

COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES

ADVANCE

FALL 2025

MAGAZINE

LEADING CHRISTIAN COLLEGES THROUGH CHANGING TIMES

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THE LEADING VOICE OF CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION



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FROM THE PRESIDENT | **DAVID A. HOAG, PH.D.**

Cultivating Future Leaders In Christian Higher Education



In a few short months, the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities will embark on a year-long celebration of our 50th anniversary. For half a century, Christian colleges around the world have united under the banner of the CCCU, recognizing the strength that arises when we advocate together, share resources, and grow alongside one another.

As I reflect on the CCCU's history, and look ahead to our future, I have been considering the central role of leadership formation. The Bible presents our fundamental model of leadership. Jesus, of course, serves as the ultimate example, a leader with a servant's heart, guided always by wisdom and faithfulness. Recently, however, Dr. Mark Batterson's book *Chase the Lion* has turned my attention to a lesser-known example of biblical leadership: Benaiah, one of King David's mighty men introduced in 2 Samuel.

Benaiah earned renown through seemingly impossible acts of courage. Scripture tells us he killed two mighty warriors from Moab, struck down a lion in a pit on a snowy day, and even defeated a towering Egyptian who wielded a spear while Benaiah held only a staff. His victories were not a simple result of skill or strength, but rather of trusting God in moments when the odds were stacked against him. Because of Benaiah's faith and courage, David honored him with the responsibility of leading his personal bodyguard.

The story of Benaiah is an excellent reminder of what it means to be a Christian leader. In today's rapidly changing world, the call to develop faithful leaders is more urgent than ever. Preparing the next generation means cultivating minds and hearts—instilling not just strategic skills, but also spiritual maturity, biblical wisdom, and courage to follow the Lord in the face of insurmountable odds. Benaiah trusted in a God who is greater than any challenge, and he lived with a sense of divine purpose, understanding that each victory prepared him for the greater calling God had in store.

At the CCCU, we hope this approach to leadership—and to life—grows through our leadership development opportunities, which have been a cornerstone of the CCCU's work for more than 25 years. In fact, I had the honor of participating in the very first Leadership Development Institute (LDI) in 1998. Since those early days, the CCCU has faithfully invested in these institutes each year, nurturing the capacity and character of countless emerging leaders. The fruit of these efforts is evident: from our LDIs, more than 15 college and university presidents and 45 vice presidents have gone on to serve in Christian higher education.

Before the first LDI, the CCCU held the New Presidents Institute, started by former CCCU President Bob Andringa in 1995. I again had the opportunity to benefit from the CCCU's leadership development offerings when I became the president of Warner University in 2016. Attending the NPI was a formative experience, providing me with clarity, community, and confidence as I embarked on a challenging new role.

In today's rapidly changing world, the call to develop faithful leaders is more urgent than ever. Preparing the next generation means cultivating minds and hearts—instilling not just strategic skills, but also spiritual maturity, biblical wisdom, and courage to follow the Lord in the face of insurmountable odds.

Every year, the average tenure of a college president shrinks. According to the American Council on Education's 2023 report, in 2006, the average president had served in their position for more than eight years. Now, the average is down to five years. Challenges in today's culture, and in higher education specifically, make this a harder time than ever to lead—whether you lead from the president's office or any other position on campus.

The need is clear: As leaders today, we are called to raise up modern-day "lion chasers." We must cultivate in ourselves and others the confidence that God can overcome any obstacle, the courage to face fears head-on, and the perspective that every trial shapes us for God's greater purposes. As we reflect on Benaiah's life, let us remember that leadership is not about avoiding difficulties but stepping into them, knowing these seemingly impossible challenges may be the very instruments God uses to write the next chapter of our calling and, through that process, to transform the world.

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THE COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES

(CCCU) is a higher education
association of more than 170 Christian
institutions around the world. Since
1976, the CCCU has served as the
leading voice of Christian higher
education. With campuses across the
globe, including more than 130 in
the U.S. and Canada and more than
30 from an additional 18 countries,
CCCU institutions are accredited,
comprehensive colleges and universities
whose missions are Christ-centered
and rooted in the historic Christian
faith. Most also have curricula rooted
in the arts and sciences. The CCCU's
mission is to advance the cause of
Christ-centered higher education and
to help our institutions transform
lives by faithfully relating scholarship
and service to biblical truth.

THE MISSION OF THE CCCU is to
advance the cause of Christ-centered
higher education throughout the world.

DISTRIBUTION

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ADVERTISING

Advance accepts advertising from
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PRESIDENTIAL CHANGES

The following institutions have experienced presidential transitions since September 2024. Campuses that currently have interim presidents are not included.

Anderson University
(Anderson, IN)
Scott Moats, June 2025

Asbury Theological Seminary
(Wilmore, KY)
David Watson, July 2025

Bethel University
(Mishawaka, IN)
Dee McDonald, July 2025

Christ’s College Taipei
(New Taipei City, Taiwan)
Cheng-Hui Wang, February 2025

Denver Seminary
(Littleton, CO)
Mark Husbands, January 2025

Huntington University
(Huntington, IN)
Robert Pepper, June 2025

Lee University
(Cleveland, TN)
Phil Cook, July 2025

MidAmerica Nazarene University
(Olathe, KS)
Jon North, July 2025

North Central University
(Minneapolis, MN)
Darnell K. Williams, May 2025

Northwest Nazarene University
(Nampa, ID)
Mark DeMichael, July 2025

Point Loma Nazarene University
(San Diego, CA)
Kerry Fulcher, August 2024

The King’s University
(Southlake, TX)
Iriní Fambro, January 2024

Northwest University
(Kirkland, WA)
Jeremy Johnson, August 2025

Ohio Christian University
(Circleville, OH)
R.D. Saunders, January 2025

Point University
(West Point, GA)
Stacy A. Bartlett, July 2025

Trinity Western University
(Langley, BC)
Todd F. Martin, February 2025

Universidad Nacional Evangelica
(Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic)
Rafael Reyes, October 2024

Warner University
(Lake Wales, FL)
Gentry Sutton, February 2025

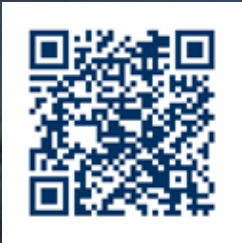
York University
(York, NE)
Timothy Westbrook, July 2025

CCCU AWARDS \$70,00 IN FACULTY RESEARCH GRANTS

In September, the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities announced the 2025 recipients of its annual Networking Grants, awarded to support high-quality, collaborative Christian scholarship that brings Christian voices into contemporary academic conversations. A total of \$70,000 was awarded to four research teams representing 14 colleges and universities. The Networking Grants for Christian Scholars program was established in 1999 through the ongoing generosity of Walter and Darlene Hansen, and in 2020, a generous gift from the Christian Community Credit Union expanded the size of the grants. Each year, the CCCU awards Networking Grants to scholars whose work satisfies two key criteria: 1) the work is significantly informed by Christian practices, perspectives and purposes, and 2) the work demonstrates the potential for dissemination in the larger academy. “Each year, the Networking Grants provide an opportunity for the CCCU to support the vital and vibrant scholarship that takes place on Christian college campuses,” said CCCU President David Hoag, Ph.D. “In Christian higher education, our faculty play an essential role both by providing students with a transformative, holistic education and engaging in academic research shaped by their faith. We are excited to see the projects that take shape through the support of this year’s grants.” For the 2025-26 academic year, the CCCU awarded Networking Grants to four distinct research teams composed of 20 scholars,

representing 10 different CCCU colleges or universities and four non-member institutions. “The CCCU and its selection committee were delighted by the range and depth of the proposals submitted. The broad range of competitive proposals showcases the scholarly excellence and productive collaboration offered by the faculty in Christian institutions,” said Dr. Stanley P. Rosenberg, vice president for research and scholarship at the CCCU and executive director of Scholarship & Christianity in Oxford (SCIO). “Investing in research is vital to help shape institutions, their faculty and their students. It is one of the significant ways we contribute to the common good and demonstrate care for our world. The selected projects promise to bring an essential Christ-centered lens to significant scholarly conversations.” Grant-funded projects are divided into two categories: Initiative Grants provide up to \$30,000 in funding over three years for teams implementing research projects, and Planning Grants provide up to \$5,000 in funding over one year for teams setting out to plan research projects.

To learn more about the projects selected for the 2025 Networking Grants, scan the QR code below.



The Counterintuitive Need to Cultivate Doubt



“The really important thing is to try and make opinion increasingly responsible to the facts. There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies.”

— Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

Despite our culture’s negative associations with the word, doubt is not something to be simply avoided. Doubt plays a key role in detecting truth, among other things, providing the impetus to identify falsehoods. The process of research, which is foundational to learning, actively involves creating and pursuing doubt. This is especially true in the context of Christian higher education where we seek both common truths that can and *should* be shared by all, as well as the particular truths that come via revelation.

In other words, *doubt* is central to our mission as Christian educators. To fulfill our mission, we must embrace the role of doubt in the educational process, teaching students to both invite and manage doubt for the sake of a high-quality education, deeper student formation, and the pursuit of our goals to have and convey an authentic understanding of our world.

Research stems from questioning, which I contend is itself an act of piety. Piety? Certainly, as its impetus is rooted in the very beginning of scripture: “God created the heavens and the earth.” This would be an unexceptional affirmation in most any church. But such an affirmation presents several follow-on consequents that are not so readily accepted: since God created the heavens and the earth, God therefore works in and through the natural world. If this is true, then God works through natural processes. This invites us to ask questions about the natural world and about God Himself. Many are conditioned to only see God at work in a miraculous, instantaneous overpowering of nature, and this view has worked in parallel with and fed into the anti-intellectualism that has marked so many cultures. Despite what some would tell us, such a view is not a hallmark of a mature, Christian-formed culture but a blatant rejection of the divine mandate. It is arguably a form of impiety.

To take seriously God as creator of nature requires a commitment to studying natural processes, whether physical and biological or human and relational. By investigating the processes of the world, we not only probe the book of nature, but we also develop the habits of mind and vision for understanding the work of God. While it is not incumbent for all to engage in these investigative activities, it is incumbent for that part of the body of Christ called to education;

it is incumbent for educators who believe they should seek God and pursue a life with divine purpose.

When considering how we discover the work and nature of God, earlier traditions of Christian thinkers distinguished between God’s essence and His activity. It is not within our ability, they maintained, to understand much of the essence of God, except those small bits illuminated in His revelations to us through scripture, the first book. And even our understanding of revelation is of course limited, as God is infinite and beyond our imagination. Our reading of that book is clouded by the inexactitude of human language, the inability of human writers to fully fathom divine mysteries, and yet God’s revelations in scripture are nonetheless true and valuable, leading to a fuller unveiling of truth.

Recognition of the two books—Scripture and Nature—enriches our apprehension of the divine and develops habits of mind that vitally impact and shape the character of people and institutions.

But we can also know something more, complementary and additional, through attention to God’s activity or “energy.” This requires skill, sensitivity, scrutiny, and the like. To reject the study of God’s activity is tantamount to a rejection of a substantial part of God’s gift to us, the tools He has given us by which we can know Him and carry out His purposes. To suggest that God only works by instantaneous miracle and not by the natural processes He instituted is in fact a form of impiety!

At its core, Christian higher education seeks to understand and communicate the natural processes while offering formation to those who study these processes. This is why research is an essential activity—not an optional add-on when convenient. Our mission

Photo courtesy of Stanley P. Rosenberg

depends on research. Our commitment to investigating the world is a central formative activity for the students, alongside the vital work that takes place in chapels and through student life. Simultaneously, research is formative for faculty and the broader community—the families of our students, their churches, our denominations, and the common good.

In a society that currently questions and undermines the value of pure and, increasingly, applied research, and where support for research is therefore diminishing, it is incumbent for leaders of Christian higher education to step up to prophetically challenge the impiety of rejecting God’s work in and through nature. Investment in the leadership of Christian higher education requires the formation of leaders who deeply understand the doctrine of creation and hence possess a commitment to cultivating a research-minded culture. These essential leaders of the future will recognize the qualities of character that inform healthy research and its role in student formation. They will share their confidence in divine providence, which plays out through a commitment to training researchers. Here, I’m not strictly speaking of training professional researchers—future academics—though some leaders will surely do so, and it has been my pleasure to contribute to the development of academics here in Oxford. Instead, I am concerned with the broader student community who would deeply benefit from training in research, but who may never go on to advanced education and professional teaching.

Why is this training so essential? Learning to ask good, answerable questions and developing a commitment to truth, a commitment to honestly assessing one’s own findings—despite one’s predilections, comfort, and easy certainties—is essential, both to being fully human and to establishing a healthy body politic. It is central to authentic faith in Christ. These skills are vital in service of the entire body of Christ. In a culture that increasingly values assertions over evidence, dismissiveness over persuasion, and power over service, casual cruelty seems more evident than self-sacrifice and generosity of spirit.

A healthy attention to the formative role of research solves this, too. It encourages and teaches empathy, recognizes the uncertainty that attends our perceptions and the provisionality of many of our commitments. Hence, practiced well, research is a path to both knowledge *and* humility. Recognition of the two books—Scripture and Nature—enriches our apprehension of the divine and develops habits of mind that vitally impact and shape the character of people and institutions.

This leads to a counterintuitive affirmation: Christian higher education should lead to the affirmation of (certain kinds of) doubt! Doubt? Can the faithful Christian entertain doubt? Surely not... look at Thomas, after all! Yes, indeed, let’s look at Thomas and his doubts. Let’s look at Moses, Job, David, Hosea. For these faithful followers and countless other figures throughout the Bible, doubts ultimately enabled them to recognize that God worked in ways well beyond their expectations and their own human limitations.

