Training, Transforming and Transitioning: A Blueprint for the Christian University"

Michael Zigarelli

Messiah College

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/facscholar

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/facscholar/34

Recommended Citation
Zigarelli, Michael, "Training, Transforming and Transitioning: A Blueprint for the Christian University" (2011). Faculty Scholarship Papers. 34.
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/facscholar/34

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

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.
Training, Transforming and Transitioning: 
A Blueprint for the Christian University

Currently under review at the Journal of Education and Christian Belief 
(Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning, Calvin College)

Michael Zigarelli
Associate Professor of Management
Department of Management and Business

Abstract: With respect to students, Christian universities have at least three interrelated missions or aims: training, transformation and transition. That is, their role is to educate or “train” students to be excellent in their field, to co-labor with God to “transform” students to think and to live Christianly, and to “transition” students into culturally-relevant positions of leadership. This paper examines briefly the dimensions of training and transitioning, and then engages in a deeper analysis of the transformation dimension, since that is the principal distinctive of the Christian university. It then proposes six conditions necessary to pursue student transformation.
Training, Transforming and Transitioning:
A Blueprint for the Christian University

Once upon a time, God created a nation and seeded it with 4,146 institutions of higher learning\(^1\)—universities, colleges, seminaries and other post-secondary schools—to teach His children truth and how to apply it rightly. But some of these institutional seeds fell on a path and were stolen away by birds before they could ever take root. Some of the seeds fell on rocks and sprang up, but then withered for lack of moisture. Other seeds grew amongst thorns and were choked to death before they could flourish. Some of God’s seeds, though, fell on good soil and took root and grew strong, yielding a harvest 100 times what was planted.

Let me follow Jesus’ lead and explain the parable. The schools on the path are those that were founded as secular institutions—schools that were stolen away from God at their naissance and have never attempted to educate people from His point of view. The schools on the rocks are those “church-related” or “historically-Christian” schools that were founded to honor God and that pursued this mission for awhile, but whose weak roots caused the original mission to die. Now they are indistinguishable from secular schools.

The schools amongst the thorns are those Christian schools that still have an overtly-Christian mission statement, but whose mission has been choked out by many things—fear that they’ll lose prospective students if they are too overtly-Christian, faculty trained in secular schools who cannot or will not to teach from a Christian perspective, open admissions policies that culminate in a highly-secular student culture, and so on. The thorns are as diverse as they are deadly.

Then there are the schools planted in “good soil”: Christian institutions fully committed to honoring God in all they do, where there is a primacy of spiritual formation and education from a Christian worldview, and where faculty members endeavor to teach and write from this same perspective. As a result, students in these institutions are trained to think Christianly—to see the world from a Christian worldview—and are more like Jesus when they are graduated than when they first enrolled. The legions of alumni from these “good soil” schools are serving people and leading change in their various vocations in ways that please God, as are the faculty through their scholarly, popular press, artistic, volunteer, and practitioner work. Indeed, these schools are yielding a harvest 100 times what God sowed.

Now admittedly, this is an imperfect analogy because it implies that only one category of university bears any fruit. That’s where the analogy breaks down since this is clearly not the case. But the main point of the parable is that God calls certain institutions to develop

\(^1\) This is the total number of non-profit public and private colleges and universities in the United States (2007 database), according to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Center for Education Statistics (this database is publicly available at [http://nces.ed.gov/ipedspsas/](http://nces.ed.gov/ipedspsas/)).
people to engage the world with pure hearts and penetrating Christian minds. More specifically, God invites His postsecondary schools to prioritize what we have come to call “faith integration” or “faith and learning integration” or “integration of faith, learning, and living” (that is, cooperation with God to teach all subject matter from a Christian perspective), as well as “spiritual formation” (that is, cooperation with God to help people become more like Jesus in their character). Along the way, God cautions His schools to protect their “roots” and to circumvent the myriad “thorns” that can threaten or even thwart their distinctively-Christian identity.

This article proposes a framework for becoming the kind of “good soil” university that returns to the Master Sower the greatest possible harvest. I do not by any means offer the ideas herein as the “one right way” to achieve that end; neither do I offer these ideas as a comprehensive treatment of the Christian university’s role in the world. Rather, my intention is to present one Biblically-consistent conceptualization of that role, as well as several practical ideas for how to pursue it faithfully.

