations about how their cohort approached this daunting assignment and what they learned in the process.

Community building practices foster a sense of vocation that extends beyond the individual’s gifts and goals. Students come to understand that communities themselves have purpose and meaning and that exploring vocation within community is vital for individual growth and understanding. So too can a set of well-structured prompts be useful to students who are unfamiliar with the values-discernment and goal-setting process. These prompts should guide students into the metacognitive and integrative work that is needed to ground their decision-making in values that they have intentionally evaluated and adopted. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE Rubrics for ethical reasoning and integrative learning may be especially useful in crafting prompts since they can help tease out whether students have developed the intellectual tools to address real-world situations.

In the first-year honors living learning program at Texas A&M, students are assigned a series of prompts that iteratively ask students to reflect on their values, think about where these values come from, and then connect these values to future goals. The iterative nature of these assignments gives students the opportunity to revisit, revise, and solidify their understanding of their values as they are related to their goals. The excerpted prompts provided below are adapted from those in the University Honors Program’s first-year program at Texas A&M University. The prompts are tailored to our locally adapted rubric on lifelong and integrative learning, which also gives formative feedback to students’ annual updates to an ePortfolio constructed around related questions (see next section). (See Appendix for additional assignments.)

### 1. Who Are You?

*The goal of this assignment is to help us get to know you and to have you start reflecting on your values and how you have developed these.*

This exercise is important because it provides you an opportunity to think about your values, interests, and strengths. The ability to articulate these is important when making important life decisions and when prioritizing new opportunities and obligations.

Instructions:

Tell the story of your life, highlighting memories or events that you feel are important to who you are today. To help guide your writing, think about the following questions:

- What is most important in your life? Where do these values come from?
- What do you do? What topics interest you?
- How would you describe yourself as a learner? What is your work ethic like?
- What are your strengths/talents and weaknesses/deficits?

## 2. Courage & Values

*The goal this week is to help you further explore your values in relation to your long-term plans and identify areas for growth to become the person you want to be.*

Instructions:

Lee Walker, '63, has led an extraordinary life full of adventure and success. He has shared stories of that success, along with the failures that led to that success, with students on the Champe Fitzhugh Honors International Leadership seminar. In distilling the lessons of his life, Mr. Walker identified three important characteristics that led to his success: imagination, courage, and gratitude. We have already asked you to consider how gratitude can help you identify your core values in the "Thank You Letter" assignment. In this assignment, we ask you to consider courage as another way to help you focus on those values most important to you. We will focus on imagination in upcoming assignments like the "Real-World Issue" and "Personal Statement."

Mr. Walker likes to talk about "courage pushups," or doing small acts of courage each day that build your resolve "muscles" and equip

you to face bigger challenges when they come. With this metaphor in mind, please respond to the following questions:

- Describe a time that you tried something that you weren't sure of the outcome when you started. What did you learn about opening yourself up that way?
- Describe a time that you failed at something. How did you/are you working your way back from that failure? Who or what were/are your resources in that process?
- Thinking about the experiences you've just described: can you identify any common thread between them? Are there particular things that you find yourself willing to be more courageous about? If so, how would you describe that as a personal value?
- How can you/have you adopt/ed the concept of "courage push-ups" in your life?

### 3. Real-World Issue

*The goal of this assignment is to help you connect your personal interests and values to real-world issues that may impact your career.*

Instructions:

Review your previous assignments in which you described who you are, what your values are, what your strengths are, and how you hope to grow over the course of your undergraduate career.

With that understanding of yourself in mind, describe an issue, question, or problem in your intended career field that you are passionate about, want to contribute to answering, or that you find interesting.

A few notes that may help with common questions or concerns:

- If you struggle to find a topic, don't panic. You can use the break to talk with someone in your field/industry or read about your intended career field.
- You may change your topic for the final assignment, if needed.
- If you cannot find an issue in your intended field that you feel passionate about, is there an issue in another field that you do find interesting?

- Find several news stories that you are interested in. Try to figure out what these stories have in common. While it may not be obvious at first glance, your major/disciplinary interest likely has a way to address this topic. Once you identify your topic, remember that you can always use the expertise of the subject-expert librarians to help you find sources that will let you see how people working in your intended field are approaching the issue.
- You can find a listing of the most pressing world problems from “the effective altruism community” at <<https://80000hours.org/articles/cause-selection>>.

## **Integrating Vocation into Honors Courses and ePortfolios**

As Clydesdale described in *The Purposeful Graduate*, context matters greatly when designing courses or experiences related to vocation or meaningful work. At some institutions, robust retreat programs serve as the primary vehicle for vocational discernment. At others, vocational programming occurs as a part of the classroom experience.