We are not called to doubt God, or to be cynical, but doubt has an important role to play in our lives. We should be among those who doubt our institutions, our culture, our communities. We should especially live with a dose of self-doubt. We should, without cynicism, apply the benefit of doubt to the secular as well as the more sacred elements of our society. If one doubts, one begins to ask serious questions—questions that can orient us to seeing the work of God in new and expansive ways. In this way, doubt is not a simple enemy. It can be the opportunity. For the future of Christian higher education, and the world beyond, we need leaders who can invite and model healthy doubt, in order to support the essential investigations that doubt will produce. **A**

STANLEY P. ROSENBERG, Ph.D is the CCCU’s vice president for research and scholarship and the executive director of SCIO: Scholarship & Christianity in Oxford, the CCCU’s U.K. subsidiary.

Investment in the leadership of Christian higher education requires the formation of leaders who deeply understand the doctrine of creation and hence possess a commitment to cultivating a research-minded culture.

PARTNER OR PERISH?

SEIZING NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN
CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

*By David A. Hoag, Ph.D., & James E. Samels, Ed.D.
With Dr. Amanda Staggenborg*



Christian higher education stands on shifting sand—as does the entire higher education sector. In the face of changing demographics, economic challenges, increasing competition, and shifts in Americans’ religious affiliation, Christian colleges and universities face new and unexpected obstacles... alongside opportunities for innovation.

THE HEADWINDS CHRISTIAN COLLEGES FACE

For years, colleges and universities have been bracing for the “enrollment cliff”—a sharp drop in the college-aged population due to declining birth rates, expected to hit college campuses in the next five to 10 years. More colleges and universities will be competing for fewer students, and institutions’ survival may depend on their ability to sustain enrollment.

Christian colleges and universities face an additional challenge, with an even narrower enrollment funnel. Beyond declining birth rates, the United States has seen a decline in the number of families identifying with religious faith over the past 50 years. According to a January 2024 report from the Pew Research Center, 28% of American adults now identify as religious “nones”—individuals unaffiliated with any organized religion. This number increased over several decades. In 2007, “nones” made up only 16% of the American population. This data tracks with similar research from a September 2022 Pew report, which notes a substantial decline in the number of American Christians. In 1972, 90% of U.S. adults described themselves as Christian. By 2021, that number had dropped to 63%. Fewer Christian families naturally means that fewer prospective students will consider faith-based colleges and universities.

Demographics is just one factor impacting enrollment. Higher education also faces challenges in the form of public perception. In a July 2024 article, Gallup shared the results from a recent survey on Americans’ confidence in various institutions. Gallup found that only 31% of American adults believe higher education is headed in the right direction. Many prospective students are considering alternatives to a four-year college education. According to a 2021 joint survey by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Gallup, 46% of American families are interested in alternative pathways for their high-school students, including community college, trade schools, the military or employment that does not require additional schooling. In the years to come, the U.S. will have fewer college-aged students, and increasing numbers from that diminished pool may choose not to enroll in college.

Christian colleges and universities must seize upon this season as an opportunity to innovate, finding creative new ways to meet needs while retaining the unique qualities of a faith-filled education.

These strains on enrollment leave many colleges and universities with a significant challenge—especially small institutions without an endowment, which are particularly dependent on tuition revenue. Recent years have seen increased rates of college closures, and a December 2024 working paper by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia predicts that the rate of closures will increase based on the predicted decline in enrollment. In the last seven years, among Christian colleges and universities that have closed, average income had decreased by 35%—with a particularly sharp drop in income from tuition and fees, which had decreased by 46%. Other predictive indicators showed that average expenditures among this class of institutions declined by 13%; average budgetary deficit increased from \$646,000 to \$3.86 million; undergraduate enrollment declined by 78%; graduate enrollment declined by 33%; and the average number of employees declined by 38%. For these institutions, closure followed an often-rapid descent.

These schools faced many constraints which made it even harder to overcome financial obstacles. Many of the Christian campuses that closed shared certain characteristics: high, fixed campus operating costs, spiraling insurance benefits, fewer undesignated endowment gifts, lack of liquidity and creditworthiness, a downtick in bond rating, rising average student and family tuition debt burden, and increasing default rates.

To overcome these constraints and avoid the downward plummet that leads to closure, Christian colleges and universities must seize

upon this season as an opportunity to innovate, finding creative new ways to meet needs while retaining the unique qualities of a faith-filled education.

Remarkably, several smaller, aspiring Christian colleges and universities have discovered constructive, profitable alternatives to complicated, involuntary takeovers. For these institutions, connecting with the right students, crafting relationships with the community, and identifying partnerships with mission-aligned organizations provide new opportunities to survive and flourish.

If declining religiosity in America is one challenge facing Christian colleges and universities, Ilana Horwitz offers some encouraging

Connecting with the right students, crafting relationships with the community, and identifying partnerships with mission-aligned organizations provide new opportunities to survive and flourish.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

insights in “God, Grades, and Graduation.” While Horwitz confirms that the number of “nones” is growing, she notes that “the percentage of Americans who are deeply religious has not budged.” She quotes a 2017 study by Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, who note that “only moderate religion is on the decline in the U.S.” It is from this category of the “moderately religious” that the “nones” emerge. Horwitz also discovered in recent studies that geography — specifically among various states — is a major factor. Several states are much more devoutly religious than others. These findings offer both hope and opportunity to Christian institutions, who may focus their attention on the steady category of deeply religious Americans — those most inclined to consider an education shaped by Christian faith — and strategically consider geography in their recruitment efforts.

Christian colleges and universities thrive by adapting while remaining true to their mission of Christian higher education, which is grounded in a holistic, faith-based education. Christian colleges and universities seek to develop the mind, heart, and soul, forming students who are both knowledgeable and wise, equipped to make a difference for the common good as redemptive voices in the world. This mission integrates core Christian values, ethics, and faith across the classroom, athletic fields, chapels, and dormitories.

Christian institutions are poised to carve a new niche by looking downstream to K-12 Christian private and charter schools, which provide a similar emphasis on Christian values and spiritual formation alongside rigorous academic learning. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 3.7 million students were enrolled in a K-12 religious private school as of fall 2021. Many of these schools share Christian

colleges’ approach to a holistic, faith-based education. Early college initiatives can provide Christian higher education with a significant enrollment marketing opportunity through the early character education on offer at these institutions. Through their shared vision, these K-12 schools serve as early Christian colleges, offering students an experience of the transformative, faith-based education they will find at Christian colleges and universities.

Beyond opportunities in enrollment, Christian colleges and universities can seize on new avenues for partnership by creating regional Christian higher learning consortia that utilize resource- and program-sharing benefits. For instance, the CCCU Online Course Sharing Network, powered by Acadeum, is a consortium that has expanded to include more than 80 CCCU institutions since its inception in 2018. The network allows participating institutions to share online courses and develop new programs without significantly raising costs. In the past year alone, CCCU institutions have facilitated over 4,000 shared enrollments, resulting in more course options for students and expanded offerings for institutions. Collective procurement is one example of how colleges and universities can collaborate to reduce future costs while providing enhanced opportunities for students.

Small Christian colleges and universities can also find new methods for academic partnerships through a range of methods, such as collaborative and joint degree programs, rotating semesters, course cross-registration, and coordinated pre-college camp opportunities. These bulk rate discounts, scalable services, and data solutions can help cross-subsidize revenue streams to lessen the burden on traditional tuition.

One example is the partnership between Mid-America Christian University (MACU) in Oklahoma and Warner Pacific University (WPU) in Oregon to offer an expanded ministry program. This partnership allows WPU students to access MACU’s online ministry program, earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in Christian ministries and ministry leadership.

Rather than addressing challenges by assuming more risk, which may fix a temporary problem but is not recommended as a long-term solution, Christian colleges and universities also have the opportunity to foster community partnerships that share resources, cross-subsidize efficiencies, and outsource or co-source talent acquisition. For example, Malone University in Ohio established the “Learn and Earn” initiative, which partners with organizations like Fastenal Company, Visit Canton, and Jarrett Logistics Systems to offer experience in a professional workplace setting. According to Malone, “At the end of each semester, partners can also make an additional contribution that will be put towards the student’s bill for attendance. This is an excellent opportunity for students to gain valuable experience and earn money towards their education.”

Through such partnerships, college students can gain funding for tuition and strengthen their path to employment, while the universities gain a mutually beneficial partnership which provides financial support and strengthens students’ academic experience.

As Christian colleges face new challenges, they also embrace opportunities, ideas, and partnerships in order to survive and thrive long into the future. **A**

As Christian colleges face new challenges, they also embrace opportunities, ideas, and partnerships in order to survive and thrive long into the future.



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Founder & CEO,
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The Samels Group

DIAGNOSING CHRISTIAN COLLEGES

HOW THE CCCU/EDUCATION ALLIANCE'S
NEW SUSTAINABILITY INDEX SUPPORTS
INSTITUTIONAL VIABILITY

A CONVERSATION WITH

Jeff Clawson, Ph.D.
David A. Hoag, Ph.D.
Ron Mahurin, Ph.D.
James Samels, Ed.D.



Higher education is witnessing an era defined by distinct highs and lows. For many Christian colleges and universities, recent years have seen record-breaking enrollment. Just this fall, both Missouri Baptist University (St. Louis, MO) and Lubbock Christian University (Lubbock, TX) welcomed their largest-ever freshman class, while George Fox University (Newberg, OR) reached record enrollment and Malone University (Canton, OH) reported its third sequential year of enrollment growth.

At the same time, higher education news often buzzes with reports of campus closures and mergers. According to *BestColleges*, “At least 81 public or nonprofit colleges have closed, merged, or announced closures or mergers since March 2020.” Last year, *Inside Higher Ed* noted that most 2024 closures “were small, private, tuition-dependent institutions that lacked robust endowments”—a description that applies to many faith-based colleges or universities that are members of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities.

To support member institutions during this unique season, the CCCU and Education Alliance recently developed a new resource called the Sustainability Index. Utilizing publicly available data, the Sustainability Index presents a unified score intended to help college boards and presidents assess their own institutional sustainability.

The CCCU/Education Alliance’s Sustainability Index divides data into two categories: Financial Resiliency and Sustainability, assessing an institution’s financial metrics, and Educational Quality and Student Success, considering factors such as graduation and retention rates, student-faculty ratios, and more.

Intended to serve as a confidential tool for the presidents and boards of member institutions, the Sustainability Index presents easy-to-understand scores, both at the macro and micro levels. The Index aims to help institutional leaders accurately assess the current performance of their institutions and to support data-informed strategic decision-making for the institution’s future.

The Sustainability Index draws from the work of Dr. James Samels, the founder and CEO of the Education Alliance and the Samels Group, two higher education consulting firms. Dr. Samels is also a prolific writer, authoring books including *Consolidating Colleges and Merging Universities: New Strategies for Higher Education Leaders* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017) and *Turnaround: Leading Stressed Colleges and Universities to Excellence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

The following conversation explores the development and planned implementation of this new resource. Moderated by Ron Mahurin, a leading higher education consultant who specializes in strategic planning and board development, and who previously served as vice president for the CCCU, the conversation brings together CCCU President David A. Hoag, Assistant Vice President for Membership, Grants, & Research Jeff Clawson, and James Samels of the Education Alliance. Together, they discuss the Sustainability Index and its role during a time of increased campus closures, mergers, and overarching financial difficulties for many institutions.

Ron Mahurin: What prompted the creation of the CCCU’s Sustainability Index? Was there a particular moment or insight that catalyzed its development?

David Hoag: Early in my time at the CCCU, I got a call from Dr. Samels and we had a engaging conversation. I was really taken by the work that he had already done in this space on mergers and higher education. We are in this certain time in higher education in general, and in Christian higher ed, when the headwinds are challenging. There’s a group of our schools that may need to merge or do collaboration or shared services at a whole other level in order to survive in the future. Connecting with Dr. Samels was important because he’s done so much work in this area.

In my first year as CCCU president, I had all these opportunities to meet with boards. Often, I don’t think these boards really understand where they are and how healthy they are as an institution. In my conversations with Dr. Samels, we talked about the need to give boards an index to show how they are really doing. They need something like an annual checkup—you do the blood test and you get all your results back with a range showing how well you’re doing in all these different areas.

James Samels: Christian higher education is witnessing spiraling costs and intense competition from every sector. The craven competition came from both for-profit and then, after they went away, from community colleges and from state colleges as well. People don’t think that they compete with Christian colleges, but they do. All this was happening kind of at the same time. It’s tough sometimes if you’re running a tuition-dependent, small Christian college or university to be able to balance the books every year.

Jeff Clawson: Most of my own experience has been at small Christian colleges and universities that are struggling. I’ve seen mergers from the leadership side, and I’ve seen mergers as a staff person. I think even in those conversations, the conversation is often the press-release version—everybody wants to put their best foot forward, but then you actually get into the merger and it can be a lot more daunting. From that respect, we need a lot more data to drive difficult conversations.

Mahurin: How does this Sustainability Index differ from other widely known tools like the U.S. Department of Education’s Financial Responsibility Composite Score or Moody’s ratings?

Clawson: You know, you have the Financial Responsibility composite score, which is available from the National Center for Education Statistics. You have the Fitch or Moody’s bond ratings, which is an interesting thing because some of our smaller schools that are more in trouble don’t have a public bond rating. But those only give a piece of the information. What we’ve created is an index that factors in those things, but also a lot of other things that go along with it. You could have a strong Financial Responsibility composite score, but if you’re really tuition-dependent or your tuition discount rate is through the roof, it doesn’t matter as much.

What we’ve been able to do with the Sustainability Index is generate a score that we can pull from public data, but that has enough indicators in it that we can give some really decent advice when it comes down to what the score is made from.

