



Position Paper

Meeting the Moment: Reconstituting Christian Higher Education for a New Era



Center for Academic
Faithfulness & Flourishing

About the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing

The Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing exists to empower Christian colleges and universities to advance their faith-based missions, equip campus leaders with the resources necessary to flourish in our present age, and encourage broader support for these unique and valuable institutions. To advance this mission, CAFF seeks to accomplish three goals: (1) Reassert institutional faithfulness by developing a cohesive and credible counter-narrative to ideologies that undermine Christian higher education; (2) Redesign organizational networks by helping Christian colleges and universities cultivate ideologically aligned exchange partners; and (3) Reinvigorate institutional flourishing by designing initiatives that strengthen the governance, management, and financial position of faith-based institutions of higher education.



Meeting the Moment: Reconstituting Christian Higher Education for a New Era

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Executive Summary

Evangelical higher education carries forward the spiritual legacy of the earliest American colleges, yet its position within the wider postsecondary landscape is more precarious than ever before. In order for campus leaders to wisely navigate current conditions, they must clearly understand the present moment and respond accordingly. Using resource dependency as a conceptual framework, this position paper traces the evolution of American higher education from its founding to the present and details strategies Christian colleges and universities have used to balance adaptation to changing contexts with fidelity to their founding missions. It explains why past approaches will no longer work in the emergent era and argues that this reality requires different strategies for engaging the external environment. The paper concludes by casting a new vision for academic faithfulness that can empower evangelical Christian higher education to flourish despite growing illiberal trends.

About the Author

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Director's Preface

Achieving equilibrium between adaptation and constancy is a persistent organizational dilemma. This tension is particularly acute for institutions founded on distinctive missions that commit themselves to a unique focus, such as Evangelical Christian colleges and universities. One recent instance of this perennial challenge was the postmodern cultural turn, whose multifaceted relativism and emphasis on cultural pluralism delegitimized exclusivist truth claims and threatened to marginalize organizations that asserted such claims. However, many assumed that the American tradition of respecting diverse institutional missions meant that solving this quandary was essentially a question of how faith-based institutions should work within an existing system that still retained its longstanding values in spite of its new sociocultural backdrop. Moreover, conventional wisdom held that Christian colleges could maintain the organizational legitimacy necessary to persist in this environment without sacrificing their core identities, so long as they selected the right strategy for engaging with the wider industry and culture.

Perspectives began to shift in response to the cultural convulsions that reverberated throughout American society in 2020. Trends emerging within the academy pointed to a difficult truth: the postmodern pluralism to which many Christian colleges had adapted was being replaced with an illiberal authoritarianism hostile to democratic norms and traditional morality. The old order had ruptured, such that colleges and universities

ascribing to Christian orthodoxy could no longer assume that their missions would be respected, that mainstream academic publications would remain viable outlets for Christian scholars, or that external vendors would automatically continue their commercial relationships. A new era had emerged, one that would require a new vision for organizational survival.

The pages that follow represent my attempt to place these recent shifts in historical perspective and explain what they mean for the future of Christian higher education. Originally delivered in March 2022 as a keynote address during Worldview Week at North Greenville University and again in November 2022 as part of a panel on The Future of Christian Higher Education/Theological Education at the 74th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, this work laid the foundation for the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing (CAFF), an organization devoted to empowering Christian colleges and universities to thrive in this new era. Its publication marks the inauguration of CAFF's position paper series, whose entries will explore new strategies for meeting the moment with confidence and conviction. May these papers resource a renaissance in faithful persistence among America's institutions of Christian higher education.

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Greenville, SC

February 2024



Introduction: Meeting the Moment

How should organizations balance adaptation to changing contexts with fidelity to their founding missions? Colleges and universities have grappled with variations of this dilemma throughout the history of American higher education. Some have failed to adequately address new realities and thus struggled to survive, while others have adjusted too well, sacrificing essential elements of their identities in the process. Institutional responses often require inexact assessments and difficult choices, and rare is the college or university that achieves an easy equilibrium.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will examine a contemporary example of this organizational dilemma, one that currently challenges those faith-based institutions commonly referred to as evangelical colleges and universities, or more simply, Christian higher education. Although this group occupies a relatively

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small portion of the U.S. postsecondary landscape, it carries forward the spiritual legacy of the earliest American colleges.¹ Prior to the Civil War, nearly every college founded in the United States was religious in nature.² However, as the needs of the emerging nation and the values of its people evolved, so too did the religious ethos of most of these institutions. A noteworthy exception to this secularizing trend has been a group of evangelical Christian colleges, and these institutions have persisted in their founding missions, which continue to animate campus life and practice to this day.

