



Times have been tough for many institutions of Christian higher education. Changing demographics, rising tuition and student debt, fierce competition

from universities and trade schools and a diminishing commitment to Christian education have contributed to an onerous climate for Christian colleges. However, despite these pressures, the mission of Christian colleges in Canada remains as essential as ever, namely to equip students guided by the Scriptures to be agents of renewal in schools, communities and the wider public square. Despite these external pressures, there is much that a Christian college can do internally to help remain sturdy in the face of challenges.

The primary thing Christian colleges must do is to remain laser-focused on their **mission**. The book *The Dying of the Light* recounts numerous historical examples of Christian colleges that began with a mission to provide Christian education and later lost their way. Christian colleges generally fall into four streams: the Catholic, Evangelical, Anabaptist and Reformed streams, each of which has a unique approach to engaging culture. Straying from one's roots in an attempt to attract more students results in "mission drift" and can alienate the original supporting community.

How can Christian universities flourish?



The faculty at a Christian college are the front-line keepers of the mission, and a faculty is built one hire (or fire) at a time. Likewise, a Reformed Christian college must remain true to its Reformed mission, engaging contemporary issues in a manner that is "hospitably Reformed" as it interacts with students, supporters and the wider world.

A Christian college must not only remain true to its founding mission, it must also remain **relevant**. The employment landscape has changed dramatically over the past two decades; a basic bachelor's degree is no longer a ticket to secure and meaningful employment. Many Christian colleges that are thriving offer a variety of professional and technical programs which are typically nested within various liberal arts "core courses." While a general liberal-arts education is a many-splendoured thing, there is a perception that professional programs

are important to get a toe-hold in a competitive and specialized job market. One senior Christian college administrator told me that the most commonly used word in Christian higher-education circles is STEM (an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). A Christian college can provide students with professional credentials while simultaneously rejecting the increasing specialization rampant in public higher education by offering a Christian worldview and blending STEM courses *within* the liberal arts (sometimes referred to as STEAM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).

A third element essential for a Christian college to flourish is **competence**. Higher education is a highly competitive environment, and we need to ensure we are employing best practices. Besides qualified faculty, Christian colleges need to enlist the help of savvy and experienced marketers, IT professionals, media experts and finance people. Christian college salaries are sometimes not competitive, but when qualified and dedicated professionals are attracted and retained they can be worth their weight in gold. It should also be recognized that although PhDs are generally clever people, they do not always make the best administrators. Excellence is not the only goal: the mission and Christian perspective that animates a Christian college

must be evident not only in its teaching, but also in how it is administered.

Finally, structures must be put in place to both support and hold institutions **accountable**. While Christian colleges should be generously supported by their community, this support must come with accountability. Indeed, donors must be absolutely confident that their dollars are carefully used to further the stated mission. The faculty and staff report to administrative leaders, administrative leaders report to the board, and the board must be accountable to the supporting community. The community has a responsibility to hold the board and administrative leaders accountable to the stated mission. The structure of our institutions must encourage good governance, regular and transparent reporting, and effective membership meetings.

While times are tough in Christian higher education, their mission in the Canadian landscape remains more important than ever! With a laser-focus on mission, relevant course offerings, competent faculty, staff and leaders and effective accountability, it is my hope that my grandchildren will also be able to benefit from a Christian university education. ✈

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