Hoag: The Sustainability Index is drawn from publicly accessible information. We didn’t want to have to have an institutional researcher fill it out, nor did we want to have a research team complete this before we can actually meet with the board. I already have a group of boards that I’m going to be meeting with this fall, and we’re going to take this index with us as a resource these boards can use.

The other piece that makes the Sustainability Index unique is all of the factors it considers. As one example, it includes a housing index. If your faculty or your staff can’t afford to buy a house close to your campus, that makes things really challenging. That probably means that rental property for graduate students or others is going to be challenging too. That’s another example of an important variable that those other indexes you mentioned don’t even look at.

Mahurin: I’d like to shift our conversation now to talk specifically about the Sustainability Index itself. What makes these metrics the right indicators for Christian colleges and universities?

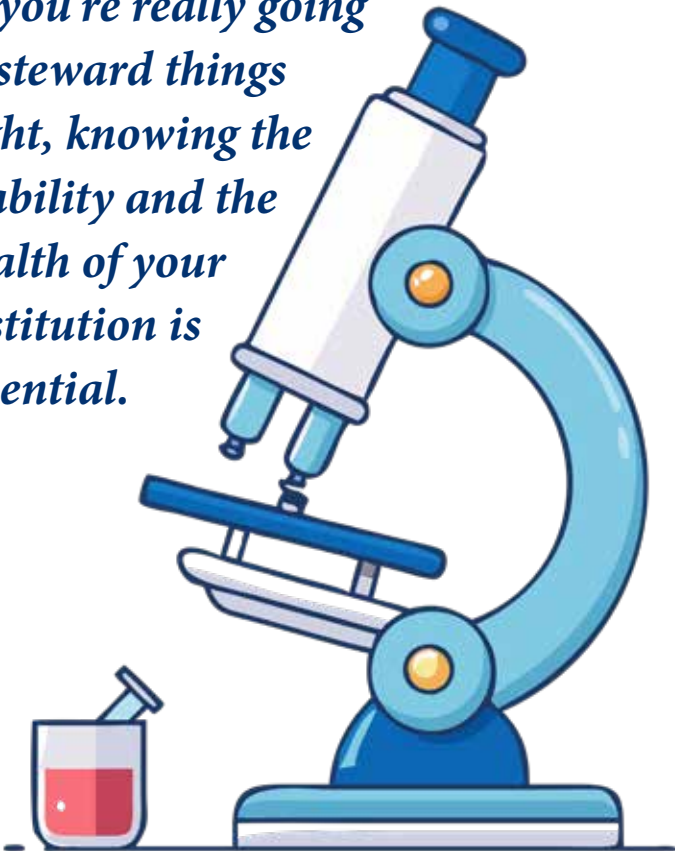
Clawson: We ended up with two main sections: First, Financial Resilience and Sustainability, which has 10 measures in it. Second, we have Educational Quality and Student Success.

Those are the two main areas that we can really measure using data from IPEDS [the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), IRS Form 990s, etc

What’s missing that is important to the mission is the spiritual side. That’s one thing I love about Dr. Samels’ entire dashboard with all the indicators, which served as a starting point for our Sustainability Index. His entire dashboard includes so much spiritual measurement. That’s absolutely important. However, that would be difficult for us to properly assess without having some reliable way for every institution to use the same kind of measurements. I’ll just state that this, though—I’d love to make that part of the CCCU’s annual Collaborative Assessment Project (CAP) because I know it’s David’s heart and it certainly is mine as well, to really help our institutions, not just to be stronger, but also to support them in their spiritual endeavors because our institutions’ mission is spiritual.

In other words, if students grow in their Christian faith over time with us, then we fulfilled our mission. Unfortunately, while that is the crux of the mission of our institutions, that doesn’t always keep our schools in business. So, I think what we ended up with were these key factors that really need to be measured most so that we can remain financially healthy to fulfill the Christian mission.

If you’re really going to steward things right, knowing the viability and the health of your institution is essential.



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CCCU



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Assistant Vice President for
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CCCU

Mahurin: Talk to me about how you constructed the overall Sustainability Index. Is there a weighting to the metrics involved? Is either category more important than the other one, and if so, why?

Clawson: On the educational quality side, there are some (factors or metrics) that are weightier than others because they just are more important, such as retention rate. That’s huge because if you matriculate a student but you don’t keep them, you lose all that money for the other years they’d be in school. So, in our Sustainability Index, the losses on things like that, like graduation rate, they’re weighted a little bit higher than some of the other factors, such as student loan default rate, which tells you something about your students, but it doesn’t necessarily tell you as much about your institution.

Hoag: To answer from my perspective, Ron, some are more important than others. And I’ll give you a great example. If you run out of cash, you’re probably done. But even if your graduation rate or your retention is poor, that’s not going to close you. Over time, it will, but in the more immediate sense, if you run out of money, you run out of money.

Samels: Financial is more near term, while aspects like the spiritual component, they think longer term. But ultimately, spiritual components relate to our conversion yield. So, they’re not mutually exclusive. Your ability to be competitive is key because it’s going to affect the size of your pool and the conversion yield. It’s not how many applications you get, sometimes it’s not even the deposits, but it’s who’s going to be sitting in the seat in September. As we travel around with our clients, they want to focus on near term—that is, quick financial turnaround secrets, tips that will change their destiny, when indeed they should be thinking long-term about student success. The best enrollment tool you have is retention, persistence, and program completion. It’s really a lot about money and financial performance and becoming less reliant on traditional tuition.

I’ll give you an example. We have a client who has been competing with community colleges for years, but then the community college sought out a senior college to do a baccalaureate completion. That turned the relationship entirely around where instead of being antagonistic,

they became mission complementary. Another client took our advice and started looking downstream to high schools, Christian prep schools, Christian schools for early college.

We’re living in times where the metrics are changing really fast, and these institutions have to be nimble, have to be on their toes to do those kind of entrepreneurial initiatives, counterintuitive partnerships with community colleges for bachelor completion and early college for Christian high schools.

Mahurin: I’d like to drill down a little bit on what all three of you have been talking about in relationship to mission identity and financial viability. How do we remain a Christ-centered institution faithful to mission while also being prepared to pivot for market opportunities?

Hoag: What we’re seeing is that the schools that are doubling down on their Christian mission and their identity are doing very well. If you’re doubling down on that Christian mission and identity, that provides clarity to the different markets and directions of the institution. At the institutions that aren’t clear on their mission, they’re trying to be all, end all for everybody. That dilution takes away from their effectiveness, and they lose track. They look for the bigger, better deal, jumping onto the next new project, the next new semester abroad program or what have you, without a guiding sense of that core Christian mission and identity.

Mahurin: How do you envision the Sustainability Index being used both internally for strategy and planning and externally either for benchmarking or other uses?

Hoag: I have an opportunity on a regular basis to go speak to different Christian college boards, to talk about the CCCU, to work with them on our priorities. When I go to have a conversation with them, I want to use the Index so I know how they’re doing, and so I can share it with them as a resource. There might be areas in which they can improve, and they may have to engage with a consultant or another party to help them work on the areas on their index that aren’t as strong. I go back to my analogy of the blood test—you know, the doctor might say, “I’m sorry, your cholesterol is a little high; we’re

going to need you to work on this.” It would be my hope that we could give them advice as to ways in which they can strengthen their institution based on the index.

Mahurin: Dr. Samels, you’ve been working on this kind of indices and benchmarking tools for over 30 years. How have you seen these indices help your clients and other institutions? How do you avoid the risk of an index such as this one becoming some sort of ranking mechanism rather than a tool for improvement?

Samels: It’s like the difference between looking in your rearview mirror versus looking over the horizon. The ranking is what happened. The index is what’s going to happen. It is a predictive tool. Ranking, looking behind. An index, a predictive tool to look ahead.

Sometimes, the index merely helps the board to recognize their own informed intuition and gives them confidence to apply it. Through these kinds of tools, what organizations like the CCCU and Ed Alliance offer is independent validation. Independent data that substantiates your intuition.

Mahurin: What cautions do you think Christian colleges and universities might consider when interpreting Sustainability Index results, especially around mission alignment versus market competitiveness?

Samels: Patience. Patience is important. If you’re going to change your enrollment, yield, conversion rate, it takes several years to do that. You don’t do it overnight. Many people are looking for a quick fix, but real progress comes through discipline over time.

Hoag: And patience can be tough for a board, because most of these boards only meet two or three times a year. I’m a little nervous about being too patient in a context where they’re not meeting on a regular basis. And quite frankly, depending on how the institution is doing on some aspects of the Index, time may not be on their side.

In considering these issues, I like to use the phrase “where do faith and reality meet?” The reality piece would be where that institution really is right now, in this moment in time. How does a board really assess that moment? You know, often they’re trying to pray their way through. I am a huge prayer warrior, and prayer is a central part of my faith. But sometimes the answer to that prayer might be that the board needs to really take a good look at the viability of this institution. My hope would be that they’re having patience to make strategic, data-informed decisions, and they use the Sustainability Index as a tool in that process.

Mahurin: How can the CCCU support institutions? What might the future look like as you begin to build a profile of individual member institutions?

Clawson:I know we’re going to be talking to some institutions that score lower on the Sustainability Index, but we have institutions that score highly on it too. With the strength of the CCCU network, we can hopefully enable those institutions that are thriving to use their voice to help smaller institutions and bring them up.

We already have a lot of that kind of support in place with our networking groups, key leader groups. We have some really top-level

leaders in those spaces working in areas of enrollment, advancement, and more. This project will help us know how to build that out in new and productive ways.

Hoag: I was blown away by some of these conversations at the CCCU Presidents Conference this past year. We had a session led by the former president of Lincoln Christian University and the president of Ozark Christian College. When Lincoln Christian announced its closure, the institution essentially gifted their seminary to Ozark. Then Lincoln repurposed itself to Lincoln Christian Institute with a focus on church leadership development. The session was packed. Following that session, there was a group of folks that wanted to meet. I put the invitation out, and we had twenty-five people in the room—some coming more from the position of a potential acquirer, and others who might have been wondering, “What do I do with this institution I lead if it doesn’t make it?”

In general, though, not many presidents necessarily want to put their hand up to say, “I’m interested in having this conversation about mergers and closures.” So how do we develop a safe place for those conversations? That is one of our goals in this space.

Mahurin: How can a board’s use of a tool like the Sustainability Index enhance its governance role and yet help it avoid falling into a management trap? Does the Index provide a framework for asking the right strategic questions rather than the wrong tactical ones?

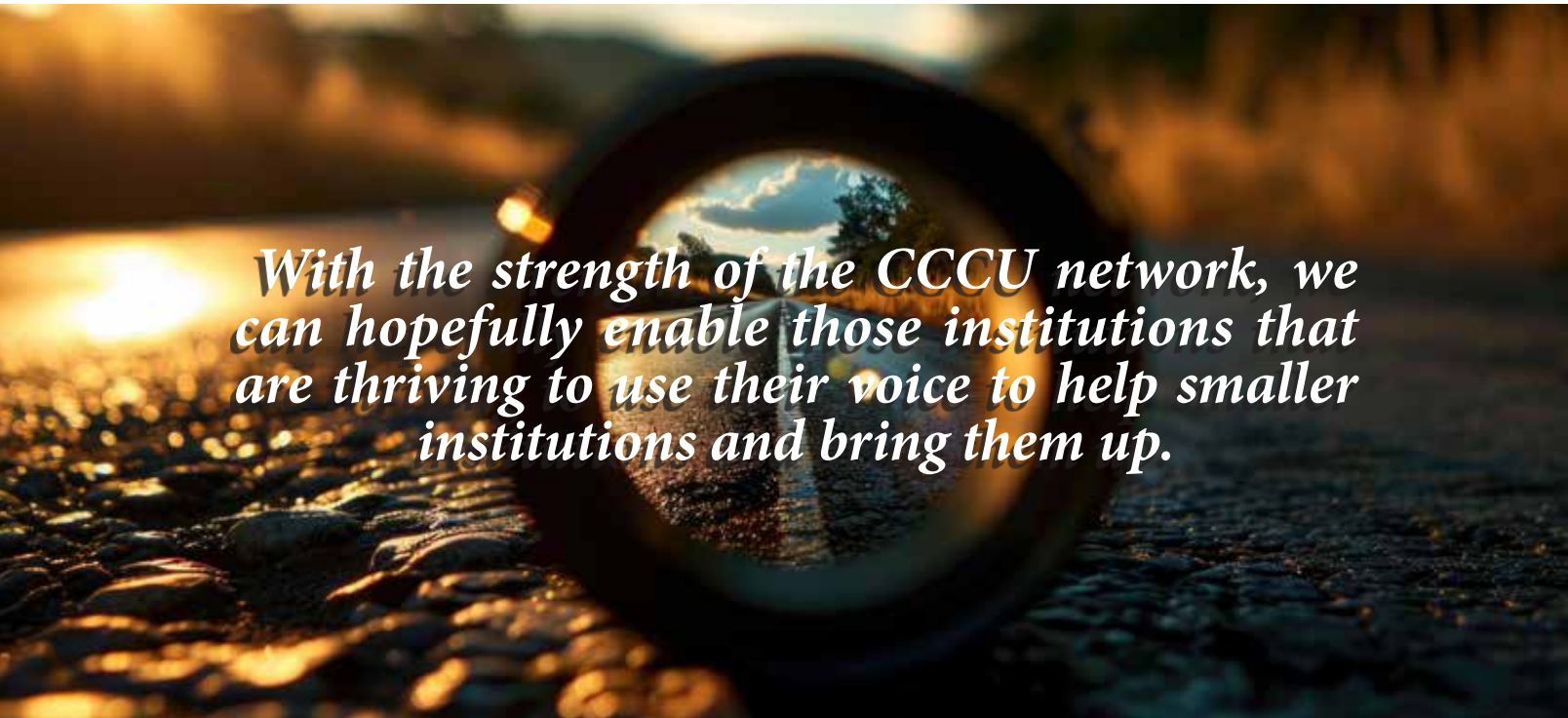
Hoag: I envision it becomes a part of each board meeting. In their board report, the board adopts the Index, and then at each meeting, they’re going to be able to look in their packet and see exactly how the institution is doing—just like how they get their audit once a year to review. These are busy people that don’t have a ton of time. And to me, a one- or two-page index sharpens them on their responsibility but puts it all in one accessible place.

