ADOLESCENT MORAL DEVELOPMENT: EFFECTIVENESS OF VOCATI IN ENGAGING YOUTH IN THE CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THEOLOGICAL CONTENT

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Abstract

Research suggests an acceleration of adolescent physical maturity and a slowing of psychological and behavioral development compared to prior decades. This paper reports the impact of Vocati, a High School Youth Theology Institute on adolescent moral development. Our findings suggest that engagement with youth in the critical appraisal of theological content may promote increased moral development and prosocial concepts linked to positive youth behaviors and wellbeing

Background

The *Vocati Institute* is a four-year, Lilly Endowment grant-funded High School Youth Theology Institute. Under the leadership of Dr. Steven Bonner, an interdisciplinary group of faculty envisioned *Vocati* as a program that would bring together a diverse group of experienced Christian leaders with high school-aged students to inform, prepare, and encourage them for lifetimes of theological exploration, spiritual discernment, and faithful engagement in their churches and communities. The 12-month program takes place during a week-long summer residency, a monthly online component, context specific missional projects, and a culminating presentation.

As a faithful witness within the Stone-Campbell heritage the *Vocati Institute* seeks to theologically form its participants into thoughtfully engaged Christian leaders. We anticipate the *Institute* will realize this vision through the students' ongoing engagement in their local churches and communities. We expect students who complete the yearlong theology institute will become active, spiritually grounded, and moral leaders in their immediate environments. Because of this expectation, we foresee two measurable effects: (1) an increased number of students will realize their ministerial calling and pursue undergraduate degrees of ministerial preparation, and (2) those who do not pursue a calling in ministry will be informed, prepared, and encouraged as developing leaders in their immediate contexts.

The program has three goals and six objectives.

Goal #1 – Students will explore the wisdom of the Stone-Campbell theological heritage within the Christian Tradition. *Objectives:* a) Articulate applications of the year's theme, b) Explore and interact with theological resources (primary thinkers and concepts).

Goal #2 – Students will cultivate spiritual discernment through attention to God's call upon their lives. *Objectives:* a) Identify their places within God's mission, b) Learn and undertake spiritual disciplines for lifetimes of discernment.

Goal #3 – Students will engage their changing cultural context from their expanded theological understanding. *Objectives:* a) Identify significant intersections for social justice engagement between their Christian discipleship and local/global opportunities, b) Develop and implement a responsive missional project that incorporates the yearly theme.

The *Institute* draws significantly from Christian tradition in its structure and content. The daily routine of the weeklong intensive is based in the centuries-old rhythms of the monastic hours of prayer. Mornings begin with the ancient prayer, "O Lord, open our lips," and the days are punctuated with regular psalm reading, responsorial prayer, silence, and songs. Following this time of morning worship, faculty present lessons focusing on Christian ideas and theology from scripture and the church fathers. Students are asked to read selections of theological texts prior to the weeklong residency and then to engage with the ideas both in these lessons and in smaller group settings.

Theological engagement of the scholars is deliberately planned to engage the whole person. Scholars are divided into intergenerational groups made up of high school students, college-aged mentors, and adult faculty participants. These groups rotate through different interactive classes that integrate the instruction designed to impact the students intellectually (through study of Scripture), emotionally (through the practice of spiritual disciplines and artistic engagement), and physically (through kinesthetic theology). The small groups are designed to encourage personal reflection and sharing across multiple generations. Throughout the week,

students also spend time writing, praying in solitude, developing and leading worship, informal conversations taking the form of "porch-time" and "hammocking", and unstructured downtime.

Purpose

Embedded in the research design of the *Vocati Institute*, but not explicitly stated, is the desire to understand and perhaps address the diminished cognitive abilities of adolescents. The social interaction design of the *Institute* incorporates shared intensive, intergenerational engagement as well as regular interaction with older college-aged peers throughout the year. This design was informed by interdisciplinary research with mid-adolescents conducted by Dr. Bonner and other Lubbock Christian University (LCU) faculty.[1] Mid-adolescence has generally been understood to refer to those teenage years associated with high school.[2] However, we noticed that our incoming college freshman and sophomores were exhibiting markers typically associated with high school-aged mid-adolescents, namely, multiple-selves. This suggested to us that mid-adolescence, understood to be a high school-aged psychosocial phenomenon was, in fact extending into the college years.[3]

