

THE COMPOSITION OF CALLING: EXAMINING PREDICTORS OF CALLING IN FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Recent scholarship suggests that sense of calling may strongly correlate with a host of positive life outcomes. It follows that further investigation into the construct of calling may have promising applications for student affairs professionals, whose work is oriented toward helping students achieve such outcomes. To that end, this study drew upon the work of Haworth, McCruden, and Roy (2001) to examine predictors of sense of calling in a sample of 364 first-year college students. Findings indicated that strengths-self efficacy, civic engagement, and spirituality significantly predicted sense of calling in students. Implications for future research and practice are outlined and discussed.

Keywords: Sense of Calling; Brief Calling Scale; Multiple Regression; Strengths Self-Efficacy; Civic Engagement; Family Support; Peer Support; Spirituality; Religiosity; Self-Authorship

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The college years are often brimming with opportunities for individuals to contemplate who they are and who they aspire to be—to wrestle with life’s “Big Questions” (Parks, 2000) and determine how they may go on to lead happy, fulfilling lives. Recent studies suggest that the concept of calling may be an especially important consideration for students as they undergo this reflective process, for sense of calling has been found to correlate with higher levels of life meaning (Duffy & Sedalek, 2011; Manuel et al., 2011), satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2011b; Torrey & Duffy, 2012; Praskova et al., 2015), and purpose (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hunter et al., 2010). Despite a better scholarly understanding of the link between calling and certain areas of personal well-being, however, little progress has been made in terms of understanding the forces that influence or predict an initial sense of calling itself.

This gap in the literature is surprising, given that sense of calling has been found to strongly correlate with a host of positive life outcomes. It follows that further investigation into the nature of calling may have especially promising applications for student affairs professionals, whose work is oriented toward helping students achieve such outcomes. To that end, the purpose of this study was to begin taking steps toward understanding which factors may shape a sense of calling in college students, and to what extent.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Definition of Key Terms

In the context of this study, ‘sense of calling’ (or simply, calling) is defined as “a person’s belief that she or he is called upon (by the needs of society, by a person’s own inner potential, by God, by Higher Power, etc.) to do a particular kind of work” (Dik et al., 2012).

Calling

Empirical interest in the topic of calling has increased rapidly over the last decade, particularly within the fields of counseling and organizational psychology (Duffy & Dikb, 2012). This growth in calling-related research has in turn led to a concomitant rise in the number of ways in which the term ‘calling’ is conceptualized, defined, and applied by researchers. Therefore, in order to mitigate any potential ambiguity surrounding the term ‘calling,’ scholars have developed a helpful framework for synthesizing and making sense of the term’s various definitions.

In particular, scholars have observed that definitions of calling tend to fall under one of two broader camps: 1) the neoclassical view of calling or 2) the modern view of calling (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Much of the extant literature on calling is rooted in the neoclassical perspective, which “emphasizes a sense of destiny and duty to contribute to the greater good of the society through work” (Dik & Shimizu, 2019, p.18). As Thompson and Bunderson (2019) note, the neoclassical perspective of calling highlights the “external requiredness” element of calling—the sense of duty, obligation, responsibility that an individual’s calling is derived from.

The modern perspective of calling, on the other hand, emphasizes the “inner requiredness” of a calling—it focuses on “passions, fascination, need, obsession, self-indulgence rather than duty” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019, p.53). In other words, the modern perspective of calling views it as a more individualized, self-fulfilling phenomenon. Under this view, a calling is considered an expression of one’s interests that is pursued for the fulfillment and enjoyment they bring. One’s calling is thus chosen and pursued as a form of personal expression, rather than something that is considered one’s duty or obligation.

Calling and Personal Well-Being

The relationship between calling and personal well-being has recently become a focus of empirical inquiry. For instance, researchers have discovered that having and living out a calling may strongly predict greater life satisfaction (Douglass et al., 2016; Praskova et al., 2014; Hirschi & Hermann, 2012; Hagmaier & Abele, 2015) and meaning (Shin et al., 2018). Calling has also been found correlate with greater psychological wellness (Hall & Chandler, 2005) through its potential protective effect against burnout (Tak et al., 2017; Yoon et al., 2017) and emotional exhaustion (Jager et al., 2017).

