

# Vocation matters

In March 2019, nearly 700 people representing close to 200 U.S. colleges and universities gathered in Louisville for the national conference of NetVUE, the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education. NetVUE's director David Cunningham welcomed a capacity crowd with the words of the late American poet Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Presidents, provosts, chaplains, professors and student life leaders came together to learn from one another about how to help students navigate the interplay of meaning-of-life questions, career preparation and religious exploration. They came eager to trade ideas and share resources as they continue to help their campuses be places where students cultivate lifelong practices of vocational discernment.

Now in its 10th year, NetVUE grew out of the Endowment's highly collaborative Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) initiative introduced in 1999. The purpose of PTEV was to encourage college students on 88 campuses to examine the relationship between their faith traditions and life choices. The objective: nurture a new generation of talented and committed leaders for religious communities and society.

"PTEV had a significant impact on the colleges and universities that participated," says Harold V. Hartley III, senior vice president at the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), which had many member schools that received Endowment planning, implementation and sustaining grants to fund PTEV programs on their campuses. When this grant support for the PTEV initiative ended, several presidents at participating schools approached CIC to explore ways to continue the work. "They told us they were going to miss the opportunity to learn from each other," says Hartley. "They were willing to pay dues to help sustain the program."

In 2009, NetVUE's first year, 125 colleges and universities became founding members. Since then, membership has grown by about 10 percent annually. At the end of 2019 more than 260 schools were NetVUE members. Membership dues cover operational expenses, and an Endowment grant to CIC supports NetVUE's effort so that member schools can:

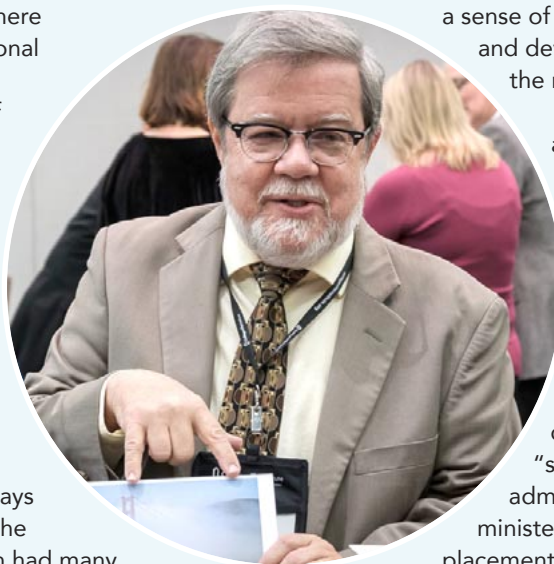
- tap into the resources of an online community
- participate in NetVUE's biennial conference
- take part in annual faculty development seminars
- interact with peers at regional gatherings
- apply for grants to strengthen their vocational exploration programs.

NetVUE schools vary in size and denominational roots. They are in every region across the United States and they run a wide variety of programs. Yet, they share

several challenges, including increased religious diversity on campuses and the need to help students develop marketable job skills while encouraging them to find a sense of direction motivated by faith and develop a commitment to serve the needs of others.

"A lot of folks are talking about developing a mentoring process that is attentive both to meaning-of-life questions and career-preparation questions," says Cunningham. "By their nature, liberal arts campuses attract students who are eager to have those conversations." He cites a "synergy" that exists among administrators, faculty, campus ministers, academic advisors and placement personnel at NetVUE schools. "All things are knitted together to help students think holistically about life's big questions before and beyond graduation."

Cunningham and his staff are leading a 10-year evaluation to learn about NetVUE's long-term impact. "We're looking at what a difference the network is making on campuses," he says. "We hope that vocational discernment will become a habit throughout students' lives. We expect one of the outcomes to be a kind of resilience so when graduates of these programs encounter obstacles or find that a vocational direction isn't working for them, they have the ability to retool and adjust."



■ David Cunningham (above) directs NetVUE.