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From the Editor

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From the Editor



The theme of the 2021 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education conference, hosted by Augsburg University, was “Called to Place: Community-Responsive Education.” Presentations and conversations over four days took stock of the importance of particular settings, including the physical and cultural geog-

raphies of campuses and the surrounding communities, for the deep learning of our students, and for us as educators. Participants considered how local landscapes and neighborhoods shape the missions, identities, and institutional callings of our schools, along with the individual vocations of those so emplaced, including our central callings to become anti-racist as we work toward the belonging of all.

In my opening address, I emphasized the importance of the everyday, quite literal sense of “place” and “neighbor” and “neighborhood.” In a world that is *digitally* interconnected *virtually* everywhere, but where our students and sometimes we ourselves increasingly feel rootless, alienated, without a sense of home and real belonging—indeed, in a world where an increasing number of our students grieve the loss of home, either because they have migrated (by choice or by force) from other places, or have been displaced and marginalized through racial and economic powers—we need to think creatively about how actual physical geographies and the particular, embodied people inhabiting them are essential to

understanding oneself and one’s meaning and purpose and place in the world.

The foundational NECU document, *Rooted and Open*, describes the “common calling” of our network of 27 Lutheran colleges and universities. Despite this shared work, the document notes that each school also has its own *particular* intuitional calling, which responds to its *particular* location. It claims that “Lutheran higher education calls students beyond the rewards of upward mobility and financial security so that their lives will also be attentive to people who need them most *and places that call out for healing*” (6). More centrally, *Rooted and Open* makes the bold claim that our students are “called and empowered—to serve the neighbor—so that all may flourish.”

“We need to think creatively about how actual physical geographies and the particular, embodied people inhabiting them are essential to understanding oneself and one’s meaning and purpose and place in the world.”

Of course, this attention to vocation or calling is not absolutely unique to Lutheran higher education. Beyond NECU you have NetVUE, the Network of Vocation in Undergraduate Education, a looser consortium of almost 300 schools that

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also identifies education-for-vocation as of central importance to independent, especially church-related, colleges and universities.

But what *is* distinctive, if not unique, is *what* Lutheran schools emphasize when they educate for vocation, *how* they do so in particular ways, and *why* particular geographical and cultural landscapes here matter. Let me try to explain.

In some more secular contexts, vocation is likened to the meanings, purposes, and passions of individuals. It's said that, when one finds one's true calling, a job will become work that one would do for free. Careers become callings when they tap into individual's deepest commitments and draw forth their deepest passions.

This emphasis on the individual's passions and feeling of purposefulness is frequently (and rightfully) tempered by colleges and universities that value their religious-affiliations—whether Lutheran, Jesuit, Presbyterian, Jewish, or something else. According to them, an individual's sense of her capabilities and interests, her gifts and passions, take the form of callings when and only when they become responsive to the needs of others. In the words of Frederick Buechner, vocation is where your own deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. Without becoming responsive to what the world needs of you, you might have ample ambition and career opportunities, but you do not yet have a calling.

Lutheran higher education, at best, goes one step further. It is aware of all the ways that "the world's hunger" or "the needs of the world" can also become abstract and vacuous—at best ciphers for, and at worst ideological justifications of, what turns out to be individual ambition after all. For example, if I'm gifted in developing flavors of e-cigarettes that appeal to minors, I am probably able to justify the "need" for that work insofar as it grows an industry, creates jobs, maybe even respects the decision-making capabilities of 13 year-old "consumers."

We can see here how "the world's need" can mean just about anything whenever people wants to justify their ambition by calling it a vocation. Even more abstract and vacuous than "need" are appeals to "the world." Indeed, in a late-industrial capitalist economy driven by consumer spending, "the world" can become almost synonymous with "the Market" (another abstraction—and one often deified).

If we are to guard against such abstractions and self-justifications, we must understand "the world's need" in particular ways. It is never simply the theoretical need of an abstract world. Rather, it must be what, for example, particular small business owners in a particular Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis need from Augsburg University as an anchor institution. Or (in my own context), what particular Spanish-speaking tutoring programs in the Florencia neighborhood need from Augustana students and educators. Or what the Driftless landscape of Northeast Iowa and the town of Decorah needs from Luther's College's initiatives in renewable energy.

"'What' and 'who' questions also depend on questions of place: Where are you? Where do you come from?"

Many if not most students at NECU institutions are by now familiar with the idea of vocation or of being called to purposeful work in the world. They learn that the question, "What are you going to do?" is preceded by the question "Who are you?" or, "What is your story?" What I am trying to suggest here is that "what" and "who" questions also depend on questions of place: *Where* are you? *Where* do you come from? Which particular communities sustain you and how do you become grateful and responsive to them? *Where*—quite literally—are you heading? In other words, in order to discern both personal identity and the purposeful work to which one is called, students and those who teach them need a sense of the places and peoples that serve and are served by them. In the words of Wallace Stegner, "If you don't know *where* you are, you don't know *who* you are."

There are at least 27 different ways that NECU institutions are at work engaging surrounding places and communities and otherwise educating our students for a sense of rootedness and belonging. This issue of *Intersections* showcases some powerful examples, which I commend to you and others in your place.