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SPRING 2022

Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education

IF WE WERE ALL EYES



WOULD WE SEE EACH OTHER?

IN THIS ISSUE

Called and Empowered (and Assessed)

Intersections is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-seven institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. It is published by the NECU, and has its home in the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, the institutional sponsor of the publication. **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives.

About the Cover and Artist

Eyes #1

Vickie R. Phipps

Digital print

If we were all eyes, could we see each other?

It is with this question that the artist invites you into your own reflection/meditation about who we are and how we relate to each other.

Vickie R. Phipps is a thinker and maker currently serving as an associate professor of art and graphic design at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.

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MARK WILHELM

From the Publisher



I never expected to grow up and become a church and higher education bureaucrat! When I revisited the encouragement received from faculty during my seminary years, resulting in a decision to enter a doctoral program in my mid-thirties, I envisioned joining the faculty at a wonderful Lutheran

college or university after defending my dissertation. That did not happen. Nonetheless, I am grateful for the unanticipated opportunities that put me on an unexpected path to becoming the founding executive director for the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.

Gratitude is rising up in me these days as I anticipate my retirement next winter. As many readers of *Intersections* will have heard, I announced at NECU's annual meeting in early January 2022 that I will retire on January 31, 2023. Much time remains before next January, and many tasks are yet to be completed. Even so, I have already begun to reflect on my experience with NECU, and those reflections have sparked gratitude within me. I am deeply and profoundly grateful for the privilege of serving our association and for the opportunity to meet many—but not nearly enough—of the thousands of gifted people at NECU member institutions.

NECU's growth in its collective understanding of the vocation of Lutheran higher education has been the most gratifying development during my time as executive director. Articulating a vision for Lutheran higher education in twenty-first-century North America was identified as a core purpose for NECU when it was established in 2015. That vision was expressed in our 2018 statement, *Rooted and*

Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities. The journal *Intersections* has promoted conversation about this vision, and NECU's summer conferences on the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education have annually explored various aspects of the Lutheran vision for higher education.

Before I reach retirement, my hope is that we will make additional progress on articulating and claiming how a common vocation to embody a shared vision for Lutheran higher education is expressed in diverse and distinctive ways by NECU's 27 member colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. The first sentence of a new mission statement for NECU (adopted at last January's annual meeting) names this issue. The sentence reads, "The Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities articulates a vision for Lutheran higher education in North America that finds expression in the rich and diverse missions of its member institutions." The first goal of NECU's 2022-2025 strategic plan directs our association to "deepen the understanding of the rich diversity of Lutheran identity at NECU institutions."

We will explore this topic at the 2022 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, next July 18-20. (Please see information on page 20 of this issue.) Good work toward addressing the issue is also underway at three NECU member institutions through their NetVUE "institutional saga" grants, in the diverse ways vocational reflection is carried out on our campuses, and through other distinctive practices.

With gratitude for the work done and for the work to come, I thank God for my time with NECU even as I thank NECU for giving me the chance to serve our community of higher education.

Mark Wilhelm is the Executive Director of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.

JASON MAHN

From the Outgoing Editor

I wrote my first editorial for *Intersections* in the Fall of 2011. It was titled, “From the Incoming Editor,” and it sat below some wise words of advice and gratitude from Bob Haak, whose last editorial was named (you guessed it): “From the Outgoing Editor.”

Now, more than a decade later, I can here give my own words of thanks from the perspective of an outgoing editor. I am passing the duties over to Colleen Windham-Hughes of California Lutheran University in order to devote more time to the planning of the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education conference. Really, though, it is Colleen’s commitments to Lutheran higher education, her leadership and scholarly gifts, and her willingness to objectively evaluate where we have been, and then creatively imagine where we might go next, that makes this transition so timely. I’m excited to see how the journal, under Colleen’s stewardship, will play a broader and deeper role in NECU’s ongoing conversation about faith, learning, and the vocation of Lutheran higher education.

It has been edifying to contact potential contributors of *Intersections* (or more often lately, be contacted by them), consider themes that would bring diverse perspective together, and edit each issue. Working with authors and our great editorial board has meant that I now know and respect scores of colleagues spanning North America—from Texas to Saskatchewan and New York City to the Pacific Northwest.

Working with Mark Wilhelm has been life-giving. Even when currents in higher education make others anxious or cynical, Mark remains hopeful, engaged, and rightfully proud of the work that our Network is doing. We will celebrate Mark’s leadership and congratulate him on his retirement at this summer’s Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education conference. (See his publisher’s comment and page 20 for more details.)

Thank you, too, to President Steve Bahls and Provost Wendy Hilton-Morrow for allowing me to devote a portion of my work at Augustana to tasks that also benefit at least 26 other institutions. It takes foresight and deep appreciation for our institutional vocation to invest in this work when the returns on investment

are harder to quantify, but valued nonetheless. Augustana will continue to publish *Intersections* on our open-access platform, as well as print and distribute hard copies.

Most of the essays in the present issue summarize comments given by Lutheran faculty, staff, and administrators at the 2022 national gathering of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE). Most of our 27 NECU institutions are part of that wider network. As the authors here testify, grants and guidance from NetVUE have been instrumental in supporting their work. At the same time, Lutheran institutions—with our uniquely historical and contemporary commitments to educate for vocation—have provided noteworthy leadership within these wider networks. I think that part of the work ahead of us is to own and live into that leadership role.

I am grateful to have contributed to this work, service, and leadership, and look forward to continuing it in new and different ways. Our institution work together not only in order to educate students in order to get good paying jobs, but also so that they contribute to the flourishing of the widest of networks—local communities, our democratic country, and the whole of creation itself. You couldn’t ask for more meaningful and purposeful work.



Jason Mahn holds the Conrad Bergendoff Chair in the Humanities and is director of the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

From the Incoming Editor



What is the worth of our work? To some extent, this question is always with us, whether or not it is spoken aloud. The pieces in this issue ask this question in various ways, guided by institutional practices of assessment. Assessment can be a cringe-worthy word, at least among students and colleagues at Cal

Lutheran, where I work, yet it helps me a lot to reclaim the root of the word *assess*, which suggests “sitting by.” Pairing assessment with a posture of sitting slows us down for collective conversation and reflection, which *Intersections* does well. I am so grateful for the work of Jason Mahn and Mark Wilhelm, as well as all those who contribute to, read, circulate, and have previously edited *Intersections*. It is meaningful and worthwhile to sit regularly at the intersection of faith and learning and to reflect on the vocation of Lutheran higher education.

In a recent gathering with colleagues, one said, “I’m not sure what the work is right now.” By “right now” they meant late pandemic, yet they also meant this social and historical moment as well as the role of higher ed in it. Over the past few years we have been working harder, in new ways, often isolated from communal practices and support, in a context that has frequently included violence. Given what it takes sometimes to remain present in body, mind, and spirit, we

insist that our work must be worthwhile. Not all of it is. And perhaps the experiences we have endured during the pandemic will strengthen us and lend courage to stop doing some of the things are not (or no longer) worthwhile.

Lutheran higher education is a strange and wonderful gift. Unabashed in its core commitments—that grace is free/unmerited/indiscriminate, that all are broken, that serving the neighbor is the practical application of every lesson learned and every skill attained—it, we, are sometimes a little too shy in telling this story or not quite equipped to convey the depth and fullness of these values within our campus communities.

