

An Education for Life Abundant

SHIRLEY J. ROELS

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*
—MARY OLIVER, “THE SUMMER DAY”

MARY OLIVER’S POEM, quoted above, asks a basic question about human identity, purpose, and direction that is at the foundation of liberal education. This question was also at the core of the Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) and is now at the base of the Lilly-supported Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE).

In the late 1990s, the wild hope of the Lilly Endowment was that a set of American higher education institutions would respond to the call for an exploration of vocation, giving a portion of their precious institutional lives to explore this question with undergraduates. Through projects on multiple campuses, the intent was to learn whether and how a theology of vocation and calling could deepen undergraduate education. The goal was to strengthen an education that could sustain abundant lives for these emerging adults, an education in which intellectual and applied learning could converge with resources from moral and theological traditions. PTEV was an experiment to learn how we might reshape effective liberal learning for life, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century.

What can educators learn from these Lilly Endowment–supported efforts about the future of effective undergraduate education? What should we now reclaim for a liberal education to encourage students’ big questions and worthy dreams?¹ In this special issue of *Liberal Education*, several writers explore PTEV and note the development of NetVUE as its successor. As someone invested in PTEV, first for eight years as grant director of the Lilly Vocation Project at Calvin College and now as senior advisor for NetVUE, I provide a brief history of this initiative, reflect on what was learned, and note strategies for continuing this work in American higher education. Three independent scholars then document the outcomes of PTEV in the articles that follow.

As skilled and knowledgeable higher education researchers, Bill Sullivan, Molly Sutphen, and Tim Clydesdale each asked, did PTEV improve the actual outcomes of undergraduate education? Through campus interviews, document analysis, case studies, and social science surveys, these researchers probed whether and why PTEV programs were effective. They each have gathered wisdom for us as higher education leaders. Bill reflects on the experiences of several PTEV campuses as they sought strategies to renew liberal education as vocational discernment. Molly offers case examples and describes campus factors and strategies that led to effective results. Through student stories, Tim assesses how campus initiatives deepened student maturity and resilience. As educators, we expect evidence to connect goals with outcomes. These three commentators document tangible results in order to inform the shape of undergraduate education.

SHIRLEY J. ROELS is senior advisor for the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education at the Council of Independent Colleges and professor of management at Calvin College.



Calvin College

Lilly Endowment support for vocational exploration

During the 1990s, the Lilly Endowment's board of directors became convinced that young adults needed more focused attention in order to develop meaning, purpose, direction, and practices that could shape life-defining decisions and prepare them for lifelong leadership. At that time, much of higher education was expanding its specialization by task or field of study. Some of these dynamics thwarted the time and energy required to work with students as whole people. Frequently, specialization led to fragmentation; undergraduate students' critical need for deep perspectives and commitments, the educational threads for life clothing, became secondary to other interests. Educational responses to whole-student needs were thinning as institutional specialization thickened. If the goal of undergraduate education is to shape a summoned life through which students can become responsive in their changing contexts, then more focused attention to the whole of their wild and precious lives was needed.²

Lilly Endowment leaders, including then-vice president Craig Dykstra and then-program officer Chris Coble,³ recognized that the undergraduate experience, especially in liberal arts colleges and universities, was particularly well suited to education for lifelong leadership contributions. Frequently, such institutions had ready access to resources from religious and moral traditions to aid their efforts. They could encourage student flourishing as their campus leaders engaged undergraduates in the thinking of an Augustine, Aquinas, Dorothy Day, Mahatma Gandhi, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Martin Luther, Eboo Patel, or Howard Thurman.⁴ At the same time, the Lilly Endowment's leaders were also aware that religious communities needed a new generation of talented, creative, and committed leaders. So they began to envision strategies to enrich settings in which those coming of age could discover paths toward abundant, rooted lives that connect with religious communities. So church-related independent American colleges and universities became a focal point for the endowment's experiment. Lilly leaders focused their initial efforts on such higher education institutions with the hope that their campus leaders could mesh intellectual, theological, and practical strains in varied pilot projects from which all could then learn. The hope was that such colleges and universities

would be able to translate the endowment's broad vision into specific initiatives and that, through these on-the-ground experiments, in failure and success, undergraduate education could become more effective in educating the young for abundant lives.

