

The Power of Addressing the “Why”: Catholic Education as a Source of Meaningfulness and Competitive Advantage¹

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The crux of this paper is to distinguish meaning from meaningfulness and to show in what ways Catholic Colleges and Universities (CCUs) are in a unique position to provide the latter, whereas other educational systems may provide only the former. In short, CCUs are better equipped to help students understand the “why” of working (and living, more generally) and not just the “how.”

To set the stage for the argument, the paper reviews some research on what makes work and life meaningful, delineates hedonic (pain and pleasure) from eudemonic motivators, and distinguishes “realization” (i.e., self-fulfillment) perspectives of meaningfulness from “justification” perspectives, the latter of which are better equipped to address existential issues. Within the justification perspective, it argues for at least six distinct cultural accounts for what makes work worth doing, and suggests how CCUs might be more explicit in providing accounts and for advocating for some accounts over others.

¹ I would like to thank Kristin Heyer and Timothy Muldoon for their suggested readings regarding Catholic teachings about work.

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With the skyrocketing cost of higher education and shrinking economic prospects for those without a college degree,² it is not surprising that the narrative has shifted from “why go to college” to “how to (afford to) go to college.” Such questions perhaps become even more acute when considering a Catholic college or university (CCU), which are private institutions. Even though some offer generous financial aid, CCUs may carry an even heftier price tag compared to other college options, such as state-sponsored schools. Indeed, as a professor in a CCU who strongly believes in the value of higher education, it is the “how to” question that keeps me up at night—especially since I anticipate having three kids in college at the same time in the year 2023. While the shift from “why” questions to “how” questions is certainly rational—and I believe we will have a hard time moving the focus back as long as higher education remains out of reach for so many—this shift is also troubling on a variety of fronts. A focus on “how to” afford college, not surprisingly, is often accompanied by statements regarding “education as investment” and “maximizing earning potential.” This shift can have profound ripple effects on what we teach and how we teach it. Specifically, it can lead to a shift in emphasizing “how” over “why” in our approach to education, which, I will argue, may have the ironic effect of undermining the competitive advantage of CCUs—that is, what we do better than other colleges and universities.

The argument I advance explains what I believe columnist David Brooks of the *New York Times* observes in his column, “The Big University.”³ He notes:

Universities are more professional and glittering than ever, but in some ways there is emptiness deep down. Students are taught how to do things, but many are not forced to reflect on why they should do them or what we are here for. They are given many career options, but they are on their own when it comes to developing criteria to determine which vocation would lead to the fullest life.

Brooks begins his column by noting the religious origins of many of our colleges and universities in the U.S., and suggests that as more and more colleges and universities drift from their religious “roots,” the moral underpinnings of education have largely waned. Though he also notes some attempts to reverse this trend, the core problem he astutely observes is a persistent one: in many colleges and universities, students are taught “how to do things” rather than “why do things.” What Brooks suggests, and I affirm, is that by losing their religious moorings—and thus their moral and spiritual insights—colleges and universities lost their focus on “why.” Indeed, they may now be quite ill-equipped to address these types of questions. By contrast, in many CCUs these moorings remain. Indeed, they are an essential part of the purpose of these organizations. This organizational purpose, if compelling enough and effectively enacted, can be adopted by

2 Patricia Cohen, “It’s a Tough Job Market for the Young Without College Degrees,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/business/economy/its-a-tough-job-market-for-the-young-without-college-degrees.html?_r=0.

3 David Brooks, “The Big University,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-university.html?_r=0.

A Catholic college or university can, by articulating a compelling organizational purpose, foster meaningfulness in its members: particularly its students, but also its faculty and staff.

organizational members (e.g., employees or students) as a standard for behavior—for knowing why doing some things is better than doing other things. As a consequence, individuals with a purpose are more likely to find what they do to be meaningful. In brief, I am arguing that a CCU can, by articulating a compelling organizational purpose (that provides a reason “why to do things”), foster meaningfulness in its members: particularly its students, but also its faculty and staff.

Before delving more deeply into my core arguments, it is important to ask, what are CCUs fostering meaningfulness about? My short answer is life, but given the often career-based nature of conversations about the value of higher education, I am going to focus on a subset of life: meaningful or purposeful work. To be clear, even though we spend much (and for some, most) of our lives working, I do not equate having meaningful work with having a meaningful life.⁴ However, to broaden the conversation somewhat, I am viewing work as more than just paid employment to include the larger domain of life that we call working (be it working at home, working while volunteering, working for pay in a for-profit or not-for-profit, etc.). Because I view work broadly, I also see much of what I am discussing to be of relevance to students’ current “work”—i.e., getting an education and learning how to be better contributors to society.

