

Gender Does Matter: Barriers for Women Living Out Their Vocational Calling in the Academy

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## Gender Does Matter: Barriers for Women Living Out Their Calling in the Academy

Although the link between religion and higher education has a long history, their relationship has been characterized by various tensions, contributing to a growing separation between academic and religious pursuits.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, the pendulum has begun to swing in the direction of increased attention toward the connection between spiritual development and the role of the academy. One significant catalyst for this interest is the work of Alexander Astin and his colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) beginning in the late 1990's. Astin's research suggests that undergraduates are far more spiritual than was once recognized and that they desire guidance in their search for spiritual truth and meaning from their colleges and universities.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, college professors have not typically received the necessary support to attend to matters of faith and spirituality in their classrooms and in their conversations with students. Alexander and Helen Astin, for example, conducted a series of personal interviews with randomly selected faculty from diverse colleges and universities (e.g., state and public research universities, as well as private secular and religiously affiliated colleges).<sup>3</sup> Their findings suggested that although nearly all faculty members were willing and able to speak about personal and professional matters of spirituality, they did not feel encouraged or supported by their institutions to do so. Nearly a decade following the Astins' seminal work, research in higher education has seen a proliferation of articles and books on the topic of religion and spirituality in higher education. This work has focused on such diverse topics as the beliefs and values of college students, religious

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Chickering, Jon C. Dalton, and Liesa Stamm, *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, "Meaning and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty: A Study of Values, Authenticity, and Stress." (Los Angeles: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 1988). See also Alexander W. Astin, "The Changing American College Student: Thirty-Year Trends, 1966-1996." *The Review of Higher Education* (21) 2: 115-135.

<sup>3</sup> Astin and Astin, "Meaning and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty: A Study of Values, Authenticity, and Stress."

perspectives on scholarship and teaching, and the role of student affairs professionals in the spiritual development of college students.<sup>4</sup>

One particularly important aspect of faith and spiritual development in the context of higher education, which is the focus of the current study, is the process of developing a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Questions about life meaning and purpose, for example, often surface during the college years as students consider issues associated with personal identity, faith beliefs, and career options. Religious systems frequently offer a home to questions about one's personal life meaning, role, and purpose.<sup>5</sup> The answers that religion provides usually depend in some way on the juxtaposition of one's finite human qualities with the infinite, transcendent nature of deity and/or the spiritual realm.<sup>6</sup> An examination of life purpose within the spheres of religion and spirituality, however, also calls for consideration of anthropological and biological systems, particularly as they pertain to gender differences.<sup>7</sup> In order to comprehensively understand the religious or spiritual context for life purpose and associated gender differences, one must consider the dimensions of both anthropological and biological influence.

Within the field of anthropology, some have raised questions as to the reality and role of gender difference within one's culture. Mead, for example, asks whether gender differences are *real*, whether giftedness in the division of labor is biologically or socially constructed.<sup>8</sup> Her research suggests that gender differences, no matter how they are culturally manifested, are

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Love and Donna Talbot, "Defining Spiritual Development: A Missing Consideration for Student Affairs," *NASPA Journal* 37 (1992): 361-375.

<sup>5</sup> Three works help frame this perspective: Karen Armstrong's *Buddha*, Ursula King's – *Women in the World's Religions, Past and Present*, and the volume edited by Arvind Sharma – *Women in World Religions*.

<sup>6</sup> See the encyclopedic account by John Bowker: *Religions*.

<sup>7</sup> For anthropology, see Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz; for biology, see Valerie Saiving, & Bonnie Miller-McLemore.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Mead – from *Male and Female*.

valuable and misunderstood. Geertz<sup>9</sup> writes that our fields of social action within culture are not given by nature, but are “historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied,” leaving us with the impression that nature is not what determines our cultural role or purpose. Others have focused on the biological aspects of gender. Valerie Saiving,<sup>10</sup> for example, points out that gender is often taken for granted as a way of defining distinctive roles for women and men. She argues that this distinction is singularly rooted in motherhood, which represents a biological role that defines a larger religious framework for women that has largely been overlooked by patriarchal theological systems. Miller-McLemore<sup>11</sup> adds that motherhood transcends every aspect of the female persona and represents a social, personal, spiritual and even mythical component of the female psyche. The notion that one’s consciousness is essentially rooted in the body requires that we look at life purpose from a gendered perspective in order to understand its roots and ramifications. A book review by Fivush<sup>12</sup> elaborates on the way in which gender is biological, socio-emotional and cognitive, providing further evidence of the degree to which one’s gender is influenced by one’s sense of self. Each author suggests that life role is tied to one’s gender and should be considered in any significant discussion of life purpose.

