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Christian Graduate Programs: Transformational, Not Transactional



by Steve Holtrop

“How can we make the graduate school experience more transformational instead of just transactional?” We live in a transactional culture. When prospective students contemplate graduate degrees, they find that jobs, children, spouses, church obligations, and other important callings are competing for their focus. Further, the hard-sell marketplace of adult higher education prioritizes getting the necessary credential as quickly and cheaply as possible. Tellingly, the federally mandated tuition calculator on every university website illustrates the cost-benefit analysis assumed to be at the heart of the program-selection process.

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At Dordt University, we find that most of our graduate students seek fully online programs that allow them to keep their full-time jobs and live at home. Increasing numbers of our graduate students are unfamiliar with the faith-integration emphasis so central to our faculty and board, and many may lack the preschool-through-twelfth-grade Christian education that has been so ubiquitous among Dordt students in past generations. In many cases, students compare our tuition rate, total required credits, and professional relevance with that of other programs at both private and public universities. For many, our rankings in academics and student engagement are just icing on the cake if we edge out the competition in ease and cost for credentialing. To some, our faith integration may be an afterthought, or puzzling, or a concern that we will push a particular political stance.

Our Transactional Culture

Offering high quality products and services can be challenging in our highly transactional culture. For example, why wait for a handsome hardcover book at a brick-and-mortar store when the Kindle or Audible version can be on our phones instantly for half the price? This transactional thinking in graduate programs means that the focus on a cost-benefit analysis, such as tuition costs vs. salary increases, pushes aside considerations about course content, personal relationships, or deeper thinking. If students do consider the concepts and skills learned in a graduate program, they are tempted to focus on whether the concepts are immediately

relevant, interesting to learn, and lead a higher-paying job. As with all sectors of the economy, a central summary question is this: “Does the product cater to my individual needs?”

To be sure, it generally “pays” to get a higher educational degree. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one can earn twice as much with a doctoral or professional degree as with an associate degree. People with a master’s degree earn twice as much on average as people with just a high-school diploma. Each step on the educational ladder increases one’s earning power.¹

But is that the main reason to get an education? Do we want to let students think it is all about a minimal ticket out of blue-collar jobs? Metaphorically, is higher education letting us settle for selling flip-flops when we are capable of providing high quality leather boots that will take students more places and last much longer? So, what are some ways we can emphasize the value and existence of a longer-term, higher-quality product than students think they are getting or need? How can we shift the focus to longer-lasting, enduring worth rather than the perfunctory and minimum threshold for stepping up a rung? And how can we shift the thinking toward mind and soul transformation rather than a product transaction?

In this article, I’d like to examine several key components of graduate learning and analyze both the transactional and transformational aspects of each component.

Adult Learning Theory

A key consideration with graduate students is adult learning theory. In this important component of graduate education, a transactional-only approach might still do a good job of tailoring the program to the working professionals in the target audience. This would include addressing the customer’s demands for accelerated and convenient

course formats and avoiding traditional teaching formats since those don’t sell as well with adult learners.

But a transformational approach to adult learning might include all of that as well as a hard look at who the students are right now, their professionalism, their personal life, and their faith stages, as well as how the professor could really adapt the teaching and engagement most thoroughly to all students enrolled: value-added material they weren’t necessarily shopping for! They will

be transformed, rather than merely transacted with, if we tap into their adult levels of development, years of experience, and desire for collaboration. With adult learners, we can reject the stance of “trust me, you’ll need this someday”—they are going to try out in the workplace tomorrow what they learn in class tonight. We need to nurture their potential transformation by making the course topics as relevant and problem-centered as possible so that their education takes them

deeper and farther than they expected.

Marketing Our Programs

How we market our graduate programs can provide another transformational distinctive. It is tempting to say that because we at Dordt are a small school, late to the marketplace with online graduate programs, we will have to expect a lot of shark attacks from the competition, who often have deeper pockets and farther reach in their advertising.

However, the *Blue Ocean Strategy*² of marketing goes beyond the shark-infested competition-focused transactional approach. Sure, it is great to have one of the better products and cleverer marketing and pricing strategies. But we can eliminate a lot of this competitive anxiety for ourselves and our students if we focus on being more transformational. At Dordt, we have an ingrained distinctive

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ness (especially in our thoroughly infused biblical perspectives) that provides a unique product unavailable in any other university in our region and distinctive globally. We explain to our prospective students and our enrolled students how our approach helps align their personal worldviews with their professional practices, and how this approach contributes to their role in kingdom building. This is new language for some, but transformative for all. This can *delight* the customer, not merely honor the expected transaction.