To be sure, this persistence has not been the result of happenstance; rather, it has stemmed from the difficult labor of those who have sought to understand and articulate what form faithfulness should take from age to age. I endeavor to extend that tradition by exploring how the evangelical Christian college might faithfully meet our present moment, and I will do so in five parts. In part one, I will provide a foundation for the discussion by defining what is meant by evangelical Christian higher education and offering a brief overview of the theological and philosophical foundations of these institutions. Next, in part two, I will introduce frameworks that help us understand how all organizations, including colleges and

universities, must adapt to changes in their environment in order to survive. With this background knowledge in hand, part three will survey the history of American higher education, paying particular attention to how various philosophical, cultural, and societal shifts have shaped the environment

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in which Christian colleges and universities operate. This survey sets the stage for part four, which will describe our current era and its unique challenges. I will conclude with part five, which considers the implications of these challenges and proposes principles for reconstituting Christian higher education to ensure faithful persistence in our present age.

¹ The content of this sentence through the end of the paragraph has been adapted from P. Jesse Rine, "Evangelical Higher Education," in *Oxford Handbook on Religion and American Education* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 328. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press (<https://global.oup.com>).

² Samuel Schuman, *Seeing the Light: Religious Colleges in Twenty-First-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 21-32.



Part One: The Christian College

Evangelical Christian colleges and universities belong to the private nonprofit sector of American higher education, and they represent a diverse array of institutions, from small residential liberal arts colleges to large comprehensive universities and everything in between.³ Regardless of institutional form or type, however, these colleges and universities share some basic commonalities. All possess a board-approved mission statement that speaks to their religious character and purpose, and all employ only

If the purpose of the Incarnation of Christ was to reconcile a fallen world to God, then the mission of the evangelical Christian college is to explore the implications of the Incarnation for every academic field and discipline.

³ The content of this and the following paragraph has been adapted from P. Jesse Rine, "Evangelical Higher Education," in *Oxford Handbook on Religion and American Education* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 331-333. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press (<https://global.oup.com>).

professing and practicing Christians as full-time faculty and senior administrators. In addition, every evangelical Christian college or university, regardless of denominational tradition, is grounded in the belief that a supernatural realm operates beyond the natural environment we inhabit, yet both have been authored by a personal God who has made Himself known through two types of revelation. The first type, the created order, is general revelation that testifies to the existence and character of God. The second type involves direct, special revelation of God through His written Word, the Bible, and the Incarnation of Christ, that moment in human history when God became man and dwelt among humanity in order to become the once-for-all atonement for sin. If the purpose of the Incarnation of Christ was to reconcile a fallen world to God, then the mission of the evangelical Christian college is to explore the implications of the Incarnation for every academic field and discipline. This mission has been pursued largely through a pedagogical paradigm known as “the integration of faith and learning.”

In his influential work *The Idea of a Christian College*, Arthur Holmes introduces a number of concepts that inform the integration paradigm. Holmes elucidates the unique character of the Christian college by drawing two contrasts. First, he distinguishes the Christian college from other forms of Christian involvement in higher education—such as the Christian professor who serves in a nonsectarian institution or the Bible institute that exists

solely to train Christian workers.⁴ Second, he distinguishes the Christian college from the secular academy, which tends to treat religion as largely irrelevant and sequester it from other areas of inquiry.⁵ Holmes notes that the evangelical college is the only type of Christian involvement in higher learning that seeks to provide an education that is both Christian and comprehensive. Unlike the secular academy’s compartmentalization of religion as one subject among many, Holmes explains that the evangelical college operates from a conviction that Christianity can generate a

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worldview large enough to give meaning to all areas of human endeavor and should therefore be integrated across all academic disciplines. This conviction rests on an understanding of truth as unified and noncontradictory—“all truth is God’s truth”—as well as the belief that humanity falls under a cultural mandate to explore, develop, and renew the created order.

⁴ Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 7-9.

⁵ Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 9-11.



As we consider how Christian colleges and universities might respond to the challenges of our present era, it is important to stipulate the foundational conviction that, no matter the circumstances, evangelical Christian higher education must remain theologically

grounded and directed. In contrast to their secular and historically religious counterparts, evangelical Christian colleges have continually affirmed their founding theological traditions, and this fidelity to original purpose not only honors historic mission, but it also provides a powerful organizing framework for institutional practice that is unique within American higher education. If evangelical higher education were to become theologically unmoored in the face of external pressures, it would risk losing not only its soul but also a key market distinction; the latter would render institutional survival more difficult, while the former would strip survival of its significance.

So how exactly can these institutions respond to our present moment while remaining faithful to their foundational commitments? What must college decision-makers consider when judging the external environment and weighing possible actions? These questions turn our attention to analytical frameworks for understanding organizational adaptation and survival.



Part Two: Organizational Frameworks

To fully appreciate the pressures Christian colleges and universities currently face, it is vital to understand how and why organizations are influenced by their environments.⁶ In their seminal work *The External Control of Organizations*, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald Salancik proposed the basic principles of what has become known as resource dependency theory, a framework I have found useful for conceptualizing our current dilemma. Beginning with the premise that organizations require resources for

their survival, Pfeffer and Salancik explain that organizations are ultimately dependent upon their environments because they must secure those resources from external entities.⁷ Simply put, organizations like Christian colleges cannot exist on their own because they need external resources to survive, and sometimes the entities that control those resources will make demands that require organizational adaptation.