To preview my main points, I begin by arguing that finding meaningfulness is a challenge for most individuals in the workforce, and that it is likely to be particularly daunting for our students. Specifically, upon leaving college (if not before that time) they will likely face challenges of alienation and anomie. Second, I will discuss how research on meaningful work has responded to these challenges of meaninglessness. Here I will hint at the role that religion, and by extension religious institutions, play in providing or influencing the frameworks or standards (called work orientations) we use to evaluate work. I will conclude by how CCUs can (and do) provide meaningfulness and how we might be more deliberate in cultivating this as a competitive advantage.

4 While not focusing on a meaningful life, I do invite the reader to engage in what Stake calls “naturalistic generalization” to make the link between work and nonwork domains. Naturalistic generalization is explained well by the Chinese proverb “A sparrow is small, but it has all of the organs.” Put another way, I hope that if you understand how CCUs can facilitate meaningfulness and purpose at work, you will be able to draw parallels between how they may facilitate meaningfulness and purpose in other areas of life. See R. Stake, “Case studies,” in N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln, eds., *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.) (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 435-454. Cited in M.G. Pratt, “Fitting oval pegs into round holes: Tensions in evaluating and publishing qualitative research in top-tier North American journals,” *Organizational Research Methods*, 11(3) (2007): 481-509, at 496.

The Challenge of Finding Meaningfulness (vs. Meaning) at Work

My first set of premises is that individuals seek meaningfulness in work and that it is difficult to find it. Before delving into these premises, however, I want to distinguish between meaningful work from more general *meanings* of work. Work can be assigned a wide range of meanings, including tedious, taxing, time-consuming, or transcendent. However, to say that work (or life more generally) is meaningful suggests that a *positive* (vs. negative or neutral) value has been assigned to it. Delving more deeply, “positive” also has a specific conceptualization in this literature. Rather than referring to “pleasure” which is hedonic (think pleasure vs. pain), meaningfulness is positive in a more eudaimonic way. Although the use of the term has varied, *eudaimonia* in the Aristotelian sense suggests a deeper form of happiness that is attained by achieving the highest human good or virtue, and that “the highest human good involves activities that are goal-directed and have purpose.”⁵ Building on these conceptualizations, my colleagues and I have tied meaningful work to work that is perceived “at minimum, to be purposeful and significant”;⁶ that is, work that is worth doing.⁷

As noted by Victor Frankl, a survivor of Nazi concentration camps and creator of a field of therapy referred to as logotherapy, “Man’s [*sic*] search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives.”⁸ Given this, it is not surprising that work is one arena where meaning—or more specifically, meaningfulness—is sought. As noted by Studs Terkel in his book *Working*:

Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.⁹

Such desires for meaningful work are especially strong in younger workers. As my colleague and I have noted elsewhere:

Studies suggest meaningful work is more desired than happiness or wealth (King & Napa, 1998) and young workers “talk incessantly about meaning,” citing the absence of meaningfulness as a key reason for turnover (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010, p. 86). For example, over 50% of young workers would accept a lower wage or diminished role if their work contributed to something “more important and meaningful” (Kelly Global Workforce Index, 2009).¹⁰

5 C.D. Ryff and B.H. Singer, “Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(1) (2008): 13-39.

6 M.G. Pratt and B.E. Ashforth, “Fostering Meaningfulness in Working and at Work,” in K.S. Cameron, J.E. Dutton, and R.E. Quinn, eds., *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003), 309-327.

7 M.G. Pratt, C. Pradies, and D.A. Lepisto, “Doing Well, Doing Good, and Doing with: Organizational Practices for Effectively Cultivating Meaningful Work,” in B. Dik, Z. Byrne, and M. Steger, eds., *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace* (Washington, D.C.: APA Books, 2013), 173-196.

8 Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 99.

9 Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), iii.

10 D.A. Lepisto and M.G. Pratt, “Meaningful Work as Realization and Justification: Toward a Dual Conceptualization,” *Organizational Psychology Review* (online before print, June 12, 2016), 2.