Clawson: Boards are often getting bombarded with information, so I think the key is to give something simple, yet something that still offers depth. They can look at a number, and they can dig a little deeper, but it’s quick and easy to digest.

Mahurin: If you could say one or two things to a college or university president or board chair who might be anxious about the future of their institution, what would it be?

Clawson: Use the data, make data-informed decisions, and take the time to do it. Patience is the key. And the beautiful thing about numbers is they don’t lie. Numbers are a positive way to get information and to make your decisions based on fact, not just on instinct or panic or other emotions.

Hoag: The board and the president are stewarding the institution. As a good steward, you need to know how you’re doing. By knowing how you’re doing, you can chart out what your future could look like, should look like. If you’re really going to steward things right, knowing the viability and the health of your institution is essential.



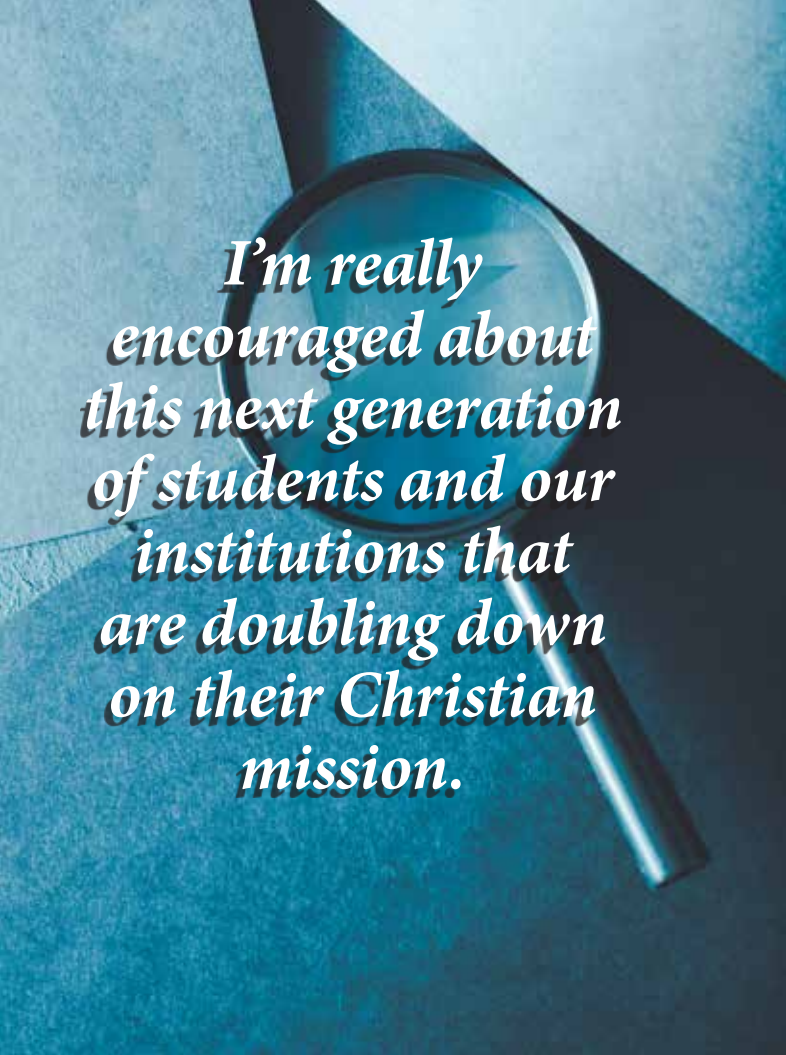
With the strength of the CCCU network, we can hopefully enable those institutions that are thriving to use their voice to help smaller institutions and bring them up.

Samels: For me, it's spirituality. Don't lose your focus; don't lose your mission. When I think about the places that have lost their way, losing their Christian faith is the biggest danger in the short-term financial liquidity ball game.

Mahurin: As men of faith, we also like to think about hope. What gives you hope about the future of Christian higher education right now?

Clawson: History gives me hope. I think about the last 25 years that I've been around Christian higher ed and all the different seasons and challenges we've already been through. Christian higher education is going to be around in the U.S. for a long time to come. There's a need for it. There are probably going to be more schools that close. I understand that. But in the long run, there's a great need and a great desire for Christian higher education right now in our culture. Seeing our institutions endure and survive so much, it makes me hope and know that we're going to continue to move forward.

Hoag: In the last 12 months, I've visited more than 30 campuses, and more than half of them are doing very well. I've been able to have a front row seat to see God at work on so many of these campuses and in the lives of these students. I'm really encouraged about this next generation of students and our institutions that are doubling down on their Christian mission. 



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25 YEARS OF IMPACT

The background of the entire image is a soft-focus, warm-toned sky filled with fluffy white and grey clouds. A series of white paper airplanes are scattered across the frame, mostly in the upper right quadrant, appearing to fly from the top right towards the bottom left. A prominent red paper airplane is positioned in the lower left, slightly below the center. A series of dashed white lines and a single dashed red line curve across the sky, suggesting flight paths or trajectories. The overall mood is one of upward movement and progress.

PREPARING THE NEXT
GENERATION OF LEADERS
FOR CHRISTIAN HIGHER
EDUCATION

With:
Dr. Amy Bragg Carey
Dr. Wayne D. Lewis, Jr.
Dr. Karen Longman
Dr. Deana Porterfield
Rev. Dr. Angulus Wilson

For more than 25 years, leadership development has stood as a central pillar for the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities. Founded in the late 1990s, the CCCU’s Leadership Development Institutes (LDIs) have brought together nearly 800 emerging leaders in Christian higher education for four-day sessions exploring the latest leadership literature and real-word scenarios, along with deep discussions, spiritual discernment and encouragement, and mentorship.

Over the years, several different types of institutes have taken shape. The LDIs include the general Leadership Development Institute (LDI), the Women’s Leadership Development Institute (WLDI), the Multi-Ethnic Leadership Development Institute (MELDI), and various “advanced” or otherwise themed institutes. Throughout their history, the LDIs have served more than 450 female leaders and nearly 200 people of color.

Each institute brings together approximately 15-30 participants with a small group of facilitators, also called “resource leaders”—generally high-level Christian college leaders, such as presidents or vice presidents, who facilitate sessions, share wisdom, and help forge connections between attendees.

Since their inception, all the LDIs have been hosted at the Cedar Springs Christian Retreat Center, located two miles from the Canadian border near Bellingham, Washington. Next year’s LDIs will shift to a new location—The Cove in Asheville, North Carolina, where attendees will continue to find a stunning retreat in a geographical area that is more central to many CCCU institutions. In this conversation, the CCCU’s Vice President of Communications Amanda Staggenborg, a two-time LDI attendee, joins five Christian higher education leaders who have made significant contributions to the LDIs as resource leaders. Together, they delve into the history, goals, content, and enduring impact of these unique professional development programs.

Amanda Staggenborg: Can you briefly describe your own involvement in the Leadership Development Institutes? What role(s) have you played, and how long have you been involved?

Karen Longman: I served for 19 years (1980-99) as the CCCU’s vice president for professional development & research. In that capacity, I oversaw the formation of the Leadership Development Institutes. I have directed or coordinated the Women’s Leadership Institute (WLDI) and Women’s Advanced Leadership Institute (WALI) offerings from 1998 through 2021.

Amy Bragg Carey: I first became involved in the Women’s Leadership Development Institute almost 20 years ago as an attendee when I was the vice president for advancement at the University of Northwestern – St. Paul, and then I have served as a resource leader several times.

Wayne Lewis: I have had the opportunity to serve as a resource leader twice. I also hosted LDI participants for shadowing visits twice. Additionally, I try to have at least one leader from my institution apply to participate in LDI each year. I have now sent three participants to LDI over my four years at Houghton.

Deana Porterfield: My first experience with the Leadership Development Institutes was in 2008. At that time, I was completing 20 years in enrollment management at Azusa Pacific University and transitioning from vice president of enrollment management to chief of staff. That summer, the CCCU hosted a Women’s Advanced Leadership Institute for past participants, and I was invited to attend—despite never having participated in an LDI before.

The next year, I returned as a facilitator and speaker. Since then, I’ve had the privilege of contributing to both WLDIs and WALIs in 2009, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2021.

Angulus Wilson: I’ve had the privilege of experiencing the Leadership Development Institute from both sides of the table—first as a participant, and later as a resource leader. As a resource leader, I’ve served as chaplain for both the institute faculty and the participants, ministering to their spiritual needs and walking with them through the process. My journey began back in 2011 as a MELDI participant, and over the last seven years, I’ve been blessed to pour back into the very program that helped shape me.

Staggenborg: Dr. Longman, what can you tell us about the original goals of the LDIs?



1998 - 2024

FORMER LDI PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE...

22

Become Christian College Presidents

111

Moved Into Cabinet Level Roles

Longman: CCCU campus leaders were asked to identify individuals who were evidencing leadership potential or increased leadership roles and capacity. Alongside my research as part of my role as program director for APU’s Ph.D. in higher education, we have focused greater attention on gender issues in leadership aspirations and experiences. We also focused on the leader identity development process (how individuals begin to see themselves as leaders, and to be seen by others as leaders) with the goal of encouraging and supporting the development of emerging leaders.

Staggenborg: As a facilitator, how have you gone about shaping the curriculum and structure for the institutes? How did you keep content fresh and relevant?

Porterfield: Curriculum topics were always developed collaboratively with the leadership team and grounded in the issues facing higher education leaders at that time. Dr. Karen Longman, then teaching in the higher education doctoral program at Azusa Pacific University, often introduced the latest research on university administration and female leadership. We paired this with what we were experiencing firsthand and what we heard from emerging leaders, ensuring the sessions spoke directly to current needs.

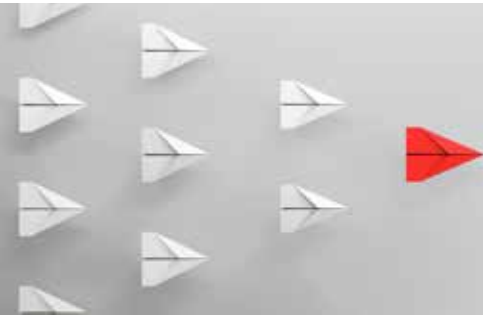
Wilson: Serving as chaplain at Wheaton College has prepared me well for guiding LDI participants. Every leader comes from a unique institutional context, and my goal has been to tailor a life-changing spiritual formation experience around the topics they are engaging in the program. In each cohort, we walk through a leadership-focused book, exploring biblical characters and how they navigated real-life challenges. We then apply those lessons directly to our own work in Christian higher education—making sure the principles we uncover are not just theoretical, but lived out in our daily leadership.

Staggenborg: In what ways do the LDIs integrate Christian faith with professional leadership development?

Longman: Faith and spiritual renewal has been a central component of every leadership development institute. Each day starts with a thoughtful devotional, sometimes led by participants and sometimes by spiritual formation professionals from CCCU campuses. Sessions at each LDI have often focused on spiritual renewal and spiritual vitality in the midst of the pressure of senior-level leadership. Worship and singing at various points in the daily agenda are complemented by extended breaks that allow for time in the beauty of the Pacific Northwest. Each institute has concluded with a participant-led “Commissioning Service” that sends participants back for Spirit-led leadership on their own campuses.

Wilson: Faith is not an add-on to LDI—it’s the foundation. Through intentional morning and evening sessions of Scripture reading, worship, prayer, and reflection, every cohort is invited to hear God’s voice afresh. The entire retreat setting is designed for both professional sharpening and spiritual renewal. Leaders aren’t just gaining tools for their vocation; they are deepening their walk with Christ and discerning His calling for both their life and their institution.

Lewis: I believe the LDIs’ integration of Christian faith with professional leadership development is its most powerful contribution. Participants benefit from hearing from and engaging with outstanding, currently practicing Chrisitan college leaders in a program that is intentionally interwoven with prayer, worship, and the building of Christian community. I never experienced anything like it as a participant. As a resource leader, I get as much out of the experience as participants—both spiritually and professionally.



Faith is not an add-on to LDI—
it’s the foundation.
—Rev. Dr. Angulus Wilson

Staggenborg: During the time you’ve been involved with the LDIs, have the needs of emerging leaders within Christian higher education shifted? How did the LDIs keep up with those needs?

Lewis: For leaders, the environment and context is continually changing. From political, social, and legal changes specific to Christian colleges and universities related to religious liberty, to changes pertaining to financial aid and diversity policy that have broader impact on the entire independent college sector, leaders are responsible for understanding how those shifts impact their institutions and finding ways to adapt and navigate changing realities.

It has been my experience that LDI resource leaders provide content for participants that includes both timeless leadership principles and strategies for navigating the current challenges institutions are facing.

Longman: The complexities and pressures facing senior-level leaders have expanded exponentially over time. Generational shifts in the student body, combined with the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of artificial intelligence have resulted in the need for updating what effective leadership requires. Today, pressures from the U.S. federal government combined with threats to financial aid, national data collecting, and deep cuts within the Department of Education add to the challenges. The LDIs work well because the resource leadership each year has involved gifted cabinet-level individuals who are facing these same complexities on their home campus and can share “best practices” and lived experiences from similar campuses that also value the distinctives of a Christian postsecondary institution.

