

Life Calling *Explorations*

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DISCOVERING A LIFE CALLING

A purpose-guided approach to navigating college transitions

Bill Millard

The passage from high school into college continues to be a much-heralded transition for students, with first year programs springing up on nearly every campus of higher education. However, the first year struggles are not the end of transitions for college students. By the time they march down the graduation aisle at the other end of the college experience, students will have encountered an entire series of serious transitions—each with its own set of challenges and pitfalls. Equipping students to successfully navigate through these passages may be the most important element in making the college experience a meaningful and productive time. At Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU), we are attempting to accomplish this by exploring a transitional map through the creation of a unified model that employs a strong, comprehensive purpose-based approach to the college experience.

The academic programs of IWU, similar to most other colleges and universities, reflect a paradigm shift in higher education. There is an increasing focus on pre-professional majors that train individuals for the workplace. We have found, however, that this approach poses problems if the subject of purpose is not intentionally addressed.

The shift toward pre-professional programs is fueled by the assumption that they are more practical and will help students be more successful in the job market. A fair question, then, is how well does pre-professional training work? If the purpose of American higher education is mainly to provide a solid pre-professional training, then data show that it may not be working that effectively. Studies from the United States Department of Education show that 25 percent of college graduates end up working in careers unrelated to their college major one year after graduation. The problem is accentuated even further out from college when the percentage of college graduates working in careers unrelated to their college major increases to over 40 percent four years after graduation. This disconnect continues to grow beyond four years.

According to the College Board, the average cost of a four-year college education in 2004 is over \$42,000 for students attending public colleges and universities and over \$107,000 for students at private colleges and universities. This is a sizable investment that colleges and universities ask students and families to make given that the pre-professional

Center for
Life Calling & Leadership
indiana wesleyan university



The Center for Life Calling and Leadership enables individuals to find an overriding purpose for their lives, equips them to make life decisions based on this purpose, and empowers them to develop this purpose into world changing leadership.

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AND LEADERSHIP**

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preparation has a better than 25 percent chance of being abandoned after one year and a 40 percent chance at the end of four years. Something greater than just preparation for a particular profession or career must be gained to make the college experience valuable.

What causes the breakdown or disconnect between a college major and the career path? Consider the traditional career development model that higher education often follows. A student entering college from high school is encouraged to choose a major course of study, usually based on an interest expressed by the student (or, as is often the case, the parent). From this major, a promising career is selected based on job availability, pay level, and growth of jobs within that profession. Once a person is in the career, hopefully some sense of purpose or calling will spring up.

At IWU we have concluded that this is the exact opposite approach to what the model should be. Instead, we reverse the process. Students entering college are encouraged to explore their life purpose and develop a sense of life calling. Once an awareness of life calling has been established, an appropriate career is identified that supports the life calling. Finally, a major course of study is pursued that most effectively prepares students for that career and their life calling. IWU has created a Center for Life Calling and Leadership to support this model by infusing a life-calling discovery process across the academic structure and experience of our campus.

How does the discovery of life calling best occur?

Let's stop for a moment and define what we mean by that term "life calling." Life Calling is confidence of an overriding purpose for one's life based on the ultimate meaning of one's life, an understanding of one's unique design, and a personal response to the needs of the world. Life calling, then, is something that is larger than a job, profession, or career. Our contention is that everyone has a life calling. There is a purpose for our lives, and we have the ability to discover this purpose as we pursue life congruence based on self-awareness. This is what distinguishes us from other animals.

If students only train for a profession and then connect with that profession without delving deeper into the fundamentals that help establish a sense of purpose and life calling, they will graduate with a purpose-deficient experience even though they may be adequately or excellently equipped to carry out the duties of a selected career. Without that sense of purpose and life calling, as the statistics predict, students will easily jump careers in just a few years out of college. Why? They will not have the staying power to endure adversity (which occurs in all careers) or they will be lured to follow what appear to be better opportunities—which may or may not be based in reality. In either case, there is no sense of purpose or life calling anchoring the decisions made.

