

Assessment of VOICES: Vocation, Interiority, Community, and Engaged Service

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Overview

January 2002 marked the beginning of a five-year grant to Saint Louis University from the Lilly Endowment for the purpose of promoting a sense of VOCATION in everyone in the university, faculty, students and staff. Now, at the two-year mark, we have some experience on which to reflect.

SLU is a Catholic, Jesuit, urban, doctoral research-extensive university of about 11,000 students. The Office of the Provost, along with Ethics Across the Curriculum, led the application for Lilly funding, developing a project with these two goals:

- Create supportive communities through which students are better equipped to discern and develop their vocations and leadership qualities in light of their faith commitments and spirituality.
- Develop faculty and staff expertise through retreats, lectures, and fellowship opportunities regarding vocation, spirituality, leadership, and faith in order to assist students more effectively with their explorations of vocation.

The program they developed rests on three concepts, which break open the idea of vocation and form the acronym, VOICES:

VO= Vocation: We take the term “vocation” to mean the intersection of one’s spirituality with one’s work life. We are keenly aware that the word vocation is used in many other and conflicting ways. It’s the idea of vocation that we are promoting more than the term itself...a spiritual calling, a sense of purpose or path.

I= Interiority: Discernment of one’s vocation or even one’s path or purpose in life requires solitude and personal reflection. This interiority does not necessarily come easily to young adults and should be promoted and encouraged by programming.

C= Community: Many of the major religious traditions of the world see community as the place where faith or spirituality can flourish. We want to promote communities of faith, as well as professional communities of students and faculty together.

ES= Engaged Service and works of Justice: Judaeo-Christian and Islamic faith traditions, among others, require their members to move outward from their communities in acts of service and justice for the world.

These three concepts underpin a dozen programs designed to achieve the goals above. Through the Student Leader Retreat, for example, we hoped to promote interiority. To build community, the Alexandria Society was fashioned. Internships promote and model engaged service in the world.

Evaluation Team

The dozen programs would require evaluation; this we understood from the outset. An Evaluation Team was a component of the University's original grant proposal to Lilly. We formed the Team consisting of an Assistant Provost (who also directs the Office of Institutional Study), a faculty member from the Department of Education, and the Director of the VOICES Project. To these three, we added three graduate research assistants. The Team represents a rich mix of backgrounds, with students cycling through from Departments of Philosophy, Public Policy, Psychology, Social Service and Theology. The team of six meets about every two weeks to discuss assessment strategies for current programs, to work with our student survey of beliefs and attitudes toward vocation and mission issues, and to consider other types of research for the project.

The task of the Evaluation Team included the development of:

1. A formative and summative evaluation on programmatic goals and objectives;
2. A formative and summative evaluation of the success of the project as it relates to the mission, goals, and student learning outcomes of the University; and
3. Broader research analyses of the project's conceptual framework, theory, and model.

The proposal called for a combination of assessment methods, applied as appropriate to the specific programs being assessed. We are using both qualitative and quantitative methods including focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires (both brief and lengthy). Why include such an important emphasis on evaluation in our proposal? Any assessment has two main purposes:

1. Accountability – Are we achieving what we promised? The proposal included outcomes we projected for our programs. The key stakeholders in our project want to be able to chart our progress in terms of the stated outcomes. These stakeholders include the funder (The Lilly Endowment's

Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation) as well as various individuals and groups in our University community.

2. Improvement – We reflect on the results of assessment to determine how we can improve activities and the overall project. Evaluation is primarily an opportunity for reflection and learning. We have found that our best discussions arise from our team speaking together about what we think the results of our assessments mean.

