Grace vs. Grit:
Reaching, Teaching and Preparing Today's Christian Learner

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INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape has changed dramatically over the past 30 years with the number of students enrolled in colleges and universities doubling from 10 to 20 million during this time (Holzer & Baum, 2017). In addition to the change in the student population, there has been a major change in the method of instruction in higher education. Today, one of four students take some or all their courses online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Professors and administrators need to become familiar with how to best aid students and how to best balance providing grace to students while also challenging them to achieve their best and holding them accountable.

While there are more students participating in higher education today, their success in these programs is surprisingly low with only 40 percent of university students earning their degree after six years (Holzer & Baum, 2017). Many of these students are also dealing with an incredible amount of stress and depression as they go through their education. Instructors play a major role in the success of the students in their education. In this paper, we will investigate ways to engage and work with today's students.

We present a possible model for how to best prepare our students to face a challenging and ever-changing world upon graduation. We provide an overview of the issue of balancing grace with challenging students, holding them accountable, thereby building resiliency (Berg, Carson,

& Vazzano, 2018) and preparing them to take risks and overcome the inevitable failures they will encounter. We believe this subject is critical to our students and needs to be investigated further, and we hope to lay the groundwork here for future qualitative and quantitative studies on this most important issue.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education looks quite different today than it did in the past. Today's average student is older and is relying more on loans and federal funding to pay for their education. More students are taking online courses than ever before, and many students are working while they pursue their degrees. Glanzer, Alleman, and Ream (2017) in their book *Restoring the Soul of the University* pointed out that universities began as institutions concerned with pursuing wisdom. They added that most universities started in order to pursue Christian truths about our world. Glazer, Alleman, and Ream's main argument was that higher educational institutions have drifted away from this original goal and are more concerned with secular and career-oriented goals for students. They summed up their thesis writing: "Saving the soul of the university requires, we believe, understanding that the soul of the research university is not merely a purpose. It also includes its central *identity* and the *story* that connects that identity to the transcendent story of the universe and its Author" (p. 5). It is even more impor-

tant that Christian universities realize the importance of their soul and focus on developing and protecting it.

Christian churches are not immune to the changes in the student population nor are their faculty and administrators immune to the challenges of deciding between grace and grit. In many ways, Christian educators are challenged even more due to the heavy reliance on grace seen in the Christian faith. The concept of grace is the cornerstone of Christianity and comes directly from Jesus. This point is stated clearly in the Bible where it is written:

> The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth … And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14, 16-17, NIV)

Grace is given to us by Jesus, not because we deserve it, or he needs us, but because he loves us. Today's professors need to understand this and strive to live up to our instruction to "love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4: 8, NIV). This passage from First Peter is very important because the word "love" here is based on the *agape* form of love which is often translated as charity instead of love. This charity, or care for others' well-being, is vital to ensuring students are cared for today and are inspired to continue in our programs.

Retention and persistence have become very important issues for universities in this changing landscape. While some confuse the two, they are unique terms that faculty and administrators should understand. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center (2015) defined the persistence rate as "the percentage of students who return to any institution for their second year" while the retention rate was defined as students returning to the same institution they were in for their first year. While they are similar definitions, it is important to see that persistence deals more with the individual student while retention is more about the specific university. Persistence is closely aligned with what we do as instructors and how they perceive their treatment in our programs. Persistence has become even more difficult now with online and distance education. Christian universities should focus on increasing persistence because it is what we have been called to do in the Bible as we love others and care about their success.

GENERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

While novel just a decade ago, we now more than ever are accustomed to a multi-generational workforce. This does not mean we are fluid and adaptable, just that it is no longer a novel idea; in fact, it is the new normal. This evidence in the workforce begins in the collegiate setting where the generations typically reside, learn, and grow before they enter their organizational life and begin careers. All the more important to this consideration and concern, is how we as academia engage these generations as prepping grounds for their futures, for what may be called the "real world."