Another recent focus in the scholarly literature on calling is the construct's relationship with various career-related gains. For instance, studies have found that endorsing a sense of calling positively correlates with greater job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2012; Rasinski et al., 2012; Steger et al., 2010; Lee, 2016), engagement (Ugwu & Onyishi, 2017), and performance (Kim et al., 2018). Additionally, sense of calling has been found to correlate with higher levels of organizational commitment (Afsar et al., 2019; Rawat & Nadavulekere, 2015) and career adaptability (Douglass & Duffy, 2015).

While great strides have been made in terms of better understanding calling as a construct, there is still more work to be done. In particular, the lack of diversity regarding the directionality of variables in quantitative studies on calling is a critical gap in literature (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Most studies that quantitatively examine sense of calling typically position it as an independent, or predictor, variable—as opposed to a dependent, or outcome, variable—in their analyses (Zhang et al., 2017). Therefore, there exists an imbalance in terms of our shared understanding of calling—while we have gained much insight on the influence that calling may have on other variables, we know little about the possible variables that may influence or impact the initial sense of

calling itself.

Calling and College Student Success

Considering the strong link between calling and personal well-being, then, it follows that calling may potentially serve as a vehicle for promoting student well-being in the college context. Indeed, ample research suggests that calling may help promote college student success; for instance, in a longitudinal study of 292 undergraduate students, Duffy et al. (2014) discovered that calling was a significant predictor of both personal growth initiative and life meaning. In a similar vein, Duffy et al. (2011a) found that calling predicted academic satisfaction among a sample of college students.

Furthermore, recent studies suggest that having a sense of calling is a fairly common phenomenon among college students, in that a sizeable amount of college students report either having or searching for a calling (Duffy et al., 2011b; Dumulescu et al., 2013). For instance, in a study of 295 college students, Hunter et al. (2010) discovered that calling was considered a relevant consideration among 68% of participants. In a similar vein, Narloch (2004) found that 58% of college students sampled viewed calling (or 'vocation') as something they were actively pursuing. Taken together, these findings underscore how prevalent the calling experience—as well as a *desire* for the calling experience—is among college students, and thus why it should remain a topic of concern for student affairs professionals.

Conceptual Framework

As several authors have noted before, research on calling is largely considered "atheoretical" in that there are very few empirically-based theories for researchers to draw from (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Fortunately, the work of Haworth, McCruden, and Roy (2001) helps to fill this gap. These scholars synthesized the literature on calling and identified seven relevant catego-

ries of influences that may potentially affect how students construe the theme of calling during their college years. These categories of influence, or “domains,” include: 1) interpersonal relationships; 2) faith/spirituality; 3) encounters with “other”; 4) personal values; 5) critical life events that contribute to self-definition; 6) self-awareness and understanding of individual passions, gifts, and talents; and 7) developmental issues (Haworth et al., 2001).

As scholars have observed, some of these domains are more difficult to examine through quantitative analysis than others. In particular, the categories of “personal values” and “critical life events that contribute to self-definition” are “woven so tightly into the remaining...domains that it [is] not possible to separate them meaningfully from the others” (Dahlstrand, 2010, p.188). Therefore, these two categories were not included in this study.

Interpersonal Relationships

In Haworth, McCruden, and Roy’s (2001) original framework, this domain refers to the influence that one’s family—specifically, one’s parents—has on the development of one’s calling. However, in order to examine the influence of one’s peer relationships on one’s sense of calling, this study expanded this domain to include both family support and friend support.

Faith/Spirituality

This domain considers how a person’s religious and spiritual beliefs influence their calling development. In the present study, religiosity and spirituality were treated as separate constructs to compare their respective, individual contributions to participants’ sense of calling.

Encounters with “Other”

In Haworth, McCruden, and Roy’s (2001) framework, encounters with “other” generally refers to the interactions one has when they engage in community service. Therefore, in this study, the construct of civic en-

agement behaviors, or the degree to which one is actively involved in their community, was used to capture this particular area of influence.

Self-Awareness and Understanding of Individual Passions, Gifts, and Talents

This area of influence aligns well with the national call for a strengths-based approach to higher education research and practice (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Therefore, strengths self-efficacy, or one’s awareness of and confidence in using their personal strengths, was the construct used to capture this domain.

Developmental Issues

Haworth, McCruden, and Roy (2001) also argue that developmental factors play an important role in how individuals develop a calling. Specifically, the authors cite Marcia Baxter-Magolda’s (1999) writings on self-authorship as a frame of reference; therefore, the construct of self-authorship was used to assess the influence of this particular domain.

