

Liberating Minds, Enlarging Sympathies,  
Enhancing Discernment, Encouraging Commitments:  
Reformed Higher Education as Seen Through the Eyes of  
Northwestern College

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One hundred twenty-three years ago the Northwestern Classical Academy was established. The school's purpose was to "provide learning in the sciences and literature, with religion." Its challenge, according to one of the first principals, James Zwemer, was to "stand in protest against ignorance and materialism," making sure that this area of the country was known "not only for hogs and corn but for dedication and culture."<sup>1</sup>

In these statements, we find the heart of a Reformed understanding of higher education. Unlike some of their sisters and brothers in other nineteenth century Christian communities who chose to focus their educational efforts only on "religion" and "dedication," fearing the influence of literature and science, and unlike their colleagues in the burgeoning state universities where religion was seen as a private matter unrelated to higher learning, Northwestern's founders valued both "special grace" – the revelation of God's truth in scripture – and "common grace" – God's revelation of truth in nature and culture.

Central to this vision is an affirmation of the human world and a critique. This world is not merely a stage on which the gospel of personal salvation is presented. The world itself is important. Directly and indirectly it is God's handiwork, to be appreciated and enjoyed. Still, in its present form it is not the ultimate expression of goodness, truth, and beauty. The scriptures explain that the good creation of almighty God was corrupted by human selfishness and pride, making criticism of culture necessary and cultural witness a part of the divine plan.

In Northwestern's years as an academy and junior college, "dedication" and "culture" were always present. And on numerous occasions, particularly in the early days and during the depression of the late nineteen twenties and thirties, this educational vision, embodied in committed faculty and staff, kept the institution alive and focused. But it was not until Northwestern became a four-year liberal arts college in the 1960s that its Reformed vision could be fully realized. It is on these latter years that this essay will concentrate, looking at the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald F. De Jong, *From Strength to Strength* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 17, 20.

emergence of four themes that came to mark Northwestern's mission – and a new challenge that the college, along with all of higher education, is now facing.

### **The Integration of Faith and Learning**

When Northwestern became a four-year institution in 1961, its most formidable task was to create a curriculum that prepared young men and women more for *remaking* the world than *making it* in the world. The task was given to a group of faculty from several academic disciplines, led by Dr. George DeVries of the History Department, Dr. Lyle Vander Werff and Dr. William Kennedy from the Religion Department, and President Lars Granberg. Their pioneering work continues to guide the college today.

The new curriculum was broad but focused. “Our students [in all academic areas] need to grapple with the ultimate, perennial issues of life,” stated a summary report of 1970. They “need to be introduced to ‘the funded wisdom of the ages.’” Intellectual skills and personal faith were to be honed together. The report continues:

We should help young Christians to develop a kind of Christian humanism, guided by the Word of God – that they may learn to think critically, to understand themselves and their world, to analyze and synthesize, to make wise decisions, to evaluate, to appreciate, to empathize, to articulate, and in general to become conscious of their own personal Christian interpretation of life – and thereby better to serve God and man in the church and the world.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying these statements of curricular purpose was the radical notion that educational excellence required both academic rigor and deep Christian faith, and that both were to be practiced in the classroom. It was not enough for academic rigor to be experienced in a supportive Christian campus environment, as important as that was. The truth of scripture and the historic disciplines of faith were to be partners with “culture” in the curriculum. Indeed, in the strictest sense, the phrase, “the integration of faith and learning,” though helpful when communicating Northwestern's vision in a secular educational world, is not accurate. For Reformed believers faith and learning cannot truly be separated; learning without God and God's revelation in scripture is without foundation and purpose, and faith uninformed by knowledge of God's world is without direction. The more appropriate phrase may be the “reintegration of

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<sup>2</sup> De Jong, *From Strength to Strength*, 182

faith and learning” or even better, “faith: learning come of age,” and “learning: faith come of age.”

