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From the Editor

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From the Editor

In his recent *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, American political philosopher Michael Sandel points to hundreds of cases where encroachments of “the Market” on goods that used to be priceless corrode our civic values and our sense of civic togetherness. Some of the Market’s expansions are irksome but perhaps morally inconsequential: the trend toward monetizing gifts through those once-tacky gift cards, the scalping of campsite tickets for Yosemite National Park, or the corporate renaming of professional baseball parks. Others are ethically alarming: the sale of the right to immigrate, cash to female drug addicts if they undergo sterilization, or the rise of the viatical industry, through which a terminally ill person sells his or her life insurance to a third party who then makes money when the terminal person dies—the sooner the death, the bigger the profit (Sandel 35-37, 62-62, 136-49).

Sandel’s primary objection to the expansion of market forces into the civic realm is that putting a price on public goods or “incentivizing” consumers to choose the right thing to do (lose weight, stop smoking, care about the environment) does not simply add external motivations to internal ones but actually corrodes the latter. We no longer do what is good because it is good or right or helpful to “our neighbors.” We do it because we are paid. And when those payments cease to be worth our effort, we stop doing it altogether (Sandel 84-91).

While shared goods presently sell off at surprising rates, Sandel’s concerns are not new. Some twenty years ago, Larry Rasmussen foresaw how the Market beguiles us into believing that obligation to others is fulfilled through calculated self-interest (Rasmussen 61-76). Some two centuries before that, Adam Smith himself insisted that capitalism could help humans flourish only so long as nonmarket civic virtues restricted the domain and curbed the temperament of economic exchange (Smith in Rasmussen 41-45).

A parallel trend is already upon church-affiliated colleges and universities. Language of vocation can seem ubiquitous these days even outside of Lutheran higher education—especially since 1999 when Lilly Endowment, Inc. began giving millions of dollars in grant money to schools to examine the link between faith and vocational choices. The fact that a leading pharmaceutical company financed a good deal of vocational reflection over the past decade does not in itself degrade it. But the fact that, in these trying economic times, church-related colleges increasingly point to education-for-vocation as a distinctive “trademark,” as that which might *sell*, may raise some scruples.

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Indeed, the trend toward the commercialization, “incentivization,” and commodification of what were once shared, public goods poses real risks for the goods and aims of education. Martha Nussbaum, for one, traces our expanding Market’s corrosive effects on education. Her book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, documents the particular corrosion that worldwide pursuits for profitability have on humanistic education and its promise to educate for citizenship and democracy. When education becomes exclusively or primarily for economic growth, we lose the skills and dispositions that are at the center of humanistic education and that are necessary for human flourishing. Certainly we at Lutheran colleges and universities feel this trend with

every meeting about enrollment and endowment numbers. Most of us have ceased to resist the temptation to market the liberal arts by showing prospective students and their paying parents statistics about how many of our students open their own businesses or go on to law school. One small but important instance of this trend is the place and function of “vocation” within Lutheran schools.

Two short examples: First, at a recent Vocation of a Lutheran College conference at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, I attended a breakout sessions led by a staff person of the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America (LECNA) entitled, “Marketing the Concept of Individual and Institutional Vocation.” After chatting with Laurie Brill, the LECNA representative and session leader, I know she shares healthy reservations about how or whether the idea of vocation can be marketed without commercializing and corrupting it. But the fact that tough economic times in Lutheran higher education seemingly “necessitate that we *pitch* vocation as part of the Lutheran *brand* remains disconcerting.

Second and closer to home, Augustana College, my own institution, has incorporated the Center for Vocational Reflection within an overarching Community Engagement Center so that it can communicate more efficiently with the study abroad office, internship coordinators, and the career center. This—like marketing vocation to prospective students—*makes all kinds of institutional sense*, but the danger is that aims to discern God’s call or to find meaning in the whole arc of one’s life now principally buttresses the institution’s retention rates or the student’s career exploration. I am not claiming that anyone intends to relegate “vocation” to sound career planning in the face of economic necessities—quite the opposite, we intend to promote it. But if Sandel is right in noting how incentives often dis-incentivize us toward nobler ends, we should be careful about how we promote vocation.

How might emphases on the liberal arts and on the goal of discerning one’s calling survive and maybe even thrive in an economic culture where fear of unemployment and of not paying back student loans increasingly drive student expectation and exploration? How can vocational discernment—a practice which is, at bottom, ethical, maybe even theological and pastoral in concern—resist getting absorbed or eclipsed by careerism, the pursuit of professional advancement as one’s chief or only aim? How might we articulate *both* the “value added” of vocation *and* the ways vocation’s value resists quantification? And finally, how might we characterize human callings and the Caller behind them in ways that do

not wholly separate vocation from the investment in a career, on the one hand, but do not eclipse the first by way of the second, on the other?

