

The Reformed Tradition and Student Success
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Board of Trustees, March 2007

My thanks to Chairman Chlapaty and President Bullock for the invitation to speak with you this morning about our mission as a Christian university and how that mission informs our understanding of student success. That is, the question we want to explore, if only briefly, is how our mission lends content to our vision of success.

So, first, the mission.

Your packet for this meeting includes a copy of the Mission, Vision, and Values Statement adopted by the Board in 1998. That mission states right up front, at the very top, “As a community, the University practices its Christian faith by educating students and pursuing excellence in scholarship.” We practice our Christian faith, we assert, by educating students and pursuing excellence in scholarship.

In this day and age, in the early 21st century, if you ask folks about how they practice their faith, teaching and scholarship may not rise immediately to the top of the list. Worship, prayer, song, acts of generosity, acts of compassion, devotional reading, and fasting might surface and rightly so. But we, as a school in the Reformed Christian tradition, the Presbyterian tradition, have affirmed that we practice our Christian faith first and foremost by educating students and pursuing excellence in scholarship.

This commitment, this link, between the Christian faith and higher education, we need to note, is particularly striking given the overwhelmingly secular character of higher education in America today. Though many of the preeminent universities in the country, as recently as a half-century ago, referred to themselves as “Christian” institutions, and in fact could do so with some integrity, the influence of Christianity on these schools, let alone many church-related colleges, has all but vanished today. How and why this has

occurred is an interesting story, but not one we will pursue here. An article that was distributed in your packet gives a start on that topic as background to our conversation and I would be happy to suggest further bibliography to any interested parties.

Rather, this morning, I'd just like to spend a few minutes remembering why it is that we have such a unique mission and opportunity here at the University of Dubuque. Our mission, "to practice our Christian faith by educating students and pursuing excellence in scholarship," is rooted in the Reformed theological tradition, in which this school was born.

Attending to this story could take us back to Moses, or even to Abraham and Sarah, but we don't have that much time, so we'll leapfrog over millennia to the 16th century and the birth of Protestantism. The 16th century was, of course, a time of major religious and social upheaval. In the midst of that turmoil, John Calvin, the preeminent theologian of our tradition, the Reformed or Presbyterian tradition, thought teaching and learning, educating students and pursuing excellence in scholarship, were absolutely essential to faithful living not simply for individuals but also for the society.

Calvin, who oversaw the Reformation in Geneva, wrote in 1541: "Because there is need to raise up seed for the times to come so as not to leave an empty church to our children, a college must be organized to teach children in order to prepare them both for the ministry and for the civil government."¹ These words, written almost 500 years ago are key to our subject here today, so let me repeat them. "A college must be organized to teach children in order to prepare them both for the ministry and for the civil government." This vision of forming a school to prepare leaders for the church and society gave birth, in 1559, to Geneva Academy, "the crowning achievement of Calvin's

¹ J. Calvin, *Calvin, home d'Eglise* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1971), p. 34; quoted in Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 257.

work.”² Geneva Academy provided schooling not simply for citizens of that city but, more importantly, attracted students from all over Europe, many of whom returned to their home countries to become leaders in church and state.³ The school had international, indeed, global influence.

The import of education for Calvin was rooted in his doctrine of vocation, of calling. “The Lord bids each one of us,” Calvin wrote, “in all life’s actions to look to his calling....[God] has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life.... It is enough if we know that the Lord’s calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing.”⁴

“God has appointed duties for every[one] in his particular way of life [and this calling] is in everything the foundation of well-doing.” Here is why higher education is so important for the Reformed tradition, for our tradition. Inasmuch as “Christians were to serve God in whatever their occupations . . . university learning . . . could be [indeed when faithfully pursued would be] a means of glorifying God.”⁵ Teachers, bankers, carpenters, physicians, attorneys, midwives, clergy, magistrates, merchants, soldiers, musicians, poets—all, according to Calvin, had a calling from God and for many such callings a collegiate education was essential. Education was, is, for service: for service to God and to neighbor.

This Reformed emphasis on calling found its way across the Atlantic nowhere more clearly than in Puritan New England. John Cotton, the preeminent Calvinist divine in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, put the claim this way, “We live by faith in our

² John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 78.

³Robert M. Kingdom, “Geneva Academy” in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 724.

⁵ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 37.

vocations, in that faith, in serving God, serves men, and in serving men, serves God.”⁶ Christians, Cotton insisted, have two callings: their general calling as people of faith and their particular callings, their professions, in which we use the gifts bestowed by God to serve God and others.⁷

This Reformed emphasis on vocation, God’s calling, and the importance of education to the pursuit of one’s calling bore fruit on the shores of America when, in 1636, a mere six years after the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Harvard College was founded by Puritans to “advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity.”⁸ Likewise Reformed Congregationalists, at the founding of Yale in 1701, sought, in the words of the charter, to instruct youth in the arts and sciences to be “fitted for Publick employment both in Church & Civil State,”⁹ and Princeton, founded by Presbyterians in 1746 desired to instruct youth “in the learned Languages, and in the Liberal Arts and Sciences,” “for the Benefit of the inhabitants of [New Jersey] and other [colonies].”¹⁰

This concern for higher education in service to God and neighbor, higher education in order to nurture each student in his or her calling, compelled Presbyterians in America to found 49 colleges in the years before the Civil War and dozens more after that.¹¹ Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that concern for education, education for the service of God and neighbor, was a hallmark of the Presbyterian Church in the new world. The University of Dubuque founded first as a seminary to educate clergy and then

⁶ John Cotton, “Christian Calling,” in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 176.

⁷ Cotton, “Christian Calling,” 174.

⁸ “New England’s First Fruits, 1643,” in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 6.

⁹ Hofstadter, *American Higher Education*, 2.

¹⁰ “Charters of the College of New Jersey (Princeton), 1746, 1748,” in *American Higher Education*, ed. Hofstadter, 83, 82.

¹¹ Bradley Longfield and George Marsden, “Presbyterian Colleges in Twentieth-Century America,” in *The Pluralistic Vision: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestant Education and Leadership*, ed. Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox press, 1992), 102.

to nurture undergraduates perfectly mirrored this Reformed emphasis that led to the founding of Geneva Academy, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton centuries before.

The calling of this school, then, the calling of the University of Dubuque, is to attend to the God-given callings of our students which brings us back to the topic of student success. Success understood within this context, within the context of the Reformed tradition, within the context of this Christian university, means we seek the full development of the gifts God has given to our students, so they may live in service to God and neighbor. Success is all about living as God intends for us to live: to live faithfully, compassionately, generously, hopefully, with our eyes on the welfare of others. Which is why our vision commits us, as Dr. Carlson noted yesterday, to graduating individuals who “make their mark through . . . service to their community.”

The commitment of the university to practice “our Christian faith by educating students and pursuing excellence in scholarship” is a high and noble calling. It means that day in and day out we seek to help our student’s discern God’s call. It means that day in and day out we seek to nurture God’s gifts in our students so they can build a world of justice, freedom, and compassion. Such a calling requires sacrifice, endurance, vision, prayer, and the ability to see the image of God, the image of Christ, in each individual. This calling, our calling, was the very same calling embraced by such saints as Jacob Conzett, Cornelius Steffens, John Knox Coit, and William Lomax. By God’s grace, we too, can be faithful stewards of that precious heritage.