Between 1999 and 2002, the endowment sought institutional grant proposals from a set of campuses in response to its call for initiatives to foster a theological exploration of vocation. Over three annual rounds of response to this invitation, the Lilly Endowment received more than four hundred campus proposals. From these proposals, the endowment funded eighty-eight colleges and universities to engage a theological exploration of vocation in undergraduate education. Most of these institutions received close to \$2 million dollars for an initial five-year grant period; and most of them qualified for a follow-up sustainability grant approximating \$500,000 as they then embedded their initiatives in long-term campus plans. Over time, the Lilly Endowment devoted more than \$220 million to its PTEV initiative.

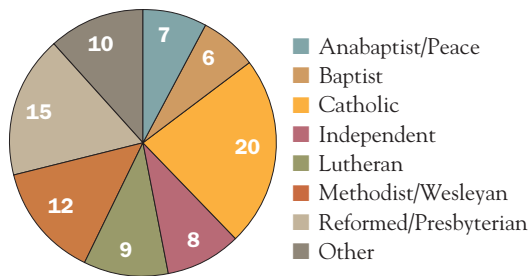
The Lilly Endowment's leaders began with a question, asking colleges and universities how to educate future leaders for society who would have a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction. This initiative was framed as an "honest inquiry, a true exploration . . . more an important question to ask than it is an answer we have some way of providing."⁵ Varied Christian traditions of vocation and calling were acknowledged and encouraged. Vocation was understood as a response to the One who calls each person from the depth of being to a moral and purposeful life; and vocation was differentiated from career, which is solely focused on paid employment. The call for proposals explained that campus explorations should encompass students in many fields of study, but also described the endowment's concern for the future leadership of American religious communities. Yet the endowment did not define vocational terminology tightly, constrain the scope of these initiatives, or dictate a preferred program. Instead Lilly Endowment leaders consistently communicated that each college or university should develop a vocational exploration strategy that fit its particular identity, mission, and context. The resulting initiatives were diverse, and the campus circles of engagement were expansive. Initiatives encompassed students and campus leaders from multiple perspectives, including participants

While honoring its faith-related roots, the vocational framework became flexible and fluid

from Buddhist, Jewish, humanist, and other traditions. The quest for identity, purpose, and direction, and those who supported its exploration among undergraduates, was not confined by Christian history about a theology of vocation. Instead, while honoring its faith-related roots, the vocational framework became flexible and fluid to honor a variety of voices joined in common cosmic pilgrimage.

The selected colleges and universities represented a variety of Catholic traditions, those typically identified as evangelical or mainline Protestant, and a few institutions, such as Butler University, that did not claim structured ties to a particular religious circle. The PTEV network also included some historically black colleges, such as Spelman, as well as Hellenic College, which is associated with the Orthodox Christian tradition. In all their particularity but also together, these eighty-eight institutions constituted the PTEV network. (Figure 1 depicts PTEV institutions by religious affiliation.)

Figure 1.
PTEV Institutions By Religious Affiliation



NOTE: "Other" includes Adventist, Assemblies of God, Church of God, Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Nazarene, Nondenominational, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, and United Church of Christ.

The Lilly Endowment supported the PTEV network not only with substantial grant funds, but also with multiple avenues for development. Campuses used grant funds to improve first-year experience programs, reframe capstone courses, enhance service learning, expand internship options, host summer theology institutes, strengthen campus ministries, reformulate advising systems, and open centers for faith and learning. Many institutions enriched students' explorations of future congregational leadership and

their knowledge about theological education. Student retreats about purpose and values abounded. Many of us recall more than one campground floor on which we slept; and we still reflect on the nuggets of vocational gold shared during dinners with famous scholars and over coffee with not-so-famous campus custodians. In PTEV national conferences, administrators, chaplains, faculty, and professional staff learned how to advance a vocational framework and culture on their campuses through sessions led by senior scholars, educational experts, theologians, and each other; and PTEV coordinators gathered recommended books, course syllabi, and film suggestions to share across the network. These opportunities heightened campus leaders' knowledge of what a vocational exploration could become and advanced their capacity to implement it.

To build vocational vocabulary and understanding, the Lilly Endowment's leaders also supported the publication of books and articles that explored theologies of vocation. A good share of the PTEV campuses utilized and still benefit from William Placher's edited anthology *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* in which he gathers many vocational voices. In his own voice, Placher writes that "central to the many Christian interpretations of vocation is the idea that there is something—my vocation or calling—God has called me to do with my life, and my life has meaning and purpose at least in part because I am fulfilling my calling."⁶ To add further nuance about such response and service to others, many campuses also engaged a robust collection of vocational narratives edited by Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass called *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*.⁷ With such helpful support, some campus leaders observed that the Lilly Endowment was generating its own cottage industry within higher education, and students on more than one campus observed that they were the "Lilly vocation babies." Having come to believe in the efficacy of blending a moral and religious sense of calling with undergraduate study, by the latter 2000s the majority of these eighty-eight campuses were on their way to sustaining a post-grant strategy for an undergraduate culture of calling.