But interest in meaningful work is not limited to youth. If you search for “meaningful work” on Google you will instantly get nearly 10 million hits, including one that claims to help you find “what it really takes to find meaningful work.”¹¹

But why is meaningful work so hard to come by? There appears to be at least two core answers to this question: alienation and anomie.

Alienation. Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, many people have stopped doing whole jobs and now often do little pieces of them. The net result is that people often feel separate from what they do (and make). While most obvious for individuals who work assembly line tasks, individuals such as new college graduates that have a fair amount of repetition in their jobs—repetition that may be critical for new learners—may also suffer from alienation. In this case, meaninglessness stems from the nature of the tasks we perform.

People become anxious and uncomfortable when they don't know how to evaluate what they are doing.

Anomie. Whereas alienation is separation from work, anomie is separation from the values, norms, and standards of a larger collective. In other words, people become anxious and uncomfortable when they don't know how to evaluate what they are doing.¹² While anomie is certainly a problem that is broader than work, Richard Sennett does suggest that it is a problem in this domain of life; he argues that what workers “need most is a mental and emotional anchor; they need values which assess whether changes in work, privilege, and power are worthwhile.”¹³ Personally, this source of meaninglessness is illustrated when I come home from a day at work and one of my kids asks if I had a good day. There are times when I really don't know how to answer that question. I spend a lot of my days “putting out fires,” talking with students, evaluating manuscripts, and preparing for things in the future, and as a result, I don't have much—at least much tangible—to show for my efforts. It makes me wonder, what makes for a good day at work? The degree of difficulty you have answering that question for yourself may reflect a problem of anomie.

How Does One Find Meaningfulness at Work?

Organizational scholars (in business and in psychology) have two general alternatives to helping people find meaningfulness at work, each of which corresponds to one of

11 <http://www.fastcompany.com/3046825/how-to-be-a-success-at-everything/what-it-really-takes-to-find-meaningful-work>

12 Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) (London: Macmillan, 1984).

13 See Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), cited in Lepisto and Pratt, “Meaningful Work as Realization and Justification,” 9.

the major problems identified above. Put simply, responses to alienation have been to change the nature of the work or jobs we do, and responses to anomie have been to change people's meanings—or often by changing the stories we tell ourselves.

Responses to Alienation. With regard to overcoming alienation, there has been an extensive amount of research on how to redesign jobs to make them more meaningful. In general, this stream of research has focused on *job enrichment*. Such research suggests that to the degree that individuals can do a variety of tasks at work, do whole jobs rather than disparate parts, and see how their jobs are important to the organization and/or to the world around them, their jobs will be more enriched, and more meaningful.¹⁴ In addition, research has also shown that to the degree that individuals have autonomy and feedback, work can be perceived as meaningful as well. More recently, two important additions to this research have been made. The first finds that work is often perceived as meaningful when people know they are benefiting others.¹⁵ Thus jobs can be designed so that workers are more aware of the beneficiaries of their work. This is referred to as relational job design. The second is that individuals need not wait for their bosses to redesign their jobs; rather, individuals can “craft” (i.e., job crafting) their own work to make it meaningful.¹⁶

Responses to Anomie. While the predominant focus in the meaningful work literature has been on addressing worker alienation, my colleague Doug Lepisto and I have recently argued that there is a second, less-known stream of research that explores how to overcome anomie at work. Building on the work of Frankl and others, we argue that individuals can also find meaningfulness by having stories or accounts for why their work is worth doing.¹⁷ Such accounts often come from broader society: our culture and our institutions. For example, in their foundational analysis of American society entitled *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Bellah and colleagues note that there are different cultural-institutional meanings surrounding work. For some, work is a “job” or a means of accumulating resources (e.g., money), often in service of activities outside of the work domain (i.e., they “work to live”). For others, work is viewed as a “career” or as a venue in which one can test one’s skills and abilities against others. Finally, work can be viewed as a “calling” whereby it has a moral and more communal purpose.¹⁸ These cultural meanings were later picked up by Wrzesniewski and colleagues who described jobs, careers, and callings as three distinct types of “work orientations.”¹⁹

14 J.R. Hackman and G.R. Oldham, “Motivation through the Design of Work: Test of a Theory,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 16(2) (1976), 250-279.

15 A.M. Grant, “Relational Job Design and the Motivation to Make a Prosocial Difference,” *Academy of Management Review* 32 (2007), 393-417.

16 A. Wrzesniewski and J.E. Dutton, “Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work,” *The Academy of Management Review*, 26(2) (April 2001), 179-201.

