

Spring 2016



# Vocation Connections

*“Vocation is a gradual revelation—of me to myself by God...It is who we are, trying to happen.”*

*Evelyn and James Whitehead*

Editor’s note: The chapter excerpt below is from a recently published text entitled *At This Time and Place: Vocation and Higher Education*. The author highlights a number of challenges at play in higher education, including the digital revolution, fiscal uncertainties, specialization and silos, and what she labels the dis-integrated degree. The complete chapter, written by Cynthia A. Wells, focuses on vocation and the common good.

### Higher education and the promise of vocation

Fortunately, any of these pressing challenges can be addressed by greater attention to the work of vocational exploration and discernment. What is it about the language of vocation that facilitates this process? What does it mean to bring the language of vocation into the educational process for students and faculty? What does paying attention to vocation do for an institution? While these questions will only be adequately addressed by the work of this volume as a whole, it may be worth laying out some of the broad characteristics of vocational reflection. Three of these elements—vocation’s enduring, mission-oriented, and holistic dimensions suggest that it may well offer the kind of centripetal force that higher education needs in the present moment.

### *Vocation is enduring*

Simply put, vocation is not a fad. The language of vocation is as long-standing as education itself; its rich and dynamic history feeds its lasting quality and provides it with a wide relevance. As already noted in this volume, vocation was once used narrowly to reference a very specific call to the priesthood or a religious order. Centuries later, vocation began to be used to refer to particular preparation for paid employment. While this inheritance might seem confusing at first, it can also contribute to the richness of the concept—inasmuch as vocation expanded to include nonreligious contexts but never lost its theological significance. Precisely because vocation applies to both spiritual calling and paid work—that is, both to broader queries of meaning and to specific career preparation—it can serve as an integrative concept for higher education in the present.

By way of illustration: vocation's enduring quality helps us remain attentive to the positive elements of specialization, even while serving as something of an antidote to some of its unintended consequences. After all, the problem facing higher education is not academic specialization per se, but rather those forms of it that go unmediated by integrative elements. Without specialized knowledge, higher education would not be able to fulfill its call to address the very pressing challenges facing our world today. Nevertheless, specialization without attentiveness to integrative questions of ethics and meaning would fail to faithfully address the technically complex but also fundamentally human dimensions of the world’s deepest needs.

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The language of vocation honors what is valuable in specialization while also stretching the concept in new directions. Rather than simply lamenting an overemphasis on specialization (particularly as this manifests itself in an excessive focus on the major field of study), vocational reflection encourages us to affirm the major while also opening it up to integrative questions. The notion of the “enriched major,” an idea grounded in the work of Ernest L. Boyer and highlighted recently by Arthur Levine and Diane Dean, illustrates the way in which vocational queries can both affirm and faithfully stretch specialization. The enriched major points to the importance of seeing educational fulfillment as more than simply the knowledge of particular content and the expertise associated with an academic discipline. Knowledge of the discipline must be mindful of larger ethical concerns and challenges to which the discipline can attend: “What are the social and economic implications to be pursued? What are the ethical and moral issues within the specialty that need to be confronted?” From this perspective, specific fields of study—as well as the professions—are given a broader purview through reflection on a more diverse range of issues. The advantages of specialization are maintained, even as commitments to questions about meaning and purpose are nurtured. One gift of vocation lies in its ability to affirm disciplinary expertise but also to situate knowledge within larger purposes. This brings us to a second characteristic of vocation—its ability to serve as a guiding principle.

*Vocation is attentive to mission*

Vocation serves as an orienting principle that keeps us moving in the right direction even amid rapid change; it offers a north star that helps us navigate a frenetic educational environment. The fast pace of technological change tempts us to get lost in the immediate. The fiscal challenges facing higher education place more and more demands on the time of students and educators alike. For students, the culturally dictated overemphasis on employment as a college outcome often leads to viewing general education as an unnecessary and even annoying hurdle. For educators, the pressing demands of the twenty-first-century academy can lead to viewing the daily tasks of academia as distractions and disruptions. In the midst of these challenges, the language of vocation—which necessarily reminds us to give adequate attention to the big picture—helps us to see how such apparently small matters as advising students, developing syllabi, and even participating in committee meetings can contribute to the whole. It thereby enables us to recognize how that larger whole can influence students and advance an institution’s mission. In a manner of speaking, vocation asks us to “get out of ourselves,” yet without ignoring the valued contribution that individuals make to shared goals.

Being attentive to vocation helps us to address, in a generative way, the concerns often raised about the excessive individualism evidenced in colleges and universities. As noted above, higher education has clearly inherited an overemphasis on the individual; nevertheless, we should not ignore the ways that individual outcomes can be crucial. William Frame demonstrates that vocation facilitates the exploration of individual interests but places them in a shared context of social responsibility. A robust pedagogy of vocation can accept the individualism that higher education has inherited and understand it as a new beginning point, rather than a fundamental hindrance to an authentic education. Indeed, a rich understanding of vocation takes the contemporary focus on the individual and opens it out to the “other.”

