
*Finding the Center as Things
Fly Apart*

VOCATION AND THE COMMON GOOD

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COLLEGE LIFE TENDS to generate certain quintessential images. Admissions brochures prominently feature an engaging faculty member surrounded by a small group of students on a lush green lawn. Faculty members envision spending hours concentrating on research and guiding students through deep reading of consequential texts. Educators evoke portraits of students raising and pondering “big questions” about the meaning of life. Alumni recall studying together in the library and late-night conversations in the residence halls. The collegiate ideal is a perennial image that speaks to higher education’s capacity to encourage contemplation and build relationships, to invite deep questions and create space for attentive response.

Of course, anyone familiar with the current context of American higher education knows that new developments are crowding out these prototypical portraits. Students read assignments on their laptops, tablets, and smart phones rather than in printed books. They study “together,” but this may take place in digital environments rather than in physical proximity. The image of the college student quietly reading and writing in a library contends with the picture of one who fits in only a few moments to study here and there between other pressing demands. The image of faculty and students on the well-manicured lawn has been replaced by

the individual student sitting in front of a computer accessing education via a portal, the presence of a teacher merely implied. These increasingly prevalent images have led many to wonder whether broader goals, such as the contemplation of purpose and the cultivation of relationships, are no longer matters of priority.

We must avoid the tendency to superimpose collegiate images from days past upon the realities of college in the present. At the same time, we cannot allow the particularities of the present to block our view of the longstanding and enduring promise of higher education. This moment in time calls for deeper attention, both to the phenomenal potential of colleges and universities to address questions of meaning and purpose, and to the pressures that these institutions feel as the realities of the contemporary world impinge upon them. Thankfully, the language of *vocation* and *calling* provides us with a way of attending to matters of institutional purpose that takes into account our particular place and time.

A context-specific interpretation of vocation is well articulated by Edward Hahnenberg, who draws on Karl Barth to argue that vocation involves responding as a “unique creation placed by God in a particular time, at a particular place, and gifted with particular abilities, disabilities, experiences, and associations.”¹ Clearly, vocation is a matter of identity; it pays attention to *who* we are. In addition, vocation is lived out as a distinctive response to the particular context in which we find ourselves; it is heavily influenced by *where* we are. As we engage the idea of vocation in higher education, we need to address complex questions of identity among colleges and universities, even as we attend to the gifts and challenges posed by our time and our social context.

This chapter will suggest that, among the many purposes of colleges and universities, the call to *educate for the common good* stands out as particularly important. After an exploration of this claim, the chapter then examines the higher education landscape in our time, emphasizing how present realities impinge upon the ability of colleges and universities to fulfill this element of their collective mission. In particular, we will observe the *centrifugal* tendencies of our current context, in which the central focus of higher education seems to be spinning out in every direction. The third section argues that the language of vocational exploration and discernment can address some of these tendencies, thereby

1. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 119 (see chap. 1, note 7 *supra*).

helping us to re-imagine this central focus in ways that are attentive to the importance of educating for the common good. A concluding section examines two exemplary initiatives that have been implemented by specific institutions—initiatives that seek to create an environment in which vocational exploration and discernment can prosper, and to do so in ways that contribute to each institution’s particular mission and purpose.

Education for the common good

Higher education has a rich and dynamic purpose that flows from its identity and history and is grounded in its particular gifts and relationships. Fulfilling this purpose hinges upon colleges and universities realizing their distinct call to educate for the common good—a vision that undergirds and connects their commitment to the flourishing of individuals and of society as a whole.²

The origins of the language

The notion of the common good is embedded in the Hebrew scriptures, and especially in the prophets. Jeremiah urged the Israelites to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). Jeremiah counsels the exiles from Jerusalem to care for the foreign land into which they have been displaced. Not only that: he implores them to recognize that their own well-being is interdependent with that of their place of exile. Similarly, after the exiles return from Babylon to the destroyed city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah gathers them and rouses them to action: “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace” (Neh. 2:17). When they agree to start building, he describes them as having “committed themselves to the *common good*” (Neh. 2:18, emphasis added).

Much of the current literature on colleges and universities suggests that higher education, like Jerusalem, is in ruins. Admittedly, higher

2. In the literature, the language of *common good* is sometimes employed as a synonym for *public good*; this parallel, however, would seem to align *common* with *public*, as though it were the antithesis to a “private” or “personal” sphere. This chapter’s use of the term *common good* is meant to denote a region where individual and community goods overlap.

education does face many challenges (some of which will be discussed later in this chapter); yet it also holds great potential to attend to the common good, which emphasizes that the flourishing of each individual human being is inextricably linked to the thriving of others. In this light, the very nature of higher education—as responsible to both personal and social well-being—makes it an ideal locus for attending to the common good. By exploring and making use of the capacity of colleges and universities to educate for the common good, we can, like Nehemiah and his listeners, renew our own commitment to this important work.