Porterfield: The need for a strong leadership pipeline has remained constant, but the urgency has grown—particularly around developing women and multi-ethnic leaders. The LDIs have responded by intentionally creating safe spaces where emerging leaders can explore next steps, gain clarity on leadership expectations, and discern God’s calling.

Staggenborg: Are there specific moments or milestones in the history of the LDIs that you view as pivotal?

Longman: Beginning the WLDI work in 1998 was pivotal. Women across CCCU campuses who were gifted and doing a lot of the work in third- and fourth-level position were encouraged to think about the benefits that would come from moving into more senior leadership. Those individuals in cabinet-level leadership were encouraged to “pot potential” and nominate women who were offering a great deal but had not yet been encouraged to consider senior-level roles.

The same would be true for the Multi-Ethnic LDIs, which began in 2011.

The launch of the Advancing Women in Leadership annual conferences would be a third—well over 2,000 people have participated in this initiative, which grew out of WALI gatherings.

Finally, the preparation of *Thriving in Leadership* and *Diversity Matters*—two books published by Abilene Christian University Press that emerged directly from the WLDI and MELDI work.

Porterfield: To me, two initiatives stand out: The launch of the Multi-Cultural Leadership Development Institute (MELDI): This created intentional pathways for diverse leaders, offering community and connection in what has often been a lonely journey on many campuses. The launch of the Women’s Advanced Leadership Development Institute (WALI): This program focused on developing future presidents and senior leaders, encouraging participants to step boldly into new opportunities.

Wilson: One of the most significant milestones was the decision to add a worship component and a dedicated chaplain to the retreat. This created a sacred space for leaders to pause, reflect, and reconnect with the biblical foundations of their calling. It was more than a program change—it was a realignment with our core mission to serve Christ and His Kingdom through Christian higher education.

Staggenborg: What kind of impact have the LDIs had on participants? On their institutions? What about shadow visits?

Bragg Carey: The WLDI experience was formative for me in my work as a vice president and the only female leader on our cabinet at that time. It provided a network of amazing individuals that I could reach out to, and together we could support one another. I’ve heard similar comments from many other people who have been a part of an LDI, that it’s hard to put into words it has been so transformative. The connections and people that you meet have an impact on future career

I would not be serving as a university president today without the encouragement I received at an LDI.

—Dr. Deana Porterfield

There are so many headwinds coming at higher education and particularly Christian higher education today. We’re going to need leaders prepared to take on these challenges, leaders with great resilience and a strong sense of calling.

—Dr. Amy Bragg Carey

opportunities. When you’re able to connect with people from all over the country and gain insight into their world and their institution, it’s very helpful learning, but it also provides a great network of people resources that last well beyond the days at Cedar Springs.

Porterfield: For me personally, shadowing Dr. Kim Phipps at Messiah was transformational. It was the first time I had seen a female president with a leadership style similar to mine—it was inspiring, motivating, and humbling.

As I’ve hosted shadow visits myself, I’ve seen participants return to their campuses with new ideas and fresh energy, while also leaving insights with the institutions they visited. Shadowing expands our vision of what is possible, often revealing opportunities we may not have recognized for ourselves.

Wilson: Shadow visits have been life-changing for many of us. Walking alongside a seasoned academic leader in their own context opens your eyes to new possibilities and deepens your understanding of leadership. You gain practical wisdom that can’t be learned in a classroom—wisdom you carry back to your own campus. The LDI keeps leaders rooted in the mission of Christian higher education, reminding us that our work is part of God’s Kingdom agenda. No other form of training can match the integration of faith and leadership development we receive here.

Staggenborg: How do the LDIs contribute to the vitality of leadership within Christian colleges and universities?

Porterfield: Leadership is sustained through relationships, and the LDIs foster lasting networks of encouragement, accountability, and mutual support. Cohorts often stay connected well beyond the institute, sometimes through social media or ongoing peer groups.

The impact is visible across the CCCU: many alumni of the LDIs have stepped into advanced leadership roles on their campuses and beyond, strengthening the vitality of our institutions.

Bragg Carey: I think you just need to look at the number of presidents and cabinet-level leaders who have come through an LDI, and in that process expanded their influence and their leadership to take on these important roles in Christian education. It’s not only been an important training ground, but an important way to inspire and empower people to consider the next level of leadership.

Lewis: The impact of the LDIs includes increased leadership capacity and expanded networks for participants. Subsequently, participants’ increased capacity and expanded networks have a direct and positive impact on the institutions they serve.

Staggenborg: What are your hopes for the future of the LDIs in the next 5–10 years?

Wilson: I long to see LDI become a priority for every Christian institution. The spiritual formation of emerging leaders should be essential training, not optional. If we want to make disciples through Christian education, then we must invest in transforming our leaders. This model deserves to be celebrated and championed across North America and beyond.

Lewis: The LDI is a critically important part of the leadership development pipeline for CCCU institutions. My hope is that program remains strong and continues for many years to come.

Porterfield: I hope the LDIs continue to cultivate emerging leaders while also intentionally identifying and preparing cabinet-level leadership for our institutions. While no program can guarantee a role, the combination of professional development and spiritual formation provides leaders with clarity and readiness as they discern God’s call.

Bragg Carey: There are so many headwinds coming at higher education and particularly Christian higher education today. We’re going to need leaders prepared to take on these challenges, leaders with great resilience and a strong sense of calling. I believe that the LDI has been a critical part of building up leaders and emerging leaders to take on these challenges, so I sincerely trust it will continue to be this very special resource for many people over the next five to 10 years.

Staggenborg: For you personally, what has been the most rewarding aspect of engaging with the LDIs?

Lewis: By far, the most rewarding aspect of engaging with the LDIs has been relationships. Professional relationships and friendships that will last a lifetime began at LDI. As leaders, we very seldom have the opportunity to spend days of uninterrupted time building and nurturing relationships with colleagues, especially with colleagues

from other institutions. Having that time together is a gift. I treasure the relationships that have grown from the very special time we spent together at LDI.

Longman: I have had the great privilege of meeting and interacting with almost all of the 800 past participants of the CCCU’s Leadership Development Initiatives hosted at Cedar Springs. I have consistently been impressed at the incredible individuals who are serving across the member campuses. Each June I have observed warm-spirited followers of Christ who are deeply loyal to and invested in their home campuses. While it is easy to be fully absorbed in the demands of a singular campus, the days at Cedar Springs have afforded opportunities to develop a national and international network of friends and colleagues that can help to carry Christian higher education effectively into the future. Spotting potential and assisting individuals to live into their full giftedness through the offerings at Cedar Springs has been one of the greatest joys of my life.

Porterfield: I would not be serving as a university president today without the encouragement I received at an LDI. Shortly after completing my doctorate, I participated as a resource leader and shared my journey with others. At that time, I wasn’t sure what was next for me. But the women around that table encouraged me to step forward. Within a year, both a colleague and I—who had made a mutual commitment at that WALI to explore leadership together—were serving as presidents.

That pivotal moment, and the relationships formed through the LDI, forever changed my trajectory.

Wilson: For me, the greatest joy has been building lifelong friendships with leaders across the country who share the same mission—advancing the Kingdom of God through their profession. I’m still in touch with cohorts from the last seven years, celebrating their growth and impact. These relationships are a gift I will cherish forever.

Bragg Carey: We learn best by teaching and sharing with others, and the ability to connect with so many amazing people through the years of my involvement with LDI has been so worthwhile. I would come back to campus fueled by a renewing experience, with an arm full of books, many resources to share, and great ideas. I am so blessed to have a small part in this important work of the CCCU.

Staggenborg: How has the work of developing leaders in Christian higher ed shaped your own understanding of leadership?

Longman: I’ve witnessed how both introverts and extroverts can be highly effective leaders. Overall, respect for individuals and relational skills are key, as is the ability to cast a compelling vision for a better future. When led well, Christian higher education has the potential to model the way of Jesus—where leaders have the integrity, humility, and people skills to “wrap others into those enthusiasms” of shaping future generations of students to make a difference in a world that continues to be full of need.

Porterfield: I’ve learned that you never truly “arrive.” Serving as a resource leader has given me the gift of self-reflection and growth alongside others. Leadership is a continual journey of learning, being shaped, and aligning ourselves with what God desires to do in and through us.

Wilson: The LDI has expanded my vision of leadership in Christian higher education. We live in a rapidly changing culture, and the need for Christ-centered leaders has never been greater. Jesus is the answer for the world today, and Christian higher education is one of His chosen venues for making disciples of all nations. Thank you, CCCU, for boldly living out the Great Commission in this way. **A**



DR. AMY BRAGG CAREY
President, Friends University



DR. WAYNE D. LEWIS JR.
President, Houghton University



DR. KAREN LONGMAN
Professor Emerita, Azusa Pacific University



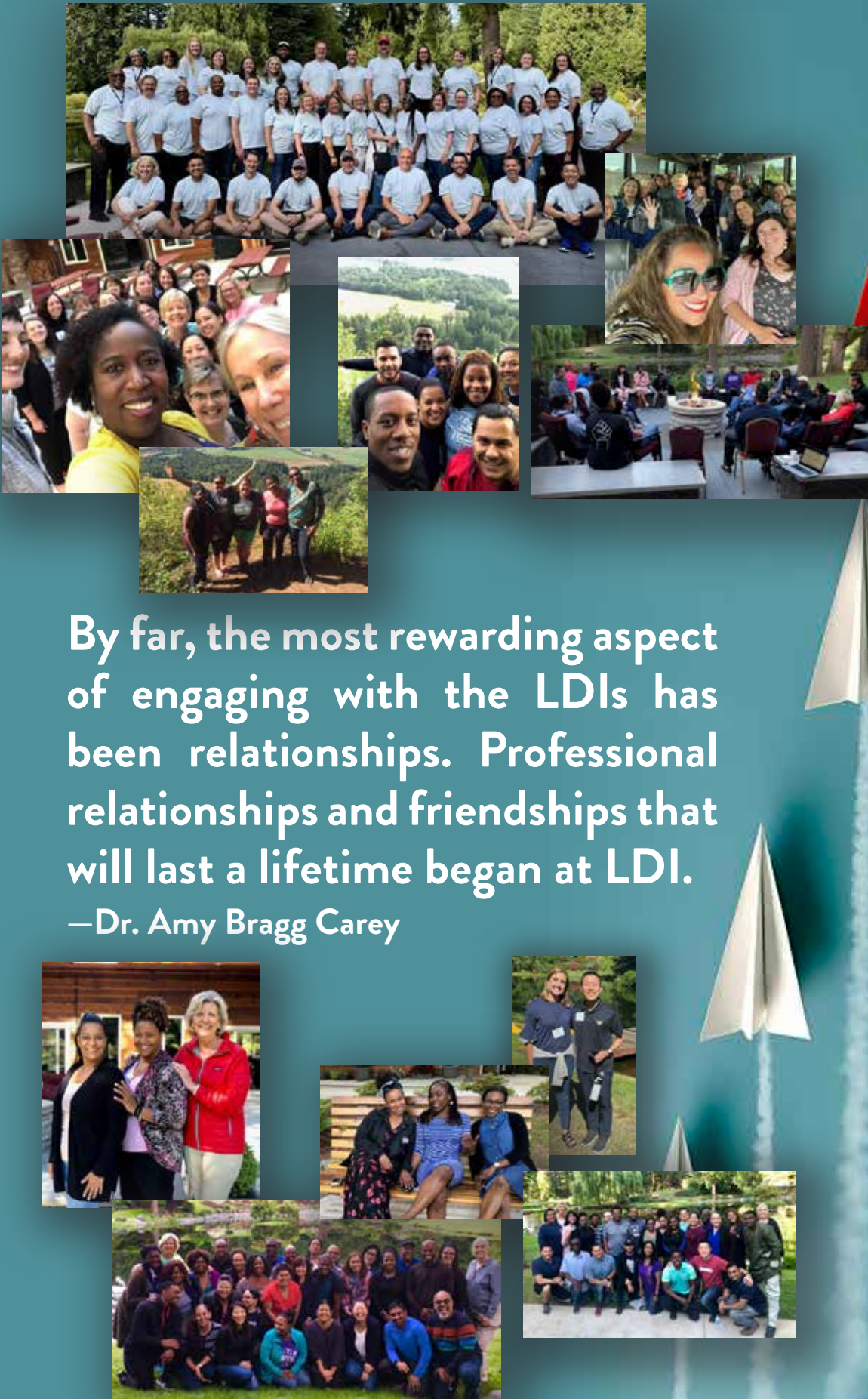
DR. DEANA PORTERFIELD
President, Seattle Pacific University



REV. DR. ANGULUS WILSON
Chaplain, Wheaton College



DR. AMANDA STAGGENBORG
Chief Communications Officer, CCCU



By far, the most rewarding aspect of engaging with the LDIs has been relationships. Professional relationships and friendships that will last a lifetime began at LDI.
—Dr. Amy Bragg Carey

The background of the entire image is a dramatic, painterly illustration. It depicts a man with a beard, wearing a white tunic and a blue sash, standing in profile and looking towards the right. He is surrounded by several lions. The scene is set in a dark, cavernous environment with rough, textured walls. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the man's robe and the lions' manes, contrasting with deep shadows. The overall mood is one of courage and faith.

THE DANIEL OPTION

**Pursuing Faithfulness Through
Changing Times**

BY JIM GASH

IT IS AN UNCERTAIN TIME IN THE WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The air remains tense in the wake of protests that erupted on campuses across America over the past year. The threat of violence directly impacting colleges and universities looms as large and palpable as ever with the assassination of Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University in September. Suits and counter-suits abound, and of the canceling and uncanceled of speakers, as it were, there is no end.¹ We face the looming enrollment cliff, the effects of the One Big Beautiful Bill on higher education funding and operations, and the impact of artificial intelligence on our classrooms.

