

Creating a Common Language of Vocation
at Ohio Northern University

**Presented by the NetVUE Grant Vocational Study Team
to the University Community**

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Abstract

A white paper sharing the results of conversations held among faculty and staff of Ohio Northern University during the spring of 2015 around the topic of “A Common Language of Vocation.” The discussions were underwritten by a grant from the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE). This paper begins by asking the question, “What is vocation?” and answering the question via a variety of sources. Vocation is presented as being both foundational and functional to a university education, and examples of how the conversation around vocation is already being treated at ONU are included. The conclusion asks the question, “Why vocation?” and invites the campus community to further discussion as the NetVUE grant continues its course over the next two years.

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Introduction: What is Vocation?

The term “vocation” has taken on two primary meanings within contemporary society. On the one hand, many think of vocation in terms of practical work, as in the sense of “vocational training,” wherein one studies a trade or marketable skill in preparation for employment. “Vocational school” is often seen as an alternative to college, and as good preparation for skilled trades such as plumbing, electrical work, construction, and home health aides. On the other hand, many who hear the word “vocation” automatically assign it a theological meaning. Within some circles, such as the Roman Catholic Church, vocation can have a very specific meaning—that of a call to the religious life, such as serving as a priest, monk, or nun. Within Protestant Christianity, vocation is often seen as having a broader application, in the sense that all people are called by God to specific work in life, regardless of whether or not that work takes place within the Church. In this sense, one’s vocation is holy work, carried out within secular contexts. The concept of vocation as a theological concept has been largely forgotten in 21st century America, as most people associate the term with the former meaning, that of training for skilled work.

“Vocation” comes to the English language via the Latin *vocare*, meaning “call.” For most Jews, Christians, and Muslims, this call comes primarily from God. For instance, Exodus chapter three tells the story of the call of Moses. God spoke to Moses from within a burning bush, and sent him to bring a message of freedom from slavery to the Hebrews who were enslaved in Egypt. 1 Samuel 3:1-10 recounts the call of the young boy Samuel, who heard the voice of God calling him. The New Testament is filled with examples of persons being called by Jesus.

The meaning of vocation in the context of a modern university education lies somewhere between the two most common interpretations of the term. It is reasonable to conclude that higher education trains one in the necessary skills for a particular profession, but it is equally reasonable to conclude that one of the purposes of the university is to help students discover their “calling,” whether that calling is from the Divine, from within the individual’s own convictions, or from the needs of society. Theologian Frederick Buechner may have put it best when he wrote that vocation is the place “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹ Though speaking from a Christian perspective, Buechner encapsulates the educational mission of most institutions of higher learning, including the mission of Ohio Northern University, which reads, in part,

“...to provide a high quality learning environment that prepares students for success in their careers, service to their communities, the nation, and the world, and a lifetime of personal growth inspired by the higher values of truth, beauty, and goodness.”²

¹ Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 95

² Ohio Northern University, “Mission, Vision, and Core Values,”

http://www.onu.edu/about_onu/mission_and_purpose Accessed 2/9/2015 at 4:51 p.m.

The task of the university, then, is to develop the whole person. It is not merely the intellect that is affected by one's time of study at this institution, but one's spirit, as well as a sense of civic responsibility, citizenship, and duty to the common good.

This paper is being set before the university community as a tool to facilitate discussion about the topic of vocation. It is the result of conversations and study sessions held by the Vocational Study Team (VST) in the spring of 2015. The team set out with a goal of sparking theological, spiritual, and intellectual thinking, toward the creation of a common language of vocation on the campus. With this goal in mind, the team hosted a series of gatherings, and invited faculty and staff from across the university community to give their input and initial reactions to some introductory materials which the team had produced. These conversations were recorded, or notes were taken, so that the team could assess what common themes emerged. This paper will include the most commonly mentioned of those themes.

The VST members hope this white paper is widely read, by faculty, staff, students, and administrators, across the campus, and facilitates a common vocational language on campus. This language may have many dialects. That is to say, we may ultimately come to a common understanding of the basics of what we mean when we speak of vocation at ONU, but various groups may also interpret and define that language slightly differently within the classroom and curriculum. This fall, we will host a series of workshops and panel discussions, ending with the invitation for the campus community to attend a lecture by a well-known expert on the topic of vocation. As the conversation about vocation deepens and becomes more prevalent on campus, we intend to invite faculty and staff to propose pilot projects, which may be funded by mini-grants provided by the NetVUE grant received by the university. These mini-grants will focus on faculty development, curriculum/course development, or student services, and must be cross-disciplinary in nature in order to qualify. Once the pilot projects have been completed, we hope the conversation about and language of vocation will continue into the foreseeable future, as ONU continues to align itself more closely with its mission and vision.

Vocation: Foundations and Functions

At Ohio Northern University, we pride ourselves in the principles upon which we were founded, as expressed in our seven core values: Collaboration, Community, Diversity, Excellence, Faith, Integrity, and Service. Each of these values can add to the conversation about vocation, but as was noted in the introduction above, the value of Faith is one that has most influenced this particular conversation throughout the history of the institution. Beginning with the founding of the university in 1871, Ohio Northern has helped students nurture and explore the deep questions of life, of which vocation is one. In 1899, when the university affiliated itself with the Methodist Church (one of the predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church), the commitment to the faith and moral development of students was deepened by the addition of a Methodist/Wesleyan understanding of calling. In Wesleyan terms, a call or a vocation is a person's response to God's grace, which is available to all people. This grace can be accepted or denied because humans have free will, but it exists nevertheless. Once one has

accepted the work of grace in one's life, and been "justified" (another common term among Methodists and Wesleyans), then it is incumbent upon one to respond in some way. This response is not what Methodists believe saves or justifies a person, but a way of acknowledging God's grace in his/her life. The university's commitment to the ideals of openness to all, social justice, and strength through diversity are all evidence of our Methodist "DNA".

