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René Johnson

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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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