

Dialogue III

Marketing in the New Millenium: Revisiting Mission

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An extensive literature indicates that traditional and non-traditional students have different motivations for pursuing a college degree. The surprising finding of the study conducted by Andrews, Roller, and Baker was that the difference extends even to spiritual motivations. Non-traditional business students attending a Christian college did not appear to be motivated by the Christian environment, faculty, peers, content, or the leading of the Holy Spirit. At least three reasons for this immediately spring to mind:

- Non-traditional students are less mature Christians.
- Students experienced in business feel that Christianity is not relevant to their business education.
- The students in the sample did not perceive the college they were entering as Christian.

As a business professor in a Christian university, I am disturbed by this finding.

The strategic reason for the existence of the schools in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities is focused differentiation¹—focus on students who want to approach education from the Christian perspective and differentiation in providing an education that integrates Christian values with subject matter. If large numbers of students are entering our colleges without understanding that Christ is directly relevant to the subject they are studying, our competitive advantage is being diffused.

Interestingly, the authors attribute the disparity in spiritual motivations to the interuniversity sample:

One campus' non-traditional students rated spiritual motivations significantly higher than parallel students on other campuses. The rating was high enough to produce a factor, but not so high as to positively skew the overall mean.²

One interpretation of this could be that the results were not necessarily a function of the age, life stage, or Christian maturity of the student, but were rather a function of the program the student was considering. That is, the students did not perceive the nature of the program they were entering as overtly Christian. Whatever the religious affiliation of the university, if the program does not demand spiritual input from the student, it would follow that more individuals who were not interested in spiritual issues in their education would enter that program.

Anyone involved in program development at a Christian college or university knows that in terms of marketing non-traditional programs, the questions become difficult. Should the non-traditional programs have the same spiritual requirements as the traditional programs? For example, should evening students be required to take the same number of Bible credits as day students? Should they be required to attend chapel? Must students be Christians in order to enter the non-traditional business degree? Must all the professors be Christian? For example, is it necessary to hire Christians to

teach finance or accounting classes?

Programs for non-traditional students tend to create new resources for institutions, and the temptation is great to not limit the potential student base by requiring the same level of original Christian commitment as students in traditional programs. Open enrollment brings in more students. Furthermore, non-traditional students are known to be more pragmatic than traditional ones. They tend to find extensive Bible or general education requirements prohibitive; they do not want to pay for or spend the time taking the “extra” credits. It is very tempting to minimize the requirements in order to maximize the number of students in the program. This is simply good marketing.

Nevertheless, marketing tactics should, rightly, depend on the mission and the competitive strategy of the institution. In other words, the starting point of any marketing endeavor is to define the business. Abell's framework, for example, suggests that the competitive advantage of an organization exists at the overlap of the three questions: Who are our customers? What are their needs? What distinctive

competencies do we have that will meet the needs?³ Therefore, any discussion on marketing to students must necessarily come back to the basic questions: Who are our customers? What do they want from us? What is our mission?

A trend in some CCCU schools is to consider the student as the customer. The mission can then be characterized as the desire to give the student a quality education (excellent thinking and technical skills), coupled with moral and character content. I disagree. I submit that the customer of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities is the Church of Jesus Christ, universal. The Christian college or university is an arm of the Christian church. This statement is not without controversy, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend. For an extensive discussion of the issue, see Marsden, 1994; Milton, 1957 [1644]; Neuhaus, 1998; Noll, 1994; and Packer, J., 1998. Please note that I am not arguing that Christian colleges must be tied to a denomination, nor am I assuming that every Christian sees the need for higher education. Nevertheless, the Christian college and university is

the arena used by the church to train Christians in the life of the mind.⁴ Its customer is the church.

The purpose of the universal church, as commanded by the Head,⁵ is to preach the gospel to everyone and teach them to observe all of His commands.⁶ As an arm of the church, the ultimate purpose of the Christian university is to further the kingdom of Jesus Christ. If the Christian college or university exists only to educate students in a moral atmosphere, it does not fulfill its mission.

How can a Christian university further the Kingdom? If the history of the church is reviewed, we see that the gospel prospers when Christians (1) live a life that others want to emulate, and (2) can articulate the faith according to the intellectual standards of the day.⁷

Therefore, I submit that the purpose of the Christian university is threefold:

1. To create godly character in the student. This is the argument of John Milton when he said:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright ... to be like him, as we

*may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue.*⁸

Milton's argument goes much further than developing a moral person who treats others properly. In his view, we and our students should be continually striving to know God correctly, to become like Christ⁹—a much more complex matter. We are commanded to love as God loved,¹⁰ to be holy as He is holy,¹¹ to have the same submissive attitude as Christ Jesus.¹² This goes far beyond kindness, ethics, and integrity; becoming like Christ can lead individuals into unpredictable areas where only the omniscience of the Holy Spirit can guide. These are the qualities the Christian college or university should be systematically *and overtly* training in students.