With God’s grace, we continue to convene—in person, online, and through *Intersections*—to recommit to the values that make higher education in the Lutheran tradition treasures of inestimable worth. As incoming editor, I do not pretend to know what all of these values are, yet I am committed to the questions, chief among them, “What does this mean?,” and I will show up for the conversation. I will also confess my starting place with the worth of our work, which is centered in the universality of vocation—the giftedness of each being, manifest in different ways through the whole of life and relevant to the community’s needs. The conviction that education is for the whole of life and that it is properly directed to the common good brought me to Lutheran higher ed in the first place and continues to keep me here. I look forward to hearing from you and to sitting awhile together with the worth of our work.

Colleen Windham-Hughes, PhD, MDiv, was born into and ordained by the United Methodist Church, yet became Lutheran (ELCA) over time, due in part to over a decade at California Lutheran University, where she holds the Wilbert and Darlene Carlson Endowed Chair of Youth and Family Ministry and serves as associate dean of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Outreach.

BRIAN RIDDLE, LIZA ANNE SCHAEF, and GREG Q. BUTCHER

Building a Developmental Framework for Vocational Reflection at Thiel College

Over the past five years, Thiel College has been exploring how its rootedness in the Lutheran tradition translates to student care and success in today's pluralistic society. As a member of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), we are among a movement of undergraduate colleges asking how we can serve all members of our campuses through our deepest held values and inspired by our institutions' faith traditions. Support from a NetVUE Program Development Grant provided time and resources that allowed us to ask specific questions about our educational philosophy and delivery. To initiate this work, we held focus groups, examined existing programs, and questioned long-standing structures to determine if our "way" of serving our students needed an update. The resulting product of this introspection, the Tomcat Way, a four-year developmental framework for vocational reflection, now guides all aspects of the student experience at Thiel.

Founded in 1866 by Rev. William J. Passavant, with a generous gift from Louis and Barbara Thiel, Thiel has a beautiful campus overlooking the Shenango River valley in Greenville, Pennsylvania. At the center of campus is an historic walkway that connects the upper and lower campuses. Climbing between a multigenerational procession of maple and oak trees, "Brother Martin's Walk" intersects with a second main artery that conveys students



between Greenville Hall and the Academic Center, two buildings that represent the center of our academic life. Thiel's most cherished tradition is to lead new students along this path to their first opening convocation. In four short years, they will make their way up Brother Martin's Walk again as they journey back to Thiel's Passavant Auditorium to receive their diploma at commencement. This symbolic journey, and the physical walkway, became the central image of the Tomcat Way.

Initial support from NetVUE provided for a series of reading groups, which engaged faculty and staff around issues of finding meaning and purpose through academic work and the Thiel community. In the 2019-20 academic year, the college intentionally connected our campus pastor with our director of career development, with a charge to create a pathway for vocational exploration. With the NetVUE grant, we created a committee consisting of

Rev. Brian Riddle graduated from Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania, and returned to the college to serve as campus pastor in 2019. He coordinates spiritual programming and teaches in the religion department. **Liza Anne Schaeff** is the director of career development at Thiel. She oversees all aspects of the center and works to provide career advising and support to students and alumni; Liza also collaborates with faculty to connect students to experiential learning opportunities. **Greg Q. Butcher** is professor of neuroscience and associate academic dean for student success at Thiel. He oversees the career development center, coordination of the academic portion of the first-year experience, and a summer bridge program for new students.

the associate academic dean for student success, the associate dean for diversity and inclusion, and a diverse group of staff and faculty to begin conversations about what vocation might mean for our students. By the end of

“We formed a developmental plan for students to engage and think about meaning and purpose in their academic and co-curricular experiences, during and beyond their time at the college.”

the academic year, we formed a developmental plan for students to engage and think about meaning and purpose in their academic and co-curricular experiences, during and beyond their time at the college.

Domains of the Framework

Early in the process, we decided to borrow from Luther’s deep reflection on vocation, which provides meaningful calls for all people, not simply for those engaged in religious vocations. Faculty members on the team helped bridge these theological and philosophical concepts with work by Marcia Baxter Magolda and other developmental psychologists. To that end, we identified four domains of the student experience that underlie the framework for vocational reflection: personal, social, academic, and professional.

In the personal domain, we are concerned with the students’ internal life and their capacity for growth of personal relationships. This involves taking an honest inventory of their passions and strengths, including their ability to confidently make their own decisions and think critically about their world.

In the social domain, we ask questions about the students’ capacity to find and appreciate friend and colleague groups, work together in clubs and in academic projects, and to see themselves as part of a diverse and engaged community of learning both on the campus and in the local community.

Under the academic domain, we encourage students to think about themselves as scholars and to gain confidence in their skills and abilities. They develop capacity for

academic study rooted in their dreams and passions as they take what they learn in their coursework and apply it to the real world.

Finally, the professional domain focuses on enhancing the capacity of our students to be self-reflective as they prepare to enter graduate school or launch their careers. This involves intentional reflection about how their experiences at Thiel can help guide and prepare them to achieve their future goals.

Phases of the Tomcat Way

The above four domains demark the areas of student experience that are touched by vocational reflection. We know, however, that students typically engage different domains at different moments in their four-year college journey. We felt it was important to examine the holistic lives of our students and attempt to align points in their development with each phase of our model. The result was four identified phases of the Tomcat Way, through which Thiel students are called and empowered to explore, envision, belong and lead, and then launch into their rest of their vocational lives.

Explore

Starting at summer orientation prior to the first-year, we encourage students to explore. Such exploration is quite literal insofar as they get to know their new campus and the surrounding community. We also encourage students to seek answers to the question, *Who am I as a college student?* We do so through active exploration of different academic departments and co-curricular opportunities across the four domains described above.

We ask them to set goals for their first semester. They revisit those goals in their first-year seminar and later through advising conversations prior to spring registration. Academic advisors are trained to ask more than transactional questions (e.g. when do you want to take English?); they engage students where they are developmentally. Questions in this phase help us understand how students are connecting to the institution and with their peers as they begin discerning their values and beliefs:

- *What interest you?*
- *Have you made new friends?*
- *What is going well this semester?*

Envision

In the second phase, students are asked to consider the question: *Who am I in context?* They begin to develop confidence in their major area of study, and are encouraged to invest in their passions and interests as a way to draw them deeper into their academic and co-curricular involvement. Students begin to envision the opportunities available to them and what they hope to accomplish before graduation (for example internships, research, or study abroad).

“Students have the opportunity to participate in an off campus retreat where they identify their strengths, work together in groups, set goals, and engage in activities related to leadership.”

Students have the opportunity to participate in an off campus retreat where they identify their strengths, work together in groups, set goals, and engage in activities related to leadership. Academic advisors support students as they solidify their academic major and consider minors. Advisors also foster conversations that explore purpose and meaning in the chosen field and help students consider:

- *What about your major interests you and why?*
- *How well do your skills fit with your aspirations?*
- *What additional courses or activities might bring you joy?*
- *How do your academic and professional goals relate to your values and beliefs?*

Belong and Lead

By the third phase, we expect students to have committed to departments, student groups, and other communities through which they find meaning. This belonging is more than simply declaring a major or participating in a club. Rather, we want students to take a deep dive into their academic discipline(s) and take on leadership roles in communities they consider important. We ask students to reflect on how their passions align with acquired skills.