From their earliest beginnings in the United States, colleges (and, later, universities) have nurtured the development of individual gifts while also seeking the good of the society.³ Upon their arrival in the New World, the colonists quickly sought to found colleges in order to establish and distinctly shape a new society by educating people with the character of the desired society in mind.⁴ The charters of the colonial colleges laid out a vision for educating young men for professions including, but also beyond, the “ministry” and “public officials.”⁵ This vision was grounded in an effort to “qualify a governing elite” in order to carry forward the society they were founding.⁶ College served to prepare individuals for meaningful work but also functioned as “part of a large, important social, religious, and political vision.”⁷

This interconnection has remained evident as higher education’s history has unfolded. In a prominent report of the mid-twentieth century, *General Education in a Free Society*, a Harvard University committee

3. It is important to acknowledge here that the colonists’ vision of leadership was limited by the focus on European white males. The view of Native Americans as “savages” is evident in many of the early charters and indicative of this limited and inhumane vision. In describing this early connection between individual and society as an asset, I do not mean to gloss over this particular failure in the way that connection was made manifest.

4. Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977); Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History*, rev. ed. (Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

5. John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities*, 4th ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 6.

6. Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 28.

7. John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 23.

wrestled with the meaning and purpose of undergraduate education against the moral backdrop of World War II.⁸ The committee reaffirmed the interrelated ideals that undergraduate education was important for social relations in a democratic society as well as for individual preparation for occupation. The committee contended that the purpose of general education was to serve as the element of a “student’s whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen.”⁹ This broad preparation was coupled with elements of undergraduate education that attend to the “student’s competence in some occupation.”¹⁰ The committee was emphatic that these “two sides of life are not entirely separable, and it would be false to imagine education for the one as quite distinct from education for the other.”¹¹ Education for individual advancement was thereby affirmed as inextricably bound to the needs of the society.

In a more recent example, The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement argues in its report, *A Crucible Moment*, that civic learning must be a priority for “all of higher education” and that the betterment of the future of our society depends upon it.¹² The authors maintain that “if human beings hope to maintain and develop a particular type of society, they must develop and maintain the particular type of education system conducive to it.”¹³ *A Crucible Moment* argues for infusing a “civic ethos” into campus culture by cultivating civic knowledge, integrating “civic inquiry” into majors and general education, and cultivating capacity and commitment for “civic action.”¹⁴ Toward these ends, the authors argue that higher education requires both the “fullest preparation for economic success” and “education for citizenship.”¹⁵ Education

8. Harvard University, *General Education in a Free Society; Report of the Harvard Committee*, 15th printing (1945; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955).

9. Harvard, *General Education*, 51.

10. Harvard, *General Education*, 51.

11. Harvard, *General Education*, 51–52.

12. National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future, A National Call to Action* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012), 2.

13. Ira Harkavy, cited in National Task Force, *Crucible Moment*, 25.

14. National Task Force, *Crucible Moment*, 15.

15. National Task Force, *Crucible Moment*, 10.

for self and community are thus reaffirmed as mutually important and inseparable.¹⁶

These examples remind us that, particularly in the American context, higher education has both intended (and has been expected) to be a positive influence on both societal and individual well-being. Moreover, merely by virtue of the large number of people who experience higher education, colleges and universities are granted a powerful ability to shape contemporary culture.¹⁷ Still, the influence of colleges and universities cannot be measured solely by the sheer number of people they touch; what matters most is their social and cultural impact, to which we now turn.

Expectations for higher education

First, with regard to individual flourishing, higher education has been tasked with *preparing emerging adults for meaningful work and service*. This involves helping them find meaning and purpose in their work and in their lives, not only for their specific occupation, but on a broader scale as well. Undergraduate students discern and develop individual talents, but fulfilling higher education's purpose requires more than simply amassing a sufficient range of individual gifts; they need to be understood as serving a purpose beyond the self.

Second, higher education has been entrusted with positively *influencing the character of society*. Colleges and universities wield a tremendous influence on society and its mores, infrastructure, and direction. They are not only tasked with preparing graduates with adequate knowledge, but also with the social and cultural development of students. The unique potential of a college education to help society flourish is an essential gift that undergirds higher education's role in establishing and promoting the common good.

Third, higher education has also been distinctively vested with *orienting emerging adults to the realities of the world*. Higher education serves as a "vital expression of vocation" in our contemporary context insofar as it is charged with the responsibility of "initiating young lives into a

16. See the further discussion of this point in the reflections on community engagement in chapter 13.

17. Sixty-six percent (66.2%) of 2012 high school graduates were enrolled in colleges or universities the fall following their graduation. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *College Enrollment and Work Activity*, 2013.

responsible apprehension, first of the realities and questions of a vast and mysterious universe, and second of our fitting participation in it.”¹⁸ Colleges and universities provide students with a way of understanding the world, so that they might see their own capacities and passions in light of their interdependent relationship with others. Higher education has inherited the responsibility to orient emerging adults into the realities of the world, and to help them acquire a sense of full and meaningful participation in that world.

In sum, to advance the commitment of educating for the common good, colleges and universities must help students connect their individual talents to the areas of our world that are broken and in need of those talents. Moreover, the common good—embedded as it is with commitments to individual and social flourishing—is not static. As Reinhold Niebuhr suggested, “each century originates a new complexity and each generation faces a new vexation in addressing the problem of our ‘aggregate existence.’”¹⁹ Advancing the common good depends upon seeing and responding to our shared realities in all their complexity.

Shared realities that shape higher education

We are in a time of radical change and considerable disquiet in American higher education, in which dynamic and consequential transformations are fully in motion.²⁰ Even among those skeptical about whether this era marks some kind of fundamental revolution, urgent concerns are being raised regarding the contribution of higher education to individuals and to society. This section fleshes out the particularities that shape our context and considers their potential impact.