Three related concepts illuminate the mechanics of how this adaptation occurs.

⁶ The content of the following three paragraphs has been adapted from P. Jesse Rine, *Pluralism, Provisionality, and Faith: Christian College Persistence in the Postmodern Turn* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2010), 18-21.

⁷ Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik, *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependency Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2.



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The first is the notion of the *organizational set*, or the constellation of exchange partners that interact with a particular organization.⁸ The second is the notion of the *organizational domain*, or the array of products and services provided by the organization and the various constituents it serves.⁹ For example, because the organizational domain of the Christian college is to provide faith-based higher education, the members of its organizational set will naturally include: students and parents who purchase education through tuition payments; religious denominations and associations who participate in institutional governance and support; accreditation agencies and government entities who enforce standards for educational quality; and institutional competitors who collectively set the norms for acceptable practice within the industry.

Now, just because an exchange partner naturally belongs to an organizational set does not guarantee that it will provide resources to a particular organization. The likelihood of exchange depends upon a third key concept, *organizational legitimacy*, which is gained when the organization successfully justifies its right to exist within its chosen domain.¹⁰ This justification is a product of negotiation between the organization and each of its exchange partners, and when all partners are in agreement regarding legitimate practice, this negotiation is fairly straightforward.¹¹ It may come as no surprise, however, that

⁸ W. Richard Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*. 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 126.

⁹ Scott, *Organizations*, 126.

¹⁰ John G. Maurer, *Readings in Organization Theory: Open-System Approaches* (New York, NY: Random House, 1971), 193.

¹¹ Scott, *Organizations*, 198.

As American culture and society have evolved over time, the demands of the Christian college's key exchange partners have come into conflict more frequently, thereby threatening its long-term institutional survival.

an organization's exchange partners do not always agree, and this results in competing demands, wherein meeting the demands of one partner prevents the organization from fulfilling the wishes of another partner. This outcome is problematic because organizations can only survive so long as they are able to maintain a sufficient coalition of support.¹²

So, how does this all relate to evangelical Christian higher education? Well, like any other organization, the Christian college must demonstrate institutional legitimacy to the members of its organizational set in order to maintain the resources necessary for continual operation. For much of our nation's history, the Christian college's exchange partners have been in agreement regarding legitimate practice. However, as American culture and society have evolved over time, the demands of the Christian college's key exchange partners have come into conflict more frequently, thereby threatening its long-term institutional survival. A brief review of the history of higher education illustrates this trend and helps bring the challenges of our present age into focus.

¹² Pfeffer and Salancik, *The External Control of Organizations*, 29.



Part Three: Historical Precursors

Medieval Era

To understand the deepest roots of the American academy, one must reach all the way back to the medieval era, a thousand-year period following the fall of the Western Roman Empire.¹³ It was during this time that the first European universities were founded. The medieval era was defined largely by the Roman Catholic Church and its Christian worldview, which held that truth was unified and singular, God was its ultimate source, and faith was a necessary precondition to knowledge. The dominant

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¹³ Unless otherwise noted, the content of the Medieval Era, Colonial & Antebellum Era, Era of Transformation, and Era of Multiplicity has been adapted from “Why Is Religion a Difficult Issue in American Higher Education and How Should Student Affairs Respond?” by P. Jesse Rine and Brian D. Reed, in P. M. Magolda, M. B. Baxter Magolda, and R. Carducci (eds.), *Contested Issues in Troubled Times: Student Affairs Dialogues on Equity, Civility, and Safety* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC), 241-244, with permission of the publisher, copyright © 2019, Stylus Publishing, LLC.

philosophy of the day was Scholasticism, a form of Christian rationalism that employed deductive and dialectical reasoning to craft a systematic approach to theology. The Scholastic method animated the cathedral schools, which were established by the Roman Catholic Church to educate its clergy.

Initially, instruction in cathedral schools consisted of basic literacy training through the study of scriptural collections, church documents, and devotional materials.¹⁴ Over time, however, the Roman Catholic Church's perspective on the study of pagan writings started to shift. Originally understood as a threat to Christian belief, secular sources came to be viewed as potential contributors to the unified field of knowledge that ultimately pointed to the Creator. Reflecting this conviction, ecclesiastical authorities began to require that cathedral schools teach the seven liberal arts—grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—in addition to, and in service of, theology.¹⁵ This curricular shift coincided with the rise of the first universities in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, most of which grew out of the cathedral schools.

Going forward, three key institutions—the civil government, the church, and the university—would shape the character of medieval society and direct its course. However, as the recognized guardians and purveyors of official knowledge, universities exerted a unique degree of influence in that they educated

the persons who would lead the other two institutions.¹⁶ Centuries later, the earliest American colleges would be founded for the same purpose—to train clerics for the church and administrators for the state—and would adopt an explicitly religious identity as well.

Colonial & Antebellum Era

The colonial and antebellum era began with the arrival of the first Europeans in America and continued until the eve of the Civil War. Various motivations spurred relocation to the New World, not the least of which was the lure of religious freedom. The Protestant Reformation had challenged the religious order of medieval Europe and brought forth scores of new Christian denominations, many of which faced religious persecution. The New World, however, offered the prospect of freely practicing one's personal faith.

