

Holly ([00:07](#)):

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast. I'm your host Holly Tate, vice president of business development here at Vanderbloemen. At Vanderbloemen, we serve all types of Christian organizations from churches to ministries, Christian nonprofits and Christian schools, both secondary and higher education.

Holly ([00:25](#)):

So on today's episode, our executive search consultant Brian Jensen, talks with Erin Stamile, the enrollment management coordinator and career consultant for the honors college of Baylor university in Waco, Texas. As a Christian university, we are excited to learn from Erin as she serves as a resource and guide to students as she helps them form patterns of connections, service, and intentional interactions that they'll carry into life beyond college, through living learning communities.

Holly ([00:54](#)):

Brian talks with Erin about how her own college experience in a living learning program created her desire to uncover and foster students' potential in her current role and how these programs impact students' lives during and after college by providing community and purpose.

Holly ([01:10](#)):

So for all of our Christian listeners out there that are helping with Christian schools, whether you're a head of school, a teacher, or a board member of a Christian school, I know that Erin's conversation with Brian will be helpful to you as we cultivate the next generation for Christ. So tweet your takeaways from today's show, using the hashtag Vandercast and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where we post behind the scenes content. We'll even posted a show notes inside that Facebook group. Without further ado, here's Brian's conversation with Erin Stamile.

Brian ([01:50](#)):

Erin, thank you for being with me today. I'm really excited to have you here.

Erin ([01:55](#)):

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Brian ([01:57](#)):

Good. Well, let's jump in. I'd love to start by just hearing a little bit more about your story and what's exciting about your current work you've just wrapped up or you're currently wrapping up an academic year, which is always an exciting time of year. So tell me a little bit about what's exciting right now.

Erin ([02:14](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Well, a little bit of background on my story. One of the things I've been thinking about is that most students, they say that they leave home right to go to college. And for me it was almost like going away to college was like coming home. I feel like that's where my story really started. I left upstate New York for the first time and started school in a small Christian college in Pennsylvania and it was there that I really became passionate about my studies for the first time. I felt true belonging in my friendships and was excited to learn more about myself and my place in the world.

Erin ([02:57](#)):

And so I link much of what I do now and what I'm passionate about right now, back to my freshman year, to living learning program experience that I was able to have at my college and it was through this sort of program on the third floor of my residence hall that I began to understand my identity and calling and even more maybe my purpose in the world and that purpose in relationships.

Erin ([03:25](#)):

And I knew from that freshman year that I had found something special. And I've really been continued to network of course since then. And so today I'm in the honors college at Baylor university. I'm the enrollment management coordinator and career consultant. So the great thing about this position is I have the opportunity to work with students from their very first days of interest in the university all the way through graduation and then even beyond alumni.

Erin ([03:53](#)):

And I found that I'm working with students a little bit less these days than I have in positions in the past, but I'm really enjoying sort of the strategizing and development that goes behind the scenes, some of our great initiatives. And I really liked kind of maximizing opportunities to benefit students and their families and not just thinking about students, but sort of this greater picture of who they are before they can and also who they're going to be when they leave.

Erin ([04:21](#)):

And I've been enjoying thinking about the big things and how we can impact students through our programs and also in the very small things, how we can impact them day to day. And what I love most I think about this position is that I'm also surrounded by colleagues who truly care for our students and also care about one another. So that's the exciting work going on right now.

Brian ([04:45](#)):

Yeah, that's awesome. Well, I may or may not know that little college in Pennsylvania that you had a great experience. So I know you had a great experience and we're going to talk a little bit about some of what you reflect on in the chapter that you contributed.

Brian ([05:03](#)):

But first I want to ask you something, because you and I have recently talked about faithful service and leadership during times of transition and you've kind of gone through one of those yourselves. I'm wondering, could you reflect on some of the changes you've gone through recently and what do you think you've been learning? What have you been learning or what have you been focusing on recently?

Erin ([05:30](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Well, over the past few months, the past year, I've taken a lot of time for reflection, which to be honest, isn't something that comes naturally to me. I'm always kind of powering forward. So stopping and reflecting has been really important and valuable in this transition. My husband's in Enneagram instructor and so the language of the Enneagram and its meaning has become so woven into our lives in past nine years.

Erin ([05:58](#)):

And so a lot of my thinking has sort of come around the Enneagram as well in the power that it gives us for self awareness and understanding, but also grace for myself and for others and their differences. And it's been really important to me in reflection that to think about self awareness and how this is key to our relationships and into our work in higher education. And so through my reflection, I've been thinking about my work and my calling and my vocation as I transitioned into a new role this past fall.