I. THREE MISSIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

With respect to students, their primary constituents, Christian universities have at least three interrelated missions or aims: training, transformation and transition. That is, as depicted in Figure 1, their role is to educate or “train” students to be excellent in their field, to co-labor with God to “transform” students to think and to live Christianly, and to “transition” students into culturally-relevant positions of leadership. I will examine briefly the dimensions of training and transitioning, and then engage in a deeper analysis of the transformation dimension, since that is the principal distinctive of the Christian university.

A. The Mission to “Train” and “Transition” Students

The first and third dimensions of the model are reasonably self-explanatory. Regarding training, there is, in essence, a psychological contract between universities and their students (and the students’ parents, if they are the actual paying customers): In exchange for all of the time and money invested, the university experience will yield a fair return in the form of exceptional knowledge, skills, and abilities, employability (or admission to graduate school), and a promising career trajectory. By their very nature in the marketplace, universities serve as this critical training ground.

---

2 Christian universities, of course, have many stakeholders, from donors, to alumni, to employees, to the local community, to the broader society in which they operate. As such, they have important purposes beyond the development of students. However, my discussion in this article will be limited to how Christian universities fulfill their mission with respect to students.
But for the Christian university, this dimension of its mission is more than just a reciprocal obligation. It is better conceived as a divine mandate, deriving from the Biblical theologies of stewardship and excellence. God entrusts students to His universities and calls the trustees, administrators, faculty and staff to be faithful stewards of these students, shaping them into highly-skilled people who are then better equipped to serve in the vocation to which God calls them.

In fact, excellence should permeate everything that Christian graduates do, since they confess with Paul that “whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31, cf. also Col. 3:23-24). As a result, Christian higher education should produce outstanding journalists, outstanding teachers, outstanding medical professionals, lawyers, business people, social workers, counselors, scientists, and so forth. How could it be any other way, since Christians—and the universities that train them—simply have no business doing anything with mediocrity? The “training” mission, therefore, has a theological basis, not merely a pragmatic one.
Similarly, the mission to “transition” people—to place them in positions of leadership—also finds its impetus in scripture. We do not put a light under a bushel; we do not train up an army to patrol unimportant territory; we do not cultivate ambassadors only to sequester them to their own country (cf. Matthew 5:13-16, Matthew 28:18-20, 2 Corinthians 5:20). Rather, there is restorative work to be done in the world. God invites His people to do this work in schools, businesses, government, the media, the arts, courtrooms, and of course, in our churches—to be agents of His common grace by sustaining and renewing the institutions He created, bringing them into closer alignment with His will. This is nothing less than our “cultural commission.”

A practical outworking of this “transitioning” role entails fully-resourcing the university’s internship and career services function, and including its leader—for all intents and purposes, a “dean”—on the university executive team. This is not primarily for competitive advantage reasons (though a strong placement system will surely serve that end quite effectively). First and foremost, Christian universities should prioritize career placement so that their graduates are in roles where they can serve people and be a positive influence on their organizations, their communities, and on the culture generally. The “good soil” university embraces God’s redemptive mission in this world and they make it their own by helping students and alumni secure meaningful positions of leadership.

B. The Mission to “Transform” Students

As elemental as “training” and “transitioning” are to the Christian university mission, they are not the core distinctives. They are necessary conditions for a Christian university to grow in “good soil,” but they are surely not sufficient since universities from many worldview postures pursue these same two purposes. Instead, the central distinctive of the Christian university (and I would argue the key determinant of whether it is planted in “good soil”) is the extent to which it is wholeheartedly committed to “transformation” of its students—the extent to which the university takes seriously its mission to renew minds (Romans 12:2). Faithful, effective Christian schools (and this applies to primary, middle, and secondary schools as well) are those that engage in systematic faith integration and systematic spiritual formation in their curricular and co-curricular activities, developing people to see the world from God’s perspective and to be more like Jesus Christ.

The abandonment of this purpose, intentional or otherwise, explains why so many “historically-Christian” schools are now indistinguishable from their secular counterparts, and it further explains why even some schools that do retain Jesus in their mission

---

statement then crowd-out Jesus from their curriculum and co-curriculum (this may be akin to the seeds that fell on “the rock” and “amongst thorns” in the opening parable). The former schools no longer embrace Christian formation of students; in fact, many actively eschew this on the grounds of “diversity,” “inclusion,” and “tolerance.” And the latter schools pay mere lip service to the development of a Christian worldview and Christian character. Though such ends sometimes appear in the forefront of their advertising and Web sites, they are relegated to the periphery of students’ educational experience.

