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Deep Roots, Big Questions, Bold Goals

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Deep Roots, Big Questions, Bold Goals

Let us begin with the title. “Rooted” refers to the Lutheran tradition—to the sources and foundations of a particular approach to higher education and its role in the world. “Open” refers to the bold posture of receptivity to “insights from other religious and secular traditions.” This means that the effort to find and articulate a common calling reaches back into history, is continually opening forward into shared future, and in every moment invites both connection and commitment to Lutheran higher education. This approach is predicated upon an understanding of a God who is big enough for all human questions. The approach also demands that big questions about the world and human beings be pursued from the perspectives of all disciplines, and that the truths that are found are offered for the good of the whole.

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Asking questions that are big in a variety of ways is required if our graduates are to become equipped to tend the human heart and meet the needs of the wider world. Big questions also turn back to put the questioners in question. They ask, with poet Mary Oliver, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” They are

questions that ask not only, “What are you going to do?,” but also, “Who are you going to be?” Though the roots of this education are specifically in the Lutheran tradition of higher education, the bigness of the questions extends the roots into the foundation of the world and the human condition.



Why ask such big questions? The document asserts three primary reasons for asking big questions:

1. Big questions shape character, transforming through education our students into the kinds of people we want our graduates to be.
2. Big questions reach deeply into the human heart and the call of conscience to help students connect their education with their vocational discernment, the ways they might give their training, their gifts, and their critical thinking to the world.
3. Big questions build religious literacy, which consists of the capacity to receive the gifts from multiple religious and non-religious traditions and the skills to convene those multiple perspectives for the sake of common good. The big questions asked in Lutheran higher education are aimed not just toward what students are good at, for their own sake, but also toward what passions students can apply to purposes in the world.

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To work on these questions, multiple forms of truth must be present at the table and in the classroom for study, examination, and conversation.

Rooted and Open boldly proclaims: “The world needs our graduates, graduates who are intellectually acute, humbly open to others, vocationally wise, morally astute, and religiously sensitive.” Not every institution of higher education has this as its goal, and not every graduate has these qualities. Perhaps not all graduates of Lutheran colleges and universities have these qualities, and yet it remains our bold goal to attend to all students in multiple ways, nourishing their sense of self in community as well as their intellect so they are prepared to contribute their energies and attentions to the world in which they live. Even as the Lutheran colleges and universities join together to make a statement of common calling, the outward face of each to the world is different, having its own context and witness.

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According to the most compact formulation of our common calling, students from all our colleges and universities are:

Called and empowered
To serve the neighbor
So that all may flourish

Each phrase has deep roots in the Lutheran tradition and an openness to the reach and the scope of our world today.

Called and Empowered

From the beginning, Lutheran reformers promoted freedom of inquiry and meaningful work—with access to education for all children, regardless of gender or socio-economic state. Our institutions are proud of that deep

root and what it set out to accomplish in the sixteenth century. This root continues to call and empower Lutheran colleges and universities to consider what freedom of

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inquiry and access to education look like in the twenty-first century. An approach to higher education rooted in the Lutheran tradition prioritizes the liberal arts, “prepar[ing] students for roles they cannot yet envision and a future as yet unknown.” To be sure, Lutheran colleges and universities offer courses that are familiar across higher education and follow disciplines that are well-established. And yet, our curricula and co-curricula are not limited to how-to knowledge or we’ve-always-done-it-this-way experiences that are known, specific, and ready to apply right now. Instead, the aim throughout is the cultivation of critical thinking, embodied in questions such as: “How will it be?” “How can we?” “What if?” Critical thinking skills help now and can be called upon later in life and career, even when discipline-specific knowledge has changed dramatically.

Freedom of inquiry in Lutheran higher education is frequently referred to as a “third path” in higher education, drawing upon the work of Darrell Jodock. A first path in higher education assumes the separation of religion and education. It asks participants to check their religion at the door and not consider any religious forms of truth. A second path in higher education is sectarian, which advances a particular view of truth and draws that view of truth through all curricular and co-curricular activities. Lutheran higher education navigates a third path, where participants are permitted to talk about forms of religious truth alongside other forms of truth in and out of the classroom and where no one religious truth commands obedience or privilege (Jodock 13-14). This third path includes “investigation of religion in public academic spaces, rather than restricting religion to the private, personal realm” (Network). This

means that all students at Lutheran colleges and universities, whether personally religious or not, will have some facility in talking about forms of religious truth—how religious truth can be approached and what it can offer to public conversation.