Vocational reflection is oriented to helping students think about their lives more broadly and in longer spans of time than is conventional within the limits of a course. Nevertheless, a course can be an important location for making vocational thinking concrete and practical rather than holding it in an idealized, abstract space. In their sophomore year, students in the Trinity Christian College Honors Program normally take a required philosophy course that is different from the philosophy course in the regular curriculum. The course has been an example of innovation in the honors program that the rest of the college followed: the course both in and outside of honors is now more aligned with the college’s increasingly articulated concern with students’ vocational discernment and formation. The honors philosophy course approaches vocation from four angles: knowing, calling, identity, and commitment. Students first encounter these four angles by confronting four questions: Who am I? (identity); Why am I here? (calling); What kind of life is worth the risk of living it? (commitment); How can I tell whether my answers to any of these questions is reliable? (knowing).

A recursive focal point for these big vocationally oriented questions is a single assignment that students engage at multiple points throughout the course. One way of helping students to broaden their sense of vocation is to direct them to think about their vocation not only as something that will

happen later, for which they are preparing now, but also as something that is going on now; this helps them think about vocation as not only a particular “what” but as the larger “how” of their lives. At three points throughout the course (early, middle, and late), students write and subsequently work back into and extend an essay titled “My vocation in this course.” The prompt for the early-stage version of this semester-long reflective writing includes the following questions:

As you consider the course’s focus, objectives, and structure (in light of the syllabus and your experience of our first few class meetings):

- What particular gifts and abilities do you have which will contribute to the flourishing of the whole class? What are some specific ways in which you intend to put these gifts and abilities to work, in and out of class meetings? How do these intentions connect to the stated priorities of the course?
- What about the course do you expect will be challenging, unfamiliar, or uncomfortable for you? What are some specific ways in which you intend to address such challenge, unfamiliarity, discomfort? How do these intentions connect to the stated priorities of the course?
- What intentions do you have for this course that, while they may not directly connect to either of the two categories mentioned above, are important to your understanding of your calling, your vocation at this time in your life?
- How are your observations and intentions related to some elements of what we have been reading and discussing so far? That is, how does your own sense of what you are doing and are called to do in this course relate to (how is it supported by, challenged by, complicated by, etc.) what we have been encountering?
- How do you know all of the things the other questions here ask you about?

Asking students to consider their meaning and purpose “now” affords them some critical reflection tools to consider questions of vocation throughout their college years. When they transition from college into workplace and community roles, they have already cultivated a sense of vocation.

Vocational discernment can happen at all stages of a college experience from the introduction of reflective prompts and community-building experiences to assignments and professional exploration. Saint Louis University

features several opportunities for junior and senior honors students to place their learning in the context of their emerging professional and vocational identity. Students can opt into a one-credit course called “Honors Professional Development and Vocational Discernment,” which takes the form of an intentionally sequenced five-part workshop series in which students think and write extensively about the substance of their academic and personal lives, then reflecting on aspirations for future work and service. The goal is for students to emerge from this course with both concrete professional skills and philosophical insights to aid in a job search or graduate school application.

The course at St. Louis University encourages deep reflection in two ways. First, it requires that all students compose a narrative autobiography in which they consider their values and professional/academic ambitions. When students begin to take stock of their lives and the people, experiences, and ideas that comprise it, they often begin to identify major themes that can inform future action. As they do so, they begin to shape a narrative that gives them more confidence in the decisions they have made and will make in the future. Clydesdale’s research on purposeful work initiatives on college campuses supports this view (*Purposeful Graduate*). Based on his review of colleges and universities around the country, students who took part in purposeful education programs “voiced longer-term perspectives and demonstrated persistence in spite of setbacks”; he also noted that “participation in purpose exploration programs . . . generat[ed] broader satisfaction with these graduates’ life-at-present” (117). In short, exercises like writing a narrative autobiography can make a difference in graduates’ post-college overall happiness by compelling critical self-reflection on choices made, successes and failures, and opportunities gained (and lost) during college.

The second main way that the St. Louis University course fosters reflection on purpose is through a session focused explicitly on an understanding of vocation. Facilitated by a member of SLU’s Department of Theological Studies and inspired by readings from Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass’s *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, students consider what it means to have a vocation as opposed to, say, a career or a job. If students grant that a vocational identity carries a higher responsibility, they then wrestle with competing definitions from theological, philosophical, and other contemporary sources on the meaning of the term. They consider whether a vocational identity compels them to take on a specific career or instead to have multiple “callings” in life, regardless of their paid

occupation. Ultimately, this session encourages them to be thoughtful about how they define their vocation in both their career and their personal life. Students also consider how their developing sense of vocation fits in the context of prospective careers, graduate schools, competitive scholarships, and fellowship opportunities. The course aims to situate students' professional goals within some greater understanding of who they are, where they have been, where they are going, and what values guide them.

As we ask students to consider their vocational identities, bringing together the many pieces of their honors education—including coursework, internships, service, and co-curricular activities—becomes an important process. The goal is to continue an assessment of their talents, values, and experiences so that they see their lives as purposeful and understand the ways they do and can contribute to the greater good.

