

The Future of the Small Christian Liberal Arts College

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Introduction

1. It is a problem to sift through the varied types of colleges within a single denomination, a theological tradition, or religious order, let alone make some conceptual sense of the dozens of American church communions who have founded colleges and universities.
2. To help us in this topic, nevertheless, I will first define a Christian liberal arts college, then make some observations on the future of all liberal arts colleges, identify some specific challenges facing Mount Vernon Nazarene College, and draw some conclusions on what small Christian colleges must do if they are to survive the next twenty-five years.

I. Definitions

A. "Christian College"

1. Classification of church-affiliated college
 - a. Institutions that had Protestant roots but are no longer Protestant in any legal sense.
 - b. Colleges that remain nominally related to Protestantism but are probably on the verge of disengagement.
 - c. Colleges established by a major Protestant denomination and which remain connected with a church.
 - d. Colleges associated with the evangelical, fundamentalist, or interdenominational Christian churches.

This study gave explicit recognition to the theological divide between old-line and evangelical Protestantism.

“Colleges who have neither a generous endowment nor close relations to their churches face a risky future.”

2. Duncan S. Ferguson, Director of the Committee on Higher Education of the Presbyterian Church (USA) provided a classification of Presbyterian colleges in 1991:
 - a. Peripheral. “In this kind of institution, one finds little intentional cultivation of the essential features of church relatedness.”
 - b. Historical. In these institutions, a conscious effort is made to speak about the historical roots and founding vision.
 - c. Dimensional. Here the institution intentionally supports church-relatedness, and it is an important dimension in the life of the institution.
 - d. Central. “The central mission of the institution is viewed as an extension of the mission of the church.”

(Colleges are often in transition. Sometimes they advertise one type but have moved to another.)
3. Recent classification of Roman Catholic colleges.
 - a. Humane Values colleges. “Such institutions make religiously derived values their central identity.”
 - b. Progressive colleges. “Such colleges define their religious stance within the social concerns legitimated by Vatican II.”

- c. Conservative colleges. “The conservative identity is a call to return to traditional Catholic teachings.”
4. Interestingly, Pope John Paul II in 1990 summarized what he believed to be the essentials of a Roman Catholic institution. A Catholic school should have:
 - a. “A Christian inspiration not only of individuals, but of the university community as such.”
 - b. “A continuing reflection in the light of Christian faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute its own research.”
 - c. “Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the church.”
 - d. “An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which give meaning to life.”
5. Fairbanks’ definition of a Christian college: “A Christian college integrates academic scholarship and service learning with biblical faith and spiritual formation.”

“The task of MVNC is to shape servant leaders who will make a difference in the 21st century.”

B. “Christian ‘Liberal Arts’ College”

1. The words “liberal arts” have their roots in the Latin word *liberalis*, which means “free man” or free person.
 - a. *Liberalis* refers to the arts, skills, understandings, and abilities of a “free” person, someone who is not controlled by others, as was a

- slave, or someone who does not or cannot think for himself or herself.
- b. A Christian liberal arts college teaches the arts, skills, understandings, and abilities of a free person in Christian perspective.
 - c. The goal is to integrate the heart of Christian faith with the best in liberal arts education.
2. The curriculum of a Christian college reflects the belief in a strong liberal arts foundation.
- a. There is a core...a general education core needing approximately two years to complete.
 - b. These required courses include courses on the Bible, in philosophy, science, mathematics, foreign languages, English, history, communication, literature, and the arts.
 - c. Affirmed is the belief that all students benefit from a broad-based education.
 - 1) An education that equips the student with the skills of a “free” person
 - a) The skills to think clearly and analytically,
 - b) The skills to use words precisely,
 - c) The skills to solve problems creatively,
 - d) The skills to communicate well--in writing and in speaking,
 - e) The skills to read widely.

- 2) However, in a Christian liberal arts college one acquires a strong liberal arts education from a Christian perspective with strong biblical and theological foundations.
- 3) Christian liberal arts colleges seek to develop the mind...the way one thinks to cultivate the heart...the way one responds to God, and to shape Christian leaders who will make a difference in society.