Consistent with the concern—perhaps more a theme than a concern—has been the psyche of Millennials and Gen Z (or iGens) (Pappano, 2018). These generations have seemed to exhibit a need for more coddling and hand-holding than prior generations and are considered to "present a challenge" to the campuses which are insistent, or "eager" to "reach and teach them" (Pappano). Whether an accurate concern or not is the perceived need for counseling and mental health services (Gray, 2015) and more student-focused programs to engage the higher needs amongst student populations today.

Millennials are not "the entitled, unfocused and narcissistic bunch the generations before them make them out to be" (Carter & Walker, 2018). They want meaningful work and desire to make an impact within their organizations. They "seek mentors who will assist in their growth process" (Carter & Walker). This mentoring can be an extremely beneficial partnership, with senior or tenured employees mentoring Millennials in knowledge about the organization, its goals, leadership insights, and expertise while Millennials can mentor senior employees in adapting to new technology (Flinchbaugh, Valenzuela & Li, 2018; Ohmer, Barclay & Merkel, 2018).

We propose mentoring involves not only walking alongside and sharing information and best practices but also includes providing honest feedback on opportunities for improvement, or "speaking the truth in love." In fact, the Bible addresses the need for correction (Proverbs 5:12, 12:1, 15:5, 15:12, 15:31, and 15:32). Yet, while these young people *say* they want feedback, student and/or parent involvement indicates truth often is not what's desired—rather, inflated grades are desired. The resulting disconnect between grades earned and grades demanded results in frustration for the teacher/professor and is devastating to academia. Lahey (2015) cites the National Education Association's report that one-third of new teachers "will quit after three years, and 46 percent will be gone within five years … many [citing] 'issues with parents' as one of their main reasons for abandoning the profession" (p. xxiv). So how did we get to this point?

Twenge (2006) explains that in raising the Millennial Generation, we had a concerted effort in American society to increase children's self-esteem, raising children

who "should always feel good about themselves" (p. 53). Unfortunately, this resulted in what Hershatter and Epstein (2010) describe as "trophy kids who spent their childhood receiving gold stars and shiny medals just for showing up" (p. 217) rather than choosing "extraordinary efforts to praise publicly" (Scheder, 2009, p. 43). We propose this is what has led to the expectation for reward beyond what is merited for work submitted. We also propose this request (demand) may be perceived as simply a request for grace. While we absolutely agree grace may be warranted, we also are concerned grace can be abused. We will discuss both ends of the spectrum relative to what is best to truly help develop young people into mature, fully functioning, productive members of society.

GRACE: WHAT IS IT?

According to Swindoll (2003), Jesus never used the word "grace." "He just taught it, and equally important, He lived it. Furthermore, the Bible never gives us a one-statement definition" (p. 6). To understand grace, Swindoll (2003) goes "back to an old Hebrew term that meant 'to bend, to stoop.' By and by, it came to include the idea of 'condescending favor'" (p. 6).

Grace is described as "the unmerited favor of God toward man" (Biblestudytools), and Stanley (2018) explains that Scripture uses the word grace "in reference to God's goodness and kindness, which is freely extended to those who are utterly undeserving" (p. 12). However, people often confuse and misunderstand the difference between mercy and grace. "In short, mercy is God *not giving* us what we *do* deserve; grace is God *giving* us something we *do not* deserve" (Compellingtruth).

We submit that both grace and mercy accurately describe what students request when they face academic challenges. Mercy is not implementing the consequence of missed deadlines (e.g., a failing grade or at a minimum, deduction in points), while grace is extending something they do not deserve (e.g., a second chance, an extension date with no penalty, etc.). Grace is the term most often used regarding academic requests. However, a challenge we face is determining when grace is warranted and when grace is abused. We submit that grace is abused when it becomes an enabling process that will perpetuate an entitlement mentality resulting in a lost teachable moment relative to consequences for choices made.

Lucado (2012) explains, "God answers the mess of life with one word: *grace*" (p. 7). He asks if we have been changed, shaped, strengthened, emboldened, and/or soft-ened by grace. This accurately captures the struggle we face when extending grace at the academic level. Will this extension of grace change, shape, strengthen, and embolden the student to better perform on the next paper … in the next class … at work in the real world?

