

Called for Life

How colleges help students discern their purpose in life and prepare to live it

Called for Life is a collaborative research project designed to examine the impact of Lilly Endowment funded programs at three Lutheran colleges in the Midwest. These programs, each in their third or fourth year of implementation when the study began, were intended to develop on-campus resources to help students discern and commit themselves to a vocational calling.

The primary questions addressed in the *Called for Life* study include the following:

- Have campuses increased students' exposure to and knowledge of calling and vocation?
- Has exposure to the campus programs increased students' understanding of call and vocation?
- Are students who have been exposed to these programs more likely to report that they have identified vocations, callings, or plans for incorporating their faith and values into their post college lives?
- What program elements appear to have the most promise of making a difference in student's discernment of calling and preparation for vocations?

The colleges participating in the study are:

- Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN
- Augustana College, Rock Island, IL
- Luther College, Decorah, IA

These colleges and their programs are briefly described in Figure 6 on the last page. All three are affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Each has completed its initial grant from the Lilly Endowment and is now implementing a follow-up "sustainability grant." Some elements of their vocation programs have changed since the period covered in this study – in part based on what has been learned from this study, as well as colleges' own evaluation work.

Study methods

Study findings are based primarily on surveys with three groups: 800 students during the winter of their freshman year, and 434 of the same students again two years later as juniors; 787 students who were juniors to start with, and 384 of the same students two years later as first-year graduates; and a sample of 247 students who graduated in 2001 before the vocation programs were started. Given the smaller numbers in the follow-up panels, we examined the potential for bias, and found it to be minimal.

Survey questions included a mix of open-ended and closed-ended items about personal background, participation in campus activities (both vocation-related and general), and knowledge and feelings about a variety of aspects of vocation and calling. Open-ended responses were coded and analyzed according to the ideas (or themes) expressed.

Influences on vocational discernment and preparation

Based on discussions with college representatives as well as prior research on college-age development, a variety of factors besides the vocation programs were considered likely to influence student attitudes and outcomes related to vocational development. As illustrated in Figure 1 [next page] these include:

- Influences that predate college enrollment (such as gender, race, religious affiliation and participation, and level of volunteer activity)
- Exposure to or participation in specific vocation-related activities during college
- Exposure to or participation in other kinds of college activities

As a result of these factors, immediate effects on students include observing examples of others who are living out their vocations, conversing with others about vocation, and reflecting on one's own gifts and talents, beliefs and values, and calling.

continued

A variety of outcomes are expected to begin to be evident during the college years, including:

- **Cognitive outcomes** such as knowing the definition of the term “vocation”
- **Discernment outcomes** including better self-knowledge (including gifts as well as values), skills for discernment, and development of a sense of one’s own vocation
- **Application outcomes** including using one’s gifts and talents, being part of one’s faith community, and serving others.

Over the longer term, these earlier outcomes are expected to broaden and deepen, and especially the application outcomes (living out one’s vocation in the application of gifts and talents, serving one’s community, and deepening one’s faith).

Moderating factors

As discussed further below, three factors are significantly associated with higher levels of many different vocation outcomes. These are:

Discussing vocation with others

Results show that juniors are significantly more likely than freshman (59% to 53%) to report discussing the ideas of vocation and calling with friends.