The use of ePortfolios is a helpful tool in this reflection of learning and growth, supporting and enhancing student reflection in ways that are not new to honors (Zubizarreta; Corley and Zubizarreta). AAC&U has recently acknowledged the power of this kind of meaning-making activity as the “eleventh high impact practice,” joining other pedagogical innovations such as learning communities, undergraduate research, and capstone experiences that also saw their start in an honors context (Watson et al.). In the context of discerning vocation, ePortfolios provide space and structure for students to consider their curricular and co-curricular choices together, connecting them to their values and goals in order to create meaning and evaluate learning.

At Texas A&M, students receive guidance in this reflective process in the form of an evaluation rubric (see <<http://tx.ag/ePortfolio>>). This rubric, a local adaptation of the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics for lifelong and integrative learning, evaluates students' responses to three basic questions: What have you done? Why is it important (so what)? How will your experience shape your future plans (now what)? Within each question, the rubric identifies characteristics of lifelong and integrative learning, revealing how these are demonstrated. Students are evaluated at the end of each of their first three years and are expected to show improvement from year to year. The intent of this practice is to help students iteratively refine their own understanding of their values, how these values connect to their goals and guide their decisions, and how they are using their refined understanding to continually improve. The prompts that we give students to guide their responses toward this rubric are adapted below.

What?—Interests, Opportunities, KSA (knowledge, skills, and abilities)

- What are my interests and what opportunities do I see to pursue those in my undergraduate career?
- What are my long-term plans? How are these connected to my core values?
- What classes, lectures, organizations, communities, events, or experiences such as study abroad, undergraduate research, service, or internships have been meaningful to me? How have these reinforced my goals, refined them, or changed them?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) have I built to this point in my undergraduate career?

So What?—Reflect on Why these Experiences Matter to You

- What has surprised me in my undergraduate education?
- What has caused me to feel excitement or accomplishment?
- What has caused me to feel concern or disappointment?
- How have I grown in my awareness of issues/questions/or problems in my intended field?

Now What?—Connect Experiences & Interests to Your Plans

- How do I see the various aspects of my education, both in and out of the classroom, coming together to help me achieve my goals?
- What gaps in my knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) do I need to fill?
- How is my capstone project helping (or how will my capstone project help) me build confidence in my knowledge, skills, and abilities as I embark on a career?
- How will I celebrate my successes?
- How will I respond to setbacks and disappointment?
- What are my next steps in pursuing my long-term goals?

## Vocational Exploration in Advising and Senior Experiences

When students arrive at the final stage of their honors experience, the occasion invites a serious consideration of the past as they look toward their future vocational identity. They have an opportunity to assess their deepest desires alongside the needs of community, family, and workplace. Signature work, as described by AAC&U, is a culminating experience in which the student selects the topic and form of a project and completes it independently with guidance from an expert mentor (Peden; Arthur and Kerrigan). Examples might include a service project, capstone experience, or ePortfolio. No matter the format or focus, a key part of the experience is the student's articulation of how the project draws on their previous learning both in and out of the classroom and how it connects to their future plans. Ideally, students also articulate how their work fits into a larger conversation about real-world questions or issues that are important to them. In cultivating a sense of vocation, students are connecting aspects of their past and present to discern purpose and meaning for their future life trajectories. They are also connecting individual talents and goals to the needs of the world around them.

At Texas A&M, students have a number of different capstone options to fulfill these expectations (see <http://tx.ag/Capstones>). Whether they are pursuing a scholarly thesis, undertaking a service project, teaching a seminar, enhancing a student organization, or reflecting on the impact of the arts in their education, students are building confidence in their learning and demonstrating competence in their knowledge, skills, and abilities for future employers. They are also demonstrating broader reflection on their purpose in their community, family, and workplace.

Texas A&M's honors program is in the process of developing capstone evaluations based on the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Competencies:

- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving
- Oral/Written Communications
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Digital Technology
- Leadership
- Professionalism/Work Ethic

- Career Management
- Global/Intercultural Fluency

A deeper dive into these competencies reveals important overlaps with the work of discerning vocation, including reasoning ability, clear articulation of ideas, the ability to work across differences, demonstrated integrity, and the ability to “identify and articulate one’s skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences” (NACE) related to one’s chosen career path as well as identify areas for growth and development.

Students need to reflect on their role as change agents, and signature works are their opportunity to leave their mark at Texas A&M. The incentive for students to invest time in effecting change on their campus is the understanding that their personal experiences, their expertise in a field of study, and their comprehension of issues in their community are all unique.