For clarity purposes, allow me to address the faith integration and spiritual formation elements sequentially, rather than simultaneously.

1. Faith Integration⁴ to Develop a Christian Worldview⁵

For some Christian schools, including some members or affiliates of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), the task of integrating faith and learning amounts to little more than faith and learning “interaction,” in the words of Arthur

---

⁴ I use the term “faith integration” with caution, recognizing that in some circles it has been misused in an epistemologically-arrogant manner. As Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen show, some suggest that “faith has the right, and indeed the duty, to critique learning but learning has no authority to critique faith” (Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 23. See also Perry L. Glazer’s critique of integration language in “Why we should discard ‘the integration of faith and learning’: Rearticulating the mission of the Christian scholar,” Journal of Education and Christian Belief, 12:1 (2008), pp. 41-51.) At the same time, I am inclined to agree with Duane Litfin that “integration” remains an appropriate way to conceptualize our task, because we are, in fact, simply re-integrating what Enlightenment thinkers separated, namely the Christ-centered unity of all knowledge (Conceiving the Christian College, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), pp. 128-129.) Moreover, Julie Reuben uses similar language to close her formidable study of how morality was severed from the realm of knowledge in U.S. higher education: “Scholars hoped that the distinction between fact and value would lead to more reliable knowledge … (but) [s]ince it has proved impossible to completely separate fact and value, we should begin to explore ways to reintegrate them” (emphasis mine; Julie Reuben, The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 269.)

⁵ When I use the term “Christian worldview,” I am referring to knowledge informed by the fundamental pillars of Christian theology as expressed in the historic creeds. Among these pillars are: (1) God is the Creator, the first cause of all that exists. (2) God is unique and immutable, the One True God who has always existed and will always exist in Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, (3) God is transcendent: God is not part of the creation, but exists over and above the creation as one who is omnipotent and omniscient, (4) God is immanent: Notwithstanding God’s transcendence, God remains involved in His creation, providing for it, loving it without favoritism, guiding people, responding to prayers, and supernaturally effecting His purposes here on earth, (5) the nature of humankind is sinful; that is, in lay language, people are naturally inclined to do things their own way, rather than God’s way, (6) God will hold us accountable for how we use our time here on earth and desires that we use it for His purposes, (7) God desires us to reject sin and to do His will—that we move increasingly toward Christ-likeness with the help of God’s Holy Spirit, (8) God teaches us what is sin and what is His will through His two-testament Word, the Bible, a book written by agents of God’s choosing under the inspiration of God’s Holy Spirit, (9) God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, “one in being with the Father,” to teach us how we should live, and to be crucified as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, (10) God resurrected Jesus and Jesus is alive today, (11) God has prepared a place in heaven for those who believe in Him and who put their faith in Jesus’ sacrifice, and (12) God will send Jesus a second time, at a moment that we cannot know, to bring believers to heaven.
Holmes, or "pseudo-integration" in the words of David Wolfe. In these schools, shaping students to have a Christian worldview is largely consigned to the curriculum—to chapels, Bible studies, missions trips, and special events—and to mere pre-class prayer or devotional time, if a professor chooses to do so. It is not, however, integral to the educational process. Economics, for example, is often taught without scrutiny of the secularized assumptions that permeate the field. So are psychology, history, management, biology and other subjects. Not surprisingly, in fact inevitably, students are graduated from these schools thinking dualistically: God has been privatized—even ghettoized—to particular non-academic times and places, while students’ intellectual and career pursuits have had little to do with Him. Is it any wonder that once graduated, many students maintain this sacred-secular dichotomy, a dichotomy that infects their work, their marriages, their parenting, their consumption habits, and almost every other area of daily life? Stunningly, and scandalously, these students have been unwittingly indoctrinated by their Christian alma mater to reject a central pillar of Christian theology: God's lordship over all things.

By contrast, "good soil" Christian schools identify and extinguish dualistic thinking. They instill in their students that there are not two truths, the first one a sacred, Sunday morning reality, and the second one governing the other six days. Instead, these schools eviscerate the Sunday-Monday gap in their students’ thinking by how they teach each discipline; that is, by teaching all subject matter from a Christian worldview.

