

## When Survival Becomes the Highest Purpose<sup>1</sup>

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Higher education in the United States faces a major dilemma that has several dimensions. The symptoms crop out in a variety of ways, but generally higher education no longer has a purpose governed by a vision. Almost 3000 years ago, an ancient Semitic writer said that without a vision, people perish. The increased specialization of disciplines within higher education over the last hundred years has bred fragmentation of knowledge rather than integration. Fields of knowledge increasingly pull apart and fail to deal with the relationship between different spheres of knowledge.

At the same time, professional education has been given up by the professions which once controlled membership in the guild by apprenticeship. The academy has assumed the function of training now in place of the earlier apprenticeship model. The professions now train their members through higher education. As a result, the academy has become torn between the liberal arts, which see as their mission the development of critical thinking, and the professional departments which see as their mission the development of "competent" practitioners or professionals. Educational institutions tend to be embattled by these parties over the purpose of higher education.

Institutions also experience conflict between teaching faculties and administrative staff in terms of priorities, which are always judged in terms of how much money is spent by whom. In this climate, decisions about curriculum and basic academic directions often become political and economic decisions. This dynamic appears in a wide range of institutions including state universities, private liberal arts colleges, state technical schools, private religious colleges, and well-endowed private universities. A wide range of conservative to liberal agendas come to play in deciding what ought to be taught, how it ought to be taught, what emphasis ought to be given, and what kind of values, if any, should permeate the academy.

Society as a whole now demands a greater stake in the "product produced" through higher education. Increasingly, this business or economics

model of education controls. What is the product which a university or college produces? Who is the customer? Am I getting value for my dollar? Education has come to be regarded as an "investment" by different interests: the state, private enterprise, philanthropists, religious groups, as well as parents and students.

The way out of the growing indolence of the academy has clouded because the academy no longer has a clear purpose and over arching ideal of what it should be doing. It has no clear reason to be.

## The Collapse of Christendom

Higher education in the west came about as an invention of the church, and its purpose was intrinsically related to its form and function. The church created higher education to deepen one's faith, knowledge of God, and knowledge of God's creation. Education existed as a part of the church. God provided a basis for understanding the relationship of all knowledge. Because all things came from God, all things could be legitimately studied and understood as a gift from God. This basic view of the purpose of education created the stack pole or the *universitas*, the basis for universal knowledge.

Different religious orders created their own *collegium* or college which was a religious community. The members of each community who completed their initial period of instruction advanced to the rank of novice or bachelor. Thus, the first degree of progress was the bachelor of the arts knowledge. Of course a bachelor became synonymous with an unmarried man because only a man could enter the male religious orders charged with preserving the knowledge of God and civilization. Those members of the community who advanced in their instruction might become a master of the order. The different houses of learning had a master as their head. Different religious orders would have a master as their head. The head of the Knights Templars was the Grand Master. Thus, those pursuing knowledge advanced in their "degrees." The Masons as well as the academy have preserved this terminology from the medieval orders to measure one's advancement in knowledge and one's status within the community. The very few who became "doctor" were those authorized to teach the religious "doctrine" of the church. All ways of knowing came under the umbrella of theology and doctrine, but those who studied were all monks. The official uniform of the academy to this day continues to be the monk's simple gown and hood.

## The Collapse of Value and Vision

The academy holds onto the traditions and terminology of the church, but it has separated itself from its ecclesiastical foundations. The form and tradition remain, but without the purpose. Without purpose, the academy (or

any other institution from a business to a government agency) drifts toward tradition. Without vision, functionality no longer has a relationship to a value. In the absence of true values, the academy constructs pseudo-values; such as quality.

The academy now speaks of itself as offering "quality" education. What does that mean? We do it the way we have always done it, of course. We define ourselves as the standard. The way we do it is the best way to do it, because we are the standard. To depart from the way we do it would mean to diminish our "quality." For instance, a student must be in class fifteen hours per semester for every "hour" of credit they receive. Why? Because that formula makes quality education. Why? Everybody knows that. Of course, the real reason the academy started requiring fifteen hours of class time for every hour of credit was because the Carnegie Foundation wanted "a day's work for a day's pay" from faculty. Institutions that did not follow their formula did not receive money from the Carnegie Foundation. As a result, the schools in the United States adopted the formula driven by economic pressures related to stake holders external to the institution itself.