Immigrants from a wide range of religious sects inhabited the New World, including Dutch Calvinists, English Puritans, French Huguenots, German Lutherans, and Scottish Presbyterians, and many of these groups would eventually found colleges. In 1636, English Puritans established Harvard College and modeled it after Emmanuel College at Cambridge, one of the great medieval universities. Harvard's character was religious, and its purpose was dual—to train clergy and to educate civic leaders—a

¹⁴ Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History*. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 36-37.

¹⁵ Lucas, *American Higher Education*, 37.

¹⁶ James Axtell, *Wisdom's Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 37-39.

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After securing its independence from England, the infant nation grew, and its population expanded westward. New colleges sprouted up all across the American frontier as Christian denominations sought to evangelize newly formed communities. By 1810, colleges founded by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians accounted for more than 85% of all postsecondary enrollment in America.¹⁸ Two additional Protestant denominations, the Baptists and the Methodists, benefited from membership surges following the Second Great Awakening and rapidly raised new colleges across

the country.¹⁹ On the eve of the Civil War, Protestant denominations had founded more than 80% of the nation's colleges.²⁰

Era of Transformation

Following the Civil War, American higher education entered an era of transformation, during which the purposes and composition of the existing system shifted significantly. As the nation industrialized throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, demand for formal education in the practical arts intensified. In response, the Morrill Act of 1862 provided federal land to states for the purpose of establishing colleges that would offer courses in agricultural, technical, and mechanical studies. The resulting proliferation of state colleges normalized the expansion of the college curriculum beyond the traditional liberal arts disciplines.

For decades after their founding, the land grant colleges continued to reflect the country's broader Protestant cultural consensus in their institutional structures and practices. For example, most state colleges required students to attend chapel services as late as the 1890s.²¹ However, the religious character of American higher education would eventually wane in the wake of new

¹⁷ Lucas, *American Higher Education*, 104-105.

¹⁸ Arthur M. Cohen and Carrie B. Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System*. 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 65.

¹⁹ William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 58-59.

²⁰ Axtell, *Wisdom's Workshop*, 165-166.

²¹ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

approaches to teaching and learning, new purposes for the educational enterprise, and new perspectives in the academic disciplines.

One significant catalyst for change was the importation of the German model of higher education and its modernist outlook. In contrast to the medieval formulation of faith seeking understanding, the German model emphasized the objective pursuit of truth through empirical investigation. In 1876, Johns Hopkins University became the first American institution of higher education intentionally modeled after the German research university. As the land grant and colonial colleges grew into universities, many followed the Johns Hopkins example.²²

As institutional forms evolved, so too did institutional functions. American universities increasingly viewed their social purpose in economic, rather than religious, terms. Consequently, clerical training moved to the periphery of collegiate life, while preparation for the industrial workforce took center stage. In addition, moral philosophy gradually displaced Christian theology as the primary framework for defining the educational enterprise.²³

Religious influence further diminished with the rise of new schools of thought that undermined the established Christian

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worldview. Higher criticism sought to interpret Scripture within its sociocultural context, a method implying that the Bible was of human, rather than divine, origin.²⁴ Logical positivism rejected supernatural explanations in favor of empirical analysis, while relativism argued that truth could be grasped only in local, but not universal, forms.²⁵ Darwinian evolution called into question accepted understandings of human origins.²⁶

New institutional forms, new educational purposes, and new academic perspectives all contributed to a general secularizing trend in American higher education during the era of transformation. One important effect of this trend was the eventual disengagement of many religious colleges from their founding denominations.²⁷ Despite these developments, however, the modernist epistemology that dominated the postsecondary landscape had the virtue of providing a common

²² Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 269-280.

²³ Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 99-100.

²⁴ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 115.

²⁵ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 115-116.

²⁶ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 117-119.

²⁷ For several examples of denominational disengagement among America's religious colleges, see James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges & Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

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framework for the pursuit of knowledge.²⁸ Thus, although the Christian college differed in its institutional presuppositions, it shared modernism's belief in the existence of universal truth and found common cause in seeking to discover and articulate that truth. Modernism may have rejected Christianity's specific universal truth claims, but it did not reject the very legitimacy of making claims to universal truth. Thus, while the Christian worldview's influence waned within American higher education during this era, modernist epistemology did foster a common forum in which the Christian college could argue the merits of its particular truth claims.

Era of Multiplicity

The final era of note began at the close of World War II. The American system of higher education entered an era of multiplicity, during which colleges and universities



diversified across a number of dimensions. The longstanding trend toward secularization resulted in further variation among the ranks of religiously affiliated institutions, with most of these colleges characterized more by abandonment of than adherence to their founding missions. However, a subset of evangelical Christian colleges held firm to their original missions and increased their formal cooperation through national organizations such as the Christian College Consortium and the Coalition for Christian Colleges, which facilitated cross-denominational dialogue about the integration of faith and learning.²⁹

²⁸ The content of this sentence and the remainder of the paragraph has been adapted from pages 16-17 of Rine, *Pluralism, Provisionality, and Faith*.

