True to the Task

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The Educational Task of Dordt University

The Educational Task of Dordt University is an 18-page statement of purpose describing “how a Reformed confession of biblical faith impacts Christian higher education.” Students may not know much about it, but The Task is a lynchpin for a Dordt education—or, as President Erik Hoekstra says, an educational creed—a statement of beliefs that guide action.

“While nearly every institution has a mission statement, very few have taken the time to dive deeper into a document like The Task, and fewer still base such a document on Christian principles,” says Hoekstra. “Having a document like The Task provides the gravitational pull to align all our activities and efforts at Dordt in the same direction.”

The Task, says Hoekstra, has helped Dordt to stay in line with and is a deeper articulation of the Founders Vision—that “all the class work, all of the students’ intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.”

“So, not in the sense that we just have on-campus Bible studies or chapel services wrapped around a traditional university but that, in a larger and deeper sense, everything here—from courses to co-curriculars—is permeated with the truth of the Gospel,” says Hoekstra.

Although The Task was developed and adopted between 1979 and 1996, it was not the first document of its kind; another statement, adopted in 1961, consisted of 17 propositions to guide the development of Dordt’s educational program. A more detailed statement

“The Task gives me confidence for the future of Dordt,” says President Erik Hoekstra. “Dordt is only 65 years old, so we shouldn’t get prideful, but we also need to celebrate that we have worked at keeping the purpose of Christ-centered education central to Dordt.”

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was created in 1968, titled Scripturally-Oriented Higher Education.

“The Task continues to be the foundation for our work at Dordt,” says Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for online and graduate education. “We are in a season of higher education where there are so many external changes and pressures on each institution. To stay viable and competitive, Dordt keeps innovating. Yet as we innovate, we need to maintain a strong sense of who we are. The Task clearly lays out our purpose. It provides a biblically based calling for us to pursue Christ-centered education. It defines how we work together—the ways in which we bear responsibilities and mutually submit to one another in our offices as students, faculty, staff, board, and president.”

To Dr. Wayne Kobes, professor emeritus of theology, The Task provides guidelines for what Dordt believes and why.

“The Task is our attempt to draw basic principles from Scripture and Reformed thought. We show that, as an institution, this is the direction we are moving, and that biblical principles undergird our beliefs,” says Kobes. “Within that, you can ask questions and debate issues, but we as an institution have a place to stand.”

Having a place to stand is a bit rare these days, especially in higher education.

“Many Christian universities don’t have a clear direction or are wishy-washy in what they believe,” says Kobes. “How do you prevent that from happening at Dordt? The Task helps us to stay the course.”

**LIVING OUT THE TASK**

Students may not realize it, but The Educational Task of Dordt University is an integral part of the faculty and staff experience at Dordt. To apply for a position at Dordt, faculty and staff must submit a personal statement where, in addition to expressing their religious convictions, they interact with and comment on The Task and the four curricular coordinates derived from the document: religious orientation, creational structure, creational development, and contemporary response. The hiring committees consider the personal statements just as important as a résumé, cover letter, or personal references.

“I think asking faculty and staff to respond to The Task from the get-go clarifies Dordt’s identity for some. For others, it plants seeds of questions they should ask about what it means to be Reformed,” says Dr. Jeff Ploegstra, a biology professor at Dordt.

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Dordt. Then, after two years of teaching, faculty members respond once more to The Task, this time considering how they have developed their understanding of what it means to teach Christianly.

“When faculty write their two-year papers for the board of trustees, the expectation is that each person is interacting with The Task,” says Kobes. And, even if faculty never specifically reference The Task in their classrooms, students are influenced by it.

“Some view a Christian college as having Bible study groups on campus, going to chapel, or doing service projects,” says Kobes. “But at Dordt, we think about how that affects the very structure, the organizational system, the curriculum—individual classes. It’s not simply that I’m teaching as a Christian—I want to think about the four coordinates...activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.”
and how they come through in what I teach."

The Task is theoretical in nature. In 1993, to make The Task more operational, Dordt’s faculty adopted The Educational Framework of Dordt University, which addresses how to apply The Task to the overall academic program. The Framework, as its preface states, “clarifies what the academic program should look like and how it should be structured to fulfill the mission of the university.” To this day, each academic department at Dordt is asked to design programs and courses that implement the goals posed under the four coordinates.

