
1-1-2016

A Distinctive Vision for the Liberal Arts: General Education and the Flourishing of Christian Higher Education

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Recommended Citation

Wells, Cynthia, "A Distinctive Vision for the Liberal Arts: General Education and the Flourishing of Christian Higher Education" (2016). *Higher Education Faculty Scholarship*. 1.

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

A Distinctive Vision for the Liberal Arts: General Education and the Flourishing of Christian Higher Education.

This article argues that a coherent and inspired general education program, infused with a deliberate vision of the liberal arts, is crucial to the flourishing of Christian higher education. This article begins by describing the context and status of general education, emphasizing how this element of the educational program falls short in embodying a distinctive mission of Christian higher education. This article then contends that a vibrant vision of general education will be grounded in particular aspects of a liberal arts education that fulfill crucial outcomes of the Christian university, specifically cultivating the formal virtues and fostering meaning and purpose. The article concludes with recommendations for advancing the aims of general education within Christian higher education, highlighting the benefits of a common curriculum and intentional faculty development.

In his recent book, *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be*, Frank Bruni ([6]) argues that where one attends college does not determine who one becomes. Although Bruni's book makes an important case against "college admissions mania," the frenzied fixation on getting into the most selective colleges, his rhetoric that college is not decisive in identity formation goes too far. Bruni's argument that college choice does not determine whether graduates win a Pulitzer Prize, found a Fortune 500 company, or run for President of the United States may be accurate; however, he conflates identity with professional success. Bruni's examples address what an individual accomplishes in the world, but do not reflect that individual's full personhood. Christian higher education is, in fact, predicated on the ideal that a particular college can and should be determinative in shaping "who you'll be."

The pedagogical question is how institutions that are part of the movement of Christian higher education actually implement such a lofty ideal. In many ways, Christian postsecondary institutions in the United States offer professional preparation that is similar to any other college or university. Accreditation standards for academic programs ensure that the disciplinary content of nursing, chemistry, and engineering, to name a few examples, will largely be the same. However, the manner in which disciplinary content is taught, and how the curriculum intentionally helps students make sense of their lives as they prepare to serve in their professions, can and should be remarkably different in Christian higher education.

Although there are many ways to fulfill this vision, one way in which Christian colleges and universities should be distinctive is through the general education program. This dimension of the educational program has the potential to be a "primary site of implementation, coherence, and community" in embodying the mission of Christian higher education (Fant, [17], p. 28). Christian institutions that offer a distinctive and missional general education curriculum provide a "vibrant countercultural witness" (Glanzer & Carpenter, [21], p. 299). Too often, however, general education in the Christian college reflects the broader academic culture rather than serving as a countercultural witness. It is time to imbue our vision for general education with the distinctive ideals of Christian higher education.

Several provocative questions undergird this article, among them: What are distinctive contributions of Christian higher education in the present? How does general education in the

current context embody these distinctives? What role should general education play in ensuring the future flourishing of Christian higher education, as well as the flourishing of students who graduate from these institutions? To explore these queries, I begin by describing the current status of general education, emphasizing how this element of the educational program often falls short in respect to the goal of fully and coherently embodying a distinctive mission of Christian higher education. I then argue for a vibrant vision of general education in Christian higher education that is grounded in aspects of a liberal arts education that distinctly fulfill key outcomes of the Christian university. Finally, I offer specific recommendations for advancing the distinctive aims of general education in Christian higher education.

Let me be clear at the onset: General education is not the sole means to achieve these ends, nor does it fulfill these ends in isolation from other dimensions of the academy. However, general education offers a distinct and vital space that holds tremendous and largely untapped potential to advance the aims of Christian higher education. Ultimately, this article argues that a coherent and inspired general education program, infused with a deliberate vision of the liberal arts, is crucial to the flourishing of Christian higher education in the 21st century.

