

Finding Your Focus: Exploring Vocation and Identity at Duke
Yushen Qian, Forging Social Ideals Focus Cluster

Picture the following. You come home from school on an early April afternoon to find in your mailbox, an oversized envelope from Duke University containing an assortment of blue folders, colorful program cards, and high quality paper that collectively welcome you to one of the nation's top colleges. You are no doubt overjoyed by this grand news and celebrate with your family accordingly.

Flash forward a month and you are staring at your fellow robe-clad classmates, whom you have shared countless memories and experiences in those high school hallways. From the time you walk off that high school graduation podium to where you stand today at Duke, you encounter dozens of relatives, friends, acquaintances, classmates, mentors, college advisors, and other well-wishers who seem bent on asking you, "So what do you want to do with your life?"

The answer to that deceptively simple inquiry generates a litany of potential career options. Should I be a doctor? An I-banker? A Lawyer? A Teacher? An Engineer? How will I know what's right for me? Countless advisors will say, "Follow your passion." But what if you haven't already identified that passion?

Incoming first-year students face many considerable challenges while making the high school to college transition. Within the first week of stepping on campus, I constantly found myself in awe of upperclassmen, and it was not because of their seniority. To me, these juniors and seniors generally exuded a swagger of confidence, direction, and passion. What would I need to do in four years in order to transform my crude and raw self into them? To me, they seemed like finished products ready to contribute to the real world.

My personal journey started with the class "Imagining the Self: Identity, Ideals, and Vocation," part of the Forging Social Ideals Focus Program. The experience was a crash course in introspective meta-analysis, with an emphasis on personal engagement and deliberation over more conventional textual studies. One of the most memorable books of that class was Mountains beyond Mountains by Tracy Kidder, who tells the story of Duke alumnus and uber-doctor / philanthropist Paul Farmer. I was inspired by Paul Farmer's drive to accomplish his vision for helping others through a community-minded focus. What resonated most with me was his ability to integrate his academic commitments at Harvard with his desire to provide medical care to low wealth Haitians.

Although Paul Farmer's achievements seemed unreachable to me as a first-year student, solace came to me in the knowledge that even he faced profound uncertainty at times during his undergraduate career. With a doubtful family, limited financial resources, and internal anxiety, Paul Farmer still managed to discover and pursue his passion. He did this, though, by applying himself and taking advantage of the plethora of opportunities available at Duke, academic, social, and service-related. His work with local Haitian farmworkers helped shaped his vision for his life's work. Even now whenever I seek personal motivation, I am inspired by Paul Farmer.

"Imagining the Self" also came with a more interactive component outside of the classroom. Once a week, a group of fellow classmates and I would participate in a service-learning project at George Watts Elementary School, right across from East Campus. I learned as much about myself as I did about my fourth-grade writing partner as we worked each week to transform his story idea into a colorful storybook. An important truism that I had discovered is that as humans being "useful" to others and ourselves inwardly fulfills us. I, too, find that I am most fulfilled when I am most actively engaged.

Other textual readings and class deliberations provided me with valuable tools as well. During one lesson, our professor Dr. Ahern-Dodson pointed out that most of the class thought of our careers in terms of nouns rather than verbs. Since a large portion of our class was rooted in the premedical track, she took notice of how we tended to say, "I want to be a doctor" rather than "I want to heal." By considering the action, rather

than just the title, we could consider a broader range of life work options. From these classroom activities and discussions, I became aware that my personal choices concerning my undergraduate life as well as career choices were intimately connected to my mindset of how I choose to lead that life. Confidence in making decisions, meaningful planning, constant proactive self reflection, and learning from past experiences – these are practices that will not only contribute to my long-term success, but also augment the quality of my everyday life experiences.

One of the most attractive advantages of enrolling in any Focus cluster is experiencing my first semester alongside peers both in the classroom and in the dormitory. It was fascinating to hear the different stories, backgrounds, and experiences of my peers in class, and their elaboration while we ate dinner together. Coincidentally, our class touched upon life's journey motif in class as well – how each classmate came from a different background and perhaps was heading to a different destination, but we were still all present in that class together at that instant, and we had something to learn from each other. The concept that life is not a linear path seems so simple, and in retrospect, I am astonished at how much I need to be reminded of that. Consequently, I have gained confidence and control in making personal decisions because I am comforted by the knowledge that there is more than a singular route in life.

Of course, life is not a simple jigsaw puzzle that we can tweak, and then expect everything to fit together. Rather, just thinking about the future and the associated responsibilities can be excruciatingly daunting, but a lack of planning can be deleterious. I am often intimidated by the thought of applying to medical school and then going through more vigorous schooling to complete my training; however, I realize that the only way I can maximize my experience and growth is to embrace the future and plan for it. I seek to combine career planning with self-reflection and a commitment to contribute to the world around me.

Like me, many at Duke probably have already categorized themselves into a pre-profession, and some of those include medicine, law, research, or political science. Whether you elect to participate in the Focus Program or not, I urge you to think about other choices available to your salient minds. The Focus Program and “Imagining the Self” had a significant impact on how I see my life and my options at Duke and beyond. My hope is that my fellow Duke students remain open to potential career options and possible redirections. Life is not a mere checklist of things to accomplish, but rather an ongoing process of learning. Duke is a wonderful place that is more than just academic growth; rather, it provides is a medium for personal exploration.