

Introducing the Inaugural Issue of *Studies in Vocation and Calling*

Krista E. Hughes

A sure sign that a field has been established is when nuanced claims, generative disagreements, and a real diversity of perspectives are in steady circulation—or more pointedly, when a certain disciplinary canon becomes clear precisely in its contestation by other voices joining the conversation. This is where the field of vocation studies finds itself today: replete with both classic forms of wisdom—that continue to illuminate the human condition—and new ideas, angles, and interventions that expand our range of vision and challenge our powers of imagination.

Capacious, elastic, and dynamic: these are the adjectives that David Cunningham uses to describe the concept of vocation at this contemporary stage of a conversation that theologians began centuries ago. These also describe the approach of *Studies in Vocation and Calling* (SVC). As the editors formed our vision for this journal, we sought to balance a number of factors. We wanted a journal that honors the varied forms that vocation studies take. We wanted to create a scholarly yet conversational space that parallels the broad and diverse community that makes up the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE): namely, a community of educators who serve in a wide range of roles on their college and university

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campuses, offering a wide range of gifts. This journal therefore welcomes praxis-oriented studies, scholarship from across academic disciplines, and creative works—literary, dramatic, poetic, artistic—that express themes related to vocation and calling.

Published by NetVUE, a program of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), this journal is especially attentive to the place of vocation and calling in higher education (which is reflected in the articles featured in this inaugural issue). However, the editors' and the editorial board's hope for *SVC* is that it play host to conversations about vocation and calling that spill well beyond the bounds of our specific industry, in large part because we know that the so-called ivory tower is not as insulated from broader culture as its critics like to claim. We understand—because we witness every day—that a college or university education shapes students, not only as professionals, but as citizens and what might be called “societal operatives.” It seeds and expands career, civic, and social networks. It increases the economic and professional mobility of historically marginalized groups. And it cultivates the critical thinking and communication skills that empower free, thoughtful, self-determining individuals as they go about their days—working, cultivating communities, raising families, and voting with their ballots, their dollars, and their digital attention. The current debates over the purpose, outcomes, and ultimate value of higher education—hot to the touch—are an implicit acknowledgment that higher education is a major force in contemporary society, one that significantly impacts the values, choices, and behaviors of the populace.

Although the higher education industry has its flaws (and is certainly facing cascading crises), the educators who work on college and university campuses—staff, classroom instructors, administrators, and coaches—overwhelmingly hold the mission of higher education as a sacred trust. They share an understanding and an appreciation that the formation they provide, in both its academic and co-curricular dimensions, has a significant impact on the people who have chosen the path of a college education. In the current historical moment, young people have access to both seemingly unlimited choices and a very narrow and highly curated vision of success—while in the background swirl the specters of economic uncertainty, climate catastrophe, and the unpredictable fallout of artificial intelligence. As philosopher Wendy Brown observes, “No generation has ever stared so directly into its own lack of collective future while managing such intense, complex requirements for building its personal and immediate one.”¹ This

1. Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (Harvard University Press, 2023), 104.

assessment rings true for those who work in higher education—especially those committed to advancing vocation as a key framework for student formation.

Brown's diagnosis sounds dire. But she does not stop there. She encourages those who educate and mentor young people today to pose to their students the following questions: "What world do you want to live in? / How should or could humans order our common arrangements at this juncture in world history? / What table of values ought to organize our existence? . . . What do we need to know and think about, hence to study, in order to address these and related questions in a deep and thoughtful way?"² These are not questions that only traditional-age students on college and university campuses ought to be asking, of course, for they pertain to the whole of humanity (and the more-than-human as well). This cluster of questions does, however, point to the deeply consequential inquiry and skill building to which colleges and universities play host. Put more colloquially: what happens on campus decidedly does *not* stay on campus. By design. It is meant to be carried into the world. Meanwhile, the world comes to campus as the very object of inquiry. So it is with *Studies in Vocation and Calling*—a journal that seeks to bring a critical and reflective lens, characteristic of academic study, to the concepts of vocation and calling, wherever they circulate (on campus or off) and by whatever name.

Volume 1, Issue 1

This inaugural issue of *SVC* exemplifies the vision the editors initially sketched, featuring a range of voices, perspectives, and conversational entry points. Two authors consider, from different vantages, how institutional decisions regarding mission and structure ultimately impact student formation, looking to historical models and pedagogical theories for insight. Readers have an opportunity to accompany a class of honors students as they investigate questions of natality and the role that birth plays in their sense of calling—their own births, those of their potential children, and those of all children in culture and society. This issue also contains wisdom about student mentoring gleaned from a literary classic, an argument for travel as a liberal art and vocational discipline, and a reflection on the counterproductive outcomes of clinging too tightly to vocational thoughtfulness. Similarly, the review section spans disciplines and genres, featur-

2. Brown, *Nihilistic Times*, 104–5.

ing insights about vocation from philosophy, theology, higher education theory, political science, and even the culinary arts.

The question “What, exactly, is college for?” moves at the heart of the first article. In this piece, Richard Meagher tackles the contested nature of higher education and its purposes, mining a debate from more than a century ago among those who saw college as an intellectual apprenticeship, those who identified a need for applied skills, and those—given voice by William H. Cowley—who advocated for a holistic formation that engaged not only mind but body, heart, spirit, and community. Meagher uses Cowley’s philosophy of “holoism” to advocate for a contemporary model of education for vocation that takes advantage of the unique temporality and structure of the four-year residential college in order to provide a 360-degree experience for students. How, he asks, can faculty members, staff, administrators, and coaches communicate and collaborate more effectively to provide today’s students with an intentionally cohesive experience?