2. To educate students in the Christian tradition of truth.

Richard John Neuhaus notes that “a Christian university is one in which all roles are defined by reference to a Christian understanding of truth that the university is to serve.”¹³ In this perspective, the college that is Christian focuses all endeavors, from corporate worship to administration, to the improvement of the mind in the

pursuit of Truth, in the Christian sense of the word. Christ is the Truth; all intellectual truth streams from that supreme source.¹⁴ Of course, this statement is in profound disagreement with the current philosophical thinking prevalent in most academic circles which says that grand narratives of any kind are inimical to the kind of critical inquiry that is the heart and soul of university life.¹⁵ The strategic differentiation of the Christian university is that it formulates critical inquiry from within a specific tradition of Truth. Though traditions may clash with critical thinking, inquiry of the mind is most beneficial when it exists in a relationship of dialectical interdependence with traditions.¹⁶ Critical thinking without framework feeds perpetually upon itself, resulting in mere cleverness at best and skeptical nihilism at worst.¹⁷ Thinking from an assumption of Truth frees the mind as well as the spirit. In the words of Jesus Christ, “If you continue in My word ... you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”¹⁸

3. To create scholars that can articulate the faith according to the intellectual standards of the day. The Christian university is the arm of

the church entrusted with training Christians to viably articulate the faith in response to the intellectual challenges of society. Regretfully, most evangelical churches have not equipped their members to address major intellectual issues.¹⁹ The Christian university must, by default, address the task.

To meet the intellectual challenge, Christian scholars must have expertise in certain areas. They must understand their field of study, including the underlying assumptions and the historic ramifications. They must also have a deep understanding of the Word of God. They must be able to integrate the two in ways that are intellectually viable. They must be able to articulate their understanding.

What then must the college or university that is Christian do to fulfill its mission? It must create an atmosphere that perpetrates the Christian life in all the profound complexities involved and also perpetrates intellectual plausibility. An ethical lifestyle might be envied, but it will not transcend the intellectual barriers. It is the responsibility of the Christian university to teach its students to articulate the faith as well as live by faith. This requires much more than merely

maintaining a moral atmosphere. It is critical for students at Christian universities to study the Bible, the church, and apologetics. The Christian college that requires its students take only a few general survey Bible courses is missing the main point of its existence. The purpose of the Christian university is not to merely give the student basic life skills. It is to give the Christian student an education that is distinctly different from the one they would have in a secular university, one that acknowledges the complexities of growing into the image of Christ, one that builds on the Truth of the Christian tradition, one that integrates God's Truth into every aspect of intellectual inquiry. Only then is the mission of the Christian college or university fulfilled.

Of course, all this is worked out in the "real world." Marketing to potential students is a reality, as is program development. Christian colleges, like Christian churches, focus on slightly different niche markets. Students are at different stages in their spiritual and life journey. Nevertheless, if a particular non-traditional business program consistently attracts a majority of students whose primary

motivation is not spiritual, it violates the mission of the Christian college.

The paper by Andrews, Roller, and Baker provides a valuable service by pointing out a potential problem. If non-traditional students do not have spiritual motivations for attending a business program at a Christian college or university, some remedial work needs to be done. The finding may be a function of the structure of the program, in which case the program should be changed. It may be a function of the students. Non-traditional business students at one university did have strong spiritual motivations; possibly that program can be studied to see what that institution is doing correctly. Whatever the issue, marketing to any student population must be a matter of revisiting the mission. Our main question should not be, "What sells?" Rather it should be, "What is our mission and what does Christ want us to do?"

ENDNOTES

- ¹Porter, Michael, 1980.
- ²Andrews, Roller, & Baker, 1999.
- ³Paraphrased from Abell, D.F., 1980.
- ⁴Noll, 1994, pp. 41-55.
- ⁵Colossians 1:18.
- ⁶Matthew 28:19, 20.
- ⁷A good historical discussion of this can be

- found in Bloom, John, 1998.
- ⁸Milton, 1957 [1644].
- ⁹Ephesians 4:15.
- ¹⁰I John 4:7-21.
- ¹¹Peter 1:13-16.
- ¹²Philippians 2:5-13.
- ¹³Neuhaus, 1998.
- ¹⁴Holmes, Arthur F., 1977.
- ¹⁵Natoli, 1997, p. 9.
- ¹⁶Schwehn, Mark R., 1999.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸John 8:31, 32.
- ¹⁹Noll, 1994.

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