

Vocation HIR Fellows White Paper

**The Vocation Learning Outcomes at the University of Dayton**

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## I. Introduction

In the Fall of 2015, the HIR Fellows for Vocation entered an exploration of the Vocation Learning Outcome outlined in the *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection* (2006), the document undergirding the development of the Common Academic Program. The Fellows took the following steps in developing our collective understanding of vocation, the learning outcome, the University's current approaches to addressing vocation via curricular and co-curricular offerings, and opportunities ahead. We studied David S. Cunningham's (2015) *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, discussed our collective understanding of vocation; studied *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*; reviewed curricular offerings approved through the CAP process that included vocation as a learning outcome; reviewed co-curricular offerings related to vocation; conducted focus group interviews with students, faculty and staff who are already interested and engaged in vocation-related activities on campus; and conducted focus group interviews with undergraduate students to better understand their experiences at the University of Dayton related to vocation and vocational discernment.

In this white paper, we share the results of our research and discussions and identify some of the challenges and opportunities facing our campus in meeting the University's Vocation Learning Outcome, as articulated in *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*.

**Vocation:** Using appropriate scholarly and communal resources, all undergraduates will develop and demonstrate ability to articulate reflectively the purposes of their life and proposed work through the language of vocation. In collaboration with the university community, students' developing vocational plans will exhibit appreciation of the fullness of human life, including its intellectual, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional, and bodily dimensions, and will examine both the interdependence of self and community and the responsibility to live in service of others. (*Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*, 2006, p.8j)

While the Vocation Learning Outcome has been approved and adopted as written, we found the articulation of the specific experience of finding one's vocation at a Catholic and Marianist university, as articulated in the *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*, quite instructive:

Education in the Catholic and Marianist traditions strives to support academically students' efforts to find and explore the deep purposes that lend meaning, wonder, and fulfillment to their lives. These purposes consist not merely in what students may find themselves especially fit for pursuing but in what each student is specially called to do. The university's commitment to support students' discernment of their vocations in academically appropriate ways follows from the fundamental objective to educate whole persons, in mind, spirit, and body, for whole lives. (*Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*, p. 6)

The learning outcome requires that students be able "to articulate reflectively the purpose of their life and proposed work through the language of vocation" (*HIR*, p. 8). However, as a community our understanding of vocation and the role vocational discernment plays in the experience of

undergraduate students at the University of Dayton is limited by our lack of a shared language with which to talk about these issues. Therefore, we begin with a statement of our collective understanding of vocation at the University of Dayton.

## II. The Language of Vocation

Vocation is central to the University of Dayton's vision and mission.

In its efforts to educate the "whole person," the University must attend to its students' intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth; help students define and live a life of purpose, meaning, and personal fulfillment; and develop in students habits of reflection, community engagement, and service. In other words, the University's goal is to graduate students who are actively engaged in discerning and realizing their vocation.

Vocation may be defined as follows:

*Answering a call to discover one's unique gifts and employ them in service for the common good in ways that are personally satisfying and bring meaning to one's life.*

A call is an insight to take a particular action or adopt a particular path in life. The call's source may be *external* - a summons from God discovered in faith and community - or *internal* - a sense of purpose or direction that arises organically from within - or some combination of the two. A person may come to realize his or her vocation instantaneously or slowly over time. In fact, vocations change, and at any point in a person's life, he or she is likely pursuing multiple callings.

Vocation also assumes that every individual has unique gifts to share with others, a combination of skills, talents, knowledge, interests, and experience no one else possesses. In college, students may be preparing themselves for a vocation they will pursue later in life (entering the pre-med program, for example) while at the same time discovering talents and interests they didn't know they had (skill as a painter or public speaker, for example). Ultimately, vocation involves naming desires and cultivating skills to serve others: a person perceives a need—big or small, near or far—and takes action to address it by employing his or her unique gifts.

Finally, acting on one's vocation brings joy and a sense of personal fulfillment. By pursuing their vocations, people define their life's purpose. Vocation is formed and pursued in community, recognizing and acting on one's responsibility to assist and form mutually supportive bonds with others in pursuit of the common good.

Through the university's curricular and co-curricular offerings, students should be afforded multiple opportunities to *discern and act on their* vocations by engaging in a wide range of activities that can include:

- discussing their vocation and calling openly
- identifying their unique, defining gifts, talents, skills, interests, and experiences
- articulating who they are and how they can serve others in community

- examining activities that bring meaning and joy to their life
- questioning their life's meaning and purpose
- deepening their relationship with God through a journey of self-discovery and response
- learning and practicing the skills of effective discernment in the context of community
- reflecting on their responsibilities toward others
- exploring the vocational implications of their education and professional training
- preparing themselves for a lifetime of vocational exploration

### III. Meeting the Learning Outcome

Through our study, focus groups, and review of current course offerings at the University of Dayton, we found that **many** students are experiencing opportunities for a robust exploration of vocation. These students are engaged in coursework, co-curricular programs, mentoring relationships with faculty and staff, and unique living environments focused on vocation. For them, the University is an environment filled with supported discernment. However, we also found that **most** students have had little or no experience with these opportunities, course offerings, or relationships. In focus groups, we shared a list of vocation terms and phrases with more than seventy undergraduate students to determine which resonated with them and/or reflected their University of Dayton experience. Collectively, they expressed a desire to discuss and examine vocation in college, yet, as one student put it, this notion of such a deep exploration is “terrifying.” Students both yearn for the opportunity to ask and explore vocation-related questions and recognize that doing so is difficult. Similarly, faculty and staff are interested in providing an environment that promotes the types of vocation-based reflection and discussion the students want but do not know how to achieve that goal.