Erin ([06:37](#)):

I would say I have a refreshed resolve to be a part of deeply meaningful work. And I want to do this work with others who believe in its capacity to do the great things that we say we're all about. And I've been really excited and grateful to now work with people who are engaged and wanting to do great things for students who are engaged and see what can come out of that.

Erin ([07:07](#)):

So I think through this past year or so I've find myself continuously called back to sort of this grounding truth in higher education that we're here to make an impact. We're here at our desks each day and I'm sitting here, writing emails, making phone calls, updating websites, hosting meetings. And all of this really is because we care about people, not just our students even, but also our faculty and our staff and care about their potential in the world and fostering that for them.

Erin ([07:41](#)):

And I find myself recently drawn to those with a grounding, steady, solid passion for making our university the best that it can be. And I've been inspired in this by people like you, people that are compelled by their faith and people that are compelled to really work within our mission to do meaningful work and serve with committed hearts.

Brian ([08:15](#)):

Erin, you and I could talk for a long time about just the, well thank you for pointing that out with me, but I look at your own commitment to Christian higher education and developing your own sense of that and approaching it with an engaged spirit and a faithful perspective, looking at it through a broader lens than just on a particular paradigm or just a particular population, but looking at the university as a whole and I think that's just really exciting and needed for such a time as this.

Brian ([08:59](#)):

And now having said that, I want to jump into just a particular part of higher education, which, but that's why I've asked you to jump on here today as well. I want to talk about some really cool thoughts you've shared and you and I have talked about this for years now and you've done some really cool reflection and writing on living learning communities. So I'd love for you to explain what you mean by that phrase and then give us an idea of how those are set up at Baylor university where do you currently work.

Erin ([09:32](#)):

Yeah, so living learning communities or living learning programs. They go by a few different names, but essentially they create opportunities for students to live together on campus in intentional atmospheres and communities that offer them a sense of purpose and gather them for specific reasons. So students might be gathered by hall or portion of a hall, they might be paired with an academic unit or some other type of developmental or departmental partnership such as student development, or they might be gathered just around a theme or an interest or even a major.

Erin ([10:10](#)):

So once the students are sort of gathered together for these purposes, typically the living learning programs offer events and other opportunities for programming. They might have shared classes, advising, and essentially they have additional layers of holistic support for the students that are in them. So many of these programs offer opportunities for service, they offer study groups and community involvement. They might house the students in a certain way that makes sure, they're capitalizing on opportunities for student engagement. And ideally they offer faculty involvement as well.

Erin ([10:50](#)):

So at Baylor, living learning programs were created years ago by a group of committed and passionate faculty and administrators with the idea of promoting student success and not just academic success, but personal, spiritual, professional success both as students and beyond. And I think they remain strong here at Baylor because over the years there's been essentially an infrastructure developed around them by those who believe and saw the power that these programs have to improve student lives, but also to increase recruitment and benefit retention and to support students in academic units who traditionally need additional support. So the university's dedicated resources like onsite classes and faculty offices that they're building in residence halls.

Erin ([11:44](#)):

They've created positions like faculty in residence who live in the residence halls and program directors who are, staff lines through some of the academic units. And so they've got a lot of commitment towards these programs that is really woven them into the fabric of the residence hall experience. So about 50% of students who enter Baylor live in one of our living learning programs.

Erin ([12:16](#)):

So some are geared, yeah, it's pretty amazing. And some are geared around an intro as more of a general interest and passion, maybe like leadership and others are very specific to academic units, like the school of education has the one, the honors college and so I'll pick on the honors college a little bit.

Erin ([12:37](#)):

So we have the honors residential college where essentially it's an interdisciplinary program where students gather who are taking honors courses, who are maybe working on their thesis, they're interested in deeper levels of thinking and conversation and know they might be a physics major or a math major or a philosophy major. They're coming with this shared purpose and experience that they are honors college students.

Erin ([13:03](#)):

So the research shows that the strongest LLPs are those that feature a partnership between student affairs and academic affairs and those that display a essentially a strong focus on academics, but also those that provide space for opportunity to connect with faculty and staff and other students. So connection and relationships are really at the core of what makes these LLP successful.