The role of myth can also serve as a synthesizing lens through which to view life purpose because it is a framework that overlaps with nearly every dimension of the human condition. Myth frequently relies on the notion of *story*, a medium that provides both teller and hearer the opportunity to express and interpret life experiences on many levels of meaning. It is an open-ended construct, inviting interpretation by each of its readers, as they personalize their

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<sup>9</sup> See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 363-4, as well as his - *Local Knowledge*, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> See both works by Valerie Saiving.

<sup>11</sup> As discussed thoroughly in Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s writing on motherhood and its demands.

<sup>12</sup> Fivush reviews *Gender Development*, Judith Owen Blakemore, Sheri Berenbaum and Lynn Liben, which provides a well researched analysis of the ways gender identity develops.

experiential backgrounds. Joseph Campbell<sup>13</sup> sheds light on the role of myth and gender in defining and demonstrating life purpose. He points out that deity itself is a gendered notion – that male and female gods have different tasks in the cosmos and that these are then reflected at the human level in various forms. He writes: “woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than him, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, and bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation...<sup>14</sup>” Campbell describes the fourfold functionality of mythology within each culture as opening our minds, presenting transcendent images of the universe, providing a social order that ties people to the mysteries of deity, carrying each individual through the course of their life.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the fourth function of myth provides each person with a kind of roadmap of their life purpose and journey.

There appears to be some consensus among the several views of gender and life purpose as delineated by the fields of anthropology, biology, and myth, that gender is a significant factor in contributing to the determination of one’s life purpose. The purpose of the current study is to provide empirical evidence to support inferences about the interdependency between gender and life-purpose.

Life purpose - its origins and its degree of dependency on gender - appears differently from one religion to another, depending on the nature of the religious tradition itself.<sup>16</sup> In some

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<sup>13</sup> See Joseph Campbell’s classic: *The Power of Myth*.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Campbell elaborates in three seminal works: – *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, *The Power of Myth*, and *Pathways to Bliss*.

<sup>15</sup> Also, see Campbell’s *Myths of Light*.

<sup>16</sup> See the work of Rita Gross on the issues of patriarchy and feminism in religion – *Feminism & Religion*.

cases, the concept may not appear at all. In order to fix a position by which we can examine the interplay between myth, anthropology, and biology, our own research enters this discussion within the Christian religious framework, where life purpose is frequently referred to as *vocation*. Although vocation is an elusive concept that is difficult to define, the Christian framework generally views vocation in a spiritual context, as a calling from God. For the purpose of the present study, we draw from the conceptual literature on Christian vocation and life purpose and define vocation broadly, as one's *sacred lifework*, including any human activity that gives meaning, purpose, and direction to life.<sup>17</sup> According to our conceptualization, one's calling transcends job and career to include friendship, parenting, marriage, church membership, and community involvement. Thus, vocational calling refers to the whole of life, the personal as well as the professional realms of being.<sup>18</sup>

Several authors have argued that faculty on college campuses should play a key role in stimulating and nurturing students' spiritual development, including a sense of Christian vocation, through their leadership and mentoring roles. Parks and Fowler, for example, both describe the significance of the mentoring community in the development of students' vocational calling.<sup>19</sup> Additional research examining the impact of mentoring on undergraduate students has found that students who are mentored are more satisfied with their academic major and the larger institution, more likely to persist to degree completion, report higher academic aspirations and achievement, and report higher levels of both personal and spiritual well-being.<sup>20</sup> Additional recent research has shown a connection between faculty members' spirituality and their chosen

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<sup>17</sup> See the broad conceptualization framed in the article by Miller-Perrin and Thompson.

<sup>18</sup> See Schurrman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*.

<sup>19</sup> Sharon D. Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). See also James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Brett T. Baker, Susan P. Hocevar, and W. Brad Johnson, "The Prevalence and Nature of Service Academy Mentoring: A Study of Navy Midshipmen." *Military Psychology* 15 (2003): 273-284. In addition, see Mark W. Cannister, "Mentoring and the Spiritual Well-Being of Late Adolescents," *Adolescence* 34 (1999): 769-79. Finally, see Chris Koch and W. Brad Johnson, "Documenting the Benefits of Undergraduate Mentoring," *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* 19 (2000): 172-175.

teaching methods. Bennett, for example, found that faculty scoring at high levels on a measure of spirituality were more likely to encourage students to engage actively in their academic community and to help them develop their capacity for social connectedness, responsiveness, and accountability.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Lindholm and Astin found that faculty who emphasize their spirituality tend to use more learner-centered approaches such as class discussions and student presentations compared to their colleagues who place a lower level of importance on spirituality.<sup>22</sup> These findings were found to occur largely independently of faculty members' field of study, personal characteristics, or type of academic institution. Despite the potentially important role of faculty in student spiritual and vocational development, however, most research on spirituality in higher education to date has focused on students rather than faculty. Very little research has examined either how faculty members view their roles as mentors, in particular, how faculty view their roles as mentors of Christian vocation or how they conceptualize and experience Christian vocation in their own lives.