²⁹ James A. Patterson, *Shining Lights: A History of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 30-36.

During this era of multiplicity, many elite private and land grant universities that had adopted the German research model eventually morphed into “multiversities,” or loose confederations of varying interests that “served multiple purposes, centers of power, and clienteles.”³⁰ These diverse interests cohered not by a unified vision of education, but by the common task of knowledge production, a project whose modernist foundations would eventually be called into question.

The second half of the twentieth century gave rise to postmodernism, a movement that rejected the modernist belief in language as a stable and unbiased transmitter of truth. In contrast to their modernist predecessors, postmodernists argued that meaning shifts across sociocultural contexts, and those contexts are ultimately shaped by power relations.³¹ As postmodern thought gained currency in the American university, attention turned to ensuring that historically marginalized perspectives

received representation within the college curriculum. Postmodernists maintained that institutions of higher learning should embrace cultural diversity, giving equal voice to the entire spectrum of human perspectives rather than privileging a select few.³² The result was what Nicholas Wolterstorff called “the pluralization of the academy,”³³ as critical theorists and multiculturalists sought to lower the drawbridge of the university to groups previously marginalized by the totalizing discourse of modernism.³⁴ An expansion of postsecondary curricula began with the creation of Black Studies in the 1960s and led to the eventual establishment of additional academic disciplines such as Women’s Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Gay and Lesbian Studies.³⁵ By the mid-1990s, most American colleges and universities had added multiculturalist content to their departmental course offerings, and many established multicultural course requirements as part of their general education programs.³⁶

³⁰ Axtell, *Wisdom’s Workshop*, 340.

³¹ Harland G. Bloland, “Postmodernism and Higher Education,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 66, no. 5 (1995): 526-532.

³² The content of this sentence and the remainder of the paragraph has been adapted from “Christian College Persistence in the Postmodern Turn” by P. Jesse Rine, in A. B. Rockenbach and M. J. Mayhew (eds.), *Spirituality in College Students’ Lives: Translating Research into Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge), 71-72, copyright © 2013, Taylor & Francis. Reproduced with permission of The Licensor through PLSclear.

³³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Can Scholarship and Christian Conviction Mix? Another Look at the Integration of Faith and Learning,” in C. W. Joldersma and G. G. Stronks (eds.), *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 186.

³⁴ For example, see Henry A. Giroux, “Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism,” *Journal of Education* 170, no. 3 (1988), 162-181, and James A. Banks, “The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education,” *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 5 (1993), 4-14.

³⁵ A timeline of curricular change in American higher education is found in Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer, “Key Turning Points in the Evolving Curriculum,” in J. G. Gaff, J. L. Ratcliff, and Associates (eds.), *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Comprehensive Guide to Purposes, Structures, Practices, and Change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 66-84.

³⁶ Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton, “The Quiet Revolution: Eleven Facts about Multiculturalism and the Curriculum,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 24, no. 1 (1992), 25-26.



Although the integration of faith and learning served to operationalize the mission of the Christian college throughout the modern era, its approach to cultural diversity now fell outside the accepted norms of the broader sector of higher education.

Diversification of the postsecondary curriculum signaled a shift in the norms of American higher education.³⁷ No longer were certain voices excluded for failing to fall within

a prescribed canon. Instead, difference was welcomed into the academy, a reflection of the pluralism of postmodernity. This shift in cultural context presented a challenge to the evangelical Christian college, an institution dedicated to a particular and totalizing worldview. In the age of multiplicity, such metanarratives were interrogated, pluralism was celebrated, and universal truth claims, regardless of their content, were no longer viewed as legitimate. This postmodern ethos of inclusion ran contrary to the Christian college's pedagogical paradigm, the integration of faith and learning, an approach that privileges cultural perspectives judged to be consistent with Christian doctrine while critiquing views understood to be beyond the realm of Christian orthodoxy. Although the integration of faith and learning served to operationalize the mission of the Christian college throughout the modern era, its approach to cultural diversity now fell outside the accepted norms of the broader sector of higher education.

One way to understand the academy during the era of multiplicity is to view it as an institution in transition, a fundamentally modern institution adapting to a postmodern cultural turn. And although American higher education was embracing new societal values, many believed that it was retaining its foundational behavioral norms, which meant that the bounds of acceptable discourse would thus be enlarged rather than contracted, inclusive rather than exclusive. The challenge then was to show how an institutional type dedicated to an exclusivist truth claim—that

³⁷ The content of this paragraph and the next have been adapted from pages 14-17 of Rine, *Pluralism, Provisionality, and Faith*.

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father but by Him—could adapt to this cultural turn without losing its institutional soul.