Since college is the final stepping stone to prepare students to become mature, fully functioning, productive members of society, are we being good stewards of these students if we condone, and perhaps even encourage, students to believe the world revolves around *their* busy schedules? On the other hand, if and when students truly have an emergency that negatively impacted meeting the established deadline, do we chance losing a teachable moment and perhaps alienate, devastate, or even lose a hard-working student by failing to extend grace?

In discussing grace, Lucado (2012) delves into the issue of guilt, explaining guilt is not necessarily bad. "God uses appropriate doses of guilt to awaken us to sin … [explaining] God's guilt brings enough regret to change us" (p. 23). We believe grace can successfully be used—or unfortunately be abused—in academia. Does the student requesting grace for a missed due date on a paper truly feel guilt if they own up to choices made that resulted in the missed deadline? If so, we submit the lesson has been learned and grace is merited. On the other hand, if the request for grace is seen merely as an entitlement (i.e., I'm entitled to at least one grace period or everyone else does it, etc.), then we propose we do a disservice to the student by perpetuating such irresponsible attitudes. This entitlement mentality toward grace is captured well by Richard J. Neuhaus, who said, "[The] moralizing and legalizing of the Gospel of God's grace is a dull heresy peddled to disappointed people who are angry because they have not received what they had no good reason to expect" (as cited in Swindoll, 2003, p. 1). Might this same concept apply in academia?

GRACE ABUSED

Swindoll (2004) acknowledges we are born into "a world of pain" (p. 126). Yet, "just like Christ, we learn obedience from the things we suffer (Hebrews 5:8). Spiritually, the pain of adversity helps us grow into mature people of faith (James 1:2-4)" (p. 127). In fact, Swindoll opines, "Pain has a way of turning us back to the Savior. That makes it essential for our growth and spiritual well-being" (p. 128). Swindoll (2004) cautions that rushing in to rescue others from pain may thwart God, as that may be an experience "essential for the accomplishment of God's plan" (p. 131). Therefore, if we coddle and protect students, are we thwart-

ing their growth and perhaps hindering God's plan for them? A helpful tool when facing a challenging situation is to ask God, "What are You trying to teach me through this?" Might students grow spiritually if they asked a similar question rather than trying to manipulate the outcome?

Regardless of what we are facing, Swindoll (2004) reminds us that the pain is no accident or mistake; in fact, it may be what Jesus ultimately can use to bring one to their knees. Swindoll (2004) also discusses the "tough stuff of misunderstanding." Might this be what happens when a professor takes the time to provide feedback on a paper or gives counsel regarding whether college is the best course for a struggling student? Swindoll advises motives are questioned, or you may be perceived to be judgmental. So, while remaining silent when truth spoken in love is warranted (Ephesians 4:15) might be the path of least resistance, we submit it is not in the best interest of the student long-term.

GRACE AND CURRENT STUDENTS

Clearly, these are different times, not bad or good, just different. In Pappano's (2018) verbiage, the newest generation is "forcing course makeovers, spurring increased investments in mental health … and pushing academics to be more hands-on and job-relevant"— one might say the generations are calling the shots for higher education. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Holzer & Baum, 2017) advocates students need "more options and pathways to success" along with "more active guidance" in order to be successful and move towards graduation. The *Chronicle* also reports mental health issues (Boucher, 2016; Field, 2016), grading grace (meaning no penalties, no deadlines, and/or grade inflation) (Boucher, 2016), and the need for increased student services (counseling services, therapy, telepsychology, mental-health apps, workshops to deal with anxiety, etc.) (Field, 2016; Gray, 2015) are impacting the institution more than ever before.