Notice that in this paradigm, faith is embedded within the curricular DNA, not separated from it. A Christian worldview insists that God has a particular point of view about literature, sociology, law, accounting, and so forth, and that God wants that to be our view. He has revealed it through both the special revelation of His Word and the general revelation of our study of His creation (i.e., our theoretical and empirical discoveries). So in any given class or chapel or student affairs program or athletic contest, the leader’s integration task is to bring together these two types of revelation in pursuit of one unified truth—to teach a theology of nursing, a theology of political science, a theology of resolving roommate conflict, a theology of sportsmanship, and so on—and to shape students’ thinking accordingly.

Stated differently, faith integration is the practice of giving students theologically-sound mental models and then helping them to apply those models in their daily lives. This is fundamental to the role of transforming students’ minds—to cultivating a Christian worldview in our students—and it is the role that most differentiates authentically-Christian universities from all the others.

---

2. Spiritual Formation to Develop Christian Character

A second and no less critical element of our transformation role is to positively affect students' spiritual maturity—their love for God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39), as well as other character qualities like humility, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness (Colossians 3), and the "fruit of the Spirit" virtues (Galatians 5:22-23). Stated simply, it is the role of the Christian university to graduate people who are increasingly becoming like Jesus Christ.

Why? First, because of God's persistent invitation to sanctification, a call that adorns some of the most renown passages in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 5-7, Romans 5:1-5, Galatians 5:1-23, Colossians 3:1-24) and that has inspired some of the most influential Christian writing across the centuries. And second, because spiritual formation is not just the purview of the individual, or the family, or the local church. As the secular worldview inexorably gains ground in the culture, transformation of the inner self must become the purview of all God's institutions, His universities included.

This leads us to the methodological question: What does the spiritual formation process entail? One contemporary thinker has quite helpfully summarized an enormous amount of the canonical and historic thinking on the subject, while interjecting many useful insights of his own. Professor Dallas Willard's "golden triangle of spiritual growth," portrayed below as Figure 2, describes with both simplicity and lucidity three essential components of the formation process.

To quote Willard:

A picture of the factors involved in the transformation of our concretely embodied selves from the inside (the "mind") out (behavior) can be conveyed in what I call "the golden triangle of spiritual growth." The image is designed to suggest the correlation in practical life of the factors that can certainly lead to the transformation of the inner self into Christlikeness. The intervention of the Holy Spirit is placed at the apex of the triangle to indicate its primacy in the entire process. The trials of daily life and our activities specially planned for transformation are placed at the bottom to indicate that where the transformation is actually carried out is in real life, where we dwell with God and our neighbors. And at the level of real life, the role of what is imposed on us ("trials") goes hand in hand with our choices as to what we will do with ourselves.

Willard goes on to explain each piece in substantial detail, emphasizing both our role and God's role in the spiritual growth process. And beyond its theological soundness, the

---

8 See, for example, The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis, Introduction to the Devout Life by Francis de Sales, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life by William Law, The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence, and The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola.
10 Ibid.
beauty of this model for our purposes here is that it clarifies how a Christian university
can develop its own “curriculum for Christlikeness,” as Willard calls it. The “golden
triangle” can be a blueprint for a university’s formation initiatives (or those of a local
church, for that matter), advising university leaders how to focus their efforts in this area
of incalculable importance. Co-curricular activities like chapels, service projects,
residence hall programs, Bible studies, and faculty members’ spiritual mentorship—
activities that are already a priority and a core competence in many Christian
universities—no longer need be discrete elements that are disconnected from one another,
but instead, can become a more synergistic and more effective discipleship system.

Moreover, within the curriculum itself, spiritual formation ought to be deliberate and
systematic, gently shepherding students to adopt for themselves the habits described in
Willard’s model. In my leadership courses, for example, students regularly raise the issue
of how a “faithful leader” would make a particular decision. Ultimately, many come to
realize that our decisions are merely an outward sign of an inward reality—a
manifestation of character and disposition toward God more than they are a choked-down
choice we make after glancing at a WWJD bracelet. Going deeper, then, we as a class
jointly explore how one becomes the type of leader from whom godly decisions
automatically flow, drawing heavily on their general education curriculum and their co-
curricular activities. In this way, curriculum and co-curriculum work hand-in-hand
toward the objective of ongoing spiritual formation.
II. SOME CONDITIONS FOR PURSUING STUDENT TRANSFORMATION

The practical issue remains: How do we get there? More specifically, how does the Christian university implement its central distinctive, the mission to transform students to think and live in ways that honor God? What are the key drivers of success in this area? Let me suggest six.