The Context and Status of General Education

Historically, general education has been considered a hallmark of higher education in the United States (Gaston, [19]; Rudolph, [44]). This component of U.S. higher education has been held in high esteem and even considered to be a curricular model by educational leaders shaping postsecondary offerings in other countries (Gaston, [19]; Handstedt, [25]; Roche, [43]; Tsui, [50]; Zakaria, [53]). Nevertheless, general education has been harshly critiqued. Boyer ([4]) identified general education as the "neglected stepchild" (p. 2) of undergraduate education. Moreover, general education has been criticized as lacking coherence (Johnson & Ratcliff, [29]; Menand, [38]). At best, today's higher education context reflects a deep uncertainty regarding the value of general education (Delbanco, [12]; DeMillo, [11]; Hacker & Dreifus, [23]; Keeling & Hersh, [30]; Keller, [31]; Kronman, [33]; Levine, [34]; Taylor, [49]).

General education in the Christian college is not immune from critique (Fant, [17]). For some time, the curriculum of the Christian college has been criticized for disorganization and lack of unity (Sandin, [45]). Mannoia ([36]) characterized the design of general education in the Christian college as "haphazard." Furthermore, Glanzer ([20]) has described general education as being subservient to "subject disciplines instead of a larger vision for human flourishing" (p. 389). Glanzer's critique is particularly biting in pointing out that not only is general education in disarray, but that a vision of human flourishing, which should be paramount, has been hijacked by academic overspecialization. A lack of vision surrounding general education in the Christian college has given rise to confusion regarding its purposes and stultified our ability to fulfill educational aims that can and should be central to Christian higher education.

Some broader context regarding delivery models of general education is necessary not only to comprehend the challenges but also to navigate the way forward. There are three prototypes for delivering general education: distribution, core, and individual development (Allen, [1]). The distribution model does not dictate specific content or ideas; rather, it exposes students to a wide range of ideas and a variety of disciplinary content and methods by requiring them to complete a

certain number of courses outside the major. The courses that can be selected to meet general education requirements within a distribution model are departmental courses (e.g., disciplinary, specialized) that students choose across knowledge categories. For example, if students are required to fulfill a social science requirement as part of the general education curriculum, then courses such as Introduction to Psychology or Sociology 101 meet these general education requirements but also serve as departmental courses that introduce students to the major. The basis of the distribution model is to provide "breadth" to complement the "in-depth" study of the major (Allen, [1]; Menand, [38]).

The core model, on the other hand, presumes that there is a shared body of ideas that should be required for all students (Allen, [1]; Hanstedt, [25]; Menand, [38]; Nelson & Associates, [40]; Nussbaum, [41]). The core model requires all students at an institution to complete a series of prescribed courses. These are interdisciplinary courses taught by faculty drawn from a variety of fields. By design, all or most general education courses are outside the academic department and developed specifically for nonspecialist students (Hanstedt, [25]).

A third model for general education focuses on individual development; that is, advancing intellectual skills, interpersonal abilities, and personal growth through a deliberately created set of general education learning objectives that cut across the curriculum (Allen, [1]). The key distinction is that general education models that revolve around individual development focus on process rather than specific content (Katz, 2005).

The core model used in its purist form, in which all content is prescribed, is rare across higher education in the United States. In recent years, the individual development model has been evident in moves toward competency-framed general education programs.[1] A competency model of general education frames learning outcomes around identified skills, abilities, and capacities required for all undergraduates within an institution.

The distribution model is the most widely adopted model of general education (Allen, [1]; Handstedt, [25]). Although a distribution model ensures that students are exposed to a variety of ways of thinking, it falls short—when used in isolation—in helping students integrate knowledge or apply knowledge to particular concerns of professional aspiration or individual formation. Moreover, distribution models do not ensure that all students explore queries of meaning or put their intellectual skills into context. Furthermore, distribution models do little to help students make sense of general education itself, given that students pick and choose across knowledge categories but then are forced to make connections independently. These downsides must be mitigated in Christian higher education.