PTEV's success in fostering the student exploration of vocation gave rise to a related

**A theological exploration
of vocation not only
anchors identity
but also provides hope,
creativity, and courage**

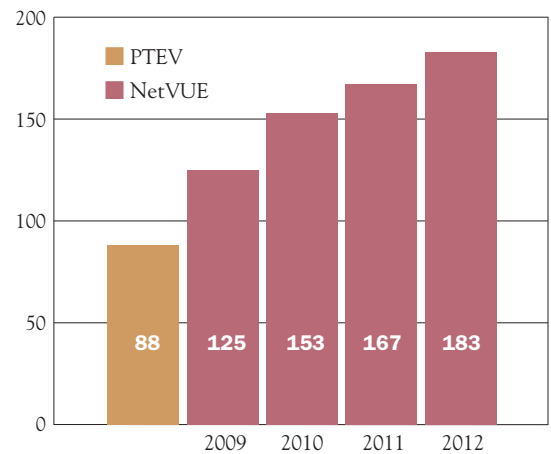
request from college and university presidents. Presidents observed that senior leadership turnover in independent higher education institutions was too rapid, and they recognized that they were missing out on part of the rich conversation that was building on their campuses. These leaders wanted a similar conversation about vocation with their presidential peers. Building on the early success of PTEV, in 2004 Lilly turned to the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) to develop a program on Presidential Vocation and Institutional Mission. The program's premise is that better alignment between the "calling" of the president and the mission of the institution would result in a longer, happier, and more successful presidency. The CIC established two year-long seminar series—one for presidents and a similar one for those aspiring to the presidency—that joined the reading of texts with periods of reflection and facilitated conversation. To date, more than sixty-five presidents and a hundred senior administrators, most with their spouses, have participated in the CIC program. A quarter of those considering the presidency have been thus far successful in their searches.

But how could all this knowledge about the reframing of undergraduate education expand and flourish beyond the PTEV grant years? As the Lilly Endowment's active support concluded, college and university presidents were pleased with the positive results of these programs and recognized the benefit of inter-institutional collaboration for sharing resources and practices. So they asked the Council of Independent Colleges to develop a nationwide campus-supported network for the exploration of vocation. In early 2008, the CIC began to craft a vision for such a network, identified its goals, and laid the groundwork for an inaugural conference in March 2009. By the fall of 2009, NetVUE was launched as a network of colleges and universities committed to fostering this cause in their campus communities. Within three months, 125 institutions had joined as dues-paying members of NetVUE. More than half of these institutions had not been a part of PTEV. With important supplemental support from the Lilly Endowment, a successor to PTEV was born. And in NetVUE, there is now an opportunity for all independent colleges and universities to participate in building institutional capacities to educate for vocation.

NetVUE's stated mission is to deepen understanding of the intellectual and theological exploration of vocation in a variety of institutional contexts and to share best practices

and resources in this regard. To date, more than 180 institutions have joined NetVUE, and the network is still growing (see fig. 2). Members now include a majority of the former PTEV institutions plus a diverse mix of more than a hundred additional colleges and universities that did not participate in PTEV. Many of these latter campuses were already doing this work on their own without the generous financial support of PTEV. Members include smaller liberal arts colleges like Hendrix and Westmont as well as larger research universities like Baylor and Seton Hall. NetVUE campuses are rural, suburban, and urban, and they extend across thirty-seven states from Massachusetts to Hawaii. Some member colleges and universities engage a variety of intellectual and theological traditions. Others have a close affiliation with a particular tradition, and some have no particular religious affiliation. But all share NetVUE's goals.

Figure 2.
Growth in the number of member institutions



For this network of colleges and universities, NetVUE provides national and regional conferences, campus visit and consulting programs, program development grants, an effort to strengthen chaplaincy, a project to develop new scholarly resources, and online resource libraries to expand what Lilly began in PTEV.

Through NetVUE, the seeds that Lilly Endowment leaders planted and watered so judiciously during the PTEV years are now growing into hardy plants.

Lessons for undergraduate education

As educational leaders, what have we learned during PTEV that we now carry forward in NetVUE? We know more about the dynamics of emerging adulthood, the educational value of campus communities, effective practices that deepen learning, and approaches that shape our graduates well for the uncertainties ahead.

