



NetVUE Consultant Report

Prepared for Example College

Prepared by NetVUE Consultant

Job Title

Home Institution

City and State

Month and year of consultation

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Summary Observations

Example College (EC), founded in 1840 and relocated to beautiful [location] not long after, is a small, private, proudly liberal arts institution in the United Methodist tradition. The faculty and staff take great pride in the personalized care afforded to each of their students, a distinguishing factor in a robust landscape of large public higher education institutions throughout the state. The campus has long supported, across the curriculum and co-curriculum, the importance of students making connections between and across various aspects of the learning experience. In the most recent curriculum design, this value of connection was deliberately held up in the concept of *paideia*, terminology that helps faculty, staff and students capture the integrative experience generations of students have known as distinctly EC. As will be detailed below, there are many existing and emerging strengths that can support a robust approach to efforts related to call or vocation. It is likely that EC will find the greatest success with these efforts not by suggesting an abrupt insertion of new programming or focus, but rather by employing certain language, perspectives, and intellectual resources that can enrich work already embraced and valued throughout campus.

Points of Strength

Commitment to student development

EC proudly owns its defining strengths as a small, liberal arts campus in which each individual student will be prompted and supported in the tasks of self-discovery and making connections. Across constituencies, when asked about foundational values of the institution, these themes surfaced. They were not noted in an automated way that might suggest these are the values the institution *claims* but may not live out. Rather they were spoken about with passion and specificity. When thinking of the importance of mentoring relationships for students in higher education, an institution of EC's scale and commitment is well-suited to foster in its students a deep understanding of vocation. More specifically, faculty, staff and administrators at EC repeatedly echoed a number of areas of commitment that, while not identical to a vocational perspective, suggest fertile ground in which to explore and root a student-focused effort around calling. Notably, there exists a shared commitment to helping each student become better, to deepen an understanding of self and of how one looks at the world, and to helping student navigate the question, *Who am I going to be?*

EC proudly speaks of the importance of *paideia*. Its website promises students will “develop the intellectual practice of identifying connections between the fundamental questions and ideas that shape our world.” Indeed, a curriculum revision carried out under the current president is both labeled Paideia and actively works to ensure students grow in their capacity to think critically and to make connections. Faculty deliberately pointed out that this perspective goes beyond marketing; as one stated, “We’ve been doing paideia far longer than we have talked about it that way.” While most people talked of the intellectual work of *paideia*, it does not seem a far leap to consider the ways in which a commitment to connection-making, concern for fundamental questions, and a deep commitment to care for each individual student can together work in support of the exploration of vocation.

Language that can be a rich element in vocational reflection

I noted some interesting language present in the institution that is worth considering in this work. The president brings to the institution the idea of *effective failure* as a helpful tool. I connected this to the Quaker idea of *way closing* and indeed sees this as a lens that may helpfully reframe those moments for students when what they thought might be called to no longer seems to be the case. Several at the university invoked the language of *think, create, connect*. While this was primarily heard in reference to the learning enterprise, there are threads here that can support a robust approach to discernment. The Mosaic initiative's language of *engage, reflect, and articulate* offers similar promise. The chaplain spoke of deepest identity as the root of one's deepest vocation, and I heard in this clear resonance with many voices at the institution that spoke to the importance of each individual student understanding themselves and becoming better.

Existing points of potential connection

There are several areas of existing and emerging institutional strength that offer promise for vocation efforts. Faculty are engaged in recent work to re-envision advising in a way that is deliberately less transactional and more educational. Indeed, they are looking to move this engagement from the collegial service element of a faculty member's three-pronged responsibilities to the realm of teaching. They have

recently engaged scholars and developed learning communities to explore the ways in which to bring best advising practices to the EC context. Across the institution there exists high regard for the recently rebranded Center for Career and Professional Development. The Center staff are clearly committed to a holistic approach to student career exploration that moves far beyond job placement. Alumni—whether local or across the nation and globe—are remarkably deeply engaged. Their desire to give back to the institution, in ways that include but go beyond financial Support, is shown in action—some 600+ having signed on as part of a mentoring community for current students. Finally, a very new initiative in Student Life, Mosaic, is poised to offer significant meaning-making opportunities across the educational experienced. Mosaic Supports the development of students as whole persons, asking them to *engage*, *reflect*, and *articulate* what they have gained in five areas: making meaning of the academic experience, developing 21st century skills, shaping identity, constructing a well-managed life, and contributing as a global citizen. This engaged approach to meaning-making holds clear promise for Support of student exploration of calling. Each of these efforts—in advising, career, alumni, and student life, is poised to Support a specifically EC articulation of students’ vocational exploration.