Whole-life discernment is given a specific focus in the second article by Agnes Howard, who provides a pedagogical case study of her interdisciplinary honors course on natality, titled “Making Babies.” Meagher and Cowley would no doubt share Howard’s conviction that the rich interdisciplinary practices of a liberal arts college create an unparalleled venue for asking questions of whether to embark on the journey of parenthood and whether to bring a new life into the world at all, with all the responsibilities such a decision carries. Howard observes that colleges today attend overwhelmingly to questions of career discernment but rarely address the equally large questions of family formation. By weaving the concepts of natality and vocation, Howard supports students in considering, not only their own (potential) future family, but also the web of interdependent relations into which they have been born and for which they bear a measure of responsibility. Howard’s class ultimately considers how each of us enters and moves through and among other people’s callings—not simply our own.

Although the third article moves from the personal to a pan-institutional level, outlining a taxonomy of Christian higher education, it too poses the question of what college is for—in fact stretching the question to inquire how particular models shape the formation opportunities offered to students. Using the history of Church of Christ universities to set the context, John Barton proposes three main institutional models of Christian higher education. Profiling exemplars of each model, Barton identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each and suggests how each

might learn from the other two. While his focus is on institutional missional identity, Barton highlights the implications for how the student experience is understood—either as a “confessional incubator” that prepares students (in a protected environment) to represent their faith tradition out in the world or as an apprenticeship “in which students are formed in the midst of worldly diversities in real time.” Given the decline in denominational affiliations among young people today, what is now possible, he asks, and more importantly, what do students need?

The last two scholarly articles turn specifically to the student experience. John Peterson invites readers into an engagement with Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* as a means of excavating wisdom about effectively mentoring students. Peterson gleans positive lessons from negative examples and identifies subtle and underappreciated practices for mentoring students in ways that are supportive but ultimately empowering. If Meagher is calling upon educators to cross the divide between staff and faculty members for the sake of serving students, Peterson demonstrates the possibilities of bridging their respective discourses to do the same—in this case, discourses that rely on theories of student development and on the field of literary studies.

Acknowledging that travel does not automatically render a person more ethical, empathetic, or enlightened, Tal Howard nevertheless commends travel as a “liberal art” and a “vocational discipline” that students should practice post-graduation and throughout their lives. Howard names the many ways that travel offers no guarantee of personal growth and can even be ethically problematic. But, he suggests, travel that is undertaken mindfully, with attention to both history and culture, fosters deeper understanding of the self as well as others—with cultural humility and relational empathy as vocational fruits. Attentive, reflective travel can function as a discipline that fortifies the common good, not just during the journey but upon one’s arrival back home.

This issue’s “Reflections” section features two articles. In the first, Robert Pampel reflects on a significant professional transition and how it destabilized not only his sense of his own vocational trajectory, but also his understanding of the nature of vocational discernment itself. One of the main tools that vocation professionals draw upon is “thoughtfulness” or self-reflection. Through an engagement with the social psychology concepts of “maximizing” and “satisficing,” Pampel comes to appreciate that the thoughtfulness he has always relied upon can, in excess, lead to paralysis, self-doubt, and ultimately a measure of dissatisfaction—even in a good situation. Meanwhile, those who eschew overthinking and embrace

quicker, imperfect action tend to be more satisfied in their work and life. Pampel implicitly encourages readers to consider becoming a vocational “satisficer” and offers a valuable reminder that taking a longer view of one’s life—as opposed to focusing on short-term goals—may yield an ever-shifting vocational narrative that offers up some unexpectedly pleasant discoveries.

In their reflection, Kay Webb and Amanda Jo Slone share how they have sought to implement campus-wide vocation programming at their institution, the University of Pikeville. They unfold lessons learned about crafting a common campus vocabulary of vocation and cultivating a mentoring community that includes not only official academic advisors but all who engage students, from teaching faculty to student affairs professionals to coaches. They also share their findings about the improved student growth, insight, and satisfaction that resulted when they redesigned an interdisciplinary humanities capstone course to focus less on career preparation and more on holistic vocational exploration and discernment.

In her role as book and resource review editor, Erin VanLaningham has curated a stimulating collection of reviews that illuminate various dimensions of vocation and calling: the nature of vocation itself, including its shadow sides; the need for conversation and active engagement as keys to vocational discernment among college students; how to better understand ourselves and our neighbors within the current socio-political context; a call to practice hope amidst contemporary threats and uncertainties; and the sometimes fraught character of passion-driven callings, as illustrated in a popular television series. Mindful of how digital technology has expanded the pool of cultural artifacts (not to mention their ready access), the editors have designed this section to include reviews of a wide variety of resources—podcasts, television and film, audio books, and more—in addition to traditional book reviews, and we look forward to what is featured in future issues.

To close, I note a subtle theme that runs through many of the pieces in this issue: *presence*. Although *purpose* language has dominated both popular culture and college marketing materials for well over a decade, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, *presence* has emerged as a key focus of the wider culture and of vocation studies. Authors in this issue, for example, highlight careful listening and presence in the mentoring encounter, the deliberate choice of sensory presence during travel, and the wisdom that emerges during silent retreats. If you are reading these words in print, I invite you to bring a spirit of presence to your reading—allowing the texture and weight of the journal in your hands to slow your pace. Texts, after all,

are conversations, and truly good conversation involves attentive listening and spaciousness for reflection. If you are reading this on a screen, you are perhaps engaging this journal in a more fragmented way, jumping quickly to the pieces that capture your eye and possibly skimming and scrolling. I encourage you to resist the urge to do both and instead invite you, too, into a closer, slower reading engagement, that you may not miss the gems embedded in these rich offerings.

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Studies in Vocation and Calling*.