Misperceptions regarding general education's purpose are evident across constituencies in Christian higher education (Fant, [17]). For students, general education is often considered something to *get out of the way* rather than a desired destination or even a route worth exploring. Even worse, students too often believe that general education courses *get in the way* of major courses (Fant, [17]; Handstedt, [25]). In the minds of many faculty, general education is more a battlefield for academic turf than fertile ground for student learning and personal formation. Glanzer ([20]) argues that "[f]aculty committees housed in disciplines with particular

professional ends tend to approach the task of shaping general education... as an arena in which their interests, classes, and professions need to be defended" (p. 389).

Misperceptions of general education extend beyond students and faculty. Individuals responsible for financial oversight of the institution consider general education to be a means to a balanced budget. Some general education courses are taught in large sections by entry-level faculty, whereas upper-division courses are delivered in small sections by tenured professors. In this manner, general education courses offset costs for upper-division courses (Fant, [17]). Senior academic leaders tread lightly on even the possibility of modifying general education, recognizing that such a conversation will open up the proverbial can of worms. Without a robust, shared vision for general education, varied perspectives only further perpetuate confusion and thwart efforts for renewal.

A clear and coherent argument for general education in the Christian college is particularly important amidst the current realities facing higher education. Across U.S. higher education, there has been a rise in alternative credit completion, such as standardized exams and dual enrollment of high school and college credits, as well as an increased number of students beginning their undergraduate coursework at community colleges in order to save costs. Students are transferring ("swirling") across multiple institutions en route to a baccalaureate degree (Allen, [1]; Selingo, [46]). Fant ([17]) identifies the particular challenge this poses for Christian colleges and universities, noting that "students are missing out on the very courses that are often the institutions' most distinctive courses in terms of mission and content" (p. 41). Further, the technical content of many fields has increased the number of credits required for the completion of the major, eliminating curricular space once held by general education (Fant, [17]). The means to achieving a general education, the message surrounding its importance, and the curricular space for advancing general education in Christian higher education are all at risk.

A lack of clarity surrounding the aims of general education today has particular significance for Christian colleges and universities (Wells, [51]), in part given that such institutions are called to "unity of purpose" (Eaton, [16], p. 138). For Christian colleges, the stakes related to a coherent curricular framework are high (Fant, [17]). In fact, Holmes ([27]) has argued that the general education program is a "key indicator of a Christian college's commitment to distinctive Christian higher education" (quoted in Mannoia, [37], p. 104). Glanzer and Ream ([22]) argue that Christian colleges and universities must "structure their curricula differently so that it coheres with their particular aims" (p. 205). It is one thing to pronounce the need for clarity of purpose. However, clarity of purpose presupposes a convincing and shared rationale for general education in the Christian university. A generative and feasible rationale for general education is found in an intentional employment of liberal arts ideals tailored to the distinctiveness of Christian higher education and to the flourishing of students.

A Vibrant General Education Vision for 21st-Century Christian Higher Education

What would an inspired and coherent purpose for general education look like within the distinctive context of Christian higher education? Coherence of purpose requires alignment among the social context, institutional mission, and educational program being offered (Boyer, [3], [4]; Boyer & Levine, [5]). Toward this end, a coherent general education program will fulfill

societal needs that connect with institutional mission; moreover, these intentions will be clearly evident in the educational program itself. That is to say, general education will be *externally* coherent in that programs will help students comprehend the world, not only as it is but as it should be, if we are to fulfill our distinctive mission for Christian higher education. General education will also be *internally* coherent in that, at the institutional level, students will comprehend a clear purpose for general education courses and understand how these courses connect to each other, to their major, and to their cocurricular endeavors.

As a step toward realizing a coherent vision for general education in Christian higher education, I offer two broad claims. First, the liberal arts are crucial in fulfilling the aims of Christian higher education, and general education is the *only* curricular place that ensures that all students benefit from engaging the liberal arts. Second, general education in the Christian university should be grounded in particular aspects of the liberal arts that are tailored to advancing distinctives of Christian higher education. I will address the first claim by offering a brief historical context of the liberal arts in higher education and address why and how general education is an essential space in which to enact the aims of a liberal arts education in the context of the Christian university. I will then turn to the second claim, laying out how two marks of a liberal arts education are requisite to fulfilling the mission of Christian higher education in the present. I conclude with a modest proposal for how Christian colleges and universities put these ideals into practice.

