

Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities

A Lutheran college or university locates identity in a common *institutional* calling. Institutions in the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) share a common calling that is deeply rooted in the Lutheran intellectual tradition and boldly open to insights from other religious and secular traditions.

Because they are rooted in a robust theological tradition, these institutions intentionally pursue conversation about big questions from the full array of religious and secular academic traditions. In so doing, they work to shape character, invite vocational discernment, and build religious literacy. These institutions pose big questions, like “who are you going to be?” alongside the question “what are you going to do?” Wrestling with these questions, students gain fluency in the language of meaning and purpose. Then, these institutions press graduates to push beyond careerism toward meaningful work and active participation in just, loving communities. These institutions also critically engage with religion while understanding that, for practitioners, religion is a way of life. Attention to religion helps Lutheran students and students in other religious traditions grow in faith and commitment to their communities. Student with a secular self-understanding will grow in their commitment to their guiding ethical perspectives.

Now, as never before, *the world needs our graduates*, graduates who are intellectually acute, humbly open to others, vocationally wise, morally astute, and religiously sensitive. Although their mission statements vary, NECU institutions share a common calling. Together these educational communities equip graduates who are:

Called and empowered

To serve the neighbor

So that all may flourish.

Because this calling names our common *institutional* identity and mission, rather than the religious affiliation of *individuals*, we can and should distinguish some shared educational priorities from the distinctive Lutheran theological values that undergird them. In what follows, the document first names educational priorities that mark each dimension of our common calling, then unpacks Lutheran theological values that ground and support them.

Called and Empowered

Students of NECU institutions receive an excellent education, rooted in the liberal arts, that engenders freedom of inquiry and prepares them for meaningful work.

A commitment to excellence has distinguished Lutheran education since its inception. Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, founders of the Lutheran reform movement and university professors themselves, led the charge for academic as well as religious reform, offering education of the highest caliber to women and men regardless

of socio-economic class. Curricular reform, new pedagogies, and rigorous learning have marked Lutheran education from the beginning. For this tradition, education matters.

This distinctive education centers on the liberal arts, which prepares students for roles they cannot yet envision and a future as yet unknown. Education across the disciplines—from the humanities and fine arts to the natural and social sciences, from business education to health care—lays the foundation for a kind of critical thinking that can still register awe. It exhibits a freedom of inquiry that challenges every assumption. This freedom of inquiry is often more open and inclusive insofar as NECU institutions invite the critical and empathetic investigation of religion in public academic spaces, rather than restricting religion to the private, personal realm.

Because NECU institutions are both rooted in the Lutheran tradition and open to others, they are distinctive in higher education in the United States. Neither sectarian or secular, NECU colleges and universities take a third path of being rooted in the Lutheran intellectual and educational traditions while being open to others.

In their openness to the new perspectives and fresh insights of others, these institutions practice a spirit of intellectual humility. Because the world is always larger and more mysterious than the lens through which it is known, intellectual humility nurtures genuine curiosity and an interdisciplinary search for truth.

One Lutheran theological root that anchors the educational priority of excellence and unfettered inquiry is radical freedom. Luther described “the freedom of a Christian” dialectically, both as a freedom *from* the need to shore up a right relationship with God and as a freedom *for* good and meaningful work in God’s world. It is both a freedom *from* false ideas about earning one’s own worthiness and a freedom *for* a life of service to and with the neighbor.

Another Lutheran theological root is a healthy appreciation for the limits of human knowing. Humans can never fully grasp the fullness of God or the mystery of the world around them; they are incapable of understanding God completely or seeing the world through God’s eyes. Luther believed God was hidden (*absconditus*) from full human understanding. The expansion of human knowledge only deepens the awareness of its limits, and this awareness leads to a dual attitude toward learning. On the one hand, because broad knowledge and deep wisdom benefit the world, these institutions reach for excellence. On the other hand, they register suspicion about claims to have a complete understanding of complex issues. The Lutheran tradition cautions that only God has the God’s-eye-view, and all other claims to a complete and final perspective stand as idolatrous, dangerous, and even potentially coercive.

With its spirited freedom and healthy sense of human limit, Lutheran higher education is a joyful undertaking with serious purpose. Called and empowered to understand the world and to help transform it, students of NECU institutions go into that world with wisdom, humility, and a sense of hope.

To Serve the Neighbor

Students of NECU institutions discern their gifts and hone their skills so that they are able to contribute capably, confidently, and courageously to the needs of a world that desperately needs them.

Lutheran education is education *for* vocation. Students are called to do work that is both meaningful to them and helpful to the earth and its creatures. Vocation-centered education equips students to understand how the world, human beings, and communities function, as well as what they need to be personally fulfilled and healthy. Vocation-centered education is for the many callings that our students answer whether in the non-profit or for-profit sectors. Vocation-centered education equips students with the wisdom and capacities for good and needed work in the world through all forms of human endeavor.