This expansive perspective is evident in Ernest L. Boyer’s vision for undergraduate education. Boyer’s work repeatedly raises questions about the balance between individual and communal outcomes for higher education without diminishing the importance of either. Boyer fully understood the challenges facing higher education in the late twentieth century, given its longstanding tendency to focus on the parts rather than the whole. His work effectively frames what it means to consider individual outcomes, but simultaneously to open them up to a communal perspective. Boyer’s body of work suggests that undergraduates should wrestle with questions of identity, purpose, and community, and underscores the importance of significant questions such as “Who am I? What is the purpose of life? What are my obligations to others; what are theirs to me?”

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Identity is a crucial concern for students, but it is embedded in a larger network of mutual responsibility. This prompts us to consider a third strength of vocation for our time and place: its attention to the whole person.

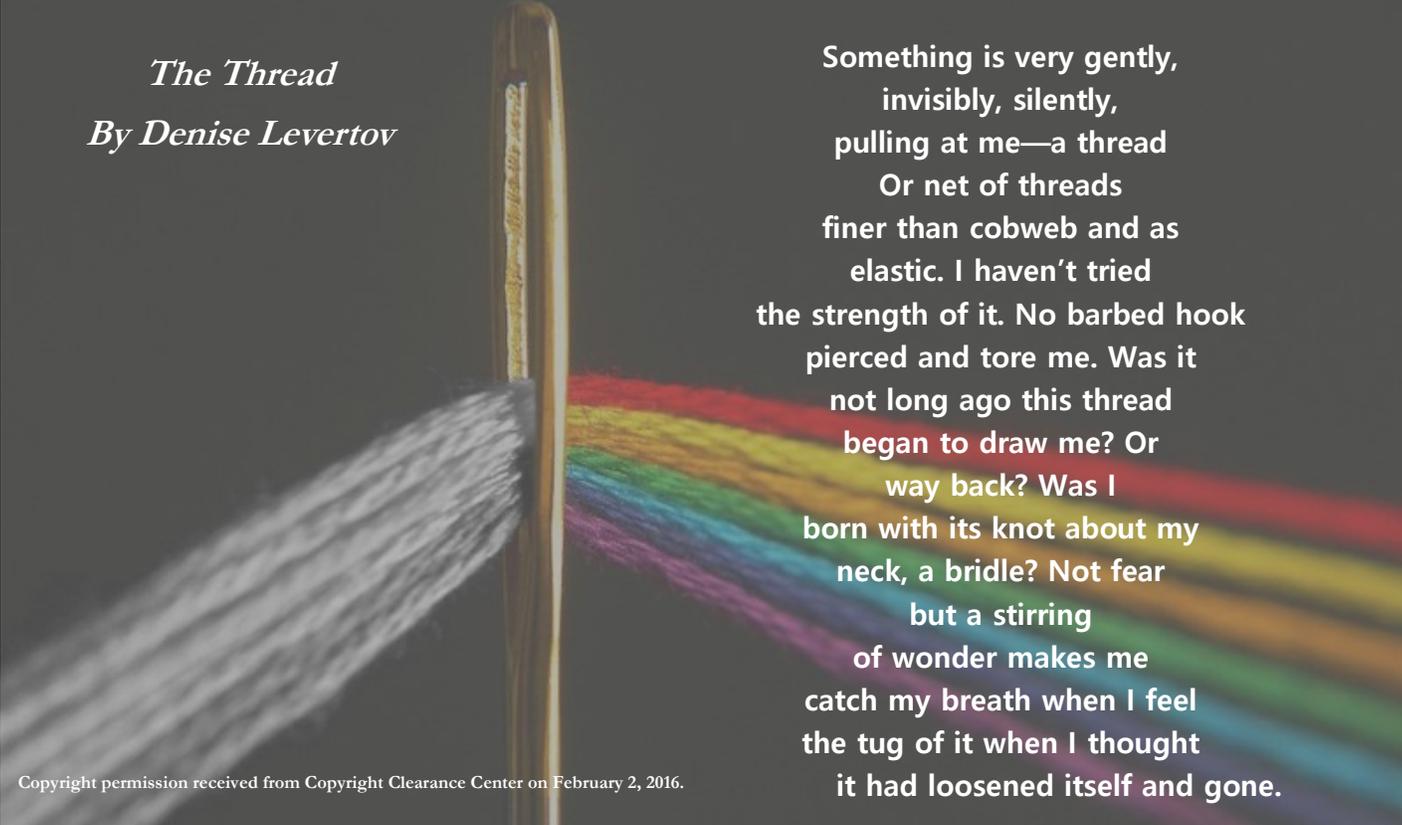
*Vocation is holistic*

Vocation stakes a claim on the whole of a person-affecting ways of knowing, being, and doing. As such, vocation is attentive not only to what we know but also to who we are and how we act. This formative claim of vocation applies not only to students but also to faculty and staff. Indeed, vocation is generative for the academy precisely because it applies to both those being educated and those influencing and delivering the education. Moreover, the language of vocation stakes a claim not only on individuals within colleges and universities, but also on the institution itself-providing a means to pull together institutional structures, programs, and practices toward achieving shared aims. Vocational exploration and discernment can be embedded into the curriculum in general education and in the major; it can infuse career and academic advising. The language of vocation is similarly apropos for co-curricular education, in everything from residence hall programs to athletic team philosophy to chapel programs. Moreover, vocation can serve as an avenue to pull these disparate parts of the institution together, creating space for relationships across apparent divides. On the whole, attention to vocation can address the disaggregation of the educational process that has occurred as a result of broader shifts in the academy.

Once again, Boyer's work helps to illustrate this vision for vocation. He surveyed a broad range of academic programs and campus offices, examining their contribution to institutional mission and suggesting how they might be redirected toward the greater fulfillment of that mission. Boyer emphasized the potential of the campus community as a whole to be educationally purposeful. Moreover, he believed that the ideals of general education could and should be fulfilled in both the curriculum and the co-curriculum. His work sought to expand and enrich our understanding of faculty scholarship in a manner that returned our attention to the ways that each form of academic work contributes to institutional mission. Boyer's body of work reminds us that effective undergraduate education involves bringing together seemingly separate arenas of the college or university on behalf of shared educational purposes.

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*The Thread*  
By Denise Levertov