Research data collected from over 700 incoming students at LCU, Texas Tech University, and Texas A&M Kingsville demonstrated that newly entering college freshman were functioning at a lower cognitive level than high school freshman and sophomores of twenty-plus years ago.[4] While the causes for this diminishment are likely related to systemic and cumulative losses of social capital, anecdotal evidence and published research[5] suggests that cognitive development accelerates for students in environments where intergenerational collaboration, structured and supportive adult scaffolding, and personal accountability are high. Through the *Vocati Institute*, we applied our research findings to engage high school students in rigorous

theological study and practice in a safe, brave, and intergenerational communal setting. We determined that the most effective and appropriate way of measuring our program's impact on adolescent cognitive ability was through moral reasoning. More will be said about the instrument below.

Finally, the personnel for the *Institute* are primarily university-level educators with strong commitments to faith that seeks understanding. The quality of the personnel permits us to tailor our collective work to speak directly to the pressing needs of high school students. We have observed that a consistent, humble, and distinctly Christian witness and exploration foundationally forms teens for flourishing lives of holistic Christian discipleship.

Cohort 1: 2016 – 2017

The first week-long summer residency was held in August of 2016 at the Pine Springs Retreat Center in Weed, New Mexico. Following the summer residency, *Vocati* scholars interacted online monthly through Moodle discussion with interdisciplinary faculty, Christian leaders, and remained in dialogue with core program content through ongoing conversations with *Vocati* Fellows (LCU Bible Majors) and adult mentors in their congregations. The 12-month program culminated in the completion of a missional service project which was then presented at LCU at the conclusion of the program.

Design

A longitudinal mixed-methods research design is employed in the *Vocati Institute* project. We are collecting quantitative and qualitative data at baseline, 6 and 12 months for each of the 4 cohorts (2016-2020). This paper reports the findings from *Vocati* cohort 1.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through the grantee institution, Lubbock Christian University. Parental consent, child assent, and participant consent (when 18 years of age) was obtained prior to participation in *Vocati*. To be included, subjects were required to be able to read and write in English. There were no exclusion criteria. Participation in the research component of *Vocati* is voluntary. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate in the research and subjects could withdraw at any time.

Measurements

Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2)

The Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2) is considered a valid and reliable measurement of moral reasoning with established and published national norms.[6] The instrument is administered before the summer residency begins and at the end of the 12-month program. A Neo-Kohlbergian measure of moral sophistication, the DIT-2 activates the use of moral schemas to determine the extent to which an individual has developed them. The development indices in the DIT-2 utilize Kohlberg's developmental model. The stage 2/3 score considers fairness, good/evil intentions, concerns for maintaining good relationships, and personal approval. The stage 4, maintaining norms score, represents consideration of maintaining social norms, including legal systems, and roles in existing formal organizational structures. The P-score/Post conventional score is categorized as Stage 5/6 in Kohlberg's model. This score is focused on consideration of societal organization through appeal to consensus, due process, and safeguarding of minimal basic rights. The N2 score is a relatively newer, sophisticated combination of items and reflects the acquisition of more sophisticated moral thinking and the extent to which individuals reject ideas because they are simplistic or biased. The N2 is generally considered the most powerful

index of moral development. The instrument has high reliability (.78 - .82) and the Center for Ethical Development at the University of Alabama publishes the national norms.[7] We administered the DIT-2 at baseline and 12 months.

Vocati Institute Questionnaire

The Vocati Institute Questionnaire (VIQ), is a six-question, seven-point Likert-type, content-specific instrument with seven open-ended narrative questions that follows the quantitative measurement. The questions asked in the VIQ are linked to program objectives. Content validity index (CVI) was established using six content experts and determined to be .94. Test-retest reliability was conducted from pilot data and determined to have a Cronbach's Alpha of .86. The VIQ is administered at baseline and six months. Open-ended narrative data is also included in the VIQ and collected baseline at the end of the summer residency, and six months.

Protocol

After providing instructions to participants, we administered the DIT-2 and VIQ to scholars prior to beginning the *Vocati* residency and at 12-months via Qualtrics. The research team was available to answer questions participants had regarding the instruments in person at baseline and via email, text, and phone during the online administration period at 12-months.