Brian ([13:33](#)):

And I know you've had a lot of experience with these firsthand and researching about them, which I want to get to in just a second. But back to what we were talking about earlier, the broader vision of

what Christian higher education could be and should be, is in a way lived out in the way Baylor has set these up from the beginning and lives them out on their campus. Would you say... You can find living learning communities across the country at the hundreds of colleges, but would you characterize Baylor's setup as unique as kind of a bar to be set for the way they've approached them?

Erin ([14:16](#)):

I would, and I think there's a great number of reasons why, but the very infrastructure, the very basic concept of a living learning community or living learning program, residential college at Baylor is designed so well.

Erin ([14:34](#)):

So we have multiple resources committed to student growth and development. And one of those is just human resources. So each residence hall that's a living learning community has a faculty in residence program director who is committed to just thinking about all the things that make the community above and beyond a typical residence hall.

Erin ([14:57](#)):

There's a resident chaplain in every community and so there's a chaplain that's there and dedicated 20 hours a week, lives in the community and they're there just to serve that spiritual component and spiritual development for our students to be sort of a counselor and a listening ear and a support network for our students.

Erin ([15:17](#)):

And of course there's the residence hall director and then all of the residence hall staff who are called community leaders. So Baylor from the very beginning I think it set these up to be very strong just by designating all these resources. And then many of our program directors also have graduate assistants for them and a whole team of student leaders that works in partnership with the community leaders.

Erin ([15:47](#)):

So any typical residence hall might have a great robust community, but the faculty in residence and the program director in on the student leadership that comes with it is really a bonus for the living learning programs. And they're all there to help create these programs that I mentioned and all this extra support for the students within. So you can really do a lot with all of those people dedicated to the same mission and vision. So absolutely, I think Baylor does a fantastic job in the academic units. Their commitment to the partnership is absolutely key.

Brian ([16:23](#)):

And that's an amazing setup. And here I have now set you up for the next question with some obvious things we can draw back on. But you've done a ton of work and you've had a lot of experience with living learning communities from your own undergrad experience through working and living in them. So from your firsthand experiences, I want you to just explain a little bit, tell us about the transformative power of these types of communities. Why are they so powerful?

Erin ([16:55](#)):

So nationally, I mean, we know, right, that there's been so much research that's been done on LLP. So we know it's sort of this basic level that students who are involved in living learning programs have stronger levels of student growth, development, engagement. They're more committed to the community, they're transitioning much easier. So we know that students who are a part of these are thriving and they're absolutely a best practice in higher education and do incredible things for our students and our faculty and administrators as well.

Erin ([17:35](#)):

But it was so cool being able to live this out personally. And it's something that I can't exactly tell you why I chose to be a part of it my freshman year, other than I just felt compelled and drawn to this community. So since freshman year in 2003 all the way to 2017 I lived in a residence hall and most of those years was involved in a living learning program. So 14 years. And my husband and I were married and living 10 of those years in a residence hall together.

Brian ([18:07](#)):

So you had a child during that time.

Erin ([18:10](#)):

We had a child and a dog that just slept in the window and watch the students walk by. So yeah, we certainly did all of our adult life in residence halls until just recently. So as a student and then as a spouse and as a grad student and an administrator. And so I would say I experienced firsthand the power and the formation that comes through intentional community through these communities and just through the people there, but through the advanced and creative use of space, the way that Baylor has defined these in other universities as well, to really foster community through the layout in, through the design, through where the faculty and residence door opens up to the community.

Erin ([18:59](#)):

I mean, all of these things are thought through and have an impact on the way that the students live within them, but also the way that the faculty and staff and their families live as well. Every night at five o'clock after work, we'd take our dog up to the courtyard and the students would watch out their windows for us to come out and then they would all run down and play with us and our dog. And we ended up talking for an hour as our dog runs around.

Erin ([19:22](#)):

So these simple things that become habit and a part of our day are really transformative I've seen living learning programs and experience them as a home. It's a place where you have belonging and a place where things start and they grow and they change. And it's also a place where I have and many have failed and do fall. And it's okay to fall. And because there's support, all of these people that are talked about, all these layers of support are there. So there's people that are walking beside you, but there's also, as a student, there are students who are walking ahead of you and they're students who are coming behind you that you can mentor and be a part of their lives. So it's not even just anecdotal.

Erin ([20:13](#)):

I mean I think that there's the big massive research, there's all of my personal experiences, but what I found most exciting, I think as an administrator was looking at the data of the actual program that as

running and seeing what impact that was having on students. And so one year, for example, I looked at the retention rate and the persistence rate in a specific major.

