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SOCIOLOGY OF VOCATION (FYS 100) MATERIALS

I created this First Year Seminar with the support of a course development grant from the Lilly Vocation Initiative at Wake Forest University. I taught one section of the course in Fall 2006 and am currently teaching two sections of it (Fall 2007).

The course is a sociological examination of the concept and practice of vocation. Although it can be difficult to understand vocation without a religious dimension, in the course we provisionally say that from a secular perspective vocation is simply our understanding of and answer to the question: "What must I do with my life?" We develop the concept of vocation by reading a small book by Stanford University education professor William Damon called *Noble Purpose: The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life*.

Having established a working definition of vocation, the bulk of the course focuses on a sociological analysis of vocation in modern society. We examine vocation in three central institutional arenas: education, work, and family.

In the educational arena, we examine how higher education's close connection to the demands of the economy affects academic life in general and students' orientations to intellectual life in particular. This part of the class takes up from a sociological perspective one of the questions posed by President Hatch's inaugural symposia: Why the liberal arts? Is it possible for higher education to be vocational in the profound sense of helping students to understand who they are and what they should be? Or must it inevitably become vocational in the narrow sense of providing a technical education aimed at certain lines of employment?

In terms of work, I draw on the ideas of some contemporary American sociologists who, working in the tradition of Max Weber, have continued to promote the idea of work as a vocation or calling. According to Robert Bellah and his colleagues, "In the strongest sense of a 'calling,' work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life." "Morally inseparable" in this context emphatically does not mean that one's life's goals should be subordinated to one's life's work, but that one's life's work becomes part and parcel of fulfilling one's life's goals. But in an era of globalization, corporate downsizing, computerization, and outsourcing, is it possible for most people to think of their work in this way? Historically, the professions have served to insulate some workers from the encroachment of the market and its relentless logic of profit, but as President Hatch's inaugural symposia also made clear, the professions are under considerable economic pressure today. Especially given the professional aspirations of

many Wake Forest students, some serious consideration of the historical and contemporary status of the professions is order in a class on the sociology of vocation.

Finally, what of family life? Most people, when they think of what they want to accomplish in life, imagine themselves as having fulfilling family lives, as mothers or fathers, wives or husbands. But families have undergone considerable change in modern society, particularly the roles of spouses in relation to work, to each other, and to their children. Especially with the widespread entry of women into the workforce in the second half of the 20th century, the question of how to negotiate work and family life has been brought to the fore. No scholar has done more to understand these challenges than sociologist Arlie Hochschild, so we read her book, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. This book raises profound questions about why workers do or do not take advantage of corporate policies designed to help them balance home and work life.

Assignments for the course are meant to meet the expectations of first year seminars, and therefore they focus heavily on writing and discussion. They include regular class participation, two class presentations, five papers, and a final portfolio.

In addition to the syllabi for the Fall 2006 and Fall 2007 versions of "Sociology of Vocation," I include in this section the grading criteria I use for the course papers and a sample student paper on "The Meaning of Vocation" from this fall.