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First-Year Students' Perception of Vocation at a Private Faith-Based Liberal Arts Institution

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FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF VOCATION AT A

PRIVATE FAITH-BASED LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTION

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A thesis

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Jonathan D. Rupp

May 2014

Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL
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MASTER'S THESIS
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This is to certify that the thesis of

Jonathan David Rupp

entitled

First-Year Students' Perception of Vocation at a
Private Faith-Based Liberal Arts Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree in
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May 2014

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Abstract

The current study surveyed 100 first-year students in order to answer the research question, "What are the perceptions of vocation of first-year students at a private faith-based liberal arts institution?" The study ultimate aimed to use the findings to assist career development professionals in planning programs that foster students' discovery of their career aspirations and life purpose. A review of the literature revealed a gap regarding the perceptions of vocation among first-year students and how a private faith-based liberal arts institution can better support students' vocational aspirations. The study utilized a modified grounded research theory qualitative design, which enabled the identification of themes through the analysis of student responses. The researcher selected the methods to achieve a more accurate theoretical sampling of the first-year students' understanding of vocation by allowing their voices to drive the results. The participants received twenty-five minutes to respond to the following questions: "How would you describe your understanding of the idea of vocation?" and "How do you believe attending this university will impact your sense of vocation, calling, and/or life's purpose?" The researcher read, analyzed, and categorized the essays into themes that emerged from the participants' responses. Seven themes emerged from each question. The primary finding of question one indicated that 90% of the participants viewed vocation as "a calling." In response to question two, the predominant theme showed that students desired encouragement from their university community to develop their self-awareness and career path. The results of this study reflected the critical role of career

development professionals—as well as the high expectations that students have of their

institutions—to offer students support in discovering their career aspirations and life

purpose. Future research could include the development of a survey instrument and

quantitative analysis in order to gain a more precise understanding of students

understanding of vocation.

Acknowledgements

After receiving my undergraduate degree, I never once considered pursuing additional education. However, eight years later, I am now married to my gorgeous wife, have a delightfully charming son, and have held numerous successful careers, lived in four states, and helped start a church... and now I am completing a master's degree in higher education. Though eight years is short in the scope of a lifetime, the trials I have endured during the pursuit of this degree have been unimaginable. However, because of them I have been afforded an irreplaceable, unforgettable achievement.

The birth of my son only five months into the journey of this two-year long program was the beginning of the most challenging and devastating chapter of my life. While beginning my second semester (of four), I learned that my newborn son had a congenital heart defect and wouldn't survive without immediate surgery. Within nine hours of my son's first open-heart operation, he went into cardiac arrest. He was revived after 45 minutes of CPR and chest compressions, but his survival rate dropped from 70% to 40%. After six operations, numerous other procedures, four hospitals, and eight months in various pediatric ICUs, my son came home just in time for the start of my third semester. Miraculously, he survived, and somehow I kept up in my studies.

I demand no personal credit in this accomplishment but instead dedicate this thesis to all those who helped make this improbable accomplishment possible. God was my strength, my wife was my rock, my family and friends were my encouragement, and

my professors were ambassadors of grace. Beckett, my son: you were my driving force, my motivation when I wanted to give up. Thank you for never giving up on us and for teaching your father what it means to be strong. May I live life with an understanding of my vocation, my calling—and may I also teach you to find and pursue the purpose for which God restored your life. One day at a time.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Student affairs educators seek to better understand how to properly equip students to navigate and benefit from their college experience. This ongoing process requires an understanding of best practices beneficial to students (Feenstra, 2011). Consistent interaction with students and awareness of relevant research enables student development professionals to improve their methods, systems, and procedures (Eldridge, 2010).

Students often pursue a college degree in order to achieve their vocational goals (Adams, 2012). A university's career counseling department exists in large part to support students in the identification and pursuit of a career (Feenstra, 2011). To prepare students for changing careers and evolving occupational demands necessitates having an accurate understanding of students' perceptions of vocation. If this perception remains unknown or misunderstood, career development professionals cannot properly support or advise the student in this realm (Hunter, Dik, & Banning, 2010).

Students begin their college experience with many preconceptions (Feenstra, 2011). A student's perception, accurate or not, becomes internalized as truth. One can reasonably conclude that, if identified early in the college experience, such perceptions will become more easily influenced and supported. Thus, helping students to gain more accurate understandings of vocation likely will yield beneficial results. At the same time, when career development professionals have a better grasp of students' understandings of

vocation, they become better equipped to support students in their vocational development.

Terminology

The current study uses several key terms that bear definition. Though the literature consistently uses these industry-standard terms, clarifying the specific terminology used in this study may prove of help to the reader. The researcher also carefully defined terms for all research participants.

Career services professional/career development department. Career services professionals frequently hold the title of career counselor or a career development professional. The present study uses these various terms interchangeably throughout. Additionally, while using many different names for career services departments; within this study, most universities primarily refer to them as career development departments.

Vocation/calling. "Vocation" stems from the Latin word *vocare*, which means "to call, to voice, or to vocalize" (Scott, 2007, p. 263). The current study uses the term "vocation" to convey an understanding of one's calling rather than general employment. In some instances, the term may also specifically refer to a "call from God" (Scott, 2007, p. 264).

Barriers to Facilitating Accurate Perceptions of Vocation

Evolving culture, naturally assumed perceptions, and an absence of an assessment procedure contribute to a lack of helpful evaluations of student perceptions of vocation (Holland, Johnston, & Asama, 1993; Phillips, 2011). First, ever-evolving culture remains a primary factor. As culture continues to evolve and new jobs emerge through natural innovation, a university's career development department must intentionally adapt to this

inevitable change (Adams, 2012; Feenstra, 2011). Moreover, first-year students continue to adapt and progress alongside their generation (Feenstra, 2011). Without adaptive programming, career development departments quickly lose relevance and effectiveness.

Students' preconceptions of the subject provide another barrier to facilitating accurate perceptions of vocation. A student may consider vocation as merely a job or, alternately, as an opportunity to live out God-given abilities through employment. All students have some general understanding of what vocation means to them, whether that understanding appears well-developed, inaccurately assumed, or perhaps slightly ignorant. In order to unpack these preconceived notions of vocation and support first-year students' vocational paths, career development departments must create relevant, tailored strategies (Adams, 2012; Eldridge, 2010; Holland et al., 1993; Hunter et al., 2010; Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2010).