Results

Analysis

Data were entered into SPSS version 24 by the research team. Demographic descriptive data were analyzed. Descriptive data and frequency distributions were determined to meet the assumptions of normality. Twenty-eight participants from 3 southwestern states, Texas, New

Mexico, and Oklahoma and 16 churches comprised the first cohort. Participants reported speaking English as their primary language. The following chart details cohort 1 demographics:

Table 1: Cohort 1 Demographics

Age		Sex		Ethnicity		Educational (grade) level	
		Male	Female	Caucasian	Hispanic		
14 years	3.6% (1)	57.1 % (16)	42.9% (12)	69% (20)	6.9% (2)	7 - 9	7.1% (2)
15 years	14.3% (4)					10 - 12	78.2% (22)
16 years	32.1% (9)					HS graduate (freshman)	10.7% (3)
17 years	32.1% (9)						
18 years	14.3% (4)						
Missing	3.9% (1)			24.1% (4)			

Participants completed DIT-2 scantron forms. These were mailed to the University of Alabama Center for Ethical Development for scoring. Electronic data files containing aggregated data from the DIT-2 instrument were returned to the team within a 3-week period. Results from the baseline and 12-month administration of the DIT-2 of *Vocati* participants were compared to the published national normative data. Stage 2/3 (NN: 27.7; T1: 29.08 – T2: 29.29); Stage 4 (NN: 35.3, T1: 32.46 – T2: 32.94); P Score (NN: 31.64, T1: 33.46 – T2: 35.06), and N2 (NN: 30.97, T1: 30.71 – T2: 36.41). *Vocati* scholars' DIT-2 scores showed the most significant change in the N2 score compared to the national norm. *Vocati* scholars scored 5.17 points higher than national norms at the ends of 12 months, as illustrated in the figure below.

Vocati Cohort 1
2016 - 2017
DIT-2 Scores Comparison to National Norm

Subjects with missing data in the VIQ required for the paired t-test were removed from the paired analysis. The mean scores from the VIQ suggest a significant difference in participant thinking in regard to program goals and objectives over the 12-month program timeframe. A paired t-test was conducted to compare VIQ scores prior to the summer residency (baseline) and 12 months (end of program). Participants reported a statistically significant increase in five of six VIQ questions:

2016 -2017 VIQ Significant Mean Score Difference Between Baseline and 12-month end of program	
Q1. Understand theological wisdom of Christian tradition.	$t(18) = 3.897, p < .001$***
Q3. I am better able to engage my culture as a result of this program.	$t(18) = 2.926, p < .009$**

4. I am more familiar with and have a better understanding of the primary thinkers, theology, and wisdom from the Christian tradition as a result of experiencing this program.	t (18) = 2.935, p < .009**
5. I am better able to practice private and communal spiritual disciplines as a result of experiencing this program.	t (18) = 2.357, p < .030*
6. I am better able to be intentionally engaged with issues of morality, ethics, and justice and have a broader vision of the world as a result of experiencing this program.	t (18) = 2.731, p < .014*

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

We also collected narrative data from a focus group at the end of the week-long summer residency. Focus group participants were asked seven open-ended questions derived from the VIQ. Three members of the research team independently read and reflected on the data using a qualitative interpretive approach. Similar ideas were noted, clustered, coded, categorized, and cross-checked for comparison. Eleven themes emerged from the narrative, focus-group data:

- "Awareness of self"
- "Awareness of others"
- "Be Present"
- "Use Talents"
- "Erase Boundaries [e.g. to loving others]"
- "Break [e.g. communication] Barriers"
- "Listen"
- "Empathy"
- "Eye Contact"
- "Accepting"
- "Trusting"

These qualitative themes were then examined in relation to the Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development (PYD). A review of PYD frameworks determined that the "Five Cs model of PYD is the most empirically supported framework to date."[8] The model focuses on adolescent strengths and is framed by developmental systems theories. It suggests that positive youth

development occurs when the strengths of adolescents are aligned with "positive, growth promoting resources in the ecology of youth."[9] As a result of this alignment, PYD can be operationalized by the Five Cs – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring.

C	Definition[10]
Competence	Positive view of one's actions in domain specific areas including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills (e.g., conflict resolution). Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities (e.g., decision making). School grades, attendance, and test scores are part of academic competence. Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations, including entrepreneurship.
Confidence	An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; one's global self-regard, as opposed to domain specific beliefs.
Connection	Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship.
Character	Respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity.
Caring	A sense of sympathy and empathy for others

The Five Cs have been used, generally, to describe the characteristics of adolescents who are thriving. Over time, when adolescents manifest these Five Cs they are understood "more likely to be on a life trajectory marked by a mutually beneficial person – context relations that contribute to self, family, community, and civil society…and less likely to be on a trajectory of risk and problem behavior such as substance abuse, delinquency, and depression."[11]

Our examination revealed that *Vocati* scholars aligned with these categories. That is, qualitative themes reflected concepts found in each of the Five Cs.