The overriding purpose of this study was to determine the influence that these areas have on sense of calling, both individually and when combined together. The author’s work was thus guided by the following research question: *Drawing on Haworth, McCruden, and Roy’s (2001) model, to what extent does spirituality, religiosity, family and friend support, civic engagement, strengths self-efficacy, and self-authorship influence sense of calling in first-year college students?*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Participants included 364 first-year, undergraduate students at a private, mid-sized university in the Southwestern United States. In terms of gender, 67.6% of participants identified as female (n=246) and 30.8% identified as male (n=112). Participants reported a mean age of 18.5, and

53.3% self-identified as White ($n=194$), 17.9% as Hispanic ($n=65$), 14.8% as African American ($n=54$), and 2% as Asian ($n=7$). These demographics mirror those of the institution at which data were collected.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the institution's First-Year Seminar pool. Once IRB approval was obtained, First-Year Seminar instructors were given an anonymous survey link to provide their students. Students were given the link at a single time point (around mid-semester) and had approximately two weeks to complete the survey before the link closed. Participants were not compensated and/or offered any sort of incentive (e.g., course credit) to complete the survey. 386 students initially completed the survey, resulting in an overall response rate of 44.5%. Of the 386 participants who completed the online survey, 364 provided usable data that were included in the study's analysis.

Once the data were determined to meet the four assumptions of normality (Field, 2009), a standard multiple regression was conducted to see how the study's variables related to participants' sense of calling. As Keith (2015) notes, multiple regression analysis uses "multiple independent variables to explain the variation in a dependent variable" (p.18). In the context of this study, sense of calling served as the dependent variable, whereas civic engagement, strengths self-efficacy, friend support, peer support, self-authorship, religiosity, and spirituality served as independent variables. The R-Squared (R^2) value was computed to determine the overall model's contribution to the variance in sense of calling. Additionally, standardized coefficients (β) and unstandardized coefficients (B) were computed to compare the relative influence of each variable in the model. All analyses were performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 25.0 program.

Instruments

For each of the instruments, when a measure used a Likert-type response format of other than six alternatives, the scales were adapted to use a common 6-point format.

Calling

Participants' sense of calling was assessed using the two-item presence of calling subscale in the Brief Calling Scale (BCS; Dik et al., 2012). This scale has previously exhibited excellent psychometric properties and is widely used in calling-related research (Duffy & Dik, 2012). In this instrument, participants are given the following definition of calling: "a person's belief that she or he is called upon (by the needs of society, by a person's own inner potential, by God, by Higher Power, etc.) to do a particular kind of work" (Dik et al., 2012). Participants are then asked to indicate to what degree they believe they possess (or are in search of) a calling. Sample items include "I have a calling to a particular line of work" and "I have a good understanding of my calling as it applies to my career." In this study, the scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .89 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement was measured using the six-item behaviors subscale in Doolittle & Faul's (2013) Civic Engagement Scale (CES). Sample items include "I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in my community" and "I help members of my community." In this study, this scale demonstrated sufficient reliability and had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .89.

Strengths Self-Efficacy

An adapted version of the Strengths Self-Efficacy Scale (SSES; Tsai et al. 2014) was used to measure participants' strengths self-efficacy. Sample items include "I find ways to apply my strengths in the things I do every day" and "I use my strengths to help me achieve the goals in my life." In this

study, this scale demonstrated sufficient reliability and had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .95.

Self-Authorship

Participants' level of self-authorship was measured using an adapted version of Pizzolato's (2007) Self-Authorship Scale (SAS, four items). A sample item includes "When I set a goal for myself, I come up a specific plan of how I'm going to achieve it." Previous studies have demonstrated that the SAS has content validity and reliability (Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). Likewise, in this study, this scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .80 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Spirituality

Participants' spiritual identification was measured using an adapted version of the Spiritual Identification sub-scale from the College Students Beliefs and Values (CSBV; Astin et al., 2011) survey. Sample items include "I consider myself a spiritual person" and "It is important to me to integrate my spirituality into other aspects of my life." In this study, this scale demonstrated sufficient reliability with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .89.

Religiosity

Religiosity was assessed using an adapted version of the Religious Commitment sub-scale from the College Students Beliefs and Values (CSBV; Astin et al., 2011) survey. Sample items include "I consider myself a religious person" and "My religious beliefs have helped me develop my identity." In this study, this scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .94 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Family Support

Participants' perceived family support was measured using five response items developed by the study's author. These items measure the level of psychological support that participants believe that they receive

from their respective family members. Sample items include "My family is very supportive of me" and "I know that I can count on my family in times of need." In this study, this scale demonstrated sufficient reliability and had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .91.

