

The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation

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What is the purpose of my life? What does it mean to live a meaningful life? Does my contribution in the world really matter? How can I attain happiness?

These questions and many more confront today's college graduates as they embark upon their post-collegiate lives. In recent decades, higher education institutions have weathered some forceful changes. The men and women who pass through their doors come face to face with a stark reality after graduation, one whose shape and character is altogether novel—and sometimes alarming. It is the privilege and responsibility of higher education to prepare these individuals to lead lives of meaning and service amidst such an environment. How can an institution best do this?

In spring 1999, Lilly Endowment Inc. sought to answer this very question. The endowment's Religion Division invited a small number of colleges and universities to further theological exploration of purpose and vocation on campus. Supported by grant funding, these institutions were to establish or strengthen programming to encourage intellectual and personal engagement of questions such as these introduced above. High-minded in its goals, the initiative's success was to be founded on active and intentional programming for students, as well as faculty and staff, on campus. The unveiling of the project was met with immediate, enthusiastic, and widespread acclaim.

What developed from this initial step was an eight-year, \$285 million grant program, encompassing 88 diverse institutions. Grounded deeply, though often implicitly, in the rich religious identities of each institution, these "Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation" encouraged the development of new perspectives among students, rooted in healthy self-reflection and appropriation of one's faith tradition. Known now as the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), these programs quickly took shape, and the endowment staff, in addition to administrators across the country, waited anxiously to see the results of the initiative.

The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation offers that analysis. Written by Dr. Timothy Clydesdale, the long-awaited study serves as the definitive litmus test of this extensive initiative, evaluating both its short- and long-term effects and successes. The author has compiled extensive research through campus visits and countless interviews with students, faculty, and staff. As a result, he presents a thorough but engaging account of the struggles and achievements of the grant-funded programs, while highlighting the importance of the broader initiative within higher education.

While spending much of the book presenting and analyzing the extensive data collected in order to effectively evaluate vocation exploration, Clydesdale introduces the reader to a unique means of reinvigorating campus culture and the graduates that it produces. In the face of widespread disillusionment with higher education and its perceived value, the book stands as witness to a fresh wind blowing through university coursework and programming. Filled with gripping personal stories and firsthand experiences, *The Purposeful Graduate* contains an underlying message of hope and promise.

True to its mission, the book evaluates and critiques the exploratory programming, giving concrete criticisms of errors made and honest appraisal of data, not always favoring a given program's success. Such forthright assessment proves valuable, especially in enabling readers to discern a sensible course forward. His candid observations serve higher education well, providing clear direction and motivation to experiment boldly and explore various options for increasing meaningful education, both within and beyond the classroom.

What is most striking is the guarded optimism expressed throughout the book. *The Purposeful Graduate* has been published in a time that sees higher education often criticized for its utilitarian approach and failure to form students for workplace success. Against this backdrop, the book calls forth educators and students to consider concrete steps to better root students in self-knowledge and service oriented toward others.

Consequently, much can be gleaned from this interesting read. The reader is given a privileged look into "what can happen when genuine learning and passionate purposes unite." The emphasis on citizenship and leadership,



Encouraging Students to Explore Vocation

encouraged and supported in dynamic communities of like-minded individuals, is notable. While always emphasizing the unique character each institution brings to vocation exploration, the book is filled with tangible examples appropriate for implementation on other campuses. Not only in theory but also in practice, this volume proposes a new approach to education, one unique to each person, discovered through thoughtful reflection and empowered by purpose-driven passion.

Throughout, Clydesdale challenges institutions to take action to enliven and support meaningful education and students' ability to explore their purpose. Though not naïve to the need for reform in the structure and content of higher

education, he reveals another way toward holistic formation of graduates, empowered to make a difference in the world.

His words resound powerfully for students and faculty, staff and administrators alike, looking to invest their life and work with greater purpose and meaning: "What this volume contributes is not another verse to this sad song... It writes instead of hearts young and old, and of every persuasion, who encounter on their campuses practices of reflection, conversation, and mutual support, who find strength in these practices, and who use them to launch (and re-launch) lives of service." ✧

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