



NetVUE Consultant Report

Prepared for Example University

Prepared by Stellar NetVUE Consultant

Job Title at Home Institution

Name of Home Institution

City, State

Month and year of consultation

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Summary Observations

Example University (EU) is utilizing a period following significant transition to undertake some healthy reflection on what an education at their institution is for, and how best to support student journey of calling and purpose during the college years. In my estimation, the setting and timing of these questions could not be better. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many small colleges have been moving away from such reflections and allowing external pressures to push core mission and purpose questions off course. EU, on the other hand, is bringing together its considerable internal wisdom and their high concentration of dedicated, capable educators (faculty and staff educators) to the challenging task of asking how they might better participate in what God is doing in the lives of their students. Even more, this community is wise enough to know that such questions are not answered quickly – or rather, when they are answered quickly, they are not always answered well. Both for discerning the calling of the institution as a whole (that is, what EU hopes to do for each graduate) and for discerning the best way to support vocational exploration in the student body (programs, partnerships, courses, etc.), EU is allowing time and space for quality answers to emerge. A University Task Force and the NetVUE Core Group are charged with these difficult vocational questions, and each group is being asked to offer a set of recommendations to the campus as a whole at the end of this academic year. It is a great privilege to add my voice to this ongoing conversation. This report will offer an overview of the consultant visit, and then identify the wealth of strengths I observed, and several challenges to be met. Then, I will offer a set of recommendations which can be summarized as follows: to gather a set of intentional conversations over the next few months between groups already concerned with mentoring students for calling and purpose, to offer additional support to a few vocation-related efforts already happening on campus, and to expand and modestly restructure the Spiritual Formation Credit requirement as a tool for vocational discernment and exploration across students' time on campus. I trust that this wise community will adapt the specifics detailed in this report to the needs of their community and their students.

Points of Strength

EU has many strengths on which to build during this process of discernment, especially in the wonderful faculty and staff working for real and lasting good in that community. Some of these strengths they recognize, while others they do not. Each is firm ground on which this institution can stand in moving forward toward a sustainable vocation program.

1. Dedicated and highly capable administration, faculty, and staff

Every single educator I met at EU was dedicated to the privilege of accompanying and mentoring undergraduates in discerning God's calling on their lives. What a gift that is to the students under their care! Coordinating campus-wide work on vocation at EU requires no large-scale adjustment of institutional ethos, and no 'on-boarding' of faculty, staff, or administrators otherwise unconcerned with student vocation. Instead, the single greatest strength I observed was the unity of the whole educational system toward student calling, and the great dedication of each member of the faculty, staff, and administration in that endeavor. This is not only a community dedicated to the well-being of the students under their care, but highly capable in creatively and adaptively finding new ways of supporting vocational discernment for EU students.

2. An intentional time of conversation and discernment

Indicative of both the dedication of this community and their high levels of practical wisdom is the way in which they have designed their discernment process. EU intentionally designed a longer window for cross-campus committees to discuss and discern two key questions: (1) the NetVUE Core Team asks what are the most effective structures and lenses through which vocational discernment and reflection can be best supported for students at EU, and (2) the University Task Force asks what the true purpose of EU is for their graduates – what is this university called to do for those who enroll? This intentional time of group discernment is vital for the transitional time in which EU finds itself. The fact that they are willing to allow such difficult questions sufficient time and conversation in allowing answers to emerge speaks to the wisdom and instincts of their faculty and staff.

3. A diversity of organic growth connected to vocational reflection

While the language of vocation might be somewhat novel in the EU context, it was clear in conversing with EU faculty and staff that the broader project of helping students discern and reflect on a life of calling, meaning, and purpose has long found active expression on campus. In the classroom and outside of it, EU students are experiencing rich support and caring mentoring as they strive to discover and live their calling. The theological and intellectual exploration of vocation seems, from my perspective, already to be taking place at EU, but without structures or language to coordinate it. What an immense strength this is, in that the primary task is to bring focus and coordination to the good work EU already does well with students.

