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William M. Sullivan

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Exploring Vocation

REFRAMING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AS A QUEST FOR PURPOSE

By William M. Sullivan

In Short

- Institutions participating in the PTEV program helped their students develop a sense of purpose by using participatory approaches to teaching and learning, including experiential and service experiences; forming learning communities; and teaching reflective practices.
- The liberal education that ensued increased students' engagement with academic learning, ability to connect that learning with entry into careers, and resilience in the face of difficulties following graduation.
- The project also strengthened the colleges' sense of common purpose and trust in their educational mission.


William M. Sullivan (wmsphl@aol.com) is a senior scholar at the Center of Inquiry at Wabash College, where he has recently completed a study of the Lilly Endowment's Program on the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV). He was formerly a senior scholar at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, where he codirected the Preparation for the Professions Program.



Between 1999 and 2012, the Lilly Endowment placed major resources into a unique experiment in undergraduate education. Called the Program on the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV), this project challenged a group of 88 colleges and universities affiliated with a variety of Christian denominations, from Orthodox and Roman Catholic to Evangelical Protestant and Quaker, to think anew about what they were trying to achieve for their students (for a list of the campuses that participated, as well as articles discussing the PTEV, see the Lilly Endowment website at www.resourcingChristianity.org). The theme of life purpose,

or “vocation” in the language the project drew from the religious language of calling, was the way the Lilly effort sought to give focus to the often-diffuse collegiate efforts to “educate the whole student.”

Reflecting on his college experience, a senior described his freshman self as having been “way too cool” to get involved in the university’s program on vocational exploration. As a sophomore, however, he noticed that students he knew who had participated in the program had developed new insights into themselves and were having conversations



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with each other, as well as with faculty, about the ways in which particular majors construed the world and how these perspectives related to future careers.

His friends also seemed animated by a confidence that they could make a difference in the world. But it was their evident sense of community that led him to begin joining activities and taking courses that were part of the program. These opened up a deeper understanding of the value of learning, which in turn broadened his grasp of the world's complexity and needs.

The experience gave this student a longer and more coherent perspective on his life, connecting the present with a more realistic understanding of future possibilities than he had previously enjoyed. He reported that, to his surprise, these conversations became a “centering point” amidst the pressures he felt in preparing himself for the transition from college into adult life and work.

This senior's reflection on his undergraduate experience is what we might expect—and certainly hope—to see from a good liberal education. Yet his experience, though common among participants in the Lilly Endowment's initiative, is not typical.

Undergraduates are generally not deeply engaged with their learning. Many of them do not develop a thoughtful process of investigating future career possibilities, and all too few report thinking seriously or deeply about their larger values or long-term commitments.

In the aggregate, students are also not very interested in what are sometimes called “the big questions.” While tolerant and open to a plurality of values and cultures, only a minority report that they are curious about the nature of reality, the clash of worldviews, current affairs, or human destiny and history.

And finally, too few are interested in civic or political views or commitments: Today's emerging adults are optimistic about their own futures but pessimistic about their ability to influence the larger world. They rarely see college as a path toward wider loyalties or deeper engagement (Astin et al., 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009).

This is not surprising. For some time, national leaders in many sectors, including higher education, have characterized a college education almost exclusively as a tool for upgrading the workforce and enabling personal prosperity.

The public takes a broader view of higher education, seeing it as important for equipping the nation's citizens with attributes such as the ability to think, a sophisticated understanding of the world, and ethical perspectives (Johnson & DiStasi, 2014). However, in an increasingly unequal society, the rising cost of college has tended to crowd out consideration of the purposes and public benefits of higher education. In this climate, the Lilly Endowment's ambition to help colleges address a fuller range of purposes for higher education is welcome.

THE PROGRAM

As the example of the senior graduating from one of these institutions suggests, much of the emphasis at the colleges

and universities funded by the initiative was on helping students confront personal and practical issues regarding who they want to become, what challenges they face, what capacities they can nurture, and what views of life they find especially compelling.

Over a decade of experiment and reform, many of the participating institutions developed effective ways to foster the development of purpose among their students. For their faculty, the effect was a significant intensification of professional commitment as educators. In some cases, the projects fomented a reinvention of liberal education on the campuses involved.

