
EVANGELICAL HIGHER EDUCATION: HISTORY, MISSION, IDENTITY, AND FUTURE

GARY K. HOUSE

Huntington College

Evangelical Christian colleges have had a unique role in the development of higher education in America and in producing Christian leadership for the world. These institutions have sought to educate and train leaders not only by transmitting knowledge and skills but also by attempting to instill moral character, integrity, and responsibility in their students. They have endeavored to educate according to Christian purposes, recognizing the value of integrating faith and learning. The evangelical Christian liberal arts college is especially adapted to create a context for educating the whole person. These institutions have a unique heritage, a clear purpose, a distinct identity, and a bright future.

Christian higher education in America has a heritage that is both unique and significant. The Christian college has influenced the nation both socially and politically, made a unique contribution to its history and culture, and helped shape the development of higher education in America. An accurate assessment of the nation's history cannot be achieved without an awareness of the development of these institutions.

Few institutions that began as Christian colleges are recognized as Christian today (Pace, 1972). As a result, the contemporary definition of the Christian college can be cast quite broadly. Most institutions can be identified as (1) "essentially secular" (Ringenberg, 1984, p. 142), those having Christian roots; (2) "generally religious" (p. 142), those nominally affiliated with the church; (3) "liberal Protestant" (p. 142), the largest group, which are those affiliated with the church but are no longer evangelical; or (4) "conservative Protestant" (p. 142), the fastest growing group, which includes those associated with evangelical, fundamentalist, or interdenominational churches.

Christian colleges have always faced critical issues and difficult years, perhaps in part due to the effects of secularization. As a result of this process, many institutions and their leaders have lost the vision embraced by the founders and supporters of the early institutions. They have lost an awareness of and appreciation for their heritage.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Evangelical Christianity was a primary impetus in the development of American higher education. Individual Christians and church denominations founded and provided leadership for almost all colleges before the Civil War and most private institutions since.

The academic model of Oxford and Cambridge in England influenced the early colonial colleges. The primarily agrarian society viewed higher education as inconsequential. The cultural and economic elite provided most of the students. Teaching was most often tutorial. Enrollments were low and the indigent institutions were free to receive federal funds when required. While the colleges were religious, the church-state and public-private distinction had not been made at this time. It was not until the Dartmouth College case in 1819 that these issues were defined.

Students of the colonial college both resided and studied on campus. This residential model, adapted from English institutions, not only provided opportunities for intellectual dialogue and social engagement beyond the classroom, but also offered a protective environment for young students, solved the problem of limited alternative housing, and provided an atmosphere for religious influence.

The colonial curriculum would have included Latin, Greek, Hebrew, rhetoric, literature, divinity, ethics, arithmetic and geometry, physics, natural and moral philosophy, astronomy, and some history. This classical curriculum was rooted in the medieval course of study. The purpose of the old-time college curriculum was to train the mind and cultivate character, rather than to discover new knowledge or acquire vocational skills. Developing the ability to think, educators believed, would prepare an individual for life. While colonial colleges were founded primarily to provide ministerial training, the curriculum also provided education for public leaders and other members of society.

The number of colleges increased significantly in the mid-18th century as a result of the First Great Awakening. Several denominations were compelled to launch academic institutions to educate a growing number of ministers. The doctrinal divisions and controversies of the revival also had significant educational implications. A comprehensive study of colonial education during this period is inadequate without an awareness of the cultural, social, and religious impact of the Awakening.

Nearly all the colleges founded during the Early National Era, between the American Revolution and the Civil War, were established and managed by a religious organization. The various denominations were highly competitive in their efforts. The colleges of this era were anchored in tradition and were authoritarian. The curriculum remained similar to that of the late colonial period. The majority of these institutions failed to succeed as a result of financial struggles and divisions within denominations.