The impact is not just on the educational institution, the impact goes much further to include the effect on the workforce, highlighting the importance of the student as a person —and a future career professional. The reason for these monumental increased mental health services is the need for resilience in students (Field, 2016). If resilience in students has become so great a need, why seek to treat only the symptoms (such as stress, anxiety, depression, etc.)? Why not go directly to the root problem — the lack of grit (Duckworth, 2016) and resilience (Berg, et al., 2018)? Would efforts to engage the student to become more resilient and "grit"-oriented produce better results? This method

not only serves the student in their temporary condition of being a student but ultimately serves the entire person—for whom they are becoming and ultimately will become. As we send these students into the workforce and organizational life, the opportunity exists to send out strong (gritty), resilient, able-bodied people, rather than perpetuating issues that will only follow them and create more need.

The *Washington Post* (Stanley-Becker, 2018) recently referred to the idea of students as "snowflakes" who are "traumatized" and "apathetic," acknowledging that 25 percent of college students report mental health issues. Gray (2015) noted emergency calls for counseling at colleges and universities have "more than doubled over the past five years." Both Stanley-Becker and Piper (2017) noted reaction to election results and its psychological impact on students. Stanley-Becker describes the delicate mentality in these generations as distress is manifested in ways not seen in prior generations.

But before we start the blame game towards higher education, let's remember how students arrived to us from their lawnmower (Martinko, 2016) and helicopter parents (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchannan, 2014; Morin, 2018). For distinction, Morin offers that helicopter parents kept a "close eye on their kid's every move," and lawnmower parents are actually "paving the way" by "mowing down obstacles before their kids reach them." And while all parents, and colleges for that matter, truly want to help their children and students, Morin clearly advocates this has not helped. It actually has been harmful by depriving development of problem-solving skills and not showing youth "how to deal with discomfort," not teaching them "emotional skills" that will help them actually grow through mistakes, adversity, and failure. Furthermore, this has deprived them of the inherent lessons learned in these times. We have helped so much that youth cannot even identify a problem before well-intended parents have tried to solve it. In so doing, we have taken away character-building moments. Morin (2018) also clearly shows we have fostered fragility instead of instilling confidence. In so doing, we have paved the way for poor mental health by depriving these young people of increased mental stamina, which would be strengthened as they encounter challenges and develop techniques to overcome those challenges, thereby learning and becoming stronger.

GRACE AS A LEARNING TOOL

While these authors advocate grace, in abundance, we are also cautioning the reader(s) to regard the virtuous

ground of balance—the middle between extremes. Too much grace will likely encourage entitlement and coddling, termed "helicopter academia" (Waddell & Patterson, 2018). However, too little grace is likely to foster a harshness or rigid mentality that will not serve students or institutions well. We do not want to crush the spirit of a student who challenges himself or herself.

Boucher (2016) cautions against assuming students are "irresponsible or lazy rather than overwhelmed or struggling." So the crux becomes where to draw the line drawn between grace and grit—where do we find the balance between grace in abundance (kindness, safety, serving needs and loving students) and grit (not enabling or coddling students, depriving failure and learning opportunities)? This article seeks to encourage us all (colleges, universities, faculty, staff, administration, and beloved students) to consider the needed balance—asking what is the virtuous ground in academia that will serve all well and ultimately propel students from collegiate training grounds towards destined futures where they themselves will become the leaders, the world changers, and the decision-makers to ultimately impact the generations that come behind them. Is this too high a call to reach for? We think not when you ask the right questions, seek the right domains, and pull from within to fully embrace serving others—servant leadership.

GRACE: IMPEDIMENT TO BUILDING GRIT?

Reflecting on the news she was being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, Duckworth (2016) explains the award was for her discovery "that what we eventually accomplish may depend more on our passion and perseverance than on our innate talent" (p. xiv). She opined that in the long run, grit may matter more than talent" (p. xv). Duckworth further theorized that grit is not fixed; it's mutable, meaning you can grow it.

