Vocation and Career Discernment

Supplementary Material

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Main Street Project Steering Committee Research Questions

1. At what level are students in their vocational and career plan development (based on self-perception)?
   a. Vocational development
   b. Career plan development

2. What are students’ experiences with and attitudes toward services, resources and activities facilitating vocational discernment?
   a. Helpfulness of services, resources, and activities
   b. Factors motivating vocational exploration
   c. Factors deterring use of specific vocational discernment resources
   d. Perceptions of effective methods for advertising vocational services

3. To what extent do students link their sense of vocation with their career plan development?

4. What vocational development resources would students like to see provided in the future?

Insights from Scholarly Literature

Researchers have noted the transition to adulthood has changed drastically within the past 20 years. We researched vocation and career discernment in “early adulthood” (Goodwin and Jasper 2008). Today, researchers recognize early adulthood as emerging. Further, they define adulthood through the milestones of completing school, establishing an independent household and full-time employment (Goodwin and Jasper 2008). In accordance with the Main Street Project, we researched four categories of interest in vocation and career discernment of undergraduate students: student perception of vocation and career plan development; students’ attitudes towards and experiences with services, resources, and activities facilitating vocational discernment; and vocational influence on career development.

Student Perceptions of Vocation and Career Plan Development

Banning, Dik, and Hunter (2010) note that students conceptualize vocation as a “calling” in multiple ways. Students view vocation as a call from outside of the self which is either secular or non-secular, a life path seeking meaningfulness, or a desire to help others and society (Banning et al. 2010).

Researchers examined the factors that determine students’ perceptions of their vocation, most notably through the concept of self-efficacy, which is an individual’s belief in his or her ability to do a job effectively (Yang and Gysbers 2007); (Bandura, A. 1994). Students with greater psychological resources experience less stress, which leads to a better sense of vocation (Yang and Gysbers 2007). Stringer and Kerpelman (2010) note that students with higher levels of self-efficacy have stronger career identity. Outside influences like parental support and experiential learning experiences can improve self-efficacy (Stringer and Kerpelman 2010).

Services, Resources, Experiential Learning

The current studies on emerging adulthood suggest experiential learning is a necessary component in helping students to better understand their vocation and develop their career...
goals. Billet, Newton, and Ockerby (2010) note that work experiences help emerging adults develop confidence in choosing their careers and in developing their sense of vocation. Dik and Steger (2008) found students who participate in career counseling workshops have higher levels of vocational discernment and self-efficacy in making career decisions compared to those who do not participate in career counseling workshops. A workshop is more effective in helping students with career discernment when a counselor uses self-disclosure specifically when a counselor explains her or his own discernment process (Dik and Steger 2008). Workshops addressing specific callings and vocations did not cause significantly higher rates of vocational discernment or self-efficacy than did general vocational workshops.

Jurgens (2000) found that students who had low levels of career certainty experienced increased certainty and decision-making in their career planning if they participated in either: decision-making workshops, completed a computer program for career planning, participated in a one-hour individual career counseling session, or participated in a two-hour professional forum. Students who completed either two or four career-indecision and uncertainty interventions effectively increased their certainty and decision-making (Jurgens 2000).

Most notably, Dik and Steger (2008) found that a one-on-one setting provides more client satisfaction and increased self-efficacy in career planning and vocational discernment. Jurgens’ (2000) findings illustrate one-on-one counseling, with counselor self-disclosure, is a promising strategy for improving students’ vocational discernment and career development (Dik and Steger 2008; Jurgens 2000).

**Vocational Influence on Career Development**

Studies reveal a close tie between vocational discernment and career development (Dik and Steger 2008; Stringer and Kerpelman 2010). Duffy and Sedlacek (2010) found that 44% of first-year students surveyed believed they had a career calling. Factors such as social support, career counseling, and work experiences affect both career and vocational development. Experiences related to career development, such as internships, become more significant when aligned with personal interests and goals, leading to the development of career as vocation (Billet et al. 2010).