In most private faith-based institutions, first-year students represent a variety of perspectives (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2010). Students may come from different cultural, socio-economic, denominational, and even religious backgrounds. Higher education institutions must frequently assess these backgrounds to accurately track any developing trends (Feenstra, 2011), for these various backgrounds play a key role in forming the preconceptions of vocation with which students enter college. Colleges and universities must also address preconceptions early on. Because a student's college experience proves highly formative, facilitating accurate perceptions of vocation toward the beginning of their experience can likewise prove greatly effective and beneficial (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2010). In upperclassmen, these benefits may manifest as a

more accurate ownership of their vocational goals, greater pride in coursework, a strategic pursuit of employment, and a more accurate understanding of vocation.

Finally, a third barrier to accurate perceptions of vocation comes with a shortage of assessments evaluating those perceptions. Assessments provide the data needed for career development departments to craft adaptive programming and tailored strategies. When conducted frequently, internal qualitative studies help analyze generational progressions and perceptions, and properly analyzed assessments reveal effective methods to support students' vocational goals and objectives. This assessment must become an emphasis in any university's career counseling department that desires to successfully support students in this rapidly changing society.

Purpose of the Research

The present study aimed to explore, track, and implement effective questions administered to first-year students with the intent to better assess and support career development departments' challenge of addressing students' preconceived notions towards vocation. Regardless of students' specific perceptions, an understanding of them becomes critical to properly evaluate and address students in their unique levels and types of vocational aspirations. Without an understanding, career counselors lack proper discernment to accurately support students with their career counseling needs.

Research Question

The current study sought to answer the question, "What are the perceptions of vocation of first-year students at a private faith-based liberal arts institution?"

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Vocation in Higher Education

The development of vocational aspirations appears commonly understood as a primary goal of higher education. While potentially very difficult to facilitate as it involves many different facets, an institution's curriculum and teaching methods, mentorship programs, and career development departments all play an integral role in supporting students' vocational development.

Curriculum and teaching. An institution's curriculum can prove highly influential in the development of students' perceptions of vocation. To encourage faculty to better incorporate vocational issues into their disciplinary courses, numerous incentives—such as faculty grants—have emerged (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007). The following titles exemplify these types of vocationally integrated courses: "Women, Work, and Calling in the Organized Church," "Christian Faith and the Engineering Profession," "Let Your Life Speak: Social Justice Vocation Symposium" and "Exploratory Studies and Vocational Discernment" (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p. 36).

However, vocationally influenced curriculums have not integrated as seamlessly as faculty hoped. According to VanZanten Gallagher (2007), "Assisting students to think about vocational issues is radically different from what most faculty members have been

equipped to do in the graduate programs that trained them" (p. 36). Within revised curriculums, the research has shown the need for alternative ways of teaching that raise thoughtful questions and challenge purpose and direction (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007). Parks (2000) agrees to the crucial function of thoughtful questions. These questions, interlaced with alternative teaching styles, have indirectly influenced the realm of vocational mentorship (Parks, 2000; VanZanten Gallagher, 2007).

Mentorship. Much as presenting challenging questions in the classroom has positive effects, using strategic questions within mentoring relationships also becomes crucial in effectively cultivating critical thinking, which in turn inspires students to formulate their own larger questions about the universe and, more applicably, their participation within it (Parks, 2000). Parks (2000) defined mentorship as "an intentional, mutually demanding, and meaningful relationship between two individuals, a young adult and an older, wiser figure who assists the younger person in learning the ways of life" (p. 127). Mentorship not only provides positive intrinsic outcomes for a student's vocational support but often proves the most effective tool a career development professional can use with higher education students concerning their vocational needs (Gore & Carter, 2011; VanZanten Gallagher, 2007). As college students search for meaning and direction, some directly and some indirectly, mentoring relationships provide support, challenge, and inspiration and mentors should prepare "to be present in ways that invite more learning and becoming" (Parks, 2000, p. 128).

Despite high encouragement for one-on-one interventions, mentorship can manifest itself in several forms—for example, by way of mentoring communities. This concept functions as a collaborative effort in which faculty and advisers become the most

influential facilitators of vocational and faith development within a college student's life (Parks, 2000). These collective efforts, focused on vocational development, establish a viable framework on which career counseling departments can confidently build.

Career services professional support. The university's career counseling department serves as another institutional tool designed to support vocational development. These offices have become by-and-large held most responsible for—and have become considered as the frontlines of—a university's strategy to adequately support the vocational development of each student.

Career development departments have many methods of providing support, including so-called career interventions. According to Gore and Carter (2011),

> Career counselors and educators have questioned (or been questioned about) the effectiveness of their work for a century. Fortunately, today there exists a growing body of literature that not only established the effectiveness of a broad range of career interventions, but also offers some guidance on the form and substance of the most effective interventions. (p. 13)

Career interventions generally emerge as "interventions designed to promote career development" (Gore & Carter, 2011, p. 4). More specifically, Spokane and Oliver (1983) defined career interventions as "any treatment or effort intended to enhance an individual's career development or to enable the person to make better career-related decisions" (p. 100). Krumboltz (1996) described career interventions as career education, school-to-work initiatives, job clubs, simulations such as job shadowing and internships, counseling, and psychotherapy.

Though variously defined, career interventions seem generally understood as assisting students to discover and explore their vocational potential. Of the four primary meta-analyses on career interventions in comparison to non-treatment control conditions, each overwhelmingly supports the consistent utilization of career interventions within higher education (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Oliver & Spokane, 1998; Spokane & Oliver, 1983; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998).

In addition, research has disclosed five critical components institutions should weave into their current career development programs and services. The first suggests written exercises, which encourage students' career choices and, significantly, the implementation of those choices (Gore & Carter, 2011). Brown et al. (2003) stated that written exercise appears most effective when it involves occupational comparisons, future planning, and goal setting. Secondly, current literature suggests the critical need for individualized interpretation and feedback (Gore & Carter, 2011). In general, this feedback refers to a "formal and informal career assessment [strategy]" (Gore & Carter, 2011, p. 8). Hildenbrand and Gore (2005) explained that first-year seminars must frequently include discussion and feedback of career-related interests.

The next suggestion seems straightforward yet exceptionally effective: make occupational information readily available (Gore & Carter, 2011). Consistent role modeling offers a fourth practice of a successful strategy (Gore & Carter, 2011). "Practitioners should think of modeling opportunities more broadly and concentrate on experiences and processes with which their students are currently struggling" (Gore & Carter, 2011, p. 9). Lastly, intentional support-building among academic, social, and personal structures needs to become "explicitly available and all the more utilized" (Gore

& Carter, 2011, p. 10). The more easily available these structural supports appear to students, the more likely students will utilize these resources in systematic ways (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). Gore and Carter (2011) described in great detail these aforementioned strategies and concluded their research with the challenge that this "information is critical to not only understand but to implement" (p. 10).