Pricing is a challenge for each new graduate program we create. Overpricing can make graduate students resent being the “cash cow” that bolsters institutional profit with few of the campus benefits that undergraduate, residential students enjoy. Underpricing sends unintended messages about low quality, a “degree mill,” and not compensating faculty at the same rate as for undergrad teaching. But if we get word-of-mouth testimonials going in many directions, a delighted customer is not focusing on slightly different tuition rates and trying to gauge program value on price alone. A transformed student is not scrutinizing just the transactional elements.

Quality of Online Courses

A real test for transformational learning started in the spring of 2020 when every university in America had to provide online education because of the Covid-19 pandemic. So how do we increase the quality of online learning to be distinctive? How can our online assessment of student learning be upped a notch toward greater long-term applications and professional collaborations? How can we ramp up our game in terms of inclusivity and accessibility standards in online content? These things can show that our Dordt DNA really does involve caring, engaging, and kingdom-building instead of just meeting minimum thresholds.

A transactional approach to quality standards in online delivery would involve not just meeting-the-minimum-threshold features such as having a course-overview page, assessments and learning activities that correlate with stated course outcomes, and several accommodations for learner support and, for example, accessibility for blind or deaf students (if necessary). To be sure, not all on-

line courses offered in American higher education during the pandemic met even these minimum standards, so students are rightly asking at some schools whether they got their money’s worth.

However, a more transformational approach provides not only the minimum standards but also an inviting (aesthetically pleasing, not merely perfunctory) course format, authentic and real-world assessments, and instructional materials that are varied, stimulating, and relevant. Project-oriented, collaborative learning opportunities are offered with state-of-the-art technologies, attractive design, and an overall pleasant user experience. Further, multi-mode navigation and support options round out a delighting and learning-enhancing experience, in contrast to what we often hear about outdated platforms and hard-to-navigate courses. One concrete example is that all learners can benefit (not just hearing- or vision-challenged students) from video captions and transcripts, and all can benefit from audio options to augment the visual readings and other visual resources. So, we strive to provide these resources—not as limited compliance for ADA standards but as available to enhance the learning experience for all. Student comments last summer, for example, praised the new course design we have adopted at Dordt, providing students with more than they expected and an updated, more clarified, aesthetically-pleasing, and productive learning environment for all.

After all, delighting the customer isn’t just good business, it’s good for the soul. God made us not only logical but also aesthetic, social, and creative. An attractive, tension-reducing, multi-modal online learning experience aligns with the sense of order and beauty our Creator built into us and models for us in his good creation.

Mental Health in the Virtual Classroom

Mental health is a growing concern for all age groups—even before the pandemic. Many graduate students are in graduate school because of life transitions, some of which may have been unplanned or distressing. These transitions include losing a job or spouse, being thrust into new responsibilities, undergoing significant health changes, or living through a community disturbance such as a disaster. Most of us have been through additional

layers of stress recently, with heightened political, public health, financial, and racial anxieties just in the last months alone. Further, as one university counselor puts it, “The online population is often juggling quite a bit more than our main campus population.... They’ve got life, family, work and then school, and our online program has accelerated eight-week classes that move at a very fast pace, so when something happens in your life, it can be difficult to keep up.”³

How do we go beyond just Band-Aids for anxiety, depression, trauma, personality disorders, and other mental health struggles affecting our distance-education students? How do we model and pass the peace of “The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14) to an adult learner on the other end of our Canvas discussion forums?

A *transactional approach* to student mental health would be, again, a minimum standard. This could include a web page providing state or national contact options and information sources on depression, anxiety, eating disorders, ADHD, trauma, abuse, PTSD, addictions, etc. And we would comply with all legal reporting requirements for suspected abuse.

But a *transformational approach* could include looking for signs of student distress in discussion forums and Zoom meetings and for changes in performance. These signs can be subtler than the signs in face-to-face classes but are often still there. We might offer accommodations such as flexible deadlines for course work. If faculty realize a student is struggling in solitude, a personal email or Zoom meeting can make a positive difference. And indications of suicidal thinking or domestic violence should include a call to local authorities and any local professionals with whom we have a relationship or can quickly establish one. In addition, various web-based surveys can provide quick screenings and information for all students, re-

gardless of program.

