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NEWS

For immediate release

Ouachita awarded \$37,000 NetVue development grant to encourage discovery through reflective writing



By Madison Cresswell

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ARKADELPHIA, Ark. – Earlier this year, Ouachita Baptist University was awarded a \$37,000 program development grant from the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) for its proposal “Discerning Vocation Through Writing.” The two-year grant is intended to equip faculty to better assist students in discerning their vocation through reflective writing exercises.

According to its website, NetVUE is “a nationwide network of colleges and universities formed to enrich the intellectual and theological exploration of vocation among undergraduate students.”

The 2020-2022 NetVUE funds will be used to train select Ouachita faculty in methods of writing for discernment of vocation; for them to equip other faculty, staff and students through workshops to help them discover their callings through writing; and to enrich already existing interdisciplinary intensive writing courses at Ouachita. It also will be a resource as they develop new courses that involve discovering vocation through writing.

The grant builds on a previous professional development project grant awarded to Ouachita for the 2018-2019 academic year for the proposal “Articulating Vocation as Story for the Common Good.” This

previous grant provided Ouachita faculty and staff the opportunity to study and discuss vocation for themselves in order to better help students identify their vocations. The study also aligned with the campus-wide theme for the 2018-2019 year, “meaningful work,” a focus from Ouachita’s mission statement.

“Without offering our students a pat answer or a career in the bag, we resolved that the answer to – or even the question of – meaningful work is not always straightforward,” wrote Dr. Amy Sonheim, professor of English, in a 2019 article of the *Ouachita Circle*, Ouachita’s alumni magazine. “The truth about God’s callings is that He works relationally in our lives, revealing that what first appear to be individual callings are more often understood in community and what first appears to be one’s lifelong work in the future is academic work in the present.”

Sonheim, who secured both NetVUE grants and serves as the campus coordinator, wrote in the 2020-2022 NetVUE grant proposal that, in discussions following the initial grant, the faculty “realized – without a doubt – that we cannot simply teach our students what to think about their own vocations. Our students, like ourselves, must discover their callings. In short, we propose that, like us, our students might discover their own callings by using writing as a tool for discernment.”

While the “Discerning Vocation Through Writing” grant originally was to be implemented on campus beginning in the spring 2020 semester, Ouachita students were sent home in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic and the changing social and political climate later in the summer, the Ouachita NetVUE faculty team postponed its planned workshops and events and instead shifted its focus to use reflective writing to address students’ current concerns.

“When the hot summer of the pandemic brought intensified physical, social and political unrest, we renewed our mission to use reflection – through listening and writing – to work hard for our corporate vocation for peace and cooperation,” Sonheim said.

“The proposal has always been on method, not content,” Sonheim added. “Without changing the proposed method of the grant – ‘using writing for reflective inquiry to discover vocation’ – we claimed relevant content to inquire about. Giving the escalating racial tension at large in our country ... it seemed criminal to me not to reasonably engage with paying close attention to the lives of our young students of color at Ouachita.”

The Ouachita NetVUE faculty team’s decision culminated in a campus event earlier this month that discussed the graphic novel “Hot Comb” by Ebony Flowers. Led by Ouachita’s Multicultural Organization Reaching Equality (MORE) and Sigma Tau Delta international English honor society chapter, the event was an opportunity for Ouachita students to have guided conversations about race and culture outside of Black History Month in February. Key points from the novel were considered, along with discussions about the care and styling of African American hair and also about diversity among fellow friends, classmates and professors.



(From left) Arkadelphia hair stylist Sarah Price and Ouachita’s MORE president Dayja James led a discussion during the “Hot Comb” campus event in mid-September funded by Ouachita’s NetVUE grant.

“At Ouachita, we already believe our calling is to live in community, and living in community well, at best, involves listening,” Sonheim said. “Reading is a form of listening, so we read *Ebony Flowers*’ graphic novel. We listened to each other reflect about key issues raised in the book. Then, we listened for an hour to a discussion between Arkadelphia hair stylist Sarah Price and MORE president Dayja James addressing the emotions, assumptions, hiring practices and sense of belonging associated with the hairstyles of African American women. Everyone in the lecture hall wrote down their reflections on the subject.”

The discussion was made available to the Ouachita campus community over Zoom and allowed 35 physically-distanced students to meet in person. The NetVUE grant also provided copies of the graphic novel to students.

“The idea was to create a setting in which all people could connect on some level to reach understanding, gain knowledge and perspective and allow the unheard to be heard,” said Dayja James, a junior biology major from McGehee, Ark., and president of MORE. “Our world is in need of unity, and I believe this event was the start to bridging some gaps here at Ouachita.”

“I think books bring people together in a unique way because they offer a bridge between two potentially opposite ways of life,” said Tray Armstrong, a senior English major from Rockwall, Texas, and president of Sigma Tau Delta. “Books can be a common ground and a jumping-off point, much like ‘Hot Comb’ was for us at the book discussion.”

Faculty and staff who attended the event and book discussion included Jerusa Carvajal, assistant professor of Spanish; Jason Doroga, assistant professor of Spanish; Jennifer Pittman, director of the Speer Writing Center; Nicole Porchia, director of academic success and Multicultural Student Programs; Monica Rutledge, support specialist for academic success and Multicultural Student Programs; Sarah Smith, lecturer of English; Doug Sonheim, professor of English and holder of the Clarence and Bennie Sue Anthony Chair of Bible and Humanities; and Dr. Johnny Wink, Betty Burton Peck Professor of English. Porchia, Pittman, Rutledge and Doug Sonheim coordinated the event.

While other faculty development and student writing workshops that were originally planned for the 2020-2021 NetVUE timeline are still on hold due to changes in the academic calendar and COVID-19 safety guidelines, Sonheim said the “Hot Comb” discussion fulfilled the purpose of the grant, and the grant’s overall “mission has not changed.”

“We faculty are still going to read books, we are still going to take seminars on how to use reflection better in our teaching,” she said. “But for one night, we seized the moment to reflect on a subject that connected us to what was transpiring on the national stage from our vantage point at Ouachita – how the particular experiences of our black students are worthy of attention.”

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