17 Lepisto and Pratt, “Meaningful Work as Realization and Justification.”

18 R.N. Bellah, R. Madsen, W.A. Sullivan, A. Swidler, and S.M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985/1996).

19 A. Wrzesniewski, C. McCauley, P. Rozin, and B. Schwartz, “Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People’s Relations to Their Work,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 31(1) (1997), 21-33.

These orientations are the internalized cultural-institutional accounts about “what makes work worth doing.”²⁰ Research suggests that individuals have a dominant work orientation, though depending on how one conceptualizes them, some people may have more than one orientation. In addition, while such orientations tend to be stable over time, they are changeable.

My colleagues and I have found that there appear to be at least six, rather than three, of these work orientations in use today. In addition to jobs and careers, there are passion,²¹ kinship, craftsmanship, and service orientations.²² Passion, like jobs and careers, is more self-focused and is encapsulated in the notion of “do what you love.” Kinship involves seeing work as a means of creating a familial community. This orientation is often expressed in my work with firefighters, but is also discussed among soldiers and other fraternal organizations. Craftsmanship is centered on doing work, and doing it well, for its own sake. While such an orientation might bring to mind someone who builds furniture by hand, it refers to anyone who views their work as a means of expressing “quality.” Finally, we use the term “service” rather than “callings” because the latter term has been used very widely in recent years to mean something closer to passion²³ than more traditional notions involving obligation and sacrifice.²⁴ Service involves viewing work as a vehicle to helping God, the planet, or a social cause; more broadly it is service to something significantly greater than oneself.

The Role of Religious and other Institutions on Meaningful Work

As I have noted, work orientations are essentially internalized cultural-institutional “accounts” or reasons for why work is worth doing. The institutions that may influence a person’s work orientation (or orientations) are many. Family is likely a primary source of influence, as are educational institutions. However, one need not look any further than the entertainment industry to see a variety of very strong narratives of why work is worth doing. Movies such as *Wall Street* glorify a career orientation by advocating the importance of “getting to the top” by any means necessary. *Avatar*, by contrast, emphasizes “kinship” while *Pay It Forward* extols service. These and other media images are likely other powerful resources that people use to understand why their work is (or is not) worth doing.

Orientations such as callings, however, provide a stark reminder that one clear shaper of how we view work is our religious institutions. Weber’s *Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) traces the notion of a calling to the work of Martin Luther, and

20 M.G. Pratt, C. Pradies, and D.A. Lepisto, “Doing Well, Doing Good, and Doing With,” 175.

21 D. Lepisto, S. McArdle, and M.G. Pratt, “Orienting Towards Self, Others, or Objects: Toward a New Work Orientation Scale,” Working paper, Western Michigan University, 2016.

22 M.G. Pratt, C. Pradies, and D.A. Lepisto, “Doing Well, Doing Good, and Doing With.”

23 S.R. Dobrow and J. Tosti-Kharas, “Calling: The Development of a Scale Measure,” *Personnel Psychology* 64 (2011), 1001-1049.

24 J.S. Bunderson and J.A. Thompson, “The Call of the Wild: Zookeepers, Callings, and the Double-Edged Sword of Deeply Meaningful Work,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 54 (2009), 32-57.

more broadly, as a product of the Reformation.²⁵ Indeed, Weber suggests that callings introduced a new conceptualization of work not found in Roman Catholicism at that time, specifically:

The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling.²⁶ According to this work ethic, especially as interpreted by Calvin and his followers, one's material success at work could be viewed as a sign of God's favor.

While people do not often talk about a “Roman Catholic Work Ethic,” Catholicism also has its own perspective on work—one that has evolved considerably since the late 1800s.²⁷ In brief, there appears to be some consensus that modern Catholic thinking on work and labor can be traced at least back to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*,²⁸ which moved beyond viewing work as “punishment from the fall,” and began to articulate a social vision of the place of work in society and in human life.²⁹ This articulation of the role of work has continued, notably in Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* (LE) in 1981, which views work as something not only “uniquely human” but as something that allows us to be more like God, the Creator. As Pope John Paul II opens this encyclical:

Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family. And work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself. Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature.³⁰

25 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

26 Weber, 80.

27 As a proviso for this section, my area of scholarship is not on Catholic views on work. Thus, this review should be viewed as a non-expert's reading of the field.