The Center for Life Calling and Leadership is vigorously exploring what is necessary for discovering life calling. Our current hypothesis is that this discovery process is similar to the process of learning to read. In fact we have patterned our exploration after a national research effort on reading described by Reid Lyon, Chief, Child Development & Behavior Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health (NIH). The NIH found that reading is learned in a combination of the child's home, school, and community. Children who have spent their first four or five years in a home where there is a deep love of reading and a rich vocabulary enter kindergarten with a high level of language skills. They attain this level without being aware of how they did it. In that rich environment, the children's brains accomplished this without formal training. However, where this rich environment does not occur, the natural thought patterns are not developed, and significant remediation will be required during the school years.

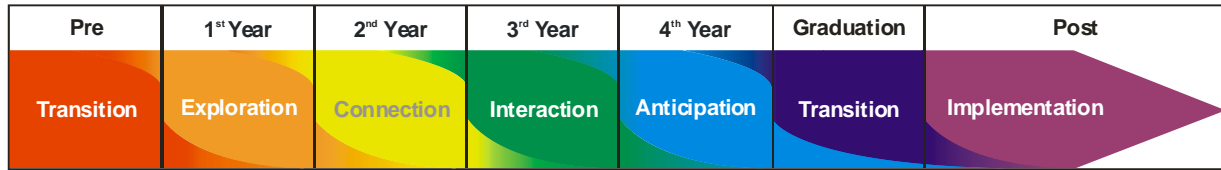
We propose that the same process occurs for discovery of a life calling or purpose. In homes where individuals have grown up talking about the meaning of life, exploring unique strengths, and engaging in community service, there is a strong sense of purpose and calling in place by the time they reach college. However, when this does not take place, a much more confused picture occurs for students entering college. Unfortunately, we have observed that a substantial portion of students entering our institution have difficulties in discovering their life calling, experience life calling confusion, and have little or no idea how to remedy the situation. The question then arises—how can we remediate life calling illiteracy in college students?

Remediating life calling illiteracy

The Center for Life Calling and Leadership believes that one important key to remediating life calling illiteracy at the college level is a comprehensive and unified life calling developmental process during the college experience. We

have formulated a stage developmental model specifically oriented toward the life calling discovery process during the various transitions in college. The transitions are broken into the traditional four-year experience. We have identified the overriding issue in each of these years and then designed our relational and programmatic elements around these issues. As the model depicts, however, we realize that these do not always fit neatly into the single-year experience. Some students are ready to address these issues early, while others work on the issues well beyond the single year.

STAGE-APPROPRIATE LIFE CALLING DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL



The **Pre-Stage** issue is *entrance transition*. Life calling support is focused on helping students successfully traverse the dramatic change between the high school experience and college life. This is achieved through an intentional orientation program for college entrance that begins before arrival at college. Involvement in the recruiting stages to help students enter college with realistic and better-directed expectations is crucial.

The **1st Year** stage is *exploration*. With the evolution of the college experience into pre-professional training, less of an emphasis is given to exploration and more is given to preparation. The fact that we have to redirect many of these students from one program to another indicates that fast-track professional preparation may not be the best approach to a first year experience. Rather, it might be better to allow students to explore their own strengths and design and then explore the wider world of options. Too many times our students come into the first year undifferentiated. The track they are put on has been predetermined by someone else.

Our first year exploration stage includes a strong course that combines an introduction to the liberal arts, mentoring, and service learning to expand the students' horizons. We also assign all students who would prefer to explore possibilities rather than locking into a major to the Center for Life Calling and Leadership for academic advising. The Center creates for these advisees an exploration-enriched program beyond the first year course taken by all incoming students, combining a course on the exploration of life calling with exposure to humanities core courses and general education courses. Students are also encouraged to explore gateway courses that lead into areas of study in which they might have a calling or interest. The Center uses life coaching and mentoring to support this process.