We understand that our campus is well positioned to attend to this learning outcome for all students because of the numerous programs and widespread interest in the learning outcome. However, we identified the following **challenges in meeting the student learning outcome:**

*Careerism:* In our review of CAP approved courses, we found that while some courses appear to be attending to the Vocation Learning Outcome, in many other classes the content and requirements resemble career development, not vocational exploration. While career development may be part of vocational exploration, as a concept vocation is broader and deeper than careerism. Students, faculty and staff may become focused on the technical preparation for career prior to or in place of more challenging discussions of vocation.

*Balancing career preparation and vocational exploration:* As a campus community we are called upon and challenged to help students - perhaps by giving them “permission” - to move beyond careerism and to think broadly and deeply about vocation. Students enter the University of Dayton concerned about career and future employment. Families, faculty and society reinforce this notion, and rightfully so. Students will need support to balance demands for future employment questions with the opportunity to explore vocation throughout the college experience.

*Diverse experiences at the University of Dayton:* Not all students articulated an ability or opportunity to explore vocation because they were coping with issues of safety, basic needs,

and belongingness on campus. Exploring vocation is a luxury for many students on our campus that cannot be realized when these other issues are most pressing.

*Educating faculty and staff in the language of vocation:* Creating a common language of vocation on campus, understanding that vocational discernment is a developmental process, and establishing a campus culture of vocational exploration will require educating faculty and staff across campus.

*Faculty role in vocation is unclear:* Both students and faculty expressed concerns that perhaps it is not the role of all faculty or all courses to explore vocation or provide the structure to do so. Some faculty who are experienced in teaching courses with vocation-related components talked about not carrying those approaches over to other courses or relationships with students. Faculty may not be comfortable with the language or concept of vocational exploration. For most faculty, little or nothing in their professional development has prepared them to facilitate conversations with students on this topic. Students were concerned about the role of faculty in guiding vocation-based reflection, particularly if it is a graded activity in a course.

*Assisting faculty and staff in shaping pedagogical/co-curricular frameworks from which they can facilitate student reflection about vocation.* Faculty and staff will need to be trained to support a process of vocational exploration and discernment that spans the entire undergraduate experience.

*Advising and the role of advisors:* We heard from students that having a mentor who asked good questions was important to their exploration of vocation. Advisors can take on this role, but few students named their advisor as a key person in their exploration. A mentoring model for advising would provide a sounding board and structured reflection for all students.

*Initiative overload:* Faculty, in particular, expressed concerns about how much work there is to do on many different topics on campus. Efforts to focus curriculum development and reform, along with faculty development, on vocation must have support from top administrators and be resourced appropriately.

*Integration required by the learning outcome:* The learning outcome calls for an integration of scholarly and communal resources, personal reflection, the development of vocational plans, and the recognition of one's interdependence with as well as responsibility to others. These complex components will require a fully integrated experience for each student guided by curriculum, mentorship, experiences, reflection, and thoughtful planning. At present we do not have systems to provide for this integration.

*Lack of a systematic approach:* The University does not currently have a mechanism to provide a systematic approach to supporting students in meeting the learning outcome.

The University of Dayton has the following **opportunities** or strengths upon which a systematic approach should be built:

*The learning outcome:* The learning outcome of vocation is, in and of itself, a strength and an opportunity. The learning outcome outlines a depth of inner connectedness that requires tremendous reflection throughout a student's university experience. The learning outcome is

a road map, of sorts, for members of the community to use in finding their role in supporting students on the journey.

*Packaging current opportunities!* Numerous opportunities are already in place, largely outside of the classroom, for students to explore vocation. Particular strengths exist in campus ministry, student development, and career services. All of these opportunities could be leveraged to assist the campus community in seeing the value and power of an intentional discussion of vocation for all students.

*Awareness and Interest:* Faculty, staff, and student excitement and interest in this topic is compelling, once they are aware of the topic, and could compel a rich conversation.

*Student openness:* The students, being community and engagement focused, are likely to be open to exploring the concept of vocation even if they might not know what it means. Likewise, the campus culture will likely support efforts to move beyond careerism to vocation.

*Program for Christian Leadership model:* The experience and expertise developed through the Program for Christian Leadership has provided the campus with a clear model for ways to explore vocation, deeply, for a subset of the population. This model and the lessons learned from it should play a role in the design of future vocation-related programs or initiatives.

*First Year Experience courses:* Students suggested that the University explore using the introduction to the university course (ASI150, etc.) as a starting place for the exploration of vocation and practices of vocational discernment. In our first focus group, students suggested that all of these courses adopt a “discovery” model of course design and instruction.