As a governing metaphor for the social realities that we face, we might describe the forces that dominate higher education as *centrifugal* rather

18. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 16.

19. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932; New York: Scribner, 1960), 1.

20. Bobby Fong, “General Education: Connecting to Issues of Vital Importance—For Students, For Society,” Keynote Address, Association of American Colleges and Universities, February 2013, unpublished manuscript; Jeff Selinger, *College (Un)bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students* (Boston: New Harvest, 2013); Mark C. Taylor, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

than centripetal: these forces create a tendency for things to fly apart in all directions, instead of referencing (and being oriented toward) a center.²¹ Centrifugal forces work against the kinds of integrative work needed to educate for a “common good.” Attending to our present context requires that we recognize these centrifugal forces and respond in ways that take these tendencies into account. The goal of the present section is to name and describe some of the centrifugal forces that higher education faces; in the section that follows, we will consider how a focus on vocational exploration and discernment might address some of these realities.

The digital revolution

Among the social realities about which concern is most frequently voiced, the digital revolution is often identified as a disruptor to higher education’s greater purposes. What, if anything, do we lose when learning becomes, at least in part, a “virtual” enterprise? Can knowledge be divorced from the contexts in which it is generated, and can learning be disengaged from the relationships that have traditionally constituted it? Certain elements of online learning change the nature of the relationships between students and faculty, as well as those among students. It is more difficult to communicate meaning when words on a screen are detached from the facial expressions and intonations that accompany face-to-face communication. Online forums provide avenues for shared discussion, but the contributions to the dialogue arrive piecemeal over time, rather than in the context of a shared classroom conversation. Learning online, in some fashion, decouples the educational process; students gain credentials, but without the embodied relationships and experiences that these credentials traditionally comprise.

The digital transition is one illustration of a broader obstacle that faces the academy: the tension between generations. Andrew Delbanco notes that “one of the peculiarities of the teaching life is that every year the teacher gets older while the students stay the same age.”²² It is indeed a

21. The language of “centrifugal forces” has been used with respect to higher education by a wide variety of voices. See, inter alia, Lynne Cheney, 1989, 50 *Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989); Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*.

22. Delbanco, *College*, 9.

quirk of the academy that the past generation is perpetually responsible for educating the current one. This situation is fraught with tension, for the educators are forever one or more generations (and one or more sets of social realities) behind those being educated.

Of course, some of the most dramatic generational changes in the academic world have been technological ones. Summarizing the individual and organizational challenges associated with this transformation, Arthur Levine and Diane Dean put the matter bluntly: a generation of “digital natives . . . are being taught by digital immigrants in analog universities.”²³ Students want more technology, and they want their faculty to adopt it effectively; faculty not only struggle to adopt technology (given that, for most, it is a “second language” at best), but also distrust the impact of technology on education in a way that often befuddles their students (since for students, technology simply *is*). The digital divide is therefore also a generational rift.

Fiscal uncertainties

The range and impact of the digital revolution and its accompanying generational divide accelerates amid the fiscal challenges facing higher education. These challenges are real and coupled with a growing sense among many that accruing high levels of debt for college is no longer sensible.²⁴ We need to be cautious, however, about any overly simplistic attempts to determine college education’s “return-on-investment”—particularly when this is measured in terms of starting salary or other narrow monetary terms.²⁵ Should undergraduates really be pointed toward

23. Arthur Levine and Diane R. Dean, *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 49.

24. Measurements of the educational debt of college graduates are fraught with complexity and often challenged in the literature. See, inter alia, Matthew Reed and Debbie Cochrane, *Student Debt and the Class of 2012* (Oakland and Washington, DC: The Institute on College Access and Success, 2013), <http://www.ticas.org/files/pub/classof2012.pdf> (accessed December 31, 2013); S. Georgia Nugent, “What Do We Talk About When We Talk About College Debt?” *The Huffington Post*, October 1, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/s-georgia-nugent/what-do-we-talk-about-whe_b_5909416.html (accessed November 5, 2014).

25. Various organizations have launched campaigns designed to help college students (and their parents) to think in broader terms about college affordability. See, inter alia, the Council of Independent College’s “Power of Liberal Arts” website, <http://www.liberalartspower.org/passion/afford/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed November 5, 2014).

majors such as engineering or business, and directed away from history or music, for financial reasons alone? It is really wise, in the long run, to steer students away from their passions and inclinations, simply because they don't promise a sufficient monetary pay-off? Such approaches pay little attention to the particular ways of understanding the world that have dominated those fields and professions that are less well compensated in monetary terms. Needless to say, a business or engineering major may be ideal for some students; it may be precisely where their passions and inclinations lie. But if such fields are pursued only for their perceived economic security, something very important is lost.

The cultural conversation on the value of higher education in our current context has grown myopic in its focus on economic outcomes, particularly those financial benefits *to the individual*.²⁶ The question as to whether college is worth the significant investment of time and money is an important one;²⁷ in the process, however, the full value of a college education can be skewed. In particular, an excessive focus on economic utility has too often displaced attention to broader questions of meaning and purpose that include, but also transcend, one's future occupation and earning potential.²⁸

The vast majority of students place a higher premium on the employment-related outcomes of a college education than on the process of education itself. In fact, the percentage of incoming first-year students citing "to be able to get a better job" as a very important reason for attending college recently reached an all-time high.²⁹ This myopia is not limited to students. A recent poll suggested that gaining "skills and knowledge for a career" far outweighed gaining a "well-rounded general education"

26. Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), xiii.

