



Laura Ammon is an assistant professor of religion at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. She holds degrees in religious studies from the University of Chicago and Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California. Her expertise lies in the area of history of Christianity, with specializations in early modern Catholicism and the relationship between Christianity and colonialism in the New World. She can be reached at [This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it](#).

Expanding Students' Goals for Higher Education

Recent studies of the “millennial generation” have made some tantalizing suggestions about what kinds of expectations these young people have about their lives inside and outside of the classroom (Smith, 2009). Many of our students have an instrumental approach to education; they are focused on “ends” and define those ends in terms of earning potential. Encouraged by anxious parents, an increasing attempt to corporatize the university, and a burgeoning growth in the belief that there are things one must possess in order to have a happy life, our students pursue their education as a means to acquiring. Often students — and their parents — lose sight of other outcomes from higher education beyond a good job (i.e., immediately available and high-paying) and a secure economic future (Smith, 2009). What the student does with her or his life is often a secondary concern to the potential earning possibilities of a profession, even to the student’s perspective, in service of the first goal of economic security and prosperity. A recent article in *Higher Education Today* argues that humanities degrees are good for business and promise economic reward, further accentuating the emphasis on college as a means to an end of high earning (Jay and Graff, 2012). This narrow view obscures the value of humanities even as it seems to encourage students to take humanities courses. Within the humanities, religious studies courses are a place that can engage some of the other potentialities of living — meaning making, for example — that are part and parcel of life but are often neglected in the ways students and parents approach higher education. College can provide many tools for living, one of which is earning potential. But discovering how to learn and imagining different worlds are also tools that come from humanities courses and can be significant assets for life after college.

Religious studies courses, particularly as part of a liberal arts education, can help convince students that focusing on the ends is too narrow an approach to take as one looks at the entirety of one's life. While I teach at a medium-sized state university, I earned my BA at a small liberal arts college, and that experience as an undergraduate continues to inform my praxis as a professor. I hope that while teaching about religion, I can help students cultivate a curiosity about how lives are lived in various cultures and with disparate religious worldviews, and also help them consider the "how" of living in conjunction with their desire for security. In the end, it does not matter what your occupation or your pay might be: everyone, even professors, want more from life than their jobs. My job is meaningful and very fulfilling, but I also find meaning in literature, art, and music. This is due in no small part to my liberal arts degree and the humanities professors who taught me disciplinary content while also encouraging in me a sense of reflection on the way I live my life through thinking about how others have lived theirs. These foundational educational experiences, designed by a music historian and an ethicist, continue to enrich my life and to challenge and encourage me to find and make meaning. They also inspire me to cultivate that kind of reflection in my students. Arum and Roksa point out the significance of what I experienced insofar as my desire to have a vocation that is meaningful and fulfilling arose out of much reflection modeled by my professors: "It is faculty, within classrooms and beyond, who shape not only students' overall development but also their commitment to continuing their education" (2011). This is a challenge in a medium-sized state university, but is all the more important in an environment where students often feel like a number rather than a person to their professors.

One point that emerges from studies such as the ones presented in *Academically Adrift* (Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, University of Chicago Press, 2011) is that while many of our current students do not have a sense of where they are going in their post-college lives, they have a strong desire to connect their courses with their lives (Arum and Roksa; Walvoord). Addressing these issues is less about curricular development and general education and more about learning about and discovering oneself in a way that is particular to college life — what Barbara Walvoord has deemed "multidimensional growth." The core of humanities is about exactly that kind of growth and self-discovery, though not necessarily in the ways that students initially envision. Throughout their college career, students discover and encounter others through literature, sociology, art, history, and religious studies. Directly or indirectly, these humanities courses address how people create meaning in their lives. One place that creation occurs is in the realm of religion. Religion is unique in the humanities in that it cultivates a set of abilities — to imagine the ways people see themselves in relation to history, art, music, science, the cosmos — and does so in particular cultural settings. Religious literacy "must involve not only a degree of mastery of basic information...but also some insight into how people use that basic information to orient themselves in the world, express their individual and communal self-understanding, and give their lives direction and meaning" (Gallagher, 2009). This is what we are teaching along with "religious literacy" — an ability to imagine the world from the perspective of another person, if only partially, and see how that may be meaningful for those persons.

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