Erin ([20:38](#)):

And in one year I found that the students who lived in our residence hall in the living learning program compared to students of the same major and the same entry or in a typical freshman community, 18% more students that lived in the living learning program retained to the university, 18% more.

Erin ([20:59](#)):

And of that group who retained eight, that also happened to be the same number, but 18% more of those students persisted in their challenging major. And so huge, I mean huge stats for any community. I would say 5% would have been amazing. These results are just incredible that we're not just saying that we offer community. We're not just saying we offer support. We're giving it, we're doing it and it's making an impact on our students and even more than our students making impact on our programs and our departments longterm and how successful they are longterm would these students who are engaged in invested,

Brian ([21:38](#)):

There's so many cool things just wrapped up in that we could spend more time talking. I just thought of, we could talk about, I think there's a really cool aspect of stewardship of place that's happening when you intentionally design not just programs but places like this. It is incredibly powerful. But I want to hit on one point, and this is I think really important because you write about this.

Brian ([22:06](#)):

And you were just getting to some of those because you spend a lot of time talking about living learning communities as liturgies and you've take some from Jamie Smith's work about liturgies shaping who we are and defining what we love. And I would love for you to talk about Smith's influence in your own work and how communities like these prepare students for post-college life and work.

Erin ([22:35](#)):

So Smith's work I think is key to the idea of liturgy and living learning programs. Smith talks about our actions, our patterns, habits, routines, and all of these things are not shaped by our ideas because we know, if it were, I would be going to work out every morning before work and bringing a salad for lunch every day. But sometimes I like to sleep in and have a cheeseburger. So we're not doing what we know, but we're doing what we love.

Erin ([23:13](#)):

And so our everyday moments and decisions, they're shaping our lives and our identities and becoming a liturgy. The things that we love are defining us as individuals. And so living learning programs essentially create routines and rhythms. This idea of, coming out to play with the dog every night at five o'clock when you see your chaplain and his wife outside.

Erin ([23:34](#)):

These are things that are shaping our students' lives. And that's one small example of many things, but the goals we make, the things we pursue, the things we're driven to achieve and how the people around

us are encouraging in those things. How and where we spend our time, how we engage with those who are around us. If during college you're shaped through every day higher levels of conversation and a strong sense of community and a supportive and challenging environment, then these things will, we hope will be the things that students are a part of in the future. They are part of these things in their work environment, in their neighborhoods, in the greater community, in their churches. And so longterm, I think the liturgy that's experienced through LLPs has the opportunity to shape students' lives.

Erin ([24:27](#)):

And on a personal note, it certainly was my experience. I was passionate through, my first year in college about doing life with others. As I mentioned, it was like coming home, it's like this is it, this is community. This is knowing my neighbors and serving and truly connecting with those around me. And so it's not just saying these bold ideas but living them out and thinking about how they can impact you longterm.

Erin ([24:55](#)):

And it's something I've certainly seen in my students and in others who served in leadership roles. But my husband and I too, I mean when we were house searching here in Waco, Texas, we were committed to finding, a modest home in the city and not in a bedroom community in the suburbs, but in a place where space, as we talked about and where space encourages connection, we wanted a house that had space for guests and one that was within walking distance of really good friends and we wanted one that was close to a park where we could connect with our neighbors. We wanted streets that would allow us to take bike rides and pop in on friends who live nearby.

Erin ([25:34](#)):

And we ended up buying a home, thankfully with all of these things. But first of all like "Oh it happens to be on a corner. The whole backyard is exposed to all the neighbors walking at, there's no privacy." And, gosh, after a couple of years, my husband and I were just sitting outside in our backyard last night and having a little picnic and with our son and all the neighbors are going by and looking in your backyard. So it's on our picnic blanket and we're waving and we stop and talk to them. And now we're committed to not putting up a privacy fence, not putting up more barriers to connection, but actually keeping it open and creating that space again where we can spend time with people while we're hanging out in our backyard.

Erin ([26:15](#)):

So we have been formed I think for many, many years and had such a great opportunity to be in a residence hall for 14 years. But this close community and connection formed our life. And we now desire to create physical spaces that foster connection and conversation through church, through home and not just space for exciting, fun things, but in tangible space for hard and challenging conversations and just create a home and an atmosphere, whether that's at work or at home, to provide a space that's welcoming for all. And I think that this, I'm Rena, I really truly believe that this commitment and desire to do this was shaped through my experience for freshman year for living learning program and continued through now.