Models and opportunities for faculty engagement

Previous new initiatives at EC have succeeded when faculty were invited into incentivized opportunities to come together to learn new things or work on a new effort. The recently developed advising syllabus is an example of what can be achieved by bringing together faculty for focused work that produces something concrete. One can imagine a similar effort around vocation that yields a faculty/staff document with initial articulation of vocation and its connections to existing efforts. Potential specific points of connection with faculty include those who are passionate about teaching in the First Year Seminar, work being done with the well-regarded Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship, and current efforts to enrich the approach to advising. In particular, faculty advising at EC is becoming more focused on advising the whole person and asking intentional questions about why students are engaged as they are in both the curricular and co-curricular realms.

Existing efforts to Support students’ ability to reflect

A number of campus areas work to enhance student capacity for reflection, and vocational programming can build on what is already in place. Not surprisingly, the chaplain offers programs that allow students to practice individual reflection and deep shared conversation. Additionally, reflection is an expected component of academic internships, is an inherent quality of the various assessments employed by career professionals, is baked into the aims of the new Mosaic program and is being more deliberately brought into the work of academic advising. Further, the Office of Community-Engaged Learning incorporates reflective practices into its pedagogy, and students in the Paideia Seminar are expected to engage in various forms of reflection, including blogging. Finally, in some discussions around reflective practice, colleagues noted recent institutional efforts around empathic listening. This is a reminder that, if one is to become skilled at listening to call expressed in more theoretical “voices” (God, inner self, the common good), one would need to build a base of better listening skills to fellow humans with whom one is in direct contact.

Areas of Challenge

Ensuring vocation language is not only inwardly focused

Many at EC seemed to wrestle with the idea of vocation connected to a call for making a contribution to society. The majority of NetVUE campuses include in their vocabulary some sense of supporting students' self-understanding *so that* they are prepared to address the needs of their communities and the wider world. At EC there was some push back on the second piece of that view. (To be fair, the questions raised around the idea of contribution are heard elsewhere, and are points worthy of consideration.) There was reasonable concern for developing in students a sense that they individually had the view and capacity to fix the reality of others. While the institution's core values speak to preparing students to contribute to the common good and justice, many were tentative about this as an explicit aim of the educational enterprise. Some raised the important question of whether vocation is a privileged conversation. This is a significant question, and one that should inform shared exploration of conceptions of calling. That said, some 200+ NetVUE institutions, many with deep and abiding commitments to serving students from underrepresented populations, have found that rich articulations of vocation are not only the purview of the upper class or highly educated.

Connecting vocation efforts to practical considerations

Many conversations at EC included engagement of the creative tensions that can exist between the aspirational aim to find one's calling and student or parent expectations (sometimes pressure) to ensure that graduates find jobs. Faculty were well aware that what they aim for in the Paideia curriculum—teaching students how to think and make connections, and viewing this as even more essential than what they learn in a particular course—is well-supported by the faculty but not necessarily understood by students and parents. Vocation-related programming in higher education can support the vision of a broad liberal-arts education without dismissing the practical and necessary concern for employment. I spoke often about the need to disentangle conceptions of calling from a singular focus on job, but recognizes work to support student exploration of what it means to live out of a deep sense of calling can only thrive if that exploration seriously considers the student and parent concern for meaningful employment. If the notion of “don't worry about jobs...find your bliss!” worked at one time (and this seems doubtful), it is certainly out of step with the needs and mindset of Gen Z. In describing an EC approach to vocation, it will be essential to articulate a value statement that is credible to students and parents. A vibrant articulation of vocation needs buy-in from faculty and staff, ECrely, but it must also seem valuable to those who invest significantly in taking advantage of the EC environment over other excellent, perhaps less expensive public institutions.

Concerns around added work

From her own experience in a small institution, I understood the cautious recurring note around the idea of adding more work. There were references to the many hats people wear and some fatigue over the idea of adding one more thing. As one colleague noted, if it cuts into things we are already or newly committed to doing, it will not be well received. An approach to vocation that is integrated into, supports, and enhances existing work will likely fair better in this moment than something that is perceived as another new effort. Faculty noted a feeling of resistance to initiatives seen as coming from on high. As

good critical thinkers, they even articulated specific times when, in spite of a perception that this was the case, it was not the reality—e.g. they knew some faculty colleagues sat on committees and were working on new things. It will be important to bring faculty into the dialogue early on, and to connect these efforts in meaningful ways with other campus initiatives already valued by faculty.