28 Pope Leo XIII, encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (“On the Condition of Labor,” 1891), online at www.vatican.va.

29 D. Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006); M. White, “Homo Laborans: Work in Modern Catholic Thought,” *Villanova Law Review*, 58 (2013), 455-470.

30 Pope John Paul II, encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981), online at www.vatican.va.

Also critical to this encyclical is the delineation of the objective nature of work from its subjective nature.³¹ This division focuses not just on what is made by work (i.e., its objective outcomes or nature) but also the importance of the person him- or herself that is engaging in the work (i.e., its subjective nature). Pope John Paul II focuses mostly on the subjective elements of work, and in particular the critical importance of a worker's dignity.³²

Going back to my discussion of orientations toward work, Cosden suggests that *Laborem Exercens* offers a hierarchy of values that speak to how individuals relate to work. The first level is "instrumental"—work is a means for "earning one's daily bread"; for some, it is also the means through which to support a family. This level resonates with a job orientation. The second level is "relational," which Cosden links to Pope John Paul II's summary statement, "It is characteristic of work that it first and foremost unites people. In this consists its social power: the power to build community" (*LE* 20). This would appear to echo the sentiments in the kinship orientation. The final dimension is an "ontological" one that involves the role of work in a person's salvation. While this is more difficult to categorize in terms of work orientation, it likely resonates most with a service orientation. According to Cosden's interpretation, these levels are hierarchically arranged—with the ontological being more important than the relational, and both of these being more important than the instrumental.

Since the turn of the century, the issue of work has been addressed in other texts, including the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. This document reflects many of the themes noted in earlier documents but is also noteworthy in the wide array of images it provides about the nature, purpose, meaning, and meaningfulness of work. To illustrate, in Chapter 6, work is viewed:

- as a duty or obligation from God (e.g., in stewardship of the earth)
- as a right
- as an act of creation
- as a source for income or "riches"
- as a means to independence
- as a form of prayer
- as having "an intrinsic social dimension" (273)
- as a means to help the poor
- as an act of redemption

Some of these images seem tied to a *service orientation*, especially in linking work with the development and protection of the planet or with helping the poor. Similar to

31 L.J. Hebert, Jr., "Be Still and See: Leisure, Labor And Human Dignity in Josef Pieper and Blessed John Paul II," *Logos*, 16 (2013): 144-159.

32 This theme of dignity remains strong today. As noted by Pope Francis at the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker and World Labor Day (May 1, 2013), "Work is fundamental to the dignity of a person. Work, to use an image, 'anoints' us with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God, who has worked and still works, who always acts...." http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/05/01/audience_on_may_1st_an_appeal_against_slave_labor/en1-687958.

Laborem Exercens, work is also sometimes viewed more in terms of a *job orientation*—as a means to an end—especially in terms of fostering economic independence or as a means through which to support a family. There are even continuing echoes of *kinship* in its images of social relations of solidarity (see also Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*). And depending on how one interprets the text, there may even be hints of craftsmanship in the words “By his [*sic*] work and industriousness, man ... makes creation ... more beautiful” (266). Noticeably absent from this chapter are images that resonate with either a passion or career orientation.

Finally, while thoughts about work continue to evolve, and the centrality of work in human life is made clearer, work should not be viewed as the totality of human existence. For work should never be viewed as the ultimate end in life. Admonishments about not “being enslaved by work” (260) and the importance of taking a sabbath are critical in the *Compendium*. Indeed, the institution of a sabbath was to limit the hold that work has in our lives, and to allow us to allocate time to worship.

What makes CCUs potentially unique among other educational institutions is that CCUs can provide standards to help people assess why to do things, not just how to do them.

Integration and Extension: What Can Catholic Colleges and Universities Do to Provide Meaningfulness in Work?

To this point, I have argued that meaningfulness is difficult to find in one’s work because the structure of workers’ tasks often separates them from their work (alienation), and because workers lack the standards needed to evaluate the worth of what they do (anomie). I have argued that organizational scholarship has suggested antidotes to these sources of meaninglessness, either by fixing the work itself via “job enrichment” or by fixing the worker’s meanings by the provision of accounts or reasons for why one’s work is worth doing. The latter is most directly affiliated with the provision of purpose that I feel is potentially unique to CCUs and similar institutions. Finally, I have argued that individuals carry with them their own accounts of why work is worth doing—and note that these accounts come from their broader cultural-institutional environment(s). One prominent type of institution that may influence how individuals view work is religious institutions.