Two significant factors had an impact on higher education during the Early National Era. First, the intellectual movement of the European Enlightenment influenced students on college campuses, bringing into question traditional ideas, particularly in the areas of religion and education. Another factor that transformed the traditional college was The Second Great Awakening. According to J. Edwin Orr (1971), noted authority on revival history, the Awakening was instrumental to the founding of colleges throughout the West. The realization that "students were being converted by the hundreds on campus after campus certainly fired enthusiasm for establishing college after college out west" (p. 36). In view of this, Orr contends that "the principal dynamic behind the college founding movement was undoubtedly evangelical religion" (p. 36).

Several factors converged during the antebellum years to initiate a change in the course of the American college. Most significant were the movements toward a democracy and national identity, immigration and urbanization, the rise of capitalism, and science. A political and social ethos was emerging that would soon dominate the traditional Protestant culture with which America was identified (Kaestle, 1983). While the classical curriculum was still dominant, educators began to question whether it was adequate for a democratic society.

The most notable transformation in the American college occurred during the post-Civil War years, as higher education was confronted by a rapidly changing society. Perhaps the most significant change was the Industrial Revolution, which not only created new occupations requiring specialized skills but also produced a business culture and unprecedented wealth. Other changes included urbanization, the rise of the middle class, the loss of religious authority, the rise of science, and the allure of German scholasticism. These societal changes demanded a shift in the college curriculum from the classical tradition to a more practical, vocational approach. The time had arrived, as Nord (1995) observes, when "those quintessentially modern values of individualism and democracy, science and technology, profession and prosperity, had come to dominate higher education" (p. 81).

A consequence of the sweeping changes in higher education during this era was the secularization of the colleges. Historian George Marsden (1992a) defines secularization as a "transformation from an era when organized Christianity and explicitly Christian ideals had a major role in the leading

institutions of higher education to an era when they have almost none" (pp. 4-5). The restructuring of colleges at the end of the 19th century, due to the forces of secularization, has had repercussions even for contemporary Christian higher education. It was at this time that private Christian colleges began to lose their dominant intellectual position.

Numerous changes have occurred in higher education since World War II. One has been an increase in federal and state funds. Many Christian colleges have only accepted those funds that go to the student as scholarships, loans, and grants. Christian institutions that have received government assistance have often sacrificed mandatory chapel, religious course requirements, denominational relationships, and their Christian identity. Other changes during this period that have affected Christian higher education include the expansion of the university in both enrollment and curriculum and a curricular shift toward the practical, often referred to as specialization or vocationalization.

By the 1960s, the spiritual condition of the secular colleges and universities had changed significantly from that of previous eras. These institutions no longer claimed a role in the spiritual development of their students. Ringenberg (1984) suggests that colleges have secularized more than society as a whole. While colleges prior to the Civil War were more Christian in their convictions than society, contemporary higher education is much more secular than society in general. He observes that even many Christian colleges "had become more influenced by secular than by Christian thought" (p. 134).

Since the 1960s, evangelical colleges have successfully achieved many objectives. They have effectively increased enrollment; raised academic standards; improved faculty qualifications, development, and salaries; maintained the religious commitment of faculty; encouraged faculty to publish and attend scholarly conferences; strengthened financial resources; enhanced public relations and marketing; expanded physical property; engaged in collaborative efforts with other institutions; founded academic associations; achieved and maintained accreditation; developed graduate programs; and are sending more students to graduate school.

THE MISSION OF EVANGELICAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Regardless of one's intended vocation, the purpose of the Christian college since the colonial era has been to provide an education that is distinctly Christian. The colonial leaders had a clear purpose when designing these institutions. They believed that the nation would need capable rulers, the church would demand an educated clergy, and society would require informed citizens. They sought to shape an environment not only conducive

to intellectual development and cultivation of character, but one where the Christian faith and Christian morality influenced the students and ultimately society.

Educators of the Early National and Antebellum Periods held to the idea that education should develop a core of knowledge and maintain a strong moral and religious influence. In light of the political and social events of the time, their motivation included the development of character and values necessary to ensure democracy and social stability. For nearly 250 years, the Christian private sector dominated higher education. By the late 19th century, they no longer set the moral and academic standard. By the late 20th century, commitment to religious values by the majority of students actually declined during a 4-year college experience.