General Education as a Vessel for a Liberal Arts Education

The term *liberal arts* finds its origins in the concept of *artes liberalis*, connoting those branches of knowledge suitable for a free individual. In the context of the first colleges in the United States, this ideal was composed of seven liberal arts. The first three, framed as the *trivium*, focused on cultivating an appreciation for language: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. To these were added the *quadrivium* that focused on the mathematical-physical arts: geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (Kimball, [32]). Through focusing on these seven liberal arts, the colonial colleges purposed to prepare young men for clerical and civic leadership, and likely further study in law, medicine, and theology (Cohen & Kisker, [9]; Rudolph, [44]). Today, the liberal arts have broadened to include the arts and sciences (Roche, [43]). Another way to conceptualize the branches of knowledge that are rightly considered to encompass the liberal arts today is a threefold categorization of the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences (Deresiewicz, [10]).

The branches of knowledge associated with the liberal arts in the present are not only broader than the *quadrivium* and *trivium*, but also serve a larger function. In addition to being ends in and of themselves, the liberal arts serve as a means to contextualizing the specialized knowledge that has grown rapidly in higher education (Taylor, [49]). Today, the liberal arts provide an avenue to "place new and specialized knowledge within a larger mosaic" (Roche, [43], p. 6). Essentially, the liberal arts advance a holistic function that is crucial to Christian higher education.

General education is the primary venue through which most students access and benefit from a liberal arts education. The majority of college students today do not major in liberal arts disciplines (Ferrall, [18]; Menand, [38]; Zakaria, [53]).[2] As specialized education became

more common over the course of higher education's history in the United States, the liberal arts were retained in general education programs (Fant, [17]). In Christian higher education today, one pivotal function of general education programs is to ensure that all students benefit from a liberal arts education. It is to these benefits that I now turn.

Marks of a Liberal Arts Education in Christian Higher Education

The arguments in favor of a liberal arts education are vast and varied (Chopp, [7]; Roche, [43]). Two aspects of a liberal arts education, however, are particularly salient for Christian colleges and universities, considering their mission for the 21st century. First, the liberal arts afford students the opportunity to advance the *formal virtues*, the "cultivation of those intellectual virtues that are requisite for success beyond the academy" (Roche, [43], p. 10). Second, engaging the liberal arts advances *meaning and vocational formation*, that is, forming identity and character as well as influencing commitment to a higher purpose (Chopp, [7]; Roche, [43]). Although these two purposes overlap, it is helpful to consider them separately and then to address their incarnation in the context of general education.

Formal Virtues

Cultivating the formal virtues means being excellent academically, a fundamental calling of Christian higher education. A liberal arts education helps students develop "formal virtues" such as the "ability to listen, analyze, weigh evidence, and articulate a complex view" (Roche, [43], p. 52). The liberal arts assist students in sharpening their analytical and verbal skills as well as expanding their creativity (Roche, [43]). The liberal arts also cultivate students' ability to appreciate difference and comprehend equity (Hurtado, [28]; National Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, [39]). Being able to communicate well is also a virtue of liberal arts education. These formal virtues are critical outcomes for students in Christian higher education.

However, higher education is being critiqued for not achieving these very skills. Arum and Roska's ([2]) publication of *Academically Adrift* bemoans college students' inadequacies in "critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication" (p. 121). Employers repeatedly emphasize the need for college graduates with requisite skills in creative thinking and collaboration (Sportelli, [48]), and employers indicate that these skills are in short supply among college graduates (Hart Research Associates, [26]). Focusing on the liberal arts as part of an undergraduate education is thus important for all of higher education, and it is vital for Christian colleges and universities.

The liberal arts resonate with the Christian ideal to be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that we may "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2, New Revised Standard Version). Listening, communicating ideas, and setting vision are skills needed among Christian leaders in and beyond the workplace. From the local church to international development agencies, we need Christian leaders who can identify challenges and discern ways to respond. The liberal arts offer a means to developing critical minds with strong convictions about the world, including how the world in which we live falls short of God's

vision. It is critical that Christian colleges place the liberal arts at the heart of their educational program in order to cultivate the next generation of thoughtful, visionary Christian leaders.