For example, Texas A&M senior biomedical sciences major Rahul Atodaria participated in the Undergraduate Service Scholar Capstone with a project called a “Day of Play.” He partnered with a local 24-hour emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence to host a simple, sensitive, and relatable opportunity for children and their parents to enjoy local vendors and interact with community leaders, providing them with a therapeutic outlet in hopes of showing them that their community cares and that there is a brighter future for them.

Here, Rahul is connecting his experience in the course Psychology of Adjustment to address the hopelessness that some individuals feel while living in shelters. His studies of the effectiveness of placebo treatment and of hope as a key component in addressing some health conditions are the foundation of his project. As an aspiring physician, Rahul focuses on how events like “Day of Play” address the effects of both indirect and direct forms of domestic violence on children. His hope is that this experience will equip him with the necessary tools to identify the subtleties in his patients’ lives that influence their health but may not manifest themselves explicitly.

Projects like Rahul’s reveal how one student can leave his mark on his community. Another layer in reflecting on these dynamic projects is the focus on sustainability. Students reflect on ways to inspire others to pick up where they left off when they graduate. Students are encouraged to leave their communities better than they found them and also to encourage other students to carry on the work they began, goals that resonate with Clydesdale’s research showing that students who participate in vocation exploration experiences have the tools to find meaning and purpose, along with commitment to

community, after college. Such experiences at the final stages of a student's experience suggest that vocational exploration affords a deeper understanding of the self within a future context of responsibilities. While acting as change agents through the signature projects, students also have space to imagine and reflect on ways their future lives might connect to their inner hopes as well as the hopes of those around them. Students need to be allowed this space to imagine their future selves.

At Christ College (Valparaiso University), all graduating seniors participate in a one-credit colloquium built on questions of vocation and the meaning of their education more broadly. Over the years, the colloquium has taken many forms, but most recently it has been anchored by a "Senior Weekend" experience, just after classes start, when students spend time together as a cohort and can read, reflect, and discuss together questions that often feel increasingly urgent at this juncture in their lives. While some components of the colloquium tend toward the pragmatic, e.g., résumés and personal statements, the chief concern of the colloquium is that students step back a bit from the immediacy of the day-to-day and use shared readings and reflective exercises to meditate deeply on a more capacious sense of "vocation" and what it means to be anchored and enlivened by various commitments and experiences beyond the merely academic or career-oriented. Schwehn and Bass's *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be* serves as a grounding anthology in this endeavor, with readings grouped according to essential vocabularies, e.g., "authenticity," "vocation," and "virtue," as well as a series of framing questions about identity, work, balance, and purpose.

For the senior colloquium itself, much of the richness of the experience derives from the fact that students participated in an intensive first-year honors program focused on "the good life" and "human flourishing" three years before. The first-year program drew on texts from Western and Eastern traditions, spanning from the ancient to the modern-day. Critically examining such rich texts and questions as newly arrived college students helps set the table for a return in the senior year to reflecting purposefully on "the good life" and one's sense of self, around the table once again with the well-known friends and fellow-travelers of multiple honors seminars. The first-year program and the senior colloquium serve as bookends in the curriculum. They are both undertaken collectively by the entire cohort, a reminder that challenging texts and questions about vocation are part of an ongoing conversation, often best taken up within a generous community.

The Christ College's senior retreat recently began including reflective practices: time when students can walk the prayer labyrinth by the chapel,

find a quiet space, go for a walk, contemplate nature, or compose a short piece of writing as a way to model the kind of quiet we have to make room for in our lives in order to better attend to big and pressing questions.

Encouraging a sense of vocation in honors can extend to students' interactions with an academic advisor. Advisors can and often do occupy an important role in the discernment process as they facilitate students' academic and personal growth: guiding curricular decisions, encouraging research, determining extracurricular interests, and ensuring completion of program requirements. The advising situation in honors differs from a typical prescriptive mode. In many honors advising scenarios, the concern is less about the minutiae of registrar-mandated forms for major changes or minimum enrollment for classes and more about "inquiry into academic opportunity broadly defined" (Huggett 77). Therefore, honors advisors can invite or challenge students to "examine their academic goals, describe their aspirations, reflect on their decisions, or speculate on the possible outcomes of pursuing specific opportunities" (Huggett 85). Some of these discussions can lead to discomfort as students entertain future career or vocational prospects that differ from their intended path. Hause's charge to practice careful, attentive, and charitable listening takes on special importance in this context. Attentive and intentional advising conversations can reveal deeper motivations or apprehensions that accompany vocational decision-making.