27. William J. Bennett and David Wilezol, *Is College Worth It?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013); Selingo, *College (Un)bound*.

28. Philip Eaton, *Engaging the Culture, Changing the World: the Christian University in a Post-Christian World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

29. In 2012, this percentage was 87.9%, which is up from 67% in 1976. Kevin Eagan et al., *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2012* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 2013), 4. In 2013, this percentage showed a slight decline to 86.3%. Kevin Eagan et al., *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2013* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 2014), 35.

as a goal of higher education, not only among the general population, but also among college leaders.³⁰ Preparing graduates for employment is crucial, but not to the point that we neglect the longstanding commitment of higher education to nurture a sense of purpose and social responsibility.

Specialization and silos

The current emphasis on individualistic economic indicators intersects with a longstanding trajectory toward greater specialization in higher education. This confluence poses a particular challenge for the advancement of integrated, holistic learning. The current academic culture both favors and furthers specialization; in particular, the “cultivation of increasingly specialized, mutually unintelligible languages” in increasingly specialized academic departments undermines the “ability of educated citizens to live in a common symbolic universe.”³¹ Faculty members on the same campus have a difficult time finding common educational ground. Students’ educational experiences across campus are so divergent that conversation about texts or ideas is thwarted beyond those who share a major. We lack a common vocabulary that serves as a basis for integrative questions of meaning.

Historical developments in the undergraduate curriculum illustrate how the overemphasis on specialization has often crowded out more integrative goals. The widely adopted “distribution model” of general education exemplifies this reality, inasmuch as it allows individual academic departments to teach specialized content and have it “fit” within a model of general education. In this curricular design, students choose from a menu of courses created and taught by academic departments. This effectively introduces students to a variety of academic subjects, but falls short in helping students find connections across areas of knowledge. In fact, the only thread of integration across these distribution requirements is too often *the student*, who is sometimes expected to make sense of the connections without much help or guidance. The predominant idea that

30. Amanda Ripley, “College is Dead. Long Live College!” *Time Magazine* 180, no. 18 (October 29, 2012): 33–41; here, 41.

31. Donald Nathan Levine, *Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 27.

general education is accomplished solely by being “distributed” is compelling evidence on its own that undergraduate education has been drawn away from a center.

Further evidence for disintegration can be found in the split between those responsible for classroom learning and those attending to out-of-class or co-curricular education. Specialization in the academy has not only perpetuated the development of disconnected academic silos;³² it has also separated the people responsible for students’ intellectual development—the teaching faculty—from those attending to social, emotional, and spiritual development.³³ Alongside the proliferation of increasingly specialized academic departments, specialists have arisen in spiritual formation, residential education, community service, and leadership development (and, for that matter, in vocational discernment!). What should be interconnected facets of the student—knowing, acting, feeling, and believing—have become separate tasks of increasingly specialized campus offices. The structure of the academy complicates the holistic formation of persons.

The concerns regarding overspecialization extend beyond internal critiques of educational coherence to the skeptical question in the public realm as to whether an overspecialized academy delivers the education necessary for success in the contemporary context. A growing “skills gap” has been attributed to the misalignment between college curricula designed to achieve discrete content knowledge and workplace needs for employees capable of collaboration and innovation.³⁴ Employers have voiced a need for graduates who are capable of teamwork and problem-solving, in addition to applying technical knowledge.³⁵ The college’s aim should be to foster graduates who have *both* technical expertise *and* higher-order innovative capacities. In short, there is simply much more to be learned; and yet the pressures are also strong for institutions to take less time to accomplish this work.

32. Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*.

33. Julie Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

34. Economic Intelligence Unit, *Closing the Skills Gap: Companies and Colleges Collaborating for Change*, http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/Closing_the_skills_gap.pdf (accessed October 5, 2014).

35. Hart Research Associates, “It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success,” *Liberal Education* 99, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 22–29.

The dis-integrated degree

Financial constraints force students to spend less time in and on college, or at least to experience a diffusion or fragmentation of their study time. Students are increasingly attending multiple institutions and achieving college credits through a plethora of options.³⁶ Advanced placement credits and dual enrollment between high school courses and college have proliferated, largely intended to speed up and reduce the cost of a college education. College students today spend increasing amounts of time in paid employment while completing their education.³⁷ They often attend multiple colleges en route to a degree;³⁸ hence, a student is rarely shaped exclusively by any single institution of higher education over the course of four years. Taken together, these fiscal forces pull students away from full engagement in their undergraduate education and compromise the ability of any single college to serve as a formative influence on students.

The impact of current fiscal realities is not limited to students' experiences, but also affects faculty roles. The increasing need for colleges to rely on less expensive educational delivery models has substantially increased demands on faculty and increased the number of adjunct and contingent faculty.³⁹ Full-time faculty are doing more amid pressing institutional demands, leaving little time to prepare for teaching and even less time to relate to students or to one other. The image of faculty with ample time to meet with and mentor students may be as outmoded as that of the full-time student with time to linger in conversation.