One exception is a study conducted by Narloch which examined how faculty conceptualize and experience Christian vocational calling in their lives.<sup>23</sup> Narloch interviewed a random stratified sample of 45 faculty members regarding their understanding of the concept of vocational calling.<sup>24</sup> The majority of faculty conceptualized vocation from a traditional perspective, defining vocation narrowly as one's occupation. Only 14% of faculty conceptualized vocation as involving multiple roles such as occupation, family, and service to others. The way that faculty conceptualize and define vocation is important, particularly as they communicate their views to both their male and female students. Traditional views of vocation,

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<sup>21</sup> John B. Bennett, *Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality*. (Boston, MA: Anker, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer A. Lindholm and Helen S. Astin, "Spirituality and Pedagogy: Faculty's Spirituality and Use of Student-Centered Approaches to Undergraduate Teaching," *The Review of Higher Education* 31 (2008): 185-207.

<sup>23</sup> Rodger Narloch, "College Students' Conceptions of Vocation and the Role of the Higher Education Mentoring Community," *Journal of College and Character* 2 (2004): 1-15.

<sup>24</sup> Narloch, "College Students' Conceptions of Vocation and the Role of the Higher Education Mentoring Community."

for example, defined vocational calling as professional ministry leadership within the church, professional service (e.g., work/career), or a more general calling to the religious life.<sup>25</sup> Such narrow definitions can be limiting, particularly to females who either choose parenthood over career or who are limited by particular traditions of their church denomination (e.g., exclusion from various leadership roles).

In another study, Thompson and Miller-Perrin found several interesting quantitative and qualitative results in examining faculty members' views of Christian vocation.<sup>26</sup> First, in contrast to previous research, these researchers found that faculty members defined vocation more broadly than career and included family and friendship roles in addition to their occupations. Second, their findings suggested the importance of mentoring relationships in the development of one's personal sense of vocation, suggesting that faculty members can potentially serve important mentoring roles in the lives of their students as they discern their vocations, just as mentors were important to their own vocational journeys. Third, Thompson and Miller-Perrin identified specific barriers that interfered with faculty members' ability to discern and live out their callings.<sup>27</sup> These potential vocational barriers are displayed in Table 1. These potential barriers to vocational development had previously been discussed in the literature but had never before been demonstrated empirically. They include negative attitudes and emotions, undue influence by authority figures (e.g., parents) and social pressures. In their study, Thompson and Miller-Perrin identified a number of significant gender differences as a

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<sup>25</sup> Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*. (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990). See also Gilbert Meilaender, "Working in the Horizons of God's Call: Divine Summons," *Christian Century* 117 (30) (2000): 1110-1118. No account of calling is complete without referencing Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Thompson and Miller-Perrin, "Vocational Discernment and Action: An Exploratory Study of Male and Female University Professors."

<sup>27</sup> Thompson and Miller-Perrin, "Vocational Discernment and Action: An Exploratory Study of Male and Female University Professors."

function of these barriers, demonstrating the need for further research, as the present study attempts to provide.

Studying potential barriers to vocational development is important because it may uncover obstacles that may prevent both men and women from fully realizing their full potential as academics, parents, colleagues, spouses, etc. Men and women, for example, may be hindered from hearing a particular vocational call when they deviate from a “traditional” role or expectation. This is particularly important for women, who have historically not only been limited by narrow definitions of vocation, but have been confined by various social and institutional structures supportive of gender inequality. As Schuurman notes, “The doctrine of vocation can be easily abused to promote injustice in public and private spheres. It can encourage inaction in the face of injustice, and actions that harm neighbors.”<sup>28</sup> Traditional theology has prescribed that women’s divinely ordained vocational calling be in the home, bearing and raising children, taking care of the household, and subordinating to their husbands. Feminist theology describes these assumptions as “oppressive” toward women because such views endorse a patriarchal relationship between men and women that might contribute to oppressive experiences including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.<sup>29</sup> Feminist theology has also critiqued and challenged these assumptions of hierarchy, calling for reform that restricts the dualism and hierarchy associated with gender and sex.<sup>30</sup> We agree that the concept of vocation not only transcends job and career, but also transcends gender, as well as race and class, and affirms the equality among all men and

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<sup>28</sup> Douglas J. Schuurman. *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Rebecca M. Groothuis. *Women Caught in the Conflict*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994). See also Serene Jones, *Feminist theory and Christian theology: Cartographies of Grace*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Chopp, “Feminism’s Theological Pragmatics: A Social Naturalism of Women’s Experience,” *The Journal of Religion* 67 (1987): 239-256. Moreover, see the work of Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition: Women’s Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). Finally, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary has much to offer on this topic: Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics*. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

women and their mutuality.<sup>31</sup> However, we also acknowledge that tensions between traditional theological views of women and feminist views might contribute to women's perceptions that barriers interfere with their attempts to pursue their vocational callings. Many women, for example, may desire to follow scriptural teachings but are torn between teachings about women's roles and feminist critiques of patriarchal theology which often confirms the second-class treatment of women.<sup>32</sup>