In spite of this challenge, the good news was that evangelical Christian colleges and universities contributed to one of the widely recognized strengths of the American system of higher education—its institutional diversity—which provided a range of options for students to consider, including liberal arts colleges, service academies, women’s colleges, HBCUs, work colleges, and faith-based institutions. In addition, higher education research had shown time and again that a significant factor in student success was person–institution fit, so it stood to reason that greater institutional diversity meant better outcomes for more students.³⁸ Finally, the positive economic, cultural, and community impacts of Christian colleges and universities were real and measurable, such that many believed continued public information campaigns highlighting these institutional virtues would sustain goodwill within the wider culture, while continued advocacy in the public policy arena could stem the tide of encroaching threats to religious freedom.³⁹

Many scholars of higher education, myself included, believed that under these conditions,

the Christian college could still maintain both its distinctive institutional identity and its organizational legitimacy. Moreover, in spite of the conflicting demands presented by its key exchange partners, many believed that Christian higher education could successfully navigate this cultural moment by turning to theological resources within Christian orthodoxy that emphasized the importance of epistemological humility and engagement with difference. For instance, I argued that a fallibilist Christian spirituality characterized by commitment to Christian faith, provisionality of belief, and openness to pluralism presented an attractive option for cultivating an institutional posture toward difference that was both responsive to the cultural moment and within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.⁴⁰ While admittedly different than approaches taken by secular institutions, this posture could demonstrate compliance with the recently codified diversity requirements of regional accreditors and alignment with the shifting expectations of postsecondary competitors that were reshaping industry norms for acceptable institutional behavior. Furthermore, the orthodox nature of the fallibilist approach would satisfy the theological expectations of denominational patrons and prospective families who desired an authentically Christian educational experience.⁴¹

³⁸ For a review of constructs measuring person–institution fit and its relationship to college student persistence and educational attainment, see Matthew J. Mayhew, Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Nicholas A. Bowman, Tricia A. Seifert, and Gregory C. Wolniak, *How College Affects Students, Volume 3: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 361–420.

³⁹ This formula—public information + public advocacy—is foundational to the cultural engagement strategy currently employed by the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, a postsecondary membership association headquartered in Washington, D.C. For public information, see Econsult Solutions, *Building the Economy and the Common Good: The National Impact of Christian Higher Education in the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Econsult Solutions, 2018). For public advocacy, visit <https://www.cccu.org/advocacy>.

⁴⁰ Rine, *Christian College Persistence in the Postmodern Turn*, 79–84.

⁴¹ Rine, *Pluralism, Provisionality, & Faith*, 89–92.



Part Four: Our Present Era

Unfortunately, events of recent years suggest that many of us may have misjudged the longevity, and perhaps even the nature, of this cultural turn. It now appears that the amorphous core of postmodern pluralism ultimately lacks the robustness and the integrity necessary to provide long-term stability without the support of modernist values such as free expression and minority rights. In addition, the deconstructive impulse of postmodern critical theory renders it a poor mechanism for crafting and then promoting durable and inclusive norms for academic inquiry. Thus, instead of heralding progress toward a new and more diverse order within American higher education, it appears that

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the postmodern cultural turn may have in fact functioned as a transitional state that eroded many of the academy's established traditions and ushered in an illiberal new orthodoxy. It is within this environment that the evangelical college must now operate.

The erosion of long-standing traditions within the academy mirrors what we see in the rise of new and troubling American social norms. Admittedly, American society at large had been drifting away from its Judeo-Christian roots for decades, yet it appeared that foundational principles continued to wield influence in the form of widely held cultural values and practices such as freedom of speech and conscience, respect for personal property, the presumption of innocence, and the rule of law. Over the past few years, however, the extent to which large swaths of the population interrogated and even abandoned many of these bedrock principles in pursuit of illiberal and anti-democratic social norms has been alarming.⁴² Upon closer inspection, what appeared on the surface to be durable cultural commitments in retrospect look more like vestiges of a bygone era. Evidence of cultural revolution is everywhere one looks, from the imposition of

While it may be tempting to assume that the cultural revolution I have described is mostly theoretical in nature, the practical effects we have witnessed in society at large betray its consequential character.

new speech codes and value systems through mandatory training sessions at work and at school,⁴³ to the de-platforming of organizations whose products, views, or behavior contradict the new norms,⁴⁴ to the cancellation of unrepentant voices that commit heresy against the ascendant orthodoxy.⁴⁵

Although cultural revolution has reverberated throughout every corner of American society, perhaps most distressing has been the rapid installation of this new orthodoxy within American higher education. The academy had stood for centuries as a protector of freedom of thought and freedom of expression, precisely because both were necessary to fulfill its fundamental social function, the

⁴² Widespread questioning of American social norms, institutions, and systems is beginning to show up in national public opinion data. See for example, Frank Newport, "The Impact of Shifts in American Culture," *Polling Matters*, August 6, 2021. Gallup, Inc.

⁴³ For examples of increased Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) activities and programs within the business world, see Dominique Fluker, "12 Companies Ramping up Their Diversity & Inclusion Efforts – and How You Can Too," *Hiring & Recruiting*, May 8, 2021. Glassdoor for Employers. For a review of DEI initiatives in the academy, see Jay Greene and James Paul, *Diversity University: DEI Bloat in the Academy* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2021).