The academy also regards the method of instruction as a sign of quality. One lectures because education has come to be regarded as the dispensation of a body of knowledge than comes best by hearing. The lecture actually represents a veiled imitation of the sermon wherein "faith comes by hearing." The lecture hall of the academy duplicates the ecclesiastical model of dispensing the knowledge to the congregation. Why does the academy still do it that way so long after the divorce from the church? Because lectures are a sign of quality. Why? Because we have always done it that way. Professors replicate the method of instruction they experienced, not because it is the best way to learn, but because it is the only way they know. Without a clear vision and purpose, they have no where to turn, even with the exposition of the most radical social ideas, but to tradition.

The problem of higher education relates to its retention of the forms of the medieval church but without a purpose to give it unity and meaning. They do the same old things, but without any over arching reason to do them. This situation manifests itself in the fragmentation of the disciplines of learning within the institutions, and a fragmentation of personal life and society in the country where this model of education prepares people to live fragmented, meaningless lives.

Without vision, schools will pull themselves apart and lapse into habitual internecine turf warfare spawned by budget battles, but they will survive as institutions. Institutions have an amazing capacity to continue to exist regardless of how far removed they have moved from their founding purpose. Existence becomes the reason for existing. Institutions take on a life of their own devoid of any purpose. Jesus referred to this institutional phenomenon 2000 years ago when he said that a person does not put new wine in old wine skins, because the old skins cannot tolerate the dynamic ferment of the

new. Higher education in the West finds itself in that position today. The university has divorced itself from the old purpose which revolved around a universal concept and knowledge. With the emergence of Postmodernity, however, the university no longer holds to the idea of universal knowledge, universal values, and universal norms. In their place the university champions fragmentation.

## Growing Dissimilarities

As fragmentation grows, institutions will grow increasingly dissimilar in their appearance as they pursue particular visions for themselves. The failure in consensus about the purpose of the university occurs at the same time an explosion in educational experimentation has begun. The experimentation began in the late 1960's and early 1970's with ideas like the "open university." Driven largely by student disinterest in following the prescribed curriculum, a number of loosely structured programs emerged following the spring riots of 1970 which allowed students to earn academic credit toward graduation for a variety of life experiences which they deemed valuable. By the mid-1980's private colleges and public universities struggled to balance budgets while sources of revenue shrank in the face of skyrocketing costs. In this climate the experiments in education led to innovative approaches to non-traditional education. The educational institutions discovered a huge market of people who never finished college but found their careers stalled until they could earn a college degree—any college degree. Increasingly the non-traditional pool of students has grown in proportion to the total number of students. Through the use of adjunct faculty and accelerated courses which dramatically reduce the number of contact hours for courses, allowing students to complete a degree in as few as eighteen months, colleges have found the goose that lays the golden egg.

The revolution in technology that began with the introduction of the personal computer in the early 1980's has led to a transformation of college culture by the late 1990's. Those schools which do not have sophisticated campus networks and student access to the Internet stand at a decided disadvantage in recruiting students. The technology has bred another revolution in teaching methodology as faculty incorporate technology in the traditional lecture class, but also as technology becomes an alternative, and in some cases a replacement, to the traditional book. The Internet has also opened the possibility of distance education in which students have a "virtual" class experience with peers around the country or the globe. The traditional student/faculty interaction occurs not in real time and space in a class room, office, or commons area. Instead, interaction takes place over the Internet, through compressed video, and through immediate audio exchange.

Private colleges, publicly funded universities, well-endowed universities, successful grant writing research universities, publicly funded technical schools and community colleges, and religious schools grow increasingly dissimilar as they pursue different educational visions. The kind of institution that once characterized itself as *in loco parentis* often takes little or no interest in the personal life, character development, and moral habits of those who pay tuition. *Alma Mater* has taken a *laissez faire* attitude toward the raising of her children since the Boomers of the late 1960' and early 1970's rebelled so successfully against any attempts to restrict or control college lifestyle. Religious institutions have come to experience this reorientation of mission as much as secular schools. Schools with historic ties to denominations have to rethink what it means to be a "Christian" school in this era. In most cases it means little more than that a denomination started the school in the last century. Sometimes it means that a course on Bible or religion is part of the core curriculum. One looks hard to see much difference between the college experience at the denominational school and a state school except in terms of the size of the school.