To organize our evaluation activities, we listed the programs of our project. Each of these nine programs fits under one of the three theme areas of VOICES: Interiority, Community or Engaged Service/Justice. We selected the project outcomes from our proposal that fit most closely with each program. For each program activity, we selected one or more assessment methods. We established timelines for each assessment, and designated responsible parties. Our Assessment Grid, then, looks something like this:

Concept	Program	Description	Purpose	Person/s Responsible	Frequency	Outcomes	Assessment

For each assessment activity, for example, interviews with interns, we keep the following information:

- The Project Name
- The Project Coordinator
- Description of Assessment Method
- Administration of Assessment
- Assessment Date
- Start Date (planning)
- Completion Date
- Number of Participants
- Distribution of Report
- Timeline
- Notes

Evaluating Programs

A few examples may clarify how we have used assessment.

1. Alexandria Society is a program fitting under the concept of Community in the proposal. The original idea of the Alexandria Society was a prayer and reflection group for graduate students, faculty and their spouses in a particular academic department. The group would

meet, share a simple or potluck meal, pray together in a way that was comfortable across different faith traditions, and reflect on the spiritual and professional lives of those present. A motor for the program was students' curiosity about the personal spiritual lives of their faculty. They were hungry to engage with faculty in discussing the largest questions of meaning in life. We now have nine examples of the Alexandria Society in operation, one quite different from the next. On one hand, in the Philosophy Department, graduate students and faculty meet on an ongoing basis every other Friday evening for a potluck dinner, prayer, and conversation; in the Office of the Registrar, hourly staff give up their lunch hours for a discussion, directed by a facilitator, meeting weekly for six weeks. How to go about assessing this?

The relevant outcome from our plan was that students, faculty, and staff would experience the development of a fuller sense of community regarding vocation. The Evaluation Team decided to pilot some questions with the first Alexandria Society started within the project. We used these questions last spring:

- How has your involvement in the Alexandria Society helped you to develop a fuller sense of community in your department?
- Has your involvement helped you to develop a fuller sense of your own vocation?
- What suggestions do you have for others who might be contemplating setting up their own Alexandria Society?

This spring, we want to do a more in-depth study of these groups to hear stories and discover best practices:

- How did the group get started?
- How did they get people involved?
- What are the group's purposes, goals?
- What makes the group work?
- How did they achieve it?
- Logistics, e.g. how to determine topics to discuss, how often to meet.

As we gather information, we will be looking for patterns and models within the groups so that we are able to document the best practices for organizing and sustaining Alexandria Societies on campus; further, we would like to develop a manual that describes how to get such a group started, offering the wisdom accumulated from our assessment of other groups.

We are curious, too, about how participation in faith-based small groups affects approaches to learning, student/faculty interaction, and

student engagement in the University community. In the near future, we will develop tools to learn more about these questions.

2. In the area of Engaged Service, we have 20 funded student internships of three types. For all these types, students accept these half-time internships in order to serve the congregations in which they minister. The VOICES Project internships were designed also to invite students to consider in a new way what leadership role they might be willing to undertake in their current and future adult communities of faith. In other words, we encourage students to ask the question, “Am I prepared and willing to be a leader of my congregation?” Certainly this leadership could involve ministry in the narrowest sense of ordination, but the world also needs leaders and ministers in a broader sense. We ask the students to consider their personal gifts and to discern what they have to give. We are provoking reflection on the way that each individual might be called to leadership.

The outcomes from our proposal that best fit the internships were these:

- Students will develop a commitment to respond to God’s call and will carry this commitment outward to the communities in which they live and work, as well as the larger world.
- Students will be open to the possibility of full-time or volunteer ministry as a result of their experiences.

The assessment plan for internships exemplifies the way that such plans can evolve substantially from the initial ideas. In late fall of our first year, we interviewed each intern to find out:

- Their reasons for wanting to be an intern, their expectations,
- How the internship fit in with their overall experience
 - As a student
 - With their academic goals, and
 - With their career goals,
- Their satisfaction with their experiences, and
- Their hopes for what they still would like to accomplish.

In spring, we asked the same interns to complete a questionnaire asking them questions such as these: What will you take with you from this year? What did you like about the program? What suggestions do you have for improvement?