When gaps are identified, we encourage further academic, social, or professional development through

on-campus student employment, internships, and other high-impact practices (HIPs). Each of these includes reflection with a supervisor or mentor, which guides students to consider if the experience matches their long-term goals for careers and lives of meaning and purpose. In this way, students are encouraged to see connections between their values and beliefs and community engagement. We help student ask and respond to questions such as:

- *Is the academic and vocational path you are on realistic?*
- *How do you contribute to the campus community?*
- *How does your involvement on campus help you prepare for future, meaningful work?*

Launch

As students prepare for graduation, we help them navigate the answer to the question: *How do I apply what I have learned?* Throughout their college experience, students will have engaged with career development center and the utilize the Tomcat Way Four Year Career Success Guide, helping them successfully navigate their vocational and career journey in partnership with faculty, staff, and campus ministry. As students complete capstone projects, research, theses, and other projects and reflect on their experience with them, they acquire more skills and become more ready to graduate. As students “launch” toward graduate school or work, they consolidate confidence in their knowledge, skills, and abilities. They understand that knowledge gained through curricular and co-curricular experiences has prepared them to leverage opportunities that may arise. They have the courage and confidence to contribute meaningfully to the world and be leaders in their places of work and in their communities. Academic advisors continue to encourage students to navigate the end of their college journey and prepare for their next step with questions such as:

- *What steps are you taking to prepare for life after graduation?*
- *How do you see yourself fitting in and contributing to the world after graduation?*
- *How do you understand your sense of meaning and purpose?*

Challenges and Lessons Learned

At multiple points over the past few years, our organizing committee and various sub-groups have struggled with conflicting approaches to address programmatic needs. While NetVUE resources provided essential support for the initial lifting of new programs (such as the sophomore retreat), we were always mindful of the need to build sustainable structures. In some cases, this required new funds or shifting of budget lines to support Tomcat Way initiatives. More frequently, we sought to build intentional connections between existing programs and offices. In many instances simply providing language that served as connective tissue helped students, faculty, and staff see how experiences in one area of campus could complement another. This also avoided the need to add more to the already overflowing plates of many of our faculty and staff. Finally, it had the benefit of helping older students communicate value to younger students, which in turn built “buy-in.” A senior may not discuss a “launch” activity in the terms of the Tomcat Way, but they could readily relate how a business seminar series was a transformational experience to them.

A second area we continue to struggle with is ensuring that all students have equitable access to the Tomcat Way. A central goal has always been to build a framework that ensures students experience the full benefit of the model. We sought to remove barriers to participation by developing programming that was largely free of additional costs to participating students. However, we also encountered reluctance among students to engage in new experiences and programs. Some of this behavior is certainly attributable to COVID-necessitated changes in campus life. For example, over the 2020-21 academic year, multiple events were planned and then canceled or significantly scaled back to accommodate viral outbreaks or CDC/public health mandated mitigation policies. This caused many students to simply get out of the habit of attending anything—a trend that has carried over to 2021-22.

We also experienced reluctance to engage from some target populations, including athletes, first-generation students, and minorities. To address these obstacles, this spring we collaborated with the Organization for Black Collegians (OBC) and our coordinator for diversity, equity, and inclusion on a leadership training workshop. We have also made more intentional outreach efforts to athletic coaches and specific teams with the goal of holding similar workshops. These will focus on teambuilding and leadership, which essentially connects the structure and goals of a given team with the language of the Tomcat Way. Our hope is that such programming will help expand opportunities for students to connect with the Tomcat Way through multiple influencers, rather than just through academic or career-based programming.

“Our hope is that such programming will help expand opportunities for students to connect with the Tomcat Way through multiple influencers, rather than just through academic or career-based programming.”

Our experience over the last two years has greatly helped the Thiel community better understand our Lutheran traditions and heritage. The momentum of this work will also help us communicate the concept of vocation to all students, regardless of their own faith traditions, in a manner that encourages intentional vocational reflection. As we help all Thiel students follow the Tomcat Way to their individual destinations, we are confident that they will be prepared for careers and lives of meaning and purpose.

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RENÉ JOHNSON

Assessing Self-Assessment Instruments at Finlandia University

A definition of vocation adopted by and common to many of the 286 NetVUE member institutions is Frederick Buechner's idea of God's call as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (119). This simple definition has led to sophisticated theological and philosophical discussions on the sacred voice, personhood, and purpose. But some campuses are also engaging a rather scientific approach, using self-assessment tools as a springboard for vocational discernment. If vocational pondering involves wrestling with questions of personhood, self-assessment instruments can be quite useful. They provide language for individuals to discern and claim their traits, gifts, and values. At this year's biennial NetVUE conference, one breakout session focused on the use of self-assessment instruments as a tool for fostering vocational reflection. Three campuses presented on three different instruments, raising three different questions regarding the use of self-assessment instruments for vocational reflection.

Bryan J. Dik, professor of psychology at Colorado State University, is co-creator of PathwayU, a self-guided career assessment platform that (according to its website) uses predictive science to empower students "to live with purpose and joy in the world of work." While the instrument culminates in identifying career matches for students, personal discovery leads the way. But what kinds of discoveries about oneself are most useful in this quest

for finding work that is fulfilling? What should we assess? The creators of PathwayU determined that the best place to start is to assess an individual's traits and values. According to Dik's NetVUE presentation, traits and values function like a boat's rudder, determining one's direction. Subsequent assessment of one's abilities, personality, or strengths then function like a boat's motor, influencing how far and how fast one might go in said direction. PathwayU, which employs several assessments of self-discovery, gives students a sense of career direction grounded in their own personhood, as well as the steam to get there, fueled by their innate resources.

There is, however, a risk with a self-guided assessments like PathwayU; students may make use of the platform for career prospecting but neglect the tools available for serious vocational reflection. Finding a fitting career is not the same as hearing the voice of vocation. Career aspirations without attention to one's "deep gladness" and "the world's deep hunger" may find students unable to distinguish between what James Joyce identifies as the "dull, gross voice of the world of duties and despair" and the "call of life to the soul" (qtd. in Neafsey 37).



René Johnson is associate professor of religion and the director for vocation at the Seaton Center for Vocation and Career at Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan. She is a certified CliftonStrengths® coach, certified yoga instructor, and certified instructor on the Concept2 rowing machine. Her strengths are Connectedness, Achiever, Learner, Command, and Belief.

Friends University in Wichita, Kansas was interested in vocational reflection at the institutional level and wondered if self-assessment instruments might have an impact on systemic change. At the NetVUE gathering, Kassia Krone, assistant professor of communication and co-chair of the university's diversity council, described her university's initiative with the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). This instrument measures multicultural awareness on a sliding scale with the intent of building cultural competencies in an organization one individual at a time. A NetVUE grant supported training for three Friends University personnel to become IDI Qualified Administrators. The three have, so far, administered the IDI with fifteen faculty and fifteen staff members. In the next phases of the project, they will continue to administer the IDI to more employees and eventually to students, with the hope that this exercise will help them live more fully into their mission and Christian values in their vocation as a Quaker institution.