To Serve the Neighbor

Meaningful work from the perspective of Martin Luther and the Lutheran tradition of higher education reaches beyond a paycheck and personal satisfaction because it contributes to the world and serves the neighbor. At its best, students at Lutheran colleges and universities can both *see the neighbor* and the neighbor's needs and *be the neighbor*; they can be receptive to the gifts of neighbors as well as mindful of their needs. Education with the neighbor in mind situates every self within the ecology of the whole. Of necessity this education is vocation-centered, asking not just what students do but why they do it and for whom. In the words of *Rooted and Open*, "Vocation-centered education equips students to understand how the world, human beings, and communities function." This understanding of vocation is not individual or singular. It is not focused on the one right career path or betterment of self alone. Though Lutheran higher education is invested in helping students identify what makes their hearts sing, that concern is never allowed to turn inward for the sake of the student alone. Instead, the singing of the heart searches for harmony, unity, and counterpoint with the neighbor. Vocation-centered education is rooted in community and opens its fruits to community. It is oriented to cooperative relationships and meaningful work that can be of use in broader society.

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So that All may Flourish

Lutheran higher education aims at the whole person and toward just communities. Both of these aims are indicators of radical hospitality. Students are, of course, welcomed in their intellectual acuity, yet they are also welcomed and encouraged to flourish in all of the other ways they are involved in campus life and contribute to the community. Campuses are not social clubs. Rather, they are collectives working toward and trying to embody just communities that are principled and focused on the values that unite them. *Rooted and Open* puts it this way:

In their appreciation and cultivation of diversity in its many forms, Lutheran colleges and universities welcome all and learn from all. They practice civil discourse; they encourage inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Denying conflict between faith and learning, they seek to draw on the resources of both to address human problems. Their hope is that, in so doing, students will feel called to reduce suffering and to improve the quality of life and the well-being of creation. Lutheran colleges and universities educate for lives of meaning, purpose, and responsible service.

The principles in this quotation imply practices in community that must continually be made new. How might our practices of welcome change as we encounter new people to welcome? How might we learn from *their* practices of welcome? What parts of God and the world do our neighbors see that we do not see? Can we get to the place where we take turns welcoming each other?

As we consider the importance of welcoming all, it is also important to clarify what we mean by "civil discourse." The words "civil" and "civility" are sometimes invoked with placidity, which forces a coolness or a niceness onto difficult aspects of living together. In this way, to be civil can sometimes mean to preserve order above all other concerns, which leaves in place dominant ideas and power structures. That is not the sort of civil discourse intended here. What is intended by "civil discourse" in this document is commitment to common life and conviction that the approach to liberal arts rooted in the Lutheran tradition of higher education is relevant to today's concerns.

Graduates from Lutheran colleges and universities are prepared to think with their neighbors about the pressing issues of the day and expected to contribute what they have learned for the sake of the common good.

The vision of the common good advanced at our institutions precedes and exceeds what is offered specifically from Lutheran traditions. Early Lutheran reformers, many of them professors at institutions with long histories, were motivated in their reforms by visions of the common good that they inherited. Successive generations of Lutheran higher education have also inherited visions of the common good from many different perspectives, both religious and secular. Lutheran colleges and universities today serve as meeting places for people from many different areas of life to exchange academic and applied knowledge in dialogue and to activate both cooperatively.

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In these dialogues, the gifts of faith and reason are both essential, and each is incomplete without the other. Held together in cooperation and productive tension, both faith and reason aim toward the shared goal of reducing suffering and improving the quality of life for all of creation. Aiming toward big, audacious goals together gives the work at and beyond Lutheran colleges and universities meaning and purpose. Educators practice responsible service and

strive to call responsible service forward into the paths our graduates take in the wider world. This calling is big! Alone, we cannot do it, which is why we invoke a common calling and pledge to walk in it together.

I close with three questions to ponder as you read and reflect on the document:

1. How would you name your own rootedness and openness? How might you draw from your own rootedness and openness for this moment of your life and work?
2. Where does your personal sense of calling intersect with the common calling of NECU institutions? How does your personal sense of calling overlap with your own institution’s calling?
3. How does your reception of the common calling shift your thinking on your vocation or the vocation of your institution? On what you or your institution should stop doing? On what you or your institution might begin to do?

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