This paper describes the findings of a qualitative research study examining male and female university faculty members' perceptions of vocational barriers, sponsored by the Lilly Endowment's Theological Exploration of Vocation project. The research design included qualitative data assessing various barriers experienced while pursuing one's Christian vocation along with specific attention to sex differences in faculty responses. Our research was inspired by Frederick Buechner's insight that all theology is autobiography.<sup>33</sup> Thus, one effective way to understand how faculty members discern and act upon their faith and vocation is to hear their stories and self-reflections, thereby providing them enough room to express and interpret personal experiences. Our data collection is an attempt to touch on the personal mythology that each participant describes through their individual stories. Analysis of autobiographical writings focusing on faith and vocational calling within faculty members' teaching, scholarship, and leadership roles were used as a qualitative source of information relevant to the processes of vocational discernment and action. We hypothesized that women would experience a greater number of barriers than men and that the nature of the barriers would differ between men and women.

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<sup>31</sup> Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*.

<sup>32</sup> Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict*.

<sup>33</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1970).

## Methods and Procedures

### *The Faculty Sample*

The sample included faculty participants in an ongoing study on vocational discernment and action in university faculty, sponsored by the Lilly Endowment. Faculty who participated in a series of seminars designed to integrate faith, learning, and Christian vocation at a private university in Southern California (N=120) were invited to complete an autobiographical essay. Of those invited to participate, 83 faculty members did so for a response rate of 69%. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 69 years with a mean of 40.4 years of age. Additional demographic characteristics for the sample are displayed in Table 2.

### *Assessment Procedures*

The assessment included an autobiographical essay assignment associated with attendance at a seminar designed to integrate faith, learning, and vocation. Faculty were asked to write a self-reflective vocational essay focusing on: 1) the turning points in their lives that had shaped and clarified their vocational paths, 2) mentors who had offered guidance in discerning their vocation, and 3) the distractions, tensions, and barriers they had experienced in pursuing their vocation. The analysis for the current study focused on barriers experienced, including distractions and tensions, while pursuing faculty members' vocational callings.

Each faculty member was sent a letter inviting them to participate in the seminar autobiography assignment as part of an ongoing research project related to Christian vocation in the academy. An informed consent form detailing participants' rights and responsibilities was included with the letter, along with a brief demographic information form. Each faculty member was asked to complete their autobiographical essay prior to the seminar and to write their essay according to the following instructions:

*We would like for you to write a self-reflective essay focusing on your vocational journey up to this point in your life. Please aim for three to four pages of double-spaced text. The essay should **draw from some or all** of the following issues:*

- *A description of the major “turning points” along your vocational journey*
- *Discussion of particular moments of crisis or confusion as well as moments of joy and clarity along your journey*
- *Attention to particular individuals who have contributed either positively or negatively to your vocational development*
- *Discussion of experiences that have either affirmed your sense of calling or that have shaken your sense of calling*
- *Discussion of any distractions, tensions, or barriers along the way that you believe have hindered your pursuit of your vocational calling*

We carried out a content analysis of the essays using the methods described by Mayring and Patton, utilizing two readings of each essay – the first deductive, the second inductive.<sup>34</sup> The first reading deduces which essay passages respond to the writing prompt. Deductively, we employed the following process: We read each of the 83 essays, looking for specific mention of barriers to either discerning or to living out one's sense of calling. As we read each essay, we highlighted these pertinent passages and created a statistical record of which essays contained each topic. In a second reading, we applied an inductive approach in order to establish barrier subcategories. In each essay, as we focused our attention on the highlighted passages, we noted the recurring barrier subthemes that were present. We then collected all of the subthemes that were present and analyzed the frequency of occurrence of each subtheme in order to be able to determine their significance within the scope of all 83 essays.

We divided the essays by sex and reviewed the differences in each group's treatment of barriers. We focused on four subthemes in the context of the barriers mentioned in the essay passages including demographic factors, personal attitudes and negative emotions, interpersonal relationships, and socio-cultural pressures. Within each subtheme, many additional topics

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<sup>34</sup> See the works of Philipp Mayring and Michael Patton.

emerged and these are described in Table 1. Based on our review, we constructed a "thick description" for each subtheme and its set of topics, based on the conceptualization developed by Geertz.<sup>35</sup> In Geertz's own words, our analysis is a way of "sorting out the structures of signification" so that we can describe the "degree of coherence" of the "culture" of vocational journey. Thus, we have summarized the overall textual content of these essays as relating to barriers. Our approach was to let each faculty author's writing speak for itself. Accordingly, we identified the recurring types of content that are present in this 83-essay cultural artifact. Then, for each content type, we sampled representative excerpts from the essays, thus providing, via the voices of the faculty themselves, a "thick" account of the "anthropology" of vocational barrier.

