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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

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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).

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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.

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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.

Works Cited

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