The formal virtues associated with the liberal arts also cultivate the ability to learn over a lifetime (Deresiewicz, [10]; Menand, [38]). Our calling as Christians is to continually learn and grow in order to bring the world ever more in line with the reign of God. The world's challenges are not static; thus, the analysis of the challenges faced by local, national, and global communities demands continual attention. A typical refrain is that the liberal arts helps students learn "as the world learns"; for the Christian college, the learning outcomes of the liberal arts are even more complex. Christian institutions certainly need to cultivate lifelong learners; graduates of Christian colleges and universities must be prepared to be a faithful and wise presence in the face of dynamic change. However, cultivating critical minds capable of lifelong learning must work in tandem with instilling a sense of connection to a higher purpose among our Christian leaders.

Meaning and Vocational Formation

Instilling a sense of meaning and purpose is a characteristic task of Christian colleges and universities. Yet the pressure to focus solely on career preparation, and even more specifically the emphasis on the economic utility of a degree as a barometer of higher education's value, has steered colleges and universities away from questions of meaning and identity (Deresiewicz, [10]; Kronman, [33]; Lewis, [35]). Unfortunately, Christian higher education is falling short of its call to educate for meaning. According to Eaton ([16]), the Christian university's purpose has been limited to developing skills by which students have the ability to "operate at the highest levels of our society" (p. 50) without providing a "map of meaning by which [students] might effectively use those competencies" (p. 50). Christian colleges must instill more than competencies.

While maintaining a commitment to professional preparation, Christian colleges and universities must help students make sense of their education and their lives. Christian higher education beckons students to consider knowledge in light of the larger question of *to what ends*, and to do so from a Christian perspective. This obligation to "help students think about their future commitments more deeply and in more complex ways" (Glanzer & Ream, [22], p. 191) results in students who are able to apply a Christian perspective to the "various academic pursuits that help us to understand the world and humankind's place in it" (Fant, [17], p. 35). Christian leaders who know themselves, including their weaknesses and gifts, and who have cultivated their passions, are crucial to the many contexts in which graduates of Christian higher education serve.

As the liberal arts advance the formation of identity and character, they encourage students to explore queries of personal meaning that are at the heart of the Gospel, including: Who am I? What makes a life significant? What are my convictions? How will I live and act? In the original sense, the liberal arts were *liberal* in that they sought to free individuals from selfish desires and delusions (Fant, [17]). The aims of a liberal arts education resonate with the Christian ideal to "be not conformed to the self" (Eph. 4:22a, New Revised Standard Version). Christian higher education should be "compelled by a transforming vision" toward "freeing students from the dominant values and dispositions of the day" (Slimbach, [47], p. 74).

Further, the Gospel imperative requires that we consider questions of identity and personal character within a context beyond the self: What is love and friendship? What is justice? What are my obligations to others? What are theirs to me?[3] These questions illustrate how the liberal arts are a means to vocation in the broadest sense of the word. As Roche ([43]) has articulated, "To develop a vocation, an ultimate concern or animating purpose, is to ask the question, how does the world differ from how it should be?" (p. 157). To cultivate Christian vocation is to consider how to respond to Jesus's command to love thy neighbor (Dockery, [14]). Students are transformed by engaging larger questions of meaning and purpose (Parks, [42]). For example, one recent comprehensive, empirical study determined that "sustained conversations with students about questions of purpose" resulted in a "recalibration of post-college trajectories that set graduates on journeys of significance and impact" (Clydesdale, [8], p. xvii). Christian higher education must be designed to enact such trajectories of significance.