## Results and Discussion

We divide this analysis into four sections based on the four barrier categories that are discussed in faculty members' autobiographical essays: demographic factors, personal attitudes and negative emotions, interpersonal relationships, and socio-cultural pressures.

### *Demographic Factors*

Examination of the essays indicated that 32% of the male respondents and 56% of the female respondents mentioned a demographic factor as a barrier. The most frequently mentioned demographic barriers for men were "race and ethnicity" and "socioeconomic background," accounting for 40% of the responses. In contrast, women most frequently mentioned their gender, accounting for 75% of their discussion of demographic barriers. The following representative essay excerpts illustrate these barrier perceptions.

One male faculty member essay included the following statement about "the system" tied to race:

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<sup>35</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

During my adolescent years, I was told about “the system” that is designed for black people in general to fail. Born into a family in the late 1960’s, not long before the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., I was two years of age when the tragedy of his death was ringing in the ears of every human being that understood what it meant to be in a struggle. My young adult years came with many challenges. These years helped me to identify that the home is the breeding ground of what “the system” becomes. My Dad taught against going to college. He believed it was worthless because of the white image placed on education in his day. This teaching resonated with my five older siblings. My journey is about my personal struggle as an African American male born and reared in East Los Angeles. This is a journey of overcoming the perceived insurmountable; about how I survived. This story is about a change of perspective leading to a change in living. By connecting the dots of my life, I attempt to make sense of a life that some would consider senseless.

By contrast, the predominant demographic barrier for women who are trying to live out their life purpose was the fact that they are female. One example described how one young girl struggled to stay active in sports, despite the expectation that sports were strictly a boy’s domain:

My specific calling where I found my purpose in life occurred during the college years where sports and administration were central in my life. I had been a very successful high school athlete. I was an all-state basketball player and softball player in high school and Calvin College was happy to have me as a student because I could play four sports—field hockey, volleyball, basketball, and archery. They were a division III school so they did not recruit but knew about my athletic abilities. By my senior year, I was the MVP on all those teams and named the outstanding athlete of the college. My gifts were in

sports. I tried to avoid sports as a major since my parents weren't wild about sports. My Dad had never allowed my two highly-gifted-in-sports older brothers to play on high school sports teams because they had to work on the farm. I only got to play high school sports because I sneaked onto the teams even though my Dad had told me it was "unladylike" for women to play sports. The coaches begged my parents to let me play and after I was in the starting line-up, they could not bear to take me off the team. I think it was their pride rather than their values that guided the decision to let me play.

Next we consider the barriers to discerning and living out one's vocational calling, as perceived at the personal and emotional levels.

#### *Personal Attitudes and Negative Emotions*

Examination of the essays indicated that 66% of the male respondents and 69% of the female respondents mentioned some aspect of personal attitude or negative emotions as a barrier. In the essays from our sample, men mentioned personal attitudes and negative emotions such as "fear" and "lack of confidence" about their career path as contributing most to the challenge they felt in discerning and living out their calling. These references occurred in 32% of the male essays. For women, the two most dominant personal attitudes and negative emotion themes were "self-doubt" and the "need to feel secure," as mentioned in 48% of the women's essays. The following representative essay excerpts illustrate these barrier perceptions.

The following excerpt described a man's fear of entering a career that was wrought with conflict and stress:

As I grew older, however, the joy that my father had expressed as a teacher was overshadowed by the weight of obligation he took on as chair of his department. For several years our nightly routine was regularly marred by the pain my father felt and

expressed at our evening meal about the difficult issues, personalities, and office politics with which he had to deal. My brother and I recall our own shared agony as we listened to his recapitulation of the day's challenges, battles, and betrayals. The constant stress of his situation led to migraine headaches and bursts of temper that affected all our lives. From this experience I carried forward two things: an abiding hatred of conflict, and the resolve to be anything but an educator.

By contrast, the autobiographies of women focused on the personal challenges of self-doubt and security. The following essay sample described the experience of a woman feeling insecure about the larger issue of disease and death, and how these called into question her own life direction:

As a young adult, perhaps unlike many teens, I was aware of the finitude of physical life. This awareness probably developed because my father began to struggle with his finitude when I was 12 years old. That was the first time he battled cancer. He also had a heart attack at an early age. Although he's still living today, seeing him face the real possibility of death made my own finitude clear. However, it wasn't until my mother-in-law was diagnosed with terminal cancer 3 years ago that I really began to ask one of the "ultimate questions": what is the meaning in life, and what is the meaning in death? Perhaps because of the crisis I was experiencing in my occupation when we learned of her diagnosis, these questions became inextricably linked to my vocation. At the time, I was completing an internship, a year of supervised work experience, required in the final year of clinical psychology doctoral programs. I was at UCLA Student Psychological Services, providing therapy to college students full-time. The limited free time I had was spent desperately trying to finish my dissertation. During that year my husband and I were also planning our

large upcoming wedding. Quite simply, even though I was finally providing the healing services I went to graduate school to provide, living the “life of service” I strived toward for years, I was burned out - emotionally, intellectually, physically exhausted. I found my finitude in all those areas. There I was, just beginning to see the light at the end of the long, dark tunnel of graduate school, and all of a sudden I was questioning if I pursued the right profession. I didn’t know what I was doing with my life, or more importantly, *why*.

