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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

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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.

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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.

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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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