The pragmatic, hard-nosed business people who raised the Baby Boomers and sat on the boards of trustees of religious schools saw nothing particularly Christian about an English course or a history course. Decisions at such schools tended to be driven by economic considerations. Yet, religious world views filter through every discipline of knowledge as one of my friends who had a peripheral church experience as a child found when she went to college. Her English professor taught that "God" was nothing more than the "Spirit of the Age." The Baroque Period was characterized by a certain "Spirit" of the culture and the Romantic Period had a different "Spirit." This Spirit of the Age is what God is. She accepted this view as her Gospel. This was the first experience she had with someone discussing religion at an intellectual level, but her experience suggests that world view come into play with how one teaches a course. One cannot simply dismiss a discipline as not being "religious." All knowledge is religious.

## Today's Student

At a time when the average college and university has draped itself in the self-authenticating trappings of scholarly tradition while pursuing a policy of marketing a product and survival at any cost, a different kind of student enrolls in the traditional undergraduate program than did so twenty years ago. College students today are the children of Baby Boomers. They were raised by the most self-centered generation the country has yet seen. In that regard, these young people were not raised so much as they were allowed to raise themselves. While their parents revelled in the higher standard of living that a two-income family can enjoy, these children took up the slack at home.

These are the children who a few years ago were referred to as "latch-key children." They cared for themselves after school, and the television set was their baby sitter and nanny. This generation became the first emotional beneficiaries of quick, no-fault divorce as the divorce rate climbed to the fifty percent range during their formative years.

In terms of values development and world view, this generation grew up without any significant exposure to religion. In their study of marginal church members, Penny Marler and Kirk Hadaway point out that seventy five percent of Baby Boomers had a significant "base line" experience of at least two years in church while growing up. The Baby Busters reversed this statistic with only twenty five percent having a significant "base line" experience in church. No one was left to take the Echo Boomers to church. While the Boomers rebelled against their parents' religious conventions, the Echo Boom has no such emotional involvement pro or con with religion. Boomers said, "I had to go to church when I was little. I'll let my children decide about religion for themselves." While the sentiment has a certain egalitarian flare, in practice it meant that the parents denied their children a basis for deciding about faith, because they were never exposed to the option.

## Implications for Campus Ministry

Campus ministers undertake their responsibilities in a different world from that of twenty years ago. The academy represents the intellectual, moral, social, and religious direction of culture, and the academy is adrift. Oddly clinging to the last trappings of Christendom or cultural Christianity, the academy represents the maelstrom of religious ideas percolating in society as a whole. The academy also represents the breakdown between belief system and behavior. Always a difficult marriage to maintain which often leads to the charge of hypocrisy, belief and behavior have a necessary relationship without which individuals and society as a whole becomes dysfunctional. The value slogans of universities take on the air of TV commercials that exist only as a hook to the buyer, a feature the sophisticated Echo Boomer recognizes immediately. A university cannot speak of the importance of "community" if it does not also have a value basis for community which all the members of the community embrace in covenant together. Without a basis for value, the university cannot supply the fundamental element of education it was created to supply.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has argued that Christians in the West no longer enjoy a dominant cultural position but once again live as missionaries in an alien culture. The greatest outpost of this mission occurs on the college campuses and the campus minister represents the fresh voice that provides a new generation with an option to make sense of their world and give them some direction in life. A generation of emotionally disengaged people have

never had the option of faith because they have never been in a context to even know what it meant. The university offers a smorgasbord of religious ideas, but Jesus Christ will not be one of those options explored during the formal education process. Campus ministers have the advantage, however, of being able to put the gospel in a relational framework rather than in a formal educational setting. With the coming of Postmodernity the conventional status marks within the university setting which created degrees of authority and credibility have begun to crumble. The person who relates to students creates their own credibility.

In the past, campus ministers have had the luxury of functioning as chaplains to the Christians students on campus. That role will shift as the pressures of Postdenominationalism continue to erode the sense of denominational loyalty which might have once connected a student to a campus ministry. The effectiveness of campus ministers in the future will correspond to their willingness to shift their own approach to ministry as they move from a chaplain to a missionary role.

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<sup>1</sup>Portions of this article were originally part of a presentation made for doctoral students at the University of Memphis.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Poe's most recent book is *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, published by Zondervan in 1996.