4. Vocation-harmonious student initiatives, ready for campus support

One of the more inspired (and inspiring) programs that I encountered at EU was the COSMO groups. These, as I understand it, are groups of students who propose a group centered on cause – often connected with real community problem, a social justice issue, or a pressing spiritual need. These student groups

receive some guidance from faculty or staff, but no funds to support their initiatives. This is a wonderful strength, not yet fully tapped. This institutional pattern is ripe for support and mechanisms to help students reflect on and learn from their experience, especially in terms of the shape of God's providence in their present and future. Even as it currently exists, however, this unique program offers students a hands-on opportunity to identify a need in their world and then organize to begin to meet it. The overlap with vocational discernment is significant and has great potential for expansion and support as a part of a broader vocation initiative at EU.

5. An unparalleled coaching staff

So many of the staff and faculty members I met at EU displayed superb emotional intelligence, savvy practical wisdom, and deep commitment to student care. Yet, while EU is especially fortunate in nearly all its employees, there was one subgroup which stood out as uniquely extraordinary. I have not yet visited a college campus which had a coaching staff exhibiting *all three* of the following: (1) a deep commitment to education of the whole student, and to mentoring students as character models, forming quality persons for life, long after participation in a particular sport has ended, (2) a willingness to work cooperatively with other campus offices and campus resources to bring student athletes the help, support, and formation they need during their time at EU, (3) that have earned the genuine respect of faculty and staff colleagues across campus as trustworthy educators for students. My hope is that coaches will emerge as invaluable partners in the ways this community helps students explore and live vocation. But even if that partnership is not discerned as most effective, EU should feel very, very fortunate in the cooperative educators they have in the coaching staff.

6. The tools for home-grown guidelines for academic advising

The advising staff have already completed a fully home-grown, thorough academic advising manual, which I have read and admired. A campus community which can coordinate in this way around informed common policy for mentoring students is extremely well suited, it seems to me, to consider how they might coordinate together to better supporting students for the exploration of vocation.

Areas of Challenge

While the above named areas of strength will, I believe, help move EU toward meeting their goals and the development of rich new programming, those designing this initiative also face some challenges. None of these challenges are insurmountable, but all of them will need attention if the intellectual and theological exploration of vocation is able to continue forward.

1. A wounded community, already overloaded

The recent and necessary "prioritization" at EU left a great deal of pain and loss in its wake, and this time of discernment is unavoidably interwoven with the progression of processing this grief. Compounding that problem, making room for new programming or adding vocation-related dimensions to existing job descriptions will be quite difficult, as I imagine that the many recent changes have

involved streamlining and reduction efforts. Flexibility and room for growth will be scarce commodities as EU explores how to best support vocational exploration.

2. Poor lines of communication

Immediately striking in my conversations with EU faculty and staff is challenges in maintaining lines of communication for such a small campus. As perhaps the primary and most relevant example: the University Task Force charged with exploring the purpose of an EU education – the calling and vocation of the institution – and the NetVUE Core Team are asking similar questions along similar lines, and even share some common members. Yet the efforts of these two groups are quite disconnected and neither group seemed especially aware of how closely related their inquiries truly are.

A second, relevant, example (that may well need immediate attention) is the lack of connection between the ongoing work of mentoring students by faculty, and the mentoring work coordinated by Campus Ministry in connection with the Spiritual Formation Credits. As I understand it this potentially interconnected work does not find much coordinating conversation at EU.

3. Lack of clarity about the difference between internal mission and external marketing

In terms of the work of vocational discernment for EU students, and the vocation of the college as whole, it seemed to me that members of this community were not always clear on the difference between the internal work of clarifying the mission and calling of the institution, and the necessary work of translating those hallmark character traits for marketplace. Discerning the best tools for helping students explore vocation should not be confused with effective student recruitment/admission, and the discerning the vocation of EU should not be confused with clarity in marketing strategy.

4. Shortage of course offerings with any connection to vocation, and the difficulty of structuring a learning arc (especially for non-traditional students)

There are a number of barriers to a rich inclusion of the exploration of vocation in the EU curriculum, but perhaps the biggest one would be the difficulty of structuring a multi-semester learning arc for students around vocation. Just as with any other important student learning outcome, the least effective curricular model is the simple gate-way course – all students required to take one class connected to vocation before graduation. Even considering only traditional undergraduate students, the question of calling changes dramatically over the four years of a college education, and a one-course solution to this journey is not especially effective. Yet, it seemed, from my limited time there, that there is a shortage of course offerings in which vocation could be easily included for the formation of a coherent educational arc. Having said that, given the growing number of non-traditional students, a set 3-4 year progression in the curriculum may not be the ideal approach anyway.