Finally, Union College in Barbourville, Kentucky utilizes Mark Savickas's Career Construction Counseling Manual to guide students in constructing a personal narrative of vocation. Rather than using an instrument based on predictive science or a reputable inventory, both of which supply individuals with results and a particular vocabulary of self-discovery, Union College is using Savickas's theory to accompany students in an organic exercise of self-assessment evoking vocabulary and a narrative unique to each student. However, the process is not entirely rudderless. There is an 18-page workbook called "My Career Story," developed by Savickas, that is used to assist the student through the process.

Like the PathwayU platform, the Career Construction initiative at Union College places great emphasis on helping students find a *career* direction, which raises the question, where is the *vocational* reflection? At the NetVUE conference, David Miller, campus minister at Union College, proposed a connection between the narrative approach of Career Construction Counseling and the big question mentoring approach of Sharon Daloz Parks' *Big Question, Worthy Dreams*. He stated that both are engaged in "meaning-making in its comprehensive dimensions." Still, it was unclear in Miller's presentation if the comprehensive dimensions of meaning-making included discussions on the sacred voice, personhood, and purpose.

Self-discovery, or a sense of authentic personhood, is important to vocational reflection. You might even consider it of primary importance in the work of vocational reflection, agreeing with Parker Palmer when he says "our deepest calling is to grow into our authentic selfhood" (16). At the same time, growing into our authentic selfhood is only one of the journeys in vocational pilgrimage. Vocation is never a matter of the solitary individual; it encompasses so much more than finding purposeful work. Robust and enduring vocational reflection leads the individual into but then beyond self, toward a deep interdependence that binds selfhood to social responsibility within the larger purposes of God. Therefore, it seems that one must be careful when using self-assessment instruments to always connect progress toward greater self-understanding to movement toward "realities and relationships that are larger than oneself" and to "behaviors that benefit the community" (Johnson).

"One must be careful when using self-assessment instruments to always connect progress toward greater self-understanding to movement toward 'realities and relationships that are larger than oneself.'"

This is what we try to do at Finlandia University where we use the CliftonStrengths® assessment with all first-year students. This assessment, based in positive psychology, identifies students' top five strengths (out of 34) in building relationships, influencing others, getting stuff done, or thinking. After completing the assessment, each student has a 45-minute strengths coaching session with a certified CliftonStrengths® coach. On a practical level, this conversation has a settling effect on students, many of whom are a bit unnerved at the beginning of their college venture. The conversation reminds them of the things they're already good at and the tools they possess for college success. On a deeper level, we make a concerted effort to connect the strengths assessment and coaching session to vocational reflection.

In a typical CliftonStrengths® conversation, the strengths coach asks questions related to the student's

strengths rather than explaining the meaning of each of the strengths. This engages the student in storytelling that usually moves through self-expression to self-affirmation as the student recognizes the ways his or her strengths have been employed to benefit others. For example, one student with the relational strength of Includer describes how he has been a welcoming presence for an international student. Another student, also an Includer, makes sure that the quiet person in their group project is given the chance to be heard. A student whose influencing strength of Communication, which is most obviously expressed in a lot of chatter and comedic banter, recognizes how she has been helpful to fellow students with her ability to simplify and bring clarity to complex ideas.

Members of the football team are asked to reflect on how one of their strengths contributes to and cares for the team off the field. A bulletin board with their responses is displayed in a public area, encouraging both the players and those passing by to be practiced in linking one's personhood to "behaviors that benefit the community."

At the end of the coaching session, each student leaves with a personalized summons to vocation. The last thing they hear in their coaching session is a vision for how their personhood might make a difference for others. A male student whose strengths are Restorative, Harmony, Adaptability, Connectedness, and Learner received this summons:

You have a way of recognizing the better side of humans. Even if they are broken (as we all are), you see past that to the good in them. You have a steady and pleasant disposition that allows you to adapt to changes and unexpected circumstances. These are learning opportunities to you, not something to gripe about. Your primary lens on the world is compassion, for the whole planet, and you seek ways to be a helper—to fix the problems—rather than complain about them.

Within a week of the coaching session, students submit a short reflection on their coaching session. They might reflect on how their strengths can be usefully applied for academic success or fitting for their career aspirations. But they also make connections between their strengths

and their sense of calling. According to this first-year, female student:

My top five strengths help me understand how to contribute to the world by just being the person I am. My strengths of Harmony and Significance will help me become more open to the world and advocate for people. The other three—Restorative, Belief, and Deliberative—will just help me grow as a person and understand what I can do to impact someone's life.

It was a NetVUE Vocation Across the Academy Grant that enabled Finlandia University to establish our Seaton Center for Vocation and Career. The intent of our work is to create a campus culture where students *and* employees are thinking vocationally about their strengths and how they contribute to Finlandia being a thriving, interdependent learning community. CliftonStrengths® coaching is used with students in leadership roles and in various religion or Seaton Center classes, providing students multiple opportunities to link their strengths to vocational reflection beyond the initial reflection in the first-year experience course. Departments have had individual coaching sessions and have participated in strengths-based team-building exercises, opening the door for employees to reflect on their sense of call in their particular roles on campus. We are only in the second year of using the CliftonStrengths® assessment on campus, but we see so much potential with this instrument. We think it is an inroad to conveying to students the importance of taking themselves to heart... for the purpose of taking their hearts to their neighbor.

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Pivoting to Imaginative Programming in the Midst of the Pandemic at Bethany College



Thanks to generous funding from the Council of Independent Colleges and the Lilly Foundation, Bethany College was fortunate enough to receive a two-year, \$50,000 NetVUE Program Development Grant in the Spring of 2019. Despite some radical changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the grant

programming at Bethany College was a success. Indeed, the pandemic encouraged us to be more imaginative and global in envisioning the work of the grant and the vocational goals of our students. The initial grant proposal involved leading four service learning and social responsibility trips each year, for a total of eight over two years. These trips were designed to extend learning from the classroom out to local sites and organizations. Our pilot trip, for example, involved taking several students from a Women's and Gender Studies course to a local homeless shelter where they hosted a Christmas party for the families there. It exposed our students to the realities of the intersectionality of poverty, displaying how the brunt of poverty often falls on women and children. As was the

plan, this experience led to several student-led projects, such as one student's development of a garden whose produce was then donated to a local food bank.

The first year of the grant was quite generative, with frequent meetings, development of curricular resources, and the great success of several initial trips and projects. Yet, it was cut short in March 2020, right before three additional trips were scheduled to take place. Like many, we were bewildered at the forced changes and the speed with which they gripped our lives and the lives of our students and community. It sometimes felt like we returned to the virtual drawing board in the Fall of 2020, and with limited personal resources. Yet, conferring with NetVUE leaders and other grant recipients in the Summer of 2020 gave us hope and additional ideas. We moved our team meetings to the grant director's backyard, and we transitioned from a format of trips out to visit local organizations to one of speakers coming from all over the nation and globe to join our classes virtually.

Several trips were reformatted and executed in new and exciting ways. For example, students from Interdisciplinary Communication classes were originally scheduled to observe the Kansas House of Representatives in Topeka, Kansas and provide them with (invited) feedback regarding

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their use of civil discourse, ultimately offering strategies for public deliberation based on their classroom learning. Instead, a local political candidate running for the U.S. House, representing the Kansas First Congressional District, spoke about her own vocational journey as she transitioned from grade school teaching to politics. The change in timing (from March to October) meant that the class and other community members were able to gain important insights about political campaigns and the importance of voting and engagement with local politics.