But perhaps most notably, these efforts often swept up administrators and staff in the enterprise, forging or renewing a sense of common purpose and trust in the educational mission of the institution. As a result, many of the colleges and universities involved in the initiative became more vital centers of learning and more actively connected to their civic and religious environment.

This points to new directions for the nation's many religiously affiliated colleges and universities. But it also holds lessons for more secular institutions that are committed to liberal education.

PTEV Outcomes

To discover its effectiveness in achieving its stated goals, the Lilly Endowment asked sociologist Tim Clydesdale to carry out an extensive outcomes study of the PTEV. Having started as a self-confessed skeptic, Clydesdale became convinced of the efficacy of the programs in fostering students' engagement with academic learning, ability to connect their undergraduate learning with entry into career paths, and resilience in the face of difficulties following graduation. The last is especially significant in light of the continuing difficulty graduates face in obtaining employment commensurate with their educational credentials.

Clydesdale compared a selection of graduates of the PTEV programs with both students on the same campus and demographically similar students on comparable campuses that were not participants in the initiative. He discovered sizeable developmental effects that distinguished the PTEV participants from graduates who had been through academically comparable collegiate experiences but lacked the coordinated focus on vocation.

Perhaps most noteworthy of the findings was that the programs were able to reverse the widely deplored and apparently intractable trend toward student disengagement from academic learning. Clydesdale noted that students and faculty on the PTEV campuses became "engaged and intrigued" by taking part in "vocational exploration" within a campus context that connected academic learning with personal self-awareness, community participation, and occupational investigation.

How They Did It

To achieve these outcomes, the PTEV campuses developed programs that addressed in a coordinated way three

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often-fragmented aspects of the undergraduate experience. First, they spurred innovations in teaching and learning. Second, they generated new forms of campus community life, especially residential life. Third, building on the evidence that personal relationships with faculty and mentoring adults motivates learning and personal development, the programs combined the academic and the social through learning communities that involved students, faculty, and staff. The initiative also connected the campus to the larger community.

The programs applied the insights of the learning sciences in new ways. Many of the campuses created small-group first-year courses that brought students and faculty together around themes of meaning, identity, and purpose. Some institutions developed courses in a variety of disciplines focused on the themes of exploring the self, the world, and theological ideas of vocation. Most of the colleges engaged students in courses that interwove service beyond the campus, including study abroad, with social and ethical reflection.

And the PTEV programs pioneered new forms of campus community life around the themes of calling and purpose that drew in faculty, staff, alumni, and senior administrators. The programs wove connections among people—faculty, student-services and counseling staff, religious-life and career-planning staff—that had previously had little sustained contact. They did so by treating all these areas as integral to the educational mission of the institutions. These connections had revitalizing effects, helping to produce the strong educational outcomes.

The initiative also enhanced the integrative nature of education at these institutions, helping to instantiate the ideal of educating the "whole student." By bringing faculty and students together in programs that explored some of the large issues of our time—poverty and justice, pollution and climate change, the use of new technologies, the global exchange of knowledge, and so on—the programs revived liberal education's traditional concern with integrating critical investigation, knowledge, and practical concerns. This has been an enduring legacy of the programs on the participating campuses.

Through these projects, a number of campuses developed new partnerships with both community organizations

Exploring life purposes directly enhanced the perseverance or ‘grit’ typical of resilient people and communities.

and religious congregations with which the campus had previously been only nominally affiliated. These relationships turned out to be particularly important in spurring an upsurge of interest among undergraduates in careers in the clergy and religious service organizations.

The Exploration of Vocation

The exploration of calling that stood at the center of all the programs funded by the Lilly initiative provided students with robust opportunities to better understand themselves and to undertake a quest for purpose. This gave participants an overall sense of direction for their college experience. The idea of exploring vocation through academic and co-curricular activities provided a coherent conceptual frame within which students could make sense of their activities in and outside of the classroom. The distinctive influence the PTEV gave to this search for purpose centered on the notion that learning entails a responsibility for individuals to be of service to others, for their own well-being and for that of the world.

This orientation toward service provided participants with a sense of participating in aims larger than themselves but at the same time included and enlarged them as people who mattered and had something to contribute to the community. By making this perspective concrete in a variety of educational experiences, the PTEV expanded students’ sense of what could matter in life.