5. A campus with an unusual number of ‘centers’

EU has an unusual abundance of ‘centers’ – and in more than one way. There are a great many hallmark campus entities that claim the name of ‘center’ in its function on campus. At the same time, the campus seems to be divided in as many ways as it is united, and the ‘center’ of an EU education is probably quite different for different students. To be clear, this is not necessarily a weakness in itself. In fact, the current organization of things seems to be operating just fine (or at least it is far beyond the scope

of this report to say otherwise). The problem this indicates is that, in asking what the campus is for, its vocation, or what it hopes to offer graduates, there may truly be a range of quality answers appropriate to different students. Likewise, in trying to support the exploration of student vocation, a one-size-fits-all approach truly may not suffice.

Again, none of these challenges are insurmountable, but all of them will need careful and ongoing attention if EU is to move forward with appropriate optimism toward a sustainable and transformative program for the exploration of vocation.

Recommendations

As noted under *Summary Observations*, EU has designed a wise course in coming to clear recommendations to their community for (a) a set of appropriate programs for the exploration of vocation for EU students, and (b) the discernment of the vocation of their university, as a whole. In attempting to present a fitting set of recommendations for this unique time of discernment, I will recommend clear courses of action on some issues, and methods (and questions) of discernment for others.

1. Joint meetings of NetVUE Core Team, the University Task Force, and Campus Ministry

Perhaps the most straightforward recommendation I can offer is that these three groups prioritize some joint meetings to discuss how their discernments of vocation (supporting student vocation in the NetVUE Core Group, discerning and supporting institutional vocation in the University Task Force, and exploring how those questions could overlap with coordinated mentoring through Campus Ministry) might inform one another. During my visit, I circulated a common reading that might be used to begin these discussions. I also shared a document that was the product of the slow process of discerning institutional vocation at my institution, along with an explanation of that process. My hope is that these resources can be used (or adapted for use) to function as a way of bringing these groups together around some common questions, and allowing potential answers from each inform the other.

2. Spiritual Formation Credits

Given the specific gifts and strengths I observed, and also given the great challenges of supporting vocational discernment and exploration in such a diverse student body across multiple years of a student's education, and the limited room for programmatic growth for most of the EU community, a unique set of tools is necessary. Vocational discernment must leverage the wealth of mentoring wisdom at EU, but also be centered on student need, and flexible enough to accommodate the wide range of religious engagement in the student body. Ideally, too, vocational discernment and exploration programming would engage students not just for one semester or one year, but across their entire time at EU. Far and away, the single most promising tool I observed for supporting the discernment, exploration, and living of calling for EU students was the flexible and mentoring-rich Spiritual Formation Credit requirements. The leader is already conducting focus groups and giving a great deal of critical thought to the specific learning that

can and should happen for the fulfillment of this requirement across multiple years of education. With some intentional coordination and the inclusion of a wider set of EU's faculty and staff mentors, I believe this requirement could be reorganized to bring powerful vocational reflection and exploration to all students.

EU is wise to move slowly toward a final recommendation of the combination of tools and programming elements that will constitute their vocation initiative. To get even more specific, there are a few iterations of utilizing this requirement which merit discussion in the coming months:

a. Coordinate this credit with the ongoing discernment work of the NetVUE Core Group

If the EU community observes, as I do, the possible promise of a partnership between the NetVUE Core Team's efforts and the ongoing work of revising and refining the structure of the Spiritual Formation Credit, then each party should work closely with the other in discerning a solution. If my evaluation is mistaken, and the Spiritual Formation Credit does *not* turn out to be the best tool for vocational exploration and discernment, it is nevertheless true that the projects of supporting vocational discernment and supporting student spiritual life are so very closely related that each group can benefit from the wisdom of the other. Both the Spiritual Formation Credit and a campus-wide vocation program are being discerned. I recommend that both groups do their discernment together, as I see the solution for each to overlap a great deal.