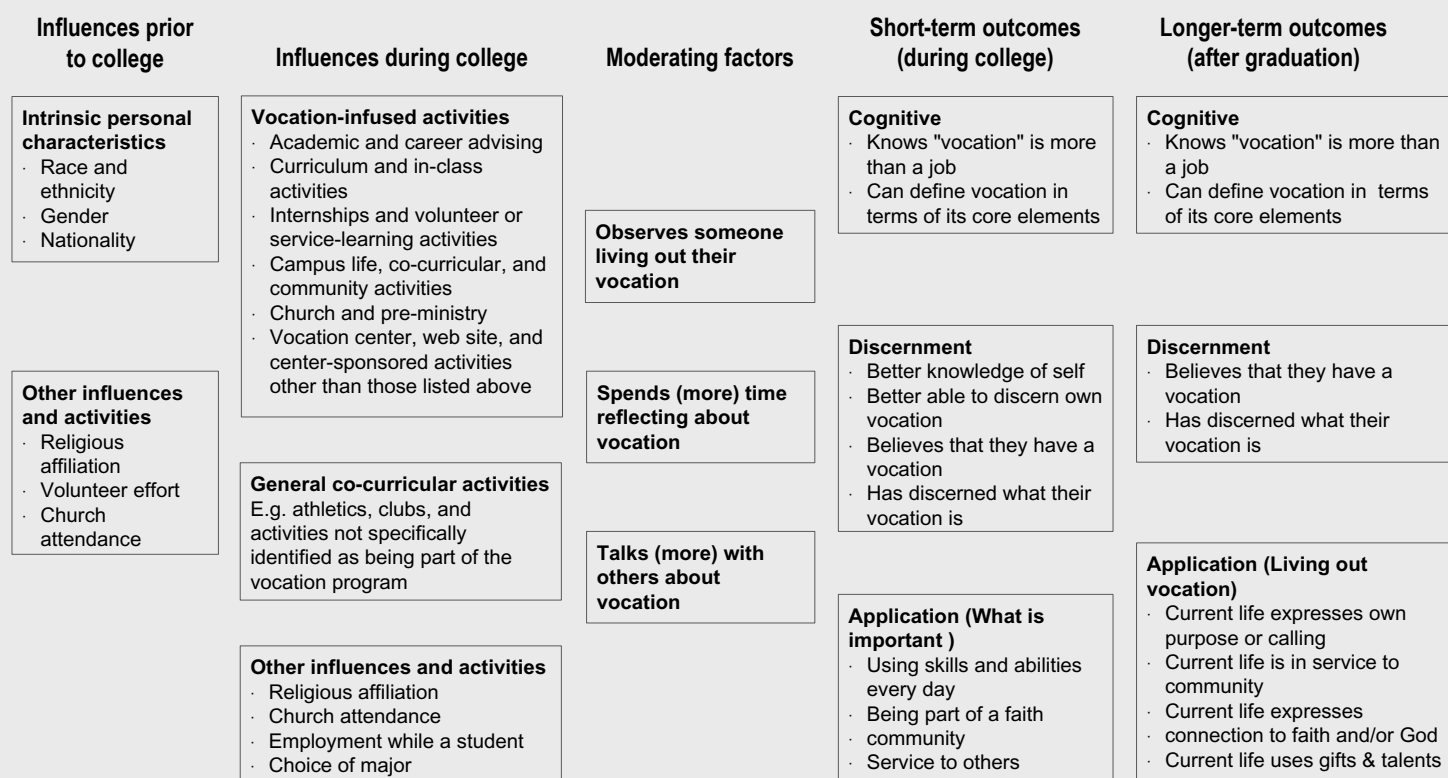
Reflecting on one’s own vocation

Freshman and junior respondents were almost equally likely to report personal reflection about vocation (44% of freshmen and 40% of juniors).

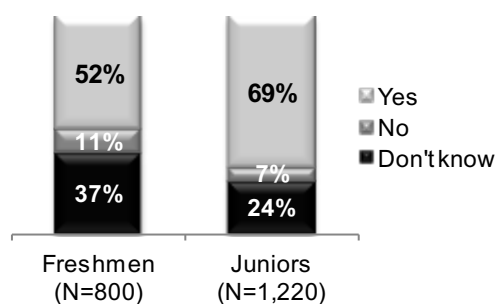
Observing vocation in others

Results show that 69 percent of juniors compared to 52 percent of freshmen have observed someone living out their vocation. As Figure 2 [next page] also shows, significant proportions of both groups did not know whether they had or had not observed anyone who was living out their vocation.