In reviewing what we learned from these assessments, we realized in a new way that the internships are personal experiences. While they absorb a large amount of the project’s resources, the results of assessment show that the interns’ experiences have a huge impact on students involved. Therefore, in the spring of 2004 we decided on in-

depth interviews to examine more fully the impact of their experiences on interns:

- As students
- In career choice
- In their engagement in their communities
- In exploring their vocations.

3. VOICES has several concurrent speaker series, developed by a committee of faculty, staff, and students to build Community. We bring in about a dozen speakers each semester, including some from our own faculty and staff. The endocrinologist from Mayo Clinic gave her talk about the Faith of a Physician, while the three indigenous women from Chiapas talked about the impact of globalization on their spiritual traditions and economic conditions. The outcome we sought for these speaker events was this: that students, faculty, and staff will be exposed to role models and mentors who understand their professions and career in terms of a faith-based commitment.

Early in our grant, we developed surveys for audiences attending our speaker events. We asked deep questions about the impact of the speaker on the respondents' spiritual lives, careers, thinking about vocation, etc. This strategy did not work well because the impact is not always immediately known and because the survey took too long for busy people to complete at the end of an event.

Therefore, we came to realize that, for this activity, a much simpler form of assessment would do nicely. We counted the number of participants in the audience, and distributed a brief (two minutes) survey to ask about their satisfaction. Now we ask them to complete a page that asks about:

- Expectations
- Satisfaction
- Promotion – how did you hear about this presentation?
- Suggestions for future speakers and topics

4. Student Retreat (for Interiority) - Our plan called for a retreat with student leaders; for two years we did this with approximately 125 students. Last year we tried something new: we took 450 first year students away for an overnight that we called the Roadtrip. The Roadtrip was a mandatory element of an elective course called University 101. The course has a number of goals unrelated to VOICES, but also seeks to build community for and with the students. The Roadtrip sought to begin conversations with students about their purpose, path or vocation. With additional reference to these themes in the course before and after the Roadtrip, we hoped to introduce a large number of students to the idea of

vocation and reflection on their purpose. In addition, we wanted to be part of the university-wide push toward greater retention of students. It was thought that the Roadtrip might contribute to student retention.

For this activity, one proposal outcome applied: Students will develop an understanding and appreciation for the relationship between their professional lives and their faith and value commitments and of habits of quiet reflection and solitude.

We developed a more complex plan to evaluate the Roadtrip. We created a list of open-ended questions and asked University 101 instructors to debrief the Roadtrip in the class following the getaway. Instructors asked students to answer the questions on paper. These anonymous sheets were collected. Evaluation Team members observed a sample of the classes during the debriefing, took notes, and collected students' written responses.

We reviewed our notes on the discussions during the classes we visited and reviewed the written responses of the Roadtrip participants. The results were these: the Roadtrip did get students starting to think about their life's work as a spiritual calling.

Conclusion

Overall, how do we assess the VOICES Project? It seems to us to be important not to be satisfied with the spreadsheet describing the responses of our participants, but to challenge ourselves to seek the real meaning of our findings. We need to do this as early as possible, to reshape programs as we go, and to create the maximum impact. We want, first, to have the greatest impact and, secondly, to be able to communicate the impact effectively to stakeholders who will want to continue to provide resources for the most effective efforts.

Therefore, the Evaluation Team takes time at each meeting to talk about the impact of VOICES in every possible way: in breadth vs. depth, in short-term as well as long-term effects and best use of resources. What should be the role of VOICES? How can resources be best used to have impact on students? We try to think as globally as possible, at least from time to time, so that the small evaluation tasks do not distract us from the important goals of the project as a whole.

In addition, we are encouraging others in the university to take up the task of writing related to the results of our research. Several students are considering dissertation topics using VOICES data, and articles have already been accepted for publication. These expose us to a

broader community of scholarship around the issues of student vocation.
We believe that exposure will lead to greater refinement of our programs.