Amidst these headwinds, Christian colleges and universities should consider our calling. In such circumstances, what should our strategy be? What is our way forward?

An Example of Faithfulness

I have always been struck by the story of Daniel. Sent to Babylon in adolescence, he is a living embodiment of God’s command in Jeremiah 29:7 for his people to “seek the good of the city” in which they were exiled.

When Daniel first arrives in Babylon, he is placed in the king’s court, but he immediately encounters a problem: he and his friends cannot eat the food given to them in the court without defiling themselves in the eyes of God’s law.

Daniel tells his supervisor, who understands his dilemma but fears the consequences of defying the king: “Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”²

Daniel offers him a challenge:

“Test your servants for 10 days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”³

The test implicit here is obvious: do God’s ways of doing things actually *work*? Will they lead to human flourishing, or are they merely arbitrary rules? Do they really exist for our good? If we “seek first the kingdom of Heaven,” will “all things be added unto us”?⁴

God, unsurprisingly, comes through in flying colors, vindicating the men’s faithfulness with unmistakable clarity: “At the end of 10 days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away the choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.”⁵

And not only are Daniel and his friends physically healthy, but God gives them “knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.”⁶ The passage goes on to say that “in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.”

Faithfulness leads to flourishing.

THE DANIEL OPTION

Our situation at Christian colleges and universities is not dissimilar to Daniel’s.

Strangers and exiles upon the earth,⁷ we are outposts in a world that is our home and yet not our home. We are entrusted, like Daniel, with not only our own lives but with the lives of friends who follow after us. In our case, these are the some students who pass through CCCU institutions around the globe each year. Like Daniel and his fellow exiles, we hope to *seek the good of the city*—to contribute knowledge and research and, most importantly, graduates—that will contribute to greater human flourishing in the world.

And like Daniel, we are often confronted with choices.

Will we *truly* hold true to the missions our institutions were established to follow? Do we still believe in the *idea* of Christian education? Will we do what is *right* or what is expedient? Do we believe that God’s way of doing things will actually *work*?

For a time, it appeared that the answers to these questions—at least in the wider landscape of American higher education—were resoundingly negative. While nearly every major American college and university was founded with Christian missions in mind (and on paper), the march of post-Enlightenment secularism and the omission of Christianity in the academy seemed inevitable. For much of the late 20th century, religion was on the retreat in the academy as secular assumptions became standard in academic discourse.

¹ See Ecclesiastes 12:12.

² Daniel 1:10 NIV.

³ Daniel 1:12-13.

⁴ See Matthew 6:33

⁵ Daniel 1:15-16.

⁶ Daniel 1:17.

⁷ See Hebrews 11:13.

But as G.K. Chesterton reminds us, “Christianity has died many times and risen again, for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”⁸

The suspicion and even outright hostility toward religious belief once faced in the academy writ large is losing its voice. We are moving toward something like a *postsecular* order. Secular institutions are increasingly open to input from people of faith.

The failures of secularism as an educational paradigm become more evident with growing chaos and distrust across American university campuses, providing Christian institutions with an opportunity to demonstrate a more excellent way. Looking forward to the next decade of Christian higher education, it is my hope that we will follow Daniel’s example of faithfulness.

This is not the time to shy away from our institutional beliefs or apologize for our convictions. If there were ever a time to walk with renewed courage and clarity in our missions, that time is now.

It is high time that we see our missional distinctives as a distinct *advantage*.

Far from being at odds with academic excellence, our Christian commitments uniquely position us to cultivate the very intellectual virtues desired by our colleagues across the world of higher education.

Because we see all people as human beings created in the image of God, we strive to treat one another with dignity and respect—especially when we disagree.

Because we practice the radical hospitality of Jesus, we offer communities where all students can truly belong—and find belonging based on the eternal truth found in scripture.

Because we are honest about our core convictions, we can create environments of robust, well-defined academic freedom—tethered to our institutional beliefs and defined by the good of our communities.

Because we know that all truth belongs to God, we are unafraid of scientific inquiry and robust intellectual discourse. We are neither lost in the endless, hopeless inquiry of relativism nor locked away in the fearful confines of the echo chamber. Instead, we set out, boldly, to search for truth, because we believe we can actually find it.

And we know that the truth—wherever it is found—will lead us back to its Source.

It is no coincidence that so many of the greatest minds across the history of the academy have been people of faith. As Daniel and his friends learned, the path of faithfulness is neither fruitless nor arbitrary. We have been given a blueprint for abundant life—both inside and outside the classroom. This is why the great scientist Johannes Kepler stated, upon discovering his laws of planetary motion, “I was merely thinking God’s thoughts after him.”⁹

It is no coincidence that so many of the foundations of our society, from philosophy to science to ethics to law, are, in fact *Christian* foundations. As historian Tom Holland argues throughout *Dominion*, such influence is so pervasive that even when modern society attempts to critique the Christian worldview, it often does so on Christian grounds.

And finally, it is no coincidence to see so many graduates of CCCU institutions providing vital service, leadership, and moral fortitude in a world that desperately needs it. They have been shaped by an education that forms the whole person into a citizen of wisdom and

virtue—given *knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning*. Their advantage in the king’s court is evident.

Like Daniel, we can walk boldly in our calling, knowing that faithfulness begets flourishing. Like his friends, we know that God’s deliverance can intercede even in the most dire of circumstances. And we know, too, that even if our efforts at times appear to be in vain on this side of heaven, they will not be in vain in eternity. Let us choose to walk boldly and obediently, entrusting the outcome to God: “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”¹⁰

As we attempt to “read the winds” across the landscape of higher education, many things are uncertain. But one thing remains constant: faithfulness to God is non-negotiable. Our missions, should we choose to embrace them, provide us solid ground that does not change with the winds of culture. Technology evolves, political tides turn, and laws change, but such turbulence merely reveals what sort of foundation we have been built on.

May it reveal that we have been built on the rock.

"Far from being at odds with academic excellence, our Christian commitments uniquely position us to cultivate the very intellectual virtues desired by our colleagues across the world of higher education."

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 254.

⁹ Kepler, “Preface,” *The Harmonies of the World*.

¹⁰ Daniel 3:17-18.

¹¹ Chesterton, *G.F. Watts*, 48.

The Time Given Us

I opened this article by asserting that we are in uncertain times in our field. The challenges we face in higher education today are qualitatively different than those our predecessors at Christian institutions faced over the last 50 years. As the old challenges have been overcome, new ones have grown to take their place. Artificial intelligence, funding, enrollment, protests, violence—these are serious matters that demand wise counsel.

But in another sense, the situation we face is not new at all. Uncertainty, difficulty, and potential failure have always been part and parcel of the Christian mission. As Chesterton muses: “Faith is always at a disadvantage; it is a perpetually defeated thing which survives all its conquerors. The desperate modern talk about dark days and reeling altars, and the end of Gods and angels, is the oldest talk in the world: lamentations over the growth of agnosticism can be found in the monkish sermons of the dark ages; horror at youthful impiety can be found in the Iliad.”¹¹

Technological development and societal turbulence have *always* threatened to undermine the present work of the academic enterprise. C.S. Lewis reminded his students in his lecture “On Learning in War Time” that even as the bombs of World War II dropped within earshot, the vocation to learn and to teach remained unchanged: “If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun.”

There will never be a perfectly convenient time to follow our calling. Our mission will always face new obstacles.

Our situation is not new. It is the same situation faced by Daniel and his friends as they were exiled into a world of uncertainty and unknown, forced to wonder if remaining faithful to God would be as worthwhile in exile as it was back home. It is the same question faced by believers since time immemorial: will God be faithful to us now as he has been in the past? Will we trust and obey?

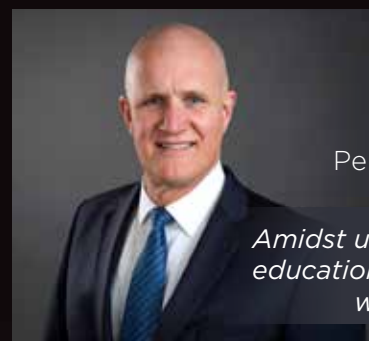
J.R.R. Tolkien asserts that, from a Christian perspective, all of history is a “long defeat ... with only *samples or glimpses* of final victory.”¹²

It is my hope and prayer that we may take up our calling with renewed commitment, whether these future years ostensibly hold victory or defeat—knowing, of course, that final victory is assured.

As Daniel and his friends realized, only God knows what kind of miraculous victories may occur when we allow faithfulness to be our guide regardless of the cost.

And as Tolkien reminds us, ours is not to decide the times in which we live, but rather, like Daniel, to decide “what to do with the time given us.”¹³ **A**

“If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun.”



JIM GASH
President,
Pepperdine University

Amidst uncertainty in higher education, faithfulness is the way forward.

¹² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 255.

¹³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (HarperCollins Ebooks), 67.

 **cccu**

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CRACKS IN THE BEDROCK

Christian Colleges' Role in Repairing Civic Virtue



By Ian Speir and Joy Mosley

Note: This article is adapted with permission from a longer version published in the University of St. Thomas Law Journal.

American public life today is marked by deepening polarization, cultural fragmentation, and a crisis of civic virtue. Many observers have noted a decline in the moral consensus that once undergirded our experiment in ordered liberty. American politics now increasingly resembles an arena of permanent combat. The usual explanations—social media, polarization, demographic sorting—miss a deeper cause: the erosion of the moral and institutional architecture that once moderated public life.

Our constitutional tradition entrusted much of that work to civil society, and, within it, to religious institutions. The First Amendment protects religion not to privilege one creed or to marginalize belief, but because religious belief and exercise are basic to persons and uniquely generative of communities of meaning, identity, and moral formation. Religious institutions mediate between person and polity, form citizens in habits of virtue, and bind communities together in common purpose. When those institutions blend into the surrounding culture, whether voluntarily or by coercion, when they cease to be confidently themselves, the civic foundation cracks. The erosion of a Christian moral bedrock has destabilized the foundation on which our secular, liberal democracy stands.

Our Constitution protects—indeed, depends upon—religious pluralism. And genuine religious pluralism depends on difference. It means that people of faith and the faith-driven institutions they form can say what they believe, live what they teach, engage in civic and moral formation, and contribute to the common good. The more religious colleges, schools, and ministries meet societal demands to mute or soften their convictions, the less they can contribute the distinctive moral goods that sustain liberal democracy. The solution to our civic malaise is not a more militant secularism or a lowest-common-denominator faith, but a reinvigorated pluralism that honors strong religious identity and robust religious freedom.

Our tradition of pluralism and religious freedom means the United States is not a Christian nation as such. Its institutions are grounded in a set of secular, or at least nonsectarian, classically liberal ideas about human equality, popular sovereignty, limited government, and rule of law. These ideas depend on a substrate of moral values that Christianity supplies, but in their everyday application and political outworking, there isn't a need to harken back to Christian theological convictions. This is why disestablishment and free exercise work. It is as though the subterranean (and thus usually invisible) bedrock is Christian, while the visible, above-ground civic foundation is nonsectarian and liberal. The essential relationship between the two isn't always seen or well-understood. If that above-ground civic foundation cracks, it's repairable—and America has had to attend to this kind of repair work over the years. But if the invisible bedrock begins to crack, what then? The repair work is deeper—deeper than civics, deeper even than the Constitution itself. The repair work is societal, even theological. There's a sense in which the bedrock itself is becoming unstable. Layered atop trends of declining church attendance and the rise of the

“nones” are broader cultural headwinds: the decades-long drift toward expressive individualism and depleted social capital, a documented epidemic of loneliness, and mounting concerns about social media's effects on adolescents' mental health and social development. Together these forces amount to a crisis of meaning and belonging that religious communities once helped to buffer and repair.

The growing illiberalism of the American public square has led many committed secularists, even atheists, to wonder whether religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is an essential public good, a kind of “load-bearing wall”—or to keep with the metaphor, a foundation-bearing bedrock—in a republican democracy.

Classical historian Tom Holland, in his book *Dominion* (Basic Books, 2019), argues that many of the ideas that secular liberals hold dear, like human dignity, equality, and care for the poor, the vulnerable, and the victim, are not “self-evident” truths but counterintuitive ideas that Christianity uniquely gave the West. Renowned atheist Richard Dawkins, confronting the dismal illiberalism that awaits the post-Christian future, recently mused that he's a “cultural Christian.” He likes the fruit of Christian civilization, even if he doesn't share the religious roots that nourish it.

Recently, another renowned atheist joined the growing chorus of skeptics sounding pro-Christian tones. Jonathan Rauch's latest book *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2025) argues that religious faith and secular liberalism need one another.

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the world, Christian institutions should pursue clarity and firmness in mission. And we are not the only ones. Returning to Rauch's argument, he comes to the same conclusion. The surprising answer from Rauch's book is not that Christians should be “more secular” or “more liberal.” Rather, they should be *more Christian*.