C. "Small" -- 1000-2000 enrollment (number artificially chosen)

II. Observations on the future of the small Christian liberal arts college

- A. Many of the challenges facing small Christian liberal arts colleges are the same challenges facing higher education institutions that do not identify themselves as Christian.
- B. "Predictions" for the years ahead in higher education (from a futurist in higher education)
 1. Access to higher education will increase as the number of degree-granting institutions steadily grow.
 2. Within ten years college students will be expected to have access to a large-scale information utility.
 3. Bachelor's and master's degrees offered by computer, by cable, by video, by fly in/fly out delivery, or a combination of these will be increasingly common.

4. Within 10 years a first-tier U.S. institution will deliver a doctoral program by alternative means.
5. The number of “end” institutions will continue to increase. An “end” institution is one which gives degrees with no requirement that courses be taken at that institution.
6. The big growth in higher education will be in degree and certificate programs for older adults. To be viable in the information society the typical adult will need to take at least 30 semester credits every seven years.
7. Within ten years 50% of the private colleges and universities of the country will offer formal three-year bachelor’s degree programs.
8. Within ten years 75% of the private institutions and 20% of the public institutions will offer fast-track degree completion programs.
9. Many undergraduate colleges will upgrade their offerings to master’s degree and doctoral programs.
10. The home school movement will lead to the home college movement.
11. U.S. colleges and universities will increasingly move to responsibility center management and to shamrock management structures.
12. Within ten years 90% of the 1000 most common journals used in U.S. colleges and universities will be available full text in digital form. Many libraries will drop subscriptions to print versions of a majority of journals due to attractive licensure fees for the digital versions.
13. The big competition to higher education in the future will come from communication entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates, Glenn Jones, Michael Milken, and Ted Turner.

14. Cities will expect colleges to pay taxes or a “voluntary” equivalent for services rendered by the city.
 15. The U.S. government will continue to certify institutions for access to federal financial aid. By the year 2005 the number of eligible institutions will jump from the present 7,000 to 10,000.
 16. Federal funding for higher education, research, and overhead will continue to decrease in all disciplines except in the health services.
 17. Accreditation will increasingly move to an outputs and public-responsibility orientation.
 18. Existing private colleges will close at the rate of 10% per decade for the next three decades.
- C. Specific challenges for MVNC (as presented to the Board of Trustees at the November 1994 Annual Meeting of the Board). We must do a better job at:
1. Managing the computer revolution/information highway implications for the institution.
 2. Managing the stress associated with a growing, culturally-diverse, and broader-age-range student body.
 3. Managing faculty multicultural experiences and faculty/staff development opportunities.
 4. Managing non-traditional academic programs in light of the institutional mission.
 5. Managing a successful capital campaign and the MVNC Foundation potential.

6. Managing a tighter operating budget due to increased construction debt servicing and a decline in corporate giving.
7. Managing the development of additional student housing, classroom and physical fitness construction projects without increasing our debt significantly.
8. Managing increasing questions about Christian values, spiritual vitality, and denominational loyalty.
9. Managing multiple expectations of key publics, including faculty, staff, students, parents, trustees, and local church constituency.
10. Managing resentment and disenchantment with families who cannot afford continual increases in the cost of a college education.
11. Managing collaboration, partnering, articulation, and networking agreements/opportunities and necessities between Nazarene Council of Education institutions and regional schools and industries.
12. Managing, and even redefining, risk for an educational institution like MVNC.

III. Conclusions:

- A. If the small Christian colleges in existence today are to survive the next twenty-five years, I'm convinced several things need to happen:
 1. Christian colleges must identify their "niches," continually strengthening these academic programs while not neglecting the liberal arts core of the curriculum.

- We must know what we do well, and strengthen these programs. (We cannot be all things to all people.)
2. Christian colleges must clarify their mission, communicate their vision, and articulate their values:
 - a. MVNC Mission Statement

Mount Vernon Nazarene College seeks to (1) provide a rigorous academic program that encourages scholarship, critical reflection, and problem-solving; (2) promote a distinctively Christian lifestyle within the Wesleyan evangelical tradition; and (3) offer a supportive environment that inspires students to achieve their highest potential spiritually, intellectually, socially, and physically as they prepare not only for a career but also for meaningful service to God and humankind wherever their vocational choices under the leadership of God take them.

