

THE WILD HOPE PROJECT: EXPLORING VOCATION AT PACIFIC LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY

The *Wild Hope* project invites students to ponder, “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?”* “Wild” because so much is possible and unpredictable and the complexities of the world are so great, and “precious” because the life of each individual student vitally matters and is never to get lost in the shuffle.

Wild Hope is a 2 million dollar wager by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., that improving at PLU the quality of reflection on vocation—meaning and purpose—will contribute to the university’s being a more intellectually rigorous, developmentally astute, world-informed, and theologically rich environment for students, and so a place that better helps them to become the mature, thoughtful, contextually aware, committed, creative leaders whom the world needs.

Wild Hope’s goals will be accomplished through an array of initiatives from 2003 through 2007 that:

- Challenge all in the university to grapple with vocation in an intellectually rich and world-engaged way
- Nurture students appropriately to claim meaning and purpose for their lives
- Cultivate faculty and staff to become more reflective, to acquire greater competence in facilitating reflection as appropriate in their areas, and to discover the resources of the university’s Lutheran heritage for this task.

Throughout, the project’s activities integrate four areas of student development—the life of the mind (intellect and imagination), connection to the larger world, personal development, and faith or spirituality. *Wild Hope* aims to cultivate a rich culture of creative reflection for courageous action, a culture that will transform the university into a more robust mentoring environment to achieve its mission: educating students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership, and care—for other persons, for their communities, and for the earth.

* * * * *

The Project’s Component Activities

Under *Challenging the University*, selected curriculum development activities will enhance service learning and expand opportunities for student-faculty research. “Returner Reflection” groups for students returning from study off campus will help those students integrate their experiences and deepen their reflection on questions of meaning and purpose. An especially visible segment of activity is a variety of visiting speakers and artists, all of whom will be chosen for their ability to relate to students’ critical reflection on vocation. All visitors, even when they are talking on specific developments in the world and in their academic fields, will

* Sharon Daloz Parks, paraphrasing the last line of Mary Oliver’s “The Summer Day,” a poem in the collection *House of Light* (Beacon Press, 1990), p. 60.

be asked to tell students something about their own journeys into lives of intense purpose and meaning.

The *Nurturing Students* segment features a new, highly focused orientation retreat for first-year students beginning in 2004, during which they will be challenged to begin the development of a sense of meaning and purpose and will be asked to understand that their role as students is itself a calling of the highest sort, not only preparation for something else. Specially trained Resident Assistants (RA's) will support the involvement of other students in campus activities of a particularly meaning-and-purpose stimulating sort. Among other support groups, a sustained ministry-exploration group will become available to students considering full-time ministry.

Cultivating the Foundation: Beginning in February 2004, intensive study seminars will become available for faculty and administrative staff. The seminars' vigorous and intellectual subject matter will be selected to stimulate better understanding of contemporary challenges to higher education generally and to PLU in particular, and of the challenges that PLU students face in developing their own senses of meaning and purpose in life. It is envisioned that among the seminars' outcomes will be faculty and administrative staff members' more stimulating sense of their own vocations, and the greater camaraderie that flows from common time for serious study. Other *Wild Hope* project activities that will cultivate the ability of faculty and staff to stimulate reflection on vocation include workshops to increase the competence of various participating faculty, staff, and student leaders to nurture theological maturation in students, employing methods of theological reflection that are intellectually and societally engaged, in contrast to those that are anti-intellectual or focused on individual salvation.

Project Staff

Paul Menzel, project director (Department of Philosophy, menzelt@plu.edu).

Opal Huston, assistant to the project director (Academic Advising, hustono@plu.edu).

Kathleen Farrell, director of student exploration and engagement for the project (Student Involvement & Leadership, farrellkk@plu.edu).

Patricia Killen, director of theological reflection for the project (Department of Religion, killenpo@plu.edu).