In the decades since these goals were articulated they have been tested in at least two noteworthy ways. The first has come from those in the academy who claim that academic freedom requires a separation of faith from learning. In the words of John Dewey, “to investigate truth, critically to verify fact; to reach conclusions by means of the best methods at command, untrammelled by external fear or favor. . . ,his is precisely the aim. . . of the university.”<sup>3</sup> The assumption is that faith and religion represent “external fear and favor.” And it is true that at times the church has squelched the pursuit of knowledge in favor of blind adherence to tradition—the story of Galileo is only one tragic example. But at Northwestern we believe this need not be the case. We are convinced that our relationship to the Reformed Church in America frees us and challenges us to explore openly and critically matters of religious belief and practice, subjects ironically excluded from secular institutions that espouse academic freedom. At the same time, because our Reformed tradition views God as the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all of life, we are encouraged to pursue truth fearlessly, wherever it is to be found, in the natural sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities.

The second test has come from those within the church who, while not fearing knowledge, do question the value of a liberal arts education that examines openly the totality of human experience, good and evil alike. Why not screen out those ideas we know to be false and destructive?, they ask. Why risk the minds and hearts of still vulnerable young men and women? What good does it accomplish? These are important questions, ones that require careful answers.

Much study has gone into understanding the developmental process of young adults in our society. We know this is a critical time of transition and growth. And, in the end, it is for this very reason that we believe strongly in a liberal arts education. One of the Desert Fathers told this parable: there once was a math student who never became a mathematician because he looked up the answers in the back of book, and his answers were all correct!

To become a mature person of faith requires struggle, facing and overcoming evil. It is rewarding journey but not an easy one. The road is often bumpy and

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, “Academic Freedom” *Educational Review* 23 (1902), 1,3, reproduced in Walter Metzger, ed. *The American Concept of Academic Freedom: A Collection of Essays and Reports* (New York: Arno Press, 1977).

uphill. There are detours and delays. Sometimes we crash. There is the joy of discovery, sometimes answers to life's fundamental questions, but what we learn is that these answers and this joy have little meaning without the struggle. It is in the struggle that we come, truly, to know ourselves and the gracious heart of God. To introduce students to this exciting but difficult, sometimes even dangerous, adventure of faith is central to our calling as a Christian educational institution.

### **A Whole Education for Your Whole Life**

In the early years of Northwestern as a four-year college there were numerous after-class activities – student government, clubs, athletics, cultural affairs programs and chapel. Often referred to as extra-curricular, these activities were valued – especially chapel worship – but were seen by most on campus as secondary, if not peripheral, to Northwestern's educational purpose. By the late 1970s this perception began to change.

A physical signal of the change was the construction of a new student center in 1980. The dream of the president, Virgil Rowenhorst, after whom it was named, the center housed many student support services (bookstore, post office, and staff offices); a large recreational space with basketball and racquetball courts; a snack bar, game room, and lounge; and a 250-seat theater. Rowenhorst believed that a residential college needed a place where students could gather outside of class, not only to relax and let down their hair on weekends but to build relationships and develop a sense of community.

The Rowenhorst Student Center was only the beginning. In the 1980s and 90s extra class activities came of age at Northwestern. The language changed. "Student Services" became "Student Life." Its "director" became a "dean" and then "vice-president." Many "extracurricular" activities were relabeled "cocurricular." The "Integration of Faith and Learning" became the "Integration of Faith, Learning and Living." All of this to indicate a growing sense that the whole life of students is important in the learning process.

The elevation of student life at Northwestern reflected, in part, a trend throughout American higher education. As recreation, entertainment, and personal development became more popular across our society, colleges and universities felt the need to bring these opportunities to campus. For many, the trend has been positive, enriching and enlivening to campus life. But for others in both secular and religious schools the trend has had a negative effect. At best it has reordered priorities, diluting the academic experience by taking valuable resources away from the classroom. At worst it has allowed the least constructive features of our culture to shape the campus environment, dangerously misunderstanding a college's or university's identity and purpose.

Over the years Northwestern has felt this tension. It has prompted lively debate and careful budgeting. Most of all, I believe, it has deepened and refined what we now call “A Whole Education for Your Whole Life.”