*The middle years:* In his book, *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*, Tim Clydesdale (2015) asserts that the “prerequisites for purposeful exploration are (1) being settled into one’s college student status, but (2) less so into one’s program of study or postcollege plans...” (p. 174). Vocational exploration, then, could be largely situated in initiatives, programs, mentoring, etc. in the sophomore and junior years.

*Capstone courses or experiences:* All students will be required to participate in a capstone course or experience beginning next year. While many, if not all, of these program requirements have been approved, there is an opportunity for the capstone to serve as a bookend, closing the exploration of the Vocation Learning Outcome which began during the students’ first year of college and/or introduction to the major. Preparation for faculty and departments would need to begin quickly to prepare courses for an expanded notion of vocation.

*Experiential learning:* The experiential learning task force and the soon to be appointed Director of Experiential Learning will provide a conduit through which much of this work, language, and attention could be directed.

*Student Development’s Aviate Model and the Path System:* There is opportunity to structure vocation-related activities into the Aviate model. The Path System encourages student participation in activities they may find attractive by providing an additional incentive via path points toward housing. Student Development’s “authorship” outcome says that students

will “engage others to identify personal values and spiritual identity” in respectful communal ways. The activities related to Authorship could be directly connected to the Vocation Learning Outcome.

*Student employment:* There is an opportunity to inform the student employment process of preparing supervisors on campus to craft an experience for students that would support vocational reflection.

*Student Success Initiative:* There could be an opportunity to intentionally support discernment of vocation through the student success network.

*Mentoring Programs:* A number of peer and other mentoring programs in the curricular and co-curricular endeavors exist where language of vocation, structured reflection, and vocational planning could take place.

## **Recommendations**

Our collective understanding of the complex nature of vocation and the required discernment process, coupled with the depth of the learning outcome, yielded the following observations:

- Fulfilling the Vocation Learning Outcome requires significant participation among campus entities, including, academic leaders, faculty, curriculum committees, Campus Ministry, Student Development, Career Services, and academic advisors.
- We need a clear, comprehensive strategy to develop a systematic approach through which opportunities can be built for **all** students to meet the learning outcome.
- We must build on the tremendous successes of the work of Campus Ministry and the Program for Christian Leadership as these entities and approaches have yielded creative, thoughtful, successful approaches that are specific to our campus.

We recommend the following:

1. **Create a Vocation Implementation Team:** We remain inspired by the good work on vocation occurring on campus. However, we submit that there is no systematic approach to ensuring that all students engage in this key learning outcome. Through a vocational planning process, outlined here, we think a system could be developed for this learning outcome. However, we suggest that a team of people gather for the next academic year to focus on: Vocational Plan Development, Sharing the Language of Vocation with the Campus Community, Faculty and Staff Development, and Curricular and Co-Curricular Integration.
2. **Develop structure and experiences that support students in vocational discernment as called for in the Vocation Learning Outcome:** A Plan for Vocational Discernment would be a **key reflection tool** and provide a method for students to communicate their growing sense of self and place in the world through a formal, tangible artifact. Because the Vocation Learning Outcome calls for a level of reflection beyond major and career, reflective components would be connected to the holistic student experience or the “fullness of human life” (HIR, p. 8) including the: “intellectual, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional, and bodily dimensions...” (HIR, p. 8).

The Vocation Learning Outcome provides a road map for students to engage in vocational discernment throughout their experience at the University of Dayton. A plan for vocational discernment would require:

- Developmentally appropriate approaches throughout the undergraduate experience
- Formal peer mentoring (vocational peer mentors)
- Vocation advisors in each major.

Reflection involves awareness of:

- Interdependence of self and community
- Responsibility to live in service to others (HIR, p. 8).

3. **Agree upon and utilize a shared language of vocation.** We have developed a clear statement on vocation. However, we will need to:
- a. Hold campus forums on the topic of vocation, beginning with the “language of vocation.”
  - b. Develop a culture where faculty and staff are willing to engage, explore and share the language of vocation.

**4. Provide faculty and staff development opportunities**

- a. Faculty and staff need opportunities to reflect on their own vocation and assistance in providing support for students as they reflect on these complex topics.
- b. Academic advising at the University of Dayton is one significant opportunity through which vocation can be discovered, planned for and reflected upon. We recommend that the University invest in providing supports for advisors in each major to be prepared to mentor undergraduate students. We recommend that, where possible, course scheduling be decoupled from mentoring.

**5. Support curricular and Co-Curricular Integration from a Developmental Perspective**

- a. First Year Experience course: Our focus groups with students convinced us that the introduction to the university course is a key place where vocation-related mentoring can and should occur outside of the major. While students understand and value the practical nature of the course, they largely reflected on the missed opportunity to think broadly about their place at the University and their growing sense of who they are as adult students.
- b. Middle years: There is no system to approach to vocation exploration and discernment in the middle years. A design could include a seminar in every major; co-curricular exploration; or a required plan approved by the vocation mentor [academic advisor], Upperclass vocation core mentors or peer mentors could play a key role.
- c. Current courses with the Vocation Learning Outcome and future courses will require additional supports.

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