At Dordt, students know we care, but we can open doors to care more pointedly and thoroughly if we train ourselves to be aware of online indicators of these kinds of struggles and needs. As mental health needs skyrocket across the entire educational spectrum (which was already happening before the recent pandemic, economic crash, and racial unrest), we need to be aware of how to recognize and respond to the needs of online adult learners. Since struggling adult students are not

simply undisciplined, immature, or rebellious, we need to tailor our approaches for each situation instead of relying on a rigid set of academic policies to pull the students back in line. A relatively new graduate advisor position at Dordt allows graduate students to get to know and be able to turn to the advisor throughout the program, especially as some of their professors quickly

come and go as the program progresses.

At the administrative level, we can review our policies and procedures in light of growing adult and online enrollments. At the course level, we can acknowledge anxiety, depression, and other common issues, allowing more normalizing and less hiding and stigmatizing of the challenges. Even as our culture becomes aware of and addresses increasing amounts of “adverse childhood events” (ACEs) causing stress in school children, those children are completing their traditional education and moving into graduate and adult programs with the same adverse childhood events triggering adult stress. One of the most freeing things a panicking person can do is name the emotion; we need to make that possible and not seemingly riskier than remaining quiet. We can avoid a warning or threatening tone when we contact students; there may be assignment expectations, competitive elements, or calendar conflicts that in the moment paralyze and overwhelm but that, with some gentle discussion, can be worked through. Even though we are on a graduate level, we don’t need to have

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a this-is-the-big-leagues attitude, since our expectations can remain high while our scaffolding remains gentle and supportive. I prefer a mastery learning approach, which is more of a real-world model, in which we keep working with people until they get things right. After all, the bell curve concept was all about sorting people, especially on the tails. What audience are we sorting them for? Grad students are already pretty much at the top of the educational ladder. And most of our master's students are profession-focused, not Ph.D.-bound. Let's strive for applicable excellence, what Dordt calls *serviceable insight*, instead of ranking and sorting, which arose with the unfortunate factory-model of education over 100 years ago.

At the individual level, we need also to model calmness and hope. We can focus on brainstorming various solutions, allowing real choices (not threatening ultimatums). Again, the sink-or-swim approach isn't necessary, even though this is grad school. Instead, we can gently encourage students to push themselves, to choose one step at a time instead of avoiding the next steps altogether. A real help in this process is spreading due dates throughout the course instead of all at the end. Another helpful strategy is breaking projects into steps with feedback, from both the instructor and peer groups, along the way. When students express anxiety and focus on comparisons and their emotions instead of tasks, a professor's best approach is being empathetic and grounded. Finally, and importantly, spiritual encouragement from the Word and offering to pray with or for individual students is often appreciated, even by those whose spirituality isn't exactly the same as the professor's. When people are in urgent stress—even non-Christians—they seem to appreciate all the spiritual “good energy” they can get!

Graduate Research

Another element to consider is research, expected to be a bigger part of the graduate experience than of the undergraduate experience. Most graduate programs offer some training in research methods. How can we make that experience truly life-enhancing, a game-changer for the students and their profession?

A transactional approach to research would

include teaching minimal statistics and research methods, successful navigation of review-board approvals, and methods of making student research look good on one's resume. These experiences are expected steps in the graduate-school journey, especially for those on the way toward a doctorate and its dissertation expectations

But research can be much more than just a hoop to jump through. Graduate research should not only add value to a discipline's body of knowledge, but also provide new and unique formative experiences for the researcher and tangible results that benefit the organization, region, or persons being studied. Making research less perfunctory and more personally and professionally meaningful can take many forms. For example, action research required in some graduate education programs allows classroom teachers to study and try out new teaching strategies in their own classrooms. Similarly, social work programs may focus on grant writing and the interpretation and use of population data rather than just a thesis option. The scholarship of new discoveries will continue to exist, especially on the doctoral level, but the scholarship of creative application of new theories is equally valid and just as necessary. Finally, research should provide opportunities to think in new ways about ethics and biblical justice. These can make the research process less of a slog and more of a transformational experience.

Student Engagement on the Graduate Level

Another increasingly important consideration at the graduate level is student engagement. Dordt has been ranked number one in *student engagement* for the last five years. Presumably, much of that ranking has focused on the undergraduate residential opportunities for interacting with faculty and other students. I work to assure that we deserve that same number-one ranking for our online graduate programs as well!

A merely transactional approach to student engagement in online graduate courses would entail the instructor's timely grading of assignments and responses to emails—being available if students have questions or concerns. It would also entail opportunities for student interactions within the class—discussion forums and real-time telecon-

ference (e.g., Zoom) breakout rooms. In fact, in nationwide studies, online education ranks better than residential education in student engagement with the instructor. However, it does worse in engagement among students. So online education has some challenges to address! It helps that Dordt has recently hired several online experts to help design and administer high-quality online courses.