In a recent interview, Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff, former professor of philosophy at Calvin College and Yale Divinity School, and longtime defender of both the Christian liberal arts and the Reformed tradition, commented that for years he assumed that if the truth was presented to students in an effective academic manner, they would naturally apply it to their lives. Intellectual comprehension would produce appropriate changes in behavior. The Christian way of life so dear to Reformed Christianity could best be communicated to the next generation through rigorous academic exercise. But after years of observing excellent students fail to make the connection between thinking and living, and convinced that the goal of Christian learning is living not just thinking, he concluded that Christian education must involve more than training the mind and introducing the content of Christian truth.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, Northwestern’s journey of understanding its students and its mission mirrors that of Wolterstorff. A vibrant student life and campus ministry program came alongside a strong curriculum not primarily because this was the trend of the times or even because of student interest though that interest certainly was present, but because our goal to prepare young men and women for effective Christian service in the world requires it. Leadership roles in the residence halls and in student government; discipleship groups; ministry teams in the region, across the country, and around the globe; expanding athletic, art, and music performance opportunities; and a growing list of internships all reflect a commitment to connect belief and practice, ideas and action.

Still the tension remains throughout American education and to a lesser degree at Northwestern. The self indulgent, entertainment orientation of our society continually threatens healthy holistic learning, giving constant rise to those inclined to reduce a college’s focus to intellectual comprehension. But for those of us in Reformed educational institutions, the path ahead, though challenging, is clear. Rejecting both the indulgent road on one side and the reductionist road on the other we move straight ahead, encouraging and guiding our students to love the Lord their God with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength.

### **A Small Campus with a Large Worldview**

Among the students who experienced the changes that came to Northwestern during its first decades as a four-year college were a number of young men and

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<sup>4</sup> David Schelhaas, “An Interview with Nicholas Wolterstorff,” *Perspectives*, Dec. 2002, 14-15.

women from Japan. Reflecting on the experience of these students, Dr. Muneharu Kitagaki, president of Keiwa College, shared this story in a recent personal conversation.

A few years ago Dr. Kitigaki and several leaders from Shibata City, Japan, visited three higher educational institutions in the U.S. as preparation for establishing a new college back home. They visited Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Northwestern College. At this point in his telling of the story, Dr. Kitigaki looked up at me with a twinkle in his eye and asked if I knew why they had come to Northwestern. Trying to be politely coy I said I could imagine several reasons, which did he have in mind. He smiled and said it was because they wanted to study “learning in community.”

He explained that many vulnerable but eager Japanese students had come to Northwestern, and the experience changed their lives. They received excellent academic training. They formed lifelong friendships. Often they became Christians. And underneath it all was a community of people – faculty, staff, students, and townsfolk – who cared for them. That caring, he said, made the difference. He wanted it to be a part of the new Keiwa College in Shibata City.

These students came to Northwestern because of the vision of one faculty member. Dr. Lyle Vander Werff came to Northwestern’s Religion Department in 1967 with a passion for evangelism and global understanding. Having served as a missionary in Kuwait, he knew the value of cross cultural learning and witness. He also cared deeply for all God’s children. Japanese students were the first to come, after Vander Werff developed a sister school relationship with Baiko Jo Gakuin in 1979. Many more international students were to follow. In 1985 a summer institute was established for these students to learn English, explore the Christian faith, and experience American culture. Eventually, several sister school relationships were formed with institutions in South Korea and Japan.

There were challenges, of course. In addition to the organizational and logistical hurdles always present with new programs, there was the question of religious pluralism and, especially when students began to come from Arab counties, the question of American foreign policy. Welcoming foreign students was one thing, welcoming foreign points of view was quite another.

During the formative years of discussions on these potentially controversial subjects, Northwestern and Orange City – indeed the Reformed Church in America – were fortunate to have the services of not only Dr. VanderWerff but also Dr. Raymond Weiss, a former missionary in Bahrain who came to Northwestern as Chaplain in 1970 and later joined the Religion Department. Both town and gown benefited from the tireless efforts of these men to interpret and

explain, listening carefully to various points of view but never failing to challenge those more culturally determined than scripturally grounded. Vander Werff's summer institute and Weiss's Model Arab League each spring became models of cross-cultural learning and uncompromising Christian witness.