A. A Mission Statement that Identifies Student Transformation as a Central Goal

Mission statements are more than public relations documents, more than advertising slogans, more than tools for securing students and faculty and donor dollars. Though they are used for those purposes, and often rightly so, their primary function is to identify the overarching organizational goals and to keep the organization on course toward those goals.

As senior leadership manages the university, they invariably encounter tempting opportunities—especially potential growth or new revenue opportunities—that may in reality be distractions from the university’s core purpose. A well-crafted mission
statement helps leaders separate the wise from the unwise pursuits. And more to the point for this article, if that mission statement includes “student transformation” as part of the university’s raison d’être, it is more likely to pursue transformation in earnest and avoid distraction from it.

This kind of mission language will also enable the Christian university to deal with a second threat to its transformational purpose. Almost inevitably, various constituents (faculty, prospective donors, disgruntled students and parents, some accrediting bodies, and so on) will object to Christian worldview and spiritual formation initiatives. A clear mission statement that specifies “student transformation” as an aim will authoritatively remind university leaders (perhaps even empower them) to stand firm in the face of such criticism. Stated differently, the mission statement is an indispensable filter to help leaders to make decisions, especially the difficult decisions, based on purpose rather than peer pressure or pragmatism.

B. A Curriculum that Educates from a Christian Worldview

As I indicated above, the Christian university should design its educational process so that it compromises neither academic rigor nor faith integration. Indeed, these ends should be interwoven, but unless universities are vigilant and proactive, market forces in a secularizing culture may influence them to marginalize the latter in an effort to attract more students.

Among the many ways to embed the Christian perspective in the curriculum is to adopt the classic “cornerstone-capstone” approach as a curricular inclusio, with the cornerstone (i.e., first) course covering the basics of Christian, secular, and other worldviews, and the capstone (i.e., last) course challenging students to a broad-scale application of what they have learned throughout the program. In between these two courses, the general core, the major core, and the elective courses build off of the cornerstone content to teach each subject from a Christian worldview.

This is, quite obviously, one of many possible structures, but regardless the pedagogical approach, several goals transcend: To design the curriculum so that (1) graduates see the world in a Biblically-consistent manner, (2) graduates recognize that knowledge is incomplete when it excludes a Biblical perspective, (3) graduates understand not just orthodoxy but orthopraxy, and (4) graduates have the intentionality and acumen to be effective ambassadors for Jesus Christ wherever God places them.

C. A Faculty that is Qualified and Motivated to be Transformational

In addition to the mission and the curricular design, the success of “student transformation” will also depend on what happens in the classroom. The faculty not only designs and delivers the product in a university, the faculty is one of the products. As
such, independent of the official governance structure, the dispositions, qualifications, and motivations of the faculty significantly affect how students are shaped.

We can go even further than this. It may not be an overstatement to say that the university faculty is the *de facto* driver of the university strategy. Senior administrators and trustees may be charged with the task of strategic management, and they often do quite well to develop strategic plans and processes, but in any organization, *the de facto strategy is determined by those allocating the resources*. In particular, Professors Joseph Bower and Clark Gilbert, writing for *Harvard Business Review*, report that:

> What we have found in one research study after another is that how business *really* gets done has little connection to the strategy developed at corporate headquarters. Rather, strategy is crafted, step by step, as managers at all levels of a company … commit resources to policies, programs, people and facilities. Because this is true, senior managers might consider focusing less attention on thinking through the company’s formal strategy and more attention on the processes by which the company allocates resources.\(^{11}\)

This may explain why there is sometimes a chasm between administrators’ strategic intentions and university outcomes. The faculty members are primary gatekeepers of academic learning, even in environments where they have virtually no authority over budget or personnel matters. What they do control—their time—is by far the greatest university expense and a principal determinant of learning outcomes. Though the faculty are not “middle managers” in the classic sense described by Bower and Gilbert, the operational dynamic is similar: Since they control the resource, they largely control the strategy.

Accordingly, if the faculty is not on-board with the idea of “faith integration” or “education from a Christian worldview,” it simply will not happen, at least not very well. And if that were not enough, even if the faculty do buy-in, there is still the *capability* issue. Few faculty members have ever been taught how to integrate faith and learning, since their graduate training typically comes from secular universities.\(^{12}\) Moreover, even when their graduate training does come from Christian universities, as we’ve said, that too may be highly-secularized in its orientation.