At Saint Louis University, an advising strategic plan promotes this kind of intentional listening and aspirational thinking, encouraging growth over a student's lifespan in honors that are oriented towards the program's core values: holistic learning, academic innovation, Ignatian reflection, and global citizenship. Each year of a student's participation in the program calls for a different advising interaction. In years one and two, the advisor encourages students to pursue learning opportunities across various disciplines to aid in the discernment process. By pursuing a holistic education, students may discover new interests or affirm existing interests. Regular conversations along the way help both the advisor and the student determine when fruitful avenues for new inquiry exist or when affirming experiences call for deeper study. As juniors in the program, students are advised to identify internship opportunities, secure research positions, and craft their own original research proposals. As students discover innovative academic projects, they develop confidence in their skills and greater commitment to their chosen vocational paths. During their final year, students continue to pursue research and internship posts, but they also pivot to a posture of reflection in which they tie experiential learning

opportunities to their quest for personal and professional purpose. In addition, they may take a senior seminar course in which they grapple with the complexity of identity in a globalized world.

Throughout a student's undergraduate experience, the advisor serves a developmental role by challenging students to pursue rigorous coursework, formative experiential learning opportunities, and research that enhances their academic field of study. Advising students as they consider and apply for competitive fellowships or graduate school programs can quickly become a rich opportunity not only for intentional listening but for deeper conversations about vocation. Many honors students find being a student a comfortable space, so applying for further study or a competitive academic award seems an obvious choice. These students also need to slow down, however, and reflect on their evolving sense of self as well as the values and commitments that ground them as they discern their path and next steps. Often this reflection occurs in conversations as well as the inevitable drafting and workshopping of personal essays that accompany any of these applications.

At Christ College (Valparaiso), part of the material used to encourage students to engage in this process of discernment is Mary Catherine Bateson's powerful *Composing a Life*, an excerpt of which appears in Schwehn and Bateson's *Leading Lives that Matter*. Bateson evocatively draws out the nuances of "composing," challenging readers to identify the plotlines they have perhaps internalized and to wrest a sort of creative control over the way they frame the "continuities" and "discontinuities" in the stories of their lives (462–63). Ultimately, the act of deep reflection and story-telling—regardless of the outcome of any particular application or competition—is satisfying and rewarding for honors students. They leave the process with a sense of their "story," but also with a fuller understanding that the narrative is ever-evolving and open to their capacity to reflect, narrate, and integrate different aspects and experiences of their lives.

## CONCLUSION

We see the honors experience as a place of formation, reflection, and purpose as students contemplate their vocational identities and their place in the world during their college years and beyond. Cultivating a sense of vocation within honors courses, programs, initiatives, and institutions can help students navigate life challenges, offering a framework with which to better understand their individual purpose within complex cultural and communal landscapes.

The current initiatives within honors education already share many goals and strategies of vocational exploration and therefore can benefit from increased attention to and development of a sense of vocation within programmatic and curricular goals. As Kathryn Kleinhans suggests:

On the one hand, educators have the responsibility of helping students understand that they have a vocation as students, here and now, not just an awaiting future vocation in an eventual career. On the other hand, we need to recognize that the academic vocation of students does not negate their other callings in domestic, economic and communal life. We need to help them identify and affirm these roles and relationships as legitimate callings and we need to help them learn to think and to act responsibly, as whole persons, within the complex intersections of lived human experience. (102)

Honors education brings a depth and breadth to college experience that affords this kind of examination of individual values and community needs. Thus, we are poised as honors educators to help students in this reflective work, affirming their many gifts as they develop their own gifts, aptitudes, and goals within a vocational identity.

## REFERENCES

- AAC&U Value Rubrics. <<https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>>
- AJCU Honors Consortium. "Essential Characteristics of a Jesuit Honors Program." (2016). <<http://academicaffairs.loyno.edu/honors/essential-characteristics-jesuit-honors-program>>.
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Arthur, Deborah Smith, and Seanna Kerrigan. "Signature Work in Action: Senior Capstones Prepare Students for Unscripted Challenges." *AAC&U Diversity & Democracy* 19.4 (Fall 2016). <<https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2016/fall/arthur>>.
- Badenhausen, Richard. "'Help, I Need Somebody': Rethinking How We Conceptualize Honors." *JNCHC* 11.2 (2010): 27–31.
- Bateson, Mary Catherine. "Composing a Life Story." *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, edited by Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 459–67.

- Bloom, Jennifer. "The Appreciative Advising Revolution." <[https://www.wsu.edu/academics/general-education/\\_files/documents/appreciative-advising.pdf](https://www.wsu.edu/academics/general-education/_files/documents/appreciative-advising.pdf)>.
- The Boston College Jesuit Community. "Jesuits and Jesuit Education: A Primer." *A Jesuit Education Reader*, edited by George W. Traub. Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 2008, pp. 38–42.
- Buechner, Frederick. "Vocation." *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, edited by Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 111–12.
- Burnett, Bill, and Dave Evans. *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*. New York, NY: Knopf, 2016.
- Cahalan, Kathleen. *The Stories We Live: Finding God's Calling All around Us*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017.
- Clydesdale, Tim. *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- . *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Collegeville Institute. <<https://collegevilleinstitute.org/vocation-projects/research-seminars>>.
- Corley, Christopher R., and John Zubizarreta. "The Power and Utility of Reflective Learning Portfolios in Honors." *JNCHC* 13.1 (2012): 63–76.
- Cuevas, Amanda, Laurie A. Schreiner, Young Kim, and Jennifer Bloom. "Honors Student Thriving: A Model of Academic, Psychological, and Social Wellbeing." *JNCHC* 18.2 (2017): 79–119.
- Cunningham, David S., editor. *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- . "Colleges Have Callings, Too: Vocational Reflections at the Institutional Level." *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017, 249–71.
- . "Hearing and Being Heard: Rethinking Vocation in the Multi-Faith Academy." *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019, 1–21.