The vision of Vander Werff and Weiss and others who built on their foundation lives on at Northwestern. Today it is coupled with a renewed emphasis on sending American students overseas. Each spring over more than two hundred students, and each summer another twenty to twenty-five, serve in Christian ministries around the world. In addition fifty to eighty students study abroad annually. One indication of Vander Werff and Weiss's legacy is that today several Northwestern graduates are teaching in other countries, bringing "learning in community" to, among other places, Dr. Kitigaki's Japan.

### **Vocare: Find Your Place**

From its earliest days as a classical academy Northwestern sought to assist students in their occupational journeys. Initially the focus was on preparing pre-ministerial students for Hope College and Western Seminary. Then, as more elementary and secondary schools were needed in the region, teacher preparation was added. When Northwestern became a liberal arts college the list of occupational options increased significantly, but equally important, the rich Reformed notion of vocation was now introduced fully.

*Vocare*, the Latin word for vocation, means "calling" and refers specifically to God's call to God's people. Originally limited to those "called" to the Catholic priesthood, Protestant Reformers both Lutheran and Calvinist applied the word to the lives of all believers—their work, family status, church membership, and community participation were all included. By affirming "nonreligious" work and the lifestyles of laypeople, Reformers validated life in this world, and by labeling these activities callings from God they elevated lay responsibility to a sacred duty. In a very real sense the purpose of a Christian liberal arts education is to help students discern their sacred place in each of life's important arenas of responsibility and opportunity.

In 2002 Northwestern received a five-year two-million dollar grant from the Lilly Foundation to enhance our ability to assist students in making vocational choices. We are using the grant to strengthen, focus, and unite the themes mentioned in this essay: *The Integration of Faith and Learning*, *A Whole Education for Your Whole Life*, and *A Small Campus with a Large Worldview*. Here is a summary of key initiatives:

1. Faculty research is exploring theologically each of the divisions of our academic program—Fine Arts, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and

- Humanities. Deepening our understanding of the integration of faith and learning, this research has brought changes to courses in business, literature, music performance, music theory and kinesiology. In all, faculty from sixteen departments have participated in grant initiatives, including new efforts to bring vocational insights into academic advising.
2. A new Center for Spiritual Formation and Vocation has been established. Through the center and the Religion Department, spiritual practices that form the natural environment for vocational discernment are being taught, experienced, and learned by students, faculty, and staff. These include Sabbath, silence, and listening for God as well as scriptural study and service. New internships both on and off campus are being formed with special emphasis on developing mentoring relationships to assist students not only in discerning their occupational choices but their Christian lifestyles.
  3. To prepare students to discern and then follow God's call in the new global village, grant dollars are funding a consulting arrangement between Northwestern and Dr. Brenda Salter-McNeil, an African-American Christian leader from Chicago. With her guidance we have formed MERT – the Northwestern Multi-Ethnic Resource Team. Its purpose is to bring multi-ethnic awareness and understanding to every area of campus life and to introduce cross-cultural competence to each student. Current initiatives include renewed minority student and faculty recruitment efforts in the U.S. and abroad; potential study partnerships with the Reformed Church in America in Oman and India; multicultural internships; Northwestern – led study/service experiences in Oman, Romania, South Africa, Germany, Ireland, and Honduras; an annual faculty diversity exchange in Chicago; and campus reading groups on multi-ethnic themes.

### **The Challenge of the Future**

There is much to be thankful for as Northwestern looks to the future. The classical academy with a handful of students and part-time teachers has grown to become a significant liberal arts college with a respected Christian identity. I think it is fair to say that today northwest Iowa is not only known for “hogs and corn,” but also for “dedication and culture.”

But despite the positive features of current campus life, Northwestern faces a major challenge in the years ahead. There are, of course, many challenges facing small, private residential colleges; cost, enrollment demographics, on-line education are among them. But there is one problem that goes to the very heart of the progress that has taken place at the college during the last forty years. The

problem is not unique to Northwestern – it plagues all of higher education – but it is more acute for those of us in Christian liberal arts institutions since it threatens what we hold most dear.