Next we consider barriers that move beyond self to the “other” including relationships with others in the workplace, at home, and in various social settings.

### *Interpersonal Relationships*

Examination of the essays indicated that 21% of the male respondents and 44% of the female respondents mentioned an interpersonal relationship as a barrier. In the essays from our sample, men most frequently mentioned interpersonal relationship barriers such as “supervisor or boss” and “parent” as contributing to the challenge they felt in discerning and living out their life-purpose. These references appeared in 38% of the men’s essays. Women believed that the views and opinions of others, such as teachers, professors, or parents interfered with their ability to pursue their vocations, accounting for 56% of the female essay barrier responses on interpersonal relationships. The following representative essay excerpts illustrate these barrier perceptions.

This man’s essay described the role a parent played in calling into question his life direction:

My father was the most logical candidate to mentor me, but he was simply unavailable. Even when we were together, my interests and inclinations puzzled, irritated, or confused him. I did not doubt his love, but I did doubt his ability to know me or understand me.

The distance from my father greatly confused me, so I invented a theory to explain my anomalous life: *I had been adopted*, I decided. Anyone today who looks at a picture of my father and me would laugh at my hypothesis. But to the child's mind—being a changeling or an adoptee made perfect sense: I was left-handed, and everyone else in my family was right-handed. I had blue eyes and everyone else had brown. Everyone else cared about the football scene of “Friday night lights,” and I didn't. It was as simple and obvious as that: *I was an orphan*.

The women in our essay sample focused on different interpersonal relationship barriers, some from the academy and some from parents. Since all of our essays come from faculty members, it is fitting that there are direct references to barriers that can be encountered in the academy, particularly when a male professor is unsupportive of a female colleague's promotion:

The summer between my first and second years in my MBA program, I taught for the first time since my junior high school tutoring. And I was home. This time I knew my vocational voice, and that of God speaking through me, strongly enough to effectively address my parents' resistance. I remained at graduate school for my Ph.D, and then went to a nearby school for my first academic appointment. After eight years, I was denied tenure there. My case was one of those horribly political, wrenching, public tenure denials. I had more publications, in more highly ranked journals, and much higher teaching evaluations than any of the members of my department previously tenured. Yet, a former friend and coauthor argued that my having had two children prior to tenure demonstrated a lack of commitment to the profession. My case created an enormous and lasting division among the faculty of the school. The University-level promotion and tenure committee recommended my denial at the Business school level be overturned, but

the President of the University supported my Dean's decision to not tenure me, due to the conflict I was creating in my group.

Finally, we consider barriers to discerning and living out one's life purpose that lie beyond our interpersonal relationships, and include the environment where we live and work.

### *Socio-cultural Pressures*

Examination of the essays indicated that 38% of the male respondents and 69% of the female respondents mentioned a socio-cultural pressure as a barrier. For both sexes, one particular category outweighed the combination of all of the others. The socio-cultural barrier that men most frequently mentioned was "lack of financial resources," accounting for 50% of the respondents. By contrast, women mentioned the "traditions of their religious background" more often than the combination of the rest of the socio-cultural barriers, and did so 72% of the time. The following representative essay excerpts illustrated these barrier perceptions.

The first sample was written by a man, and typified the kinds of financial concerns found in the male essays, describing the economic "cost" of entering the academy:

By this point, I was pushing 35 and I had a mortgage and two school-aged sons—hardly a set of circumstances for exploring new career possibilities. I spent one desperate summer applying to any job that looked remotely related to what I had been doing (no one even responded to my applications), and beating myself up for having wasted the past fifteen years. ("Why didn't I go to law school?", I asked myself.) I hadn't finished my Ph.D. yet, and I'd gone through my degree as a part-time student, so on paper I didn't have any teaching experience. So, even the local community colleges wouldn't return my calls. But finally, through a quirk of networking, I landed a two-course adjunct position at a community college an hour away, thus launching my academic career.

Through several other twists and turns, within two years I had landed a full-time tenure track position at a nearby university.