To conclude this essay, I want to go back to where I started: what makes CCUs potentially unique among other educational institutions is that CCUs can provide standards to help people assess *why* to do things, not just *how* to do them. It is the former that fosters meaningfulness. However, to move this potential into reality—in other words, to make this a true competitive advantage—CCUs must do more than simply

have a purpose (or mission) statement; they have to enact this statement such that it becomes instilled in those who are members. In the spirit of generating conversation, I want to offer four general ideas for how CCUs can help students find meaningfulness in their work (and ideally, in their lives):

(1) Emphasizing the “why.” At the broadest level, CCUs can facilitate the creation and maintenance of purpose within students (and faculty and staff) by clearly articulating *why* we work (and live). Such articulation can take several forms, none of which is mutually exclusive to the others.

a. Raise awareness of students’ own accounts for work (i.e., their own work orientations) as well as the origins and implications of these orientations. At a very general level, CCUs can help students understand that they do, in fact, have an orientation toward work—and possibly more than one. While specific measures of these orientations are still, relatively speaking, in their infancy, some do exist and others are on their way. I have been able to use some with undergraduate classes in my leadership class and they work well enough to start a good conversation.

In addition to talking about what orientations toward work students might have, these conversations should be extended to include where one’s attitudes toward work come from and what their implications might be. If, for example, students’ views of work differ significantly from those of family members, where might they have picked them up? Are such alternative sources ones that the students find trustworthy? If not, what can they do about it? What might the implications of having particular orientations be? For example, if one has a job orientation, might any job that pays well be “good enough”? How can one productively manage a “career” or “passion” orientation in such a way that it is not harmful to self or others?

Such conversations are helpful not only for career planning but also for starting conversations about how one’s work may fit more broadly into other aspects of one’s life. How, for example, might having a family or a religious vocation fit with having a craftsmanship or a kinship orientation? In addition, discussing the implications of one’s orientation as well as their origins may set the stage for changing one’s orientation if desired.

b. Discuss Catholic views on work and how they relate to different work orientations. As I have noted above, it appears that the Catholic Church has a fairly wide range of views on work and how one should approach it. Given our emphasis on helping the poor, discussions of how to address issues of meaningful work by addressing working conditions appear to be a natural fit.³³ However, it might also be interesting to discuss in our classes the accounts of work that the Church endorses and perhaps does not endorse. Can Catholic teachings, for example, ever endorse a work orientation motivated entirely by the need to advance and show achievement (e.g., a career orientation)? Alternatively, are job orientations inherently good as they do not view work as the most

33 C. Michaelson, M.G. Pratt, A. Grant, and C.P. Dunn, “Meaningful Work: Connecting Business Ethics and Organizational Studies,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 121 (2014), 77-90.

central activity in a person's life? Or, following Cosden, always inferior to relational (e.g., kinship) orientations?

Continuing this thread, it would also be interesting to directly engage in a dialogue about how Catholic teachings on work compare with what we know about work orientations, especially orientations that come from other cultural-institutional sources. For example, "passion" seems to be a dominant cultural narrative in American society. In fact, I once had a distraught evening MBA student come up to me after class because he did not love his job. He also told me that he had been advised to quit his job and find something he loved to do. While I gave him other advice and told him that passion is not the sole criterion upon which to judge one's work, it was a hard sell. He was convinced that "good work" must involve passion. Beyond passion, however, even connections to orientations that seem a natural fit with Catholicism might not always be straightforward. For example, while it might seem likely that Catholicism would advocate a service orientation, might such an orientation potentially lead to "disordered" priorities whereby a sabbath is not observed and/or one's work comes to take precedence over one's relationship with God?

c. Discuss the ethics of providing "accounts" for work. Taking a step back, when discussing the cultural-institutional "reasons" why any given individual might find work worth doing, we should also discuss the ethics of attempts to provide or change such accounts. Under what conditions is the provision of meaningfulness manipulative? Is it wrong, for example, for organizations to espouse a "higher purpose" as a reason for providing lower wages? This was exactly the situation I found myself in as a volunteer board president for a local, religiously affiliated non-profit. The purpose of the organization was to help workers (artisans) in developing countries earn a fair wage for their products by buying their products for a fair wage and then selling them in the organization's line of stores in the U.S. and Canada. I believe the organization's mission is a noble one. However, it quickly became clear that the manager of the store at which I was volunteering was being underpaid and did not earn benefits despite being a full-time employee. The rationale was that the U.S. store needed to keep costs low to help the artisans in other countries. Moreover, I was told that the manager's spouse could easily pay for the manager's health insurance and similar benefits. It was, after all, for the common good. But what are the limits of helping others overseas if one is taking advantage of someone at home? These and similar conversations seem relevant not only to business schools but to various liberal arts departments in CCUs.