Since the rapid growth of American higher education in the years after World War II, much has been added to the curricular core that was the foundation of learning in earlier years: new courses, new academic majors, the possibility of academic minors and “career concentrations” as well as numerous cocurricular activities and personal development experiences. As we have seen there was debate on the merit of these additions, but when the victory was won, so to speak, and the new opportunities proved fruitful to learning at least in the minds of most, higher education simply moved forward, not realizing that new danger loomed ahead.

Today many are coming to see that, despite the positive developments in our colleges and universities – including those at Northwestern – we in the higher education world have come to define “quality” in terms of “quantity.” We encourage students to add a minor or a second major, assuming more credits equals more learning. We advise students to add cocurricular activities and service projects to their growing list of academic credits, trusting that these additional experiences will enrich their lives.

The same emphasis on quantity marks the evaluation of professors. The more articles published, the more classes taught, the more committees chaired, the more worthwhile the contribution. Too often today the assumption is the busier the student, the more he is learning, and the busier the professor, the more she is contributing.

The tragedy and irony in this perspective is that when we stop to think for a moment (and, of course, we don’t have time to) we acknowledge – especially those of us in Christian liberal arts colleges – that the wisdom we claim to value above all can only come when we have time to reflect. Activity and busyness, the gods of our culture, are demons in the life of those seeking the mind and the spirit. No matter how good – and even necessary to the learning process – the individual academic or cocurricular experience may be, the cumulative affect of *so many experiences* is often destructive.

So what can be done?

The growing awareness among accrediting agencies that learning is not based on “seat time” – time spent in a classroom seat – has opened the door to new, creative ways to maximize time in higher educational institutions. In a recent meeting with the Higher Learning Commission an accreditation official

expressed interest in working with Northwestern to explore alternative ways of doing college.

One of the questions we will be exploring is this: Is it possible to organize a student's four years in a more developmental manner, integrating academic and cocurricular experiences – not simply adding one on top of the other – to cultivate a way of life that uses time effectively to prepare students for lifelong learning, rather than just lifelong busyness?

Here is one possibility: The freshman year would be much like it is today with a structured academic schedule and opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities. But as students move through their sophomore, junior and senior years, they would be weaned from a structured but busy schedule of many curricular and cocurricular experiences to a less structured schedule with more time for critical reflection and synthesis. The focus would be more on overall learning than on particular activities – more on growing internal student discipline than on relying on external direction.

As sophomores they might replace traditional general education courses with interdisciplinary seminars that integrate service learning and independent study with classroom content. Significant time would be set aside to explore individually and through small-group interaction with professors, staff, and peers what truly matters in life. Faculty, student life, and campus ministry personnel might work together in guiding student learning. Knowledge, experience, and personal development would merge to help shape the student's view of the world as she embarks on courses in her major.

The junior year could become an in-depth exploration of the world through the lens of one particular academic discipline. This might be done best by studying one course at a time, for at least one of the semesters. It might also include an ongoing seminar throughout the year to stimulate reflection on the moral and spiritual implications of the material being explored.

For the senior year, the goal would be synthesis – academic, professional, and personal. Bridges would be built to the world students will encounter after graduation. A senior project culminating in a personal mission statement, incorporating both career and life goals, would provide an appropriate climax.

With time opened up, new pedagogical questions arise: How many hours should students spend in class? How many in the library, online, off campus. . . in another part of our country or the world? What kinds of experiential and service learning would enhance understanding and excellent performance in a given field of study? In this new expanded world of learning, what is the role of the

professor, staff, other students, practitioners off campus, and the individual student? Are there not better ways than only traditional letter grades to evaluate student learning and assist them in their life choices?

Doing college in a new way would also provide faculty with the opportunity to take a fresh look at how they spend their time. Where in the current configuration of faculty loads is time for reflection and the growth of wisdom? Is there room in our definition and practice of scholarship to create wisdom? Is the role of wise mentors to our students cultivated and rewarded?

Many of these ideas are not new. They have been batted about in faculty lounges, board rooms and residence halls for years. Indeed some of them have been tried, with mixed results. Most, it seems to me, have failed to take root, more because of educational inertia than lack of merit.

At least this is what Northwestern plans to find out. Prompted by a need greater than ever before and inspired by the legacy of Reformed educational pioneers, we look to the future with humility and anticipation.