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Vocational Discernment A Research Report on Best Practices in Vocational Discernment at Jesuit Institutions of Higher Education

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Vocational Discernment: What is it?

The understanding of vocation, calling, and vocational discernment has expanded from the religious frame of being called to a life of church ministry work (as a priest, nun, pastor etc.) to the perspective that vocational discernment refers to the human process of discerning what one's general life vocation, calling, or purpose is meant to be (Smith, 1999). One of the most quoted and well-known definitions of vocation and calling used today comes from Fredrick Buechner's book, *Wishful thinking: A seeker's ABC*, where he states "the place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Smith, 1999, p. 33). This deep gladness is often explained as either the passion one might have for a particular subject or issue, or the joy one finds when utilizing their innate gifts and talents (Smith, 1999). According to Buechner's definition, vocational discernment therefore includes both an exploration of one's passions and gifts, along with exploration of the hungers and needs of the world in which they live. A call to one's vocation is then an "invitation to serve" (Schuster, 2003, p. 3) a need in the world by using one's innate gifts, skills and passions.

An introduction to vocational discernment during the undergraduate college years is a natural fit to the developmental processes that young adults experience during that time. The encouragement to explore and begin discerning one's vocation, or life calling, can be part of a student's natural development. Even Chickering, one of the leading theorists in college student identity development, recognizes the existence of vocation and provides his own explanation for scholars: "We discover our vocation by discovering what we love to do, what energizes us and fulfills us...and what actualizes all our potential for excellence" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 50). Vocational discernment addresses the holistic development of students, by challenging them to look up from their narrow studies to ask and struggle with the larger questions of life: "Who am I?," "Who am I called to be?," "What is my purpose of life?," "What are my passions?," and "How can I use them to meet the needs of the world?" (Scheiber, 2006, p. 26-30).

Core Literature

Initiatives and programs on college campuses that engage students and the greater campus community with vocational discernment are often found rooted in the same grounding literature. Aside from the popular Fredrick Beuchner definition of vocation, the messages found in Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak* (1999) and Sharon Parks' *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (2000) repeatedly appear to serve as the core literature guiding campus vocational discernment programs.

Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak* (1999) appears to be at the core of most college vocational discernment programs today. Grounded in the old Quaker saying 'let your life speak,' Palmer's influential message states that the discovery of vocation, or life calling, comes from listening to your life telling you who you are, and what you are meant to do (Palmer, 1999). Rather than an external voice calling you to who you are meant to be, Palmer sees that "it comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God" (p. 10). From this perspective, vocational discernment focuses on listening and reflecting upon a person's true self including personality characteristics, gifts, skills, aptitudes, desires, passions, and interests (Palmer, 1999).

Another foundational book found in higher education vocational discernment programming is Sharon Parks' book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose And Faith* (2000). Parks' (2000) message centers on the call for older adults to invest in the lives of younger adults by recognizing their need for mentoring relationships. As mentors, older adults should be encouraging young adults to grapple with the big questions of life and dream big about their futures. Parks specifically sees the importance of mentoring relationships on college campuses, and has recently brought this call to staff at northwest colleges such as Pacific Lutheran University (2003) and Seattle University (2005). Parks' model for mentoring relationships is similar to the foundational student development framework of optimal dissonance (a balance of supporting and challenging students). On one hand, a mentoring relationship must provide support and recognition of a student's gifts, while on the other hand, students must be challenged to ask and struggle with bigger questions.

Parks (2000) also speaks in her book about a change taking place in today's generation. She points out that entering a particular profession is less about simply having a career or providing a means of livelihood for oneself, but that instead the role of a profession is to "contribute to the quality, strength and vitality of our common life" (p. 175). As college students ponder questions of 'What should I major in?' and 'What do I want to do after I graduate?', they can naturally wrestle with questions of meaning and purpose. This makes college students primed and uniquely ready to engage with vocational discernment. Alexander and Helen Astin, of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, are currently conducting a study on *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search For Meaning And Purpose* (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d.). After compiling the findings from a survey of over 100,000 entering first-year students attending over 200 colleges and universities across the country, Astin found that "three-fourths [of students] say that they are 'searching for meaning/purpose in life' or that they have discussions about the meaning of life with friends, and similar numbers have high expectations that college will help them develop emotionally and spiritually" (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d., p. 3). This report affirms that college students today are ready for campus programming focused on meaning, purpose, and vocational discernment.

Lilly Endowment Inc.

Due to special funding from the Lilly Endowment Inc., the twenty-first century has brought forth the birth of diverse innovative programs, bringing a dialogue about vocational discernment to eighty-eight college and university campuses across the United States (Programs for the theological exploration of vocation, 2006). In this context, the term vocation "does not apply narrowly to the religious life but to the calling every young person has to use his or her God-given talents for the good of others" (Schroth, 2005, p. 34).