Similarly, in discussions with students and their work orientations, is it ethical for CCUs to try to change these orientations? While we might feel relatively safe in trying to convince a student that money and status should not be the ultimate goal in work or in life, where should we draw the line? As noted, a service orientation can come to dominate one's life. Is this a bad thing? If Mother Teresa were our student, would we have advised her to have more balance in her life?

2. *Linking the “why” to the “how.”* In my opinion, it is not only the provision of purpose, of meaningfulness, and of the “why” that can set apart CCUs from other institutions of higher education. As with other colleges and universities, CCUs must also teach the “how”—teaching the skills one needs to successfully act in the world. But in addition—and this is an important addition—discussions of the “how” should be integrated with the “why.” As I have noted above, issues of alienation can be addressed via job design, relational job design, and job crafting. Moreover, issues of fair trade, living wages, and other issues related to the provision of a good work context can likely be found in human resource management, economics, and other classes that cover issues of labor. One can argue that any college or university can, and many do, address these issues. But do they talk about these in the context of “why” they are important? Herein lies the challenge.

While I think CCUs know a lot about purpose and mission, what I believe we know less about is linking stories about why work is worth doing to the conversations around “how.” When I was a student taking philosophy, we tended to have discussions around what makes a good life, but not much at all about what makes for good work or how the two are related.³⁴ It could be that such conversations are happening now, and if they are, that is great. But if they are not, I think CCUs are well positioned to link discussions around accounts of work with more explicit “how to” discussions. As I discuss in my conclusion, however, it is not yet clear where these discussions might take place or exactly the form they might take.

How might conversations about meaningful work and broader conversations about a meaningful life facilitate resilience?

3. *Linking the “why” and the “how” to the “so what?”* Discussions about meaningful work and its relationship to a meaningful life more broadly are important for many reasons. In addition to the inherent value of these conversations in and of themselves as well as their use in guiding judgments and decisions/discernment, I believe that they can have powerful short- and long-term effects. In the short term, I believe they can facilitate student resilience by applying what we know about meaningful work; particularly in the form of having a good reason “why”—to their work at school. As some of you may know, colleges and universities throughout the U.S. are becoming increasingly concerned by what administrators view as a decline in student resilience—that is, their ability to bounce back from adversity. How might conversations about meaningful work and broader conversations about a meaningful life facilitate resilience? I think

34 For an exception, see H. Gardner, M. Csikszentmihalyi, and W. Damon, *Good Work: When Ethics and Excellence Meet* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

the biggest effects are likely in discussing the stories and accounts for why we do what we do. As noted by Frankl “He [*sic*] who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”³⁵ If students have stronger accounts for why their education is worth pursuing or why their work at school matters, it may serve to bolster students’ psychological “hardiness.” Specifically, a dizzying number of assignments, obligations, and activities can become part of a larger narrative for why they are here, and thus why they should continue when facing adversity.

In the long term, such conversations might also play a role in producing happier (in the eudaimonic sense) workers/people. We live at a time when engagement in work is relatively low, stress levels are high, and marital and other close relationships are fraying. Millennials, in particular, may also be particularly at risk for anomie. A new study at the Pew Research Center suggests that young adults are more detached from societal institutions, such as religious, political, and marital institutions, than preceding generations.³⁶ This would suggest that people currently in college may not have the accounts for work and for nonwork that those who came before them had. CCUs may be able to fill this void because we have a belief system about, and language for articulating “why” work (and life) is worth doing.