As with the men, the women spoke of only one kind of socio-cultural barrier, but it was tied to church tradition. The following two samples typify the writing among female faculty members. The following essay touched on the struggle to reconcile one's academic life with the life of the church:

I have found my vocation in the resonances between my own struggles to reconcile the complexities of spirituality and life and the struggles of those I study. As a woman, about whom my church background has definite theological baggage, I also find a cultural explanation and, perhaps ironically, an escape from the ingrained gender traditions wrought so subtly as to become almost imperceptible to those who labor under their influences. To be expected to occupy a space that is uninhabitable dooms women to failure—thus the Victorian obsession with the fallen woman who becomes the scapegoat for all ills opposes the redeeming ideal represents a panacea for the world. Neither one is real, but they make a congenial vision of good and evil. And this is the narrative that is rehearsed over and over again in the Victorian novel—which brings me back to *Jane Eyre*. This same novel is most often-cited as the source for that other famous figure—the Madwoman in the Attic—which informs much feminist thinking about literature, culture and authorship. Victorian literary studies have allowed me to identify the gender issues, to see them in an historical light and to understand and name the varieties of oppression that haunt the daily lives of women even still. To work intimately with Victorian literature is to confront the history of my religious heritage. It has aided in my working out where my religious tradition has been and why it has evolved in the way it has. It has

provided—often in language so beautiful it will make you weep—a framework of Christian faith that has survived both the human tragedy and the human comedy, that can stand up to critical examination and re-evaluation. And it’s still there—whether it can be explained or not, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

### Conclusions

Based on our analysis of the essay sample, we are able to confirm our original hypotheses about barrier perceptions: Women reported experiencing a greater number of barriers than men and the nature of vocational barriers differed between men and women. Women tended to report more incidences of barriers within each barrier category, and cumulatively over all barrier categories. Furthermore, for each barrier category, women and men, for the most part, reported different areas where they perceived the most dominant barrier. Although previous research has suggested that various obstacles exist with regard to the spiritual development of faculty working within the academy, the current study represents one of the first efforts to establish the role of barriers specific to Christian vocational development and to the accompanying gender differences.<sup>36</sup> These findings provide a rich qualitative analysis of vocational barriers and gender differences thereby enhancing previous research which was based primarily on objective, but limited survey data.<sup>37</sup>

Within the demographic barrier category, men reported race and ethnicity as well as socioeconomic status as barriers to living out their callings. In contrast, women experienced significantly more cases of a barrier effect of their gender when it came to discerning and living out their life purpose. In addition, women’s essays involved gender-related barriers that called into question their inherent ability to pursue a particular type of calling. These findings are

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<sup>36</sup> Astin and Astin, *Meaning and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty: A Study of Values, Authenticity, and Stress*.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson and Miller-Perrin, “Vocational Discernment and Action: An Exploratory Study of Male and Female University Professors.”

consistent with Schuurman's concern that the doctrine of Christian vocation can sometimes be limiting to certain groups, and suggests the need for conceptions of vocation that are broad and inclusive.<sup>38</sup> Oates, Hall, Anderson, and Willingham have argued that religious groups and organizations should acknowledge the possibility of multiple callings for women that include both career and motherhood.<sup>39</sup> We would argue to expand this directive to include the acknowledgment of the academy and the possibility of multiple callings for both men and women. Women and men should be encouraged to embrace vocation broadly to include multiple roles in the areas of career, parenthood, friendship, etc. For women, this can result in feeling less conflict and a greater sense of well-being.<sup>40</sup> The concept of vocation should not only transcend job and career, but also gender, race, as well as class boundaries, and affirm the equality among all men and women and their mutuality. An "equality" model is also beneficial to children who enter a world where both parents are expected to work.

In terms of personal attitudes and negative emotions serving as barriers to life purpose, men and women tended to report this kind of barrier with the same frequency but of a dissimilar nature. Men tended to report negative emotions such as fear and lack of self-confidence whereas women tended to identify self-doubt and the need for security as emotions that interfered with their ability to live out their callings. Blustein points out that one's life direction is often highly self-determined, being rooted in one's intrinsic well-being.<sup>41</sup> Thus, when that well-being is shaken at an emotional level, very real barriers to vocational development can surface. Although others have speculated about various kinds of emotional barriers to vocational development, such

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<sup>38</sup> Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*.

<sup>39</sup> Kerris L.M. Oates, M. Elizabeth L. Hall, Tamara L. Anderson, and Michele M. Willingham, "Pursuing Multiple Callings: the Implication of Balancing Career and Motherhood for Women and the Church," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 28 (2008): 227-237.

<sup>40</sup> Oates, "Pursuing Multiple Callings: the Implication of Balancing Career and Motherhood for Women and the Church."

<sup>41</sup> David L. Blustein, "The Role of Work in Psychological Health and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 63(4) (2008): 228-240.

as fear, emotional problems, and greed, our findings provide some of the first empirical evidence of these kinds of emotional barriers to self-determination.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding interpersonal relationship barriers, women reported over twice as many occurrences as men, largely focusing on their teachers and professors. Interestingly, both men and women reported barrier experiences with parents, especially during the adolescent years. Generally, the barrier interactions that men and women experienced through parents are happening with their parent of the same sex. Such conflicts between father and son, or mother and daughter, appear to be somewhat typical of family interactions involving authority figures within the family hierarchy. Thus, our essay sample provides support for the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, who point out that parental figures can serve as voices of authority, serving as a primary way for us to “know” our life-purpose during our formative years.