1. CALLED FOR LIFE: RELATIONSHIPS OF KEY EVALUATION ELEMENTS AND OUTCOMES



2. STUDENTS WHO REPORT OBSERVING SOMEONE LIVING OUT THEIR VOCATION



The people who students identified as living out their vocations were most often professors or others encountered in the classroom (46% of juniors, 37% of freshmen). Respondents also frequently mentioned or fellow students or other people in dorms and on campus (23% of juniors, 23% of freshmen). Reasons for believing that these people were living out their vocations most often were given as:

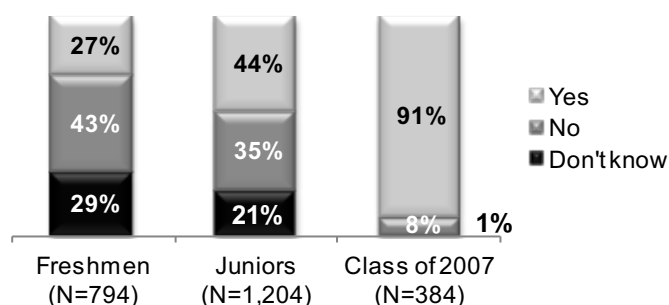
- They enjoy what they do, or get energy from doing it.
- They are passionate about what they do, or put energy into it.
- They are helping people, making connections to their community, or performing service.

Cognitive outcomes

Broader or deeper understanding

Almost all (91%) of the class of 2007 graduates report that their understanding of vocation had been broadened or deepened during their time at college, and these graduate numbers are significantly higher than the responses from junior respondents, which are in turn higher than those of freshmen (Figure 3).

3. DID YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATION BECOME BROADER OR DEEPER WHILE ATTENDING COLLEGE?



Defining vocation

Students: From freshman to junior year there was a substantial decrease in the proportion of respondents who indicated they “don’t know” what the term vocation means (from 30% of freshmen to 17% of juniors). Student respondents strongly associated the term “vocation” with a calling, and this association was stronger for juniors (43%) than for freshmen (36%). Other common themes in students’ responses to the open-ended question, “What does the term ‘vocation’ mean to you?” included purpose or meaning, the idea of belonging to a community or service to the community, God, and a connection to finding, developing, or using gifts or talents.

Graduates: One of the main components in having a deeper understanding of vocation is defining or understanding it as more than a job or career. Among graduates offering a definition of vocation, graduates in the pre-Lilly cohort mention job or career at more than twice the rate (65% to 29%) of the class of 2007 graduates. Furthermore, almost one-half (45%) of the pre-Lilly cohort describes vocation *only* in terms of, or in relationship to, a job. This is more than ten times the rate (4%) of those interviewed from the class of 2007. By contrast, the class of 2007 graduates mention calling at more than twice the rate (50% to 23%) as the pre-Lilly cohort.

Asked to think of a particular experience that shaped their definition of vocation, the class of 2007 graduates were almost twice as likely as the pre-Lilly cohort to report an experience that took place during college or as part of their overall college experience (58% to 32%).

Identifying key elements of the concept of vocation

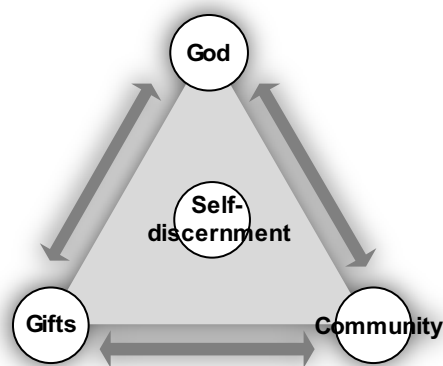
In order to code and analyze growth in students’ thinking about the idea of vocation, researchers and college representatives developed a conceptual model. This allows us to examine open-ended responses to identify what elements students use to define or describe their understanding of the idea. Key elements, illustrated in Figure 4 on the next page, are:

- **God:** Students describe vocation as including the alignment of one’s life with God or faith, serving or glorifying God, or listening to God’s guidance, or they refer to God as the source of calling, purpose or meaning, of gifts and talents.

- **Gifts:** Students indicate that vocation had something to do with identifying, developing, or using one's own gifts or talents, or that it related to passions, interests or fulfillment, or involved the use of skills, knowledge, or experience.
- **Community:** Students identified vocation as involving service to or helping others (the community in general or specific groups), seeking the common good, or being part of relationships that involve responsibility or obligations.
- **Self-discernment:** Students indicated that vocation was related to the process of discovering a purpose or mission in life or the development of values and beliefs, or linked vocation with a process of reflection or self-examination, or to personal growth (beyond simply pursuing their education or training for a job or career).

We also looked for evidence that students perceived connections among the first three of these elements: for example, evidence that students saw gifts or talents as something endowed by God, or community service as a way of serving God or God's purposes, or saw their own or others' gifts and talents as a means for serving the community.

