At the start of the 21st century, a bundle of related changes have overtaken the world of work. These include reductions in the constraints of time and place due to technological innovations, growing market pressures in the professions and in the nonprofit sector, and an escalation in the skills and knowledge required for employment in this fast-changing technological and market-driven era. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Claremont Graduate University, and William Damon, Stanford University, have teamed with Howard Gardner, Harvard University, to consider what these changes mean for doctors, lawyers, journalists, scientists, educators, and others trying to accomplish their traditional missions, often in the face of escalating pressures. Particularly, what does it mean for those dedicated to doing good work in their respective fields?
Good Work

The phrase good work deliberately exploits two meanings of the word “good.” The first meaning encompasses work that is deemed high quality by those knowledgeable about the field. The second takes into account, in one way or another, some conception of the broader public good.

In many instances, work can be successful along one of these dimensions but not the other. College A may have an ever-increasing enrollment and no deficits, but it succeeds by lavish advertising and appealing solely to the misguided dictates of the uninformed consumer. College B may adhere to a curriculum that is deeply educative yet fails to fill its classes and coffers and thereby stands in danger of closing. Such institutions realize one but not both senses of the term “good.”

It is never easy to determine what qualifies as good. Indeed, any present-day judgment inevitably raises some controversy. Controversy is less likely to surround the issue of who is a skilled practitioner—it is more likely to swirl around a determination about humaneness, responsibility, and moral excellence. In our work, we are interested in individuals and institutions that look beyond the immediate bottom line, and that are aware of moral and ethical boundaries that they are not willing to cross even when such crossing may be legally sanctioned or expedient.

The Project

The Good Work project centers around leaders in a number of disciplines or domains—journalism, genetics, business, medicine, philanthropy, and higher education—who have the opportunity to carry out and to model good work that is good in both senses of that term. We seek to understand the goals of these individuals and the obstacles and pressures they regularly confront. We also want to comprehend the strategies they have developed to deal with these internal and external forces and, most importantly, how they think about their own work and that of their contemporaries.

Our mission is not to canonize good workers. Rather, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the situations they face, and to call attention to those beliefs and practices that are most responsive to wider communal considerations. Our ultimate goal is to influence the training and practices of future workers and leaders in the domains under investigation. In short, we want to locate good work, understand its provenance, and help foster it.

To accomplish this, we investigate the structure and functioning of the domains through background reading and interviews. Thereafter, we conduct lengthy, in-depth interviews with leading figures from each domain, and analyze biographical and other published material about the respondents. After careful analysis and much discussion—both oral and written—

“Goodness”

The following indices of “goodness” were used in our study:

- an individual (or institution) with a consistent set of moral or ethical principles reflected in action as well as word
- a willingness to abide by these principles even in cases where they do not serve one’s immediate personal goals or interest
- an absence of hypocrisy
- a concern for the goodness of the means as well as the ends of one’s actions
- a concern for the effects of one’s choices on all likely parties
- a sense of profession or calling that goes beyond personal gain
of the information gathered, we develop a set of recommendations about promising practices and policies, and work with trainers and practitioners who share our commitment to the enhancement of good work in their respective domains.

The first phase of our project focused on journalism and genetics. Our research included in-depth interviews with approximately 100 journalists and 100 geneticists, as well as the collection and analysis of ancillary information. Among the findings was a revealing contrast between the two domains. Geneticists today believe they are in something of a Golden Age: they see their work infused with noble purpose and at the same time as highly honored, supported, and rewarded in a material sense. Journalists, on the other hand, say that their Golden Age has long since passed. Their domain is marked by massive misalignment. Among news reporters, for example, we found a broad and deep dedication to the long-standing mission of informing the public accurately about everything important to their lives and society, as well as to core standards such as truth, fairness, balance, proportion, and verification. At the same time, the structure of the field is changing in ways that support a more entertaining (that is, light and sensationalistic) and market-savvy approach. As a result, good work in journalism today is often done on the margins (e.g., public radio) or by those who manage to prevail over the obstacles by extraordinary talent, drive, or sheer force of personality.

Periods of alignment or misalignment do not always endure. The urgent problems faced by journalists today may stimulate them to reaffirm the core values of their domain and help realign the field; some signs of this already are appearing. Conversely, the alignment perceived by geneticists may prove illusory. There are grave, well-publicized risks in current genetic experiments and policies—the apparent agreement among scientists, corporate executives, and shareholders of publicly traded companies may prove transitory.

The Higher Education Study

We have recently embarked on the study of the higher education domain, which, while not-for-profit, is increasingly being influenced by for-profit factors. Higher education has at least one commonality with journalism: good work in these fields sometimes means intentionally introducing one’s “customers” to goods and services they do not want. In higher education, course material and curricular requirements often go against the grain of what students find interesting or “relevant,” yet any reputable institution stands behind them if they are seen as promoting intellectual growth. The commitment is not simply to produce a popular product, but rather one that also edifies the consumer.

Our higher education study includes a variety of institutional types where good work is present. The sample includes six exemplary four-year liberal arts colleges (including two Historically Black Colleges and Universities—HBCUs), six two-year colleges (also including two HBCUs), four teaching-oriented research universities, and two new proprietary institutions. At each institution, we are using an internal nomination process to identify interview subjects from multiple constituencies, including administrators, trustees, faculty, alumni, and student government representatives.

Mount Saint Mary’s College (hereafter referred to as the College) in Los Angeles was selected as our first insti-
tutional subject. The College, recommended by several of our nominators, is built on the institutional pillars of multicultural education, service learning, leadership, and assessment. It has two campuses, one of which offers largely graduate and associate degree programs in an evening and weekend format. The College’s Alternative Access program helps these students meet high academic standards and persist to graduation. Indeed, 67 percent of them graduate, compared to the 10 percent graduation rate among all California community colleges.

The ethnic composition of the College is quite congruent with that of the Los Angeles inner city, namely: 45 percent Hispanic, 10 percent African-American, 20 percent Asian-American/Pacific Islander, and 25 percent Anglo-American. Cognizant of the link between culture and learning, the College has instituted several programs designed to diversify its curriculum and teaching methodologies. The student-centered emphasis of the College has been continuously demonstrated through such efforts, as well as its extracurricular activities. Finally, the College applies rigorous evaluation and assessment techniques to align planning, academic and student support services, and budgeting for a holistic operational effectiveness and efficiency while assuring continuous student achievement and success.

We expect that the lessons gained from the initial study of Mount Saint Mary’s College will inform our data collection at subsequent institutions.

**Conclusion**

The world of work has undergone tremendous change in recent years. No doubt analogous forces have been felt at earlier times in human history, but what is striking today is the combination of these changes with the weakening of countervailing cultural forces such as religions, customs, families, and other stabilizing institutions that might serve to moderate some of the more abrasive changes. Our study focuses on good workers who may either counter deleterious trends within their current professional work, or who may actually create new institutions or innovative approaches that facilitate genuine alignment in their domains. We feel strongly that there is much to be gained from such leaders, particularly if their work can foster and guide more good workers to follow in their footsteps.

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