But even if we do these things well with online students and grad students, how can we ramp up student engagement to a new level of not just good customer service but life-changing professional and personal enfoldings for adults, especially those who have never been to a Christian college or may not even be Christians? Here are some ideas for a more transformational approach to online student engagement. Again, student feedback, so far, indicates surprise but appreciation for these efforts to take student engagement to a higher level. To foster student engagement, instructors can do the following:

- Contact students before the course starts and point to a “getting started” page in the course website.
- Schedule weekly Zoom meetings (or Teams, etc.).
- Split large classes into sections of no more than 20 (so even if enrolled in a large course, students get to know their group of 20).
- Use breakout or chat rooms for groups of 5-10 to get to know each other and learn from each other and critique each other’s work.
- Design collaborative projects and authentic, real-world tasks.
- Encourage learning from each student’s professional experiences. (Adult learners want to know what the person with the doctorate can offer, but they also crave recent stories and tips from the trenches.)
- Design relevant and flexible assignments that can be tailored to individual needs and interests.
- Require peer feedback (with students in small groups based on similar projects).
- Consider criterion grading or mastery grading: e.g., “leveling up” instead of flunking out. The real world says *get it right* not *it won’t pull down your average too badly*.

- Move from an instructor stance of judging to coaching by focusing assessment of student projects on implementation in the real world.
- Use a variety of multimedia and modalities.

Diversity

Diversity is a huge issue in higher education and includes many facets—racial, gender, geographic, economic, language, ableness, and religious diversity. As with the other transactional approaches, we can fulfill perfunctory expectations and show we affirm diversity officially and try to encourage it. This would include, at minimum, making an official statement, collecting diversity data, and encouraging instructors to honor diversity in their classes.

Or we can apply the “Body of Christ” model in such a way that grad students see how they and their professions are better off and serve more people more deeply when they employ the Body of Christ concept. This more transformational approach would enjoy and celebrate diversity while acknowledging human brokenness, not in a secular anything-goes way, but in a thoroughly biblical way:

- So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3:26-29)
- Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. (1 Cor. 12:12-14)
- All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. (Rev. 15:4)

This approach to diversity can be celebrated in a spiritually and professionally transformational way. The variety of experiences and views in the

class can be sought out and valued instead of allowing the default assumption that the textbook or instructor has the preferred perspective. Diversity in all its types can be used to enhance creativity, productivity, understanding, and problem-solving. Big organizations have proved the value of this approach many times over, so graduate programs should be pointing out this diversity-value and allowing students to start experiencing it. In fact, many employers want higher education to do more to help future employees thrive in a multicultural environment. Examples in our Dordt graduate programs include Zoom meetings and discussion forums with students from different states, provinces, countries, time zones, and climates, from public and private schools, elementary and secondary levels, male and female, administrators and classroom teachers—all together, sharing perspectives, solutions, and cultural insights. Deliberate opportunities to reduce fear and misunderstanding can shift the focus—from tolerating and coping with diversity to improving performance and brainstorming new approaches through diversity. As the Apostle Paul points out, the body of Christ needs diversity just as a human body needs a variety of parts to function smoothly and effectively.

Curricular Outcomes

We can also think transformationally about curricular outcomes in our graduate courses. A transactional approach focuses only on the new information needed and perhaps uses a credentialing test that students must pass to prove their new level of knowledge.

However, a transformational approach goes much farther. Students learn to apply deeper concepts to broader situations; they also practice critiquing arguments and assumptions. Students hypothesize, predict, or validate results, based on informed knowledge and experience. Also, groups of students collaborate, direct, solve, manage, and negotiate results within their new areas of expertise. I do not perceive that most online adult programs marketed for quick and cheap credentialing do much with these transformational outcomes.

And, while Bloom's Taxonomy⁴ is known through all levels of the education system, my experience is that *all* levels, even graduate programs,

spend most time at the lower levels. For example, I was told by my master's program advisor at a large research university that it was in the Ph.D. program where we would really get into more critical thinking. Here at Dordt, all graduate syllabi include a paragraph explaining what we expect of graduate vs. undergraduate students. More critical thinking (higher-level thinking) is at the heart of that statement. Our graduate students seem pleased but surprised that we put so much emphasis on using real-world applications, making usable projects, and producing relevant, real-world solutions. We know that our courses (at all levels) include a lot of new information and new concepts. But we also know that it is much more transformative (with longer-lasting usefulness) to have students work with those concepts, debate them, question them (with the instructors and the other students), and create with them something useful in their professional lives; these experiences provide value, not just for their credentials but for their daily work and lives. Student feedback confirms that they are again a bit surprised but very pleased with this transformative outcome in each course.