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These questions are my own, and I’ve pursued them in a theological way in an essay called “Called to the Unbidden: Saving Vocation from the Market.”¹ The presenters of the 2013 Vocation of a Lutheran College conference, “Vocation: A Challenge to the Commodification of Education,” whose papers comprise the bulk of this issue of *Intersections*, come from different academic and professional backgrounds and pursue their own questions in different ways. Yet undergirding each is this shared concern to rearticulate and revalue education-for-vocation and other “distinctives” of Lutheran higher education in an economic climate that threatens to erode their most important features.

In “Welfare of the City and Why Lutherans Care about Education,” DeAne Lagerquist (St. Olaf College) takes us on a historical tour of Lutherans engaging education, with an eye toward how we got to today, can weather the present, and thrive in the future. She asks us to resist collapsing a distinction central to the Lutheran Reformation—that between a closed system of economic exchanges (whether commercial or spiritual) and “economies of the gift,” where receiving a gift enables and impels one to pay it forward through worship of God and service to those in need. While the history of Lutheran higher education was not immune from *quid pro quo* exchanges between benefactors, rulers, administrators, teachers, and students, preserving this gift economy—with its focus on the welfare of the city—will continue to remain invaluable.

In “The Value of Evoking Vocation and the Vocation of Evoking Value,” Mark Schwehn (Valparaiso University) also turns to history, this time to uncover what has been valued in the liberal arts by Lutherans and why. While “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” and cultivating a “life of the mind” remain popular reasons for valuing liberal education, Schwehn convincingly argues that Lutherans have or should have more

of a stake in education-for-vocation, that is, education “for the sake of empowering and equipping human beings for various kinds of work in the world.” He makes a case for the practicality of the liberal arts, assuring educators at Lutheran schools that they need not feel guilty about “selling” their programs by holding up such practical results. While some of this pulls in an opposite direction than does Lagerquist’s essay, one notes that Schwehn includes within liberal arts’ “practicality” dispositions often unrelated to earning potential: fidelity to family, finding joy in daily work, and responding to neighbors in need.

The 2013 Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference next included a keynote address by Lynn Hunnicutt, (Pacific Lutheran University) entitled, “Can Higher Education be Commodified? And Why Does it Cost So Much?,” which explained the rising costs of higher education and offered an economics-based model for thinking about the challenge to and by education-for-vocation. Unfortunately, because Hunnicutt spoke from notes, we were able to reproduce her talk here.

Next, Karl Stumo (Pacific Lutheran University) and Tom Crady (Gustavus Adolphus College) lean on their experience directing recruitment and enrollment offices to convey realities shared by all our colleges—that of supply and demand, of a decline in the perceived value of college and in “willingness to pay,” of “messaging” and “leveraging,” and of the diminishing role of church-relatedness as a reason to enter one of our schools. As they admit, many of the strategies they offer to face these realities will appear to underwrite “the commodification of Lutheran higher education.” Yet, the authors insist that without becoming increasingly strategic in marketing and recruitment, fewer students will benefit from our institutions.

A short sermon preached at the conference by Patricia Lull offers a word of hope in these trying times. It gets us to hear anew the promise of being valued in a world of collegiate worry and woe. We are happy to reproduce it here.

Finally, we are able to include an essay about the scope and aim of a recent valuable research project that considers how ELCA and other liberal arts schools are strategically reinventing themselves to deal with today’s challenges: Project DAVID by Ann Hill Duin and Eric Childers. Neither author currently resides at a Lutheran institution but both come from them and have spent their recent years analyzing them. Specifically, Project DAVID asks how ELCA schools create *distinction*, use *analytics*, articulate *value*, foster *innovation*, and explore *digital* opportunities to ensure future success. We include some of their initial findings because the project highlights the resolute reclamation and recreation of Lutheran institutional identities while facing the pressures of our market economy.

Please send along any letters to the editor, essay ideas or submissions, or suggestions for future topics to me (jason-mahn@augustana.edu). In the meantime, may our ongoing conversations about faith and learning and Lutheran higher education prove to be priceless.

Endnote

1. This editorial repeats several paragraphs from that longer essay (citation below); used with permission by the editors of *The Cresset*.

Works Cited

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