

Exploring Institutional Vocation

A conference for Catholic schools in the PTEV initiative.

St. Norbert College

October 23 – 25, 2008

Conferences Proceedings

SESSION ONE: EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATION

Panelists invited to address these questions:

1. How have our PTEV grants stretched our institutions to understand themselves in new or different ways?
2. What consolations and desolations have come from seeing our institutions in new ways?

Panel included:

- Marian Diaz – College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
- Julie Massey – St. Norbert College
- Susan Mountin – Marquette University

Notes from Session One

- Initiative has made our schools better at being explicit about who we are, how we teach and learn and express our mission
- In this work we need to look for persons who are bridge builders (*Con un pie en cada lado*)
- To be successful we must be intentional about men and women's involvement in program
- Important to honor the fact that students are involved in real life now; vocation questions not only for future consideration
- What our program has equipped students with has helped them move through difficult experiences
- Experience on a larger campus means program is diffuse
- While university ministry may especially reach those already interested in faith exploration, vocation program has seen itself as "Ministry for the rest of the campus"
- Project touched people's religious imagination
- Vocation project jump- started a dreaming process – things we talked about for a long time but didn't have resources to do
- Wide planning process led to shared ownership
- Consolations- so many great things that have not come directly out of our program but have been jump-started by the energy our program created
- During the duration of the program, the college motto changed from a focus on success to making a difference
- Admittedly, in many parts of the college things remain business as usual. But in a lot of areas, the program helped to raise important questions.
- Concerns about what can happen to the program when there are changes in administration
- On-set of newly difficult economic times a concern – will the value of the vocation program be seen by those in positions to make tough economic decisions?
- Vocation was a question people were willing to engage who were not previously willing to engage the religious dimensions of the college

- Vocation moved from a worthy question for the individual to a question the institution must engage
- Vocation asked us to learn to be still
- Our program gave us a lived experience of community so often talked about on campus
- Work of the program helped us see the profound goodness in this place
- Work of the program showed us that our founding order has something beautiful, significant, and relevant to offer us all today
- One desolation is that we did sometimes lose ourselves in busyness
- Another desolation is that some continue to meet the focus of our work with distrust

SESSION TWO: CONNECTING TO CHARISM

Mark Erdosy from Marian College presented initial remarks responding to these questions:

- In what ways can we link the charism of our founding order and story with our current institutional vocation?
- How do we honor the truth of our founding order and story while acknowledging the importance of historical context?

Notes from Session Two

- Gifts varied, spirit same
- Nothing happened in isolation – community needed to pull it off
- Dare to venture – as founding sister did
- Invitation to apply for PTEV grant led to soul-searching (Catholic and Franciscan identity had been “turned down”)
- Stories of transformation v. “the numbers”
- As a result of our PTEV grant we have San Damiano crucifixes in each classroom, pilgrimages to Assisi, and brown bag lunches exploring what it means to be Franciscan

Small Group, Session 2

- Connecting to charism has been easier than the Catholic piece—especially for the faculty
- There is a distinction between connecting to history and connecting to charism
- Risk-taking potential commonality of the schools—founders generally responding to requests to come serve new ethnic settlements
- Don’t learn charism by talking, need to experience
- What effect does the gender of the founder have on the institution?
- History telling the story, telling the deep stories beyond dates and biography
- Need for college constituents to ask the founding community for what they need

SESSION THREE: FOSTERING INSTITUTIONAL VOCATION THROUGH PARTICULAR ROLES

Session Three took place entirely in small groups of conference participants with similar institutional roles. Participants asked to address these questions:

- How do we translate our understanding of institutional vocation through our particular roles and responsibilities?
- How do the roles we play in our institutions impact the ways in which we understand institutional vocation?
- What is our responsibility to foster and support institutional vocation in light of our particular roles?

SESSION FOUR: INSTITUTIONAL VOCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF EMERGING LAY LEADERSHIP

Panelists invited to address these questions:

1. Who needs to be in the conversation about institutional vocation?
2. How do we effectively maintain a vision of institutional vocation as lay membership increases among governing boards, faculty, administration, and presidencies?
3. How well are our founding orders articulating their stories?

Panel included:

- Sr. Isabel Ball – Our Lady of the Lake University
- Fr. Andy Cribben – St. Norbert Trustee
- Stephanie Russell – Marquette University

Notes from Session Four

- Who *doesn't* need to be in the conversation?
- Needed in the conversation: President, B.O.T., sponsoring religious order, students
- Need clarity about mission/identity for development purposes
- Don't ask various constituents to possess clear vision until they become immersed in the vocation. Then, listen to what they tell you
- The culture shift that is needed includes explicit signs and symbols, but demands an internal transformation
- Need to engage in seeking the deep story—founding congregation needs to do its deep story work so it can pass this story along
- Vocation serves as a more permeable entry point into mission just as our founding traditions often serve as a more permeable entry point into our Catholic tradition
- Strong presidential leadership required for exploration of institutional calling
- Subsidiarity needed as well: sending discussions back into all corners of institution
- The poor have a claim on who we are in that we are to make them our preferential option
- The local church needs to be a part of our reflections on institutional vocation in appropriate ways
- Founding traditions has travelled through the centuries in the context of community—but we hand them off to a group of well-formed (maybe) individuals as an objective reality—"Here's the Norbertine/Jesuit/Benedictine tradition; don't screw it up!"
- Must consider what is it about our tradition that cannot be lost? What are the deal breakers?
- What do we say "no" to? What is not where we want to invest ourselves—at least at this moment?