As seen in the research, vocation in higher education proves not only a substantial component of a student's experience but also a pressing concern of the university itself—one that institutions seek to address through a variety of methods, including curriculum and teaching, mentorship programming, and their career services departments. Current literature offers many promising, effective solutions to maximize vocational support within higher education. However, vocational support proves complex due to the influence on students' perceptions of vocation by a variety of factors, including the role one's religion and faith may play in vocation, as examined below.

Vocation and Faith

Within the discussion of vocation in higher education, a dialogue addresses the connection between vocation and faith. In some ways, the search for vocation becomes the search for the meaning of life. According to Guinness (2003), "the notion of calling, or vocation, is vital to each of us because it touches on the modern search towards a basis for individual identity and an understanding of humanness itself" (p. 20). Unsurprisingly, faith remains central to a discussion of vocation for some. Vocation and faith merge in a frequently quoted expression from writer and theologian Buechner (1992): "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (p. 189). Also, abundant literature discusses the connections among one's calling,

subjective vocation, and personal faith. This ideology of vocation and faith has divided into three sections that encompass a general overview of the literature related to this topic: primary and secondary call, using gifts and talents, and college support.

Primary call and secondary call. Many authors who address vocation from a faith perspective distinguish between primary and secondary callings. Importantly, faith may serve as the key to understanding both callings. A clear distinction between these two concepts ideally leads to understanding how the literature approaches this subject.

Primary call. Guinness (2003) argued that "there is no calling unless there is a Caller" (p. 20)—namely, God. Guinness distinguished between God's primary call as one "to be" and the secondary call as one "to do." The primary call appears universal, that is, in this framework, [every]one's calling remains to follow Jesus Christ (Guinness, 2003; Schultze, 2005; Schwehn & Bass, 2006). "Answering the call of our Creator is 'the ultimate why' for living, the highest source of purpose in human existence. Apart from such a calling, all hope of discovering purpose will end in disappointment" (Guinness, 2003, p. 4). This paradigm initiates when one fully integrates God's call into every area of life. However, one's primary call does not come in one's work or career.

Interestingly, even a secular framework observes that one's calling "is empty and indistinguishable from work unless there is 'Someone who calls'" (Guinness, 2003, p. 37). Guinness (2003) commented that

> one contemporary bestseller argues—admirably—that we need to "make a life, not just a living," and that to do this we need to inject "values and vocation" back into the world of work. Within such a "new paradigm," the book claims, work can become "a vehicle for transformation," personally and socially. (p. 37)

While not all ascribe to a Christian worldview or even a religious belief system, the concept of a primary call seems more broadly applicable and resonates with a variety of individuals as a sense of calling to a special or higher purpose.

Secondary call. One can understand a secondary call, or one's vocation, from multiple perspectives. Drew (2007) described it as "calling to self-discovery—to the faithful and joyful expression of who I am" (p. 34). Others including Schultze (2005) and Schwehn and Bass (2006) referred to one's secondary calling as a "station," a place where people are called to serve. Quoted by Schwehn and Bass (2006), Martin Luther described these stations as anything, including the responsibilities of a "parent, child, citizen, parishioner, and so on" (p. 92) and like a primary call, need not manifest solely as a traditional job. Schwehn and Bass (2006) explained:

> I may not have a paid occupation. But that doesn't mean I have no calling in life.
>
> ... Indeed all of us have, at any one time, a number of vocations—and only one of
>
> them might be pursued as a paid occupation. (p. 92)

Drew (2007) reiterated that "secondary calling can relate to career, but it is not the same thing" (p. 34). Though healthy to acknowledge one's station in a non-paid occupation, many stations do receive pay as a job or career in the traditional sense.

Guinness (2003) warned that, all too easily, the secondary calling distracts from the primary: "the greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Him…The one aim of the call of God is the satisfaction of God, not a call to do something for Him" (p. 41). To keep the primary call focused on one's devotion to Jesus proves crucial. One must view the secondary call as a complementary calling, not one that supersedes the primary call (Drew, 2007; Guinness, 2003).

Greater purpose: Utilizing gifts and talents. Vocational ideals as a child become misplaced as forces outside of a person's control mold his or her identity (Palmer, 2000). For example, Palmer (2000) argues that "this economy makes demands on us even as it sustains our lives. We are here not only to transform the world but also to be transformed" (p. 97). Like Peterson (2011), who considers his pastoral vocation more than a job, many may resonate with the 2000 statement by Palmer: "I wanted more than a job. I wanted deeper confluence between my inner and outer life" (p. 37).

When inspired by Buechner's quote of a vocation as "'the place God calls you to…where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet' [then that person] will discover ways to serve the common good rather than to be driven by status and salary" (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p. 34-35). Fowler (2003) summarized the concept thus:

> There is a calling for each of us in which our gifts and abilities intersect with the needs and challenges of God's purposes for life. Life, with a capital L. We intuit, we discern, and we come to understand, that our deepest happiness has something to do with finding ways to use our gifts and opportunities to contribute to the health, vitality, and viability of life in this Creation of which we are a part. (p. 17)

And so Fowler (2003) answered the question "How can one find his or her vocation?": "*In commune per vocatione*—in community through your vocation: This means finding a purpose for *your* life that is part of the purposes of God" (p. 19).

College support. In terms of vocation and faith, "colleges and universities are doing little either to help students explore such issues or to support their search in the sphere of values and beliefs" (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p. 32). However, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2010) explain that

to ignore the spiritual side of students' and faculty's lives is to encourage a kind

of fragmentation and a lack of authenticity, where students and faculty act either

as if they are not spiritual beings, or as if their spiritual side is irrelevant to their

vocation or work. Within such an environment, academic endeavors can become

separated from students' most deeply felt values, and students may hesitate to

discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, and wholeness with each other

and especially with faculty. (p. 7)

However, some private colleges and universities address the connection, with their efforts

currently encouraged and rewarded by programs such as the Lilly Endowment's

Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) "which helps 'provide a

variety of strategies on which any institution—either private or public—can draw in

designing programs to address the issue of vocation'" (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p.

33). This program has presented a great opportunity for universities to rethink their stance

of vocational development, specifically as it relates to values, beliefs, and faith.

By studying and better understanding a first-year student's experience, institutions

can begin to effectively support vocational aspirations from the ground up through faith

development and strategic implementation.

