

**Vocation and Gender:  
Seeking Meaning in Work and Life**

**Proposal for DISCOVER Curriculum Development Grant**

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**I. Introduction**

Women today are presented with unprecedented opportunities for participation in the workplace, community leadership, and politics. At the same time, they are faced with persistent inequities in salary, the glass ceiling, and the continued failure of both the government and corporations to address the systemic need for high quality, affordable child care coupled with flexible work schedules. We have told them they can do and be anything they want—they can have it all – yet this “superwoman” dream continues to be out of reach of many. Young men face equally difficult pressures. We have expanded cultural ideas of fatherhood and broadened masculinity to include sensitivity, emotionality, and tenderness. At the same time, the average number of working hours is at an all time high, stay-at-home fathers encounter discrimination, disconfirmation, and the same type of career stall or derailment women have always faced without sufficient institutional support. Most families find they need two incomes to meet expenses, and the pressure to be supermom and superdad is immense. While many in our culture claim that gender roles and expectations are a relic of the past, both research and common sense demonstrate that this is simply not the case; the pressures and conflicts experienced by today’s young people are deeply gendered in nature.

Vocation should be understood broadly to encompass both our careers and our lives outside of work, that is, relationships with partners, children, other family members, friends, and community. This means we need to consider a broad range of factors in making decisions on how we plan to spend our time; there are likely to be conflicts between our multiple callings that have to be addressed. Simply stated, vocation is germane to all facets of our lives as “whole people.”

The proposed course will take an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing the important issues of the personal choices we make in our activities of work, partnership, childbearing, family and community. By incorporating the theoretical and empirical methods of the disciplines of communication and economics, we will provide students with a rich set of tools with which to make their own discerning decisions on personal vocation. Decisions on work and life within the family and community clearly have an important economic dimension, yet we must be able to communicate and negotiate well to achieve our dreams.

Economics will be a vital cornerstone of the course: economic models and empirical studies will provide the framework under which the students can consider their life choices. Some economic topics that will be covered include: behavioral economics (other-regarding preferences, attitudes toward risk and competition, optimizing decision-making, etc.); economic models of the family (division of labor, paid and unpaid work, childbearing decisions, child care, etc.); gender and labor markets (discrimination, gender pay gaps, glass ceiling, pink-collar jobs, etc.); employment (for-profit, not-for profit, entrepreneurial, part-time, exiting labor force, etc.), and government and corporate policy (work flexibility, part-time or shared jobs, child care, parental leave, etc.).

Communication is the means by which all meaning is established, maintained, and transformed among people. Hence, an understanding of how individuals and groups engage in interpersonal, organizational, and mediated communication surrounding work/life issues will empower students to act on their own behalf, relate well with others, and advocate for marginalized groups. Communication topics that will be covered include: negotiation skills, powerful/powerless talk, gendered styles of verbal and nonverbal communication, intimate communication, gendered family dynamics, and group decision making. Relevant communication theories that will be incorporated include standpoint theory, bona fide group perspective, muted group theory, and structuration theory.

We are hoping that this course will be included both as one of the pilot vocation classes in the new core curriculum and as a course in potential pathways in gender or vocation. We plan to work with the core curriculum committees to see if this can be approved.

## **II. Pedagogy and Vocational Development**

Pedagogical goals to be realized through written assignments, discussions, lectures, and readings include:

- Understand vocation as a calling; find spiritual meaning in one's life
- Identify one's own vocational goals in both work and life outside of work
- Understand work/life opportunities and constraints
- Engage in interdisciplinary learning and perspectives; connect research across fields
- Understand gender differences in relationships, work, and family.
- Find ways to navigate the difficult course of achieving one's work-life vocation to nurture the "whole person"

### III Tentative Syllabus

#### A. *Topics for syllabus*

The fields of economics and communication will provide an integrated treatment of topics at the intersections of vocation, gender, and work/life balance. For each topic, we will explore both the socioeconomic realities that surround individuals' choices and the daily enactment of those choices through communication.

#### Tentative Schedule of Topics:

##### Introduction to Vocation

Students will explore questions such as: What is vocation? What does it mean to have a calling? How do personal and professional choices relate to one's spirituality, values, strengths/weaknesses, family, and culture? Are there gender differences in vocation?

##### Employment/Careers

Students will investigate gendered patterns in choice of profession, career trajectories, salary differentials, pink and blue collar work, use of family leave, achievement of executive level professional positions.

##### Life Partnerships

Students will confront the economic realities, legal standing, and social meanings of marriage, domestic partnership, and same-sex partnerships, as well as trends such as the growing percentage of single adults, later age of marriage, delayed childbearing, divorce, remarriage and blended families, and lesbian/gay and other chose/nonnuclear family units.

##### Childbearing Choices

Students will consider decisions surrounding the choice to have children, timing of childbearing, and provision of child care. We will also explore infertility and the fertility industry, adoption, and those who remain voluntarily childless.