While the majority of academic institutions move along a secular path, most evangelical colleges are still attempting not only to educate but to train Christian leaders for the world in which they live. The entire educational program is often designed for that purpose. An educational institution should be committed to a purpose, an ideology, and a heritage. Commitments made by evangelical colleges make them different from other academic institutions. They are different not only in purpose but regarding certain doctrines and beliefs, different in heritage and constituency, and different in what is required of faculty and students. An institution's purpose should affect all aspects of its program, including its curriculum, its student life, its recruitment, and its public relations.

Many Christian colleges face critical issues at the beginning of the new century. Through the process of secularization, many institutions and their leaders have lost the vision embraced by the founders of the early institutions. Many Christian institutions have attempted to resolve their problems without regard to their heritage. They have operated outside the context of the philosophy of the institution. Often, when an institution is in trouble, it is not operating in accordance with its original purpose. The leaders may be uncertain about what the institution should hold as its primary mission. Many Christian colleges have abandoned their original goals. They have tried to compete with secular universities. They need to reaffirm their commitment to the values that sustained them through the past. Unless these institutions remain true to their original intent and purpose, in mission and ethos, they face an uncertain future.

THE IDENTITY OF THE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

Ringenberg (1984) claims: "Enough time has passed since the peak period of the secularization challenge for most of the historically church-related colleges to decide whether they are generally accepting of or generally resistant

to secular influences" (p. 189). For many Christian institutions over the past century, a transformed identity was a welcome change. They deliberately severed themselves from their past. Others struggled with an allegiance to their traditions, but yielded to the demands of a new era. Still others possess an uncertain identity as they endeavor to find their place in the diverse and expanding arena of American higher education.

A distinct identity which distinguishes most evangelical Christian colleges from other institutions of higher education has emerged in recent years. At the core of their objective is an effort to integrate faith and learning and an emphasis on spiritual nurture and character development. Most of these institutions consistently strive to maintain both aspects of their identity.

Integration of faith and learning involves freedom to seek truth within a Christian context. According to Holmes (1987), "the Christian college is distinctive in that the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal education exposes students" (p. 45). This concept is difficult for the secular world to reconcile. It appears to be a contradiction since the world views Christ and truth to be antithetical to one another.

Those maintaining the evangelical position, however, would argue that God exists and that He created everything. If God created all things, then reason itself is a gift from God. It has limitations, however, because it is created and because man is fallen. Creating a world with order and unity, God gave man reason and the mind to comprehend its order and relationships. God commanded man to be master over and to understand the world. To the evangelical scholar, the pursuit of all knowledge and truth, regardless of its nature, is the work of God and accomplished for the glory of God.

Contrary to the secular view, biblical Christianity is not negative toward learning. It does, however, recognize the consequence of man's pursuit of knowledge without God. Man without God will make his intellect, given by God to understand His creation, an end in itself. Reason is used to justify and rationalize, rather than to seek truth. Therefore, the intellect is not free to seek truth apart from self-interest.

Two major themes in Scripture, the doctrine of redemption and the doctrine of creation, relate to the place of learning in Christianity. While the Church is the structural social expression of the doctrine of redemption, the college or university is the structural expression of the doctrine of creation. According to Kinlaw (1995), a former evangelical college president, biblical Christianity is not an adversary to the university. He elaborates:

The reality is that Christian truth is the womb out of which the university system in the world came. Christianity contributed something very significant to the university, and that is now being lost out of the higher educational institutions in our country and in the western world. This loss does not mean a broadening of the horizon, it does not mean a freeing of the spirit, it does

not mean an enlarging of a person's world. The loss of the Christian element means a narrowing of the process and of the perspective, and it means a limiting of the educational process. When the Christian element went, we lost our academic soul.