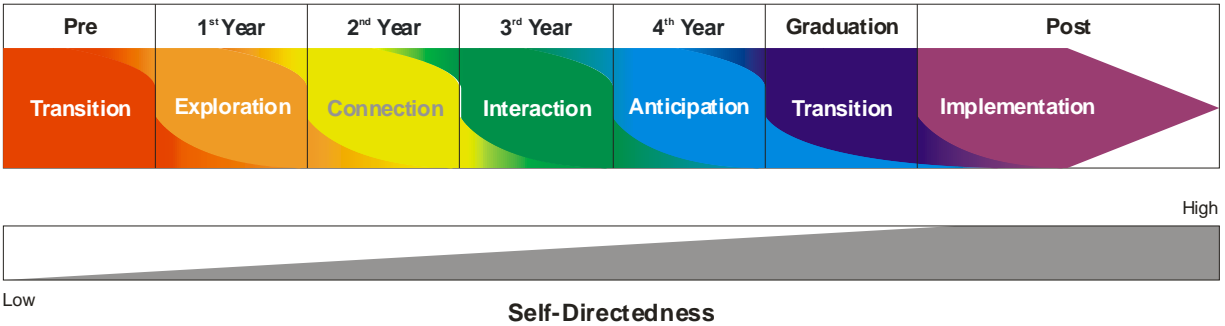
The **2nd Year** stage is *connection*. Students in this stage need a strong connection with others to carry them through what has been termed "the Sophomore Slump." They also need connection with a plan for how they are going to pursue their college experience. Finally, they need a strong connection with academics—especially if they have not yet identified a major to pursue. Once again, life coaching and mentoring are crucial.

The **3rd Year** stage is *interaction*. Our observations reveal that this is the most productive year for students to become involved with service and leadership, both outside of and within the institution. It also becomes one of the most effective times for students to integrate learning within the rest of their lives.

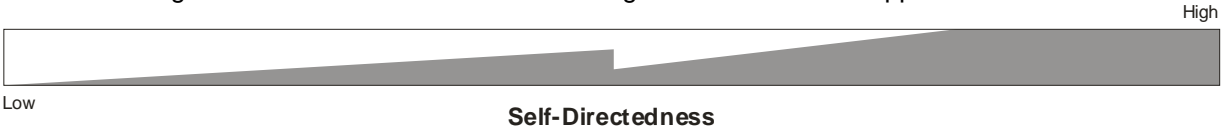
The **4th Year** stage is *anticipation*. Students who had a broad societal focus in the previous year now narrow that focus to personal implications. Their prime question is "what is going to happen after I graduate?" This anticipation also includes a significant level of apprehension.

Graduation brings on *exiting transition* stage. Following this exit, graduates now begin to implement what has been learned during the college experience in their **Post-Stage** life.

Our goal throughout this development has been that students would increase in self directedness. We originally thought it would occur in a gradual increase as we guided students through the four year experience as illustrated below.



One of the more eye-opening findings we have made is that this is not necessarily true. We found self-directedness increasing until the end of the 3rd year and then suddenly, with the anticipation and apprehension of life after college, there was a distinct regression from self-directedness and a greater demand for supportive intervention.



The 4th year stage may be just as difficult as the 1st year stage. We also suspect that as we continue to develop this model that we are going to see multiple regressions correlated to various issues that occur throughout the college experience. Instead of gradually disengaging in our life calling support at our Center, we may find it a case of multiple refocusing of emphases and efforts.



Notice in the illustration above that we have suggested at least two other regressions of greater magnitude: one within the 2nd Year Connection and another within the Post Implementation as various career crises are encountered.

This Developmental Model has a direct impact on efforts carried out by centers that work directly to guide students in discovering their life calling. The model shapes what we offer for different stages. The illustration on the following page relates the model to four key activities carried out by our center: life coaching, academic advising, career development, and mentoring.