“The Task is our why—why Dordt exists—and The Framework is our how—how we teach in light of our reason for existing,” says Aaron Baart, dean of chapel.

In his courses, Dr. Ethan Brue, professor of engineering, uses Scripture not for devotions but for providing a weekly class outline and justification. "Scripture defines the space in which we construct the simple circuit. It does not supply the content, rather it guides and directs us to the field in which the details of engineering find their ultimate context.”

If you attended Dordt, some of the terminology found in The Task might sound familiar. What about the word “sphere”—defined as “a realm of human life that has its own distinctive calling, authority, and responsibility”? That can be found in The Task. What about the notion of an “office”—that, in any social context, “certain individuals will have responsibility to care for the common good of the community”? That’s in The Task, too.

“‘The Task is very distinctly us—some language that’s been coined here at Dordt,” says Baart. “We like that it’s weird and different.”

Another oft-used term is “serviceable insight.” According to The Task, a Dordt education is about more than transmission of information or knowledge; it strives for transformation of the whole person. Wholly dependent on biblical wisdom, this transformation is cultivated in community and equips individuals to serve God and neighbor. “We do not pursue wisdom simply for wisdom’s sake or personal benefit,” says The Task. “Rather, we are seeking wisdom that enables us to better know, serve, and praise our Creator.” This is the definition of serviceable insight, as described in The Task’s glossary.

To Brue, serviceable insight is not static. Every day as he reviews last year’s notes to prepare for his control systems course, he is challenged to put it into practice.

“Our educational goal of providing serviceable insight prompts me to ask, ‘How do I step into this classroom and respond to the risen Lord who turned..."
to his broken church and said, ‘Feed my sheep’? What implications does this invitation to service with the backdrop of an empty tomb have for the modeling of a signal filtering system made up of operational amplifiers cascaded in series?”

Brue does not go into class with an easy answer; instead, he feels challenged to enter each day with a new context.

“My primary goal is not that the students have more insight into my particular field, to theoretically know how to mathematically model and predict the performance, or to simply create a circuit that functions,” he says. “My overarching goal is that all of these activities and the students—myself included—find their purpose and goal in the fields of the Lord.

Hoekstra thinks that, on a macro level, the notion of being office-bearers is what makes Dordt an engaging place to work and live.

“The Task describes how, at Dordt, we have five distinctive offices—board, student, faculty, staff, and president—yet we’re all similar in that we serve as office-bearers in Christ’s kingdom, rather than simply as volunteers, consumers, or employees,” says Hoekstra. “Having us all understand our work at Dordt in that light makes a transformative difference in both how and why we labor together. Whatever I’m seeing, God is allowing me to see—he allows us to unfold his creation daily.”

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—Dr. Manuela Ayee, engineering professor

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Viewing belief as more than Sunday activity and recognizing God’s sovereignty over all provides an opportunity to think about what it means to be God’s disciples in all academic fields, including in research, says Dr. Abby Foreman, a social work professor at Dordt.

“If you come from a Reformed perspective and are doing research, you know that you are doing what God has called you to do, even if the word ‘Christian’ isn’t in the title of your research project,” she says. “I think that comprehensive view helps us to be confident in our research and scholarship and to think deeply about what it means to live our lives as disciples through our research.”
REFRESHING THE TASK

Three years ago, Kobes, Baart, and a committee of faculty and staff worked to refresh the language of The Task.

“This was an opportunity to put The Task in the hands of the next generation of faculty to shape it and own it at a deeper level,” says Baart. “Our mandate was to refresh the language—we were not supposed to rewrite the document. Everyone loved the vision; the content was not up for grabs. We had to maintain the meaning but use language that was a better fit for today.”

“The goal was to make the principles more understandable to a wider Christian audience,” says Foreman, a committee member.

To do that, the committee rephrased certain words or phrases that may have been difficult for some to understand and provided a glossary of frequently-used terms like “office” and “serviceable insight.”

“You might think that refreshing or changing a few words wouldn’t take much time, but it did,” jokes Foreman.

The Task took nearly three years to refresh. Foreman believes the revised version is more readable without losing the integrity and conviction of the original version. And she thinks that the willingness to work through the long process demonstrates how much the mission and task of Dordt means to its employees.

