

## Considerations for Vocation in First-Year Programs<sup>1</sup>

Putting vocation in the first year is appealing to many institutions, because they can reach all their students at the same time; moreover, it seems like a good chance to get early buy-in for vocation. On the other hand, NetVUE has heard from many institutions about the challenges—and even some disadvantages—involved in robust first-year programming related to vocation.

### *Reasons not to have vocation in the first year*

- Students are not very open to the work of vocation at this point because there too many other concerns and pressures that crowd it out.
- Vocation can't receive valuable, sustained attention in the first year because there is too much pressure for institutions to focus on career and retention (or at least getting students to declare a major).
- Some students are so underprepared as they enter college that this is a low priority relative to other things that need to be done. The added philosophical layer of vocational exploration could be overwhelming and unwelcoming to them in their first year.
- Trying to make something work in the first year is particularly problematic when the institution doesn't have shared language or a strong understanding of vocation (particularly relevant for institutions that are newer to NetVUE).

### *Examples of vocational questions and content that could fit in the first year*

The reasons not to have vocation in the first year does not mean it has to be completely ignored. There are some strategic approaches that seem most successful and most appropriate to the moment in which students find themselves.

- Engaging questions: What is the vocation of being a student? Of being a roommate?
- Instructors can consider skill building to prepare for vocational discernment: awareness of strengths/skills/values, how to be self-reflective, and attentiveness. These skills would also be in support of advising conversations (among other things), particularly when things aren't going well in a particular area and students need to consider other options.
- Institutions could use time in the FYE curriculum to plant the seeds of vocational thinking, particularly if there is a culture of vocation across the institution to help students begin to understand the institutional mission, or the story of the institution's calling.
- A brief introduction to vocation—one that helps students understand that it is part of a liberal arts education, and that focuses on more than just finding a major or a career—may be reassuring to some students (and a new revelation to others!).

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<sup>1</sup> This document contains emerging advice being developed by NetVUE staff and consultants (last updated 9/30/2025). We are open to continued insight and recommendations as we get feedback from others doing work with first year students. This was developed in part from the work of Tim Clydesdale in *The Purposeful Graduate*.

- At institutions with grounding philosophical or theological traditions which are drawn upon frequently, current or new courses exploring that grounding tradition can incorporate new elements highlighting the wisdom/tools from that tradition which can facilitate joyfully rich vocational exploration and discernment.
- Any academic community really committed to making a difference in the vocational journeys of first year students could be strongly encouraged to *train and coach* staff and faculty members for one-on-one conversations with first year students to open space for students to voice their developing thoughts on calling, meaning, purpose, and sources of truth as they currently understand each. Important and transformative work can be done in the first year one-on-one with staff, faculty, coaches, or academic advisors.

#### *Advice for institutions considering first year programming*

When working with institutions, it is always helpful to start with questions to better understand the appeal for that programming and to help them think about where there might be other spaces that could help them meet the same goals. For example, work with FYE is sometimes appealing because many different faculty and staff are involved in the programming, and it creates an opportunity to do vocational professional development with them. However, there are other places where this same broad professional development could happen, like in advising. Some things to consider in your conversations with institutions include:

- Advise institutions not to start their work with vocation with FYE. They should develop an institutional culture of vocation first and then ground any FYE vocation programming in that broader culture of vocation.
- Institutions should not imagine that FYE will be the motor that makes vocation happen on their campus or be the anchor point for vocational efforts. It is much better as a supporting space for broader vocational efforts.
- Simplify! Institutions that are going to do work with vocation in FYE shouldn't plan to do too many different things or have deep expectations for what can happen in the first year. It may be useful to provide some examples of activities and approaches that are tuned appropriately and have worked well in the first year.
- Conversation cards can be a good way to introduce vocational thinking about vocation without needing to provide a full theological grounding off the concept. The conversation cards offer good questions to use with first year students.
- Institutions should be realistic about priorities and other things that are needed in the first year (especially for underserved or underprepared students).

Regardless of whether an institution chooses to do engagement with vocation in FYE, the experience of most NetVUE institutions makes it clear that continued consistent programming in the years that follow increases the effectiveness of conversations about vocation.