

## Vocation During College: Practice in the Present

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Christian college students have some concern for vocation, though typically with a limited understanding of what that means. Christian faculty can help students reframe that concern in terms of a more complete framework. Doing so in a way that brings students' practice of vocation into the present has immediate benefits not just in their understanding of vocation but also in their understanding of education.

### The nature of vocation

Lee Hardy has called for restoring the breadth and depth associated with *vocation* in the early Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Most use of the term *vocation* has narrowed it to paid occupation. Hardy points out that each of us is subject to not one but a variety of particular callings, corresponding to our various roles and obligations. Paid occupation may be among those callings, but the relationship between employment and calling can vary greatly. In addition, we have missed the depth associated with vocation by failing to link it to the work of God. That link is more evident if we substitute the plainer word *calling*: it makes no sense to speak of a call without acknowledging the Caller. Hardy points out that the language of particular vocation (calling) was originally intended to express the understanding that the believer's day-to-day work and responsibilities are part of God's activity in the world to serve those around us.

There is a third dimension in which we often truncate our understanding of vocation, especially as it relates to the college years: we speak of the search for our one true calling ("what God wants me to do with my life") as if it were a one-time decision. College students commonly look at choosing a major as a step toward choosing a career that they will pursue in "real life" after college. Even if we make the mistake of narrowing vocation to career, we have to concede that career choice is not a one-time event: many writers have noted that in the contemporary climate most individuals should expect to make several career changes over the course of his or her working life. The dynamic nature of God's call should be even more evident if our understanding is appropriately broad and deep. The several particular callings to which each of us is subject at a given time arise in part from the circumstances (including relationships) in which we find ourselves. Changes in our circumstances can give rise to changed or altogether new callings.

The multiplicity of callings can also be described in terms of the Christian's ministry in different areas of life. Robert Slocum frames his discussion of lay ministry in terms of having a *developing heart*, a concept that he develops in some detail.<sup>2</sup> Slocum describes four spheres of

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<sup>1</sup> These comments are based on Lee Hardy's retreat presentation, "Deep and Wide: Recapturing the Concept of Vocation." He develops similar ideas in *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*, especially around pages 85–87 and 112–113.

<sup>2</sup> Slocum argues that in scripture *heart* is a broader idea than in common usage. He devotes a chapter to each of five dimensions of heart: volitional, emotional, ethical, intellectual, and spiritual (*Maximize Your Ministry: How You as a*

life (church, family, work, and government/society), concluding that if we have a developing heart, “When we step into each arena, we must ask what it means to be Christ’s person in that place.”<sup>3</sup> We can express this question in the language of vocation as “To what service is Christ calling me in this setting?” The developing heart, then, is characterized by a habitual sensitivity to this question of calling, and so we see that vocation—discerning and responding to God’s call—must have its foundation in a habit of the heart.

### **College and “real life”**

The misunderstanding of vocation identified here corresponds to a misunderstanding of the nature of education. It is commonplace to contrast college with “the real world,” viewing the former as a time and place for acquiring skills and techniques for future use in the latter. The split between college and real world is often described in terms that suggest that the student spends the college years building up an apparatus that remains inactive until graduation, when he or she expects to throw the switch and finally put all of the learning into action.

Education, however, is not just the transfer of knowledge and skills. The tradition of liberal education emphasizes that education is about the formation of persons, including attitudes and habits. Even professional education (in which students may be especially focused on knowledge and skills) can be framed in terms of formation, for gaining expertise can be conceived in terms of *becoming* an expert. Becoming an expert must include developing the habits and attitudes of a good practitioner. Both skill and habit are not learned by *study about*, but by *practice of*. We need, then, to communicate to our students—both explicitly and via the manner of our courses—the broad educational perspective that “real life” has already begun, and that the college years are time to practice the habits needed after graduation.

### **Vocation during college**

Most students arrive at college with vocation—in at least a shrunken form—already on their agenda, in the form of questions about selection of major or career. Faculty have a chance to address these questions, especially in orientation courses and as advisers; in doing so, we need to go beyond the questions students are asking to make the case for a fuller understanding of vocation. Students expect to spend at least part of their college years working out their vocation. Good teaching about vocation will make it clear that this “working out” will be a life-long practice. What the student is doing now is developing a set of habits to continue after graduation.

In addition, if vocation is an ongoing process, then each student must ask the question of what his or her calling is *now*, as a student. A call is discerned in circumstances, and the college student—especially the full-time, traditional undergraduate—is in some special circumstances. When college is viewed through the lens of vocation, the question of “what kind of person Christ would have me be in this place” suggests that a careful stewardship of the opportunities that are peculiar to college, especially the opportunities for learning. To the degree that college is a time of preparation, the student should view that preparation as God’s work of preparation for service

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*Lay Person Can Impact Your World for Jesus Christ*, pages 88–162).

<sup>3</sup> *Maximize Your Ministry*, page 172.

that He has not yet revealed. The change to a perspective of stewardship and of listening for calls in unexpected directions has the potential to transform the perception of unwelcome constraints (such as degree requirements) into blessed opportunities.

This represents a fundamental shift in approach to vocation. What was a question for the college years about what to do after graduation has been transformed into a habit to begin practicing now, and which will continue beyond graduation.

### **Branching out: college as real life**

As we guide students to a deeper understanding of vocation, this shift provides us with a chance to further transform their attitude about their college education. If one needs to begin practicing in the present the life-long habit of attentiveness to God's calling, what does that say about other habits one will need after college? Making this question explicit opens a breach in the assumed wall between college and "real life." By how they live and work during college, students are learning habits and attitudes that will persist in life after college.

Some extra care may be required in order to bring the sense of real life all the way into the classroom. We all have a tendency to partition our lives, and one way to deal with bringing vocation into the present is to shift it from the compartment labelled "school and work" to the one labelled "spiritual." Students at a Christian college likely encounter plenty of encouragement to think of spiritual matters, including practices and habits, as matters to cultivate in the present.

But vocation is a special opportunity to integrate college and later life precisely because it cuts across such boundaries, integrating the spiritual with the everyday. Addressing vocation in the context of ordinary academic courses brings the formation of habits and attitudes *by current practice* into direct contact with the work in those courses. Vocation brings into view the fact that students are establishing patterns—learning habits—by their current practices, and that the habits they are now establishing will remain with them after graduation. This is an excellent opportunity for faculty to draw students' attention to the formative nature of their college education.

This broader view of education clearly allows students to get more out of their college experience in the long term. But we have noted that there are immediate benefits for students when they discern their present calling as students, and there are short-term benefits to this broadened perception of education as well. The awareness that they are forming enduring habits with respect to work gives students some additional motivation for self-discipline in managing their time and assignments. The abundant spiritual, service, and social activities that compete with academics for students' time provide an excellent opportunity for the careful practice of vocational integration—the need to balance our multiple callings.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Teaching our students about vocation provides us as faculty with a wonderful opportunity to help

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<sup>4</sup> *The Fabric of This World*, pages 111–118.

them gain a richer understanding of their educational experience. Vocation bridges the gap between faith and everyday life. Bringing the practice of vocation into the present provides a way to connect the college experience with the rest of life in a way that benefits our students in the short term as well as long.

*To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfill;  
O may it all my powers engage  
To do my Master's will*  
— Charles Wesley