

## Response to Michael Pratt

**Christine M. Pharr**

Michael Pratt's paper was a masterful combination of his own insightful research on work orientations and meaningfulness in work with the ways in which Catholic colleges and universities (CCUs) can use these understandings as a competitive advantage. I, like most of you (I suspect), have a personal passion about living a meaningful life and fostering this interest in students. It is a topic of extreme importance with today's students, who as Nash and Murray have pointed out clamor for purpose and significance in their lives, along with jobs and financial security, of course.<sup>1</sup> My own education and my academic career as a faculty member and administrator have been spent in a number of Catholic and public institutions, and thus I have experienced firsthand the differences in these distinctive types of institutions' aptitudes toward providing a pathway to meaningful work and life for students.

What I would like to do in my response is threefold. Given Michael's explanation of the challenges of workplace meaningfulness as alienation and anomie, I will present some evidence that suggests that CCUs do incorporate practices that can lead to an understanding of meaningfulness as described by Michael in terms of a life of purpose and significance. Secondly, using Haidt's behavioral psychology mental model, I will highlight practices, many of which we have discussed, that may more deeply embed student reflections on the "how" and "why" of meaningfulness in life and work into their psyche. Third, I would like to briefly address how my own experience of public

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Nash and Michele C. Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: A Campus Guide to Meaning-Making* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

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versus private higher education has led to my personal conclusions about the roles that CCUs play in addressing the “so what” that Michael references, that they might truly lead to the common good.

Based upon the various presentations we have heard at this Roundtable, some of the questions we are posing on this general topic of Catholic higher education and the common good are these: how do we assist students in accessing a culture of encounter? In understanding the importance of the common good? In using careful listening and intellectual hospitality to understand perspectives different from their own and hence, from these practices, in finding meaningfulness in their work and lives?

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*According to data from the National Catholic College Admissions Association, alumni of Catholic colleges and universities perceive the cost/benefit equation of their education to be balanced.*

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The question that Michael poses is “do CCUs have a unique opportunity to address issues of meaningfulness in work and life?” I considered how well CCUs are currently addressing these issues. A small sampling of data can be found in two studies by the National Catholic College Admission Association conducted in 2006 and then repeated in 2011.<sup>2</sup> In these studies it was shown that 92% of CCU alumni believe that their Catholic higher education was a good investment. I am not suggesting that rising higher education costs are not a troublesome issue, but at least this conclusion suggests that the cost/benefit equation has been perceived by CCU alumni as balanced!

In addition, if we agree that some of the key identifiers of developing an understanding of meaningfulness are purpose, significance, and developing a value system, the results of studies from graduates of CCUs compared to those from national flagship public universities (NFPUs) suggest that there is a “value added” to a CCU education.

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<sup>2</sup> National Catholic College Admission Association Survey, 2006, 2011, conducted by Hardwick-Day Higher Education Consulting Firm, <http://www.catholiccollegesonline.org/members/resources/values-that-matter.html>.

Statement posed to Alumni	Alumni responses from CCUs		Alumni responses from NFPUs	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
My college was effective in helping me develop moral principles that can guide my actions.	80%	82%	35%	49%
My college was effective in helping me develop a sense of purpose in life.	73%	77%	57%	57%
My college helped me integrate faith with other aspects of life.	57%	58%	12%	17%
My college experience integrated values and ethics in classroom discussions.	75%	75%	27%	40%

These data are clearly limited in scope as they do not address those who would have appreciated a CCU education but could not afford it. However, they clearly point out that alumni at CCUs have different perspectives on their educational experiences than those at large public institutions on topics related to purpose, faith integration, ethics, and values.

Secondly, one might ask where CCUs have had and continue to have the opportunity to lead in addressing meaningful issues that public institutions either cannot or have not, in large part, attempted to address. On each of these examples, Pope Francis has spoken quite vocally.

1. **The Education of Women** Catholicism, while extremely patriarchal in leadership and not often viewed secularly as particularly friendly to women on many issues, has often been a leader in educating women. During the dark ages when the female laity were not allowed to participate in university education, many women religious were educated in seminaries and convents. Catholic religious orders have begun many women's colleges and even today 30% of women's colleges are Catholic.<sup>3</sup> These religious orders have long placed a value on the education of women and have brought forth wonderful women such as Sr. Helen Prejean, whose life serves as an example of what it means to live and work in

3 Richard A. Yanikoski, "Catholic Higher Education: The Untold Story," address to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, February 1, 2010.

a purposeful way.<sup>4</sup> During Pope Francis's recent presentation to the United Nations he stressed the importance of education for girls, noting that millions of girls and young women around the globe still don't have the right to education—a right that he considers universal.

2. **Social Justice Issues** The Catholic Church has long taken a leading role in identifying issues of social justice and leading Church members in actively addressing these. As early as 1891, Pope Leo XIII addressed the condition of labor in *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>5</sup> This encyclical is considered the foundation of modern Catholic social teaching and addresses the wretched conditions of the working class. Recently Pope Francis has clearly delineated not only an agenda to address social injustice but nearly a directive to do so. In 2013 Francis said to the people of Brazil, “To all people of good will who are working for social justice: Never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity! No one can remain insensitive to the inequalities that persist in the world!”<sup>6</sup>
3. **Environmental Concerns** While the Catholic Church has not always aligned itself well with science, on the issue of concern for the environment, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* has taken a strong stand on “care for our common home,” addressing environmentalism quite explicitly and stating that we each have a moral responsibility to address care of the earth.<sup>7</sup>

I simply choose these three examples because they each represent issues of tremendous importance on which CCUs could, and often have, chosen to engage students about diverse topics related to meaningful work.