First-Year Experience

The first year of college for a traditional campus-based student remains a critical

transition point to support as he or she moves from a dependent high school setting to a

more independent setting within higher education (Skipper, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, &

Barefoot, 2004; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Ambitions can appear high as

many students arrive eager to take full advantage of their experience. Take Emily, a first-semester student, for example:

> I want to use and abuse this school to the fullest. I want to experience everything this institution has to offer. I do not believe my college experience would be the same if I don't. I want to make this the best four years of my life and getting a hand in everything I possibly can is the only way I know how to. (as cited in Upcraft et al., 2004, p. 86)

Though some students may exemplify an attitude similar to Emily's, according to Upcraft et al. (2004), many

> students tend to come to college with 'extrinsic' motivations to learn that are based on their desire to pass and receive a good grade and get a better job. The task of the college is to shift them to an 'intrinsic' desire to learn from self-betterment. (p. 254)

The following section breaks down a student's first-year experience into categories identified in the related literature.

Development. The first-year of college for a student "is actually a time when prior patterns and priorities become more deeply habituated," stated Clydesdale (2008), "rather than being a time when behavior patterns and life priorities are reexamined and altered" (p. 15). Not surprisingly, a student's experience prior to college has a substantial impact on their overall development. In fact, Clydesdale (2008) claimed that "what differentiates [college students] is not the colleges they attend, but rather their family, faith, and community starting points" (p. 15). However, though students begin their

experience with predetermined patterns and priorities, they do not become necessarily immune to developmental strategies with either positive or negative influence.

Positive influence. Positive and influential developmental strategies may include both curricular and extracurricular initiatives. Many studies show positive correlations between in-class and outside-of-class programs and initiatives. These initiatives prove important for institutions to maintain and implement as many provide support for

> major developmental issues facing students as they enter college, including
>
> developing feelings of intellectual and academic competence, establishing and
>
> maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity, making decision about
>
> career, considering issues of faith and spirituality, and developing civic
>
> responsibility. (Skipper, 2005, p. 4)

Though the above does not provide an exhaustive list of developmental issues, a balanced and collaborative effort of both in-class and outside-of-class initiatives remains advisable to minimize and assist students through these various issues (Skipper, 2005).

Many institutions have begun to adopt in-class initiatives—often referred to as academic interventions—in the form of first-year seminars, learning communities, and service-learning opportunities (Skipper, 2005). Of these, first-year seminars appear most extensively studied due to their increasing effectiveness among students, especially as regards vocational discussion (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007). Many of the courses focus on self-exploration and personal development, even though most have reported a goal of improved academic skills (Cox, 2005). Learning communities also exist as another encouraged academic intervention (Skipper, 2005). These communities have proven to increase the likelihood that a student will remain in college because of connections made

in support groups and friendships beyond the classroom setting (Tinto, n. d.). Finally, service-learning opportunities (Skipper, 2005) afford students with improved academic performance, increased commitment to personal values, greater fulfillment of overall college experience, and even additional networking opportunities with both faculty and other students (Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002). These initiatives, at their core, function as "in-class" programs due to their use in the curriculum.

Though significant impact appears through these developmental initiatives, extracurricular involvement also has meaningful impact on first-year student learning and overall development. However, "not all extracurricular activities are created equal"; some have created a reputation for continuous positive impact, whereas others remain ambiguous (Skipper, 2005, p. 7). The unclear options include memberships and involvement with Greek organizations (Skipper, 2005). Though such organizations have deep traditional roots and can "lead to gains in practical competence…[their] impact on interpersonal and intrapersonal competence is unclear" (p. 7). However, residence life, which oversees on-campus student living, has emerged as a extracurricular activity with positive impact; it "has long been associated with increased satisfaction and retention of college students, but it also has a positive impact on student development" (p. 7).

Engagement in service remains yet another extracurricular activity encouraged for first-year students as they "lead to gains in cognitive complexity and practical competence" (p. 7). Lastly, "participating in diversity experiences leads to gains in cognitive complexity; humanitarianism; and interpersonal, intrapersonal, and practical competence" (p. 7). The ideas mentioned above do not provide an exhaustive list of extracurricular activities supported by all institutions but rather an overview of a few

outside-class initiatives regularly explored and implemented by many colleges and universities. Also worth note, in addition to these positive influential factors, students also constantly feel bombarded by negative influential factors.

Negative influence. Institutions have always battled the unwelcome opposition of negative influences that compete for their students' attention. These negative developmental factors include current cultural influence (Smith & Snell, 2009). According to Clydesdale (2008), "the impact of popular American moral culture on the first-year out is […] substantial" (p. 4). Culture fails first-year students by leaving them "lacking in conviction or direction" in addition to not having "larger visions of what is true and real and good, in both the private and public realms" (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 294). Lack of conviction can then lead to increased sexual activity, greed, and drug and alcohol abuse (Clydesdale, 2008; Smith & Snell, 2009). Acceptance of mainstream culture forms students' identities, when instead, institutions should form culture by inspiring students to redeem it (Clydesdale, 2008; Schultze, 2005).

This negative development can reverse but will require "student-centered activities and a change in the learning environment" (Upcraft et al., 2004, p. 244). When a student's ingrained patterns and priorities become understood, a shift can take place, allowing professors to become more aware of student learning styles and stages of intellectual development. However, according to Upcraft et al. (2004), this understanding must join with a student's active involvement "in all stages of the learning process: setting learning goals, acquiring information, connecting to what they already know, organizing it in long-term memory, and identifying circumstances for retrieval and application in new situations" (p. 254)—some of the responsibility lies with the student:

Students need to work harder and take advantage of more of the learning

opportunities colleges and universities offer. Institutions need to hold students

accountable for meeting mutually espoused standards of performance. We simply

must do better at converting good intentions into educationally purposeful action.

(Upcraft et al., 2004, p. 106)

As Chickering and Gamson (1987) argued, "Expect more and you will get more" (p. 5).

Before one can fully understand and relate to first-year college students, a

theoretical framework should exist (Skipper, 2005). Positive and negative developmental

influences will always exist, but to maximize a student's college experience should

always remain the goal. This perspective, when fully employed and interpreted within a

theoretical lens, will increase the quality of graduates who will serve the common good in

step with their individual calling (Skipper, 2005; VanZanten Gallagher, 2007).

Theoretical Lens

One should perceive the theories addressed as general descriptors, as "it is

important to acknowledge that they do not illuminate the realities of all—or perhaps even

most—of the students on college campuses today" (Skipper, 2005, p. 10). Commonly

recognized theorists in this area include Chickering, Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan

(Skipper, 2005). Though their theories help provide a deeper understanding of a student's

development throughout college, a few specific theories—namely, Fowler's and

Parks's—prove particularly applicable to the first-year student's perception of vocation.

Fowler's faith development model. Fowler (1995), a faith development theorist,

defined faith as "our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple

forces and relations that make up our lives" (p. 4). Influenced by Kohlberg, Piaget, and

Erikson (Parks, 2000), Fowler viewed faith as broader and more personal than religion—universal but also unique to the individual's demonstration of it (Evans et al., 2010). Fowler's theory integrated well into mainline psychological theories of human development and strove to identify reasonably predictable developmental turning points in how faith changes and creates images throughout life (Fowler, 1995). These turning points or "stages" appear spiral-like in nature and encompass six different levels, beginning with a pre-stage of primal faith and ending with a sixth stage of universalizing faith (Evans et al., 2010; Fowler, 1995).