Bloom, as many of you know, developed three taxonomies, not just one for the cognitive domain. How can we add superb value to graduate courses by engaging students in higher levels of the affective and psychomotor domains? These objectives may be harder to assess, but it is worth our while to challenge adults to take their professional values, appreciations, and behaviors to the next level. Ironically, this is not a focus in most graduate programs. Since God created us with heart, soul, mind, and strength and asks us to use all of these to love him and others, it seems negligent to focus on developing just the mind as we seek to transform adult students at a crucial transition in their careers and personal lives.

Our Dordt documents say "contemporary response" is at the heart of who we are.⁵ Talk about blue-ocean opportunities! Talk about students getting more than they thought they were paying for. It's challenging to add attitudes and values into a curriculum, but isn't that part of the *why* that makes the *what* of a Dordt education special and unique?

Faith Integration and Development at the Graduate Level

At the heart of Dordt's DNA, directing everything else, is *faith integration*. Therefore, we are not limiting spiritual-development emphases to residential undergraduates. At the same time, we want to avoid the all-too-common sugar-coating approach, especially when we have as few as ten courses in some graduate programs and no face-to-face engagement with many students. As mentioned above, many of our graduate students are not expecting or seeking this part of the graduate experience.

A merely transactional approach to faith integration would mean the instructor provides a few biblical alignments and references and a few theological or doctrinal concepts related to course content now and then so that students learn how the institution's stance applies to course content. It also might include several religious add-ons (e.g., share and prayer forum, verse of the day, reference to institutional mission statement, or faith-based anecdotes) throughout the course. This would be a minimum-threshold, transactional approach to faith integration in an online graduate course. In my experience, this is actually the most common level of faith integration in graduate and adult courses at many Christian colleges and universities.

A more transformational approach to faith integration allows students to see the worldview perspectives of others (even non-Christians) in the course. It invites them to assert ownership of their beliefs and spiritual development and to find faith applications in the course that provide the most meaning for them. Students explore new aspects, depths, or facets of faith within the learning community that their courses create for them each term. Students then look for ways to put their faith in action through their new-found knowledge,

skills, attitudes, and appreciations.

To assist in this process at the undergraduate level, we teach James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*⁶ in the Lifespan Development course in Dordt's core program. Unlike cognitive development, where one's age range can predict one's developmental level (for most people), in spiritual development many people slow down or quit about halfway through the stages. For example, most humans get to Piaget's "formal operations" stage (his top stage) at around age 11.⁷ (Further, you and I know there

are substages; for example, there are big differences cognitively between first-year college students and seniors, which are consistent for most students.)

But with faith stages for most people, if they even get to Fowler's Stage 5 (out of 6 total), it is not till midlife, and many people never get to Stage 6. What are we doing with our adult learners at a Christian university to encourage their movement from Stage 3 to 4, or 4 to 5, etc.? Are there ways we can encourage graduate students who are still operating with an externally provided,

institution-based belief system to see outside the box a bit more, to do some serious personal questioning, maybe to see life more as a mystery with paradoxes rather than just a theological and logical set of rules (to use some of Fowler's language)? Can we help graduate students imagine their faith more in terms of service and community than personal constraints? Can they see themselves becoming a friend of God, girded up for daily kingdom-building alongside of God, rather than seeing themselves in terms of their success in adhering to the rules? We may be able to help students' hearts leap to greater gratitude, freedom and joy while also giving their minds more professional concepts and skills to employ.

I've thought and written about the Great Commission and the ways that different Christian

I guess the bottom line for transformational higher education can still be found in the Dordt founders' vision: "all of the students' intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity."

denominations concentrate on different aspects of Jesus' assignment to all Christians. I see three foci in the Great Commission that map onto different branches of the Christian church. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."⁸ I'm not a church historian, but I think certain denominations concentrate mostly on the *baptizing* part here—for example, some Baptist churches and the Church of God come to mind.

But in the next verse (Matthew 28:20a), in which Jesus continues his sentence, he adds, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." It seems that certain other denominations have focused more on this *teaching* part of the Great Commission. This might include Calvinists and Lutherans.