For instance, at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, an institution that serves many first-generation Hispanic students, those participating in the PTEV reported that their involvement in “immersion” programs in Mexico expanded their understanding of issues of immigration and development. Some found new motivation to prepare for careers in education, social work, and the health fields to address these issues. At Macalester College in St. Paul, service projects among recent immigrants in the Twin Cities induced students studying the social sciences to explore careers that could unite academic research with involvement in the legal, economic, and social challenges of immigration.

These experiences, and the reflection on them which the PTEV instigated, also extended students’ time horizons,

so that they began to think of their college experience as a venue for shaping their growing identities and commitments as they moved into adult life.

To a striking degree, the general rubric of exploring vocation proved cohesive and yet flexible enough to sustain considerable diversity of approaches among the PTEV programs. Courses might address the theme of vocation by using that lens to examine various academic topics.

Students at Santa Clara University in Northern California, for example, studied the Renaissance by framing lives in that period as experiments in vocational exploration and struggle. In doing so, many students reported that they gained a new appreciation of the tools of historical and literary study as valuable for shaping their own lives.

Meanwhile, at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, management students learned to ask ethical questions about the kind of lives made possible or impossible by the pursuit of various careers in business and with different types of corporations or organizations. Through these reflections, based on externships in actual organizations, the students discovered new ways to use the analytical skills they had been honing to connect the particulars of their post-graduation job search with their evolving longer-term aims in life.

Sometimes through linked sets of academic courses or capstone experiences, and at other times by programs that provided placements off-campus, the explicit interweaving of calling and purpose gave a point of reference to individual students’ experiments with establishing a significant stance in the world. The theme of calling also extended the process into exploration of meaningful career trajectories that could embody that stance.

The developmental effects of participation in the programs, already noted, showed that exploring life purposes directly enhanced the perseverance or “grit” typical of resilient people and communities, a much sought-after quality today. The causal relationship between developing a sense of purpose and resilience in the face of challenges is now well established in the literature on emerging adulthood (for example, see Damon, 2008).

The intent of vocational exploration was to provide educational experiences that would allow the needs of society and the globe to shape the context for the students’ personal decisions about their future. Such an enlargement of mind and growth of social and civic concern are traditional aims of liberal education.

Learning Communities as Schools of Reflective Learning

But the secret of the PTEV’s success was awareness that such larger horizons become real to individuals only when they actively share those concerns with those they live among. This is why taking part in learning communities committed to exploring vocational possibilities within a sense of shared purpose enabled students to find lasting significance in experiences of social service.

The effectiveness of the PTEV initiative therefore depended heavily upon the ability of campuses to form and

sustain communities of learning focused on these goals. By connecting students with groups of people in other communities or with projects that addressed significant problems beyond the campus, the PTEV programs stimulated deepened engagement in learning.

They also enhanced students' quest for self-knowledge, while they aroused a sometimes urgent curiosity in a variety of areas. It seems that the sense of community the programs engendered significantly eased students' anxieties, allowing them to expand the range within which they explored possibilities.

In all these learning communities, practices of group and individual reflection played an essential role. These practices included Socratic efforts at self-understanding, as well as probing the assumptions underlying varying (and sometimes conflicting) views of the good life. Such reflection made it possible for students to gradually construct an understanding of life as a whole and make connections between interests, immediate goals, and longer life trajectories.

Practiced in multiple settings, orally and in writing, both within and outside the formal curriculum, these activities helped students integrate academic learning and practical experience with important dimensions of meaning in their lives. That made it more likely that they would maintain a sense of direction through the sometimes difficult and disorienting undergraduate years. Organized reflection also laid a basis for continuing use of these practices beyond graduation.

In sum, reflection on vocation taking place in a community of shared interest and support shifted the framing of higher education for both students and faculty. The three elements of the PTEV programs—vocational narrative as basic structure, the grounding of this narrative in learning communities, and the cultivation of reflective practices—invited students to experience their college education not as passive consumers but as protagonists in a serious enterprise with life-long consequences. These programs demonstrated that it is possible to recover the formative power of liberal education, even at a time when fixation upon its merely instrumental value threatens to overwhelm the deeper and more public ends of higher education.

Traditions of Reflection

Traditions of reflective practices were perhaps the most important contribution of the participating campuses' religious traditions to the success of the enterprise. To make the theological exploration of vocation educationally effective, the Lilly initiative urged campuses to draw upon their religious roots, which ranged across a wide spectrum of Christian denominations.

