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WHERE YOU LIVE AND WHAT YOU WILL DO

Teaching Vocational Discernment in Residential Learning Communities

By Mark Ravizza, S.J. and Chris Boscia

College is a time when students strive not merely to get an education, but also to gain increased clarity about what to do with their lives. As a first-year student, whom we will call Sarah, recently put it: "I feel as if there is a gift inside me—something special that I am meant to do, to give...to those in need. But I'm not sure what it is. And I don't know how to figure it out. What can I do?" Sarah's situation is not unique. A great many students wonder (to use Parker Palmer's memorable expression) "how to find the life that wants to live in them." And this question is far deeper than merely which courses they should take or what major they ought to declare. It is a question about the type of people they are called to become and how they will make a difference in the world. In effect, Sarah and so many students like her are asking about vocation: about how to discover where their unique gifts and talents interconnect with the world's needs.

The difficulty with the vocation question is that it is not easily answered by a single course or visit with a career counselor. Indeed, as many writers have noted, vocational discernment is never a question that can be answered once and for all; it is more like a habit, a regular practice of examining our lives and reflecting on where our passions, gifts, and experiences are drawing us. If this point is correct, then as educators shouldn't we consider how best to assist our students in developing this type of practice? Isolated programs, retreats, and workshops certainly can be of help in this regard, but is there a way to offer students a more sustained and integrated approach to vocational exploration?

One promising strategy is to take advantage of the growing number of Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) on our campuses. RLCs can take a variety of forms, but in essence they are communities in which students live together and share common curricular and co-curricular activities intentionally structured to provide an integrated educational experience. A key motivation for RLCs comes from the recognition that a student's most significant learning sometimes takes place outside of the classroom; consequently, it is important to build educational opportunities into the residential environment. Prior to RLCs, programs and activities in a dormitory could be completely disconnected from students' curricular responsibilities. Such an arrangement encouraged the over-scheduling and excessive busyness that are such problems on our campuses. By creating a more cohesive and coordinated learning environment, RLCs potentially avoid this type of fragmentation and better promote the education of the whole person.

Since 2000, all incoming students to Santa Clara University have been placed in multi-year RLCs. These communities are loosely based around themes such as multiculturalism, environmental awareness, the arts and communication, global solidarity, and faith and justice. In their first quarter, incoming students take a pair of core classes with other students from their learning community. Ideally these classes are connected to co-curricular programs sponsored by the RLC, such as films, field trips, reflection groups, and immersion experiences. After the first quarter, students may continue to take courses associated with their RLC and to participate in a range of educational and social programs.

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organized around the theme of the RLC. Increasingly these communities are maturing into residences where students can live and learn during all four years of college.

An important goal of the RLCs is to create what Sharon Parks calls “mentoring communities.” Toward that end, each RLC has a range of faculty and staff associated with the community such as faculty directors, resident directors, faculty-in-resi-
dence, and resident ministers. The presence of these educators in the residence hall creates oppor-
tunities for informal conversations and learning that often go far beyond what might be accomplished in the more traditional setting of office hours. The integrated learning environments created in RLCs make them promising places to teach stu-
dents the practices needed for vocational explo-
ration. Not only do they foster an ongoing sense of community that supports vocational discernment, but also they can sponsor interlocking courses and programs to encourage students to reflect on signif-
icient life choices in a sustained way.

To illustrate this point, consider the example of Dan, a sophomore at Santa Clara last year. At the beginning of the year, he enrolled in a 2-unit RLC film course which focused on the theme of voca-
tional discernment. During the course, he watched Baz Luhrmann’s Strictly Ballroom, a movie that humor-
ously examines the struggle we all face to break away from the safety and rewarding conventions, and dance our own steps. Later in an informal conversation with the RLC faculty-in-resi-
dence who taught the course, Dan mentioned that he had just watched “Strictly Ballroom” and never took seriously the things that really gave him joy like his work at a local soup kitchen. In the course of the conversation, the faculty member suggested Dan sign up for a weekend retreat that the RLC was hosting to help students to explore vocational issues. At the retreat, Dan had a chance to reflect on his life choices in a new way, and he grew closer to other students in the RLC who were grappling with similar issues.

