



Under Review

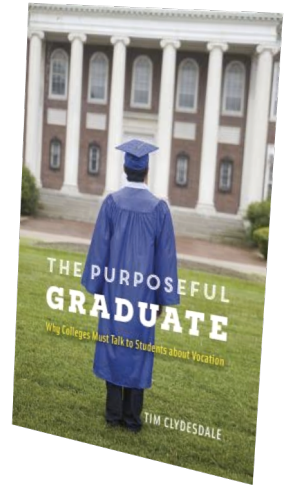
Critical Readings of Texts that Matter for Collegiate Ministry

The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation

Tim Clydesdale

The University of Chicago Press, 2015

Many college faculty and administrators have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the outside pressures that threaten to limit the college experience to job training. In the new book by Tim Clydesdale they get to peek into an alternative approach to the liberal arts. They also get the data that they need to show that a broadly liberal education makes economic sense as well. Clydesdale is a sociologist and evangelical Christian who received a grant to study the outcomes of the Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV), an eight-year, 88 campus, \$225 million initiative of Lilly Endowment, Inc. (LEI). This book is the report of that extensive study.



Clydesdale argues that higher education has drifted from the lofty aim of forming students for civic engagement and for the good of the world to answer student and parent demand for employability. The course correction needed has already been tried and shown to be trustworthy according to Clydesdale. Intentional and sustained engagement with questions of purpose and meaning will redirect higher education toward its core mission while also improving student morale, increasing persistence, and reenergizing educators.

Clydesdale states three goals for his book. *The Purposeful Graduate* is a report on the effectiveness of the PTEV programs. It is also a sociological analysis of those programs to identify core attributes. Maybe most importantly, Clydesdale wants to convince administrators at colleges and universities to develop “purpose exploration” programs. Though Clydesdale denies that he intends to do so, the book serves as something of a guidebook for those developing the programs, by describing institutional sociologies, best practices, and identifying institutional fit. It includes a 17-page appendix of resources for purpose exploration that are being used across the country in these programs. For those developing programs, the appendix alone is worth the price of the book. Regardless of Clydesdale’s claims to the contrary, those hoping to use it as a guide in program development will find rich resources to do so.

Via real world examples of students and programs across the country, he tells a vivid story of students who shifted from instrumentalist notions of education and work, to a deep commitment and call to making a better world. These were not idealists who quickly faltered when life challenged their idealism. Clydesdale claims that graduates of these programs were much more resilient when failed job searches, broken family situations, and crisis struck their lives.

These programs were remarkably simple, but were costly. It required individual faculty mentoring, exploration themed residence halls and retreats, mini-grant programs for student experiences and faculty initiatives, meaningful service opportunities where students took primary leadership, and nimble institutions to make these opportunities possible. For administrators willing to take the risks, Clydesdale has data to show that the reward is great.

Unlike most books from sociologists, Clydesdale is not afraid to set an agenda. In a recent faculty book study group, Clydesdale's presuppositions regarding the state of liberal arts education drew the ire of more than one of my colleagues.

Clydesdale suggests that its not only institutions that are overly concerned with employability of graduates and their own economic interests—concerns that distract them from their core missions. Similarly, he often suggests that faculty and staff are distracted by publication, tenure, and other career aspirations to be sufficiently oriented toward student development. He also assumes from the outset that a student that is living a sufficiently religious life that is marked by altruism and self-sacrifice is living a better life. My colleagues argued that Clydesdale cannot see the value in a young adult who gets a good corporate job and purchases a home in the suburbs. Though I share Clydesdale's presuppositions, those who do not may be frustrated by his constant search for the altruistic and idealistic student.

LEI launched a Campus Ministries Theological Exploration of Vocation initiative in 2012. This took the earlier PTEV programs into a new sector of church- and parachurch-based programming. For those 104 campus ministries as well as those that might desire to seek a grant should additional funding be made available, the book is the most comprehensive resource available. Similarly, LEI's follow-up initiative, the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), continues to provide resources for private colleges and universities to develop programs.

But the book is not limited in usefulness to those developing full-scale programs for vocation exploration. Some of the key best practice programmatic tools include retreats, internships, themed residence halls, service learning, and formal mentoring relationships and all of these are regular practices of collegiate ministries. They can easily be adapted for greater attention to questions of vocation. This is particularly helpful for the spiritual development of young adults because a student that develops a theological notion of calling to their future profession develops a symbiotic relationship between their commitment to their faith and their future career. Each successive religious commitment results in greater commitment to academic success. Their rapidly developing sense of professional identity similarly increases their sense that they are or will be doing meaningful work for the Kingdom of God.

Readers hoping for a detailed guide for developing vocation exploration programs will be disappointed. Clydesdale insists this wasn't an aim, and to date I know of no such book. Readers coming to this book as a substitute may not get the level of detail and

description for which they hope. The professionals in NetVUE can be helpful resources in this regard.

There is another challenge to this book's usefulness: many of the institutional programs described would be impossible without the infusion of money that LEI provided. Institutional pressures, described by Clydesdale, are too high. Many of these programs would be quite expensive to initiate. Other campus ministers would not have the administrative power, either because they minister at public universities or at universities not friendly to the program concept, to institute some of the suggested initiatives. Gleaning wisdom from the findings to apply to ministry innovations will be necessary. But Clydesdale has given the research that provides a path forward and outcomes data by which campus leaders can make the case that exploration programs are worthwhile.

Reviewer Biography

Jeremiah Gibbs has served as University Chaplain and Director of the Lantz Center for Christian Formation (a PTEV-funded initiative) at the University of Indianapolis since 2009. He earned a Ph.D. in Theology from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and has published widely on Pentecostalism, liturgy, prayer, and apologetics. His first book, *Apologetics After Lindbeck* (Pickwick, 2015), proposes a new model of thinking about Christian apologetics in a postmodern framework.

Disclaimer

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