Institutions that could draw upon highly developed traditions of spiritual reflection, such as those of the Quakers and the Jesuits, were able to create ways of engaging students in thinking about their lives by adapting their inherited practices. However, these were not narrowly defined or dogmatically exclusive approaches. Since all the 88 participating

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campuses, while religiously affiliated, also had religiously diverse student bodies and faculties, the attractiveness of the vocational theme and the reflective practices it engendered drew many who remained unaffiliated with the religious sponsorship of the institution.

In these programs, religious faith had practical meaning. It grounded their cultivation of attention and responsiveness toward the world. This orientation found its expression in the attitude of service that propelled the exploration of calling. As it was developed in the PTEV, this stance of responsiveness structured rather than determined students' educational paths. It provided orientation, directing attention toward a life narrative as becoming oneself through connecting with others and contributing to the world.

The programs were able to give the quest for meaning roots in faith traditions that affirmed such a purpose as responsive to the deep nature of reality. But the explicit faith commitments endorsed by many of the programs did not constrain the participants' quest for purpose. If anything, students described their encounter with persons motivated by religious faith as a stimulant for seeking knowledge and greater self-understanding in a variety of ways. For the most part, students associated faith with a hope for justice and inclusion in the larger world.

Because they functioned in this way, the programs' religious commitments attracted participants with a variety of views and so brought together both religious and non-religious participants in common work rather than dividing them. At their best, the PTEV campus programs promoted interfaith dialogue among students. Some also supported discussion of the meanings of secular and religious outlooks. Even though not all programs were equally successful in achieving this kind of dialogue, their activities in this regard were a noteworthy achievement in a time often marked by acrimony around such issues.

The narrative of vocational quest provided a thread of significance across the range of undergraduate experience. That range included intellectual probing and a mastery of knowledge that was often occasioned by questions and interests sparked by the experiences of service and reflection.

The programs encouraged students to deepen their quest

for purpose through testing and questioning their values within campus social life and through participating in the exploration of occupational and service contexts. It was striking to observers that when students enacted these commitments to service, they seemed to do so because they really wanted to or thought it was the right thing to do and rarely to accumulate service medallions to boost the competitive value of their resumes.

In all these ways, the explicit affirmation of the vocational conversation as a core feature of undergraduate education provided a broad platform for dialogue. It enabled students to appreciate, analyze, challenge, debate, and try out possible ways of answering the overriding question posed by the initiative: “What should I be doing with my life?” Whatever answer students gave—and they often changed their answers in the course of their explorations—the experience of the programs demonstrated the great educational value in insistently posing the question.

Renewing Liberal Learning by Reframing the College Experience

The PTEV vision of undergraduate learning was not simply engagement with a set of intellectual disciplines, although in a number of instances the initiative enhanced faculty dedication to their disciplines. Nor was it a package of techniques to increase students’ critical-thinking skills, although it clearly did enhance those. It was not simply a program of social involvements in community service, although it strengthened such efforts. And certainly it was not a “vocational” project in the sense of simply enhancing students’ occupational skills, although it demonstrably enhanced their employability and resilience in a difficult job market (as Clydesdale discovered, in following up on students a year after graduation).

Rather, it was *liberal learning* that connected and enhanced all these aims by focusing attention on a goal on which the programs’ various elements converged: the formation of a particular type of person—one who was able to learn, think, and deliberate in order to act with integrity and reflective commitment.

After a decade and more of experimentation, vocational exploration—inspired by faith and grounded in communities of learning and action—has proven a powerful resource for revitalizing undergraduate education. These effects have been sufficiently impressive to college leaders beyond the original group to have led to the formation of a consortium known as NetVUE (the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education), which is sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges and the Lilly Endowment to refine and expand the Lilly initiative at several hundred additional institutions.

An education grounded in this quest opens the question of purpose in the widest sense: how to participate in relationships, institutions, and the larger human project. It also poses, in very personal and practical terms, the question of what to pursue, what to do here and now in light of those larger values.

Searching for purpose through finding a sense of calling connects the individual’s personal interests with larger values and greater communities. This is a vision of learning as practical wisdom, the capacity to synthesize the best available knowledge with social intelligence, animated by a disposition that can both appreciate value in the world and act responsibly to enhance it. ☐

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