Adjunct faculty are even more overworked, often teaching at multiple institutions in order to make ends meet. These faculty may very well be

36. Selingo, *College (Un)bound*.

37. Among full-time undergraduate students, 18% reported working twenty to thirty-four hours per week and 6% reported working thirty-five hours or more per week. See Susan Aud, et al., *The Condition of Education 2013* (NCES 2013-037) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013037.pdf> (accessed December 30, 2013).

38. Selingo, *College (Un)bound*, 2013.

39. Adrianna Kezar, Daniel Maxey, and Judith Eaton, *An Examination of the Changing Faculty: Ensuring Institutional Quality and Achieving Desired Student Learning Outcomes*, Occasional Paper, Council for Higher Education Accreditation, January 2014, http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CHEA_Examination_Changing_Faculty_2013.pdf (accessed October 4, 2014).

excellent teachers, but the very nature of adjunct instruction disconnects classroom teaching from institutional mission. Adjuncts often do not have the opportunity to contextualize individual courses in light of departmental curricula or the larger whole of the curriculum and are often isolated from students and other educators. Overdependence on adjunct and contingent instructors raises serious concerns, since it sometimes results in teaching that is disengaged from an institution's mission and its fulfillment through more active educational relationships between students and faculty. In short, adjunct instruction delivers the “part,” but unplugs it from the whole.

Taken together, these “centrifugal” forces mean that aspects of higher education tend to move out away from one another, losing their center and their focus. This situation has led some observers to stake a claim in the past, mourning what has been lost as curricular models and educational practices have adapted over time. Others have fixated on perceived crises of the present, frenetically reacting to shifts in our midst. A better path might be to avoid succumbing to both these temptations and instead to try to pull the past and the present together. How can higher education attend to the successes of its past while reaping the benefits that may be hidden within the new realities that we face today? How might it resist the tendency for all the pieces to fly apart and perhaps recover a sense of “educating for the common good” at its core? In essence, we need to find a *centripetal* force that effectively mitigates the many *centrifugal* ones that we now face.

Higher education and the promise of vocation

Fortunately, many of these pressing challenges can be addressed by greater attention to the work of vocational exploration and discernment. What is it about the language of vocation that facilitates this process? What does it mean to bring the language of vocation into the educational process for students and faculty? What does paying attention to vocation do for an institution? While these questions will only be adequately addressed by the work of this volume as a whole, it may be worth laying out some of the broad characteristics of vocational reflection. Three of these elements—vocation's enduring, mission-oriented, and holistic dimensions—suggest that it may well offer the kind of centripetal force that higher education needs in the present moment.

Vocation is enduring

Simply put, vocation is not a fad. The language of vocation is as long-standing as education itself; its rich and dynamic history feeds its lasting quality and provides it with a wide relevance. As already noted in this volume (and as will be examined more thoroughly in chapter 4), vocation was once used narrowly to reference a very specific call to the priesthood or a religious order. Centuries later, vocation began to be used to refer to particular preparation for paid employment. While this inheritance might seem confusing at first, it can also contribute to the richness of the concept—inasmuch as vocation expanded to include nonreligious contexts but never lost its theological significance. Precisely because vocation applies to both spiritual calling and paid work—that is, both to broader queries of meaning and to specific career preparation—it can serve as an integrative concept for higher education in the present.

By way of illustration: vocation's enduring quality helps us remain attentive to the positive elements of specialization, even while serving as something of an antidote to some of its unintended consequences. After all, the problem facing higher education is not academic specialization per se, but rather those forms of it that go unmediated by integrative elements. Without specialized knowledge, higher education would not be able to fulfill its call to address the very pressing challenges facing our world today. Nevertheless, specialization without attentiveness to integrative questions of ethics and meaning would fail to faithfully address the technically complex but also fundamentally human dimensions of the world's deepest needs.

The language of vocation honors what is valuable in specialization while also stretching the concept in new directions. Rather than simply lamenting an overemphasis on specialization (particularly as this manifests itself in an excessive focus on the major field of study), vocational reflection encourages us to affirm the major while also opening it up to integrative questions. The notion of the “enriched major,” an idea grounded in the work of Ernest L. Boyer and highlighted recently by Arthur Levine and Diane Dean, illustrates the way in which vocational queries can both affirm and faithfully stretch specialization.⁴⁰ The enriched major points to the importance of seeing educational fulfillment as more than

40. Ernest L. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Levine and Dean, *Generation on a Tightrope*.

simply the knowledge of particular content and the expertise associated with an academic discipline. Knowledge of the discipline must be mindful of larger ethical concerns and challenges to which the discipline can attend: “What are the social and economic implications to be pursued? What are the ethical and moral issues within the specialty that need to be confronted?”⁴¹ From this perspective, specific fields of study—as well as the professions—are given a broader purview through reflection on a more diverse range of issues. The advantages of specialization are maintained, even as commitments to questions about meaning and purpose are nurtured. One gift of vocation lies in its ability to affirm disciplinary expertise but also to situate knowledge within larger purposes. This brings us to a second characteristic of vocation—its ability to serve as a guiding principle.