Taken together, it is clear that Christian higher education has a high calling. As Christian academic communities, Christian colleges and universities further formal virtues so that our graduates will demonstrate intellectual clarity and incisive analysis. Christian institutions influence the formation of persons who can continue to advance the formal virtues beyond their college years, as well as apply these virtues to our dynamic, global context in ways that bring the world into greater alignment with the reign of God. In addition, Christian colleges are charged with influencing identity and character so that graduates are grounded in Christian identity and in a moral orientation of Christian vocation. These aims cannot be achieved, despite the best efforts of excellent faculty, in courses designed primarily to impart technical knowledge or to advance professional preparation (Mannoia, [37]). Tackling these two intersecting liberal arts ideals demands focused examination of the role and function of general education in the Christian college. Specifically, a vigorous but more tightly configured and thoughtfully crafted general education program that reflects the distinctive vision for Christian higher education is a crucial and achievable means to fulfilling these lofty ideals.

Reimagining General Education: A Modest Proposal to Re-Center Human and Institutional Flouris...

A general education program provides a pedagogical space to place crucial objectives at the heart of Christian higher education (Fant, [17]). A general education design rooted in liberal arts education that focuses on advancing formal virtues as well a meaning and vocational formation is a way to ensure that human flourishing takes center stage in Christian higher education. As stated earlier in this article, general education does not achieve these aims in isolation from other arenas in the academy. At the same time, a thoughtfully crafted and carefully implemented general education program provides a space in which these aims can be intentionally cultivated. Moreover, it enables other educational arenas to augment and reinforce these essential aims of general education in Christian higher education. Finally, such a design, when coupled with faculty development and well-equipped cocurricular educators, empowers a wider community of guides who can walk alongside students as they journey through and make sense of general education.

What might it look like to thoughtfully configure general education in the context of Christian higher education so that all students experience a salient educational vision of advancing formal

virtues as well as meaning and vocational formation? On one level, each institution's particular mission and context heavily influences its vision of general education. At the same time, Christian higher education is called to do things differently than the status quo in higher education. If general education in Christian higher education is to be distinctive, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of the distribution model. The distribution model alone falls short in advancing the integrative education that is so critical to achieving a distinctive vision of Christian higher education. The distribution model does advance formal virtues but it does not, on its own, enable students to comprehend the *so what* of these virtues. Moreover, the distribution model of general education does not facilitate the connectedness that is necessary to meaning-making. We must mitigate these concerns without resorting to overly simplistic and unconstructive arguments to return to the primarily prescribed core program of the early 20th century.

A thoughtfully crafted common curriculum combined with a more tightly configured distribution model is a feasible step to advancing formal virtues as well as meaning and vocational formation in general education. The aim of the common curriculum, a modest subset of the curriculum that is shared by all students, is not to replace all distribution requirements or to negate or usurp the major. A common curriculum enables the integration of a variety of disciplinary content in order to achieve the aims of a liberal arts education in a distinctively Christian context.

A common curriculum offers a clear pedagogical space in which to articulate, reaffirm, and assess the achievement of formal virtues and meaning formation. A common curriculum includes shared content as well as shared learning objectives. Shared objectives ensure that formal virtues, such as intellectual clarity, incisive analysis, and rhetorical ability, are advanced. To advance meaning and vocational formation demands more than shared objectives, but extends to shared content. At the same time, there needs to be room for faculty to make these courses their own; that is, common content is crucial, but does not mean that every text across all courses is the same. Rather, shared content will compose a portion of the courses in the common curriculum. Institutional mission and theological heritage should dictate the particularities for shared content; the point is flexibility and unity rather than constriction and uniformity. By emphasizing shared experience, a common curriculum provides faculty and students with "effective points of reference" and "teachable moments" (Fant, [17], p. 40) for discussion. While the common curriculum might be as few as six credits, a common curriculum provides a connective space across the educational experience that enables students to discuss ideas and texts with those beyond their own disciplinary contexts and friendship groups. It also offers a space in which faculty can help students make and renew connections between their studies, their experiences, and their own Christian vocation.