- . *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- . *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- . “‘Who’s there?’: The Dramatic Role of the ‘Caller’ in Vocational Discernment.” *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016, 43–164.
- Dean, Shannon. “Understanding the Development of Honors Students’ Connections with Faculty.” *JNCHC* 20.1 (2019): 107–21.
- Erikson, Erik. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, Florence M. Guido, Lori D. Patton, and Kristen A. Renn. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2010, 48–51.
- Evans, Nancy J., Deanna S. Forney, Florence M. Guido, Lori D. Patton, and Kristen A. Renn. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Gallagher, Marianne F., and Peter A. Musso. “Ignatian Pedagogical Principles Synopsis.” *JSEA* (2006): 1–9.
- Gray, Howard. “The Experience of Ignatius Loyola: Background to Jesuit Education.” *A Jesuit Education Reader*, edited by George W. Traub. Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 2008, 63–86.
- Hause, Jeffrey P. “Two Neglected Features of Honors Advising.” *JNCHC* 18.2 (2017): 151–62.
- Huggett, Kathryn Dey. “Advising in Undergraduate Honors Programs: A Learner-Centered Approach.” *NACADA Journal* 24.1-2 (2004): 75–87.
- Kaplowitz, Craig. “Helping with the ‘How’: A Role for Honors in Civic Education.” *JNCHC* 18.2 (2017): 17–23.
- Kass, Leon R. “The Aims of Liberal Education.” *The Aims of Education*, edited by John W. Boyer. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 81–106.
- Kleinhans, Kathryn. “Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities.” *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016, 99–121.

- Kohlberg, Lawrence, Charles Levine, and Alexandra Hewer. *Moral Stages: A Current Formulation and a Response to Critics*. Basel, NY: Karger, 1983.
- Korth, Sharon. "Precis of Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach." *A Jesuit Education Reader*, edited by George W. Traub. Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 2008, 280–284.
- McLemore, Bonnie, and Kathleen Cahalan, editors. *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017.
- Miller, Earl K., and Jonathan D. Cohen. "An Integrative Theory of Prefrontal Cortex Function." *Annual Review of Neuroscience* (2001) 24: 167–202. doi:10.1146/annurev.neuro.24.1.167.
- Miller Earl K., David J. Freedman, and Jonathan D. Wallis. "The Prefrontal Cortex: Categories, Concepts and Cognition." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*. 357(1424) (August 2002): 1123–36. doi:10.1098/rstb.2002.1099.
- Mohrmann, Margaret E. "'Vocation Is Responsibility': Broader Scope, Deeper Discernment." *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017, 21-43.
- National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Competencies. <<https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined>>.
- NCHC. "Definition of Honors Education." <<https://www.nchchonors.org/directors-faculty/definition-of-honors-education>>.
- Organ, Jerome M. "Of Doing and Being: Broadening Our Understanding of Vocation." *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017, 225–43.
- Peden, Wilson. "Signature Work: A Survey of Current Practices." *AAC&U Liberal Education* 101.1-2 (Winter/Spring 2015). <<https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2015/winter-spring/peden>>.
- Perrin, Tom. "One Way to Make College Meaningful. Don't Find Yourself; Find a Vocation." *New York Times*, New York Ed., 02 Feb. 2019, p. SR12.
- Perry, William G. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, Florence M. Guido, Lori D. Patton, and Kristen A. Renn. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2010, 85-88.

Ray, Darby Kathleen. "Self, World, and the Space Between: Community Engagement as Vocational Discernment." *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016, 301–20.

Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning. "Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm." *Saint Louis University*. <<https://www.slu.edu/cttl/resources/ignatian-pedagogical-paradigm.php>>.

Riswold, Caryn D. "Vocational Discernment: A Pedagogy of Humanization." *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016, 72–98.

Schwehn, Mark R., and Dorothy C. Bass, editors. *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.

Smith, Christian, and Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

VanLaningham, Erin. "Exploring Vocation in Honors Education." *Vocation Matters*. Sept. 11, 2018. <<https://vocationmatters.org/2018/09/11/exploring-vocation-in-honors-education>>.