<sup>43</sup> In addition, as noted by Thompson and Miller-Perrin, parents belong to the mentoring category, since they also serve as one of our first role models.<sup>44</sup> The essays provide empirical evidence of parents serving as both mentors and authority figures, especially between children and parents of the same sex, and point out that the life directions taken by the child are occasionally at odds with the counsel of their parental figures, when seen retrospectively.

Finally, there was a nearly two to one ratio of occurrence of barriers related to socio-cultural pressures for women as compared to men. For men, the most prominent barrier within this category focused on lack of financial resources. Plagnol and Easterlin point out that men are frequently unhappy with their financial situation in their pre-middle age years, to the extent that

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<sup>42</sup> Farnham, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*.

<sup>43</sup> Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson and Miller-Perrin, “Vocational Discernment and Action: An Exploratory Study of Male and Female University Professors.”

they feel that it is not “good enough.”<sup>45</sup> These observations connect with our own empirical findings in many of our essay responses. Perhaps this is tied to a stereotypical notion that the man must be the breadwinner in the household and is therefore under pressure to perform that function above other concerns. Thompson and Miller-Perrin discovered the same results with their analysis of the sacrifices that individuals must make in order to live out their life-purpose, sacrifices that frequently include salary, job location, and time with one’s family.<sup>46</sup> These are tied to a central aspect of vocation definition felt by many subjects of the study – that one’s work should define one’s vocation. Accordingly, one’s salary defines the “value” of one’s vocation, making financial considerations a key issue in vocational fulfillment.

In contrast, women reported the influence of their religious background as a significant socio-cultural barrier when it came to discerning their life-purpose, representing a challenge that is rooted deeply in their personal lives, their social interactions, and their pursuit of balance between their faith and their career path. This finding is consistent with the tensions described in the Christian feminist literature that suggests that women can sometimes be torn between traditional theological views of women and feminist Christian views.<sup>47</sup> Blustein also points out that the world of work has become a critical part of female empowerment, which explains why the socio-cultural barriers to the realization of this empowerment can be so challenging.<sup>48</sup> Sociologists often use the term “ascriptivism,” meaning that one’s calling is assigned by an institution or social network.<sup>49</sup> Thus, women do not choose their calling, but their class, parentage, or gender chooses their calling for them.

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<sup>45</sup> Anke C. Plagnol and Richard A. Easterlin, “Aspirations, Attainments, and Satisfaction: Life Cycle Differences Between American Women and Men,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*: 9 (4) (2008): 601-619.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson and Miller-Perrin, “Vocational Discernment and Action: An Exploratory Study of Male and Female University Professors.”

<sup>47</sup> Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict*.

<sup>48</sup> Blustein, “The Role of Work in Psychological Health and Well-Being.”

<sup>49</sup> LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition: Women’s Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective*.

Ultimately, our findings indicate that barriers to finding meaning and purpose to one's life are perceived across a number of categories and that these perceptions are frequently a function of one's gender. Therefore, it is important for both men and women to be able to reconcile these tensions in their own lives in order to integrate their spiritual and professional selves, thereby helping them develop a greater sense of wholeness and authenticity. In so doing, they will be able to connect perception with experience, discernment with action, and personal story with universal stories present in the realms of spirit, religion, and myth.

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Table 1: Potential Barriers to Vocational Calling

**Demographic Factors**

Age

Gender

Ethnicity

Education

Income

**Personal Attitudes and Negative Emotions**

Fear

Emotional problems

Selfishness

Self-doubt

Need for personal control over one's life

Desire for certainty

Lack of motivation

Need to feel secure and safe

Uncertainty about one's vocation

Lack of faith

Lack of understanding of the concept of vocation

**Interpersonal Relationships**

Parent or other family member

Friend

Boyfriend or girlfriend

Teacher or professor

Spouse

Mentor

Colleague

Supervisor/boss

**Socio-cultural Pressures**

Lack of financial resources

Concerns about standard of living

Unwillingness to sacrifice financially

Feeling pressure/desire to marry

Gender discrimination

Race discrimination

Job-related responsibilities

Raising children and family responsibilities

Traditions of my church

Physical limitations

Table 2: Percentage of Faculty on Demographic Characteristics

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Gender	
Female	43
Male	57
Race	
African American	7
Asian	7
Caucasian	79
Latino	5
Other	2
Marital Status	
Divorced	2
Married	81
Separated	0
Single	16
Widowed	1
Religious Identification	
Catholic	21
Jewish	1
Muslim	0
Protestant	78
Other	0