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Called for Life — Affirming Vocational Discernment

The Lilly Endowment has in recent years invested significantly in church-related colleges and universities in order to strengthen vocational discernment and church ministry throughout the country. Nine colleges affiliated with the Lutheran church received Lilly grants. Luther College, Decorah, IA, Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN, and Augustana College, Rock Island, IL were three colleges of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) of the more than 80 colleges across the country who received Lilly Endowment support. Each college has developed its own distinctive programs and structures to help students discern and commit themselves to their vocational callings.

In June 2004, key leaders of all the ELCA colleges that received Lilly grants gathered at Luther Seminary, St. Paul to discuss the strategic significance of these grants for Lutheran higher education and to explore their wider relationships to the church. This meeting also focused on the feasibility of conducting a demonstration project to rigorously study the effectiveness of vocation programs in collaboration with Luther Seminary's *Centered Life* project and Wilder Research, St. Paul, MN. The *Centered Life* initiative is a multi-year project located at Luther Seminary's Center for Lifelong Learning that seeks to strengthen the capacity of churches to inspire, equip, and send church members into their work, family, and community life in a way that is centered in their faith and their values.

This 2004 meeting concluded with the decision to propose a three college project to the Lilly Endowment in which the assessment and skill-building tools developed as part of the *Centered Life* project would be adapted and expanded for use on college campuses to assess vocation program effectiveness. Luther College was selected to serve as the lead institution and project administrator. Wilder Research was selected as the collaborating partner for research design and implementation.

Specifically, the *Called for Life* project undertook a rigorous examination of the tools, resources, programs, and structures

at each of the three partnering colleges (Luther, Augsburg, Augustana) to answer the following questions:

- Have campuses increased students' exposure to and knowledge of calling and vocation?
- Has exposure to campus programs increased students' understanding of call and vocation?
- Are students who have been exposed to these programs more likely to report that they have identified vocations, callings, or plans for incorporating their faith and their values into their post college lives?
- What program elements appear to have the most promise of making a difference in students' discernment of callings and preparation for vocations?

In September 2005 the Lilly Endowment awarded a 3-year grant of \$278,437 for an impact assessment of vocational exploration programs and thus the *Called for Life* initiative was begun. Our collaboration on the *Called for Life* project has solidified our commitment to continuing vocational discernment on our campuses, strengthened our inter-institutional connections, and affirmed that cooperation and trust can be fostered in ways we never thought possible. We have also demonstrated the efficacy of using survey methods to evaluate and strengthen programs, but most importantly we have affirmed the value of the investment made by the Lilly Endowment to engage college students in the consideration of how their talents and gifts can be applied to respond to the needs of the world for the common good. The results of the *Called for Life* project are highlighted in the following pages.

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