Competence	Connectedness	Confidence	Character	Caring
Idea of social, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and moral competence	Idea of bonding	Idea of self-efficacy, self-determination, belief in future, and a clear and positive identity	Idea of prosocial norms and spirituality	Idea of sympathy and empathy for others
"Awareness of self" "Awareness of others"	"Erase boundaries" "Break barriers" "Be Present"	"Use Talents" "Accepting" "Trusting"	"Listen" "Eye Contact"	"Empathy"

When considered holistically, the Five Cs generally summarize the goals of positive youth development. Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman argue that these categories are helpful "when thinking about what a particular program, organization, or initiative offers to youth."[12] The alignment of our qualitative findings with the Five Cs suggest that the *Vocati Institute*, as a program that seeks to intentionally inform, prepare, and encourage adolescents for lifetimes of theological exploration, spiritual discernment, and faithful engagement takes advantage of and aligns with the enormous potential for growth with the adolescent years represented by *Vocati* scholars. When considered alongside the quantitative data from the DIT-2, together, this data suggests that *Vocati* programming is positively impacting the overall trajectory of adolescent wellbeing.

Discussion

For some twenty-plus years, the Lilly Endowment has strategically impacted adolescent theological development and vocational discernment through its High School Theology Programs (HSTPs) embedded in many of the nation's seminaries. All of these programs, in a

dazzling array of offerings, promoted adolescent theological agency. The collective wisdom and research of the first twenty years of HSTPs was collected and published in "How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education – If We Let It" edited by Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson. In chapter one, they posit three ways that these programs have impacted churches: 1) *High school theology programs are yielding talented and committed young leaders for Christian communities,* 2) *High school theology programs stretch ecclesial imaginations – not just intellects and behaviors,* and 3) *High school theology programs suggest new forms of theological education.*[13] The chapters in this book offer abundant evidence that intentional theological programming can positively impact the theological formation of youth.

The *Vocati Institute* is part of the second wave of funding from the Lilly Endowment Inc. to create High School Youth Theology Institutes (HSYTIs) embedded in colleges and universities in North America. The *Vocati Institute* seeks to add to this growing body of research. Findings from *Vocati* cohort one suggests youth theological programming which intentionally engages mind, heart, and body may be helping to accelerate adolescent moral development which in turn impacts prosocial concepts linked to positive behaviors and well-being.[14]

Limitations to this research include a small, self-selected sample of youth primarily from the Church of Christ tradition. Additional research is underway with cohorts 2 and 3 and a comparison group from a large local youth group has been added in the fall of 2018.

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[1] Bonner, Steven and Dean Culpepper. *Extended Midadolescence & Entering College Students: Quantitative Evidence of Diminished Logical and Moral Cognitive Development.* Association of Youth Ministry Educators, National Meeting, Chicago, IL, 2013.

[2] Laurence Steinberg, *Adolescence* 8th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), p. 7.

[3] It is beyond the scope of this paper to addresses the wide variance in the literature regarding the age and stage of adolescence, however, it is enough to say that our theory would sufficiently address the shift that JJ Arnett picked up on and has since called Emerging Adulthood.

[4] Based on published data from the Center for Ethical Study, University of Alabama (http://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu).

[5] Susan Harter, *The Construction of the Self* 2nd edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012), pp. 94-118.

[6] http://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/

[7] http://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/

[8] Bowers, Edmond et al. "The Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development: A Longitudinal Analysis of Confirmatory Factor Structure and Measurement Invariance," *Journal of Youth Adolescence* Vol 39, 2010, p. 721.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Hamilton, Stephen, Mary Agnes Hamilton, and Karen Pittman, "Principles for Youth Development." in S.F. Hamilton & M.A Hamilton (eds.) 2004, *The Youth Development Handbook: Coming of Age in American Communities*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 3.

[13] Dean, Kenda Creasy and Christy Lang Hearlson, "Taste Tests and Teenagers: Vocational Discernment as a Creative Social Practice." in Dean & Hearlson (eds.) 2016, *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education – If We Let It*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp.20-23.

[14] See description in Background section above.