Life Coaching

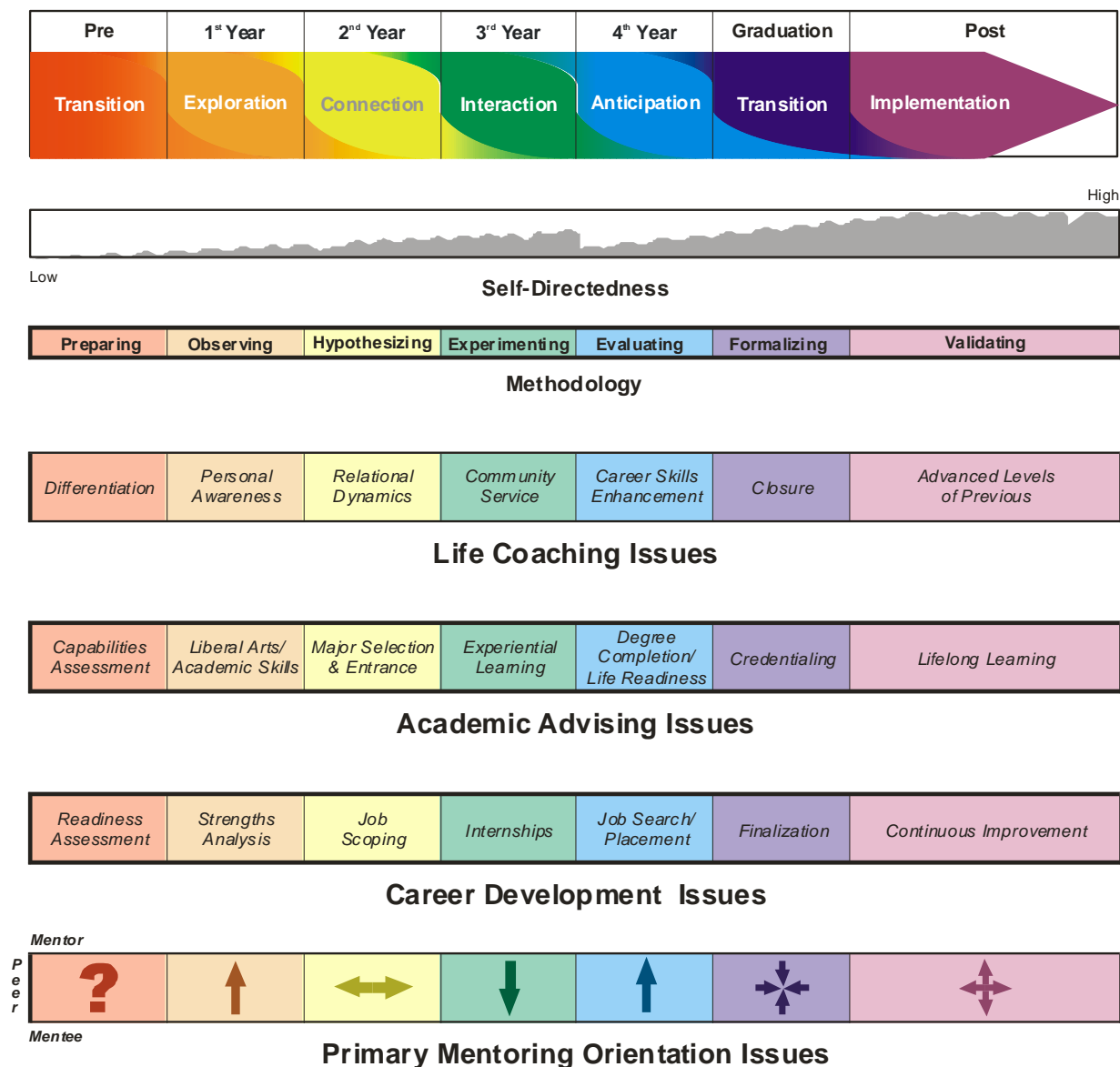
In the life calling discovery process, our center employs life coaches to work with students as they look for solutions to future questions. Life coaching is rooted in positive psychology and differs significantly from clinical counseling in that it is primarily forward-focused and proactive. Life coaching also differs from traditional career counseling in that it goes beyond career issues and looks at life calling in a much larger context.

Our life coaches work with students in all stages of the model. However, each coach also maintains a specialty related to a specific stage within the model. That coach will also coordinate the activities related to that stage of development.

Prior to even arriving at college, our life coaches work with prospective students during the Pre Stage Transition to help them start the differentiation process to discover their own identity rather than seeing themselves as extensions of others in their lives. This differentiation process carries into the 1st Year stage as well.

During the *exploration* stage that occurs primarily during the first year in our model, life coaches work both one-on-one and teach classes to increase personal awareness with the students. A life calling model is introduced in which we use a strengths-based approach to identify the personal assets each person has. Our 1st Year life coach specializes in strengths assessment and the general education program of our institution. This person coordinates the 1st Year Exploration program. This person also supervises all of the life coaches.

STAGE-APPROPRIATE LIFE CALLING DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL



The focus expands and shifts during the *connection* stage of the second year to address relational dynamics. A strong mentoring program is maintained that helps students to connect with others. Students are also coached in the process of connecting with educational and career direction. Our 2nd Year life coach specializes in strengths development, mentoring, group dynamics, and student retention. This life coach coordinates the 2nd Year Connection program. This person also coordinates the overall life coaching program.*

During the *interaction* stage of the third year, students have the greatest potential to be involved in making a difference in their surrounding environment. The most significant life calling discovery support our life coaches can give to students during this third year is assisting them with involvement in community service—both on campus and in the surrounding community in which we are located. It is also a time to provide leadership training and opportunities. Our 3rd Year life coach specializes in experiential learning, leadership development, and internships. This life coach coordinates our community service program for all students we work with, but gives a special emphasis to third year students.