Some noted critiques referred to Fowler's theory as too basic and non-specific in regards to questioning one's faith (Evans et al., 2010). Additionally, some challenged the theory as incompatible with some forms of Christianity, biased in favor of Protestant Christianity, and too heavily reliant on male psychologists (Evans et al., 2010):

> Fowler (1995) concludes his book with this thought regarding primary calling: [O]ur study of faith development […] underscores the fact that we human beings seem to have a generic vocation—a universal calling—[which] calls us to the covenantal relationship with the transcendent and with the neighbor—when the neighbor is understood radically to be all being. (p. 303)

Essentially, Fowler (1995) desired his theory to inspire an "enlarged commitment to be part of God's work of righteousness and faithful liberation in our world" (p. 303).

Parks's faith identity model. Parks's theory focused on faith development among college students as pertains to cognitive development (Evans et al., 2010; Parks, 1980, 2000). Though highly influenced by Fowler's theory, the key distinction remains a primary focus on cognitive development rather than Fowler's emphasis on structure and

symbolism (Evans et al., 2010). Parks also drew on some of the aforementioned developmental theorists, such as Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan (Parks, 2000).

"Parks explained that during young adulthood, individuals are consumed with questions regarding purpose, vocation, and belonging" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 203). Student development professionals and faculty should encourage and properly foster these questions (Evans et al., 2010). Also, the four developmental stages prove critical to the theory: adolescence, young adult, tested adult, and mature adult (Evans et al., 2010; Parks, 1980). Despite generally good reception of Parks's work, some criticism arose of her neglecting how ethnicity affects the developmental stages. Others contended her theory placed unbalanced focus on cognitive development over faith development when it comes to reflecting on the meaning of life (Evans et al., 2010).

Though all have shortcomings, these theories identified some of the major issues of a college student's first-year experience, particularly vocation, self-awareness, and faith development. Parks (2000) in particular presented faith in a way that argues anyone can make meaning in his or her personal life:

> To become a young adult in faith is to discover in a critically aware, self-conscious manner the limits of inherited or otherwise socially received assumptions about how life works—what is ultimately true and trustworthy, and what counts—and to recompose meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery. (p. 7)

As explored below, Parks (1980) also commented on the important role of faith in meaning-making: "The recognition of faith as the elemental, dynamic, composing

activity of meaning-making is informed not only by a broadly phenomenological perspective within theology, but also by developmental psychology" (p. 75).

Meaning-making. A college student's pursuit of purpose and meaning insists on the inseparability of spirituality and religion and requires a more personal approach to the topic (Nash & Murray, 2009). Meaning-making, or the personal process of making sense of the world, is in this context "all about the student; we are there mainly to evoke, respond, inform, and clarify" (p. 102). Many critics feel as though meaning-making seems "too much like what ought to go on in the counseling center, or with campus ministry, or in a career service workshop [and that] it has no place in the formal academic curriculum" (p. xxviii). However, Nash and Murray (2009) saw an opportunity and tool to help students search for meaning and purpose.

As research and practice encourage meaning-making to specifically include students' vocational aspirations, Nash and Murray (2009) explained,

Whether we are talking about religion or spirituality, we strive to help our students create personal narratives that combine the qualities of faith, doubt, honesty, and integrity in such a way as to deepen their understandings of themselves and others. We try to [… get] students to think of their careers as more of a calling, as a commitment of faith without guarantee, as a risky response to the summons deep within them to minister to others wisely and compassionately. (p. 62-63)

VanZanten Gallagher (2007) commented on this issue as well:

> A theological approach to vocation involves a sense of the transcendent, of purpose, and of community. To receive a call means someone or something outside the self is calling; what an individual is to do in response to that call provides the person with purpose; and this call and response occurs within, and is guided by, the larger community. (p. 34)

The link between faith and vocation, specifically for first-year students, can emerge through a proactive effort to collectively embrace meaning-making as an institution while approaching each transformative opportunity through the appropriate theoretical lens.

Conclusion

As the above review of the literature demonstrated, a clear gap exists regarding first-year students' perceptions of vocation and how institutions—particularly private liberal arts institutions—can better support these vocational aspirations. While vocation stands as a clear objective and primary goal of higher education, a student's faith should merit significant value in deciphering one's secondary call or station. These stations appear influenced by internal and external forces and, by acquiring applicable skills and implementing effective strategies, can receive support and developed into a place God calls a student's "deep gladness [to meet] the world's deep hunger" (Buechner, 1992, p. 189).

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design and Approach

The present study aimed to better understand first-year students' perceptions of vocation. The researcher employed a qualitative design to gather information; Creswell (2008) explained qualitative research as follows:

Educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words or text from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner. (p. 46)

More specifically, the current study used a modified grounded research theory with a content analysis subtype. In the qualitative approach of grounded research, "the hypotheses and concepts are worked out in the course of conducting the study and from an analysis of data" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 4). The number and length of the essay questions utilized in the study did not qualify the research as true grounded theory; however, the study used a modified approach involving open coding which still provided the opportunity to naturally ascertain results generated through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher selected this method to achieve a more accurate theoretical sampling of the first-year student participants' understanding of vocation by allowing their voices to drive the results, rather than utilizing various quantitative

instruments to acquire an outcome constrained by pre-constructed categories. Unlike a quantitative approach, the researcher did not intend the study to test a hypothesis; instead, the research sought a more complete understanding of first-year students' perception of vocation with intent to better equip career counseling departments to more effectively support students' various vocational aspirations.

Participants

The researcher chose participants for the study from among first-year students enrolled full-time at a small, private, faith-based, residential liberal arts institution in the Midwest founded in 1846. Participants included approximately 450 first-year students enrolled in a required course titled "First-Year Experience."