However, Lahey (2015) opines, "We have taught our kids to fear failure, and in doing so, we have blocked the surest and clearest path to their success" (p. xi). "The setbacks, mistakes, miscalculations, and failures we have shoved out of our children's way are the very experiences that teach them how to be resourceful, persistent, innovative, and resilient citizens of this world" (p. xii). Rather than characterizing failure as negative, Lahey points out that small failures are "opportunities in disguise, valuable gifts misidentified as tragedy" (p. xx). "Not failure, but low aim, is crime" (Lowell as cited by Swindoll, 1983, p. 273). We want to encourage growth, which may entail taking a risk, learning from it, and moving forward in spite of failure.

Duckworth (2016) describes implementing challenges that exceed current skills, explaining West Point cadets were "being asked, on an hourly basis, to do things they couldn't do yet" (p. 6). What was important was "to keep going after failure" (p. 7). Duckworth found highly successful individuals were unusually resilient and hardworking but also had grit. And Lahey (2015) notes, "Gritty students succeed, and failure strengthens grit like no other crucible" (p. xxi).

Of particular interest to us in academia is Duckworth's (2016) finding that "adults who'd successfully earned degrees from two-year colleges scored slightly higher on the Grit Scale than graduates of four-year colleges" (p. 11). Duckworth was puzzled until she learned "dropout rates at community colleges can be as high as 80 percent. Those who defy the odds are especially gritty" (p. 11). While "a supportive teacher made it more likely that students would graduate, … grit still predicts success" (p. 12).

Regarding culture and grit, Duckworth (2016) advises, "*If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you're a leader, and you want the people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture*" (p. 245). Note, she does not advise the organization become "softer," she advises creation of a gritty culture. This type of grittiness in academia has been captured by Piper (2017) in describing Oklahoma Wesleyan University as "not a day care." Rather than buying into coddling demonstrated in so many universities (e.g., demanding safe spaces and trigger warnings, frolicking with puppies, and playing with Play-Doh and coloring books), Piper encourages students to grow up, stating,

> Our universities are doing a tremendous disservice, both to students and our culture, by letting students think they can bend reality to fit their whims. In the real world, people don't get paid to be selfish and disruptive, but, rather, to be productive members of society. (p. 15)

We believe this aligns with what we've seen in helicopter parenting, and helicopter academia. We propose the goal of academia should be to raise and train young people to become mature, fully functioning, productive members of society.

Evidence of the disconnect between helicopter academia and preparation for the real world are students from Oberlin College who worked with community members in Cleveland, Ohio, protesting the shooting of Tamir Rice. With a 40-minute drive, on-site involvement wasn't sustainable, so more than 1,300 students "signed a petition calling for the college to eliminate any grade lower than a C for the semester, but to no avail" (Heller, 2016). This resulted in the students feeling unsupported. Welcome to the real world. Few, if any, employers are willing to pay employees

to participate in events or issues one chooses to engage in on their own time.

CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

Plagiarism and Standard Formatting

We have combined experiences teaching at over ten different universities. Recurrent challenges include an increasing number of students unprepared for graduate-level work. Feedback on repeated grammar and noncompliance with the university's standard format (APA) corrections were met with justification and rationalization, including one student evaluation that stated, "I thought I was back in high school English." Think about the magnitude of that statement by an individual in a master's-level course.

An additional and very serious problem is plagiarism. Despite forewarnings that universities routinely use software to identify plagiarism, students still plagiarize. The challenge to professors is the push/pull between professors attempting to teach quality research and writing while emphasizing ethics and values and universities attempting to retain students and the subsequent tuition dollars. There is a time and place for grace. However, is grace extended to students who plagiarize and lie about it really in the best interest of the students? To future professors? To future employers? To society? Are we tacitly condoning an attitude of "the ends justify the means" when proposed discipline of grade point deduction or even removal from the university for repeated violations are dismissed? Additionally, have we lost a teachable moment in these cases when there are minimal or no consequences for such violations?

Rather than obsessing about some small failure, Lahey (2015) proposes small failures (e.g., a B-minus grade) "can actually serve as a great opportunity to teach their child about resilience" (p. xxiv). But Lahey notes, "Teaching has become a push and pull between opposing forces in which parents want teachers to educate their children with increasing rigor, but reject those rigorous lessons as 'too hard' or 'too frustrating' for their children to endure" (p. xxv).