b. Build a wider council from across campus to better support all that this requirement can be – include coaches

As EU discerns how best to support the spiritual flourishing of students for a life of calling and purpose, it would be well to recognize the unseen ways faculty and staff are already engaged in this and draw council from those people in best meeting student need. To that end, in examining and restructuring the Formation Credit, I would build regular conversation groups to include athletic coaches, student life professionals, and faculty who care a great deal about student mentoring. Building a campus-wide program to aid in vocational reflection for all students will take multiple perspectives and a range of types of expertise in helping student spiritual life flourish.

c. Re-structure the Formation Credit requirement such that students must attend some chapel services, but cannot attend only chapel services to fulfill this requirement.

(1) Vocational exploration and discernment discussions, (2) spiritual mentoring relationships, and (3) public worship may be closely related to one another, and may all be important in maintaining a relationship with God, but *they are not the same as one another*, and one should not be used as a substitute for another. Currently, the Spiritual Formation Credits are built through set of elective options, which may include #s 1-3, but which does not force engagement in all three, across four years. I recommend that the requirement be re-examined and restructured such that, perhaps, across one or two years, students must engage in all of #s 1-3. The number of disengaged students that I observed during chapel was striking, and yet I am told that this is the "path of least resistance" for fulfilling the Spiritual Formation requirement. Perhaps those students could benefit from being pushed in this requirement to engage in some small group vocational exploration and discussion, or pushed to some spiritual mentoring by a coach, a student life professional, or a faculty person. In any case, I recommend restructuring the requirement as a part of the effort to increase intentionality as to what this requirement is for, and the

mosaic of activities which really might, as the name of the requirement suggests, form students spiritually.

d. Utilize the many wonderful mentors on campus and coordinate around the notion of calling – allow groups to engage in this topic in their own ways

Involving and coordinating a variety of skilled educators and mentors need not mean eliminating the differences in how leaders or students engage questions of calling. Different voices on campus will, I have no doubt, offer firm and diverse opinions as to how they believe student vocation is best supported and explored. I recommend that, insofar as it is feasible, such diversity should be encouraged. If a coach, student life staff member, or faculty member has a unique approach to engaging small groups of students on vocational exploration, a degree of organic growth in diversity along these lines is best.

e. Apply for grant funds to support the discussion of common tools and coordinating the kinds of learning and questions of discernment

Supporting program development through NetVUE Grant funds would be a strong way to initiate aggressive change connecting vocational exploration with the Spiritual Formation Credits. These funds could be used to stipend staff and faculty members in coming together to revise the requirement. They could be used to stipend additional gatherings to form a vocation-connected “curriculum” and learning outcomes across a one or two year cycle for the Spiritual Formation Credits. These funds could also be used to offer supportive stipends for those faculty and staff willing to conduct the first two years of small group mentoring and vocational work within the restructured format emerging from these conversations.

3. COSMO groups

These student-centered and cause-driven initiatives are ripe for institutional support. Other NetVUE campuses have found that offering mini grants (\$500-\$1500, perhaps) as seed-funds for student groups that wish to pursue a cause, meet a local need, or undergo a disciplined inquiry into a spiritual issue/practice is an extremely effective way of allowing students to explore vocation in a way that can be easily guided and supervised. If such groups are already finding healthy participation at EU without much institutional support, then I would hope that providing annual support to groups that can generate a quality proposal for community ministry would widen participation considerably. Additionally, if groups like this were supported with modest funds, the institution then has the justification for requesting annual reports, stories, and pictures – all of which could be valuable in vocational discernment, and the promotion of the unique shape of a Mount Vernon Education. As the NetVUE Core Team discerns the best ways of supporting vocational discernment, I highly recommend that they consider giving financial support and greater supervision to the COSMO initiatives on campus.