As another example, Developmental Psychology students were originally scheduled to visit a Heartland (Headstart) preschool class in Salina to practice social and emotional learning strategies through the use of self-regulation tool kits and toys. Instead of using the kits with the students, a teacher from the program spoke with Bethany students about using these types of sensory bottles to help kids self-regulate their emotions. The Bethany students then made sensory bottles, observed their own play with them, and then donated them to the school. Knowing the value of the sensory bottles and conscious discipline practices made the students more eager to work with children in emotionally healthy ways. They were excited to know that the sensory bottles—something they made—would be donated and used by children in the Heartland program.

In several instances, when we sought out guest speakers for our classes, we learned that our community and extended networks offer a deep pool of stories that can significantly shape how students envision what is possible. For example, in a playwriting class, a college alum who is now a critically acclaimed playwright in New York City was able to Zoom in to talk with students about how her own experiences with race, religion, and power dynamics in small town Kansas shape the plays she writes. In another instance, a student who had participated in our earlier pilot trip to the homeless shelter returned to a peer ministry course to speak about his experiences as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer with a local organization that fights poverty through building mentor relationships. Students responded well to the close connections of these speakers. Suddenly, what seemed impersonal or impossible regarding their own vocations seemed within reach. While a student might learn about poverty and think generally about the value of volunteering when interacting with an expert, it is wholly

different to hear from a current student or recent alum who actively works with a local poverty reduction organization and explains volunteer opportunities that might fit a student schedule based on firsthand experience. Our community learned an excellent lesson regarding how rich, varied, and global we are already, even in central Kansas. The structure of the grant encouraged students to take the opportunity to follow up with guest speakers or their suggestions. Following the speaker's visit, several students arranged job shadowing experiences or began volunteering at similar organizations.

"Suddenly, what seemed impersonal or impossible regarding their own vocations seemed within reach."

Trips out to local organizations are excellent opportunities, of course, but they can also require a lot of time and money to plan and to execute. Students' lives are increasingly busy as they juggle classes, clubs, sports, and jobs. Trips like these are also impossible during lockdown periods. But bringing in guest speakers can be a relatively easy alternative that can still open new worlds to students. With our original plan, we had a goal of including around 100 students in these trips. The shift to guest speakers meant that three times as many students were able to participate, potentially hearing the call of the needs of the world in ways that inspire their own vocational reflection. I would encourage fellow instructors to think about incorporating guest speakers into their classes, and particularly those that come from your own communities. Consider the types of stories you might want to hear about the various topics the class addresses. Then, look to your own networks and think creatively about the people who are in your larger networks and the talents and pools of knowledge they possess. You might imagine what types of students at your institution might particularly benefit from hearing their story. If our experience is an indicator, you will be surprised at the ways students respond when they glimpse new vocational possibilities and are encouraged to follow up on their interests.

LARRY PAPENFUSS

Serving and Building Community at Concordia College

Just a few years ago, my son, Luke, was a prospective college student who was interested in a career in computer technology/security. We looked at a number of colleges and visited several campuses. Being steeped in the experience of Lutheran higher education, I was pushing the Lutheran college options. One day, he suggested that perhaps he should go to Rasmussen College (a technical college) because they offered specific course work in his area of interest and he could live at home. Imagine my reaction. How could a son of mine know so little about the differences in the types of higher education models? Did he not see the value added by attending a college where faith and learning were nurtured in the tradition of both the liberal arts and our Lutheran heritage, where he would learn not only how to make a living, but also how to make a life? How can we expect other prospective students, their parents, or even our own faculty and staff to understand how a Lutheran liberal arts education helps serve the world?

Concordia College shares a common bond with many of our sister NECU institutions, while also possessing a unique flavor instilled by the culture and pragmatism of the Norwegian immigrants who founded the college in 1891. Located in the fertile Red River valley, and adjacent Fargo, North Dakota, the area was originally tall grass prairie and ancestral home to the Sisseton-Whapeton Oyate Nation (Dakota/Sioux). Eventually, the tall grass prairie gave way to farming and the railroad, which

connected western farms and ranches with markets in the east. Today, Fargo-Moorhead serves as a regional center for education, healthcare, technology, and agriculture, with a population of approximately a quarter million. While considered prairie, Fargo-Moorhead is within short driving distance of some of Minnesota's finest lakes country, home to the Anishnaabe/Chippewa.

I serve as the Director of the Dovre Center for Faith and Learning at Concordia. The Center's signature program is a year-long mentoring program aimed at second-year faculty and staff. Participants receive a stipend and are introduced to the mission and identity of Concordia with an opening full day workshop, six dinner discussions throughout the year, and a concluding full day workshop. This paper is adapted from a lengthier introduction to that program and focuses specifically on the portion related to how our mission and identity helps us serve the community.

Concordia College's mission statement has remained unchanged for over sixty years: "The purpose of Concordia College is to influence the affairs of the world by sending into society thoughtful and informed men and women dedicated to the Christian life." It captures the aspiration



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to be both an institution of higher learning and a place of spiritual discernment, with the ultimate purpose of serving the world. The mission is audacious in that its goal is not simply serving the local community, but *influencing the affairs of the world* through a transformative faith-based education grounded in the liberal arts tradition.

The taproot of Lutheran theology is that human beings are saved through grace by faith, which then frees us to serve the neighbor with a faith active in love. Concordia views such service as occurring on both the large national and international stage, as well as on the local and personal one. Here I share eight ways that I believe Concordia, and institutions like her, serve the community—in many cases, by building and modeling the kind community we hope to see in the world.

We Serve Community...

By educating students to the best of our ability

When I first came to Concordia, I attended a dinner gathering where faculty shared papers on their calling to teach at Concordia. Iris Stewart, an accounting professor at the time, started her paper by saying “Clearly there is no Lutheran way to do accounting.” While she went on to discuss how her faith impacted her sense of ethics in accounting, her point was that as a faculty member, she was fulfilling her calling by teaching her discipline to the best of her ability. She was right. First and foremost, we serve the campus community by providing quality education. It follows then, that we seek to hire the best teachers who support the educational mission of the college, but they need not be Lutheran or even Christian.

By challenging uniformed thinking

Liberal learning also serves the community by freeing us. The word “liberal” in liberal education is not to be confused with political liberalism, but is rather a liberating or freeing type of education. It means that we are *freed from* our unchallenged prejudices, preconceptions, and assumptions, so that we become *freed for* service to others. As Darrell Jodock says, “Such an education endeavors to wean [students] (and their teachers!) from their comfortable, uncritical allegiance to societal assumptions and to entice them into both an intense

curiosity regarding the worlds beyond their own experience and an intense desire to make their corner of the globe a better place in which to live” (Jodock, “Lutheran Tradition”). We present students with information, arguments, and experiences that challenge uninformed views, in order to produce *thoughtful and informed men and women*. Perhaps my favorite definition of a liberal arts education is attributed to Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, who said that the work of our Lutheran liberal arts colleges is to “complicate lives open.”

“The work of our Lutheran liberal arts colleges is to ‘complicate lives open.’”

By molding future leaders

Other attributes of a liberal arts education are the ability to view problems from multiple perspectives, communicate clearly, think critically, and problem-solve creatively. These abilities often land our alumni in positions beyond what they originally pursued in their careers and vaults them into positions of servant-leadership in their professions, in their churches, and in their communities. It is no surprise that our local church councils, school boards, and non-profit organizations are filled with Concordia alumni. Like other NECU institutions, we claim an inordinate number of leaders in business, education, healthcare, and more. The combination of a liberal arts background and a faith-based motivation to serve the neighbor creates leaders that serve the community.