In May 1999, Lilly Endowment Inc. launched an initiative titled "Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation" (PTEV) (Programs for the theological exploration of vocation, 2006). PTEV began with an invitation for program proposals with the initial objective to "establish or strengthen programs that assist students in examining the relationship between their faith and vocational choices" (History, 2006). With the initial driving Lilly mission to "identify and nurture a new generation of highly talented and religiously committed leaders for church and society," grant-funded colleges devised programs that "encourage their students to reflect on how their faith commitment is related to their career choices and what it means to be 'called' to lives of service" (Programs for the theological exploration of vocation, 2006, & Wolfram, 2002). This piece has inspired and led colleges to ground much of their vocational discernment programs on the foundations of reflection and service. The two pillars of internal reflection, and external service provide much of the foundation around which vocational discernment programs have been built. As Coble, PTEV Program Director, so passionately shared in 2004 with practitioners of these programs: "You are building programs that engage young people in explorations about the shape of their lives and that help them claim ways of life that give life" (¶ 1). Each institution was able to develop a vision for vocational discernment on their campus that aligns with their own individual mission and approach to student learning (Wolfram, 2006).

Jesuit Institutions

The eight Jesuit institutions awarded PTEV funding have learned from each other and share many of the same types of programs (C. Boscia, personal communication, May 8, 2006). Spread across the country, Boston College (BC), Creighton University (CU), Fairfield University (FU), College of the Holy Cross (CHC), Loyola University Chicago (LUC), Marquette University (MU), Saint Louis University (SLU), and Santa Clara University (SCU) have students stating that they were challenged, liberated, given courage, helped to ask questions, confirmed directions, and had their spirits rekindled (Scheiber, 2006). Out of the eight Jesuit institutions receiving PTEV funding, BC, LUC, and SCU provide excellent examples of best practices in how they engage their students with the two vocational discernment programmatic pillars of reflection and service.

Reflection

The key internal and external reflection questions central to vocational discernment are found woven into similar campus programs within the eight PTEV-funded Jesuit campuses.

Retreat

As a guiding principle of vocational discernment, the internal questions of reflection and the ultimate goal to “know thyself” appear throughout vocational discernment programming (Scheiber, 2006). One of the most prominent arenas for internal questioning, challenge, and reflection can occur when people step away from their everyday life and participate in a retreat. With this in mind, along with the common practice of Jesuit retreats, many Jesuit institutions have used their PTEV award to revitalize existing, or create new, retreats. These retreats are often run out of, or in partnership with, the Campus Ministry office and may be specifically targeted towards either first-year students or upper-class students. LUC’s PTEV funded *EXPLORE* retreat, introduces first-year students to reflection and personal discovery by exploring gifts, curiosities, and talents (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). Offered for a weekend both fall and spring semester, LUC’s *EXPLORE* retreat introduces the practices of internal reflection early in a student’s college experience. LUC follows-up two years later with a one-day *Inter/Mission Day*, which is similar to the *Halftime* retreat at BC. Both *Halftime* and *Inter/Mission* occur halfway through a student’s college experience (usually at the end of sophomore year, or the beginning of junior year). These events allow students to take a “punctuated moment” during which they stop to reflect upon where they have been, who they are now, and where life is taking them (C. Boscia, personal communication, May 8, 2006). At Santa Clara University (SCU), the Campus Ministry Office partners with Residential Learning Communities, and occasionally other campus groups, to put on *DISCOVER Weekends* twice each year (C. Boscia, personal communication, May 8, 2006). Open to all students, Discover Weekends invite students to “stop and think; to get away from daily busyness, to reflect on life and calling... hear from others asking the same questions...relax in a beautiful environment...and reflect on who you are, what you really want and who you want to become” (Santa Clara University, 2006).

Regular Small Group Discussions

One way that the internal reflection questions of vocational discernment have moved from off-campus retreats on to campuses is through the formation of regular small group discussions. These small group discussions are found in different places, according to the structure and community of an institution. At SCU, *DISCOVER Groups* have less of a faith focus than LUC *Christian Life Communities* (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). At SCU each small group gathers around a common interest, friendship, faith, or Residential Learning Community with the purpose to “gather to reflect upon deepest longings, burning questions, and dreams for the future between peers, faculty, and staff” (Santa Clara University, 2006). At BC small group reflection is found in the PTEV funded senior wine and cheese series, *Senior Consilium* (Senior consilium, 2006). Sponsored and led by a senior student, and co-led by a faculty, staff or alumni member, each group of

seniors meets several times over wine and cheese to identify and reflect on their joys, passions, gifts, and career choices (Senior consilium, 2006). Specifically, they reflect on questions concerning the possibilities of life after BC, the skills they have developed, the experiences they have encountered, and how they can utilize their experiences, skills, and gifts in the workplace once they leave college (*Senior consilium*, 2006).

