

## **From Career to Calling: What My First Year at PLU Taught Me to Ask**

I came to PLU with a pretty simple plan. I wanted to study Computer Science, get good grades, and eventually land a job in tech. I did not come here thinking about sustainability or vocation or what my purpose was. Those felt like big abstract words that did not have much to do with me yet. But something about my first year here has started to shift that. Slowly, and sometimes without me even noticing, my classes and the conversations happening around me have begun to change the way I think about what I am doing here and why it matters.

One of the first things that surprised me about PLU was how much my general education courses pushed me to think beyond my major. I expected college to be mostly about learning technical skills. What I did not expect was to be sitting in a class reading about ecological health and finding myself genuinely interested. In one course we were asked to think about how the choices made by engineers and designers affect communities and the environment. That was the first time I really connected computer science to something bigger than just building software. It made me realize that every system someone designs has consequences, and that the people who build those systems have a responsibility to think about what those consequences are.

That realization did not come all at once. It built gradually through small moments. A discussion in class where someone brought up how social media algorithms affect mental health. A reading about how certain technologies have widened economic inequality rather than closing it. These were not conversations I expected to be having in my first year of college, and they were not ones I was fully prepared for. But they stuck with me in a way that purely technical content often does not. They reminded me that the things I build will exist in the real world, affecting real people, and that I have some responsibility over how that plays out.

I started paying more attention to conversations happening in class and on campus about sustainability and about what PLU calls diversity, justice, and sustainability. I will be honest. At the start of the year those words felt like things printed on a brochure. But the more I hear people actually talk about them, the more I understand that they are describing real problems that real people are dealing with. Ecological health is not just an environmental science issue. It touches on who has access to clean water, which communities are most affected by pollution, and how the decisions we make today shape the land and air that everyone depends on to live.

One of the most meaningful readings I encountered this year comes from my Purposeful Living class. Robin Wall Kimmerer's essay "The Serviceberry" describes the way ecosystems work as a kind of gift economy where organisms give to one another without keeping score. That idea felt both completely new and somehow familiar at the same time. In computer science there is a whole culture around open source software where people share their work freely so that others can build on it. I had never thought of that as an ecological idea before, but reading Kimmerer made me see the connection. Healthy systems, whether they are natural or digital, seem to depend on that same spirit of contribution and care. And when that balance breaks down, ecological health suffers.

What struck me most about Kimmerer's framework is that it challenges the assumption that progress has to come at someone else's expense. A lot of the technology industry operates on competition. Who builds it first, who scales fastest, who captures the most users. But open source flips that. Linux, Wikipedia, Python are some of the most widely used and relied upon technologies in the world, and they were built on a logic of shared contribution rather than private gain. Reading Kimmerer made me think that this is not just a business model. It is an ethic. And it is one that I want to carry into how I think about the work I do as an engineer.

That ethic also makes me think differently about who technology is built for. A lot of software is designed with a specific kind of user in mind, usually someone with reliable internet access, a modern device, and enough technical literacy to navigate complex interfaces. But that is not everyone. And the communities that get left out of that design process are often the same ones already dealing with the consequences of ecological neglect. Thinking about vocation means thinking about that gap and asking whether the skills I am building could help close it rather than widen it.

I am still figuring out what vocation means for me. I do not have a clear five year plan or a specific cause I am dedicating my life to. But I think that is okay, because what this year is giving me is a new set of questions to carry with me. What is the technology I build going to be used for? Who is it going to help, and who might it leave out? What does it mean to use a technical skill in a way that actually supports ecological health rather than harming it? These are not questions I had when I arrived at PLU. They are questions my first year here is teaching me to ask.

My Purposeful Living class has pushed me to think about what it means to have a calling rather than just a career. Before this class I had never really thought about the difference. A career is something you build for yourself. A vocation is something that connects you to others and to the world around you. That distinction is starting to change how I think about my future in Computer Science. I do not just want to build things that work. I want to build things that matter and that contribute to the kind of ecological health that makes life possible for everyone.

My first year at PLU has not given me all the answers. It has mostly given me better questions. I came here thinking my job was to learn how to code. I am leaving my freshman year understanding that my job is also to think about what coding is for. That shift feels small, but I think it is important. It is the beginning of understanding what it means to have a vocation and not just a career. And it is the reason I believe my time at PLU is already shaping the kind of person and the kind of engineer I want to become.

## **Works Cited**

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance." *Emergence Magazine*, 2020.

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