By helping students look beyond themselves

Luther described our chief sin as stemming from *cor incurvatus in se*—a heart turned in on itself. In opposition to this, *Concordia* literally translates as “hearts together”. Perhaps the most important goal of a liberal arts education is to draw us out of ourselves and into relationship with others. Ernest Simmons call this “self-transcending self-hood,” meaning that as we become less self-centered and focus more on others, we become more of who God wants us to be. We find our true selves by serving others (Simmons 48). We are called into relationship, into community.

By fostering community on campus

Within such a Lutheran relational theology, “relationships do not serve beliefs, beliefs serve relationships” (Jodock, “Religious Diversity,” 44). This is why a sense of community is a definitive characteristic of our institution. It is exemplified in some of our traditions, such as first-year students wearing beanies, singing the Hymn to Concordia at events, our celebrations at homecomings, and wearing the Concordia ring. (Concordia ranks second only to one of the military academies in percentage of students who purchase a class ring.) It is a characteristic that is nurtured through orientation clubs, residential living, interdisciplinary collaboration, classroom dialogue, opportunities for communal worship, and a sense of egalitarianism that can be traced to our founders.

By promoting service to the neighbor.

Having spent a decade in the office of advancement, I can attest to the deep and abiding sense of community felt by our alumni, many of whom, years removed from their college experience, speak with great fondness of their Concordia family. They share life-long relationships with classmates, but they also share life-long commitments to serving others—outgrowths of the culture of community that was inculcated here. In orientation, first year students participate in a Hands for Change Project, devoting one of their first days on campus to a community service project. Our Habit for Humanity chapter has students literally lining the halls the night before sign-up in order to secure their spot. Students participating in Justice Journey, sponsored through Campus Ministry, embark on trips over breaks to learn and serve around justice issues such as immigration

“Liberal education nurtures human freedom in the service of human community, which is to say that in the end it celebrates love.”

and U.S. border relations, reconciliation of native boarding school experiences, disaster relief, and more. Numerous academic courses require service projects. One engages students with incarcerated young people in the juvenile justice system.

President William Craft, early in his tenure here, asked us to read and reflect on William Cronen’s article, “Only Connect,” which outlines the goals of a liberally educated person. Cronen concludes his essay by stating that “Liberal education nurtures human freedom in the service of human community, which is to say that in the end it celebrates love.” In this regard, both our faith and our liberal arts tradition endeavor to make us free and motivate us to serve our neighbor in love.

By encouraging dialogue and debate

Being in relationship or community with one another means we must be willing to have dialogue. This is especially true for complex topics and issues about which we disagree. Dialogue is the first step in challenging uninformed ideas, of complicating simplistic arguments, and ultimately helping us to arrive at deeper truths. Even when dialogue does not produce agreement, it deepens understanding of the other. Examples of such constructive dialogue here at Concordia include hosting a “Meet Your Muslim Neighbor Night” and hosting an interactive discussion between campus Democrats and Republicans on climate change. (Interestingly, there was agreement on the concept of a carbon tax, but disagreement regarding how such revenue might be spent.)

The Particular Community We Build and Serve

The final way that Concordia builds and serves community brings us to the particular kind of college we are, and to why the community we build and serve is of a particular sort. Darrell Jodock has described Lutheran colleges and universities as offering a third path that is distinct from both sectarian and secular schools (“Third Path,” 92). According to NECU’s foundational document, *Rooted and Open*, Lutheran colleges and universities are both rooted in a particular tradition and—on account of that very rooted—open to and inclusive of a diverse array of peoples and perspectives. The eighth way Concordia builds and serves community is *by modeling diversity with particularity*.

Thanks to the founding director of the Forum for Faith and Life, Dr. Jacqueline Bussie, Concordia has become a leader in interfaith cooperation, one of just a handful of

institutions recognized for offering a minor in interfaith studies. Concordia has formed a strong relationship with Interfaith Youth Core and its leader, Eboo Patel. When Patel visited campus, a faculty member asked him why a Lutheran college should embrace other faiths? He responded that Lutherans embrace other faiths “*because you are Lutheran.*” This sentiment was captured in Concordia’s Statement of Interfaith Cooperation:

Concordia College practices interfaith cooperation because of its Lutheran dedication to prepare thoughtful and informed global citizens who foster wholeness and hope, build peace through understanding, and serve the world together.

Indeed, as Bussie states, “The first way church-related colleges can fulfill their vocation to educate for religious pluralism is by teaching interreligious literacy as a crucial component of twenty-first century intercultural competence and global citizenship” [242].

People of other faiths, agnostics, and atheists can embrace the educational values that spring from Lutheran theology—values like academic freedom, educational excellence, service to others, and the importance of dialogue and debate. They model for us the diversity of thought our graduates will see in the world and provide us with conversation partners who hold us accountable for what we profess to be.

At the same time, an institution need not jettison its own particular identity in order to embrace others. Lutheran theology provides a pathos or passion for living a life in the way of Jesus that we cannot abandon, and in fact, must continue to nurture. There is a danger in an academic setting to let the dialectic between the life of the mind and the life of the spirit lean too far to the side of reason, ignoring the essential motivational quality that faith plays in our lives. The mission of a third path college is a holy endeavor. Constituents pray for the success of the college, professors pray for students, and we practice communal worship in which we share together our joys and our sorrows. The thousands of people who attend our Christmas concerts still cry when, together with the assembled choirs, we sing *Silent Night*. The Holy Spirit is present here and active in what we do.

Many students (whether Christian, Muslim, atheist, or other) will remember their time at Concordia as a spiritual revelation as much as an intellectual one. So, while an individual faculty member or student is not asked to adopt the religious identity of the institution, they should expect that Concordia will engage in spiritual practices and be curious about what we can learn from the practices of others. We welcome individuals into our community with a respect for diversity, and a seat at the table, but also with an understanding that one should not be surprised to be asked questions about how their faith/beliefs inform their learning and how their learning informs their faith/beliefs. It is this ethos—this *spirit*—of Concordia that makes it a community in the strongest sense: a people made up of very diverse individuals, but who become a single body with a shared calling, without ever losing their individual identities, spiritualities, and vocations. Called into and formed by *this* community, students then are sent into the world to build and serve other strong, diverse communities.

“Called into and formed by this community, students then are sent into the world to build and serve other strong, diverse communities.”

Living Lives of Service in Community

In the end, my son came to Concordia, where he majored in religion, and minored in computer science. Today he works as a systems analyst at the college. He is active in the church and has a passion for social justice. He was followed a few years later by my daughter who double majored in Spanish and psychology with minors in interfaith studies and political science, graduating *summa cum laude*. My son is gay and my daughter is physically disabled, which requires her to use a motorized chair and receive assistance with many daily activities. Both my children found their voice here for the things they are passionate about—advocating to make our community and the world more just, especially for those who are on the margins or considered “different” in any way.

When confronted with challenging opinions, the first response of my children is now typically to ask, "Can we have a conversation about that?" They learned a commitment to dialogue and the importance of promoting understanding. Each has volunteered time in service to community and church organizations (Habitat for Humanity, Churches United for the Homeless, Tutoring new Americans, PRIDE in the Park, and the ELCA Eastern North Dakota Synod Council). They are living lives of service in the community.