Something is very gently,  
invisibly, silently,  
pulling at me—a thread  
Or net of threads  
finer than cobweb and as  
elastic. I haven't tried  
the strength of it. No barbed hook  
pierced and tore me. Was it  
not long ago this thread  
began to draw me? Or  
way back? Was I  
born with its knot about my  
neck, a bridle? Not fear  
but a stirring  
of wonder makes me  
catch my breath when I feel  
the tug of it when I thought  
it had loosened itself and gone.

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# Vocation News

The departments of Faith, Learning and Vocation and Faculty Development will be collaborating on a retreat for newer faculty. to be held at the Norbertine Center for Spirituality from 3:00pm Tuesday, May 17 to 3:00pm Wednesday, May 18. This retreat, devoted to finding *Connections*: between our own callings as teachers and scholars and the College's mission, will allow faculty important space for reflection at the end of the semester and a chance to consider how individual work dovetails with the College's mission to educate the whole student. Led by Julie Massey, Senior Director of Mission and Ministry; Becky Lahti, Assistant Director of the Program of Faith, Learning and Vocation; and Laurie MacDiarmid, Director of Faculty Development, this retreat will focus on what the St. Norbert mission means to each individual, and what it means to those who created it.

*If interested, Contact Laurie MacDiarmid for information on how to register.*

The Faith, Learning and Vocation staff are available to create a personalized workshop for any departmental group interested in exploring the concept of vocation. Past workshop audiences include staff members in student development, residential education and housing, auxiliary services, and dining services. Please contact us if your area or group is interested in a workshop that focuses on vocation in a particular area.

*"What a great message. I found myself pondering much on my vocation journey."*

Jessica Jacques

*"The vocation presentation offered by Julie Massey and Becky Lahti was a huge success! We are now incorporating the idea of vocation in our student hiring process.....thanks for sharing your passion with the Auxiliary Services team!"*

Mary Jo Morris

## Navigate

This year, 41 students are participating in our newly renamed vocation exploration program, *Navigate*. Divided into five groups that are led by staff members Becky Lahti, Julie Massey and Sandy Murphy, these sophomores, juniors, and seniors meet 10 times over the course of the academic year and engage with the concept of vocation through writing, reading, and conversation. In the spring semester they have the choice of meeting with a mentor, attending an afternoon of reflection, or going away on a silent retreat. Students receive a small scholarship for their participation. Now in its third year of existence, the program has grown every year and has received excellent evaluations from the students.

Do you know a current student who would be a good fit for and benefit from this program? We are accepting nominations for *Navigate 2016-2017* through **April 15**. Send the students' names to [rebecca.lahti@snc.edu](mailto:rebecca.lahti@snc.edu). They will receive a notification that they have been nominated and an invitation to apply.

*Vocation Connections* is an occasional newsletter published by the Program of Faith, Learning & Vocation.  
We invite your comments, suggestions, and contributions.

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