Friend Support

Participants' friend support was assessed using a total of five response items developed by the study's author. These items measure the level of psychological support that participants believe that they receive from their respective friend groups. Sample items include "My friends very supportive of me" and "I know that I can count on my friends in times of need." In this study, this scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .94 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations for all study variables. Bivariate correlations indicated that each of the study variables significantly correlated with sense of calling. Additionally, sense of calling is positively associated with spirituality, friend support, civic engagement, and strengths self-efficacy. In terms of magnitude, strengths self-efficacy had the largest correlation with calling ($r = .51$), followed by civic engagement ($r = .49$). Finally, no problem of multicollinearity was detected as bivariate correlations did not exceed 0.80.

Multiple Regression Results

As shown in Table 2, Regression results indicate that the overall model significantly predicted sense of calling, $R^2 = .371$, adj. $R^2 = .358$, $F(7, 356) = 29.95$, $p < .001$. This model therefore accounts for 37.1% of the variance in sense of calling. Regression results also indicate that three of the seven predictor variables significantly contributed to the overall model: strengths self-efficacy, civic engagement, and spirituality. In terms of magnitude, strengths self-efficacy

Table 1.*Inter-correlations and descriptive statistics*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Mean	SD
1. Calling	1.0								4.70	1.23
2. Spirituality	.26	1.00							4.83	.98
3. Religiosity	-.19	.77	1.00						4.52	1.10
4. Family Support	-.23	.35	.29	1.00					5.40	.88
5. Friend Support	.22	.25	.21	.35	1.00				4.51	.98
6. Civic Engagement	.49	.38	.36	.36	.24	1.00			5.20	.92
7. Strengths SE	.51	.21	.17	.37	.30	.42	1.00		4.90	1.07
8. Self-Authorship	-.22	.23	.20	.29	.19	.38	.51	1.00	4.84	.76

Note. N=364.^a Strengths SE=Strengths Self-Efficacy.*All correlations are significant at the $p < .01$ level.**Table 2.***Multiple regression results for sense of calling*

Variable	B	SE B	β	t
Spirituality	0.21	0.09	0.16	2.36*
Religiosity	-0.12	0.08	-0.11	-1.56
Family Support	-0.07	0.07	-0.05	-0.98
Friend Support	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.59
Civic Engagement	0.49	0.07	0.35	6.82**
Strengths Self-Efficacy	0.51	0.06	0.42	8.01**
Self-Authorship	-0.22	0.09	-0.13	-2.56

Note. N=364.^a $R^2 = .371$.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

had the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = .42$), followed by civic engagement ($\beta = .35$). In other words, for every one standard deviation increase in strengths self-efficacy, there was a .42 standard deviation increase in sense of calling. Similarly, for every one standard deviation increase in civic engagement, there was a .35 standard deviation increase in sense of calling.

DISCUSSION

Many insist that one of the essential tasks of higher education is to prepare students to lead meaningful, satisfying lives. Therefore, understanding the factors that may influence students' meaning and fulfillment in college should remain a priority for both student affairs scholars and practitioners alike. The current study takes an important first step toward addressing this priority by taking a more in-depth look at calling, a construct that has been consistently linked with greater levels of life meaning and satisfaction, in addition to a host of other positive life outcomes. This study aimed to gain a better understanding of the forces that shape a sense of calling in college students, by exploring the relationship between calling and a set of variables as outlined by Haworth, McCrudden, and Roy (2001), namely: religiosity, spirituality, peer support, family support, strengths self-efficacy, civic engagement, and self-authorship.

Findings from the current study reveal that these variables collectively demonstrate significant, medium predictive power for sense of calling. Furthermore, strengths self-efficacy, spirituality, and civic engagement each significantly predicted sense of calling. Somewhat surprisingly, religiosity, family support, and self-authorship each negatively contributed to the overall model, indicating that reporting a higher level of religiosity, family support, or self-authorship may negatively influence the strength of one's sense of calling.

This study offers important contributions that can be brought into the fold of student affairs research and practice. In the

following sections, the author will outline directions for future research, as well as practical implications of the study's findings.