To the evangelical college, the Christian faith makes a difference in the matter of education. The fact that a personal God created the world and gave man certain responsibilities is significant to education. Christian institutions, therefore, have a foundation for thinking and experience that no longer exists in the secular universities. It is the observation of many evangelicals that most contemporary universities are forced to confine their interests to knowledge that solves specific problems or serves society in certain utilitarian ways.

It is the contention of an evangelical institution that the keys for interpreting truth are found in Scripture. It may be science or some other discipline, however, which discovers where those keys fit and reveals new realms of knowledge. Hence, biblical faith is not an obstacle to knowledge or understanding, but opens the way of truth and understanding. Christian colleges, therefore, should be at the forefront of any kind of academic venture, intellectual pursuit, or scientific research.

Secular higher education does not understand or accept this type of reasoning. Marsden (1996) describes the current position of American university culture toward religion. He explains that "it is not unusual for otherwise judicious scholars to dismiss the idea of the relevance of religious perspectives to respectable scholarship as absurd" (p. 5). He points out "no matter what the subject, our dominant academic culture trains scholars to keep quiet about their faith as the price of full acceptance in that community" (p. 7). He calls this "separation of faith and learning" (p. 7). He suggests that a bias against religious perspectives in the classroom exists, despite the claims of universities "to stand above all for openness, tolerance, academic freedom, and equal right" (1992b, p.34).

There are two basic philosophies of education. One comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and is rooted in Christian revelation as it has been revealed in Israel, in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. The other philosophy of education began in the reaction against medieval religion and ideals, and has evolved since the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. This philosophy does not embrace the relevance of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its doctrines. The two compete with each other in the system of American education.

The two educational philosophies differ in their motivation to educate an individual. If a person's fulfillment is in relation to God, the system that does not include God precludes the possibility of a true education and fulfillment for that individual. There are two opposite purposes for which education pre-

prepares a person. An evangelical Christian education attempts to prepare an individual to be whole and in fellowship with God. Most education equips a person for a marketable trade and a practical skill. While recognizing the need to be educated with a vocational skill, the evangelical college would not regard education as solely for utilitarian purposes.

These two educational philosophies also have different concepts of a student. An institution's perception of who a student is will determine the nature of the education given. While a secular institution tends to ask the question of "how" creation occurred, the evangelical institution asks "who" initiated the process. The first system places man's origin in nature, while the second reveals the key to man in the Creator. Each position provides an educational institution with a different answer as to who a student is and what will be done for the student.

While the emphasis of most education today is upon information and skills, the priority should be upon the education of a person. Education today is more market driven than person centered. The institution recognizing that man was intended to have intimacy with God will devote itself to the concept of personhood. An emphasis upon educating the whole person has characterized the evangelical Christian college. The nature and structure of these institutions creates a context for a person-centered education. Christian colleges are inclined to maintain a spiritual emphasis, develop a "community" which encourages interpersonal relationships, and place a priority upon training the mind to think.

Believing in a personal God, the evangelical Christian college would not develop an educational program with a void at the core. God would be the central point of reference. The heart of its objective is to bring a student to an understanding of Christian purposes, providing knowledge of the Creator as well as the creation. If one is to be educated, it cannot be accomplished without explaining life in terms of the one from whom he came and the one to whom he goes. It is in Christ that a person discovers who he is and what he is intended to be. In this sense, Christianity is not separated from education.

Influencing the mind and soul is accomplished in a variety of settings in an evangelical institution. Academic excellence can be combined with Christian devotion in the classroom, the dormitory, the dining commons, the chapel, prayer meetings, and extracurricular activities; and through the development of interpersonal relationships. Absent from the routine of most colleges in America today is chapel. Unique to most evangelical Christian colleges is required chapel. Chapel fulfills the academic and spiritual objective of educating the "whole person." It provides an occasion for spiritual nurture and worship as well as an opportunity to expose a student body to a vast selection of speakers. Chapel speakers offer interaction beyond classroom teaching, broadening the mind, inspiring an excitement for learning, and developing open-mindedness and respect for other points of view.