Watson, C. Edward, George D. Kuh, Terrel Rhodes, Tracy Penny Light, and Helen L. Chen. "Editorial: ePortfolios—The Eleventh High Impact Practice." *International Journal of ePortfolio* 6.2 (2016), 65–69. <<http://www.theijep.com/pdf/IJEP254.pdf>>.

Wells, Cynthia. "Finding the Center as Things Fly Apart: Vocation and the Common Good." *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016, 47–71.

Zubizarreta, John. *The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

---

The author may be contacted at

[Erin.vanlaningham@loras.edu](mailto:Erin.vanlaningham@loras.edu).

## APPENDIX

### Further First-Year Reflective Prompts

#### A. Thank You Letter

*The goal this week is to help you deepen your understanding of your values and how you came to hold these values.*

By writing a letter of gratitude to someone who has inspired you, you will reflect on why that inspiration was important and how you came to value the lesson(s) that you've learned. This exercise will be good practice for your personal statement and provides practice at writing a formal letter (e.g., a thank-you letter after an interview).

Instructions:

Respond to the questions below for three different things that you are grateful for learning. Then, in business letter format, write a thank-you letter to one of the people who taught or guided you through an important lesson. Submit your final, proofread and edited letter. You are also encouraged to send your letter to the person you wrote it to!

Think about what you're most grateful for having learned:

- Who taught it to you?
- What did you learn?
- Why are you grateful for learning this?

You can find guidance on writing a business letter at <http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Writing-Speaking-Guides/Alphabetical-List-of-Guides/Professional-Writing/Business-Letters>.

#### B. Ethical Implications

*Building and maintaining integrity is an ongoing process. Doing this thought experiment about integrity will help you think through how you would react in a difficult situation so that when you are presented with an ethical dilemma in real life, you'll be better prepared to make a decision that is in line with your values.*

Integrity is telling myself the truth. And honesty is telling the truth to other people.

—Spencer Johnson

It takes courage to create a meaningful life of integrity. It also requires good company. And practice.

—Shelly Francis

Integrity has also been defined as doing the right thing even when no one is watching by figures such as Oprah Winfrey and C.S. Lewis.

Instructions:

Imagine that you are well-established in your desired career, doing meaningful work that is fulfilling, respected, and well-compensated. Now, imagine that you are presented with an ethical dilemma that makes you uncomfortable to continue with the status quo, but addressing it might cost you the comfort that you now enjoy.

- Write a response to the following questions:
- What is the ethical issue that you imagined?
- How will you react, and why?

### C. Summer Plans & Development Gaps

*The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to start (or continue) being intentional in how you are investing your resources of time and energy in making decisions that are aligned with your values and goals.*

This assignment asks you to identify a skill you are proficient in as well as one that you hope to develop and at least one way you want to use the summer break to work toward the long-term goal you wrote about in your real-world issue assignment.

Instructions:

Write a reflection that addresses the following questions and upload it here as a .doc or .pdf file:

- What specific knowledge, skills, or abilities related to your long-term goal(s) have you already developed? What do you still need to develop?
- Which of these do you have an opportunity to work on this summer? What kinds of opportunities are available to you?
- Which one of these opportunities is highest priority for you? Why?
- What steps have you already taken to pursue this opportunity, or do you plan to take?

## D. Personal Statement

The goal of writing a personal statement seems deceptively simple: You have two pages to articulate a goal and communicate how your personal qualities and experiences have prepared you to meet this goal. Typically, the audience is trying to learn more about you as they prepare to evaluate you for a job, graduate school, or a nationally competitive award. Success in these situations will mean selectively sharing, not only the experiences that best showcase yourself, but also those that connect your values with your audience members.

Depending on the purpose, you might approach writing a personal statement in several different ways. The purpose of this assignment is to have you analyze how your experiences during your first year have reinforced or modified your future direction and values, identify past and planned experiences that demonstrate your values, commitments, and connect your overall college experience thus far to the life that you hope to live.

### Instructions:

Respond to the prompts below. In order to focus your writing, we are giving you two prompt questions as well as guiding questions for each.

Your response should be 2 pages and fully respond to the two prompt questions.

1. Reflect on the past year: Have your goal and expectations shifted, narrowed, and/or changed since coming to college?
  - What choices did you make that challenged you, required you to grow, or to take a risk?
  - How did your first affect your career plans or goals? What did you learn that will translate to your career?
  - How did your major or coursework affect how you approached your first year? How did what you learned in your first year affect the way you think of your major and future career?
  - How has what you learned in your first year affected the way you think about your major, your courses, or your career goals? About undergraduate research or other projects?
  - What was unexpected or surprised you?

