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Cultivating Staff Flourishing in Lutheran Higher Education: A Framework for Advocacy and Engagement



In the realm of higher education, the concepts of thriving and flourishing are gaining increasing recognition as essential facets of institutional vocation and community well-being. In the following essay, we delve into the notion of staff flourishing within the context of Lutheran Higher

Education (LHE), exploring its significance, challenges, and persistent questions. Drawing from our experiences and insights, we aim to suggest multiple frameworks situated within different university contexts for advocating and actively fostering staff flourishing within LHE institutions. We approach this opportunity with gratitude as we bring attention to this vital conversation. We believe it to be not just a relevant and timely topic but one that is essential with respect to the vocation of our institutions.

Specifically we want to suggest that one vocation of LHE is to support the development, vocational discernment, and well being of the university community. Certainly for our students but also faculty and staff. In fact, every institution represented here, not only has this vocation or calling but

a vast array of tools furnished by the Lutheran tradition with which to answer that call. LHE stands apart from other educational models due to the depth of its tradition and the values it espouses. At its core, LHE embodies a commitment to vocation, emphasizing meaning and purpose in one's work rather than mere performance or passion. Moreover, LHE celebrates diversity and unique contributions within the shared context of humanity and the pursuit of the common good. These foundational principles are what captivate educators, administrators, and staff members like ourselves and draw us into a profound relationship with LHE. This deep commitment is akin to a long-lasting love affair, one that we believe should endure the test of time.

Two years ago, in June of 2021, I had the opportunity to attend and present at a virtual conference for ELCA schools. Because I did not grow up Lutheran, folks were interested in how and why I became such a champion for vocation and Lutheran Higher Education. I was asked to share a bit of my story with a group of clergy, scholars, and colleagues in response to the prompt: how I caught LHE. We were still in the midst of the pandemic, and I didn't want to think about LHE as a disease to be caught so I opted for something rather unconventional. I reframed the prompt to read: how I fell in love with LHE. I shared my response

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using the metaphor of a romance. I talked about how it wasn't love at first sight but that it started as a schoolgirl crush. One full of curiosity that gave way to a slow smoldering kind of attraction that led eventually to a full blown passionate love affair. I talked about how being a staff member and a student helped foster this growing interest in LHE. How my faculty were like matchmakers setting me up on a series of dates that nurtured my curiosity and this budding romance. For the sake of time and space, I am sparing you many of the details. I not only fell in love but I made a deep commitment to LHE. The "to death do us part" kind of commitment.

You might be asking me what was it that attracted me? Was it LHE's smile, intellect, good hair, learning outcomes or assessment data? Well, it was actually LHE's heart. I fell in love with the heart of the tradition. Once again, it is the heart that I think contains the keys and the tools to advocate for staff flourishing. In addition to the commitments to meaning, purpose, diversity and the common good, this tradition also rejects hierarchical structures, recognizing the intrinsic value of every individual's contribution to the mission of LHE. Although I am deeply committed to LHE, I recognize the very real challenges in cultivating and maintaining a flourishing relationship.

However, just as any enduring relationship can face challenges, the relationship between staff and LHE is not without its complexities. In some instances, staff members may feel undervalued, neglected, or left behind in favor of newer, seemingly more "relevant" models. External factors, such as financial difficulties or unforeseen events, can further strain this relationship. It is in these moments of doubt and frustration that our commitment to LHE and its tradition is put to the test. However, if you really commit to something you don't give up. You continue to engage, study, reflect, and reform. You remind your love of *their* commitment. You remind them of who they *are* and who they are to *you*. You remind LHE, and those that represent its mission and values, that they come from something. Specifically a tradition:

- A tradition that has a deep history of reforming, accessibility, and innovation. Students are not the only ones who are changing. We must meet our staff members where they are too.

- A tradition that emphasizes vocation—the "third way" is not a way of performance or passion but rather of meaning and purpose. Meaningful work that serves the neighbor is a vocation or in the university context—meaningful work that serves the students and the mission of LHE is a vocation.
- A tradition that de-emphasized hierarchy—**everyone** has a vocation and everyone's vocation is essential to the purpose of our institutions.
- A tradition that recognizes our differences and unique contributions through the lens of our shared humanity and our shared purpose to influence the common good.

It's because of this tradition that I am optimistic that my love will stand the test of time. That we will make it LHE and I. Together forever. And yet, we must continue to work on our relationship.

In this work, advocacy plays a pivotal role. Advocacy implies actively supporting the development, vocational discernment, and overall well-being of not only students but also staff. This kind of advocacy seeks to bridge the gap between the institution's mission and the daily experiences of its staff members. To that end, I still have a few lingering questions regarding our future together:

1. **What does it take for staff to flourish?** Do we know? If not, how will we know? Who will ask? Who will listen? Who will act? Our institutions get data on everything else. Collecting data on staff flourishing is imperative. In an era where institutions meticulously track various metrics, it is crucial to understand the well-being and satisfaction of staff members. This data can inform targeted initiatives and policies to address areas of concern and enhance overall staff experience.
2. **Why are staff often viewed differently than other members of the university community?** We all agree that we are here to serve the students and the educational mission. Our leadership has stated—"We are all educators". So why are we viewed differently? Why have the hierarchies been reinstated?

3. **How can those of us with resources and Centers focused on the work of vocation reflection and discernment, advocate for and contribute to staff flourishing?** To truly cultivate flourishing, institutions must also invest in professional development opportunities for staff members. Traditionally, these opportunities have been more accessible to certain roles and departments, leaving others overlooked.

In the next chapter of this love story my hope is that staff flourishing in Lutheran Higher Education is

not merely a theoretical concept; it is a calling deeply rooted in the tradition and values of LHE. By embracing advocacy, investing in professional development, and collecting data, LHE institutions can ensure that staff members not only serve the mission but also flourish within the vibrant community of the institutions. We invite our colleagues in the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) to join us in this endeavor to nurture and support staff flourishing as an essential component of our institutional and community well-being.

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS



The theme for *Intersections* in Spring 2024 is “Vocation as Action in the Affirmative.” We invite written or artistic pieces from any perspective within the university that emphasize the importance of acting on the vocations we hear, cultivate, and/or espouse in our various mission statements. We are especially interested in including Lutheran theological, educational, and sociological perspectives related to “Affirmative Action.” See more about this specific call on p. 26. Contributions are due February 15, 2024. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: windhamh@callutheran.edu