Vocation is attentive to mission

Vocation serves as an orienting principle that keeps us moving in the right direction even amid rapid change; it offers a north star that helps us navigate a frenetic educational environment. The fast pace of technological change tempts us to get lost in the immediate. The fiscal challenges facing higher education place more and more demands on the time of students and educators alike. For students, the culturally dictated overemphasis on employment as a college outcome often leads to viewing general education as an unnecessary and even annoying hurdle. For educators, the pressing demands of the twenty-first-century academy can lead to viewing the daily tasks of academia as distractions and disruptions. In the midst of these challenges, the language of vocation—which necessarily reminds us to give adequate attentive to the big picture—helps us to see how such apparently small matters as advising students, developing syllabi, and even participating in committee meetings can contribute to the whole. It thereby enables us to recognize how that larger whole can influence students and advance an institution’s mission. In a manner of speaking, vocation asks us to “get out of ourselves,” yet without ignoring the valued contribution that individuals make to shared goals.

Being attentive to vocation helps us to address, in a generative way, the concerns often raised about the excessive individualism evidenced in

41. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience*, 290.

colleges and universities. As noted above, higher education has clearly inherited an overemphasis on the individual; nevertheless, we should not ignore the ways that individual outcomes can be crucial. William Frame demonstrates that vocation facilitates the exploration of individual interests but places them in a shared context of social responsibility.⁴² A robust pedagogy of vocation can accept the individualism that higher education has inherited and understand it as a new beginning point, rather than a fundamental hindrance to an authentic education. Indeed, a rich understanding of vocation takes the contemporary focus on the individual and opens it out to the “other.”⁴³

This expansive perspective is evident in Ernest L. Boyer’s vision for undergraduate education. Boyer’s work repeatedly raises questions about the balance between individual and communal outcomes for higher education without diminishing the importance of either. Boyer fully understood the challenges facing higher education in the late twentieth century, given its longstanding tendency to focus on the *parts* rather than the whole. His work effectively frames what it means to consider *individual* outcomes, but simultaneously to open them up to a *communal* perspective. Boyer’s body of work suggests that undergraduates should wrestle with questions of identity, purpose, and community, and underscores the importance of significant questions such as “Who am I? What is the purpose of life? What are my obligations to others; what are theirs to me?”⁴⁴ Identity is a crucial concern for students, but it is embedded in a larger network of mutual responsibility. This prompts us to consider a third strength of vocation for our time and place: its attention to the whole person.

Vocation is holistic

Vocation stakes a claim on the whole of a person—affecting ways of knowing, being, and doing.⁴⁵ As such, vocation is attentive not only to

42. William Frame, *The American College Presidency as Vocation: Easing the Burden, Enhancing the Joy* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2013).

43. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 175.

44. Ernest L. Boyer, “General Education: The Integrated Core,” text of speech delivered as the Academic Convocation Address at the University of San Francisco, April 11, 1988, Catalog No: 1000 0000 9298 (Mechanicsburg, PA, The Ernest L. Boyer, Sr. Archives Collection, 1988), 33.

45. See the comments on the work of Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, note 1 *supra*.

what we know but also to who we are and how we act. This formative claim of vocation applies not only to students but also to faculty and staff. Indeed, vocation is generative for the academy precisely because it applies to both those being educated and those influencing and delivering the education. Moreover, the language of vocation stakes a claim not only on individuals within colleges and universities, but also on the institution itself—providing a means to pull together institutional structures, programs, and practices toward achieving shared aims. Vocational exploration and discernment can be embedded into the curriculum in general education and in the major; it can infuse career and academic advising. The language of vocation is similarly apropos for co-curricular education, in everything from residence hall programs to athletic team philosophy to chapel programs.⁴⁶ Moreover, vocation can serve as an avenue to pull these disparate parts of the institution together, creating space for relationships across apparent divides. On the whole, attention to vocation can address the disaggregation of the educational process that has occurred as a result of broader shifts in the academy.

Once again, Boyer's work helps to illustrate this vision for vocation. He surveyed a broad range of academic programs and campus offices, examining their contribution to institutional mission and suggesting how they might be redirected toward the greater fulfillment of that mission. Boyer emphasized the potential of the campus community *as a whole* to be educationally purposeful.⁴⁷ Moreover, he believed that the ideals of general education could and should be fulfilled in both the curriculum and the co-curriculum.⁴⁸ His work sought to expand and enrich our understanding of faculty scholarship in a manner that returned our attention to the ways that each form of academic work contributes to institutional mission.⁴⁹ Boyer's body of work reminds us that effective undergraduate

46. See the discussion of the importance of co-curricular conversations around vocation in chapter 11.

47. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, Special report, with a Foreword by Ernest L. Boyer (Lawrenceville, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

48. Ernest L. Boyer and Arthur Levine, *A Quest for Common Learning: The Aims of General Education* (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1981).

49. Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).

education involves bringing together seemingly separate arenas of the college or university on behalf of shared educational purposes.

Vocation and the common good

The language of vocation provides just the sort of generative catalyst the academy needs to rouse attention to the rich promise and deep potential of higher education amid the complex and pressing realities of our time and context. It is conceptually broad enough to lead the academy into new territory—to encourage faculty and students to see beyond the narrow confines in which their respective academic disciplines and professional aspirations have been situated. At the same time, its perspective is not so novel or so intense as to make genuine progress unattainable. The language of vocation offers us a renewed sense of focus, thereby counterbalancing the impact of higher education’s centrifugal tendencies that have left us feeling unmoored, while still honoring the gifts inherent in those forces.

