



The Importance of Educational Value Added¹

Ted Ward

Nothing is more persistent in the lore and advertising of the Christian colleges than the generalization that these institutions are “different.” In the minds of some, the differences are quantitative: smaller, lower ratio of faculty to students, more focus on a smaller number of majors and courses, and so forth. Others assume that “different” refers to qualitative matters: more and better supervision, attention to individual differences, concern for moral and spiritual values, for example.

The claim that a college is different invites an important question: In what specific ways is the college different? At a superficial level, the question is relatively easy to answer since all sorts of idiosyncrasies are evident in any given institution. In order to respond to such questions wisely and well, the answers that the college offers about its uniqueness should be based on substantial evidence and be related to authentic and significant matters of quality. The claim that a whole category or set of colleges is different invites a challenge, not just a question. Satisfactory response to the challenge requires evidence about significant, systematic, and predictable common characteristics among the institutions, not just a recital of their random idiosyncrasies and wishful thinking.

Claims about distinctiveness of any educational institution are always being scrutinized by professional and private observers. Being under continuous critical observation comes with the territory. Private institutions, especially, rise and fall with the confidences that donors and students are willing to place in the projected image and promises of distinctiveness. In the case of a prestigious college with a long and well-molded reputation, these images and promises are often taken at face value. Great is the pity.

One pattern of image-maintenance common to “name” institutions is familiar to professional observers of higher education: the Martford Effect. (Note the altered spelling: it is intended to keep the mystique safe just a bit longer.) This approach to looking mahvelous, simply mahvelous, can be reduced to three steps:

1. Admit only the best of all good applicants.
2. Try very hard not to hurt them very much during the four collegiate years. (It is especially important that they remain creative.)
3. See that the educational institution takes credit and glory for whatever good they do in the world thereafter.

¹ Ted Ward. The Importance of Education Value Added. Editorial. *Faculty Dialogue*. (5) Winter 1985-86: pp. 3-5. Used with permission. *Faculty Dialogue* ceased publication in 1995.

Few colleges can successfully use this formula because of the intense competition (and the difficulty of defining the right criteria) in point 1. But even if both the first and the second points are handled poorly, it is a rare college that doesn't engage eagerly in point 3.

One must wonder if this sort of aggrandizing of institutional and personal ego is what Christian higher education should be about. The more significant issue is the *value added* by the Christian college. What is the college doing for the students and for the society? Never mind if it deals with the "cream of the crop" or has "the best faculty." Never mind how old, how well endowed, prestigious, widely known, or how well "grounded in the faith." What is it doing for students and for the human condition?

Every college deals with human beings of worth and value. Some are indeed smarter and more privileged than others, but all are objects of God's love and, one way or another, all are gifted for ministry and service. The big question remains: What is the college doing to facilitate these ministries and services?

What sort of student does the college turn out? Overlooking the innocent offensiveness of the "factory" metaphor of education, the question is apt. The valid marks of distinctiveness are more a matter of output than of input. Notwithstanding the irrefutable importance of admission criteria, the worthy claims of a college's being "different" relate to the qualities of those who have been shaped, influenced, and marked by the college. The development of what sort of students is worth the claim of difference for the Christian colleges as a whole? Earl McGrath's tantalizing answer is simply put: "Physicists who ask moral questions."

Coming down to the same sort of conclusion, Warren Bryan Martin says that a student's acquisition of skills and methodologies must be accompanied by a commitment to purpose, and that "above every other skill . . . is development in the person of a capacity for good judgment. To judge rightly is . . . the end of the education experience to which everything else is means."

Edwin E. Crawford, Jr., suggests that the value of a Christian higher education, rightly defined, allows for a disentangling of valid godly criteria for basic values from the facile valuing of pragmatic "success" which has become endemic in North American Christianity.

Harking back to Reinhold Niebuhr, Earl McGrath reminds that the uniqueness of the Christian higher education is represented by the relationship between the Bible and the newspaper, a gutsy coming to grips with troublesome contemporary problems from the stance of tough-minded moral truth.

Is this the "difference" of a Christian higher education? If so, let every so-called Christian college get its house in order.

What is important here is more than attracting good students and perpetuating reputations; it is the value-added outcomes of the Christian educational experience.