Evangelical colleges seek to train leaders not only by transmitting knowledge and skills, but also by attempting to instill moral character, integrity, and responsibility in their students. Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, suggests five objectives of a liberal arts education; the acquisition of "information and knowledge," the acquisition of "skills and habits of thought," the study of "another language," a "knowledge and mastery of one academic discipline," and the development of "judgment and values" (as cited in Kinlaw, 1974).

Bok acknowledges that education has its limitations. He notes that 15 years after graduation, a Harvard student would ideally have qualities of intellect, imagination, moral character, emotional maturity, honesty, integrity, and generosity. He admits, however, that it would be arrogant to assert that these qualities could be developed in an undergraduate educational program. Consequently, these are not included in the objectives of an undergraduate education at Harvard. Bok qualifies the objectives he seeks to include as those with lasting value, which he hopes can be achieved by a significant number of students.

Educators at an evangelical institution would likely disagree with Bok at this point, arguing that the objectives he downplays—for example, moral character—are essential to a liberal arts education. One might argue that knowledge without character and integrity may be more dangerous than ignorance. Perhaps Bok would leave the development of these qualities to someone else, such as the family or the church. The evangelical college would tend to have confidence that these qualities can be instilled through a Christian liberal arts education.

THE FUTURE OF EVANGELICAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Noll (1984) observes that Christian colleges seemed doomed by the educational revolution of the 19th century but agrees that they have not only survived but prospered. He suggests several contributing factors:

One is the colleges' ability to provide students with the necessary educational certification for entering the major vocations and professional schools. Another is their success in cultivating the support of Christian communities which had come to distrust modern higher education but which expressed confidence in institutions that retained Christian professions and traditional behavioral standards. A third is the capacity of faculties at the evangelical colleges to articulate to themselves, to college administrators, and to wider Christian constituencies the theoretical and practical necessity for distinctly Christian views of the world. (p. 32)

Many evangelical Christian colleges have prospered in recent years for the reasons Noll has suggested. They have also flourished due to factors that have benefited higher education in general, such as a strong economy, the popularity of attending college, and the vast college-age population.

The condition of Christian colleges can continue to improve as they properly prepare for the future. Sandin (1982) selects several goals that Christian colleges should strive to attain in the future. First is to articulate a theory of faith and learning and a philosophy of education; second, define their objectives and pursue them; third, design a curriculum in accordance with those objectives; fourth, enlist skilled Christian teacher-scholars; fifth, capitalize on opportunities for personal and spiritual growth available in a Christian college environment; sixth, assemble an efficient administration and adequate physical resources; and seventh, solicit public support according to the purpose of the institution.

Sandin (1982) believes that Christian colleges must “maintain that level of educational effectiveness which the competitiveness of the times demands” (p. 2). He states the following concern, however, regarding this effort:

Some will compromise the theological dimensions of their mission in an effort to compete with secular institutions for students and support. Others will maintain their religious distinctiveness but will be too weak academically to exert a decisive influence. The question is how many of them will succeed in combining religious distinctiveness and academic excellence in a manner which will fulfill the promise of Christian higher education. (p. 2)

Noll (1984) stresses the reality of this effort. He points out that “Living between two worlds as they are, committed both to Christian values and to modern learning, the evangelical colleges have singular opportunities and singular difficulties as they attempt to encourage Christian perspectives on the world” (p. 32).

Longman (1999), of the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, offers a challenge for evangelical higher education. She writes, “The brighter our distinctiveness shines as thoughtful Christian institutions, the more we’ll have to offer to a world that is searching for truth and spiritual vitality” (p. 41). “Let us envision a future of equipping the students of the next generation with the “mind of Christ” and sending them out into various areas of service around the world” (p. 51).

A renewal of intellectual, moral, and spiritual vitality and integrity is the aspiration of the evangelical Christian college.

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Gary K. House is assistant professor of educational ministries and director of mentoring at the Huntington College Graduate School of Christian Ministries. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Gary K. House, Huntington College, 2303 College Avenue, Huntington, IN 46750.

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