Every undergraduate is an apprentice under our care in an emerging adult quest that typically continues for a decade. The designation of undergraduate students as “emerging adults” had not yet occurred when Lilly began its PTEV initiative. Only in 2004 did psychologist Jeffrey Arnett coin the phrase in *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties*.⁸ It would be another five years before sociologist Christian Smith’s *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* was published.⁹ But we now realize that we must reconfigure our educational efforts for undergraduates who take more diverse paths to full adulthood and see themselves as long-term pilgrims.

Vocational explorations are most effective when our students experience life together within educational communities that cultivate individual beliefs and contributions. Often students from fractured homes, congregations, communities, and nations are less sure of their own voices and unconvinced they can make a positive difference. Smaller pro-vocational communities within our campuses become spaces in which students find the special places they need to become known and therefore to know.¹⁰ These pro-vocational campus spaces become mentoring communities for undergraduates, places in which to nurture the whole people we need them to become.

Undergraduate education is also deepened when ideas are intertwined with experience. When the exploration of writings by moral and religious thinkers is woven into times of community service, contemplation, internship, and study abroad, graduates recall both the experience and the ideas with which it was connected. An education for vocation must be simultaneously taught and caught. We know that vocational initiatives have greater

stickiness when concepts and practices are interconnected.

Finally, in a more fluid world where it can seem that “there is no there there,”¹¹ a multilayered theological exploration of vocation sustains a “there” amidst continued uncertainty. If students struggle to find postcollege callings amid the crumbling of easier paths toward economic security, a theological exploration of vocation not only anchors identity but also provides hope, creativity, and courage in a context where less can be reliably known. For our students to discover their place of being and doing requires that we help them personalize vocational vocabulary, reflective skills, and moral choice. Then such efforts aid students in shaping wise ways to create a “there” that is less dependent on uncontrollable factors.

Differentiating institutions that educate for vocation

Through NetVUE, colleges and universities also continue to gain wisdom about competitive differentiation, strategies for institutional change, the role of executive leadership, and mission-based sustainability.

Vocational initiatives can differentiate campuses in their mission and outcomes. Not all college degrees are equal, and not all measures of educational effectiveness are the same. Recent research by the Astins and Lindholm provides substantial evidence that attending to the spiritual formation of students is linked to better academic performance, greater student satisfaction, and a deeper sense of campus fit.¹² So campuses that engage students’ spiritual and theological dimensions can differentiate their outcomes. For a good share of prospective students and their parents, such differentiation still matters if and when it is well articulated by campus leaders. Another narrative can arise to counter the intense deliberations about massive open online courses, or MOOCs. Instead of education as information, vocational exploration sustains education as formation.

The focus on education of the whole student extends us beyond more typical campus silos and advances institutional change when higher levels of technology are matched with greater human touch.¹³ The composition of campus vocational teams varies. Frequently they include professors in the humanities and social sciences, campus leaders who direct academic and career

advising, and those with responsibilities for student spiritual life. But campus vocational champions are also found among professors of chemistry, directors of human resources, and endowed chair holders. Together, faculty and staff develop civic discourse and intercultural competency while they also create a scaffold of skills that transcend academic majors. Campus vocational teams enable students' engagement of a profession's conduct, ethical standards, aspirations, and place in society so that undergraduates see their choices from multiple angles of vision.¹⁴ Cross-campus teams help students assess their educational strengths and passions while simultaneously exploring the deep mysteries of life. Such educational "wholes" arise when groups of campus champions are less focused on specialized turf and more focused on the personhood of the student. Faculty and staff teams transcend traditional structures because they emphasize the educational task of composing a life for each undergraduate. In doing so, campuses are changing from the bottom up.

Still, active support from campus presidents and other senior leaders is crucial. Without such, campus voices are less articulate about the nature of the vocation, and priorities can be muddy. When senior administrative leaders expect and enable consistent vocabularies and ideas to support campus vocational initiatives, connections to institutional mission, strategies, and resources are more likely to emerge. Developing a pro-vocational climate does not require that executive leaders press their campus communities to answer every question in exactly the same manner, either personally or institutionally. As one president noted, "I can't make anyone on this campus do anything; but I can provide signals, incentives, and opportunities."¹⁵ Yet institutional leaders create a campus vocational stew by focusing on common human questions about identity, character, choice, community, service, and hope. In such a stew, an intellectual and theological exploration of vocation may be a bit like tofu. It takes on a special flavor when cooked with many particular campus ingredients. Campuses with successful vocational initiatives have leaders who know and appreciate their special campus recipes and understand the cooking process.

