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Choosing to Make a Difference: Reflections on Mentoring Students

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Choosing to Make a Difference:

Reflections on Mentoring Students

I sat in my office, a windowless small cubicle with institutional cream colored walls devoid of any decoration. I was a younger librarian then with my first significant job at a major research university library. I had attended a different campus of that same university as an undergraduate student, so the student body was similar and familiar.

I'd been watching the students; many were much like I had been a few short years before. They were young, living away from home for the first time, with opportunity before them and little understanding of the long range ramifications of that opportunity. They were smart, good students able to meet the challenge of academia, but still young and impressionable. This was their time in life to make good decisions that would affect their future, but many lacked the guidance and resources it would take to make those right decisions. I knew that this research university provided little if any guidance to individual students and that they were expected to figure life out on their own.

That early morning the small room became transformed from an office to a prayer closet as I listened to God's still small voice impress a Scripture verse on my heart. "I sought for a man among them that should make up the hedge and stand in the gap ..." (Ezekiel 22:30 King James Version). Standing in the gap is often interpreted as making intercessory prayer on behalf of something or someone. Prayer is important, even crucial, but I decided that intercessory prayer for students in a general way was just not sufficient. I felt God was asking me to do more.

My own experience included very little parental or other adult guidance and I squandered years before realizing a clear career path. My parents were immigrants from Europe who lacked a good understanding of the American system from which to provide career counseling. No teacher or counselor

in high school or university had taken a particular interest in me or encouraged me in the direction of any career. I attended a large public research university where I was just one of many undergraduates. I reasoned that there must be a segment of the student population where I was now a librarian who, like me, needed someone to take a genuine interest in them and help them sort it out.

I wondered how to find that segment and if could I help them in some way. I felt a burden for these students and sensed God asking me to stand in the gap for them, to offer them what no one else was offering. Asking myself what that would look like, I reflected on what I wished someone had done for me as a student, to guide and nurture me. I had to open myself, genuinely care about them and what will happen to them in their lives. These students needed a mentor and a role model.

It was 1989, and at that time the political climate favored affirmative action. We were in a state with significant underrepresented minority populations, as they were then called. The university had about 16,000 students, some of whom were from underrepresented minorities. Many of them were the first generation of their families to go to college and their families did not know how to guide them through higher education or beyond into careers.

I reasoned that if I could come from an immigrant family, go to the university and on to graduate school, become a librarian and find a career in a research university library; these students could likewise aspire to achieving college degrees and a career. So I proposed a program to mentor minority students toward careers in library and information science. The university library approved it and supported it for 8 years, 1990-1998. We called it the Undergraduate Student Internship Program (USIP) (Echavarria, 2000, pp.24-25). It was targeted at minority students who had jobs

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the journey of mentoring students for the past two decades yields one librarian's insight about mentoring for career options and mentoring for vocation. The need for guidance exists among undergraduate students. Mentoring opportunities depend on the institutional support available. While research universities may at times support some career mentoring, Christian higher education affords a venue for vocational mentoring that is enriching for both mentor and students. It is meant to assist graduating students approach life from a Christian worldview that has been thought out through theological reflection on vocation.

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in the university library and it touched the lives of approximately 50 students during that time. Most entered the profession by either going on to graduate library schools or as paraprofessionals and they stayed in touch with me for years afterwards. I had convinced them that I did indeed care about what happened to them. My willingness to stand in the gap for them mattered and was evidenced by a willingness of some of these former students who began to mentor students themselves.

I found support for mentoring from the American Library Association Office of Library Personnel Resources. A few people in the profession felt a similar burden and reached out to those from underrepresented minorities to draw them into the library and information science profession in the 1990s (Wheeler & Hanson, 1995). But within the research university where I worked few were willing to invest significant time in the lives of undergraduate students. Few understood why I was willing to spend my time mentoring. They seemed to get stuck on how much time mentoring required and were reluctant to invest their own time. I understood the personal satisfaction of making a difference for someone, and the friendships of those students who later became my colleagues in the profession.

Time and experience taught me the value of mentoring. But the opportunity to leave that prestigious research university and move on to a position in Christian higher education became the turning point in my career in which mentoring holds an important priority. Mentoring in the context of Christian higher education takes on new import in terms of vocation rather than career aspirations. Several characteristics make the environment of the Christian university radically different from that of the secular research university where I once worked.