In a role where I am responsible to lead change on an ongoing basis, I find the stability and flexibility called for in The Task to be essential for decision-making.

— Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for online and graduate education

STAYING TRUE TO THE TASK

In the 2020 U.S. News and World Report college rankings, Dordt tied for second most innovative school in the Midwest. With programs like Pro-Tech and state-of-the-art facilities like the Carl and Gloria Zylstra Nursing Education Center, Dordt leaders try to think outside of the box regarding higher education. The Educational Task of Dordt University helps them do so by providing a unique take on how a Reformed confession of biblical faith impacts Christian education.

“As we innovate, The Task gives us guidance about what needs to stay the same and what can—and should—change,” says Zuidema. “What endures is that we live in response to our Creator, Redeemer, and Lord—in anything and everything that students learn, whether in class, in co-curricular activities, in residence life, or in campus ministries. What changes is that each new generation of students faces new cultural challenges and opportunities. The Task holds us responsible to shape learning experiences in anticipation of what our graduates will need in order to live faithfully for Christ.”

One of Zuidema’s favorite passages from Chapter 6 of The Task speaks to this:

“Dordt provides insight into crucial challenges and opportunities facing contemporary culture. Living in a global community, we continually encounter issues that require discernment and thoughtful engagement. Dordt implements a curriculum sufficiently flexible to address these challenges and opportunities as they arise. In our study of history and contemporary problems through a Reformed perspective, Dordt instills the ability to discern the spirits and to engage in redemptive transformation of cultural activity.”

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GATHERING EXTENSIVE INPUT

In addition to committee meetings where faculty and staff made line-item edits, Baart and Kobes met frequently to rework drafts of The Task. They brought in retired faculty, including Dr. John Van Dyk and Dr. Calvin Jongmsa, to speak to the context of when the original document had been written. Baart and Kobes held open forums where faculty and staff could respond; they built time into faculty workshops where faculty could provide suggestions on how to update the language. The committee wrestled with words and phrases—for example, with regard to the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, they asked whether the translation should say “subdue the earth” or “nurture the earth.”
ALUMNI NOTES

Lydia Marcus ('18) and Ashley Huizinga ('18) presented a poster at the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois on July 19-21. Their post was titled “Breast Cancer Epidemiology: A Case Study in Using Science for Social Justice.”

This summer, Aaron Van Beek ('18) was recognized as an Iowan of the Day at the 2019 Iowa State Fair. Van Beek, a third-grade teacher at Kinsey Elementary School in Sioux Center, is the president and director of the Midwest Honor Flight, an organization that “provides veterans with honor, respect, and closure with an all-expense-paid trip to our nation’s capital.” Van Beek was one of 10 Iowans to receive the Iowan of the Day honor, which recognizes individuals for their volunteer efforts.

Cora Okkema (’16) is working on a master’s degree at the competitive Livestock Behavior and Welfare Program at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. Through this program, Okkema has the opportunity to study under Dr. Temple Grandin, a world-renowned expert in animal science and an autism spokesperson.

Evan Westra ('11) was selected as a 2019 CFE Media and Technology Engineering Leader Under 40. Westra, who works as a lead project engineer at Interstates in Sioux Center, has worked on projects in many industries such as flour and feed milling, oil seed processing, meat processing, and grain elevators. The award is given to individuals who have made significant contributions to the success of their companies and to the control and plant engineering professions.

WHAT ARE THE FOUR COORDINATES?

The four coordinates guide the application of The Task within the curriculum. The four coordinates are:

Religious orientation: “Who owns the cosmos and who owns your heart?” Students need to know where they and others stand, acknowledging that the whole world belongs to God.

Creational structure: “How do things hold together?” Students need to understand that God made the world as a structured interconnected whole, obedient and subject to his laws.

Creational development: “How do things unfold?” Students need to know how our world became what it is now and that everything they do affects the world for good or for evil.

Contemporary response: “How are we called to respond?” Students need to translate what they learn into thoughts and deeds that will enable them to live and work in the world as Christ’s disciples.

To learn more, please see page 13 of The Educational Task of Dordt University.

SARAH MOSS ('10)