**Method and Sample**

Our survey was comprised of five-point Likert scale, open-ended, yes/no and multiple-choice questions. A Likert scale is a question in which the respondents answer with their level of agreement with the statement. We adapted the conceptual definition of vocation from the Main Street Project (2010) as “the alignment of an individual’s gifts and talents with the meaning and purpose of their life’s work.” We conducted a focus group, consisting of a homogeneous group of 8 college students, and received significantly negative attitudes towards the term “vocation.” Focus group participants equated the term “vocation” with a religious calling. The group agreed that the term was “scary” and “constraining” their identity. We chose to replace the term “vocation” with “passions in life” in our survey. We conceptualized the definition of passions in life as “areas of interest and action that provide meaning in one’s life.” We also used the term “meaning in life” for three statements in the survey.

Our target population was the student body of approximately 3000 St. Olaf College students. Susan Canon selected participants from the sampling frame of the college’s student email directory. Participation in the survey was voluntary and incentives were provided in order to
increase response rates. She selected students using a simple random sample of 780 students, excluding students who participated in research focus groups; part-time students; students under 17 years of age; students currently enrolled in Sociology/Anthropology 371; and students currently studying abroad. Because our survey was one of three surveys sent out to the student body, she ensured there was no overlap in respondents.

Students received an email inviting them to participate in the survey. 344 students responded, which gave a response rate of 44.1%. 66.0% of respondents were female, 34.0% were male. 27.8% were first-years, 23.6% were sophomores, 26.6% were juniors, and 22.1% were seniors. Respondents varied in age from 18 to 25. The top five reported majors were undeclared (19.1%), biology (10.1%), economics (6.6%), English (6.3%), mathematics (6.0%). 34.9% of respondents self-reported having a GPA of 3.5-4.0, 27.3% reported 3.0-3.49, 5.2% reported 2.5-2.99, 0.3% reported 2.0-2.49, and 0.3% reported below 2.0. 26.7% of respondents answered “No GPA Yet” and 3.0% preferred not to answer.

Analysis

1. At what level are students in their vocational and career plan development (based on self-perception)?

   a. Vocational development

   We measured students’ level of vocational discernment (based on self-perception) by creating a six-question index framing vocation as “passions in life” or “meaning in life.” Students responded on a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree) to the following statements:

   - I have specific passions in life.
   - A sense of meaning in life is unimportant to me.
   - I see myself pursuing my passions in the future.
   - I participate in activities that give meaning to my life.
   - I am uncertain about what gives meaning to my life.
   - Compared to my peers I have a stronger sense of my passions in life.

   Our index is based on a 0-24 scale and has a mean of 18.3 with a fairly normal distribution (see figure 1a). It appears that students have strong levels of vocational discernment, as 78.6% of students scored in the upper third of the scale (16-24).
An analysis of the individual statements reveals additional insights. 95.6% of students agreed (somewhat to strongly) with the statement “I have specific passions in life.” However, 19.9% of students agreed (somewhat to strongly) with the statement “a sense of meaning in life is unimportant to me.” When considering the results of our focus group, in which participants viewed the term “vocation” negatively, we suggest that it may be important to carefully consider the connotations of “vocation” and alternative wordings (“passions in life,” “meaning in life”) when labeling and advertising future vocation related programs.

We ran an independent-samples t-test to determine if there is a significant difference in the average scores of vocational discernment between underclassmen and upperclassmen. The mean of underclassmen respondents is 17.84 while the mean of upperclassmen respondents is 18.76. We can be 95% confident that the true mean of underclassmen is between .222 and 1.608 lower than the true mean of upperclassmen. We are confident that a real difference exists, but the difference is small.

To determine if there is a significant difference between the levels of vocational discernment of students who have participated in a CEL Vocational workshop compared to those who have not participated, we ran an independent-samples t-test. The mean of participant respondents is 18.42 while the mean of non-participant respondents is 18.27. With a significance of .734 there is no reason to believe that the difference of the means between participants and non-participants is not 0. This might suggest that CEL Vocational workshops do not play a more significant role than other activities in the vocational discernment process.
We also examined whether students arrived at St. Olaf with a sense of vocation, and if their sense of vocation has changed while attending St. Olaf. 77% of students agreed (somewhat to strongly) with the statement “I already had specific passions in life when I arrived at St. Olaf.” This suggests that most students have some level of vocational discernment before they begin undergraduate studies. 63% of students agreed (somewhat to strongly) with the statement “my sense of passions in life has changed since I came to St. Olaf.” This suggests that for many, vocation changes while at St. Olaf. We cannot say for sure why a sense of vocation changes for many students. This may be due to normal development or to the services and environment that St. Olaf provides both. This is an important topic for further research.

b. Career plan development

We measured students’ level of career plan development (based on self-perception) by creating a five-question index. Students responded on a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree) to the following statements:

- I know what my future career will be.
- I feel confident in pursuing my career path.
- Compared to my peers I have a stronger career plan.
- I have no idea what I will do after college.
- I have a clear plan for pursuing my future career.