So to pursue faithfully the mission of transformation, the Christian university must ensure that the frontlines of faith integration are strong and willing. Briefly, that would entail alignment of at least the following systems:

- *The faculty hiring system*: No one is qualified for a teaching position unless he or she is academically and spiritually qualified, as well as willing to embrace faith integration as a central part of his or her job.

---

• **The faculty training and development system**: We learn faith integration by doing integration, more so than by hearing about it, reading about it, or by watching it (though these latter approaches are essential supplements). If faculty members are to learn faith integration well, the university might consider an experiential approach. In practice, that means besides learning about worldviews and a Christian perspective of their field, faculty members should wrestle with the concepts for themselves, articulate them in written and oral formats, and do integration in their classrooms (perhaps beginning their second semester on the job), even though they may not feel fully qualified to do so.

Other practices are effective as well, including (1) a mentorship program where exemplary faculty members coach those who are just beginning the endeavor and (2) regular professional development opportunities on the faith-learning nexus for all faculty members.

• **The promotion and tenure (P&T) system**: As with employees everywhere else, faculty members tend to do what the environment incents them to do. Consequently, they pay particular attention to the P&T system. If the university makes faith integration in teaching and writing a sine qua non for P&T, then integration is more likely to happen.

One possibility is for faculty members to average at least one written faith integration piece per year, possibly published through a university’s own online journal. This in-house resource ensures that there is an automatic outlet for the research, as well as a formal mechanism for intra- (and inter-) campus communication and collaboration on faith and learning.

• **The performance management system**: The P&T system is part of the broader performance management system of the university. To motivate faculty to make faith integration a consistent priority, a university could consider the following: (1) regular evaluation from one’s department chair or dean regarding progress in faith integration, (2) meaningful merit pay (or some other reward that is valued by the faculty member) for outstanding performance in this area, and (3) faculty grants specifically earmarked for faith and learning projects. There are, of course, many other practices that may align faculty activities with the mission of student transformation; these are just a few.

### D. Spiritual Formation Activities that are Systematically Coordinated

Recall that student transformation entails both curricular and co-curricular activities—activities intended to instill not just a Christian worldview but also to grow students’ character. For the latter to be most effective requires coordination across the myriad formation initiatives, led by passionate, fully-committed believers, who are operating based on a Biblical paradigm of spiritual formation.

Willard’s “golden triangle” is one such paradigm, as discussed above. Indeed there are others. The point, though, is that the fiduciaries of formation—faculty, campus ministry
leaders, residence hall directors, coaches, and so on—should have a guiding theory that informs maturation activities, rather than permitting spiritual formation to be what it too often becomes in Christian universities: A plethora of uncoordinated events and opportunities. Though many of these opportunities are quite excellent, there is far too much at stake to permit formation to remain an unsystematic process.

E. A Student Culture that is God-Centered

Universities seem to operate under the assumption that the primary driver of student learning is their exposure to faculty, and as such, universities take great care in faculty selection and development. No doubt, the faculty is an important determinant of student outcomes, as noted above, but even so, it is a determinant that may be dwarfed by peer effects.\footnote{See, for example, Professor Richard Light’s ten year study of more than 1,600 undergraduates across 90 campuses where he found that students were shaped more by their living arrangements than by their classroom experience (\textit{Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds}, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001)).}

What I mean is this: Full-time undergraduate students are exposed to faculty for 12 to 15 hours per week. They also invest about 50 hours per week sleeping. That leaves about 100 waking hours per week doing other things, much of it with other students. Stated differently, students may spend about 700 percent more time with their peers than they do with faculty.

Beyond that, there’s the similarity effect. A formidable body of research demonstrates the \textit{enormous} power of “social evidence”—how our values, attitudes, and behaviors are naturally influenced by people who are similar to us.\footnote{For an overview, see Robert Cialdini, \textit{Influence: Science and Practice, Fifth Edition}, (Boston, MA: Pearson Education / Allyn & Bacon, 2009).} Consequently in college, not only is there vastly more time for students to be shaped by their peers than by faculty, students are vastly more amenable to adopt the values of their peers in the first place.

The point of all this, I hope, straightforward: If a Christian university is serious about student transformation, it must enroll students whose values and worldview comport with the ideal. In practical terms, it must make an applicant’s “love for God and neighbor” part of its admissions criteria. That does not necessarily mean that the university enrolls only committed Christians; it does mean, though, that the university enrolls a critical mass of spiritually-mature believers who are eager to grow toward God and to pursue His calling on their lives.