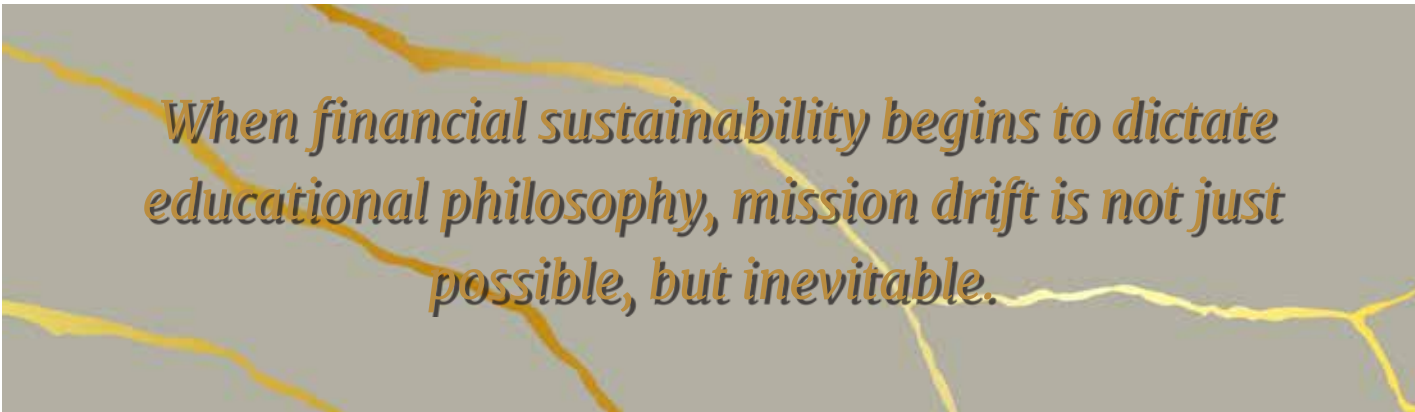
This argument may come as no surprise from two conservative Christian writers, raised in the Bible belt, who attended Christian colleges, but for Rauch to make this argument is remarkable. Rauch is a gay, Jewish atheist—and his book represents a one-eighty in his thinking, turning away from an apathetic secularism and toward religious faith, and toward Christianity in particular, as essential to the American experiment in ordered liberty.

Now, to be sure, Rauch isn't the first or the only person to make this kind of argument. What makes Rauch's argument unique, in our view, is that he doesn't just defend the place of religion *generally*. And he goes beyond the standard (albeit correct) argument that religious institutions are “mediators” between government and individuals. Rauch argues that Christianity as such is essential to American democracy. We don't understand Rauch to mean that Christianity is exclusive—it does not exclude or displace other faiths in the public square.

His argument is not just that one is instrumentally related to the other, but that each is *intrinsically reliant* on the other to provide a complete and coherent account of the world and supply the “moral goods” needed for a healthy republic. Using an economic metaphor, Rauch articulates what he calls a “cultural trade deficit.”

Secular liberalism promotes important values like tolerance, rule of law, equality, civic virtue. But the legitimacy of these values depends on something outside of secular liberalism itself. Their legitimacy rests on a religious, and, in America, a Christian, bedrock.

We don't agree with everything Rauch has said (either in this book or elsewhere). But his account of the interdependence of Christianity and American government is compelling. Secular liberalism, he argues, “rel[ies] on Christianity to maintain a positive cultural balance of trade: we need it to export more moral values and spiritual authority to the surrounding culture than it imports. If, instead, the church is in cultural deficit—if it becomes a net importer of values from the secular world—then it becomes morally derivative instead of morally formative.” The danger is that religion becomes a mere consumer good, indistinguishable from larger secular society, and incapable of performing its role as a “former” of moral virtue and a “checker” of vice and impulse.



Rauch thinks this is where we are now, hence the subtitle of his book: Christianity has broken its implicit bargain with liberal democracy. It is secularizing, aligning with political forces on both left and right in a will to pursue power, rather than following a countercultural ethic grounded in traditional Christian virtues. The result: liberal democracy will not—and cannot—hold up its end of the bargain either. Without the moral bedrock that religious faith provides, foundational liberal values like equality, limited government, and rule of law start to crumble. An unreligious America is an illiberal America.

How do we respond to this crisis? We argue that Christians should be *more Christian*. Some people assume that the best approach for Christian colleges and universities in the face of legal and cultural pressures is to adopt a low profile—softening or obscuring countercultural policies in hopes of avoiding scrutiny. The assumption is that if they don't draw attention to themselves, they can sidestep controversy and continue their work quietly.

But we would argue the opposite. In a contested public square, Christian colleges are best served not by ambiguity, but by clarity about their mission, their theological commitments, and the expectations they hold for their community. Instead of attempting to look more like

Nor does he mean that Christianity is legally privileged—it does not get special favors (which the Establishment Clause forbids anyway).

But if Christianity is indeed *essential*, it means that the republic needs the moral goods—the fruit—that Christianity supplies. And because that fruit must be real, not artificial, it means the United States needs some critical mass of genuine Christians doing genuinely Christian things—attending church, raising Christian families, sharing their faith, caring for the poor, protecting the vulnerable, voting their consciences, forming ministries, establishing schools, teaching the faith to rising generations, and more. And if any of this is to occur, at least two more things are required: strong Christian institutions and robust legal protections for those institutions to carry on their sacred work.

Secular liberalism needs Christian institutions to continue their historic function of moral formation—even countercultural moral formation—and to continue exporting moral goods to the surrounding political culture. But Christian institutions that secularize—that simply melt into the culture—*cannot* fulfill this role. Neither can a thin Christianity that views faith through the lens of politics. To be more Christian means living faithfully in accordance with the Bible, to attend to the daily work of taking up your cross and following Jesus, to deny the old nature and put on the fruit of the Spirit.

So instead of secularizing or becoming militant, Christian institutions must stand firm in their biblical mission. Christian organizations, and Christian colleges in particular, are poised to address that trade imbalance because a key distinctive of Christian colleges is both the private and the public shaping of the mind, heart, and soul. Faith is not relegated to a few hours on Sunday. Faith is integrated into the chemistry, sociology, or economics classroom, into the ball field, into the student clubs, and into the late-night conversations with roommates. These colleges create an explicitly Christian community where faith integration extends beyond the classroom to every aspect of campus life, where biblically minded faculty and staff pour into students, living out what it means to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. Christian colleges and universities that remain committed to faith-based education serve as incubators for a new generation of morally grounded leaders, employees, parents, church congregants, and community members. Such institutions are uniquely equipped to integrate rigorous intellectual inquiry with robust spiritual formation. By training students to think theologically as well as critically, they can help restore the moral architecture on which democratic society depends. Yet colleges often fall short of their distinct duty and privilege to teach and form students who are theologically anchored and intellectually serious. There are two main challenges that prevent Christian colleges

from the full realization of this duty, one internal and one external. External advocacy challenges face Christian institutions, but another pressing threat to Christian higher education is internal: mission drift. For some institutions, their pressure may be biblical mission drift, while for other institutions, the pressure is academic mission drift, moving away from a broad shaping of the mind and forming of the soul to narrow training more focused on knowledge than wisdom. Importantly, drift is rarely intentional. College leaders seldom set out to steer their institutions away from a robust biblical foundation or the formation of whole persons. More often, they find themselves responding to immediate demands—the tyranny of the urgent.

Consider a common scenario: a key faculty role remains unfilled just weeks before the semester begins. In such cases, it can be tempting to hire someone who is academically qualified but not missionally aligned. Or take a different but increasingly familiar example. A school launches an online graduate program, often as a strategic response to financial pressures. Students in these programs are typically not asked to sign any behavioral covenant. The assumption seems to be that, because these students are not on campus, the need for intentional character formation is less pressing or not the responsibility of the institution. This raises an important question: If a Christian institution believes

that behavior should reflect biblical conviction, why would that expectation apply only to residential students? More broadly, can the kind of holistic, Christ-centered formation these schools claim to offer be delivered in a fully online format? Many institutions say yes, but few provide a clear theological or pedagogical rationale. When financial sustainability begins to dictate educational philosophy, mission drift is not just possible, but inevitable.

The other main challenge is external. Christian institutions cannot conduct the private and public moral formational work that society needs without the freedom to determine both what those moral values are and how they will be inculcated. Demanding that Christians be more Christian, without the freedom to be more Christian, is a contradiction in terms. Christian institutions must have the right to hire only those who will agree with and live by their mission, to determine the contours of their community, including enrollment, and to live out particular doctrines consistent with the organization's faith. If an institution cannot uphold its own convictions in decisions as central as hiring and community standards, then it no longer has the freedom to be meaningfully Christian. That is not religious liberty—that's asking religious institutions to secularize, to melt into the culture where they can no longer export moral goods.

Recovering the Christian moral bedrock of society does not mean establishing a theocracy or privileging one faith tradition over others. It means acknowledging the historical and philosophical reality that Christianity has played an irreplaceable role in shaping the habits, institutions, and norms that sustain a free society. It means strong Christian institutions resisting the internal and external pressure to conform to the world so they can be a strategic lever for national renewal. It means protecting the ability of religious institutions to shape the contours of their own communities, even if, and maybe especially if, those communities are countercultural. And it means inviting non-Christians to recognize that a public square informed by serious, humane, and virtuous religious traditions is not a threat to liberal democracy, but its best hope. The future of American liberalism may well depend on the Christian roots it has tried to forget. 

Christian institutions cannot conduct the private and public moral formational work that society needs without the freedom to determine both what those moral values are and how they will be inculcated.



Faith is integrated into the chemistry, sociology, or economics classroom, into the ballfield, into the student clubs, and into the late-night conversations with roommates.



JOY MOSLEY
Vice President of Government
& Strategic Relations,
CCCU



IAN SPEIR
Founder,
Covenant Law



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With Marlene Wall, Ph.D.

“Blessed are the bridge-builders in a war-torn world, for they are God’s children working in the family business.”
—Matthew 5:9, paraphrased by Brian Zahnd

LCC International University is a Christian liberal arts university located in Klaipeda, Lithuania, founded as the Soviet Union was collapsing in 1991. The vision was big. As a private Christian institution, we began during a window in time when the challenges often seemed beyond us—the cultural and political context hadn’t allowed for “private” or “Christian” for decades, and Lithuania issued an invitation for us to begin a university shaped by a Western, values-based perspective. These are the perfect conditions for a God of miracles to utilize the strengths and gifts of his people for strategic action.

From our humble beginnings in the early ‘90s with just a few students, all from Lithuania, LCC has grown to a fully accredited global community with nearly 600 students from 55 countries, uniquely with no majority culture on campus. We believe that our students are the much-needed next generation of global leaders.

If you were to visit our campus, you would see students doing typical student things—enjoying sunny days outdoors, competing in community games, eating hot dogs together, studying in small groups. You would be welcomed by our faculty and staff, who this year come from more than 10 countries, all committed to our Christ-centered mission. You would see us celebrate our international community. You would notice the relational nature of our community with engaging professors who prioritize impactful relationships with our students. You would see crowds attending our LCC women’s basketball games, a program that is only in its fifth year, but we’ve already managed to claim second place in the nation and in the Baltic League. You would see residence halls on campus, located next to a small, picturesque pond. All of this would seem quite similar to many of our dear CCCU partner university communities. And yet, in our context, everything I’ve said so far is countercultural. LCC is radically countercultural.

HERE ARE A FEW OF THE REAL-LIFE CONTEXTS FROM WHICH OUR STUDENTS COME

- Some of our students have heard their parents talk about the Baltic Way—when, on August 13, 1989, two million people held hands in an unbroken chain from the capital of Estonia to the capital of Latvia to the capital of Lithuania. This was a powerful statement of nonviolent resistance to the Soviet regime two years before the fall of the Soviet Union. This recent history of the region has had a direct impact on hundreds of our students and alumni, along with faculty and staff.
- In the past nine years, we have served 100 war-affected students from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan—students whose education was disrupted because of war and genocide and economic collapse. We have Yazidi students from internally displaced people camps who were pushed up Mount Sinjar in 2014 by ISIS, and whose families each bear the scars of this genocide.
- When the U.S. pulled out of Afghanistan in August 2021, our 12 Afghan students at LCC panicked. They urgently requested a meeting to consider any possible ways that we might be able to support their families who would now be trapped inside Afghanistan. We tried. We wished. We prayed. But there was little that could be done. These students were passionate. They were desperate for the peacebuilding work of God’s family business. And . . . beautifully . . . the following year, in the same year that the Taliban shut down all educational opportunities for young women, our valedictorian at LCC was a young woman from Afghanistan. A newly prepared bridge-builder in a war-torn world.
- On February 24, 2022, our 200 students from Ukraine and our nearly 50 students from Russia lost their identity. When Russia

invaded Ukraine, our Ukrainian students were essentially refugees, unable to return to their own country. And our Russian students were now “enemies”? Neither group knew what to do with their new realities. And so, they teamed up and worked together as bridge-builders in God’s family business. Together, they launched the Ukraine Care Initiative to support the thousands of Ukrainian refugees who flooded into our city.

OUR RESPONSE IS CONTSTANT.

- The outpouring of support for our own students from our campus community has been humbling. Our Campus Ministries team has offered meaningful pastoral support. Our Peace Center has supported listening circles, our trauma-trained counselors have met with individuals day and night, and we have hosted frequent prayer vigils.
- We have recognized the many global wars that have had a direct effect on our own students —Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia, Israel and Palestine. We are called to be a part of God’s family business, to be bridge-builders in a war-torn world.
- Lithuania is a member of NATO. In fact, national security would be almost nothing without NATO. NATO officers have visited LCC and commented that we are doing the peacekeeping work of NATO—an observation that we see that as affirmation of our bridge-building role in a war-torn world.

Unfortunately . . . “The 21st century isn’t for tidy minds!”

"We are called to be a part of God’s family business, to be bridge-builders in a war-torn world."

This statement, made by a world-class entrepreneur, is a sobering reminder that there is little, if any, time for us to plan and put everything neatly in place on one project before the next one begins. We must all learn to live with disruption rather than certainty, with a sense of interdependence rather than “I’ve got this.”

What if our roles as institutions of Christian higher education were created exactly for this messy world? As countercultural, peacebuilding communities with Christ located at the center, we are called to be bridge-builders in a war-torn world. Wouldn’t that be a remarkable legacy of love for each of us to leave behind? Wouldn’t that be exactly what we would pray for each of our students?

At LCC International University we are incredibly grateful for the global community of the CCCU. We could list the many colleges and universities who have trained our faculty, where our faculty have taught, and who have sent their study abroad students to us. Thank you for your years of collaboration. And thank you for your prayers.