The mission of Whitworth University, my present employer, is to provide an education of the mind and heart, preparing students to live lives which honor God, follow Christ, and serve humanity. Rather than students just getting an education, they are individuals

whose lives, decisions and consequences matter to the faculty and staff. There is a rich sense of community shared in our relationships with each other by faculty, staff and students. The faculty and staff are willing and encouraged by the university to get to know students and influence their lives in a positive Christian manner that reflects an education of the mind and heart.

Whitworth University has been a recipient of a Lilly Foundation Grant for mentoring for the past decade so there is strong institutional support for theological reflection on vocation. This grant supports ways in which theological reflection can assist with vocational discernment. Vocation rather than career options are focused upon. Various faculty, administrators and staff have chosen to participate in this mentoring endeavor. Students are mentored in small groups or individually, sometimes over a shorter time period and sometimes over the entire time they are undergraduates at the college. Faculty and staff guide students to connect theological reflection and vocation. Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare* meaning “call” or “calling” and pertains to what God expects us to do in the world, within a Christian context. Our calling is to love and honor God by loving our neighbor as ourselves, as Jesus commanded, “... thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself” (Luke 10:27 King James Version). When we do that in our daily lives, we fulfill our essential calling, or vocation (Guide).

Guidance is provided at all levels to help students approach life after college with a Christian worldview. That certainly includes career guidance which we approach through the lens of ten questions for students to reflect on in determining their post-college direction. The first five concern the individual: gifts, passions, skills, purposes, and convictions. The next five concern the realms in which vocation is lived out: work, family, church, community and the world. Together they constitute how we intentionally guide student thinking and reflection about vocation.

In our discussions with the students we mentor, we ask them to reflect on the gifts God has given them. Discovering those many gifts that can be used as part of vocation helps them to discern vocation. We ask them what they are most passionate about. Vocational discernment should reflect on what they are passionate about because we have the responsibility to exercise passion on behalf of loving our neighbors and working for justice. Vocational effectiveness requires skills that a student may already have and ones they need to deliberately identify and develop, so reflection and goals are important. Vocational discernment also requires reflection about the question, "What do you believe is your primary purpose on this earth?" Whitworth's mission of honoring God, following Christ and serving humanity is what we consider to be an excellent point from which to begin, but students from other faith perspectives may have competing answers they believe are right for them. Vocation requires reflection on what a person believes to be the most important truths in the universe, or his/her own deepest convictions. These are the personal questions that we want students to reflect upon as undergraduates.

How a person combines gifts, passions, skills, purposes and conviction in the realms in which our lives are lived is the great challenge. How one might see work as service or perhaps as love toward fellow human beings are theological questions. So we encourage our students to reflect on connecting the first five questions with the next five. Vocational reflection most readily lends itself to career consideration and how to live out one's worldview and vocation in a workplace environment. How a student understands their own role within their family can be considered as vocation. Vocational discernment should center on not only the current role, perhaps as brother/sister, son/daughter, but on future roles as well. Vocational discernment is more than just an individual endeavor; it is also about what it means to be part of a church body and the larger body of Christ. Reflecting on vocation within the church involves using a theological tradition to see one's place within the church. Vocation relates to social justice through how one connects his/her vocational discernment to a responsibility to be engaged

in the community in which one lives. And beyond that Christianity calls us to be a citizen of the world and therefore calls us to consider vocation and its implications as being a global citizen.

There is much to reflect on, but the hope is that students will emerge from their undergraduate years having begun to reflect seriously on living out their lives from a Christian worldview. For those students who are not Christians it means doing so from their own faith worldview. Not all students complete the process well while they are in college, some only begin it. For some students the process takes longer and goes beyond undergraduate or even graduate school, years. The importance of the ten questions for theological reflection on vocation is that these students may revisit these questions again and again as they go through life. This is meant to enrich their lives and assist them in living those lives well.

This rich deliberation about vocation is a continuous process that begins in the undergraduate years, progresses through a career, and continues throughout life. As I have mentored students, I have progressed in my own intentional thinking about my own vocation as well as theirs. I have grown through my own reflection as well as watched students grow through theirs. I hope I have guided well those whose lives I been privileged to touch. I hope they continue to reflect on these ten questions beyond their undergraduate years and that it is a guide for them in life. In the earlier years of my career in a secular university, I was unable to guide students toward vocation, only toward a promising career option. That beginning prepared me for Christian higher education where I gained the opportunity to expand from career mentoring to vocational mentoring. It has been a journey that has enriched my own vocation beyond being a mere career.

I hope that I have served well what God asked of me: to stand in the gap for the students He brought into my life. The gratification of seeing lives directed in productive positive ways has been my reward, and it has been satisfying. My wish is that it would encourage others to invest in the lives of their students as well. ✚

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