Commenting on the work of William Perkins, Gilbert Meilaender describes vocation as integrally related to the common good. Employing the language of Aristotelian causation in the discussion of vocation, he describes the common good as the “final cause,” or ultimate purpose, of our callings.⁵⁰ In our own time and place, being attentive to vocation helps us to see and be attentive to the “good” we hold in common without neglecting the individual talents and strengths that compose that shared good. Moreover, vocation offers us a common vocabulary that influences how we both use our specific gifts and to recognize the strengths of others as avenues through which we can both *see* and *seek* a common good. Responding faithfully to our present challenges means recognizing the elements of change for what they are: compelling realities that must find their place within a larger pursuit of the college or university’s mission.

Of course, it is one thing to theorize that vocation serves as a means to addressing the challenges facing higher education; it is quite another to bring its potential to fruition. In the following section, I will describe how particular institutions have engaged the theory and practice of vocational discernment to address specific institutional challenges.

50. Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 90.

Vocation in practice

How have colleges and universities integrated the language of vocation into their educational programs in a manner that illustrates its value? Accomplishing this task requires strategically embedding the institution's mission and identity into the curriculum and using these elements to develop an ethos of vocation on campus. The remainder of this chapter is focused on how two promising vocational formation strategies, the *common curriculum* and a *mentoring environment*, have been utilized in particular campus contexts to redirect momentum toward institutional mission.

Establishing a common curriculum

The common curriculum can productively advance vocational formation in the current context of higher education. Constituting a modest subset of the curriculum that is shared by all students, a common curriculum aims neither to replace distribution requirements nor to negate or usurp the major. Rather, it seeks to develop spaces for integration—a connective network of relationships across the educational experience. The work of vocation can find its impetus in individual gifts, but its fulfillment comes in allowing people to see their gifts in light of communal aims. The common curriculum is one way that vocation can serve as a means of educational integration.

Dominican University, located in River Forest, Illinois, illustrates how the work of vocation can enable colleges to recontextualize specialized study within larger integrative aims. By adopting a common core curriculum, Dominican has abated the decentering impacts of disciplinary overspecialization by fostering connections that complement, rather than diminish, the strengths of specialized study. A series of small, intimate, vocation-themed courses allow students to consider consequential and communal concerns, to ponder life's big questions, and to make connections between coursework and personal experience. The developmental design of these seminars allows students to begin with questions of the self and the particulars of their major and then to progress outward to broader questions of communal concern. Moreover, these seminars occur across the four-year curriculum, thereby providing intentional space for students to consider integrative questions as they progress in their major courses.

Students choose from a variety of seminars that explore a common theme. First-year seminars focus on the “examined life,” with course themes addressing a variety of perspectives on the notion of knowing oneself. Sophomore seminars examine “life in community” and consider issues facing local, national, and global communities. Junior seminars focus on “a life’s work,” building on questions of the self and community in a manner that engages students in a deeper understanding of work itself. Finally, senior seminars focus on “the good life,” fostering an understanding of the virtues as requisite qualities for living out one’s vocations in the world.⁵¹ Thus, the seminars guide students to make connections, which in turn compel them to discern and ultimately to live out their callings.

As the common curriculum was designed and implemented, Dominican made an intentional effort to equip faculty to deliver its constituent courses in a way that would be more likely to achieve their intended vocational aims. One of the genuine challenges of an overspecialized academic culture is that faculty are often not prepared to ask integrative questions. An initiative titled “Contemplating Life’s Callings” prepared faculty to integrate contemplative practices for the discernment of vocation within the learning experience. To achieve this goal, leaders provided seminar instructors with faculty development opportunities that highlighted the Dominican tradition of contemplation. These included a three-day retreat for thirty to forty faculty members, followed by regular meetings throughout the year to integrate strategies and understandings from the retreat into the seminars.

The common curriculum at Dominican University preserves and infuses its distinct institutional mission. Claire Noonan, Vice President for Ministry and Mission at Dominican, speaks to how the common curriculum addresses the present-day realities of higher education: “As the marketplace culture tends to press in, the common curriculum has been a place where we’ve staked our claim.”⁵² These interdisciplinary seminars are required for all students, offering a somewhat countercultural perspective in a consumer-driven world where “choice” usually reigns.⁵³ Each

51. The important role of the virtues in vocational exploration and discernment is taken up in Part Three of this book.

52. Claire Noonan, personal interview, 2014.

53. See chapter 1 for further reflections on the role of choice and its (sometimes debilitating) effects.

seminar year is structured with common texts, a shared theme, and guiding questions. Building from these shared elements, faculty members create courses that fit their particular interests. Commonality and integration thereby build upon, rather than negate, the individual interests of students and faculty.

Dominican University has used its vocational efforts to strengthen its own sense of institutional mission, built on the claim that the language of vocation means something particular in the Dominican context—namely, that “in order to be a vocational person, one must be contemplative.”⁵⁴ As a result of these initiatives, faculty members have become more conversant about the practices of contemplation and have sometimes been able to add contemplative practices into the classroom.⁵⁵ Moreover, faculty members and students gain greater familiarity with specific vocational practices, thus providing a space for shared conversation.

Creating a shared experience across the curriculum is one means to build an ethos of vocation. A complementary strategy is to attend to the campus culture, not only within but also beyond the curriculum. This approach is evident in our next illustration.

