

2022

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Andrew Tucker (2022) "Response to Mark Wilhelm: Distinguishing Between Identity and Vocation," *Intersections*: Vol. 2022: No. 56, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2022/iss56/7>

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ANDREW TUCKER

RESPONSE TO MARK WILHELM:

Distinguishing Between Identity and Vocation

This response to Mark Wilhelm's proposal for *Diversity of Vocations Among Lutheran Colleges and Universities* is what the Forum for Theological Exploration might call a "next most faithful step" in the process. That step is simply stated and difficult to manifest: we, as NECU institutions, must faithfully and effectively differentiate vocations and identities. For NECU institutions to robustly engage a unique diversity of vocations connected to their Lutheran rootedness, it's vital to appreciate the distinction of identity and vocation, and the contributions of identities to vocations. This distinction is a key element in my book, *4D Formation: Exploring Vocation in Community*, where I sum the distinction this way: Your identity is who you are, your vocation is what you do. Of course, we have not one vocation, but many. So perhaps it is better said this way: your vocations are how you put your identity to work in different contexts and seasons of life.

There are a number of relevant considerations. First, there's something of a Venn diagram of identity and vocation. We live much of our lives in the area where the two circles overlap. Consider, for instance, our language. I say, "I am a pastor, a professor, a voter, and a husband." I also say, "I am a straight, white, cisgender, invisibly disabled man." One is a set of vocations. Another is a set

of identities. The verb "to be" complicates our understanding of the separation of vocation and identity.

A second point was contained in the first: we not only have a multitude of vocations. We also have a plurality of identities. Of course, our work as NECU is focused on our shared calling, coming out of a shared identity of Lutheran higher education, but that is not the only shared identity we have. We're also North American institutions. We're Independent institutions. It's essential for us to focus on our vocations as they flow out of our identity as Lutheran higher education institutions, and we should also investigate how other identities impact our vocations.

Third, not only do our identities impact how we live out our vocations. The communities in which we serve give particular timbre to the calling. So, even if you transplanted Capital University to, let's say, St. Thomas in the USVI—that's one of those unanswered prayers I keep bringing before God—and even if our identity remained functionally the same, the flavor profile of our vocations would shift



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because of where we're planted. To embrace the identity of a Lutheran higher education institution is to embrace our place in the pluralistic project of higher education. Our diverse constituencies deserve clarity on how being a part of the Lutheran higher education tradition impacts their educational experience.

Finally, we must admit that not all work is holy work for us. Not all work is vocation, and not every vocation is ours to take up. From within the Lutheran tradition, we can point to the words of Jesus, who said he came to give life to the full, or life abundant. Vocation is work that is life-giving, that amplifies the integrity of others, rather than diminishes or destroys life. In an age of increasing

responsibility and decreasing resources, we cannot do all work. We cannot even do all good work. Reflecting on what life-giving work we're called to do in our specific contexts can enable us to say no, both to that work that is not our vocation because it's good work that belongs to someone else, and to that work that is not vocation because it is destructive, rather than constructive.

In short, by understanding that a diversity of institutional vocations is related to a diversity of institutional identities, we can more healthfully live out our identities and more faithfully embody our vocations in the unique communities we're called to serve.