Concordia provided a place and a culture where my children found mentors who could help them learn to reconcile their understanding of the world with their faith, how to articulate that understanding, and how to have a healthy suspicion of absolute claims. They found a place where learning informed their faith and faith informed their learning. They found a place that taught them how to serve the community in ways they had not imagined. The world needs this type of understanding, a "rooted and open" Lutheran liberal arts understanding, and we must work hard to continue to provide it.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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Sharing the Gift of Vocation at (and beyond) Augsburg University



There is no doubt that Lilly Endowment launched a robust movement when, in the early 2000s, it funded eighty-eight colleges and universities across the country to explore how the theological concept of vocation could be infused into the curriculum and co-curriculum of undergrad-

uate education. And then, recognizing how effective this vocation movement had become, the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) approached Lilly to help create and fund the Network of Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), which now includes almost 300 colleges and universities of diverse traditions and missions.

Augsburg University, where I have served as President for sixteen years, was one of the eighty-eight institutions that received the original Lilly grants. It was also a founding member of NetVUE. I have watched with great joy how this community of learning and practice has become a great resource for inspiration and innovation in our common commitment to integrating the concept of vocation into all aspects of our undergraduate programs. At the same time, I have begun to explore how what we have learned about exploring vocation with our undergraduate students has taught us important lessons that can be shared with wider

audiences. In that way, I believe that those of us in NetVUE have the opportunity to share the gift of vocation far and wide.

In that spirit, I was pleased to serve on a panel at the 2022 NetVUE Conference tasked with sharing ideas and practices about how we might take our lessons about

“Exploring vocation with our undergraduate students has taught us important lessons that can be shared with wider audiences.”

vocation to other important constituencies. Joined by professor emerita Dorothy Bass from Valparaiso University, co-editor with Mark Schwehn of the important compendium, *Leading Lives That Matter*, and Jodi Porter, who oversees the Lilly-funded Youth Theology Institute program at the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), we shared our own experiences with how the concept of vocation can be extended beyond our undergraduate campuses.

There were three main themes in our conversation.

Beyond Undergraduates on Our Campuses

Many NECU and NetVUE institutions have graduate programs, especially in professional disciplines like

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nursing, education, and social work, where the concept of vocation can play an important role in shaping a professional career and life. At the NetVUE conference, I shared our work at Augsburg in creating an online vocation portfolio (a so-called V-Portfolio) that allows students to share artifacts from their personal academic and professional journeys that help them tell a story about their vocational pursuits. We have used the V-Portfolio with both undergraduates and graduate students, and have found it to be a helpful tool for students as they share a public narrative of the many facets of a vocational journey. In addition to academic work, students share their experiences as parents, citizens, neighbors, and professionals—all of which creates that many-layered story of a life.

The panelists also agreed that the gift of vocation we share with our students is an important aspect of our work with faculty and staff. Many of our institutions have embedded vocation into orientation programs for new faculty and staff, and have designing professional development opportunities that promote vocational growth and discernment. At Augsburg, we also have used the V-Portfolio with faculty and staff who, like our students, want to share a more robust story of their lives—both on and off campus.

Across the Vocational Lifespan

Other important constituencies for our campuses include prospective students and alumni. Jodi Porter shared the mission of the Youth Theology Institutes (YTI), which were originally located on seminary campuses and then expanded to include colleges and universities. YTI is an opportunity for high school students to come to a campus in the summer and spend intense time as part of a learning community that explores a pressing issue in the world through a theological lens.

The opportunity has many important implications for our institutions. The students get the chance to experience life on a campus, to meet fellow travelers, and to learn the skills of theological exploration. These programs also offer current undergraduates the opportunity to serve as peer mentors, expanding their horizon about their own vocational paths. As Porter pointed out, these institutes also serve as an admissions event! At Augsburg, we have consistently seen several of our YTI students matriculate

as undergraduates and often end up serving as mentors themselves. Whether the students come to our campuses or not, we know that the YTI experience is an important step for these high school students in their vocational journeys.

Alumni are another important audience for our vocation lessons. At Augsburg, we have organized the Centered Life Series, led by Dr. Jack Fortin, whose book, *The Centered Life*, has inspired many of us in our own vocational work. Dr. Fortin curates a series of sessions each semester (in person before the pandemic, but even more well-attended online during the pandemic) that address a particular vocational theme. For example, one series focused on the vocation of caregiving for a spouse with memory loss; another series shared the concept of interrogating our institutional saga, the work of appreciation and accountability for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called our historical legacy. We find that these sessions attract a diverse range of alumni (and other friends) and enable us to show how the concept of vocation is alive and well on our campus.

“One series focused on the vocation of caregiving for a spouse with memory loss; another series shared the concept of interrogating our institutional saga.”

Dorothy Bass shared her work in creating reading circles around the readings found in her compendium, *Leading Lives that Matter*. For alumni and others, these reading circles provide an opportunity for lifelong learning related to a common text, while also touching on important themes in vocational discernment that have been taught over the ages.

During our discussion at the NetVUE gathering, we were challenged by a relatively young member of the audience to consider how our campus communities can be helpful to recent alumni who are facing the economic disruption of recent years. He mentioned the rise of the so-called “gig economy,” which can make it difficult for young people to find sustainable employment. This is certainly an obstacle to healthy vocational discernment. The panel acknowledged the systemic and systematic challenges—racial, economic, and otherwise—that need to be addressed as we go beyond the boundaries of campus life.

Accompanying our Faith Communities

We then turned our attention to the ways in which our vocation lessons can be shared with faith communities. In some ways this sharing entails coming full circle to the traditions that have given us the gift of vocation. The need to share (back) also recognizes that many of those faith communities have lost their way in supporting the vocational journeys of their members.

“The Riverside Innovation Hub brings scientists, artists, writers, and theologians from the Augsburg faculty into conversation with faith communities.”

I shared the work of the Riverside Innovation Hub, an initiative of Augsburg’s Christensen Center for Vocation, that works alongside local congregations seeking to become public churches. A public church is committed to *place-based vocational discernment in the public square for the common good*. In other words, the partner churches are pursuing God’s call for them to be in relationship with their local neighborhoods in ways that bring flourishing and life. Originally launched primarily focused on the work of faith communities with young adults ages 22-30, the Riverside Innovation Hub (RIH) now explores how the many resources of a college or university can be brought to bear in helping faith communities be more responsive to the vocational pursuits of its members. For

example, RIH leaders found that many young people care deeply about environmental issues and don’t feel that their faith communities offer them resources to pursue those commitments. The RIH brings scientists, artists, writers, and theologians from the Augsburg faculty into conversation with faith communities to help expand their understanding of how they might accompany those young people in their passions for God’s creation.

I would contend that the work of the Christensen Center and its Riverside Innovation Hub is a compelling example of how our colleges and universities can more authentically be in partnership with congregations and other faith communities—and it is all about vocation!

There is much more to explore in these opportunities to share the gift of vocation and the lessons we have learned with our undergraduates with wider audiences. The goal of our panel was to open up a conversation and to do what NetVue does so well, which is to share what works, what doesn’t, and then to let the imagination and courage of those of us dedicated to spreading the good news of vocation take flight.

