



The mission statements of many Christian universities like Redeemer University College include not only teaching from a Reformed Christian perspective, but also “to support research and creative endeavour in this context.” The research mission of Christian colleges is crucial not only to establish themselves as legitimate universities, but also to take seriously the call to explore God’s creation. Through research, Christian colleges can be faithful academic witnesses to the world. Christian scholars should avoid working in a Christian academic ghetto; rather, they should strive to engage in the larger dialogue in the scholarly marketplace of ideas.

Lofty mission statements regarding research goals sound good, but the reality is not easy. In an insightful essay playfully entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Produce Christian Scholarship,” John Stackhouse explores a wide variety of reasons why Christian scholarship is difficult. One of the primary reasons that the research output of professors at Christian colleges is substantially less than faculty elsewhere is that they have much heavier teaching loads. Furthermore, most Christian colleges are undergraduate institutions which lack graduate students who are typically the engine of research at many research-oriented universities. Moreover, Christian college professors spend much of their time teaching basic undergraduate courses rather than the more specialized graduate courses which involve teaching leading-edge research. As such, it can be harder for professors to keep abreast of changes in their discipline during the busy teaching months.

Another challenge is that, in contrast to large public universities, Christian colleges typically have limited support staff, smaller facilities, and meagre funding for research programs. Christian college professors are also at a disadvantage when competing for funds from external research granting agencies because of their time and resource constraints. Furthermore, Christian college professors are paid very modest salaries in comparison to public universities (in some competitive disciplines, the top professor salary at a place like Redeemer is comparable to the starting salary at nearby public universities). Hence, many Christians with a strong academic pedigree and research potential are often wooed to larger research-oriented universities. I have been on several hiring committees where attracting qualified Christian applicants has been extremely difficult. To be sure, to pursue research in a secular setting is an important vocation, but Christian colleges also need to be able to attract and nurture top-notch researchers to help them in their mission to produce excellent scholarship.

Unfortunately, when finances are tight in Christian colleges, funding sabbaticals can be easy targets for cuts. In contrast to popular conceptions, academic sabbaticals are far from extended holidays. Sabbaticals are rare opportunities for more substantial research projects that require sustained concentration and effort, like writing a book. Another misconception is that professors have a leisurely four months off each summer. In reality, this is the one time in the year to “make hay” when it comes to research and publications.

Controversy

Another reason why Christian scholarship is difficult is that controversial research can occasionally place Christian college professors in hot water. To be sure, Christian college professors have a serious responsibility to serve the church and not to stray from orthodox Christian beliefs. Heresies can be easily sown by academics seeking provocative publications. But each Christian tradition also has its “sacred cows,” and questioning these can sometimes upset the grassroots supporters of a Christian college, putting a professor in uncomfortable tension with college administrators.

Christian scholarship is also a challenge because the majority of Christian college professors earn their graduate degrees from secular universities. As such, although they are Christians, they are untrained and inexperienced as Christian scholars. Doing perspectival research demands expertise in one’s own discipline, but also a fluency in philosophical and theological concepts. Many Christian colleges have mentoring programs for new faculty so that they can be guided by more experienced faculty and grow as Christian scholars. But this takes far more than a few lunch-time seminars on the integration of faith and learning, and many Christian colleges need to do far more if they are serious about sustaining their distinct mission over the long term.

Despite these many challenges, Christian colleges have a few advantages over large public universities when it comes to scholarship. First of all, Christian colleges freely allow (and indeed, expect) professors to articulate their faith in the classroom as well as in their research. Additionally, classes in Christian colleges tend to be much smaller, enabling greater faculty/student interaction for discussion on faith and academics. Small Christian liberal arts colleges also provide unique opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between departments. Finally, Christian college professors have substantial freedom to explore less-fashionable areas and probe the underlying presuppositions in their discipline.

Christian colleges face many challenges when it comes to the strategically important task of research and Christian scholarship. The ideas published today have a way of shaping minds and the leaders of tomorrow. Christian colleges, together with the communities that support them, need to take seriously their mission to support faithful Christian scholarship and to help it to flourish. ➤

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