Implications for Future Research

The results of the current study offer many potential research directions to be explored. Firstly, continuing to explore the seven domains of influence outlined in Haworth, McCrudden, and Roy's (2001) framework is a fruitful venue for future research. In future studies, student affairs researchers should continue to delve deeper into these seven domains, focusing on the areas that are specifically developed during the college experience. For instance, when considering the domain of interpersonal relationships, it might be beneficial for future researchers to measure how sense of calling is influenced by interpersonal relationships that students develop during the college years (e.g., relationships with college faculty and student affairs staff).

Secondly, because the data collected for this study were cross-sectional, causal relations could not be determined. Therefore, future research should examine the relation of the study's variables longitudinally so that causal relations can be established. For instance, conducting a longitudinal cohort study on a sample of college students in which data are collected at multiple time-points would allow student affairs researchers to trace the development of students' callings during the college years. Additionally, such research would highlight which factors potentially motivate and or mitigate this development. Similarly, employing randomized clinical trial methodology to measure sense of calling in students before and after receiving some sort of calling-centric treatment (e.g., attending on-campus calling-exploration programming or receiving calling-centric counseling) would allow researchers to measure the effectiveness of institutional efforts to promote calling discernment and development in students.

Implications for Current Practice

Findings from this study can also be used to improve student affairs practice. Firstly, one of the most striking findings from this study is the significant influence that self-knowledge—specifically, self-knowledge in the form of awareness of and belief in one's strengths—has on first-year college students' sense of calling. This finding corroborates the work of other calling researchers; for instance, Shin et al. (2018) discovered that their study's participants were able to understand their life callings through in-depth self-exploration.

This finding indicates that student affairs administrators who aim to promote calling exploration and discernment among students should be intentional about creating on-campus opportunities and spaces that allow for students to learn more about their strengths and gain confidence in applying those strengths in various contexts. To assist student affairs professionals in applying this type of strengths-based approach to serving students, measures such as the *Clifton Strengths for Students* (formerly *StrengthsQuest*; Gallup, 2017) have been developed. Such assessments help students identify their strengths and provide them with a common language to classify and apply those strengths.

Secondly, this study brings to light the predictive relationship between students' civic engagement and sense of calling. Therefore, administrators who aim to help students develop their callings may find it beneficial to create opportunities for students to become more engaged in their local communities. Examples of these types of opportunities include implementing on- and off-campus community service projects, integrating volunteer work into student leadership roles and requirements, and encouraging participation in student governance.

Finally, this study confirmed how prevalent the experience of having a calling is among first-year, undergraduate students; nearly 69% of participants in the study's sample reported a moderate-to-strong

sense of calling. The practical implication of this finding is that, if student affairs professionals aim to help students in discerning their callings, they must acknowledge that those who work closely with students (e.g., academic advisors, faculty members, career counselors) should be comfortable in using calling-centric language during their interactions. In order to foster this type of comfort and practice, it is recommended that administrators provide professional development opportunities that allow for faculty and staff to reflect on and share their own calling-related experiences. The upshot of this type of training is that participants are then able to share their calling-related experiences with other members of the campus community, thus stimulating the campus discourse on calling and its role in a person's life journey.

Limitations

The results of this study need to be taken with a number of limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted solely of first-year undergraduate students from a single university and was mostly white and female. It is therefore critical that future research on calling draws from a more diverse pool of individuals to establish the generalizability of these findings, as well as to better understand the interplay between sociodemographic characteristics and calling. Secondly, the cross-sectional data collected in this study make it impossible to establish causal relationships between the study's constructs. Thirdly, the study's conceptual framework was adapted so that only four of Haworth, McCrudden, and Roy's (2001) original seven domains were examined in this study. Finally, all of the data used in the present study were generated using self-reported measures, so little can be determined about how sense of calling might be influenced in observable, objective ways during the first year of college.

CONCLUSION

Although recent scholarship has shed new light on the link between sense of call-

ing and personal well-being, few studies have investigated which factors influence or predict an initial sense of calling itself—much less during the college years. This study therefore contributes to the scholarly literature on student affairs by highlighting the relevance of certain factors in predicting sense of calling in a sample of 364 first-year undergraduate students. Guided by the work of Haworth, McCrudden, and Roy (2001), findings from this study convey the significant influence that students' strengths self-efficacy, civic engagement, and spirituality have on sense of calling. This study thus provides a launching pad for future research on calling and its potential role within the domain of student affairs practice.

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