4. EU Athletic Coaches

Perhaps within the structure of the Spiritual Formation Credits, or perhaps just as an organic evolution of the shape of academic mentoring at EU, I hope that the NetVUE Core Team considers ways that their plans might partner (or at least support) the way vocational discernment could move forward through the wonderful coaches on the EU campus. At the very least, my hope is that coaches and the Core Team stay in conversation about their ongoing efforts to mentor students within their journeys of calling. Beyond that, however, I offer these possibilities to consider as this community discerns:

a. To include athletic coaches in discussing and redesigning the new Spiritual Formation Credit mentoring opportunities

As mentioned in Recommendation 3b, coaches should certainly be included in discussions of restructuring the Spiritual Formation Credit. The rich mentoring they already do is useful to these discussion in at least two ways: first, they can offer quality insight in mentoring students for vocation and, second, their teams and study tables might well be ready-made mentoring groups which could be “counted” for Formation Credit by athletes (and perhaps non-athletes) who attend them.

b. Ask the coaches to consider modeling vocational engagement at EU

One of the most inspiring and most unusual things I observed during my visit was the extent to which EU coaches took their own vocation of character-role-models so seriously. Coaches, it seems to me, really attend to their own actions, attitudes, and spiritual existence not only for their own journeys, but so that they might effectively model spiritual maturity to the students under their care. The effect of this care is massive in the lives of their student-athletes, and has a bearing on student spiritual life far greater than behavior modeled by any other employees at EU.

5. Ongoing reading

The NetVUE Core Team has already begun the wise step of involving themselves in the wider discourse about vocation through carefully selected reading. During the visit, I shared a handout containing a summary of selections from four different books that I thought could help move the conversation forward: David Cunningham (ed), *At This Time and In This Place*; Cunningham (ed), *Vocation Across the Academy*; Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*; Meg Jay, *The Defining Decade*. I recommend that the Core Team continue their habit of exploring relevant literature together as they discern, and to invite a wider range of participants into discussions of this material more regularly (especially academic advisors, campus pastors, coaches, and student life professionals).

6. Curriculum

I spoke to relatively few faculty members during my time at EU, but a few things were clear during my visit: (1) faculty seemed to care a great deal about student calling and going above-and-beyond to mentor students to explore vocation, (2) with changes that have come from the recent “prioritization,” the General Education requirements have narrowed, with fewer options than students had in the past, (3) the hunger for further change in the overall structure of curriculum was modest, at best. Having said that, utilizing curriculum to aid students in the exploration of vocation as proven itself a tried-and-true choice across NetVUE member schools for its effectiveness and sustainability. My advice at this point is to gather interested members of the EU faculty to see how a modest number of tools might be usefully incorporated into existing courses, but not to center vocational exploration programming in the curriculum. Whether that advice is sound or is, in fact, too cautious and conservative, can and will be discerned as interested faculty gather to discuss the issue. EU students could gain a great deal, I’m sure, from the incorporation of vocational exploration into the General Education curriculum. It seems to me that room and enthusiasm for change in that direction is not what it could be. Gathering interested members of the faculty to discuss whether, and how extensively, vocational formation resources could be incorporated into existing classes is a sound first step to discerning the relationship between student vocational exploration and EU curriculum.

Recommendations Regarding Pace-of-Change

As with so many other plans on our campuses, the pace-of-change for these recommendations will need to adapt to the needs of our academic communities as we make drastic (though temporary) changes to the way we do education to contain the spread of COVID-19. Discernment is difficult enough even in times of relative stability. EU has been wise, I believe, to move from quality questions to clear solutions slowly. My hope is that, as this community adapts to emergent needs, they continue that disciplined process. Beyond that, however, pace-of-change in implementing new structures may need to adapt to meet campus needs.

Invitation for Ongoing Dialogue

In the spirit of our common membership in NetVUE, I sincerely hope that this constructive conversation can continue in the months and years to come. It is clear to me that the hard work and good-faith efforts of program design at EU will yield great dividends for their students, staff, and faculty. I would invite and enjoy ongoing dialogue as this process gets underway and as the wisely designed course of discernment at EU continues forward.