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ROBERT D. HAAK

Assessing the Value of Liberal Arts: A Review of *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs*, by Richard A. Detweiler

As is no doubt true for most of you, I spend many an hour these days speaking with prospective students and their parents about the decision about where their child should go to college.

I have slides on the screen as they walk in. One asks the question, “What is this college thing all about?” You would anticipate (incorrectly) that families who are about to spend a significant amount of money and considerable time over the next few years on a college education would have a fairly articulate idea of what those resources and time were for. What are they “buying” for their time and effort? Too often, they are not able to articulate that answer very clearly. The most common reason for college given is “to get a good job” (cf. Chan and Cruzvergara 6). I talk with them as a representative of the college who should be able to answer that question with some confidence, even if they can’t.

The next slide on the screen gives an overview of what I think education at Augustana College is about. It reads Explore → Reflect → *Transform*. This understanding of education is clearly informed by a long conversation with the Lutheran concept of vocation, a conversation that many readers of *Intersections* have been a part of for many years.

But both of these conceptions of the purpose of a college education—to get a job, to transform your

life—lead to a difficult question. How will we know when we have succeeded? Most of us recognize that simply “getting a job” is way too minimalistic an outcome to be useful. And if that is all it’s about, there are easier and cheaper ways to accomplish the goal. Alternatively, if the goal is transformation, the question might well be: “transformation into what?”

We have spent a lot of years, a lot of words, a lot of effort to define the answer to these questions. Lutheran colleges have used the designation *vocation* as a very productive and important shorthand for what our answers would look like. This journal has been an important voice in those conversations.

Once these questions of purpose have been addressed, a second question becomes important. How do we know if and when we’ve done it? Some might argue that what happens at Lutheran colleges and universities is so ineffable that it cannot be measured. But this begs the question. How do we (or the students, or their parents, or donors—you can add to the list) know if we are being successful?

Richard A. Detweiler, former president of the Great Lakes Colleges Association and Hartwick College, tries to



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approach these questions from a new direction, one that is worthy of considerable conversation. While he is speaking from the point of view of liberal arts colleges broadly conceived, his approach is a relevant conversation partner for Lutheran higher education institutions as a subset of this group.

There are two problems with pursuing answers to the questions raised above. What counts as evidence for an answer? It might seem obvious that the statements by liberal arts colleges about their missions must be the answer to the question about the purpose of a liberal arts institution. And testimony from graduates of these institutions about their effectiveness surely must be the answer to this second question about assessment and evidence. But both of these “obvious” answers are problematic.

In the first case, anyone who has surveyed even briefly the words of mission statements of colleges and universities will not be surprised by the conclusion that there is no common understanding articulated by liberal arts colleges about “what we do.” Rather than adding to the plethora of existing statements of the purposes of education, Detweiler reviewed the history of the philosophy of education and then analyzed over 240 statements of four-year colleges. This led to a grouping of six categories of goal statements that he believes fairly represents the goals of a liberal arts education.

These goals are summarized as:

A Life of Consequence by being a

- Leader
- Civic Altruist

A Life of Inquiry by

- Continued Learning
- Cultural Involvement

A life of Accomplishment by living a

- Fulfilled Life
- Personally Successful Life

Detweiler then proceeds to a similar analysis of the content and context of liberal arts institutions. He finds that there are three components to each:

Content:

- “Nonvocational” (i.e. studies that are not primarily pre-professional or career-oriented)¹
- Span of Study
- Development of Intellectual Skills

Context:

- Engaging Pedagogy
- Development of Larger Perspectives
- Authentically Involving the Learning Community

These few cryptic words are explicated in somewhat more detail. But it is tempting to respond, “Well, *our* program is much more complex and nuanced than this!” No doubt that is true of all of our programs. But these categories, because they cross over the large number of program descriptions, provide a rough but useful definition not of the fine points of liberal arts education but of fixed pillars in the landscape that can be useful guides.

Detweiler summarizes his conclusion:

It is clear that the *why* of education in the tradition of the liberal arts—its purpose—has been consistent since its inception. Its purpose has been, and continues to be, the higher, common good. The *what* of liberal arts education—its content—has always been about foundational preparation for life impact, including the nonvocational development of ways of thinking and an understanding of the span of human knowledge. ... *How* this education is experienced—the educational context—has consistently involved pedagogy, people of different backgrounds and life experiences, and a personally engaging educational community. (93-94)

If these words mark the “what we do” of liberal arts education, how can we get a handle on the “how do we know if we have succeeded” question? How do the content and context of liberal arts education relate to the goals?

Detweiler interviewed more than 1000 students who had graduated from colleges of all types, not only from liberal arts colleges. Information that was gleaned from these interviews determined the types of adult behaviors that characterized the goals of liberal arts education. Detweiler then looked for evidence of these behaviors in graduates of all sorts of institutions. In this way he was able to

determine whether graduation from liberal arts colleges exhibiting the content and context determined above made significant differences in the behavior of graduates at various stages of life.

The results of this work are striking. For all goals, students who graduated from self-defined liberal arts colleges achieved a significantly higher likelihood of having achieved all three broad goals. That is, graduates of liberal arts colleges had a significantly higher likelihood of leading a life of consequence by being a leader and civic altruist, of leading a life of inquiry by continued learning and cultural involvement, and of leading a life of accomplishment by living a fulfilled and personally successful life. The analysis was sophisticated enough that Detweiler was able to determine which content and context elements resulted in the most significant achievement of individual goals. The overall conclusion is that "... the available evidence suggests that liberal arts educational experiences indeed have a real impact on the way that people live the rest of their lives.... an education in the tradition of the liberal arts contributes to adult life impact and success" (186).²

While this is surely good news for the educators at NECU institutions for whom this journal is intended, Detweiler does not speak directly to the current understanding and use of *vocation* within the Lutheran colleges and does not specifically apply his results to this group. Maybe it is enough that we share in the good outcomes of the broad range of liberal arts colleges. But it also seems that this study invites us into a further conversation.

Questions that could be the topic for further consideration include the following:

- Are the goals, content, and context of liberal arts institutions that Detweiler examines also characteristic of Lutheran colleges? Or are we outliers in some respects?
- Are there similar common characteristics of our schools that are distinct from the broader landscape of liberal arts institutions? Should there be? What might those be? How would we determine if these are in fact "common" to us?

Does the methodology Detweiler developed point a way forward to answering these questions?

- How do we as individual schools and as a network compare to other liberal arts colleges using Detweiler's methodology? If we do better (i.e. our graduates have a higher chance of reaching the goals), why is that? What contributes to our success? And if our students are not as successful, why is that? And how can we improve? Detweiler's study provides specific guidance on which practices most significantly influence which outcomes. Can we make use of that information in structuring our campuses toward certain outcomes?
- What other questions should we be asking?

These are the sorts of conversations that have always marked a Lutheran college or university. The Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education summer gatherings provide a fertile venue for such conversations. I would hope that we make use of this moment to refine and further our understanding.

Endnotes

1. Detweiler clearly is not using "vocation" here in a nuanced Lutheran sense but rather as studies leading to "a particular job or profession" (Detweiler 82).
2. Detweiler is to be thanked for not simply presenting conclusions, but for providing definitions of his methods/terminology and giving the data on which these conclusions are based. Because of this, those more skilled in this area than I are able to query his methods and interpretation to contest, correct, or expand his conclusions.

Works Cited

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