##### Balancing Work/Life and Division of Labor within the Household

Using research studies and theoretical models, students will learn about the challenges of balancing work and life in a gendered world. Students will explore research on gendered patterns in daily life surrounding mundane activities such as work, housekeeping, childcare, and community service.

##### Work/Life Policies - Corporate and Government

Federal and state laws on parental leave, medical leave, regulation of child care services, and tax deductions for children, child care, and corporate policy on leaves, career flexibility, child care services and/or subsidies, and other "family friendly" policies. We are particularly interested in exploring trends in the reported use of such policies, as ample evidence suggests that many policies exist but remain unutilized due to workplace cultural norms that discourage employees from using them.

##### Student Presentations

Student groups will present on issues in vocation and work/life.

## **B. Readings**

*A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (John Neafsey, 2006, Orbis Books).

Excerpts from:

*The Economics of Gender, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition* (Joyce P. Jacobsen, 2007, MA: Blackwell).

*The Economics of Women, Men, and Work 5th edition* (Francine Blau, Marianne Ferber, and Anne Winkler, 2006, Prentice Hall).

*An Economic Analysis of the Family* (John F. Ermish, 2003, Princeton University Press).

*Off-ramps and On-ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success* (Sylvia Ann Hewlett, 2007, Harvard Business School Press).

*The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (Arlie Russell Hochschild, 2001, Holt).

*Working Families: The Transformation of the American Home* (edited by Rosanna Hertz and Nancy L. Marshall, 2001, University of California Press).

*Mommies and Daddies on the Fast Track: Success of Parents in Demanding Professions* (edited by Jerry A. Jacobs and Janice Fanning Madden, 2004, Sage Publications).

*Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It* (Joan Williams, 2001, Oxford University Press).

*Mothers on the Fast Track; How a New Generation Can Balance Family and Careers* (Mary Ann Mason and Eve Mason Ekman, 2007, Oxford University Press).

*Feminist Economics Today: Beyond Economic Man* (Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds. 2003, University of Chicago Press).

*Women, Family and Work: Writings on the Economics of Gender* (Karine S. Moe, 2003, Blackwell Publishing).

*Gender Divisions and Working Time in the New Economy: Changing Patterns of Work, Care and Public Policy in Europe and North America* (Diane Perrons et al. eds, 2006, Elgar).

*The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (Nancy Folbre, 2001, New Press).

*Liberating Economics – Feminist Perspectives on Families, Work, and Globalization* (Drucilla Barker and Susan Feiner, 2004, University of Michigan Press).

*The Second Shift* (Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, 2003, Penguin).

*The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality (The Family and Public Policy)* (Jerry A. Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, 2005, Harvard University Press).

### *C. Assignments and Assessment*

All assignments are designed to have students reflect on and think critically about both their personal vocational aspirations and the social, economic, and political realities of balancing personal and professional lives. Tentative assignments include:

Journal of Reflections: Students will relate concepts from course readings to their own experiences, expectations, beliefs, and values and think critically about the complexity of work/life balance.

Vocation-Driven Life Plan: Each student will design a tentative life plan for her/his self regarding career choices, anticipated partnership and childbearing expectations and decisions, and lifestyle choices. The exercise will require students to wrestle with tough questions about what they value and why, and how to resolve competing desires (e.g., wanting to pursue a demanding career while also being an involved parent). Since experiences such as falling in love and getting pregnant are not ones that can be timed precisely (if at all), the objective of the assignment is less the design of a plan that a student will actually carry out and more an important opportunity for students to confront difficult realities of maintaining work/life balance in today's world. The experience will make students better prepared for appreciating and coping with the complexities of life after college.

Economic Analysis Paper: Each student will complete a research paper in which she or he synthesizes and critiques research on an economic topic and relates these issue to his or her own vocational choices. Areas of research might include: self-interested vs. other-regarding preferences, gender differences in economic behavior, economic decision-making within the family, employment segregation and/or salary gaps between men and women, employment discrimination and/or the glass ceiling, costs of leaving the labor force, and corporate or government policies toward work-life issues.

Exam: An exam will cover theories and concepts from course readings and lectures and will require students to demonstrate both comprehension of material and ability to apply knowledge to real-world scenarios.

Presentations: Students will present in small groups on work/life topics of interest to them that were not covered substantially in the course. In addition to synthesizing relevant research, students will provide exemplars of success and/or pragmatic suggestions for addressing challenges within their topic area.

Class Participation: The course cap of 25-30 students will ensure that we can facilitate vigorous discussions, group work, and exercises such as responding to video segments and developing strategies for problem-solving.

#### **IV. Scheduling the Course**

The chairs of the Departments of Communication and Economics, Paul Soukup and Michael Kevane, have reviewed this proposal and approved the course. We plan to offer the course once a year (assuming there is sufficient student enrollment to warrant offering it yearly), beginning in spring 2009. The course will be cross-listed as a communication and economics course.

#### **V. Budget**

Because this is an entirely new course focused on vocational inquiry, we are requesting a course release for each of us to provide us the time to develop the course, integrating our fields of communication and economics.