⁴⁴ Notable recent examples of deplatforming include Sam Brownback, "Are Big Banks Chasing Away Religious Organizations?" *Washington Examiner*, October 6, 2022, and Terrance Kible, "Eventbrite Repeatedly Cancels College Conservatives," *The College Fix*, March 9, 2023.

⁴⁵ Bari Weiss' experience at *The New York Times* illustrates the intense pressure brought to bear on ideological minorities by the ascendant new orthodoxy, as described by her resignation letter: <https://www.bariweiss.com/resignation-letter>. For a compilation of cancellations across American higher education, see David Acevedo, "Tracking Cancel Culture in Higher Education," February 25, 2023. National Association of Scholars.

pursuit of truth. Although the postmodern impulse toward inclusive pluralism had brought critical theorists and multiculturalists into the academic mainstream, for decades each represented but one of many schools of thought. In addition, while disagreements over the acceptable bounds of free speech sparked student demonstrations against various campus events, the American professoriate as a whole vigorously defended tenure and viewed academic freedom as absolutely sacrosanct. And yet, in the span of just a few years, the conversation shifted from an appeal to inclusion—*Could you give us a seat at the table?*—to a demand for primacy—*You should not oppose our viewpoint*—to, finally, an assertion of control—*You must affirm our orthodoxy, or else*.⁴⁶ Ironically, scholars from the same postmodern schools of thought that had advocated for greater inclusion by deconstructing traditional binaries were now themselves imposing binaries of their own choosing.

Now, while it may be tempting to assume that the cultural revolution I have described is mostly theoretical in nature, the practical effects we have witnessed in society at large betray its consequential character.

For the Christian college in particular, these practical effects are profound. The same compulsory speech codes and behavioral guidelines introduced in workplaces across the country are being rapidly implemented throughout American higher education.⁴⁷ Moreover, the postmodern critical theory underlying these speech codes and behavioral guidelines views Christian social identity as a form of privilege that must be checked

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in order to prevent oppression.⁴⁸ As this perspective is codified by colleges and universities across the country, the norms of American higher education will shift, and the practical implementation of this perspective will gradually become an accepted best practice that signals institutional legitimacy among the Christian college's secular peers. Furthermore, these best practices will likely

⁴⁶ The chilling effect of this assertion of control is changing the character of academia. A recent survey of college professors found that more than half fear loss of employment or professional reputation because something they said or did could be misunderstood or taken out of context, while a third report self-censoring on campus "fairly" or "very" often. See Nathan Honeycutt, Sean T. Stevens, and Eric Kaufmann, *The Academic Mind in 2022: What Faculty Think about Free Expression and Academic Freedom on Campus* (Philadelphia, PA: Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, 2023).

⁴⁷ For a detailed example of how DEI ideology can be embedded across a university, see Christopher F. Rufo, "The Highest Principle." *Eye on the News*, February 2, 2023. City Journal. The speech codes and behavioral guidelines of the ascendant new orthodoxy are frequently enforced by Bias Response Teams, campus entities that police social norms in ways that are often unconstitutional, as noted by Greg Lukianoff and Adam Goldstein in "Catching up with 'Coddling' Part Eleven: The Special Problem of 'Bias Response Teams'." *Newsdesk*, March 11, 2012. Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

⁴⁸ Scholarly treatments of Christian privilege have mirrored the academy's wider shift in emphasis from principled pluralism (e.g., Tricia Seifert, "Understanding Christian Privilege: Managing the Tensions of Spiritual Plurality," *About Campus*, May/June 2007, 10-17) to elimination of social identities deemed oppressive (e.g., Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* [New York, NY: NYU Press, 2020]).

To clearly recognize the challenge before us is to admit that the state of play has fundamentally changed, and so too must our response.

be encoded into accreditation standards as well as eligibility requirements for state and federal financial aid programs.

The bottom line is this: the heightened demands of many of the Christian college's traditional exchange partners will eventually require unacceptable alterations to institutional character. Absent a new strategy for faithful persistence within this

environment, college leaders will ultimately be forced to choose either institutional fidelity or institutional survival. In the face of this reality, evangelical Christian higher education cannot afford to be complacent or simply hope that this cultural moment will pass and its pressures recede. Instead, we must clearly recognize and proactively respond to this cultural turn, because it presents an existential threat to authentically Christian higher education. To clearly recognize the challenge before us is to admit that the state of play has fundamentally changed, and so too must our response. To that end, I will conclude by outlining a number of principles that can help leaders within evangelical colleges and universities effectively meet the moment.



Part Five: Reconstituting Christian Higher Education

While the environment I have described may seem daunting or even demoralizing, there is good reason to be hopeful.

Even though many colleges have rejected their original religious identities, we must remember that American higher education is, at its root, a deeply Christian project, one ultimately grounded in the basic desire to systematically understand God and His creation. Those of us who serve in evangelical Christian colleges and universities are heirs to that legacy, and its eternal significance will never be diminished by the vicissitudes of our wider culture. Indeed, the work done

within evangelical higher education has real and enduring value, regardless of how it is viewed within the academy or society at large.