Courses

The internal reflection central to vocational discernment has also found its way on to college campuses through courses influenced by the topic of vocation. Some colleges and universities receiving PTEV funding have chosen to invest in the creation of new credit-bearing courses about vocation, while others have instead chosen to modify existing courses to include engagement with the concept of vocation. BC and SCU have created new credit-bearing courses with their PTEV funding. Taught by either a professor in Management or Arts & Sciences, BC's ten-week pass/fail course, *Vertices: From Halftime to course-time and lifetimes*, acts as a follow-up to the popular *Halftime* retreat (B. Howell, personal communication, May 26, 2006). *Vertices* offers upperclassmen an opportunity to pursue lines of thought and practice suggested by the first two years at BC. Students ponder their approaching futures by considering the formation of habits, disciplines, and practices that will be personally useful as they plan for the completion of their education, and life thereafter (Boston College, 2006).

Rather than creating entirely new vocation-focused courses, some institutions have chosen to modify existing courses to include engagement with the topic of vocation. LUC has done this by identifying thirty-six existing courses as *EVOKE courses*. In these courses faculty bring a dialogue about passion and purpose to their discipline (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). *EVOKE courses* range throughout seventeen different departments, with each department holding one to seven identified *EVOKE courses* (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). At Marquette University (MU), the PTEV-funded *Manresa* project has created and supported a vocation-focused *First Year Reading Program* (Dooley, 2006). Arriving at MU having read the same text, all first-year students reflect and discuss this text during orientation week. *The First Year Reading Program* annually selects books that consider the idea of vocation. Following the fall orientation reflections and conversations, vocation-centered themes and activities are incorporated into freshman English courses and the text's author is invited to campus to share insights on the book's topic and their personal vocation (Dooley, 2006).

Workshops, campus speakers or expanded speaker series

Another common way in which some institutions have brought the internal reflection of vocational discernment to their campuses, is through workshops, campus speakers or expanded speaker series. LUC's *EVOKE* program has one of the most extensive listings of workshops aimed to help students discover their calling (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). By partnering with other campus offices, the *EVOKE* program provides nine workshops both regularly and by special request for campus groups. These workshops engage the theme of vocation by discussing topics such as calling, meditation, leadership, personality types, spirituality, and personal mission statements (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). LUC also utilizes some of their PTEV funding to bring a vocation-themed speaker series to campus. The LUC speaker series brings entertainers, athletes, activists, and professionals to campus to discuss their calling and process of discovery. Speakers can include faculty, staff, students, alumni, and prominent public figures. Speakers reflect and share about their experiences, profession, opportunities, ethical challenges, vocational journeys, or simply what matters to them and why (Loyola University Chicago, 2006).

Service

'Immersion Trip' programs

In order to experience the intersection of personal passion and the external needs of the world, many Jesuit colleges and universities receiving PTEV grants have put students in direct contact with hungers of the world, found in both international and domestic poor communities. While some institutions have used PTEV funding to bring their students into service opportunities in surrounding communities, the most substantial service-oriented PTEV programs occurring are ‘Immersion Trip’ programs at institutions such as LUC and SCU. Both LUC and SCU offer domestic and international immersion trips over school breaks, during both fall and spring. At LUC, the PTEV-funded *EVOKE* program partners with University Ministries to run *Break Immersions*, open to all students, faculty, staff, and alumni; with the objectives to “do justice, build community, keep faith and live simply” (Loyola University Chicago, 2006). SCU’s immersion trips, otherwise known as the *Kolenbach Solidarity Program*, focus on solidarity and learning, rather than service (M. Colyer, personal communication, May 8, 2006). The goal of SCU’s program is “to spend intensive and quality time sharing life with and learning from poor and marginalized individuals and communities” (Santa Clara University, 2006). This goal naturally leads students to discerning how they feel called to respond. Distinguished by the phrase “Travel, Service, Discover,” SCU’s *Kolenbach Solidarity Program’s* Director, Michael Colyer, shared that the program entices students with the reality of travel and service, while also promoting the inevitable process of discovery (personal communication, May 8, 2006). Offered four times each year, SCU has up to 325 students attend immersion trips per year in teams of 12-14 students per trip. One of the most extraordinary aspects of SCU’s immersion trips is the extensive emphasis placed on discernment before, during, and after the trip concludes. Before the trip, each group meets six times with faculty, staff, and students to prepare. During the trip, daily group reflection is guided by the Ignatian Spirituality Examen process, and once students return to campus, groups meet for a post-trip gathering where further vocational reflection takes place (M. Colyer, personal communication May 8, 2006).