Students often seek a higher level of life coaching during the *anticipation* stage of the fourth year. The major difference is that the coaching they seek is focused on career discovery and life skills enhancement. They are apprehensive about what lies ahead and they need help and reassurance. Our 4th Year life coach specializes in job

search, job placement, and other career skills. This life coach coordinates the career development programs for all students, with a special emphasis on the needs of seniors anticipating graduation.

During the last month leading up to graduation, our life coaches help students bring closure to the college experience. Once students leave our institution and enter the Post-Implementation phase of their lives, periodic contact between our coaches and alumni help them put into practice advanced levels of the process they have learned in their four-year experience at our institution.

Academic Advising

The Center for Life Calling & Leadership provides academic advisement to all students who have not yet declared a major or who are in the process of dropping one major and searching for another. The stage developmental model helps us focus on academic issues related to the various stages.

In the Pre-college stage as students apply and prepare for college, we help them assess their capabilities and prepare for success in the higher educational experience.

During the 1st Year *exploration* stage in our model, students need a structured academic program that creates an exploration program for them as they enter the university. This program follows our belief that self-awareness is found more in the liberal arts than it is in technical training. Students enroll in a first year course that combines an introduction to the liberal arts, mentoring, and service learning to expand their horizons. Students also need a course on the exploration of life calling. The remainder of the exploration courses is comprised of humanities core courses, general education courses, and gateway courses that lead into areas of study in which the student might have an interest.

During the 2nd Year *connection* stage, students need to begin connecting the discoveries made during the exploration stage. Connections to major areas of study will often occur during this stage. At this point, our Center transfers academic advising to advisors within the corresponding academic department.

During the 3rd Year *interaction* stage, students are advised to enter into experiential learning embedded in their academic program. Our Center works hand-in-hand with academic departments during this stage to provide internships. This is also a good year for study abroad.

During the 4th Year *anticipation* stage, the main issue of academic advising is to ensure that students will complete all requirements for degrees and graduation. It is a stage in which life-skills readiness should be addressed. Capstone classes within a major can help address this issue. Our Center provides a credit-bearing course that deals with life-skills readiness.

Graduation should be a transition time where students receive credentials that meaningfully certify their completion of activities in the previous stages and guarantee their preparation for the world of career or graduate studies to come.

Once students leave our institution and enter into the Post Implementation stage of their lives, we have prepared them academically for lifelong learning, and we provide some level of encouragement and support through periodic contact and availability to allow this to happen during their alumni phase.

Career Development

Earlier we defined life calling as something larger than an occupation or career. However, career is an important element of how we carry out our life calling. This being the case, career development is an important aspect of a life calling discovery process. The Center for Life Calling & Leadership maintains a serious commitment in providing students with meaningful career development throughout their college experience.

As students apply and prepare for college, we assess what level they are ready for in career development. We also use this as a time to inform incoming students of the need to think about career issues throughout their college experience. We encourage them to do this rather than waiting until the last semester of their senior to try desperately (split infinitive) to rectify their needs in this area.

During the 1st Year *exploration* stage, the focus is on identifying strengths and understanding the connection of strengths to life relationships—including careers.

During the 2nd Year *connection* stage, we encourage and facilitate what we call “Job Scoping.” This is more than just job shadowing. Informational interviewing and other activities are employed to get students to explore all aspects of the work world and to begin to understand the intricacies and ramifications within that world. A connection between the work world and major selection is emphasized.

The 3rd Year *interaction* stage is the ideal time for experiential learning. With career development, this is best accomplished with internships. As stated earlier, our Center works hand-in-hand with academic departments during this stage to provide internships. At this time, we encourage students to begin the networking process.

During the 4th Year *anticipation* stage, career development focuses on hands-on training and preparation for the actual job search process. Job placement becomes a shared effort between our institution and the students. We work with academic departments to support preparation for graduate school entrance.