Building a mentoring environment

What does it mean to develop a mentoring environment? It means to shape the ethos of an institution in intentional ways around the values and ideals that the college or university has designated as central. A mentoring environment involves infusing institutional mission into campus culture. Furthermore, for students who experience college as a fracturing experience (with various aspects of their lives being attended to by different parts of the academy), the mentoring environment can bring these pieces back together again. It can serve to counterbalance those centrifugal forces that pull the campus apart, yet without requiring radical restructuring of campus infrastructure or added demands that can make this goal difficult to achieve.

While many colleges and universities have recognized the importance of mentoring at all levels (of students, faculty, staff, and administrators), the designation of one individual as another’s mentor can sometimes have

54. Claire Noonan, personal interview, 2014.

55. Claire Noonan, personal interview, 2014.

the effect of contributing to a culture of individualism. Even though mentoring relationships bring two people together, the mentee is still often expected to listen to *one* voice. Focusing instead on the creation of a mentoring *environment* can address this drawback, as well as deepen the formative influence of mentoring. Sharon Daloz Parks argues that, while a single mentor is sufficient for initiating emerging adults into a profession *as it is*, only a mentoring *community* is adequate to orient emerging adults into a profession (and the society it serves) as they *could become*.⁵⁶ A mentoring environment creates an institutional ethos that invites students into the work of vocational exploration and discernment.

Goshen College offers one illustration of the value of nurturing a mentoring environment. In order to assess the campus climate as it related to faith mentoring, the college conducted campus surveys. Results indicated that students yearned to hear more from both teaching faculty and administrative faculty⁵⁷ regarding their faith journeys. Further, the survey results suggested that while faculty were open to sharing their faith stories, they often didn't know how to do so; nor were they certain about when such sharing was appropriate. Moreover, the notion of being a "faith-mentor" turned out to be a loaded term; many felt that it should be someone else's responsibility and expected that it would demand considerable time and expertise for which faculty and staff were not well prepared.⁵⁸ These findings helped shape Goshen's emphasis on equipping *all* college employees to see their specific forms of work as contributing to a mentoring environment for faith and vocation.

Grounded in a three-part framework of "knowing, being, and doing," Goshen's efforts represent a college-wide focus on an important vocational practice. The "knowing" element describes the aims and qualities of effective mentoring and the variety of ways and spaces in which "mentoring moments" take place. The "being" element affirms the conviction that effective mentoring is grounded one's own meaning-making and faith formation. Finally, the "doing" component identifies a wide variety of practices, both inside and outside the classroom, that advance vocational formation.

56. Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 174.

57. At Goshen College, "administrative faculty" refers to such positions as residence hall directors, coaches, and chaplains.

58. Bob Yoder, personal interview, March 20, 2014.

In addition to equipping faculty both to share their faith stories and to invite student reflections on theirs, Goshen expanded its network for mentoring. Student chaplains in the residence halls were established to shape the residential context toward vocational reflection. A session was added to new employee orientation to allow the campus chaplain to help all employees recognize their contributions to the mentoring environment. Finally, campus-wide communications, both print and digital, were developed to build some degree of common vocabulary across a faculty and employee base with a variety of religious perspectives, thus increasing institutional capacity for mentoring. By equipping college employees to share their own faith journeys in their existing contexts and within the bounds of their existing responsibilities, a more interconnected mentoring environment was brought into being.

The faculty at Goshen College discovered, crucially, that inviting educators to contribute to a mentoring environment does not need to add to the workload of already overburdened educators. Sharon Parks astutely notes the impact of institutional context in considering the educators' responses to invitations to contribute to mentoring programs: "Pressured by the demands of financially stressed institutions, many professionals understandably wilt when the call to mentorship is added to a long list of musts."⁵⁹ Asking individual educators to take on mentees in one-to-one relationships can be overwhelming, particularly when educators are already doing so much more with less. Bob Yoder, Goshen College's chaplain, reflects that a "mentoring environment frees us up as a community," in contrast to the extra work demanded by individualized mentoring: "In a world with too much to do," he continues, "the pressure of being a mentor is too much."⁶⁰ As an alternative, the notion of "a mentoring environment" helps educators recognize existing places and contexts as mentoring moments, an idea to which hard-working employees can be receptive, even within a frenetic and demanding context. Yoder observes that "the beauty of the mentoring environment is that it's not all on you, it's on the whole of the environment."⁶¹ That environment comprises many things, including individual relationships, course assignments, and brief conversations on the sidewalk. By focusing on the mentoring qualities of the

59. Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 174.

60. Bob Yoder, personal interview, March 20, 2014.

61. Bob Yoder, personal interview, March 20, 2014.

campus environment, Goshen's efforts have helped to renew the promise of vocation, helping educators both to recognize the ways they are contributing to the whole educational process, and to apprehend how that process impacts every student.

Vocation as the vocation of higher education

Higher education leaders cannot eliminate digitization, generational divides, individualism, fiscal constraints, or overspecialization; nevertheless, they should seek to mitigate the ways in which these have functioned as centrifugal forces. Precisely because higher education has inherited the task of educating for the common good, it can make use of the theory and practice of vocation as a means of addressing some of the forces that threaten to pull it apart. Indeed, by developing a capacity for providing students with the time and space they need to explore and discern their vocations, higher education may be fulfilling one of its *own* essential vocations. When colleges and universities adequately consider not only their unique potential but also the real dynamics of disruption, they will be well on their way to living more fully into their particular callings. This in turn will further enable institutions of higher education to contribute to the important work of vocational formation, for they will be even better positioned to help students discern and to fulfill their own vocational paths.