- Stories arise in architecture, way we name things, what happens in the classroom
- How do we tell not just our story but the Christ story?
- Members of our founding orders may need formation in institutional charism and calling along with faculty and staff
- Active questions in exploring institutional calling include ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue—what does it mean for us to be connected to schools of other religious traditions, more diverse populations, etc.?
- Each school's tradition informs institution's view of Catholicity, or how we live out our Catholicism

SESSION FIVE: RELEVANT TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

Panelists invited to address these questions:

1. What challenges or difficulties may accompany an emphasis on institutional vocation?
2. How does hiring or evaluating for mission fit with an understanding of institutional calling?
3. What practical concerns might hinder an institutional vocation perspective?

Panel included:

- Sr. Jean Marie Cleveland, OSF – Marian College
- Fr. Jay Fostner, O. Praem. – St. Norbert College
- Lucien Roy – Loyola University Chicago

Notes from Session Five

- To begin with, Will anybody know what in the world we're talking about when we talk about institutional vocation? What does it mean? Is it real? Is it useful? Will anybody care?
- Those on board with personal vocation questions can be receptive to questions of institutional vocation
- Institutional vocation is useful as analogy
- Use Buechner quote in considering institutional vocation as well: What are we passionate about? Are we good at it? Does somebody need it?
- When we hire administrators and staff things are pretty clear. More complex as soon as we introduce faculty—part of their vocation is to their discipline. They need to hold two allegiances in tandem
- Is hiring for mission a tool for exclusion or a way to help a person and institution mutually reflect on good fit?
- What are we willing to do to introduce colleagues to what we are?
- Practical concerns—some find the conversation too poetic, too idealistic
- Others, once we raise their sense of ideals, they come back and tell us how we have failed them
- Plus side of vocation as poetic—institutional calling met with more interest than “Let’s look at the mission”
- Practical concerns—student recruitment and building needs—make this a hard time to talk about deeper things
- An ongoing challenge to help constituents understand importance of working with pause/retreat
- Perceived and actual connection to church can be a source of challenge
- Perception by some that Catholic and liberal arts traditions are in conflict with each other
- Some concerned that members of the administration or founding order, in pursuit of the institution’s calling, will change the mission in a way they will not be comfortable with
- Some methods for alleviating fears include talking about the mission with new hires and offering opportunities for people to learn about the Catholic intellectual tradition
- If we build a culture of attraction in relation to the Catholic intellectual and social justice traditions, will they come? (Students, faculty, staff who share in the mission)

SESSION SIX: CREATING A CULTURE FOR INSTITUTIONAL VOCATION

Paul Wadell from St. Norbert College offered a presentation in response to these questions:

1. How do questions of institutional vocation enable us to better serve our students?
2. What practices help us witness and pass on the story of our calling?
3. What do we owe our students?

Notes from Session Six

- How can we use all that we've been discussing to better serve our students?
- To own and live our narratives with courage and confidence
- Delighting in living our institutional vocations; what would a culture for living our vocation look like?

Owning and living our narratives

- Stories worth handing on and remembering
- Taking small parts of our story to heart can reshape institutional culture
- Stories give us a vision of what we are to be
- Called to embody our story so we can hand it on to our students
- Institutional narrative gives us a reason for being – who we are and what we are called to become
- Institutional narrative names our non-negotiables
- Knowing our story helps us be comfortable with our identity and clarity of purpose (Don't waste time comparing ourselves to something we were never called to be in the first place.)
- Need to regularly reflect on what it means for us to tell our story today
- Need to be creatively faithful to our narrative- not rigid
- Need to be honest about the less flattering elements of our story. Even if the story is good, we don't always live up to it. What elements of our institutional history do we need to repent for?
- Metz—dangerous memories: those we need to let surface and re-claim, especially the dangerous memories of the gospel

Creating a culture for institutional vocation

1. Culture of charity- support, care, seeking the best for the other, live magnanimously
 - Create institutions animated and inspired by this culture of charity
 - Tensions don't disappear, but become fruitful and creative in a culture of charity
2. Boldness of spirit reflected in our institutions and a challenge we offer our students
 - Fearlessness of spirit— so many of our orders' or schools' founder were trouble-maker on a mission
 - Need to cultivate students who are provocateurs in matters of justice. Need students who are bold in naming and challenging that which diminishes the human spirit
3. Culture of delight
 - We rightly instill healthy doubt and questioning – doubt nurtures intellectual humility, but doubt hardens into cynicism

- When we invite our students to question and think critically it should be because we want them to seek something excellent, something worth committing to
 - Delight—approaches life with wonder and enthusiasm, sees the world as a gift and therefore lives in hope; not denying darkness; sees world as not easily known because it is full of so many possibilities
4. Culture of praise
- In worship and praise we learn what truly matters
 - We see ourselves as providentially situated to do good, wherever we are, when we are rooted in a culture of praise
 - When we take God seriously we are less inclined to take ourselves too seriously