My second reflection is related to Michael's comments about linking the “how” and the “why” of meaningful work for students. Jonathan Haidt's analogy of the elephant and its rider is used to describe two aspects of our decision-making process.<sup>8</sup> Put simplistically, the rider (our logic/analytic) controls the elephant (emotion) as long as they agree upon the direction to take, but should the elephant choose to go a different route, its sheer size and weight prohibits the rider from determining the direction at all. While the focus of Haidt's argument is to learn to control the elephant in order to find happiness, I wonder if for the purposes of helping students find meaning it may be wise to *use* the elephant to convince the logical mind that something has purpose. In other words, if we wish for the intellectual discussions in the classroom to take deep root in students and to influence their choices in work and life, then we must develop

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4 Sr. Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking: The Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty That Sparked a National Debate* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

5 Pope Leo XIII, encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (“On the Condition of Labor,” 1891), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

6 Pope Francis, “Visit to the Community of Varginha.” Address of Pope Francis on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, July 25, 2013.

7 Pope Francis, encyclical *Laudato Si'* (“On Care of Our Common Home,” 2015), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

8 Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Perseus Book Group: Basic Books, 2006).

and require educational experiences that strongly impact students' hearts as well as their minds.

Some examples which may serve this purpose might be service trips to poverty-stricken areas in Appalachia, or *colonias* along the Texas/Mexico border where students work alongside and understand those living in desperate situations through no fault of their own. Study abroad similarly deepens students' understanding of cultural differences and can be a transformational experience in terms of global citizenry. Having opportunities to individually advocate to legislators on a social justice topic may help students understand how one person can make a difference. These experiences can have a profound emotional impact on young minds that intellectual discussion alone rarely achieves. However, a caution that experts such as Janet Eyler point out is that reflection prior to, during, and following experiential learning is critical to allow students to draw conclusions about why this may lead to meaningfulness in life and work.<sup>9</sup> In summary, to achieve the most dramatic impact in students' perceptions of a purposeful life that they may call upon for years to come, we must address issues of significance with guided experiential learning and reflection.

Finally, my own experience as a student, faculty member, and administrator in both public and private Catholic higher education institutions supports Michael's contention that CCUs may be better equipped to provide the "why" of meaningfulness.

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A significant difference that I have found in Catholic versus public higher education is the development and integration of mission into the works and values of the institution. By frequently employing our mission to guide our decisions, our policies and practices, and our institutional vision, we exemplify that it has meaning to us. In the public institution in which I worked I did not (and still do not) know what the mission statement is. No one spoke of it. While public institutions often have advertising themes, I have not in many of these public institutions felt there was a set of guiding principles that everyone knew and understood. In contrast, every private school which I have attended, or in which I have worked, had a mission statement regularly referenced by students, faculty, and staff. The mission is also reflected in finding times and places of respite for reflection and prayer. These can be physical locations but more than that they are prayers or reflections prior to meetings, daily Mass, and ecumenical prayer services

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9 Janet Eyler, "Reflection: Linking Service and Learning—Linking Students and Communities," *Journal of Social Issues* 58 (2002), 517-534.

that call all faculty, staff, and students to quiet within a very hectic and noisy culture. Even if one doesn't take advantage of these opportunities, people know they exist and are available. My reasoning about the importance of this embedded mission is that if we are to assist students in the importance of finding meaningfulness, might we not first model that at the institutional level?

A second observation of the differences in my public versus private institutional experience is in the area of compassionate treatment of others. Please do not misunderstand, as I have found incredibly good and compassionate people in both public and Catholic higher education institutions, but again I approach this from an institutional perspective. In my experience, CCUs typically have a more compassionate institutional (as well as personal) response to the suffering of its students. There are many examples of this, but perhaps most relevant for students is the concept of how we deal with failure. In my time at a CCU, I have learned that providing options and second chances is critical in profoundly impacting students' understanding of a loving and forgiving God. I have personally experienced students who might have been written off as academic failures (even by me) in my public education career but who were offered extensive opportunities for remediation and alternative pathways to success at Catholic institutions. And surprisingly, more often than not, these students are successful. Outside the academic realm, other examples include the multiple colleges today (including my own) that provide dormitory housing for single women and their children where the children have free room and board,<sup>10</sup> or on a more controversial note, undocumented students who are offered donor-funded scholarships because they have no access to federal financial aid, having been brought to the United States as young children.

If finding meaningfulness in life is related to serving, loving, and forgiving others, then no example can be more intensely personal to a student than their own second chance. While my own experiences may not be representative of the two types of institutions as a whole, and in fact they may be unusual, I believe they are not.

In conclusion, I propose that Catholic institutions do stand uniquely situated to assist students in finding meaningfulness in work and life. Perhaps the most effective path to that is experiential learning, reflection, and institutional role modeling. Or perhaps this is captured more succinctly by the Confucian saying: Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.

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<sup>10</sup> A sampling of higher education institutions offering on-campus living options for single mothers and their children: College of Saint Mary, Omaha, NE; Misericordia University, Dallas, PA; Mills College, Oakland, CA.