Procedures

The institution's Director of First-Year Experience granted the researcher permission to conduct the present study during the Fall 2013 "First-Year Experience" course. Before administering this study, the researcher also obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher then distributed two short-essay questions to all first-year students enrolled in the "First-Year Experience" course. Participation in this study remained voluntary. The researcher kept all responses confidential, and the participants' names never appeared in the research results. Each student received a maximum time of 25 minutes to respond to the questions (a) "How would you describe your understanding of the idea of vocation?" and (b) "How do you believe attending this university will impact your sense of vocation, calling, and/or life's purpose?" (Appendix A). This document also included a section on informed consent for the students to read and sign, with no risk to the individuals who participated in the

research project. Participants received no direct incentive to respond to the essay questions but rather an explanation that the study aimed to understand and better facilitate their personal vocational aspirations from the very beginning of their college experience. The researcher initiated the explanation and the administration of the study's questions.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the study began by randomly selecting two groups of ten essays from the gathered responses. The researcher used one section for analysis of question one and the other section for analysis of question two. The researcher then read and studied the essays for common themes by a research team comprised of volunteer graduate students. For example, when observing analogous phrases within the responses, the researcher marked and categorized each essay by these emerging themes. These themes naturally developed from an analysis of the responses alone. The researcher compiled categories into comprehensive lists and ultimately grouped them together into broader themes that properly represented the entire assembled data. After analyzing the initial ten essays, the researcher began the process again with an additional set of ten essays and repeated until the researcher had examined a sample set of 100 essays, pursuing a comprehensive saturation of data until no new themes emerged. Throughout this process, the researcher also kept a tally as another form of reference to quickly assess the emerging themes. Other members of the research team then reviewed results for validity, accountability, and diversified perspectives. An inter-rater reliability test balanced individual analysts to assure all ratings originated from general consensus. Finally, the researcher reread the essays one additional time at a later date to ensure the validity of the previously perceived themes.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the analyzed data, unpacking both research questions.

Numerous themes developed from the data, as explained and illustrated below with

applicable quotations from the students' responses.

Table 1 summarizes the results from this qualitative study.

Table 1

Summary of Themes

Question 1 *How would you describe your understanding of the idea of vocation?*	Question 2 *How do you believe attending your university will impact your sense of vocation, calling, and/or life's purpose?*
- God's Calling (26) - Holistic (24) - Career/Calling—No God (19) - Career/Job (15) - Holistic/Secular (8) - Unclear Idea (4) - Incomplete Idea (4)	- Development of Self-Awareness—Searching for Calling (26) - Development of Primary Vocation (16) - Community (14) - Holistic Development (14) - Situational Support (14) - Development of Secondary Vocation—Job Preparation (13) - Development as Christian in Workplace (3)
(Total Sample Size: 100)	(Total Sample Size: 100)

Question 1

The structure of the survey intended to elicit the students' own understandings of

vocation through their considered responses to the first question. Responses included

understandings of the concept of vocation as a calling, either spiritual or non-spiritual;

holistic understandings, both spiritual and secular; and understandings of vocation as a career or job, as well as other understandings.

God's calling. A predominant theme emerged from this question: a sense of God's calling. For example, one student responded, "Vocation is how you understand God's calling. He reveals things to use about ourselves that are a part of his ultimate plan." Responses in this category shared specific keywords and phrases, including "will," referring to the concept of God having control or a plan over one's life, and, similarly, "plan," which also indicated a sense of focus and direction on the part of the student.

Though each response seemed specific in mentioning either "God's calling," "will," or "plan," numerous responses also mentioned the word or concept "lifestyle," causing it to emerge as a meta-theme. For example, one student claimed, "Vocation is something that God is calling you to do. It is a lifestyle that you want to pursue and it is something that you feel called to do." Another wrote,

> I think vocation is something that God has integrated into who you are and your lifestyle…I feel like if you're doing something that you find great joy in, God is leading you and working with you to find your life's calling.

Responses like these provide a clear indication—and offer a slightly nuanced view—of the theme "God's calling." A significant portion of the students surveyed perceived vocation as something God calls them to and a lifestyle they should/could pursue.

Holistic. The second category, "holistic," encompassed students' interpretation of their vocation as God's calling in their life as well as the concept of their job or career. For example, one student responded, "A vocation has to do with not only your job and place in the workforce, but also God's calling for your life and understanding your

purpose and carrying it out." Nearly 25% of all randomized participants responded with statements congruent with a holistic mindset.

Moreover, the responses in this theme often appeared very thorough. Many of the students who responded with these holistic distinctions offered insightful and lengthy answers. For example, one student answered the question in this manner:

I think the best way to describe my understanding of the idea of vocation is taken from a quote I once saw that said something like, "the place where God calls you to be is the place where your passion and the world's deep hunger meet." I believe that the career I choose should be one in which I use the talents and gifts God has given me to bring him glory as I let him shine through me. I think you should love what you do, love the people you're serving, and give your best as you love God.

Thoughtful responses like this one supported the comprehensive view of vocation that this theme demonstrates.

Career/calling: No God. Because a substantial number of students responded to question one with an emphasis on career as calling, but not necessarily spiritual calling, a category of "Career/Calling: No God" developed. The analysts originally grouped these responses with the predominant theme of vocation as God's calling, but specific enough differences existed in how the students framed their responses that necessitated the creation of this category. For example, one student naturally differentiated a response by stating, "A vocation is an occupation or job. It is something you have been called to do and strive towards. Essentially, it describes your […] career that you are dedicated to." Whether intentional or unintentional, no mentioning of God's calling emerged.

Career/job. Whenever a student only connected vocation with the idea of a career or job, the analysts assigned the label "Career/Job." In these fifteen responses, no mention of a calling and of God appeared, though the researcher again made no assumptions as to the intentionality of this omission. A student with a response characteristic of this group wrote,

> When I hear the word 'vocation,' the first idea that comes to mind is that it is a job. A vocation is not just any job though, it includes what someone is passionate about and wants to pursue as a career.

Another response telling of this category stated that vocation "is my idea of how I plan to be employed in the future." Observably, this category encompassed a specific mindset of vocation as either a career or job but no mention of anything beyond that.

Holistic/secular. In the category "Holistic/Secular," the analysts deemed it necessary to distinguish the holistic mindset by referring to attributes such as "calling" and "job," yet the students never specifically mentioned God's calling in their lives. To clarify, the researcher used the term "secular" as a differentiating expression between a concept focused on God and spirituality and a concept not involving those elements. For example, one student explained his understanding of vocation: "Not just your job but your passion, your calling, that one thing that you *can't not do*" (emphasis original). The emphasis on one's job, passion, and calling proved all encompassing in the response but with no mention of God or spiritual influence. Seven other responses seemed similar.

Unclear idea/incomplete idea. The last two categories demonstrated that at least 8% of the sample either did not possess a developed understanding of vocation or

misunderstood the survey question. Either way, these two categories illustrated a need for further clarity for these students. For example, according to one student's response,

> Vocation is a word I've only heard a few times before. I can't claim to really know what it means. I have only a vague idea of what is implied, but it seems to me that it has a lot to do with what you will spend the rest of your life doing.

As another example specific to the incomplete idea category, a student explained vocation as "Hav[ing] a strong feeling towards something or an idea." Clearly the misunderstanding observed in this category proves noteworthy and significant to the results of the present study.