2. What are your plans going forward? With all of the possibilities that exist, how have you used (or will you use) your goals and values to identify opportunities that are a good fit?
  - How you would define “a life well-lived”?
  - How are your personal values and long-term aspirations reflected in your choices of academic discipline, intended career field, and personal aspirations? (think back to your “Who Are You?” and “Summer Plans & Development Gaps” essays)
  - What opportunities and/or challenges exist within these areas that will allow you to make a positive impact to others, while also authentically reflecting your commitment to your own personal values? (think back to your “Real-World Issue Assignment”)
  - How will your academic, co-curricular involvement, and your signature work (Capstone) choices help you to prepare for your “life well-lived”? (think back to your “Courage & Values” essay)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**AZAR ABIZADA** is Associate Professor of Economics in the School of Business at ADA University. He holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Rochester, New York, in the United States. His main areas of interest are college admissions, school choice, mechanism design, and education economics.

**LARRY R. ANDREWS** is Dean Emeritus of the Honors College and Professor Emeritus of English at Kent State University. His Rutgers PhD in comparative literature led to a 41-year academic career that included teaching in Poland and the USSR. He has published on Russian, French, and African American literature as well as on honors history and fundraising.

**ELIZABETH BAIGENT** is Reader in the History of Geography at the University of Oxford and Academic Director of Registered Visiting Students at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Widely published in the scholarly press, she is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, the Royal Geographical Society, the Society of Antiquaries, and the Higher Education Academy.

**ANDREW J. COGNARD-BLACK** teaches on the faculty of the honors college at St. Mary's College of Maryland, and he currently serves on the NCHC Publications Board, Research Committee, and Board of Directors. His research interests include the sociologies of higher education, work, and social inequality.

**ALICIA CUNNINGHAM-BRYANT** is the Honors College Kim T. Adamson Endowed Professor and directs the campus-wide Office for Fellowship Advising at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, UT. She earned her PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University and has extensive experience as an archivist and curator.

**BRIAN DAVENPORT** is Director of the Eastern Washington University Office of Community Engagement. He is part of reimagining honors education and honors faculty development at EWU. He earned a PhD in leadership studies from Gonzaga University, and his current research interests include whole student reflection in service learning, institutional community engagement leadership, and the institutional impact of Carnegie Community Engagement classification.

**REBEKAH DEMENT** is Interim Honors Program Director at Indiana University Southeast. She earned her PhD in humanities from the University of Louisville, and her research interests include pedagogy; cultural responsiveness; and the cultural narratives, literature, and history of the American South.

**DUSTIN J. KEMP** is Program Coordinator for Capstones & Signature Work for LAUNCH at Texas A&M University, where he earned his BS in Agricultural Leadership and Development. Kemp is also one of the founding coordinators for The Hunger Consortium, a program that connects faculty, staff, and students in an effort to address food insecurity at Texas A&M.

**JONATHAN KOTINEK** is Director for the University Honors Program at Texas A&M University, where he has served for sixteen years. His NCHC activity has included two monographs, *Occupy Honors Education* (2017) and *Setting the Table for Diversity* (2010), co-chair of the Diversity Issues committee 2006–16, and Board of Directors 2011–14.

**FIZZA MIRZALIYEVA** is a Research Fellow at The Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. She holds an MA in Education Management from ADA University.

**ROBERT J. PAMPEL** is Director of the Saint Louis University Honors Program. His research on Jesuit education and curricular design informs his pedagogy and his work to align the program's academic philosophy with the institution's Jesuit mission. He also serves on the Research Committee for the NCHC.

**ARON REPPMANN** is Professor of Philosophy at Trinity Christian College, where he was the founding director of the honors program. He currently serves NCHC as co-chair of Beginning in Honors and as chair of the Small College Committee. He is especially interested in the relationship between spirituality and vocation in honors education.

**ANGELA M. SALAS** is Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Framingham State University. From 2006 to 2019, she was Founding Director of the Indiana University Southeast Honors Program. Her research interests include honors education, student persistence, and the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa.

**ANNA STEWART** is the assistant dean of Christ College, Valparaiso University's interdisciplinary honors college, where she also serves as an academic and fellowships advisor. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Texas at Austin.

**MARIA V. TARASOVA**, PhD, is Associate Professor of Art History and Dean of the SibFU Honors College at the Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk, Russia. Besides her work in honors pedagogy and administration, she has research interests in theory and philosophy of art, visual thinking, and culture studies.

**ERIN VANLANINGHAM** is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. Her research explores the intersection between art and literature as well as the scholarship of vocation. Recently, she was a contributing writer to *Vocation Matters*, and her current book project explores cultivating vocation through literary studies.

**ERIC WELCH**, an historian of the ancient Near East, is Senior Lewis Lecturer in the Lewis Honors College at the University of Kentucky. His research examines socioeconomic changes in ancient societies in the face of imperial domination. Welch has supervised students in overseas experiences since 2010.

**LEAH WHITE** is Honors Program Director and Professor of Communication Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She earned a PhD in communication from Arizona State University. Her primary areas of scholarly interest include performance studies, feminist theory, and college student growth and development.