"How parents, teachers, and students work together to overcome those inevitable failures predicts so much about how children will fare in high school, college, and beyond" (Lahey, 2015, p. xxv). This is our goal: to teach and help prepare these young people to succeed—in academia, in work, and in society. Are we willing to do the "tough stuff" of sticking with established grading rubrics, assigning grades earned, and then working *with* the students to raise the quality of work rather than acquiescing to complaints, thereby lowering the standards? While this may create a short-term fix, we propose it leaves a long-term problem—students graduating college unprepared to assimilate as mature, fully functioning, productive members of society.

Extensions and Incompletes

There are many challenges for instructors when deciding between the use of extended grace and holding students accountable. Extending grace usually entails additional work for the instructor since it moves the grading time of the assignment outside the timeframe established for meeting final grade submission deadlines. Along with grace usually comes additional remedial instruction that the professor must conduct to get the student up to speed on the topic at hand. But this additional work is something we, as educators, should be prepared to provide. While professors need to be ready to assist students, we believe administrators should take into account the additional workload this places on faculty and should adjust teaching loads accordingly.

There are several best practices we recommend professors utilize when working with students today. First, faculty members need to create a consistent policy on assignment extensions and incompletes and then clearly communicate these expectations to their students. Syllabi, course content, and school and university policy all need to be consistent and readily available to students. Next, this policy needs consistent enforcement to ensure students know the limits of grace that can be provided. Since so much of the communication today between students and faculty is via electronic means, we recommend faculty strive to communicate via more rich communication techniques when grace is being considered. Face-to-face, telephone, and video teleconferencing should be used when allowing an extension or when aiding failing students since these methods tend to break down the transactional distance for students and help them perceive someone cares and is looking out for them.

Communication with Students

The phraseology "communication is king" is never truer than in online education. Students' needs have changed, and for the online student, the increased need for mobile devices has also increased. Blumenstyk (2018) reminds us that students are often reliant on their phones and tablets and then "want to use those devices for at least some of their coursework." This need, or dependence, is an entry point for commutation that professors need to consider. The way students communicate and complete their work has changed. Thus our communication and instructional techniques might need to change as well.

Consider also the manner in which we communicate. According to Gooblar (2018), the manner of communication impacts student levels of perception they are supported and ultimately affects their motivation in our courses. He adds that the "more secure" students feel, the "more moti-

vated" they are. Gooblar offers the following communicative tools for engaging with students. First, he emphasizes the need to "change your tone"—to help students "feel comfortable coming to you for help." He also iterates the tone of things. For instance, a syllabus can feel punitive to students. The second thing is to "create an environment that helps students get to know one another," which creates peer-strong moments whereby students can "feel welcomed and respected" (Gooblar). Finally, he suggests professors "practice inclusive teaching," which is basically fostering courses where students feel they can, and do, belong. This is consistent with other research (Lambeth, 2011) that shows most students perceive the lack of social interaction as the biggest barrier to their learning. Ultimately, being student-centered in our communication will make the difference, and Lambeth (2011) proposes this "learner-centered environment" will likely increase students' overall success.

CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The higher education student population has grown significantly over the past 30 years and the students have changed a great deal over this time. Along with this growth in numbers and the change in generational values, we have seen a dramatic change in the method of instruction with the explosion of online education. These changes merit an intense review of how these variables have impacted the ability of students to overcome challenges they encounter during their education and how faculty and university administration should respond.

We provided an overview of the issues when considering how to balance grace and grit. We described what grace is and its biblical foundations. We discussed how grace is sometimes abused and how it has become an expectation of many students today. We believe grace can be used as a learning tool, but we must not let it get in the way of building grit and resilience in our students. While there are many challenges when determining how to best balance providing grace and building grit, we do think there are several best practices that educators and administrators need to consider. This is a very important topic that needs additional qualitative and quantitative study to determine the scope of the problem and proffer additional solutions.

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