Our index is based on a 0-20 scale and has a mean of 10.89 with a fairly normal distribution (see figure 1b). It appears that students vary widely in their self-perceived level of career plan development, though 60% of respondents scored at the midpoint or above (10-20). It is also important to note that 19.5% scored very low (0-5), which may be due to the fact that 27.8% of the respondents were first-year students.

![Figure 1b Career Plan Development](image)
We ran an independent-samples t-test to determine if there is a significant difference in the average career plan development scores between underclassmen and upperclassmen. The mean of underclassmen respondents is 9.80 while the mean of upperclassmen respondents is 12.06. We can be 95% confident that the true mean of upperclassmen is between the value 3.364 and 1.172 higher than the true mean of underclassmen.

To determine if there is a significant difference in level of career development between students who have completed an internship and those who have not we ran an independent-samples t-test. The mean of respondents who completed an internship is 12.52 while the mean of respondents who have not is 10.36. We are 95% confident that the true mean of those who have completed an internship is between .887 and 3.446 higher than the true mean of those who have not completed an internship. We cannot be sure why this is the case. It could be that students who already have a high level of career plan development participate in internships, that internships increase students’ levels of career plan development, or they may be mutually positive influences.

We also ran an independent-samples t-test to determine if there is a significant difference in the average career plan development scores of those who have used job-seeking services at the CEL and those who have not. The mean of respondents who used job-seeking services was 11.17 while the mean of those who have not was 10.81. With a significance of .586 we have no reason to believe that the difference of the means between students who have not used job-seeking services at the CEL and those who have is not 0.

2. **What are students’ experiences with and attitudes toward services, resources and activities facilitating vocational discernment?**

a. **Helpfulness of services, resources and activities**

We measured students’ attitudes towards the helpfulness of services, resources and activities by using a four-point Likert Scale (Very Helpful, Somewhat Helpful, Marginally Helpful, Not Helpful at All) with the additional option of “Have not used.” Students responded to the statement “Please rate the following services, resources, and experiential learning opportunities in terms of their helpfulness in identifying or developing your passions in life while you have been at St. Olaf.”

- CEL Vocational Workshops
- CEL Vocational Handouts
- CEL Website (the “Explore Your Vocation” link)
- The Strong Interest Inventory (Career interest inventory, taken through CEL or in a class)
- MBTI: The Myers-Briggs test (a personality instrument, taken through CEL or in a class)
- Academic advisor(s)
- Professor(s)
- Classes
- Internships
- Off-Campus Study
- Volunteering
We tabulated the percentage of respondents who found each choice to be helpful (somewhat to very) in facilitating vocational discernment (see Table 2a).

### Table 2a Helpfulness of Services, Resources and Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource/Service/Activity</th>
<th>Found Helpful for Vocational Discernment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internships</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>92.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>87.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Campus Study</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Organizations</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong-Interest Inventory</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL Vocational Workshops</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL Vocational Handouts</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL Website (Vocational Link)</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-Campus Job</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than 80% of respondents found internships, classes, professors, and off-campus study to be helpful in facilitating vocational discernment. Academic advisors and volunteering were also found to be fairly helpful. It is also important to note that only half of respondents found CEL vocational workshops, CEL vocational handouts and the CEL website vocational link to be helpful, of those reporting use of the resources. Furthermore, only 23.8% of respondents indicated participation in vocational workshops, 29.9% indicated use of CEL handouts, and 25.6% of respondents indicated use of the vocational link on the CEL website.