Ministry Internship Programs

Another context for service oriented PTEV programs, has been through the creation of ministry internship programs. Ministry internship programs have caught on in student popularity across each campus, and the selective nature of programs at both BC and SCU make their annual seven to ten student spots very competitive (B. Howell, personal communication, May 26, 2006, & M. Colyer, personal communication, May 8, 2006). The definition of ministry varies between Jesuit institutions with ministry internships. Where MU and SLU offer ministry internship credit for experiences in the more traditional sense of preparing to become priests, ministers, sisters or lay ministers, BC and SCU have both expanded the concept of ministry from work with parishes and houses of worship, to administrative offices of particular faith traditions and national faith-based organizations. SCU’s PTEV funded *DISCOVER* program promotes ministry internships to students as an opportunity for “testing your vocational discernment” while “exploring the rewards and demands of ministry” (Santa Clara University, 2006).

Impact & Learnings

Although it may appear difficult to measure the impact of a program centered on an intangible concept such as vocational discernment, numbers and quotes can paint a simple picture. Two institutions that best documented their findings are BC and SCU.

In his final program report to the Lilly Endowment Inc., J.A. Appleyard S.J., Vice President for University Mission and Ministry at BC, lays out the numbers and findings from the past five years of the PTEV funded *Intersections* program at BC (2006). Appleyard reports that over five years, 1,159 students have participated in *Halftime* retreats, with a yearly high of nearly 300 students during the fifth year. BC students have had numerous opportunities to participate in various *Intersections* follow-up programs after *Halftime*, and 1,637 students participated in those various programs over five years (Appleyard, 2006). Additional highlights from the BC Intersection’s program include: the common language and principles of vocational discernment that now exist throughout campus; over 100 students completed ministry internships and are now doing

volunteer or full-time church ministry; a gulf has been bridged between faculty and staff as they come together over a sense of shared responsibility for the university's mission; and that BC has found ways to articulate and bring the central dynamic of the Ignatian spirituality discernment process to undergraduate college students (Appleyard, 2006 & B. Howell, personal interview, May 28, 2006).

In Appleyard's (2006) final report to the Lilly Endowment Inc., BC shared the initial learning that "students in the middle of their undergraduate years are not interested so much in planning their lives after graduation as in reflecting on who they are and what kind of persons they are becoming" (p. 3). This realization led BC to quickly change the frame of seeing vocation as career or life choice, to a frame of "vocation as a sense of growing congruity between inner and outer selves" (Appleyard, 2006, p. 3). Additionally, BC staff found that in order for their vocational discernment programs to be successful, all programs had to rest in a foundation of Ignatian spirituality (B. Howell, personal communication, May 28, 2006).

SCU's *DISCOVER* program began with the primary goal to "raise a level of awareness to the concept of vocation" with the purpose of "giving students the tools to make decisions now and in the future (C. Boscia, personal communication, May 8, 2006). When surveying SCU students on the impact of the *DISCOVER* program, staff found that their initial goal to raise awareness to vocation had expanded beyond their envisioned goal (C. Boscia, personal communication, May 8, 2006). Boscia reflected that when surveyed, "over 50%" of all SCU students noted that they were having conversations "at least once a week" (whether with friends, mentors or professors) about the concept of vocation or calling in some way (personal communication, May 8, 2006). Staff translated this finding into approximately 2,000 students, although tracking showed that 2,000 students had not yet participated in *DISCOVER* programs (C. Boscia, personal communication, May 8, 2006). This discovery illustrated the impact that the PTEV funded *DISCOVER* programs were having on campus; students participating in programs were talking about their experiences and causing others to consider the idea of vocation or calling as well.

Conclusion

Although the Lilly Endowment Inc. has awakened conversation about vocation on eighty-eight university campuses around the U.S., it is important to note that vocational discernment does not occur as a one-time epiphany, but rather as a developmental process (Wolfram, 2006, & Russell, 2005). As Russell (2005) explains, "the realization and confirmation of one's vocation is a circuitous, lifelong process, and it is not uncommon for individuals to say that they have 'finally discovered what it means to be a teacher' well, into their senior years" (p. 35). This is a reminder that university vocational discernment programs are less about helping students discern what one thing they are meant to do, and more about introducing students to internal and external reflection and discernment, so that they are equipped to continue the process in their futures.

An exciting opportunity awaits to engage with and learn from institutions that have thoughtfully paved the way and established life changing experience for students as they grapple with the questions central to examining vocation. Whether a person is religious or not, the big life questions, such as "What do I really want to do?" and "Who do I want to be?" are universal, and college students are especially primed and ready to engage with the practices of vocational discernment.

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