4. Being mindful of unintentional effects. Finally, before I close I want to be mindful that conversations about “why,” “how,” and “so what” may be influenced by factors that we do not normally think about. I was recently at a talk that described how people’s relationships with their organizations become more transactional during the first year of employment. My sense is that this is not intentional on the part of organizations but likely the byproduct of several other factors (e.g., long hours, disjointed or complex work, precedence of “putting out fires” over enacting the reason why one is doing this job). I wonder if our colleges and universities, even our CCUs, may be unintentionally pushing people toward certain views of work over others, and what the implications of such dynamics might be. Returning to my opening comments, despite having a good income, I find myself worrying a lot about the price of higher education. While many CCUs provide scholarships based on need, higher education is very expensive. I hear parents talking about needing to have their kids have a good return on their investment when discussing undergraduate education. If one is taking a job orientation toward education, it not only pushes people toward more “lucrative” majors but also will likely have an effect on how students see their work, and the role of their work in their lives. I have a colleague who talks about this in his entry-level organizational behavior class. He says that several students in accounting and finance feel pressured to be in these fields because their parents want them not to retain a lot of debt coming out of college. This is anecdotal, of course, but troubling nonetheless. How might these and other dynamics be influencing how students view work and the role of work in their lives? What other factors might be influencing these dynamics for our students (and for ourselves as

35 Frankl, 126.

36 www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/.

their teachers)? How might CCUs address these unintentional forces that shape views of work, nonwork, and the relationship between them?

Closing Comments and Starting New Conversations

I have argued that Catholic colleges and universities can, relative to other colleges and universities, be in a unique position to provide purpose, and ultimately meaningfulness for students as they (re-)enter the work world. The inclusion of the word “can” in this sentence is a critical one. As noted, I certainly think CCUs have the potential to provide purpose. While I have sketched out some broad parameters for what CCUs can do in the provision of purpose and meaningfulness, I wanted to conclude with some more specific non-mutually-exclusive suggestions for implementing them—suggestions that I hope will spark conversations as they did in the Roundtable discussion:

- *Start conversations about purpose and meaningfulness as part of orientation.* Would a full session on the meaning of work and nonwork life be something that CCUs want to handle as part of their orientation process? The advantage of this would be to get students while they are new and thus it may plant a seed that continues to grow throughout their undergraduate years (and hopefully beyond). The disadvantage is that any impact from such a session might be washed out in the larger tidal wave of information that is hitting them when they arrive at school. In addition, a session during orientation may not allow enough time for reflection for such ideas to take root.
- *Make conversations about meaningfulness and purpose in work and nonwork the topic of a course—possibly a required course for all majors.* I know that Boston College is experimenting with a new core curriculum that gets professors from different disciplines to teach courses together. Might a required course on “the meaning of work and life” be an avenue for these types of conversations? Alternatively, it could be a course in a particular department, such as a theology, philosophy, psychology, or organizational behavior department. The advantage of a course, especially a required one for all students, is that it highlights that the college/university believes it is an important topic. It also allows students the opportunity to have an entire semester to reflect on and struggle with these types of issues. The disadvantage is that it communicates that meaningfulness is a bounded topic like social psychology. As such, students may compartmentalize its message from other areas of their lives.
- *Make meaningfulness and purpose part of the conversation across many courses, perhaps as a more explicit part of the school’s mission.* A third way to think about having these types of conversations is to make them an even more explicit part of how CCUs think about and talk about their mission. This approach is similar to how many people think of ethics. I know that in my own methods course, I say explicitly that we will not have a class dedicated to ethics; rather, we will talk about the ethical consideration of conducting research throughout the term and throughout the research process (e.g., in the questions we ask, in how we

design our studies, and how we conduct them). Going further, is the provision of meaningfulness and purpose something CCUs want to continue to develop as a means of differentiating what we provide *vis à vis* other colleges and universities? And to what degree would such a move involve a simple restatement (and possible re-emphasis) on what we already do, and to what degree would it be a reorientation?

To close, I have argued about the dangers of the shift in moving from “why” questions to “how” questions in education. I noted that as CCUs follow the trends of other colleges and universities in focusing solely on “how to do things” rather than “why to do them”—a shift that is often done for economic reasons—we may lose our competitive advantage. Thus, sticking with the “why” over the “how” may allow us to better compete for better students. But interestingly, there is another advantage as well. To the degree that students can incorporate a “why” for their work, and thus find work more meaningful, they may actually be better and more content workers. Indeed, research has connected meaningful work with higher work engagement and motivation, lower stress and absenteeism, and higher personal fulfilment and performance.³⁷ These seem to be two very good reasons why CCUs should continue to address the “why.”

37 B.D. Rosso, K.H. Dekas, and A. Wrzesniewski, “On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review,” in A.P. Brief & B.M. Staw, eds., *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 30 (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 2010), 91-127.