We conducted further tests to examine if there is a significant correlation between the helpfulness of each service, resource and activity, and the level of vocational discernment. A Spearman’s Rho test showed a significant positive correlation between the level of vocational discernment and the helpfulness of advisors, professors, classes, internships, off-campus study, volunteering, on-campus jobs, and student organizations. As participants’ perception of helpfulness increased, the level of vocational discernment did as well. It is important to note that the correlations were all less than .33 on a 0-1 scale, or weak. We found no significant correlation between the level of vocational discernment, and the helpfulness of CEL vocational workshops, CEL vocational handouts, the CEL website vocational link, the Strong Interest Inventory test, or the Meyers-Briggs test. We believe this suggests that students have an increase in their level of vocational discernment because of services, resources, and activities at St. Olaf. Some appear to be helpful to a majority of users, while others appear to only help a minority of users. Nonetheless, we suggest that all services, resources, and activities be further evaluated for effectiveness, with subsequent improvements.
b. Factors motivating vocational exploration

We measured which factors motivated students to explore their vocation, using a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Students responded to the question “How strongly do you agree that these factors have motivated you to explore your passions in life?”

- Class Requirements
- Internships
- Off-Campus Study
- Volunteering
- On-Campus Jobs
- Student Organizations
- Professor(s)
- Academic advisor(s)
- Self-motivation
- CEL Posters
- CEL e-mails

We tabulated the percentage of respondents who agreed (somewhat to strongly) that each factor motivated them to explore their vocation (see Table 2b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Agreed factor motivated vocational exploration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation</td>
<td>96.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Requirements</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Requirements</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Media</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL E-mails</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL Posters/Flyers</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data suggests that student view relationships and themselves as the most important sources of motivation to explore their vocation. Self-motivation, professors, parents, peers, and academic advisors were all chosen by more than 60% of respondents. To further examine this finding, we combined the overall scores of relationship-related motivating factors, including self-motivation, in an index, and did the same for non-relationship-related motivating factors (see figures 2b-1 and 2b-2).
Figure 2b-1 Non-Relationship Motivating Factors

Figure 2b-2 Relationship-Related Motivating Factors
The Non-Relationship-Related Motivating Factors Index is based on a 0-20 scale, and has a mean of 9.45 with a normal distribution. The Relationship-Related Motivating Factors Index is also based on a 0-20 scale and has a mean of 15.8 with a normal distribution. The mean score for relationship-related motivating factors is even more telling; there were no scores below 9, whereas almost half of the non-relationship-related motivating factors scores were 9 and lower. This suggests that students perceive face-to-face, relationship-based factors as the most important ways in which they are motivated to explore their passions. We believe future planning should take this into account and consider emphasizing new and existing relationships in the vocational discernment process.

c. Factors deterring use of specific vocational discernment resources

We measured which factors deterred students from using CEL vocational workshops. Respondents were asked, “Have any of these factors deterred you from using the CEL Vocational Workshops?”

- I was unaware of workshops
- Workshops don’t fit with my schedule
- CEL location
- Previous bad experience with CEL services
- Peer reported bad experiences
- I don’t think the workshops will be effective
- I didn’t need workshops, because I already know my passions in life
- None of these

We tabulated the percentage of times each factor was chosen as a deterrent (see table 2c).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Deterrent to using vocational workshops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaware of Workshops</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling conflicts</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t think workshops would be effective</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Already know my passions</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL Location</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous bad experience with CEL</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers’ previous bad experience with CEL</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings suggest that the most common reasons for not participating in a CEL vocational workshop are being unaware of them and having scheduling conflicts. Results from an open-ended question that asked, “Are there any other factors that have deterred you from using CEL Vocational Workshops?” strengthened these findings. More than half of the open-ended responses indicated that not knowing about the workshops or not having enough time to participate were the main reasons for non-participation.
d. Perceptions of effective methods for advertising vocational services

We measured students' perceptions of the best advertising strategies for vocational services. Respondents were asked, “Think about services at the CEL that help students identify and develop their passions in life (vocational workshops, the “explore your vocation” link on the CEL website, etc.). For these services, which advertising strategies would be most likely to draw your attention?” Respondents picked their top three choices from the following list:

- Posters or PO box flyers
- E-mail (from CEL alias)
- Suggestion from academic advisor
- Announcements in class
- Ads on the TV screen around Buntrock
- Tabling in front of the cafeteria
- Class requirements
- Registration requirements (similar to an advisor hold)

We tabulated the percentage of times each strategy was chosen (see table 2d).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising Strategies</th>
<th>Chosen as good vocational service advertising strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEL E-mails</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters/PO box flyers</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration Requirements</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Requirements</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Announcements</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabling</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Advertisements</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Academic advisors received 20.6% of votes, indicating that a sizeable number of students regard advisors as good sources of information. CEL Email and posters were also chosen at high frequencies. The data suggests that Tabling and TV ads are not seen as good advertising strategies. This conflicts with our earlier findings that CEL E-mails were not effective motivating factors.