Possible hesitation around engaging religious thought on vocation

Many at EC, including the articulate and respected Chaplain, voiced a deep commitment to pluralism, and described its clear connection to the institutional affiliation with the Methodist tradition. This deep respect for the religious or spiritual grounding of each student (to include humanist and other non-religious perspectives) is in line with the already-described commitment to Support the particular development of each student. That said, EC would be well-served by offering students the opportunity to access the rich contributions of religious traditions related to vocation. This need not be done in a way that presumes assent to any particular faith tradition. Data suggests that about one-third to one-half of EC's students are actively engaged in practicing some religious tradition, and likely more were raised in a home with some religious connection. Given the institution's religious roots, the lived experience of a substantial portion of the students, and the richness various religious and spiritual perspectives bring to the conversation around vocation, it would seem a significant omission to leave religious thought outside the ideas and values explored in EC's vocation engagement.

Recommendations

First recommendation

Faculty and staff at EC University should give deliberate attention to the language they claim as they advance their efforts in vocational reflection and discernment. Reading, discussion and thoughtful conversation around the terms vocation, calling, meaning, direction, and purpose have proven to be significant and impactful on NetVUE campuses. The work of establishing a shared understanding and vernacular is an early and ongoing priority for these efforts. Such work includes deliberately considering links among vocation, the liberal arts, and profession or job. As reiterated during the visit, focusing too exclusively on paid work would suggest a lack of vocation among the under- or unemployed, the retired, the student, and so on. Further, deep understandings of vocation suggest we are meant to live out our senses of call on and off the clock, in work as well as in family life and in our community engagement. In exploring the language and concepts that Support a robust approach to calling, EC should be mindful of an understanding of vocation as something both deeply personal and externally responsive. While some may envision “the caller” as God, and others the common good or the voice of a wise mentor, there is a risk in locating an understanding of vocation only in the individual. Such considerations—how does vocation link to work, who is calling, and so forth—are precisely the types of topics that make for rich collegial dialogue and should be pursued.

Second recommendation

The leaders of vocation efforts at EC should work to integrate this approach into existing efforts. Happily, many such points of possible connection exist, among them the new Mosaic initiative out of student life, the expanded commitment to alumni mentoring, and a shifting faculty focus on advising as teaching. It will likely be useful to frame invitations to enter into vocation efforts explicitly in terms of how such

work can address currently understood challenges for the institution or enhance existing or emerging areas of focus. Finally, a particular opportunity is the hoped-for co-curricular senior capstone as part of the Mosaic approach. It is too soon in the life of the Mosaic initiative to know if that will come to be, or what it will look like; still, it would be another point of natural connection and enhancement should it be realized.

Third recommendation

Focused attention should be given to engaging faculty in vocation efforts at EC. Even if significant programs are planned for outside the curriculum, this work can only sink deep roots if it is understood and reinforced by a strong component of the faculty. Their role in engaging the full breadth of EC students, and the important potential of their influence through teaching and advising means this group cannot be overlooked. There are many models at NetVUE institutions for successful efforts in this area—from retreat experiences in the summer months to reading groups spanning a semester or academic year to Support for faculty engagement in NetVUE’s regional and national conference offerings. Massey is happy to be a resource for more specific details around such efforts.

Fourth recommendation

While working to explicitly engage faculty, EC should also attend to creating opportunities for dialogue and enrichment for colleagues across the institution. Staff in any role, perhaps especially those who work in student life and alumni relations, engage students at multiple and critical points in their journey at the university. Efforts to bring colleagues together to consider perspectives and practices related to vocation should include these colleagues. Whether opportunities are faculty-specific and staff-specific or mixed group is an institutional question, with good arguments to be made in all directions. That said, for small institutions particularly, something is gained when at least some of the work crosses the boundaries between faculty and staff. This recommendation is Supported by a current cultural shift at EC to break down silos and collaborate across responsibilities and divisions.