NECU institutions embrace the challenge to see all creatures as neighbor and to be a neighbor. The concept of neighbor calls students to serve others while eschewing all forms of elitism, condescension, and mere charity. Seeing others as neighbor also resists all that brands them as “enemies” or “threats” or “strangers.” To be a neighbor means to seek to understand and serve people, communities, and their needs. In the global and local communities in which our students move, they care for the people, space, and ecology of a neighborhood; they work toward a common good.

Because all life is worthy of attention, these institutions commit themselves to identifying oppression and developing strategies that promote justice and heal the divisions that fragment the whole. A common calling (*vocare*) creates advocacy (*ad+vocare*) for the sake of the neighbor to reduce suffering, build up the neighborhood, and befriend the earth. Because these institutions affirm the connectedness of all forms and aspects of life in the world, they invite students to see themselves as parts of larger wholes. They encourage them to weigh the impact of their actions on other creatures, both human and non-human.

A Lutheran theological root that grounds a priority for vocation-centered education is God’s generous concern for all creation. God’s generosity reaches all humans through the fruitfulness of the created world and the actions of others. A profound gratitude for this divine generosity motivates human generosity. Cognizant of God’s gift, people gladly “pay it forward,” working for the common good. By naming ourselves and others as “neighbors” and by calling the common place they share a community, Luther emphasized a shared commitment to the wellbeing and sustainability of all.

An additional theological root is Lutheranism’s view of humans as nested in larger communities, which liberates them from the prison of individualism (in Luther’s colorful metaphor, a “heart turned-in on itself” or *cor incurvatus in se*). Because, in the world, humans function as God’s hands, an important part of each person’s vocation is

working for justice-- the proper balance between parts and a whole or between individual and community.

Finally, Martin Luther's "theology of the cross" suggests that God is particularly present in and with those who suffer, a presence that beckons others toward solidarity with the marginalized. Lutheran higher education calls students beyond the rewards of upward mobility and financial security so that their lives will also be attentive to people who need them most and places that call out for healing.

So That All May Flourish

Students of NECU institutions are welcomed, challenged, and equipped so that they might serve a common good.

These institutions of higher learning practice radical hospitality. This welcoming hospitality creates a place in which to re-assess the familiar and consider new options. A community of caring mentors and colleagues makes possible each student's intellectual growth, personal maturation, and vocational discernment.

In their appreciation and cultivation of diversity in its many forms, Lutheran colleges and universities welcome all and learn from all. They practice civil discourse; they encourage inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Denying conflict between faith and learning, they seek to draw on the resources of both to address human problems. Their hope is that, in so doing, students will feel called to reduce suffering and to improve the quality of life and the well-being of creation. Lutheran colleges and universities educate for lives of meaning, purpose, and responsible service.

These institutions practice holistic education of mind, body, and spirit. The essential relationality of Lutheran theology believes that individuals flourish only as they are embedded in larger communities, families, civic spaces, and ecosystems that are also empowered to flourish. Cherishing and protecting healthy communities go hand-in-hand with cherishing and protecting the wellbeing of individuals. In a dominant culture where goods are increasingly privatized and fought over, graduates of Lutheran institutions can consider the whole, creatively imagine mutual benefit, and work for the health of natural and human communities.

A Lutheran theological root that grounds this educational priority of holistic education is the portrait of a God who came into the world as a human person. Reversing all spiritual instincts to climb out of the body and escape a chaotic world, Christianity celebrates a God who deemed creation and creatures important enough to join them. The divine is present in ordinary life. Every person and every creature become potential vessels of grace, and the whole of life displays sacramental significance.

The hospitality of a Lutheran educational community is rooted in the hospitality of God. Luther's most basic insight was that humans are unable to make themselves worthy of God. God instead takes the first step by reaching out to heal broken

relationships, freeing people for flourishing. The divine-human dynamic repeats itself in human-human relationships. Human hospitality to others overcomes the fear of exclusion (“Do I belong here?”), the feeling of unworthiness (“Am I good enough?”), and the burden of self-justification (“I’m the expert – and you’re not!”). Hospitality makes deep learning possible.

In Summary

Together these educational communities train graduates who **are called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish**. This vocation is shared by diverse institutions. While the history of each institution propels it from behind, a shared calling also draws the institutions forward, pulling them into a future that brings wholeness to the world. The Lutheran theological roots which these schools have inherited deepen their educational purpose, inform their educational commitments, and anchor their educational priorities.

A rich and living Lutheran intellectual and educational tradition compels member institutions to be open to a wide variety of insights from persons with a wide variety of backgrounds. They welcome all persons of good will into their communities of learning and service. Like the tradition that grounds them, the twenty-seven colleges and universities of NECU are always in the process of being reformed (*semper reformanda*). Their foundational commitments promise to make them flexible, open to change, ready to partner, institutionally curious, and intellectually alive.

They share a calling that is both rooted and open.