It is also important to note that academic advisors were the chosen the most, which coincides with the findings that they were also the one of the best motivators and one the most helpful resources in students' vocational discernment and exploration.

3. To what extent do students link their sense of vocation with their career plan development?

We measured students’ level of vocational influence on career planning development by creating a six-question index. Students responded on a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree) to the following statements:
- It is important for me to pursue a career that gives meaning to my life.
- It is important for me to pursue a career that incorporates my passions in life.
- I plan to pursue my passions in life separately from my career.
- My current passions in life will inform my future career path.
- My career path is unrelated to my passions in life.
- I believe people should aim for a career that matches their passions in life.

Our index is based on a 0-24 scale and has a mean of 19.53 and a fairly normal distribution with a skew to the left (see figure 3). It appears that students strongly connect vocation with career plan development, as 92.6% of students scored in the upper third of the scale (16-24).

**Figure 3 Student’s Sense of Vocation and Career Plan**

We ran an independent-samples t-test to determine if there is a significant difference in the average level of vocational influence on career plan development between underclassmen and upperclassmen. The mean of underclassmen respondents is 19.6 while the mean of upperclassmen respondents is 19.47. With a significance of .669 we have no reason to believe that the difference of the means between underclassmen and upperclassmen is not 0.

4. **What vocational development resources would students like to see provided in the future?**

We measured students’ attitudes towards a course focusing on vocational development. Students responded on a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree) to the statement, “Students would benefit from taking a course focusing on developing their passions in life.” 44.5% of
students agreed (somewhat to strongly) that a course focused on passions (vocation) would be helpful. However, 30% disagreed (somewhat to strongly), suggesting that there is a wide variance in students’ opinions on such a course.

To ensure that we captured the broad attitudes of students concerning future programs and services related to vocation and career discernment, we asked, “Do you have any additional suggestions for programs or services St. Olaf could provide to better help students in developing their passions in life and gaining career experience?”

55.56% of open-ended question suggestions mentioned CEL services or other existing services at St. Olaf. The majority of these suggestions requested more opportunities, such as guest speakers and panels, job postings, programs like Leaders for Social Change and HECUA, networking, opportunities for interaction with small businesses (compared to large corporations), interdepartmental opportunities, and interviewing skills.

The most frequently mentioned opportunity (19.4%) was the addition of a requirement to meet with CEL staff personnel. Networking activities and internships were the next most frequently mentioned suggestions (both 11.11%).

Some of the most salient ideas regarding programming are:

“I think a career exploration class for first-years or even upperclassmen would be… beneficial. I have no idea what my passions are, what I want to major in, or what I want to do as a career… it can be quite discouraging and confusing to try to navigate through classes and registration having no clue what I should be taking. I think a career exploration class could help me attain a general sense of purpose that would really help me in choosing classes and planning my college career.”

“[A] program that helps prepare seniors/recent graduates for the transition from college to the workplace and make them more successful in the professional field [would be helpful]. Each person should be able to progress through and complete it according to his/her own schedule (maybe an online program) and time availability.”

“Require all first-years to take a tour of the CEL website. It has amazing material on it, but unless you are a self-starter who relentlessly investigates this sort of thing, you'll never know the opportunities out there…”

Other respondents addressed problems with advertising for current vocational services and gave valuable suggestions:

“The CEL emails are more like spam. I took myself off the alias a week after being put on. The targeted emails from departments are far more helpful and readable. If the CEL was able to target their advertising of internships, they would be far more effective in connecting students with potential internships.”

An analysis of the qualitative data suggests that the CEL e-mails have the potential to be an effective advertising strategy. We suggest these e-mails be targeted towards specific departments or class-years, or by type of resource (internship, workshop, job posting). Furthermore, if the CEL created subgroups according to interests, such as economics or journalism, students could sign up for specific e-mail aliases according to their interests.
Sources Cited