Question 2

The researcher designed the second question as institution-specific in order to provide salient information to that particular institution. By acquiring an understanding of what direction the students expect from their institution with regard to their "vocation, calling, and/or life's purpose," a career development department can better address the students' expectations and offer support relevant to their needs.

Development of self-awareness: **Searching for calling.** The primary theme that emerged from the data for question two showed students' desire for their institution to help develop their sense of self-awareness, specifically with regard to their search for their calling. Succinctly, one student stated the hope that the institution would "help [students] better discover [their] passions and abilities and be more able to use them effectively." The following response provided another example:

I believe [this institution] will ultimately end up revealing my purpose in life. I

have always struggled with my future and what I want to do with my life, so I'm

hoping [this university] can help me find my higher calling in life.

These responses showed a desire for support while offering specific examples for the

implementation of this support.

Development of primary vocation. Responses in this category revolved around

the concept of a primary spiritual calling, defined as one's identity set in God's will or a

calling to follow Christ (Guinness, 2003; Schultze, 2005; Schwehn & Bass, 2006). This

particular group implied they desired their institution to assist in their development—

particularly their spiritual development and journey—in regard to their lives' purposes.

For example, one student shared, "I believe the spiritual growth [I experience through my

institution] will greatly impact my sense of vocation [and] my life's purpose."

Community. These next few groups tied with a 14% response rate. First, there

emerged an expectation from these students that their institution would foster an

environment of community. As exemplified below, they believed this environment would

have a meaningful impact on their sense of calling:

[My institution] will affirm God's calling in my life through other students,

professors, and experiences. The community and the people I'm surrounded by

will give me a taste of what I'm interested in and help me uncover what God has

made me passionate about.

Each response either specifically used the word "community" or explained the idea of

community as an entity that involved other people who help form their understandings,

passions, and goals.

Holistic development. Another 14% mentioned a desire for their institution to assist in developing them holistically. Though none of the participants used the word "holistic," their remarks encompassed different components of holistic development. The responses focused on whole-person development. One of the best examples of a holistic response is from a student anticipating their institution to facilitate

> academic, social, and spiritual opportunities [and] to find what makes [them] feel
>
> fulfilled and [discover what they are] called to. [They] will have leadership
>
> opportunities as well as leaders around [them] to help push [them] toward what
>
> God has for [their] career, ministry, lifestyle, everything!

Though not the strongest theme among the results, this result proves a significant representation of the common thread that students expressed for universal institutional support, rather than specific and narrow guidance.

Situational support. The title "situational support" remains necessarily vague. This category suggested that the students hope for impact from various elements of the institution. For example, one student mentioned believing the institution "will impact [students'] calling through the experiences, opportunities, and challenges it presents." Often, participants offered examples such as coursework, classes, or education in general as relevant experiences that should impact their sense of vocation. This section contained many specific, unambiguous examples that outline how to best support this group.

Development of secondary vocation: Job preparation. Falling just behind the previous three groups, this category represented 13% of responses and related to what Guinness described as the calling "to do" (2003). Support in the development of one's secondary vocation emerged as a clear desire. For example, one student wrote, "I believe

that [this institution] will help me achieve my vocation. I will have a great job that I love and want to go to everyday. The education I will gain will help me achieve [this]." Twelve similar responses further explained the students' desires for development and preparation in their future employment.

Development as Christian in workplace. Three specific responses referred to their institution impacting their personal development and preparation as a Christian in the workplace. The specificity of the comments required their own category and must be factored into the summary of themes.

Conclusion

Several distinct themes emerged from this study, but a few predominant themes seemed particularly constructive. The data communicated the perspectives of the students surveyed, illustrating their primary desire for development in their search for God's calling and self-awareness as well as their view of vocation in holistic terms. They desired encouragement in pursuing their future careers and appeared sensitive to their needs for community and situational support. The following discussion section analyzes the survey results through the themes outlined above. Such a diversity of themes invited an in-depth interpretation in order for an institution to provide better support for its students in areas they have identified specific needs or expectations.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The current study strove to discover the perceptions that first-year students held regarding vocation. More specifically, the study aimed to assist practitioners in their efforts to support first-year students with regard to understanding their career, calling, and vocation. The study produced practical results, highly useful to career development educators, specifically at the private faith-based liberal arts institution like the one at which the researcher conducted the present study.

Connecting Findings to the Literature

The literature reviewed in the current study addressed the concept of vocation within higher education, specifically within an institution's curriculum, mentorship programs, and among career service professionals. The application of the study's findings bears implications for all three areas while not limited to them. The study also explored the integration of vocation and faith, and the application of a theoretical lens assisted in laying a foundation from which one can draw inferences as well as challenge them. The literature focused primarily on first-year students, the demographic of the group studied.

Many of the first-year participants in the present study seemed to have a solid grasp of the concept of vocation, and their perceptions appeared largely consistent with the current literature, particularly the theologically-oriented segment. The sample from the study revealed a predominant understanding of vocation as God's calling in one's life,

a career one would be called to, or a blend of those two perceptions. The students clearly identified expectations for their institution to assist them in developing a healthy self-awareness of that calling. The proper utilization of an institution's curriculum, mentorship programs, and career development departments in the pursuit of vocational development seems not only supported through the literature but also emerged a desire and expectation of these first-year students.

Furthermore, critical in any efforts to support vocational development, the institution must focus on helping to define first-year students' primary and secondary call. Whether an individual considers a primary calling as faith-related or simply recognizes it as a "need to 'make a life, not just a living'" (Guinness, 2003, p. 37), professionals should discuss matters of belief and values as they work with first-year students regarding vocation. Likewise, the secondary call—the need to find meaningful work—certainly seems salient to first-year students, who feel challenged in clarifying this issue from before college begins to the day they graduate. Often, a secondary calling becomes referred to as a career, but as the literature showed, the two do not always exist as one and the same (Drew, 2007). These students seem to benefit from a better understanding of the essence of a secondary vocation—anything from parenthood or citizenship, to an unpaid occupation, to a paid career. The students studied also showed a need for support in this way, and many already seemed on track in acknowledging their vocation as "not only [having to do with one's] job and place in the workforce, but also God's calling for [one's] life and understanding [one's] purpose and carrying it out."

Lastly, the theoretical lens applied to the study's findings included Fowler's faith development model and Parks's faith identity model. As the study unfolded, it became

apparent that respondents at this private faith-based liberal arts institution also considered faith an inextricable component of vocation. Faith, while observable through various lenses, has become widely acknowledged with a religious understanding. Given the context of this particular study, one can assume that, when these first-year students mentioned faith, they did so with religious connotations. With that in mind, both Fowler's and Parks's models provided a framework for understanding that faith assists students in making meaning of life and understanding themselves as part of something greater than themselves in the world. Many of these first-year students characterized their understanding of vocation as "not just your job but your passion, your calling, that one thing that you *can't not do*" (emphasis original).