Building upon the foundation of our United Methodist Christian heritage, the university continues to encourage students to explore the deep questions of life regarding purpose, usefulness, and personal mission. In many of our programs and majors, and in each of our five colleges, the Vocational Study Team was able to find examples of vocational discernment currently happening on campus. For instance, in the Raabe College of Pharmacy, students are encouraged during their first year on campus to write a paper describing why they want to be a pharmacist, and this assignment often affords the professors an opportunity to talk about their own journey to pharmacy as a profession, and how they see the role of pharmacists in the quest for the greater good. Last year, in the Petit College of Law, speaker Cynthia Calendar emphasized the need to see the work of attorneys as a call to serve others, a theme that is also threaded through coursework, internships, and mentoring relationships with practicing attorneys, judges, and public figures. The work currently being done in the T.J. Smull College of Engineering around entrepreneurship shows a commitment on the part of the faculty to helping students see their futures may lie in areas currently unheard of, and to expand their vision of what an engineer does in the world. TREX courses and Extra-Disciplinary Seminars, many of which are taught within the Getty College of Arts and Sciences, stress the importance of having a liberal arts mindset, and "learning how to think," which are critical to helping students develop a sense of vocation. Personal mentoring going well beyond advising can be found in the Dicke College of Business Administration where faculty provide students with wise guides who have experience in the business world, and can provide advice and counsel on a variety of subjects above and beyond what courses one should take in order to graduate on time.

The above examples are just a few of the ways Ohio Northern University is nurturing, and has nurtured, a sense of calling or vocation in the lives of its students throughout the history of the institution. The VST heard many more examples not included above, and there may be other examples that will come to light as this conversation continues. This paper will hopefully provide a "launch pad" from which further discussion about the practice of vocational discernment will arise. The process for how conversations will move forward from here is provided on the last page of this white paper.

Conclusion: Why Vocation?

Why have a conversation about vocation and vocational discernment now? What benefit could this conversation have for our student body? The answer to that question is twofold. First, this conversation is important now because students now more than ever feel the external pressures of family, community, and the marketplace to get a good paying job to justify the expense of their higher education. In the midst of such an environment, students may feel pushed into a field of study that does not capture their interest or imagination. This can lead to future career burnout and fatigue. Such an outcome is desirable neither for the individual nor

society as a whole. Vocational discernment will help students to realize they can follow their passions and interests while still building up the skills and certifications necessary to be successful in the future. Second, the vocational discernment lessons we teach as an institution today may not take immediate hold on a student's life, but will persist with the student and provide him or her with the ability to make wise and well thought-out decisions later in life, when they go through key transitions such as marriage, parenthood, mid-life, and retirement. Again, such skills are useful for both the individual and society at large, as they provide well-rounded, centered, and grounded people in the workforce who are able to make life transitions gracefully.

It is the desire of the VST that members of the ONU community will find something within this document to spark their interest, and will in turn spark conversation among faculty, staff, and administration. This conversation may in fact include a conversation about our own vocations as individuals. In so doing, we will enrich our communal understanding of this important topic, and will begin to deepen our own sense of vocation as an institution. The net result of all of this will be the building of a community where students are encouraged to reach their greatest potential, and emerge from an education here with an understanding of their place in the world, and how they might make a difference within it.

Timeline of Vocational Conversation on Campus:

Fall 2015

- White paper on vocation published.
- Informal conversations about the white paper.
- Speaker to present on the topic of vocational discernment
- Proposals sought for mini-grants
(Mini-grants will be awarded to teams that seek inter-disciplinary approaches to the vocational conversation, focusing on faculty/staff, curriculum, and course development.)

Spring 2016

- Mini-grant proposals to be accepted and examined by the VST.
- Mini-grant awards announced
- Mini-grant teams to meet with VST to formulate plans for Fall 2016

Fall 2016

- Mini-grant pilot projects to be undertaken
- VST to meet with mini-grant teams mid-semester

Spring 2017

- Assessment phase: mini-grant teams will meet with VST to assess effectiveness of pilot projects and suggest changes for the future.
- VST to produce a document highlighting the findings of the assessment phase, focusing on the “common language of vocation” at ONU.

Further Suggested Readings on Vocation:

- Clydesdale, Tim, *The Purposeful Graduate: Why colleges must talk to students about vocation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Daloz-Parks, Sharon, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring emerging adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Dik, Bryan J, and Ryan D. Duffy, *Make Your Job a Calling: How the psychology of vocation can change your life at work*, West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2012.
- Hahnenberg, Edward P., *Awakening Vocation: a theology of Christian Call*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010.
- Lindholm, Jennifer, *The Quest for Meaning and Wholeness: Spiritual and religious connections in the lives of college faculty*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014.
- Nash, Robert J., and Michele C. Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The campus guide to meaning-making*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Placher, William C. (editor), *Callings: Twenty centuries of Christian wisdom on vocation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005.
- Schuurman, Douglas J., *Vocation: Discerning our callings in life*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.
- Schuster, John P., *Answering Your Call: A guide to living your deepest purpose*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003.
- Schwehn, Mark R., and Dorothy C. Bass (editors), *Leading Lives That Matter: What we should do and who we should be*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.