Fifth recommendation

From various perspectives at EC, the needs of sophomores were raised, and in particular a focus on retaining sophomores. I understood the institutional concern was less around retaining student from first to sophomore year, and more around the retention of students within sophomore year and from sophomore to junior year. I pointed out Clydesdale’s findings (see resource notes below) related to the value of vocation programs in the sophomore and junior years particularly. Several NetVUE institutions have offered sophomore-specific programs (such as a retreat experience prior to the sophomore year or leading into spring semester of the second year, and yearlong vocational exploration groups for sophomores), and these can be helpful models to consider. The convergence between a felt need at EC around sophomores and the contributions a vocation effort can make for this group of students Suggests this area should receive further consideration.

Sixth recommendation

Finally, since EC University is finalizing a grant proposal to NetVUE, it is recommended those involved think clearly about how the grant can offer a 2-year catalyst that builds on directions already seen as meaningful and positive and moves toward vision for the future. Those developing the grant should

consider what the time and resources of the grant will afford the institution in the short-run and how it can have a significant impact in the long-run.

Clearly, some (though not necessarily all) of the topics discussed in these recommendations could be explored for the grant proposal:

- Developing EC's vocation language
- Identifying existing points of convergence with valued efforts at the institution
- Deliberately engaging faculty while also ensuring staff are afforded opportunities to explore vocation
- Seeking to broaden the impact of existing programs that most clearly Support a vocational perspective
- Enhancing student capacity for reflection
- Considering the place of sophomores in these efforts

Invitation for Ongoing Dialogue

I very much enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about EC, to see your beautiful campus, and to witness the fine work of your institution. I am deeply grateful for the warmth and hospitality extended by all I encountered. As you continue to shape vocation programming that builds on and enriches the mission of EC, know that I am happy to remain in dialogue. Whether discussing explicit vocation efforts, faculty advising practices, co-curricular learning, deep alumni engagement or best practices in career and professional development, I know there is much for us to continue to learn from one another.

Appendix 1 – Overview of the Visit

On August 29–31, [name], traveled to EC University to consult with a variety of invested campus leaders who are interested in exploring ways to connect vocational exploration to a number of curricular and co-curricular efforts already underway. [name], prepared an excellent schedule which is included at the end of this report. Numerous colleagues from key areas welcomed me and shared their time generously in the first week of the fall semester.

Schedule of meetings for NetVUE consulting visit

<i>Thursday</i>	
8:30 a.m.	Orientation to visit with [names]
9:15–10 a.m.	President
10:45–11:45 a.m.	Director of Mosaic
Noon	Lunch discussion with faculty: [names]
1:15–4:15 p.m.	Staff from the Center for Career and Professional Development: [names]
4:30–5:15 p.m.	Vice President for University Relations
<i>Friday</i>	
8:30–9:30 a.m.	Chaplain
9:45–10:45 a.m.	Director of Advising and Retention
11:00–11:45 a.m.	Dean of the Faculty/Chief Academic Officer
12:00–1:15 p.m.	Lunch discussion with [names]
1:45 p.m.	Departure

Resource Notes

At times throughout the visit topics arose where certain resources were mentioned. Those are noted here.

- With the President, there was discussion around the constructive possibility of failure for helping with self-discovery. While I agree, it is also interesting to consider the text *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (Angela Duckworth) for a narrative of moving through the bumps or tedium of any effort to a place of greater passion and commitment.
- The president also mentioned the great value of the neighboring retiree community, and the fact that EC may not currently capture the wisdom of their stories. I thought of humanlibrary.org, a program not exclusive to college campuses but often employed in that context, as a potential way to tap into that richness.

- Clydesdale’s research was mentioned in several contexts, particularly in reference to the importance of engaging students in sophomore and junior years. See especially: *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students About Vocation*.
- Several conversations included discussion of the importance of deep conversation and skills for reflection. See contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe.
- NetVUE scholarly work was also noted as a rich set of resources for vocation efforts on college campuses.
 - *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education* (David Cunningham, ed.)
 - *Vocation Across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education* (David Cunningham, ed.)
 - *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy* (David Cunningham, ed.)

Appendix 2 - Stated Goals

In requesting a campus consultant visit, campus leaders identified a number of questions and outcomes they hoped would be explored. These included:

1. How can EC create a progressive and inclusive vocational reflection and discernment process from distinct offices and programs housed in student life, university relations, and academics?
2. How does this work address particular needs of first-generation college students, students from historically underrepresented groups, and sophomores?
3. How can both alumni and students be prepared for meaningful mentoring relationships?
4. What practices and programs from other institutions might offer helpful models?
5. How can the principles of the Clarify program be infused in other areas of campus?