**When we educate
for vocation,
our students find the
freedom that develops
in taking responsibility
for their narratives
of belief and choice**

Finally, a theological exploration of vocation is possible with modest resources. The Lilly Endowment's decade of financial support for PTEV was catalytic and laudable. Without Lilly's vision and gifts, PTEV could not have become the platform for what is now possible in NetVUE. Indeed, with the combination of substantial start-up funds from Lilly and institutional dues from a growing membership base, NetVUE is on track to become a self-sustaining network in the near future.

But campuses now find that educating for vocation is as much a matter of institutional vision, will, priority, and commitment as of funds. A campus does not need a mountain of new programs for excellent vocational exploration. Instead, based in mission and history, campuses can weave such questions into new student orientation programs, first-year seminars, sophomore advising, junior-year service learning and study abroad, or senior-year capstones and transitional counseling. Faculty and staff can deepen such programs by reading good books together and participating in collaborative workshops around campus. Modest vocation venture awards for materials, conferrals, and campus discussions leverage substantial outcomes. While some colleges and universities have now endowed a campus institute or faculty chair focused on integrating faith, vocation, service, and learning, vocational commitment does not require this. Instead, some professional development and modest funding can provide the basis for these educational emphases. In numerous educational moments, we can decide to dig beyond more instrumental objectives into foundational questions about the lives our students live. The outcomes reflect our own callings as educators.

Conclusion

The purpose of a liberal education is to free student minds and hearts for life, work, and citizenship. But in the turbulence of the twenty-first century, emerging adult freedom runs the risk of becoming "just another word for nothing left to lose."¹⁶ When we educate for vocation, our students find the freedom that develops in taking responsibility for their narratives of belief and choice.

Through such an education, we give students greater capacity to build life bridges as they walk on them, a capacity that every one of our graduates will need multiple times in a world with cultural flash floods and ecological white-water. In more turbulent times, a theological exploration of vocation helps our graduates develop the grit that keeps their hearts attuned to grace, their hands engaged in service, and their heads addressing challenges of no known equation. In many small relational pockets, we help our students craft knowledge and practices from which they can then continue their journeys and create new “theres,” for themselves and for others, in a restless global world.

The PTEV narrative is a story of ordinary educators on many campuses who caught the Lilly Endowment’s vision of learning for life abundant and willingly gave their time to this cause. Now, NetVUE is positioned to be a lasting network that advances the many lessons learned in PTEV and extends them to a broader range of higher education institutions. The Lilly Endowment invested and remains devoted to fostering abundant life for our wild and precious emerging adults. For the sake of our undergraduates and the world in which they will lead, what will we do with what we now know? □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES

1. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011). Use of the phrase “big questions, worthy dreams” refers to this volume, which is widely read by NetVUE leaders.
2. The idea of a “summoned life” builds on David Brooks’s notion of a “summoned self”; see Brooks, “The Summoned Self,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2010. Brooks compares the planned life of what an individual decides to accomplish with the summoned life, which he defines as a person’s response to his or her context.
3. Craig Dykstra retired as vice president for religion in the summer of 2012 and is now research professor of practical theology and senior fellow in leadership education at Duke Divinity School. Chris Coble is now vice president for religion at the Lilly Endowment.
4. This list is for illustrative purposes, including the authors of readings that have been noted as vocational resources on PTEV and NetVUE campuses.
5. Craig Dykstra, “The Theological Exploration of Vocation” (address, plenary conference of the PTEV

- Coordination Program, Indianapolis, IN, 2003), <http://www.ptev.org/hints.aspx?iid=22>.
6. William Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 2.
 7. Dorothy Bass and Mark Schwehn, *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006).
 8. Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 9. Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
 10. This is a reference to Parker Palmer’s book by similar title, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983).
 11. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937), 289. The full quote reads, “what was the use of my having come from Oakland it was not natural to have come from there yes write about it if I like or anything if I like but not there, there is no there there.”
 12. Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).
 13. John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). The need for a balance of more intensive technology with higher human relationships is articulated by Naisbitt and reaffirmed by Turkle.
 14. Carol Geary Schneider, “Liberal Education and the Professions,” *Liberal Education* 90, no. 2 (2004), 2.
 15. This is a paraphrase of a 2011 statement by a college president during a NetVUE national conference.
 16. Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster, “Me and Bobby McGee” (1969). This song was memorably recorded by Janis Joplin and released in 1971 after her death. The full quote is, “Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. Nothing, don’t mean nothing honey if it ain’t free.”

Copyright of Liberal Education is the property of Association of American Colleges & Universities and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.