Appendix 1 – Overview of the Visit

The consultation process began before the visit itself, with a number of email exchanges and two phone conversations between [names] in late 2019 and January, 2020. Initially, this visit was planned for November of 2019, but after careful consideration of the current pace-of-change in connected with vocation, all parties elected to postpone the consultation visit until February of 2020. During our phone conversations, we spoke in detail about an evolving set of goals to help two important EU groups move closer toward completing the tasks with which they were charged: the NetVUE Core Team and the University Task Force for Defining and Articulating Institutional Goals. While the primary focus of the visit was to help the NetVUE Core Team, our conversation revealed how deeply the work of these two groups was intertwined. The visit began on Thursday, February 6, with a breakfast meeting between [names] to do one last overview of the planned schedule of meetings, and to discuss some of the recent events at the college shaping how the notion of vocation was being examined at EU. At 10:00am, I met with the NetVUE Core Team, including [names]. We discussed some broad guiding principles in designing campus-wide initiatives in vocation, and discussed a generalized progression in the development of vocational reflection for traditional undergraduates across each of the four years of college. I recommended some reading for the group, as well, as their reflections continue, indicating and summarizing specific sections of four books: David Cunningham (ed), *At This Time and In This Place*; Cunningham (ed), *Vocation Across the Academy*; Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*; Meg Jay, *The Defining Decade*. Next, I shared an extended lunch meeting with members of both the NetVUE Core Team and the University Task Force. While the Core Team has been working towards a set of institution-wide recommendations for how best to pursue vocational reflection at EU, and while the Task Force has been working to discern the foundational goals of the institution (especially in the ways EU shapes graduates) the two questions have not yet found much overlap. Both groups are pondering calling at EU, but as a diversity of disconnected questions, rather than different facets of the same engagement with the mystery of calling. After offering a brief overview of what NetVUE is and how our network operates together, I offered two resources to help both groups work together to begin to ask questions of instructional vocation: An overview of the “Ethos Project” undertaken at my institution, and a copy of David Cunningham’s “Colleges have Callings, Too” from *Vocation Across the Academy*. Following this lunch meeting, I met with the EU President and discussed the recent “prioritization process” at the university, and potential avenues for moving along questions of institutional calling.

I then led a series of focused conversation meetings, with the purpose of discerning whether and how the project of vocational discernment and reflection might be enriched among a group of staff and/or faculty who already work together closely for the well-being of EU students. First, I met with those involved in community engagement and service learning: [names]. Next, I met with those connected with Campus Ministries at EU: [names]. Finally, I met with staff members engaged in Student Advising and Student Success efforts: [names]. The purpose of these meetings was the same: to discern the paths along which students were already walking the journey of vocational reflection at EU, and then to focus some questions on how best to enrich and support those natural avenues for vocation. I then offered a presentation to about 30 faculty members from across the university about issues to consider in incorporating vocation into the EU curriculum. Thursday ended with a congenial discussion over dinner between [names].

Friday began with a breakfast meeting between [names]. We discussed how vocation might fit into recent initiatives at EU for first-year students and their learning. After that, I had a very engaging conversation with many of the committed athletic coaches at EU about how vocational reflection already fits into their mentoring work with students, and how it could be enriched. Present at that conversation were [names]. We discussed the diversity of student populations and needs, and how EU students currently tend to manage both the pressures and the requirements they experience at the university. I attended a chapel service after this meeting, and had a closing conversation with [names] over lunch just before my departure.

Appendix 2 - Stated Goals

The stated goals in the consultation evolved prior to the visit as our conversations progressed. In their final form, goals were very straightforward. I quote, below, the goals of the visit as articulated by the NeVUE Core Team Co-coordinators:

- To assess what is currently being done in various departments, offices on campus naturally connected to vocational education (chapel/campus ministries, student life and athletics), and the Center of Student Success (including the Career Center). We are undecided about what next steps would be best and would like help in assessing current offerings and opportunities.
- To create productive collaboration between the NetVUE Core Team AND the University Task Force (working on a description of the ideal EU graduate). How might our projects align? How might the university might include vocation in the university's vision for its graduates?
- To address institutional vocation with leadership on campus, as there has been an incredible transition over the past five years.
- To help us explore possible avenues for development, particularly as we have a lot of new people on staff and we are all work in silos more than we would like.

Underscoring these goals is a wider campus process at EU. The NetVUE Core Team has been tasked with presenting a set of recommendations to the academic community in May about how student vocational discernment and reflection might best move forward at EU.