Out of the woods and into the ethos: Unique business course still resonates

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Going against the grain

In the fall of 2022, some 40 University of Michigan students in the final year of their undergraduate or graduate studies gathered for something unusual — at least for
business students: A retreat in Michigan’s remote northwoods to launch a process toward finding their calling.

This wasn’t about finding the calling toward professional and financial success in traditional terms, but in the service of something larger: “To examine their sense of who they are and what they want to be to prepare them to live meaningful lives.”

The idea of finding your calling resonates with students, says Professor Andy Hoffman, far right. (Image: Michigan News.)

These were the words and mission of the man who brought them to U-M’s Biological Station in Pellston: Andy Hoffman, the U-M professor of sustainable enterprise whose book, *Management as a Calling*, inspired the program. The material goes against the grain of a typical business school curriculum, but Hoffman argues it was past time to bring about “a new ethos in business.”

It was audacious in its way, mostly because it was never meant to be a one-and-done. The kickoff retreat was followed by another gathering seven months later, which included guest lectures and more discernment.

Hoffman advised participants at their inaugural gathering that seeking purpose is a lifelong pursuit. It’s at once intensely personal, yet can have far-reaching ramifications.

Measuring headway on such a path is difficult, but several students already have observed or experienced changes big and small in their lives since they started down this road with Hoffman. Some have rethought career goals, others are staying on their chosen path but are taking steps to ensure they don’t compromise their values in the process.
Here’s a one-year progress report from some of the participants in Management as a Calling’s inaugural class.

Nikita Mihalkin: Money is a by-product, not the goal

Mihalkin, BBA ’23, defines his purpose as “making the world a better place through positive business and technology.” (Image: Michigan News.)

Mihalkin, BBA ’23, said during the first retreat that he sought work in the high-tech, entrepreneurial space in a strategic, behind-the-scenes role where he could “help people around me.” A year later, he is working at Intel as a business operations analyst, managing product supply and demand.

“I definitely feel I’ve made great strides toward honing my calling,” he says, “which I can now summarize as ‘making the world a better place through positive business and technology.’

“I’ve always been aware that I liked the intersection of these two areas, and prior to the program, I even accepted a job offer with that exact alignment. However, without the Management as a Calling program, I would not be so clear about my professional purpose.”

Mihalkin came to the U.S. from Ukraine a decade ago, when he was 11 years old. As an immigrant who did not come from affluence, he felt “a measure of personal success should be the amount of money I’m making.”

“However, when I had a closer look at my values through exercises we’ve undergone, as long as my needs are met, I realized money for me should be the by-product of following a personal calling, not the end goal itself.”
Celia Bravard, MBA/MS ’23, says she hopes “to aid in catalyzing solutions for the climate crisis.” (Image: Michigan News.)

Bravard, MBA/MS ’23, said the retreats and guest lectures over the past year “solidified” her goal to use “my talents and education combined with my love for science and compassion for people to aid in catalyzing solutions for the climate crisis.”

Near the end of her time at U-M, Bravard hosted the first Ross Climate Week with several other dual-degree Michigan Ross/Erb Institute peers, which spurred her “calling to continue the work.”

She recently started as an associate at McKinsey & Co. where she aspires to join the firm’s sustainability practice.

“It is clear to me now that no matter what role I find myself in, what company I work for or, what team I am on, I will continually and relentlessly seek to do work that builds bridges between where we are today and where we need to be to mitigate further emissions and adapt to the very real impacts of climate change,” she says.
“I am more curious and willing to take risks in certain experiences,” says Gabriel Correa, BBA ’23. (Image: Michigan News.)

For Correa, BBA ’23, who remains at U-M pursuing a master’s degree in supply chain management, his calling remains undefined, but he knows it will coalesce around one mission: to become a catalyst for change.

“The challenges I’ve faced in both personal and professional settings have pushed me to go through deep personal development,” he says. “Now I see myself approaching opportunities in life differently. I am more curious and willing to take risks in certain experiences, as these opportunities often result in action-based learning. I am also more intentional about meeting people and building relationships.”

Correa, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, returned earlier this year after eight months away. That absence, his longest time away from home, was marked by great challenges and growth, and the homecoming offered unexpected peace — and potential.
“Arriving after so long was a moment of clarity because not only did I find complete relaxation for the first time in a while, but I also saw things in the island around me differently,” he says. “I saw them as opportunities for me to contribute in the future, but I also felt like a visitor, as many things had changed. It made me very appreciative of my upbringing but it also brought me to a reality that entails being more distanced than I’ve ever been from my home.”

Andy Hoffman: From professor to ‘guide’

Students lived in these rustic cabins on the site of the U-M Biological Station during the retreat. (Image: Michigan News.)

Hoffman says the past year confirmed what he long suspected: The idea of finding your calling resonates with students. He was impressed by their commitment — something he’s also observing in the newly convened second cohort.

“It’s not for credit and students still signed up and committed fully to the weekends — and they were fully engaged,” he says. “I can help these students on a path they’re already on. This program, more than anything, gave them an opportunity to explore it.”

Hoffman welcomes the validation; he has longed to see business schools rise and respond more intentionally to such pressing challenges as climate change and income and gender inequality. Not only did he see the need to introduce more courses, but also to develop different ways of teaching.

“I can teach people knowledge — I can have articles and books and convey that to students,” he says. “This program is more around developing wisdom, a deeper
sense of who you are. You can't teach that. My role shifts as the professor: I'm more of a guide."

Hoffman advised participants that seeking purpose is a lifelong pursuit. It's at once intensely personal, yet can have far-reaching ramifications. (Image: Michigan News.)

Hoffman says he’s sharing his material with others outside U-M and has been contacted by 30 other schools. He’s also received real-world validation from people involved with The B Team, a group of business and civil society leaders co-founded by Richard Branson that aims to engage the private sector in addressing the world's pressing problems. A United Nations-supported initiative called Principles for Responsible Management Education also supports Hoffman's vision.

There’s been a learning curve for more than just the students and instructors: When Hoffman first received the grant money from The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, he sought approval for course credit from the Curriculum Committee at Michigan Ross.

After review, he says the committee told him it was “more developmental than academic,” to which Hoffman laughed and replied, “Absolutely, that is what this is and we should do more of it.”
In retrospect, he says, the decision to go forward as a non-credit course “was a good thing,” because grading the students on the mandatory curve “felt antithetical to what we were trying to do.”

“We need to start to bring that more into education: If we just create these rational economic efficiency-maximizing managers, we’re not going to have wise leadership,” he says. “We need to teach the whole student; teaching not just the rational intellect with knowledge but inspiring the heart to seek wisdom, character, and purpose.”

(Lead image: Douglas Lake, Pellston, Mich., by Michigan News.)