Perceptions of Vocation

From the random sample analyzed for the study, a large percentage of first-year students identify God as a substantial factor in their calling. In addition, a large percentage expressed a desire to further develop an understanding of this calling as their primary vocation. Notably, over 90% of the participants described their understanding of vocation as a calling (whether specific to God's calling or otherwise) and a career they desired for their institution to develop and facilitate. A surprising number of situational descriptors emerged, as discussed in the findings; the participants provided quite cohesive responses with only minor variations. Many specific categories appeared in the data, though a number of them interrelated through similar conceptions of vocation. From both survey questions, only a few outliers surfaced, including a percentage of respondents who misunderstood the question.

Limitations

As with most studies, inevitable limitations occurred. Specific to the present study, the primary limitation developed from the percentage of students who responded with unclear and incomplete ideas to the questions. Though this limitation suggests a misunderstanding of the question or an insufficiently worded question, it provided an opportunity to remain sensitive to those who may need additional consideration or support in their education regarding vocational goals and aspirations. Collectively, this group captured nearly 10% of the sample size and should be taken into consideration as programs and processes develop in response to the study results.

Another limitation of the study related to the fact that the study's results seemed tightly connected to the setting in which the researcher conducted the study. Further discussion of this limitation appears in the section below entitled "Implications for Future Research." Normally the case with qualitative research, the results from the study prove useful primarily to the institution from which the data came.

When interpreting the data from the study, other institutions should understand the limitations and consider their implications when adopting new strategies or programs.

Implications for Practice

Career development departments should initiate programs and processes that support the most common perceptions of vocation revealed through the current study. The variations among the results revealed natural deviations within a diverse student body. Thus, perhaps the most significant implication for practice remains acknowledging and responding to a common understanding. A career development department could use the findings to shape programming to best reflect the first-year students' predominant

desires to develop their search for God's calling, a greater self-awareness of their calling, and a more holistic understanding of vocation. This support for the student seems not only warranted but also welcomed and anticipated by the student, who expects the institution to facilitate this support in a variety of ways.

The institution should also promote and develop a continual understanding of vocation with first-year students as it relates to faith, while not assuming that all share the same religious beliefs. However, it may prove more acceptable to make these assumptions if an institution has established a covenant or agreement of beliefs, though practitioners should use discretion when making such assumptions. As an example of support of understanding vocation and faith, institutions could establish dedicated chapel programs. If an institution holds regular chapel services, an emphasis week on vocation and faith by scheduling speakers knowledgeable on the topic, like Steven Garber or Rachel Held Evans, could prove a natural fit to program. The programing should operate strategically to achieve its purpose and mindfully address the targeted audience.

Such a study would function most usefully if administered each year. As culture continues to evolve, students' understandings of vocation will transition as well. Though this evolution may manifest subtly, one should expect—and not disregard—change. As perhaps a more realistic goal, an institution could conduct this study, or a similar study, every four years as a new cycle of students rotates into the university. The survey seems best utilized as a tool to investigate a student perceptions and understandings over time.

Further practical application necessitates the development of the first-year student's perception of vocation into a formative reality. Developing elective courses on vocation among first-year students could offer one way of accomplishing this objective.

Collaboration with faculty could also provide curricular enhancements to existing courses or entirely new courses. For example, course enhancements could include vocational development within particular disciplines, perhaps in capstone-like courses. A standalone first-year seminar could specifically aim to assist students in self-exploration and personal development with regard to vocational aspirations. Depending on the institution's curriculum structure, such a course could also blend into an institution's first-year experience, foundational coursework, or even general education requirements. A career development department could also suggest a reading seminar for career service professionals that would introduce them to seminal pieces of vocational literature. Current assessment tools, such as StrengthsQuest and Enneagram, prove powerful tools to develop a student's understanding of vocation and should receive consideration.

Implications for Future Research

The most apparent implication for future research comes as replicating this study longitudinally at other institutions, particularly public or private, non-faith based. Such replication could offer an intriguing and informative step in observing the results from differing types of institutions and would increase the depth and validity of results. As previously stated, the type of institution used in this study clearly influenced the results, and, notably, the results most likely will vary when moving from a private faith-based institution to another type of institution. However, interested institutions may benefit from seeing if similar themes of calling emerge, potentially affirming a commonality among dissimilar institutions. Furthermore, the use of the present study at another private faith-based institution would provide a beneficial comparison of potential similarities and differences. When the definition of faith adjusts by institutional culture, the interpretation

of Fowler's faith development model and Parks's faith identity model may differ as well. Such a comparison of various institutional influences would prove both interesting and potentially beneficial to the understanding of the perceptions of first-year students.

While acknowledging that replicating the current study frequently would yield formative results, the typical qualitative study becomes elaborate and time-intensive, which may discourage an institution from repeating the present study. Though qualitative studies prove informative, the development of a model or scale in a quantitative study could offer benefits by simplifying this type of research. Rather than attempting to develop themes or codes to make meaning of ideas, a quantitative study would not only expedite the data gathering but also yield unique results. Changing the method would alter the study's nature, but the quantitative findings would merit future consideration.

Conclusion

The present study does not necessarily offer unique content but certainly unique implementations. Previous studies explored the topics of vocation, perception, and faith, but the practicality of implementing the current study by looking specifically at first-year students' perceptions proves distinct. The study intended to illuminate a better understanding of first-year students' perception of vocation at a private faith-based liberal arts institution. The results offered useful insights and implications for consideration. Despite limitations to the present study, findings should still considerably benefit career development practitioners. The first-year students surveyed in the study displayed a reasonably strong understanding of vocation, and, hopefully, these results will help practitioners to work with them even more effectively as they pursue deeper understanding of the important concept of vocation.

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Appendix A

First-Year Student Essay Assignment

Demographics

Name:

Age:

Sex (circle one): MALE / FEMALE

Description

Using approximately 100-200 words, please respond to the following questions.

Question 1

How would you describe your understanding of the idea of vocation?

Question 2

How do you believe attending your university will impact your sense of vocation, calling,

and/or life's purpose?

INFORMED CONSENT: Your responses will be used for a research project studying first-year students' perception of vocation. Your responses will be kept confidential and your name will never be reported with the research results. Additionally, there will be no risk to you by participating in this research project. By signing below, you acknowledge reading this informed consent notice and agree to participate in this research project. If you have any questions, please contact the Director of Assessment and Quality Improvement.

Signature: _____