We only persist in this work because of our God, who by the power of His spirit, calls us to these spaces. These experiences give us an imagination for the world to come, as described in Revelation 7:9: “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” Today, and every day, we stand before the Lamb, looking for opportunities to join together, in service to others, and in service to our world. 🙏



Marlene Wall, Ph.D.
President
LCC International University

ALWAYS BECOMING NEVER ARRIVING

A book review with Dr. C. Allin Means

As a teacher—whether K-12 or a college professor—have you ever pondered questions like: What does it mean to teach in a Christianly manner? Or: Where is my calling in the teaching profession? Or: How can I develop a genuine faith-based imagination in my teaching?

Always Becoming, Never Arriving: Developing an Imagination for Teaching Christianly (Cascade Books, 2024), written by David J. Mulder, dives into these questions and offers valuable insight, while also reminding us that we are not necessarily supposed to ever arrive at any perfect answers to these challenging questions. As the title of the book makes clear, we are never arriving, but instead continuously making efforts to teach in ways that honor these questions through a Christian worldview. We are, in fact, always becoming.

Dr. Mulder, a professor and chair of the education department at Dordt University (Sioux Center, IA), writes in his introduction of the book, “Whether you are new to the profession or a seasoned veteran, you will find ideas to expand your imagination about what teaching Christianly looks like, considering topics that run the range from professionalism and ethics, to a biblical view of learners and learning, to content knowledge and curriculum, to planning, instruction, and assessment.”

Written to encourage Christian teachers—newly minted to greatly experienced—to bridge the gap between their faith and their teaching practices, the book emphasizes that teaching Christianly is not an end goal, but a continual journey of growth in both faith and pedagogy.

While I agree that any teacher—including college professors—can find something of value in Mulder’s book, I would add that it is primarily geared toward new teachers, alongside college students (or even high school students) who are considering studying education as a major.

For example, Chapter 7, titled, “Jesus Loves the Little Children: Learner Development,” trumpets the author’s affinity toward caring for God’s creation through His created children. Mulder builds on this idea in Chapter 8, “Jesus Loves ALL the Little Children: Learner Diversity,” which takes a deeper dive into the value and richness of cultural diversity and embracing those students who do not align with our concept of the “typical student.”

In this context, Mulder asks: “What is a typical kindergartener? A typical grade 3 student? A typical middle schooler? A typical senior in high school?” His point is that most students are anything but typical when we consider them as unique individuals created in the image of an almighty God.

In these two pivotal chapters, Mulder draws meaningful connections between the social science of anthropology—that is, the study of humans—and the theological context that examines the way people respond to each other in Christian faith and “express their spirituality in their day-to-day lives.” That is, he examines how we interact with our students, regardless of age, learning levels, backgrounds, and cultures, in a manner that glorifies God and recognizes that He created all of us in His image.

Each chapter of Dr. Mulder’s book opens with a personal “journal entry” from an imaginary teacher, called, “Taylor’s Journal,” which the author recommends reading before moving through the chapter.

Mulder makes the teacher gender-neutral so readers can place themselves into the fictional Taylor’s shoes, to “try and imagine what this teacher is feeling as you read those journal entries.”



DR. C. ALLIN MEANS
Associate Dean for the School
of Communications,
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Dr. C. Allin Means is associate dean for the School of Communications at Missouri Baptist University, in St. Louis, and professor of journalism and communications. He joined the MBU faculty in 2011 after teaching at Baylor University, the University of Southern Mississippi (where he earned his doctorate degree in communications), Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Morris College and Northwest Florida State College. A member of the National Scholars Honor Society, Dr. Means earned the Emerson Excellence in Teaching Award in 2021 and the Distinguished Professor of the Year Award from MBU in 2017.

This empathetic posture draws from Mulder’s own experience as he earned his bachelor’s degree in elementary education (from then-Dordt College in 1998), his master’s in curriculum and instruction from the same institution in 2008, and a doctorate in educational technology from Boise State University in 2017. After teaching K-12, Mulder has been at Dordt University since 2006, conducting research, writing books and journal articles, presenting at various conferences, and, most importantly, teaching and mentoring our future teachers.

Mulder’s advice to read these conversationally toned journal entries prior to the rest of the chapter is worth heeding because these short opening passages remind the reader that his book is geared perhaps more specifically toward grade school teachers, as many of the entries discuss the lower grade levels.

Mulder, who has delivered over 100 professional development sessions for K-12 educators across North America, invites teachers to view each decision in the classroom—from content mastery assessment methods all the way down to how desks are arranged in a teacher’s classroom space—as faith-guided acts of biblical discipleship, Christian witness, and testimony. Advising readers

to view teaching as a calling more than merely an occupation, Mulder aims to help readers “shrink the gap between what we (say we) believe and what we actually do in our teaching.”

Mulder explicates key themes in considering teaching as an act of discipleship, while always remaining creative in our imagination for “teaching Christianly.” As Mulder unpacks this concept throughout the book, he narrows in on exactly what he means by this in Chapter 14, “Effective Instruction: Teaching like Jesus?” and clearly points out in the following chapter that this effort is ongoing and never ending, titling Chapter 15, “Joy on the Journey: Why We Never ‘Arrive’ at Teaching Christianly.”

Relating those times when teachers tirelessly struggle to reach students to instances when Jesus faced some of the same relatable challenges, Mulder raises a refreshingly provocative question: Was Jesus an effective teacher? After all, scripture tells us that many of Jesus’ parabolic messages were met with confusion. The Bible references numerous occasions in which his disciples completely missed the message he was trying to convey.

Mulder’s response brings encouragement to any teacher, K-12, college or otherwise, who has made intentional strategic efforts to

bring strong pedagogy into the classroom only to be met with confused looks, apathy, or boredom. “Here’s the truth,” Mulder says. “In our work as teachers, we don’t always see immediate success. Some of our work is planting seeds—seeds that may sprout and bear fruit much later on,” as was so often the case with the parables and teachings of Jesus.

As we try out new and various approaches to getting through to our students, what Mulder calls “pedagogical moves,” the questions that must remain central to the process are, “What am I doing?” and “Why am I doing this?” These ever-relevant questions serve as affirmation connecting to the very core of the book, from which its title is derived, that we are never completely arriving at the perfect lesson plan, but we are always striving to develop our own personal interpretation of what it means to display effective Christian pedagogy. We are always becoming.

And as long as we maintain a Christian approach to our work in the classroom, or office, or workplace in general, then we are always moving in the right direction. Chapter 15 adds to this sentiment and explains in greater detail the reason why we never actually arrive at teaching Christianly. Mulder notes, “Our journey to more fully living out our faith as Christians who teach is a life-long endeavor.”

Examples that Mulder points out of “teaching Christianly” include devotional activities, modeling Christlike behaviors,

infusing a Christian perspective, doing service projects, maintaining rigor and discipline, evangelism, and imitating Christ as the “Master Teacher.”

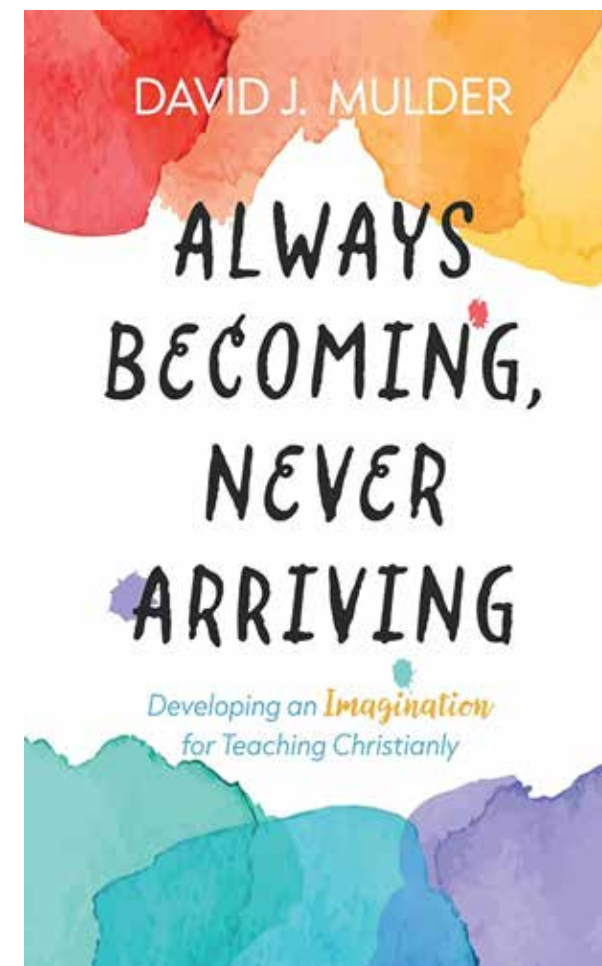
Approaching our work as teachers through a faith-informed lens enables us to expand our imagination, moving our ideal of teaching Christianly from theory to practice.

Ultimately, *Always Becoming, Never Arriving* is less a manual and more a companion for the long, challenging, and rewarding road of teaching. It reminds us that the work of education is never finished—that both teachers and students are always growing, always becoming.

For anyone seeking to bring faith and purpose into the classroom, this book offers wisdom that is both practical and deeply rooted in scripture. It left me grateful for my own calling in higher education, and even more appreciative of the faithful K-12 educators who daily embody the very truths Mulder so thoughtfully describes.

His encouragement and biblical insights underscore the weight, responsibility, and privilege of shaping students’ lives through sound Christianly pedagogy. In the end, Mulder’s vision is a timely reminder that teaching is not about reaching a finish line but about faithfully walking with students as we are continually formed in Christ. 🙏

“Whether you are new to the profession or a seasoned veteran, you will find ideas to expand your imagination about what teaching Christianly looks like, considering topics that run the range from professionalism and ethics, to a biblical view of learners and learning, to content knowledge and curriculum, to planning, instruction, and assessment.”



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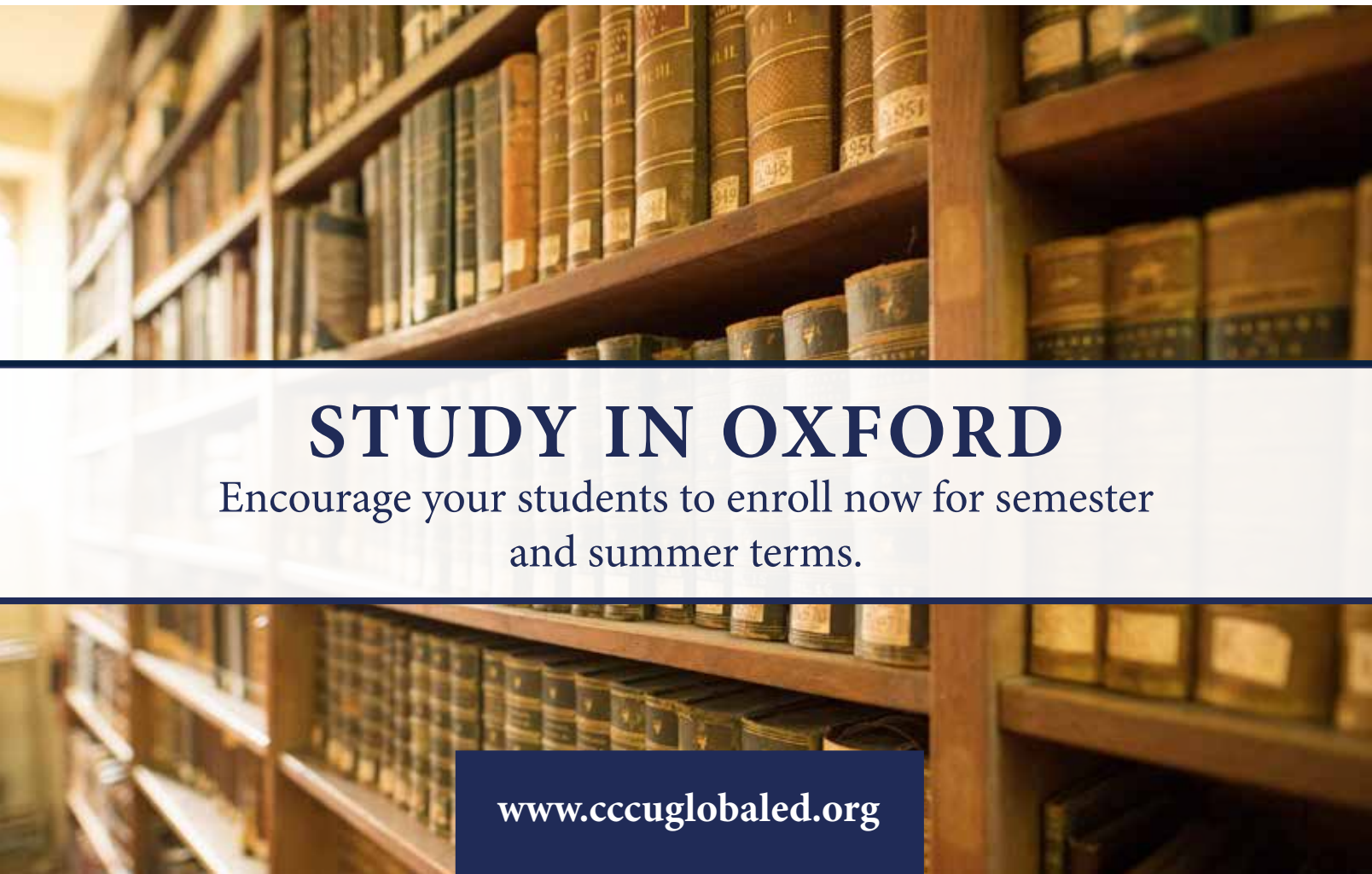
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A background image of a library with wooden shelves filled with books. The books are mostly old, with some having gold lettering on their spines. The lighting is warm and focused on the books.

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