4. THEORETICAL MODEL OF THE CONCEPT OF VOCATION



Not surprisingly, 88 percent of the class of 2007 graduates say they had heard about the Lutheran concept of vocation while on campus. In the pre-Lilly cohort, 60 percent reported being exposed to these ideas while at college.

Compared to other components of the concept of vocation, the component of **community** appears to be the most widely understood. The primary evidence for this is in how students and graduates talk about vocation in their open-ended responses. Forty-four percent of all junior respondents mention community or service at least once in their open-end responses compared to just 21 percent of all freshmen respondents. Furthermore, this number jumps to 64 percent among the class of 2007 graduates compared to only 38 percent among those in the pre-Lilly cohort.

In contrast to the community and service component of vocation, the study finds very little difference in how freshman and junior respondents associate **gifts** with vocation. Furthermore, the class of 2007 graduates (62%) are only slightly more likely than the pre-Lilly alumni (58%) to give answers that relate gifts to vocation.

The **God** component of vocation stands in contrast to the other components in that it appears to fluctuate less over time and there are fewer differences between respondents who have and have not had exposure to Lilly programs. Freshmen and juniors respondents give almost identical responses to questions about the link between God and vocation.

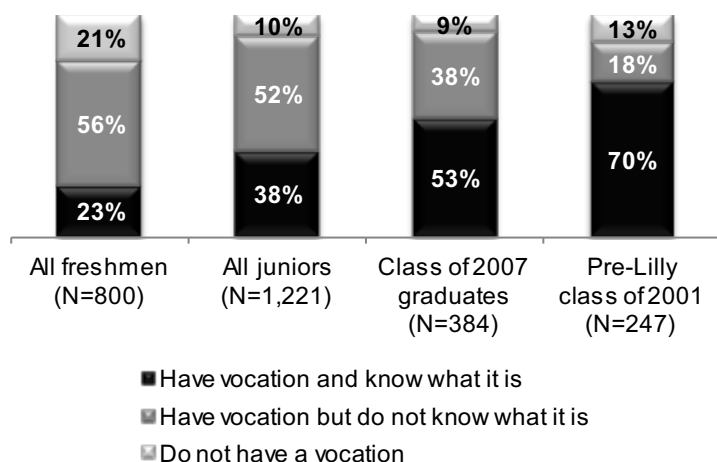
Discernment outcomes

Combining responses from several separate questions, 19 percent of freshman respondents, compared to 33 percent of junior respondents, show evidence of being better able to discern their own vocation. In addition, there was strong growth from freshman to junior year in the proportion of students (30% to 43%) who gave answers that show evidence of increased knowledge related to themselves (for example, understanding of their beliefs or values, gifts or talents, kinds of service they can offer).

Overall, the percent of respondents who report they have a vocation and know what it is steadily increases with their stage of education. Starting at freshman year, 23 percent of respondents say they know their vocation. This increases to 38 percent of all junior respondents and 53 percent of the graduate respondents from the class of 2007 (Figure 5).

The pre-Lilly cohort has the highest proportion (70%) of respondents who report knowing their vocation. However, this reflects the fact they were interviewed five years after graduation, compared to less than a year for the class of 2007 graduates. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the pre-Lilly cohort mainly associate vocation with a job, so their “knowing” their vocation means something different than it does for the students and graduates who were exposed to the Lilly programs.

5. STUDENTS' AND GRADUATES' SENSE OF THEIR OWN VOCATIONS



Respondents who report that they “know” their vocation were asked to describe it. Compared to the pre-Lilly cohort, class of 2007 graduates are more likely to describe their vocation as including service or community; equally likely to include their job; and less likely to *only* describe their job.

Among the class of 2007 graduates, 87 percent report that they have a vocation (whether or not they have discerned what it is), *and* gave a definition of vocation as more than a job, compared to only 45 percent of pre-Lilly alumni.

Of graduate respondents who know their vocation, class of 2007 graduates are almost twice as likely as pre-Lilly alumni (70% vs. 37%) to report they mainly developed their sense of vocation while they were attending college.