Brian ([27:06](#)):

It's really cool to reflect on that. And I think you can be an advocate because you're a product of this because some would say, critics might say, well, living learning communities or even residential college living itself is just a safe bubble we set up with unrealistic expectations for how life really is. But what you're saying, and I would agree with you, is that what you're doing is intentionally setting up communities, living scenarios that promote and help students to cultivate this idea of the good life and what living really can be like post-college. Not some pie in the sky picture of what living can be like, but intentionalized living is a real possibility even outside the walls of a college campus.

Erin ([27:59](#)):

Absolutely.

Brian ([28:02](#)):

So I want to ask you one more question because I mentioned you can find living learning communities all over the place, but there's probably a lot of colleges. I know there's a lot of colleges who are wondering, well that sounds great, but I don't think that'll work here. Or we've tried that and it didn't work. So what encouragement would you give to institutional leaders who are considering the possibility of establishing intentional communities like this, or re-establishing maybe if they've tried them before, but they're just unsure of the value or even unsure of how to start something like this?

Erin ([28:37](#)):

Well, I would start by saying the development of the living learning programs is not for the faint of heart. It definitely takes a lot of commitment and a real vision for what it could be at your institution. So, we know that they offer incredible value to student development. And fortunately, if you're looking to advocate for a living learning program, the value comes through in the numbers. It comes through in recruitment and retention and GPA and persistence and engagement.

Erin ([29:10](#)):

So if you're looking to start when you'll be able to express both of these sides, not just how great it could be, but here's the data, here's what other colleges like ours maybe are doing. That's available now. And it's easy to tap into. So if someone is interested in starting one, I would say first it's most important to understand your university, to seek understanding on the climate and the culture and the needs of your institution.

Erin ([29:39](#)):

Also finances and any barriers that there might be that you could foresee coming into play as you consider creating an LLP and what could be gained. Each institution is so different in so many ways and what specifically for your institution could be an amazing outcome of these programs.

Erin ([30:00](#)):

So with all that in mind, if you are, are looking to do it, I would say find a mentor, whether they're in or outside of your institution. Find someone who will walk with you through this process and connect with others and plan for time because it's going to take awhile. So gathering a group of committed individuals, consider a partnership with a key person who understands your vision and support you through it. And maybe go to other campuses even and look at what they're doing well and begin to vision cast for the future. But plan for time. These are collaborative programs and then any

collaboration, I think it makes it so wonderful to have collaboration. You can accomplish so much more, but it's going to take more time.

Erin ([30:45](#)):

So one of the things that I'm really passionate about, and I think as I've mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, reflection. I think reflection is so key to reflect and revisit your initial goals. What are you saying you want to accomplish and are there things you're setting out to do? Actually going to accomplish those things and continue that loop of reflecting and revisiting your major goals.

Erin ([31:12](#)):

And then of course a proposal and in the chapter outline, some key elements of what a proposal should entail and why it should exist, how it might function, what are some of the defining characteristics of your program. And so think through those things and create formal proposal. Make sure gets to the right people at the right time and continue the conversation. Each university that creates a living learning program has had to navigate some very muddy waters. There's a lot of crossing organizational boundaries, which again is what makes it so incredible. But it's an ambitious goal for student development and can create fantastic opportunities for your students and for your faculty and for your staff and your departments. So I would encourage anyone to continue on the path. It's absolutely worth the rich reward at the end.

Brian ([32:07](#)):

Yeah, and it's an exciting project. I know that over the years in the work that I was overseeing, a number of times people came to me with proposals for, Hey, can we take this and turn it into even short of just a whole full blown living learning community, but like an intentional floor. Can we do something with this area of campus to make it?

Brian ([32:31](#)):

And it's exciting when people come with the ideas of intentionality behind the experience that can have, the transformative experience that students can have on our campuses. And that's just really exciting work. And it's been really exciting just talking to you about this idea because I'm with you Erin, and that's one of the reasons I love that you jumped into our project and shared what you did in the book because it really is transformational in the lives of students and in the lives of our institutions, I think.

Brian ([33:06](#)):

And so thank you so much for being with me today and sharing some of those thoughts and some of your own story. That's been really awesome to hear. So encouragement to your work and, and as you enter the summer season, enjoy that summer season as well. So thank you Erin.

Erin ([33:24](#)):

Thanks Brian.

Holly ([33:28](#)):

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Holly ([33:56](#)):

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