It may also entail other practices, like a peer mentorship program to solidify Christian values in its students. But whatever it does, this much is true: The Christian university must be \textit{intentional} about cultivating a student culture that is consistent with its transformational mission.
F. A Senior Leadership Team that Can Execute

Aligning all of the above is an executive team that is committed to the transformational purpose of the Christian university and to non-negotiable execution of the mission. This may seem like common sense, but it may also be uncommon practice.

University strategies seldom fail for want of well-developed plans; we have plenty of those. More typically they are limited by distraction and sloppy execution. Many senior administrators seem to spend their day just “getting back to square one,” so to speak—dealing with a series of newly-urgent matters that were not originally on their daily docket. Important strategic issues (like authentic faith integration and spiritual formation) get perpetually deferred, crowded out by day-to-day concerns, and eventually they morph into a mere annual retreat topic, only to be again eclipsed once everyone is back in the office.

But in the end, priorities are what we do. So if effective faith integration and spiritual formation are not happening in a Christian university, they are not priorities, at least not relative to what actually does get done: thick accreditation reports, the flashy college viewbook, the innovative capital campaign, recruiting an all-conference quarterback, and so on. Many of these other tasks are important, for sure, but in the same way that we ask our students to examine their vocation from God’s perspective, so too our leaders in Christian higher education must do the same. Do our priorities match God’s priorities? Do our calendars match His calling? And overall, do our outcomes match His desires? These implementation matters are ultimately the purview and charge—indeed the vocational privilege—of our trustees, presidents, vice-presidents and deans.

III. PLEASING THE MASTER SOWER

The subtitle of this article is “A Blueprint for the Christian University,” but in fact, the article has been, paradoxically, both broader and narrower than that subtitle indicates. It is broader in the sense that much of what has been said here applies not only to Christian colleges and universities, but to other Christian schools as well. The model of “training, transforming and transitioning,” for example, captures much of what Christian secondary and middle schools are called to do, with faith integration and spiritual formation being

---


16 This is the case for business leaders as well. After examining dozens of CEO failures over a two decades, researchers for Fortune Magazine concluded that: “most unsuccessful CEOs stumble because of one simple, fatal shortcoming … It’s bad execution. As simple as that: not getting things done, being indecisive, not delivering on commitments” Ram Charan and Geoffrey Colvin, “Why CEOs Fail,” Fortune Magazine, June 21, 1999, 68-78. In this regard, see also Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done, (New York, Crown Business, 2002).
critical components of these schools’ mission (some might even argue that these components are *more critical* in these earlier years than they are in college).

At the same time, this article’s content has been narrower than the subtitle implies. For example, the transformational aspect of the Christian university’s mission is more multifaceted than what is presented here. I have limited this piece to an examination of the university mission with respect to *students*, setting aside for the time being its mission to positively influence society through faculty scholarship, extension programs, community outreach, and so on. Indeed, transformation occurs through the university’s engagement with many important constituencies—alumni, the local community, the academy, society at large, etc.—not just current students.

My framing, therefore, may be less-than-perfect, but my principal goal in this article has been to invite Christian postsecondary institutions to pursue more intentionally and more boldly their unique, imperative role in the postmodern era. In the face of mounting relativism and a socially-reinforced readiness to turn away from God, there is an urgency to grow and graduate intelligent, influential ambassadors of the faith, people with thoroughly Christian minds and loving hearts who will lead others to return to Him. None of God’s other institutions—not the family, not the local church, not the media, and certainly not the state—are better positioned to serve in this role.

Notwithstanding that pivotal opportunity, many Christian universities still pursue an incomplete mission that might be characterized as “academic excellence in a safe environment,” garnished perhaps with some assistance for post-graduation placement. Their business and educational models are satisfied with the partial purposes of *training* and *transitioning* students, largely neglecting their vital purpose to co-labor with God in the *transformation* of students. That purpose, tragically, is being choked off in many universities by the thorns of cultural conformity.

The “good soil” Christian universities, by contrast, distinguish themselves through their transformational purpose; two telltale manifestations are consistent, systematic faith integration and spiritual formation. On the sacred, fertile ground of these universities, education from a Christian perspective—the development of a Christian mind and a servant’s heart—are the paramount priorities. And as a result, these schools can yield the Master Sower a bountiful harvest: When their graduates walk out the university gates, they “walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6).
Bibliography