Application outcomes

Expressing purpose or calling in their life

81 percent of the pre-Lilly cohort, and 71 percent of the class of 2007 graduates, reported that what they were doing in their life at the time of the survey was an expression of what they considered their purpose or calling in life. While this proportion is significantly higher for the pre-Lilly cohort than for the class of 2007, the extra four years of post-college experience must be considered. Also, when asked why they said they were living out their calling or purpose, graduates in the class of 2007 were significantly more likely to mention connections to community (41% vs. 32%), or to say they were working or taking active steps toward their vocation (21% vs. 7%), indicating an understanding of vocation as a continual growth, not a final destination.

To better understand the impact of the Lilly vocational programming on graduates, it would be useful in the future to obtain additional measures of vocational understanding from the 2007 graduating class after they have been out of school for five years. These responses could be more directly compared to those from the class of 2001.

Program elements that affect outcomes

Through statistical analysis that untangles the effects of different factors on outcomes, we identified certain kinds of activities that appear to be most strongly related to more than one of the moderating factors and outcomes examined. The program elements that appear to hold the most promise are:

- Co-curricular activities with specific vocation content (such service-learning programs, Lilly internships, vocational assessments, reading groups, and convocations)
- Vocation web site or center
- Advising that included vocation-related content

For each of the three moderating factors – observing someone living a vocation, reflecting on vocation, and talking with others about vocation – students who reported each were significantly more likely to also report other vocational key outcomes (having a broader or deeper understanding of vocation; being better able to discern vocation; or placing a high priority on service to community).

Students who participated in **co-curricular activities with specific vocation content** were significantly more likely to report each of the moderating factors, as well as a broader or deeper understanding of vocation and a high priority on serving community.

Students who reported contact with the campus **vocation web site, center, or program staff** were also more likely to report some of the moderating factors (observing someone living a vocation, or talking with others about vocation) and some of the outcomes (broader or deeper understanding and ability to discern one's vocation).

Students who received **advising that included vocation-related content** were significantly more likely to report some of the moderating factors (observing someone living their vocation, and talking with others about vocation), and to report a broader and deeper understanding of vocation.

Students who participated in **general co-curricular activities** (not known to have specific vocation content) were *less* likely than others to report a broader or deeper understanding of vocation, or to place a high priority on serving community.

Students who took **courses with specific vocation content** were more likely to report a broader or deeper understanding (including knowing that vocation is more than a job, and defining vocation in terms that include at least two of the key elements of the conceptual model), or report that they know that they have a vocation. On the other hand, they were *less* likely to report that they talked about vocation with others on their own time.

Off-campus activities were associated with outcomes relating to increased self-knowledge.

Other factors that affect outcomes

Holding other influences constant, students were slightly more likely to report more of the vocation outcomes examined in this study if they were:

- Regular church attendees during college (at least once a month)
- Now affiliated with a faith that is different from the one in which they were raised
- Female
- An arts or humanities major
- Lutheran
- Regular community volunteers during their last two years of high school (at least 5 hours/month)

Thematic analysis of students' open-ended responses provides qualitative information to help understand what it is about college experiences that make some of them more effective. Certain key themes stand out, and many of them appear repeatedly across the different kinds of activities.

Pervasive campus culture of vocational exploration

In many answers to specific questions, students told us that the most important influences on them were hard to name because they were not very specific. Rather, these students pointed to the cumulative effect of many separate, related, and mutually reinforcing influences. The evidence is especially strong for effectiveness arising from the combination of formal programming with informal opportunities to further develop questions and ideas and test out potential answers in the context of informal activities and relationships. Four key ingredients stand out: relationships with adults, opportunities for experiential, hands-on learning and /or service, classes that introduce and build on the concept of vocation and its application, and relationships with other students.

Relationships with adults who take an interest

Not surprisingly, the adults who influenced students the most took a sustained interest in them and listened without judging. They helped students understand the importance of vocational discernment, helped students look inside themselves more deeply, and helped them recognize opportunities to apply their gifts and talents.

Out-of-class experiences with service and learning

Service learning, job shadowing, and off-campus study help students expand their horizons and see more broadly, beyond previous perspectives. Also, interactions with people from different backgrounds help them identify needs for help, how help might be provided, and the real difference that help can make. The experience also allows students to find out what it is like to be in a new setting and do a new kind of work, and find out if it feels right.