After the retreat, he was able to follow up on this experience by joining with some of these stu-
dents to form a DISCOVER group—eight students who met twice a month with a faculty advisor in the

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RLC to study principles of Ignatian spirituality and to practice the habit of ongoing vocational reflection. These co-curricular experiences were complemented by Dan’s course work. A Western Culture course that he took in conjunction with the RLC discussed the concept of vocation in Renaissance society. Then, as a result of this course and his other explorations of vocation, Dan decided in the spring quarter to purs-
ue his questions in a more formal, academic way, and he opted to take an RLC seminar that focused on vocation and the Catholic Imagination.

Dan’s story is just one example of how the RLC environment can provide a complementary range of curricular and co-curricular activities to help stu-
dents reflect on critical life choices. Of course, stu-
dents will choose to navigate their way through these opportunities in different ways, and not all students will take advantage of such programs. Nevertheless, an RLC can create a community of faculty, staff, and students who are engaged in a sustained conversation about vocation, and this combined with the rich type of RLC activities great-
ly encourages students to develop the practice of vocational discernment.

Three types of interrelated activities seem espe-
cially helpful in fostering such a discerning commu-
nity: coursework, opportunities for direct contact with the poor, and reflection experiences. Let us brie-
fly discuss each of these three. Coursework can include everything from an upper-division RLC seminar focused on the RLC’s theme, a single-class dis-
cussion of life choices incorporated into a core

course such as sociology, ethics, or Western culture. Particularly attractive are smaller, two-unit courses sponsored by an RLC such as a film course, an immersion reflection course, or a symposium which brings in outside speakers to share their own voca-
tion stories.

A second important activity is direct contact with the poor and marginalized. If part of the process of vocational discernment is discovering where one’s talents best serve the world’s needs, then students must have opportunities to encounter first hand those in greatest need. These opportuni-
ties can take the form of community-based learning integrated into coursework, days of service, immig-
ration trips, or summer internships. To take full advantage of such experiences, it is essential that they be combined with the third key activity, reflec-
tion. Such reflection can be accomplished through small groups like the DISCOVER groups mentioned above, or Christian Life Communities (CLCs). In
addition, RLC-sponsored programs like vocation retreats, liturgies, and community dinners can also give students a chance to step back and reflect on where their experiences are calling them.

Despite the tremendous promise of RLCs to help students explore vocation, there are also significant challenges that confront this strategy. Three in particular deserve mention. First, success of the RLC strategy ultimately depends on how effectively RLCs integrate vocational concerns into curricular and co-curricular activities. Such integration is a daunting task at best. On the curricular side, it often requires faculty to develop new courses or to revise existing courses to incorporate vocational issues into them. Successful integration requires creative linkages between classroom activities and residence hall life, and faculty are typically neither trained nor rewarded to do this. Furthermore, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to convince departments to give faculty time to teach something like a special vocation seminar or RLC film course. If genuine curricular integration is to occur, then, institutions must confront hard questions about how they will encourage and support faculty to do this work. Similar concerns arise on the co-curricular side.

Programs that promote vocational reflection such as retreats, immersion experiences, and small reflection groups need to be planned and implemented in the RLCs, and this places an increased burden on residence life staff and resources. Can such a burden be borne without an increase in staff or a readjustment in the concept of traditional residence hall programming? Moreover, in an era in which students are already over-programmed and chronically short on time, how do RLC staff ensure that vocational programs truly are integrated into normal student life and do not become just “one more thing” on an already overcrowded plate of activities?

This first challenge of integration naturally leads to a second challenge: revising academic culture. Creating integrated educational experiences requires a high degree of cooperation between faculty and residence life professionals, and historically this has not been fos-

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Students conducting research at Wheeling Jesuit University
Unless an RLC program is directly required on a course syllabus, it becomes just another activity vying for students' attention, and as such it must compete against a host of activities including poker nights, homework assignments, video games, off-campus parties, and Instant Messenger.