In the Career Development track in our model, we see graduation as a finalization of the activities completed in the previous stages. Once students leave our institution and enter into the Post Implementation stage, we have prepared them to pursue continuous improvement throughout their careers. We stand ready to assist them in later career changes.

Mentoring

We have found the two most important roles in the life calling discovery process are life coaches and mentors. The Center partners with Student Development to integrate mentoring into all stages of our model.

The mentoring program aids first and second year students as they get acclimated to college life. It provides them with an opportunity to connect with a continuing student in a one-on-one or a group setting. Depending on the needs of the individual, the mentors' role will vary. They serve in many different capacities such as a spiritual guide, coach, counselor, teacher, or sponsor. The role of the mentor is to build a relationship that will allow the mentee to grow as a result of their encounter. The program creates an environment that allows for intentional connections between peers. It is more than just a way in which students can connect with one another. It challenges students to become more accountable to each other for their actions, as they begin to explore life calling.

We have found that the predominant roles sought by students in mentoring changes with the various stages. This is indicated by the orientation of the arrows in the fourth track of the model, pointing in the direction of the role in which the students in that stage primarily assume. For instance, if students wish to be a mentee in relationship to a mentor, the arrow points up. An arrow pointing down indicates students wish to be a mentor. Horizontal arrows indicate peer mentor relationships.

At the beginning when students first arrive, the role is inquisitiveness. They want to know what mentoring is and why they need mentoring.

During the 1st Year *exploration* stage, students are often bewildered and want an older student to mentor them and help them understand the college experience, especially how to get started at college-level academics and at living away from home and on campus.

During the 2nd Year *connection* stage, students often want to mentor each other on a peer level as they seek connection. We have observed that when this occurs, the rate of dropout is reduced.

We have noticed that the 3rd Year *interaction* stage is the most productive year for students to become involved with service and leadership. In our Mentoring track of the model, this is expressed by a desire to become mentors for younger students—especially first year students needing and wanting mentors.

We have described an eye-opening finding concerning the 4th Year *anticipation* stage in relationship to self-directedness. There is a distinct drop-off in self-directedness and a greater demand for supportive intervention as anxiety about the future begins to loom. This is reflected in mentoring by the desire of seniors to have mentors that come from the alumni population within the careers they are pursuing, helping them to know what lies ahead and how to prepare for it.

The arrows at the graduation stage depict that the primary focus from all angles is expected to be on the graduate.

Once students leave our institution and enter into the Post-Implementation phase of their lives, graduates will continue mentoring relationships in all directions—as a mentor, mentee, and peer.

Conclusion

IWU is a comprehensive university with a traditional residential campus of 2,500 students and a series of satellite campuses that provide programs for nearly 9,000 working adults. We have focused the early implementation of this staged model for discovering a life calling on the traditional-aged college experience. The results we have seen have been very positive. During a four-year period when the university experienced a 27 percent enrollment increase, we have seen a 117 percent increase in students choosing to start their college experience exploring under the advisement of the Center. We have also experienced a 373 percent increase in sophomores continuing to work through exploration and decision-making. This has a definite impact on retention since many of these students would choose to drop out if they were not part of an intentional program with advisors, life coaches, mentors, and champions. As our first cohort of students has reached graduation, we have seen an increase in their ability to identify their life calling and understand its implications to life beyond college.

Though we have started out with traditional-aged students in our residential campus, our observations reveal that it is not restricted to this experience or this age group. We plan to begin integration of our model into our adult program in 2005. In fact, the stages guiding the discovery of a life calling are applicable to every point in a person's life where the issue of life discovery is involved. For this reason, the model should not be seen as a single linear event or process, but rather it should be seen as a process that cycles over and over again throughout a person's life.

With that in mind, the most important accomplishment in the college experience in relationship to this model may be equipping students with tools to properly address each stage and helping them to learn how these tools can continue to be used throughout their lifetimes. This leads us back to the original discussion. Rather than viewing college as simply a time to professionally prepare for a specific career, students should be equipped to explore their life purpose and develop a sense of life calling. Across our country there is a call for leadership in all arenas of society that is revitalized by a values-based commitment to civic service and responsibility that arises out of a true sense of purpose. If colleges and universities are going to be the incubators from which such leaders arise, then we need to make it the highest priority to create an environment where students will capture a personal sense of life calling and purpose and be inspired to become leaders of change in their world.

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