A second and also common theme about experiential learning is its value in helping students look more deeply *inside* of themselves. The experiences help them identify and test their own interests, gifts, and values, and experience the rewards of volunteering.

Classes that introduce and build on the concept of vocation

When students mentioned particular courses as influential in their development of vocation, they cited several common characteristics regardless of what fields the courses were in. These included a variety of ways in which the courses (and/or the instructors) helped students learn about themselves as well as about the subject matter. Another channel of influence is through changing what or how students think about the world or opening their eyes to how big the world is.

More concretely, students frequently cited how courses helped them understand how the academic content could be applied in a variety of real world applications. Often, they cited applications that were not only career-focused, but also more personal.

Interactions with other students

The final component of effective campus-wide vocation programs is a rich mix of student-to-student interactions. One common theme shows the value of interactions with peers who have different backgrounds, values, insights, and experiences, which helps broaden perspectives. Another points to contributions that are strongest when friends are more similar, making it more likely that they can give feedback on how well certain values or ways of living them would or would not be a good fit.

Discussion

Several lessons from this study merit further discussion. First, students do not have to come from a religious background or espouse a conventional belief in God to engage in meaningful conversations and reflections related to vocation. Colleges can effectively engage young people in the consideration of how their talents can be applied to the needs of the world without reference to God or any specific religious belief system.

Second, multiple communication strategies appear to be necessary to effectively reach a diverse student body. Our results indicate that virtually all strategies have some potential for hitting the mark when multiple strategies are in place.

Third, required courses on vocation are likely to jumpstart students' acquisition of a cognitive tool kit for vocational thinking, but may at the same time slow down the application of those tools to broader and deeper inquiry. This is seen in the finding that participation in vocation-related coursework is related to an increase in many cognitive outcomes, but also to lower levels on the key moderating factor of discussing vocation informally with others. The study thus suggests that students may be more likely to spread vocational interest and reflection among each other when the primary means of transmission is "viral" – that is, spread from person to person because of interest that is generated by the discovery of ideas in a wide range of settings.

Fourth, coursework that is integrative, presenting both subject content as well as opportunities to think about applications of the subject matter, can have a powerful effect on a student's discernment of vocation. Classroom gains can be reinforced by opportunities for students to process and consider ideas of vocational choice through exposure to knowledge or discussion outside of class.

Fifth, exposure to the larger world, especially when it stretches students' comfort zones or includes experiences from which young people from the middle class are often insulated, can be an effective vocational discernment strategy.

6. THE COLLEGES PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY, AND THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF THEIR VOCATION PROGRAMS

	AUGSBURG COLLEGE	AUGUSTANA COLLEGE	LUTHER COLLEGE
Year founded	1869	1860	1861
Undergraduate enrollment	Over 1,800 (not including weekend and evening students)*	About 2,500	About 2,500
Primary religious affiliation of students	39% Lutheran 16% Roman Catholic	36% Roman Catholic 23% Lutheran	51% Lutheran 15% Roman Catholic
Name and main components of Lilly program	Exploring Our Gifts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocation as a life approach (worship, orientation, mentoring, and assessment) • Curricular activities • Service learning and other connections off-campus • Developing vocational awareness (mainly for faculty and staff) 	Center for Vocational Reflection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricular activities (including advising and internships) • Co-curricular activities • Church and community activities 	Sense of Vocation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty and staff development • All-student vocation program (including advising and curriculum) • Church ministry vocation program

* Compared to the other colleges, Augsburg has a higher proportion of transfer and adult students.

Initial study data have been reviewed and applied by representatives at each campus, and colleagues at other colleges have sought to use some of the study strategies to examine vocational inquiry on their own campuses. The Called for Life project has demonstrated the efficacy of using survey methods to evaluate college vocation programs in a multi-site context, and to develop findings that are useful for understanding and further strengthening programs.

The longer-term effects of the college programs have also been felt among the faculty at Luther Seminary who are already sharing anecdotal stories of how students from Lilly-funded colleges are arriving on campus with a more developed sense of vocational discernment and who need to be engaged at a more advanced level than previous cohorts.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Called for Life* report. For more information about this report, contact Brian Pittman at Wilder Research, 651-280-2700.

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