



Educational Planning Tasks: *A Response*¹

Ted Ward

In his apologia for the “liberal arts” Dr. Woodbridge has invited us into a serious quest for new answers to very old problems. Far more is at stake than our interpretation of, or allegiance to, this or that “liberal arts philosophy of education.” We must confront the rudimentary issue of defining purposes and establishing the scope for the new University. But this is only a beginning. By his own judgments, Dr. Woodbridge is warning that old and purely traditional answers are inadequate. In my estimation, the tasks involved in the development of a truly Christian university have never been adequately addressed—most surely not in the twentieth century. If we undertake these tasks in the name of Trinity International University, we dare not underestimate or seriously miscalculate the size of the job; too much is at stake.

Dr. Woodbridge’s central theme is, “Above all else, we want the educational compass of this university to be set on Christ.” Indeed, this basic assertion is the starting place demanded by the heritage and unbroken commitment of the precedent Trinity institutions for the past century. But now the issue confronts us: how best to fulfill this high calling. It is not easy to define; it promises to be far more difficult to fulfill. The quest to which Dr. Woodbridge has called us is not just an architectural task; it is a perennial goal and a perpetual task.

Both the faculties of the liberal arts college and the divinity school share a common problem: how to defend the ‘utility’ of their respective prime degrees, the ‘liberal arts degree’ for the college and the M.Div. Degree for the divinity school. (Woodbridge, p. 3)

This concern for foundational relationships between distinctiveness of institutional mission and the particular academic models is valid, but the questions for the year 1996 only start with these matters. We are already at the brink of further questions: How to better realize the highest functional values represented by our belief in the degrees already in place? How to craft new degrees, especially new and diverse post-graduate degrees so as to more fully mature the gifts and resources already in place? The task of this University is to serve the church and to further the cause of Christ in the world he so loved.

Four major tasks will demand the very best resources from within and outside our University:

1. Defining a workable construct of an appropriate Christian learning community. This is no simple matter for an urban or suburban university site or for a university committed to decentralized operations. Gone are the easy days when the emergence of a learning community could be assumed because people were destined to brush their teeth and store their suitcases together. Even the faculty-

¹ Ted Ward. Educational Planning Tasks Implicit in Setting the Compass on Christ. Response to “Setting The Compass on Christ: Trinity International University Today and Tomorrow” by John D. Woodbridge, November 1995

student relationships and context needed for optimal learning community seem largely to be beyond us. We can no longer assume that if we are faculty persons of good will and Christian virtue, things will settle into a bucolic reenactment of “The Halls of Ivy.”

2. Defining, enunciating, putting in place, and maintaining a profoundly explicit and demonstrable qualification of the sort of faculty person who incarnates Christian servanthood within the scholarly and personal character of the learning teacher. This matter must be more than the declaration of an ideal; it requires some practical and demanding operations:

a) The development of the extant faculties into communities that exemplify the chosen ideals of the Christian scholar-teacher,

b) The development of assessment criteria and procedures that are defensible, legal, explicit, reliable, and valid for the measurement of the practice of these ideals in the professional behaviors of present and prospective faculty, and

c) Rigorous and accountable application of these values and assessment processes in all matters of faculty recruitment, hiring, and promotion. Make no mistake about it: aside from the case of Timothy Dwight at Yale College two hundred years ago, recovery of fundamental Christianness in a defaulted institution of Christian higher education is, as Dr. Woodbridge says, rare—“an exceptional case.” Degeneration is far more common, especially in recent times as a consequence of fiscal desperation. Many institutions whose quest for more students, more funding, more visibility, and more relevancy has driven them to unwise means. They have expanded into market-driven degrees and specializations for which there are too few strong Christian faculty persons available. Compromise on faculty spirituality is the sure doorway to de-Christianization of the college or university.

3. Development of a curriculum which is integrated and internally logical from end to end providing the models, skills, experiences, and applications of Christian learning. Such a curriculum, as a holistic and unitary expression of the ethos of the University, should be crafted seamlessly and with a minimum of competitive dissonance arising from proprietary disciplinary categories.

4. Communicating effectively with a broad distribution of persons who are capable of becoming interested, intrigued, motivated, and satisfied through their participation in a truly Christian academic learning process. Thus it will be necessary to present a clear, honest, and engaging set of academic degree programs, with a reasonable but minimal set of coherent variations capable of facilitating students’ fulfillment of a wide range of callings and the furthering of personal and intellectual development toward an appropriate set of Christ-centered life-goals.

These matters are virtually out of the question in today’s universities—whether or not Christian in their origin or creed. But if we are really serious about what Dr. Woodbridge is suggesting, we must try.

My major warning on the matters in Dr. Woodbridge’s excellent paper is that a responsible approach to these matters must be careful not to bog down in shibboleths and slogans. The debates over terminology, especially “liberal arts,” “flagship degrees,” “utility,” “core disciplines” and the like, are apt to generate more heat than light. We are people of Christ, not definable in terms of advocacy of this or that historical proposition apart from the Gospel and the Bible, itself. We need to be enlightened by the past, but how inadequate would be the University if it were motivated more by resolving the Athens-Jerusalem debates than by a vision for the effective witness of the Word in today’s world.

As I see it, there are three transcendent concerns:

Fidelity to the Word—as to the inspired infallible Scripture and as to the Word alive through Christ in the disciple.

The voluntary suppression of pride and arrogance, within ourselves and within our institution, through on-going prayer and covenant toward the refining of a true learning community.

The knowledgeable mobilization of intellectual and spiritual resources in the persistent, perpetual, and never-to-be-completed building of an institution that exemplifies the ever-fresh, always contemporary, and reliably honest application of the Gospel to matters of human society and life.

With the hope that I have done no violence to Dr. Woodbridge's excellent statement on page 5, I offer this restatement:

The special mission of Trinity International University is to do what the great universities of the middle ages and more recent times were once committed to do: to provide excellence in academics as well as preparation for ministry, the workplace, and the professions within a Christian learning community and socio-cultural ethos characterized by a biblically grounded worldview and a Gospel-driven attentiveness to the world's challenging diversity.

For my comments there is no more appropriate conclusion than this further statement from Dr. Woodbridge: "We should not yield to a despondent spirit of pessimism. Rather we should get down to work."