What will moving to a common curriculum require? It will require compromise and making our general education distribution requirements smaller. It will also require letting go of our preconceived ideas as to what constitutes a Christian liberal arts education. As noted previously in this article, there is no consensus as to which disciplines comprise the liberal arts today. As such, it is simply inaccurate to say that a liberal arts education is incomplete without devoting a distribution requirement to any particular academic discipline. As noted earlier, the curricular space available for general education in higher education at large is shrinking amidst greater demands from professional accreditation programs. Thus, a common curriculum cannot occur

through accretion. We cannot simply add general education requirements in order to make room for a common curriculum. There must be reductions in the general education distribution requirements in order to make space for a common curriculum but also to make better use of general education on the whole.

Pointedly, *more* general education is not necessarily *better* general education. As one hypothetical illustration, in a context of concern about increased credits for the major crowding out the 50 general education credits in a 120-credit degree, the more pressing concern is whether those general education credits provide a meaningful and comprehensible education in the first place. A common curriculum combined with a streamlined distribution model enables Christian higher education to embed distinctive liberal arts aims within the current academic circumstances.

General education is a curricular space in which doing more with less makes sense. To offer one radical idea, perhaps the preparation of students in terms of written communication and verbal communication should be addressed in the common curriculum rather than advanced via departmentally siloed requirements "owned" by the English and Communication departments. After all, are not the ability to write and speak interconnected? Moreover, both are tied to engaging significant ideas, whether in reading significant texts or in experiencing quality oratory. Another example would be to embed theological reflection in some aspect of the common curriculum, thereby reducing some of the credits in the biblical studies area but placing theological reflection more solidly at the center of the educational program. In order to implement and sustain a common curriculum, it will be crucial and generative to prioritize related faculty development programs.

One strategy is to convene faculty reading groups that explore the history and function of general education, the liberal arts in higher education, the formal virtues, and meaning and vocational formation. Because general education evokes such a variety of interpretations, faculty will benefit by reading practical accounts of general education, such as Handstedt's ([25]) *General Education Essentials: A Guide for Faculty 2012*, as well as historical accounts of curricular formation in the United States, such as Rudolph's ([44]) *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*. Reading *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (Roche, [43]) creates opportunities for generative faculty exploration of liberal arts ideals for the present, such as their ability to advance the formal virtues and vocational formation. For general education renewal to be effective and sustainable, faculty need to unlearn their preconceived notions of general education in order to create space for actualizing purposes that better fit the present.

A related strategy is to offer faculty workshops texts that explore meaning and identity from a Christian lens. Faculty members in Christian higher education need strong and ongoing support in their efforts to design assignments and shape class discussions that advance Christian meaning for undergraduate students. Faculty workshops might revolve around the theological concept of the Imago Dei or involve discussion of texts such as N. T. Wright's ([52]) *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. Faculty workshops should embrace deep theological ideas but also create space for practical pedagogical development that includes not only course design but also assignment development. Supporting faculty in implementing a more thoughtful general

education program will require exploration of curricular design in higher education as well as theological exploration. Such resources will benefit not only general education, but also the broader curriculum, given that being excellent Christian teachers and scholars is the ideal in Christian higher education.

The task of renewing our commitment to general education is vital, particularly given its capacity for providing pedagogical space in which to advance aims of a Christian liberal arts education. To advance this intent, we need to cultivate the formal virtues that undergird academic excellence and enable students to consider these virtues in broader Christian context. Moreover, Christian higher education must inspire the meaning and vocational formation that undergird a commitment to both Christian identity and vocation. Infusing general education with a deliberate and inspired vision of the liberal arts and embedding that vision in a thoughtfully crafted delivery model is crucial to the flourishing of Christian higher education and, by extension, to the human flourishing of our graduates.

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Footnotes

Competency-framed models of general education should not be confused with competency-based degrees. A competency-based degree is an "academic credential awarded for demonstrated competency rather than for the accumulation of credit hours through taking courses" (Lumina Foundation, 2014, p. 44).

Degrees in the humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics accounted for 40% of the bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States in 2011–2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2013, Table 311.60, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/>).

*Questions are drawn from the work of Ernest L. Boyer, *General Education: The Integrated Core*, [4]; Edward Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, [24]; and Mark Roche, [43], *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?**