This mission is fulfilled through campus experiences which personalize communication, living, and learning and is implemented through traditional and non-traditional programs leading to associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees.

- b. MVNC Vision Statement

I have a dream...

...That MVNC enters the 21st century as an outstanding liberal arts and professions-oriented higher educational institution within the Wesleyan evangelical tradition...

...That expanded and creative graduate and undergraduate academic programs reach and prepare an increasingly diversified student body...

...That the campus spirit and environment enable the students to learn and grow, to witness and worship...

...That faculty and staff view their work, collectively and individually, as a sacred calling; and function in individual assignments out of a profound commitment to biblical principles, Christian values, and our theological traditions...

...That students embrace a holiness lifestyle in their lifelong pursuit of vocational excellence, personal growth, Christian service to God and humankind, a global perspective, and Christian world view...

...That MVNC shapes servant leaders who will make a difference in the 21st century!

- c. MVNC Values document -- Christian colleges which survive must continually clarify their mission, communicate their vision, and articulate their values.
3. Christian colleges must locate “like-minded” institutions and aggressively network and collaborate with them as appropriate and possible.
 - a. Phenomenal opportunities for alliance-building provided by technology
 - b. Council of Education project, Church of the Nazarene institutions
 - c. Networking, collaboration, and alliance -- building with institutions in the State of Ohio.
 - d. We need collective wisdom to understand and process the implications of new technologies for higher education.
4. Christian colleges must insure that faculty members are committed to the integration of faith and learning in the classrooms and in their offices.

- a. requires a fresh look at our ongoing orientation of faculty and staff to the mission, vision, values, and ethos of the Christian college.
 - b. “There is no conflict between the best in education and the best in Christian faith.” (Sign in MVNC’s Education Division)
 - c. Key to maintaining distinctiveness of Christian college: integrating faculty and staff to the mission, vision, and values of the institution.
5. Christian colleges must embrace innovation and creativity as a way of life.
- a. Is there a better and less expensive way to fulfill our commitments regarding rigorous undergraduate and graduate programs? How can technology be more effectively utilized?
 - b. How do we adapt our policies and procedures to include and embrace an increasingly older and diverse student body without compromising fundamental Christian principles, convictions, and traditions?
6. Christian colleges must accelerate their efforts in addressing the physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and well as academic needs of students.
- a. We must reaffirm our resolve to remain focused on character-building and spiritual-formation issues.
 - b. Students today are entering colleges/universities with intense emotional needs.
7. Christian colleges must exercise fiscal restraints while stretching to meet constituency expectations.
- Students/parents expect Christian colleges to be “affordable” (translated: inexpensive) while at the same time expecting these same

institutions to provide many of the same programs, facilities, and resources as state institutions and well-endowed private institutions.

- B. In the book, *Competing for the Future*, authors Hamel and Prahalad talk about “anticipating the opportunities of tomorrow.”
1. “To become an industry leader you’ve got to see the future before it arrives.”
 2. They state it another way, “The real challenge in competing for industry foresight is to create hindsight in advance.”
 3. They continue, “There are three kinds of companies: companies that try to lead customers where they don’t want to go; companies that listen to customers and then respond to their articulated needs; and companies that lead customers where they want to go but don’t know it yet.” They conclude, “Technology forecasting, market research, scenario planning, and competitive analysis” will enable industries to “change the lens through which your company with ‘core competencies’ is viewed.” And in so doing, can you compete for -- and win -- the future.
- C. Mount Vernon Nazarene College doesn’t plan to be among the private colleges which will close within the next three decades.
1. But to not only survive, but thrive, we must understand that we are “competing for the future” and must increasingly anticipate the opportunities of tomorrow “by seeing the future before it arrives.”
 2. Thank you, community leaders, for your encouragement, support, and understanding as we, as a “small Christian liberal arts college,” seek to be faithful to our mission in innovative and creative ways.

3. We seek to “anticipate the opportunities of tomorrow” prayerfully, confidently, and collectively.
4. We continue to believe that there will be no conflict between the best in education and the best in Christian faith as we look to the future with confidence and faith in the God who calls us and guides us. He is in control of the future. We will be faithful to Him.