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# Vocation at Work



By Elspeth Rossetti and Elizabeth Krishnan

**A**n education that prepares for employment is paramount today in the minds of students and their parents. The value of higher education is increasingly measured in employment outcomes. For example, the four most attractive attributes of Santa Clara University for our students are employment related. Our reputation among employers, high employment among our graduates, education for skills that employers value, and employer networking all outrank small class sizes, inspiring professors, interesting courses, and study abroad. This focus on return-on-investment plays out on

the national stage as well. In a nationwide survey taken by UCLA, 85.9% of the class of 2014 state that “getting a better job” is the reason they pursued higher education. Today’s incoming students are under increasing pressure to make an immediate decision about their major that will lead, as they perceive it, to a lucrative job.

The pressure students feel to declare a major that they see as career worthy and their urgency when they embark on this path can seem to preclude the process of discernment that is integral to a Jesuit education. How can we educators in the Jesuit tradition reconcile these disparate approaches to education and

address employment concerns while giving students the education for life that encourages the authentic and conscientious decision making that the world needs? Because of this heightened focus on career preparation our students often feel trapped and bound by the pressure to “get a job.” They frequently draw misinformed conclusions about the employment value of a particular major.

One student recently sought help in our Career Center, and his story with variations applies to a

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number of others. Scott, we will call him, entered the business school as a freshman; he was not interested in business but knew that transferring into an impacted school later would be difficult. He wants a financially secure job but does not want to work in a “corporation.” He is fairly certain he will declare biology because he likes the challenge, not the content itself. Science would lead to medical school, and Scott thinks he should go. But he doesn’t really want to be a doctor. Scott loves philosophy but would never major in it because it is not “practical.” He entered our office declaring his decision to transfer to science, but everything inside him was screaming out because his thought process conflicted with a deeper knowledge about his real interests. Still, he made it clear that he would never major in the humanities and any conversation on that point would be fruitless. Despite the clarity expressed in his thought process,

future decision making will be more difficult. And as educators, we are in danger of forsaking our students if we fail to step in and offer a new way forward.

For the wholeness of our students and the well-being of our universities, we are called to reimagine how we introduce vocation discernment to resistant students. As Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the Jesuit superior general, stated in his address at Assembly ’89, “This changed world of ours is the only one in which we are called to work out our mission.”

Twenty years later, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, Fr. Kolvenbach’s successor, stated that we Jesuit educators recognize that “a careful

his anxiety clouded his ability to trust his deeper knowing.

The implications of fear-driven decision making weigh on an entire university. With this example, the business school loses a space for someone who genuinely wants to study business, the sciences gain a student who is pursuing a path against his nature, and the humanities never get to lay eyes on a student who would bring passion to the subject. The danger here is that students forsake their very selves in the pursuit of perceived security of a job and that

process of discernment” is a “non-negotiable element” of the Jesuit mission. Discernment elevates our calling as individuals beyond career preparation and toward “active life commitment.” Students who engage in a thoughtful discernment process are able to articulate how their gifts and talents align with the world’s needs, and they seek to express this alignment in ways that extend far beyond work. Our commitment as educators is to cultivate an emerging sense of students’ vocation – a meaningful purpose reflected in all aspects of their lives, including work, family, community, and relationships.

To release students from the ties that bind them to career decisions and invite them into deeper exploration of their interests, we must first allay their fears about employment. Their need for reassurance of employability must be addressed before students can hear any talk of vocation. At Santa Clara, we begin this process by gathering and communicating data that highlights the breadth of employment opportunities available for all majors. For example, employers value internships and employment during college more than major when they



recruit candidates. We showcase this reality by letting our students know that Google, Apple, and Cisco – the top three employers of SCU alumni – hire more of our nontechnical majors than our engineers. Google for example, hires for skillset, not major, and particularly values our liberal arts students. Our Career Center has also developed a campuswide marketing campaign to showcase the work of recent alumni, particularly those in the liberal arts. (See sample: <http://bit.ly/sampleprofile>) Our alumni profiles are highlighted on all of our campus screens and in the residence halls.

Fear is a strong emotion, and data-driven arguments are cognitive approaches that do not address students' feelings. As we saw with Scott, who refused to consider his interest in the humanities, no amount of data would have touched the anxieties that were paralyzing his decision making. But experience can release students from fear-based paralysis. Experience in the form of internships raises awareness of the broad opportunities available to students and builds trust in their capabilities in a very concrete way. Internship recruiting for lower classmen provides a unique opportunity to give students an early experience that can transform how they think about majors and open their eyes to new possibilities. Students who have pursued internships during their freshman and sophomore years quickly realize the breadth of opportunities available to them that are not defined by any particular major.

The introduction of employment data and experiential learning opportunities liberates students and

reassures them that they are employable. Students are then more willing and able to explore the deeper question of vocation, the hallmark of their Jesuit education. To paraphrase the theologian Frederick Buechner, they are now ready to explore where their “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”



Illustrations by Santa Clara student  
Kate Lassalle-Klein.

Returning to the example of Scott, we saw a readiness to consider alternative options only after he pursued an internship freshman year. After a summer internship in health policy with Kaiser Permanente, he returned to our office excited to learn more about alternative opportunities in healthcare and open to considering majors outside of business and science. He was now ready to engage with the questions of vocation and explore the intersection between his gifts and the world's needs. We could now suggest that he consider opportunities like the Global Medical Brigade and our university's Healthcare Ethics Internship

program. This student's development models the purpose of a Jesuit education as recognized by Fr. Kolvenbach in his address at Creighton University: “Our education was never solely for your personal development or to prepare you for a career. The goal of Jesuit higher education is always in the context of the whole world and the role of the human person in it. The vision of Jesuit education is that we can make a contribution to the world by equipping you to make a critical analysis of the condition of our world today, with compassion and commitment. The success of our Jesuit education is determined by what you become.” Once released from his own career expectations, Scott was ready to take full advantage of his Jesuit education and blossom into an individual capable of authentically discerning his fit in the world. He has experienced authentic discernment, and we can trust

that he will continually “become more” as he revisits questions of vocation throughout his lifetime.

When students are able to consider the bigger question of who they are in relation to the world, the entire educational landscape becomes a lab for vocation discernment. Students are able to make meaning out of immersion trips, classes, study abroad, and community-based learning and apply this meaning to an emerging sense of how they wish to live in a purposeful way. With this integration, work becomes just one expression among many against the much larger backdrop of vocation. ■