If Christian higher education is to flourish in this new era, it must boldly present an authentic alternative, one that is theologically grounded both at its core and in its practice, and not merely a baptized facsimile of the dominant model.

For this reason, the first step in reconstituting Christian higher education for our present era must be a recommitment to institutional mission and identity. While the Christian college should always endeavor to pursue academic excellence and remain open to engagement with the wider academy, now is the time to turn inward and audit the degree to which we are being faithful to our founding missions by asking a few key questions: Do the members of our campus community have a deep understanding of our Christian mission? Have we intentionally integrated that mission throughout all aspects of the institution? Have longstanding traditions grounded in mission become rote or stale, in need of reinvigoration? Have we unwittingly adopted any so-called “best practices” from the broader academy that could undermine our ability to achieve our Christian mission? The rapid ascendancy of the new illiberal orthodoxy within and across American higher education has led many Christian families to seek educational alternatives to the secular academy. If Christian higher education is to flourish in this new era, it must boldly present an authentic alternative, one that is theologically grounded both at its core and in its practice, and not merely a baptized facsimile of the dominant model.

Reconstituting Christian higher education will also require realignment of our institutional priorities. This means being intentional about where we direct our attention and where we invest our time and resources. Rather than continually seeking to placate the demands of cultural change agents who remain skeptical of, or even hostile to, the mission of Christian higher education, institutional leaders should

focus their efforts on cultivating relationships with kindred spirits who share the same general values and worldview. Instead of trying to maintain institutional legitimacy with a fracturing coalition of exchange partners, wise leaders will assemble new organizational sets for a new era, sets populated by partners who understand and value the unique educational experience and student outcomes a Christian college provides. In addition to denominations, local churches, and prospective families, Christian college administrators should prioritize relationships with employers who have resisted the ascendant orthodoxy as well as funders and foundations that respect diverse educational missions.

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Those of us who serve as faculty members also have a key role to play in reconstituting Christian higher education. In response to our current cultural moment, we must reorient our scholarly purpose. Publishing and presenting research in secular venues has often been a challenge for professors serving at evangelical Christian institutions, as our scholarship is regularly viewed by the wider academy as boutique at best. However, as the new orthodoxy further influences academic opinion, and thus the process of peer review, the likelihood of placing openly evangelical

scholarship in top-tier research journals will plummet. In light of this reality, we must respond in two ways: the first is attitudinal in nature, while the second is strategic. First, we must recognize that previous markers of academic credibility are qualitatively different now, as the objectivity of peer review has been compromised by the ascendant illiberal

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orthodoxy. It is imperative, therefore, that we resist the temptation to pursue academic respectability by silencing our voices in the hopes of gaining the acceptance or accolades of the academy at large. We must always remember that, as Christian scholars, our call is greater than merely being a faithful *presence* within an academic discipline; we are also to serve as faithful *witnesses* who pursue the implications of the Christian worldview in our areas of expertise—regardless of what philosophy is en vogue academically.

Second, as the priorities of the wider academy shift and the aims of its intellectual project further diverge from—and even directly oppose—those of the Christian college, we must proactively engage and support academic associations and publication outlets that challenge and resist the ascendant new orthodoxy. Where no existing options are found, new conferences and journals should be launched to give voice to the Christian perspective and provide venues for the work of rising scholars. In addition, because the current mechanisms for training and socializing doctoral students are likely to be shaped by the ascendant orthodoxy, Christian higher education must begin developing new programs and pathways for future faculty members as well as formal supports and mentoring opportunities for those who pursue advanced degrees at secular institutions but are called to teach in faith-based contexts.

Finally, reconstituting Christian higher education for our current era will require a redoubling of administrative measures designed to protect its ability to operate according to its distinctive mission. This involves continuing to advocate for the Christian college's rightful place within the American system of higher education, with all the benefits that accompany that status, and attempting to preserve the legal conditions necessary for operation—such as freedom of speech, conscience, and religion—as long as possible. This approach can help preserve existing legal rights, but it is unlikely to stem much of the cultural pressures inherent in our present moment. It will be critical, therefore, for Christian colleges to also conduct audits of current vital resources, systems, and

processes necessary for operation and to assess the risk of possible cancellation of service due to institutional mission. Proactive strategies to strengthen positioning include creating redundancy through engagement of multiple vendors, cultivating new donors who are highly aligned with institutional mission and un-cancellable, and screening potential board members for vulnerability to social pressure in their industries.

It is undeniable that we face challenging times, yet those of us serving in Christian colleges and universities should be encouraged. Although our culture has shifted in troubling ways, the outcome has yet to be determined, and we are not helpless bystanders. If we clearly recognize and intentionally respond to the current moment, we can successfully adapt to environmental changes *and* remain faithful to our core commitments, thereby standing tall in the long tradition of Christian higher education. Let us therefore proceed boldly with courage, delighting in our high calling and demonstrating our faithfulness to the One who holds the future, the Author and the Finisher of our faith. 🏰



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