And finally, Jesus wraps up with another sentence: "And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b). My thinking is that Methodists and Mennonites might be good examples of Christian groups that focus on this promised *indwelling*, allowing their work to serve as their witness—as salt and light in the world.

Even if a university is designed to be an inherently intellectual enterprise, we know that there are head knowledge, heart knowledge, and faith-in-action (hand) knowledge. Christian education is interested in biblical "knowledge," and the Bible defines knowledge as more than just factual information. Biblical knowledge includes faith, reason, and relationships—heart, head, and hands working together. The prophet Hosea warned that when this kind of complete knowledge is missing, the people are destroyed because their faith is weak and their relationships are corrupt. Knowledge is crucial for surviving and thriving as a people of God. The lack of knowledge is devastating: "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6), and "A people without understanding will come to ruin" (Hosea 4:14). Some authors in the Reformed tradition have written about this concept, exploring how we can better integrate head, heart, and hands in our teaching,⁹ how we can educate for responsible action¹⁰ and shalom,¹¹ and how we can get past our intellectualizing

(head-knowledge focus) and help students "desire the kingdom."¹²

The Great Commission calls for baptizing, teaching, and knowing that God is with us always. Perhaps we can align, with those assignments, the emphases on heart, mind, and strength (heart, head, and hands)—all of which we are commanded to offer to God (Luke 10:27): "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Truly transformational knowledge, then, emphasizes all three, not just factual knowledge.

The Christian University DNA

Although most Christian colleges and universities talk about faith integration, they may mean different things with respect to how biblical perspectives are included throughout the curriculum and other aspects of the institution's life. Additionally, some Christian colleges initially worried about and shied away from overwhelming adult students with too much religious emphasis, worried that adult learners would look for other program options if they felt indoctrinated. However, surveys have shown that even non-religious adult students enrolled in Christian universities expect a Christian perspective and are dismayed when instructors are skittish about faith integration.

Dordt University's curricular outcomes ("four coordinates"), described in *The Educational Task and Framework*,¹³ provide a kind of taxonomy of curricular elements in our educational worldview. We believe there is a *religious orientation* to everything. With Wheaton College's Arthur Holmes and many other Christian philosophers, we say "all truth is God's truth."¹⁴ Further, we believe there is a *creational structure* in everything, designed by God. With Abraham Kuyper we affirm that "every square inch" of creation belongs to God.¹⁵ We also believe that *creational development* demands a strong sense of human responsibility and stewardship toward everything God has created and entrusted to us. With millions of Christians of every stripe, we see ourselves as salt and light in this world. And specifically, as Reformed Christians we emphasize the role of Christians as culture trans-

formers, working with God’s plan to transform our world’s cultures for himself. Finally, we believe that every area of study can reveal and require *contemporary responses*, in which Christians can gain and act on “serviceable insights” revealed by God.¹⁶ We are called to participate, using these insights and responses, in God’s ongoing kingdom-building, “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

In other words, “we are not just waiting for the pie in the sky in the great by and by,” as one of my Reformed doctrine professors explained it years ago. This sense of calling to be participants in kingdom-building and culture-transforming in God’s present work is a key to transformational education at all levels. As graduate students come wired for immediate application, this spiritual dimension of learning augments their already urgent inclinations to put their new knowledge immediately to work.

The call to kingdom-building and culture-transforming demands excellence. Philippians 4:8 talks about excellence, and Christian universities often cite high quality as part of what, as Christians, they are pursuing as part of their Christian worldview. Excellence is not just striving for good test scores and GPAs on the part of students but also giving our best for God’s Kingdom at all levels (faculty, staff, academics, student engagement, office services, etc.). It involves genuine caring, not just good customer service. At Dordt, even as we expand our adult and online programs, we want to continue to provide personalized advising, individualized plans of study, caring and convenient service from all offices, low tuition rates, and minimized hassles and hoops for admission (e.g., currently no application fees, no GRE scores).

Putting It All Together

It should be clear by now that transformational graduate education at a Christian university is not a quick fix. This approach not only delights the customer with value above and beyond expectations, but also nurtures students’ hearts and lives beyond expectations. To summarize my examples, transformational graduate education includes

- Not just a tuition-for-salary-increase transaction

- But also “blue ocean” product development and marketing
- Focus on the adult learner’s needs and contributions
- Navigable, aesthetically pleasing, learning-style-friendly course pages
- Adult-focused mental health awareness and support
- Relevant and usable student research
- Higher levels of student engagement and honoring of diversity
- Higher level thinking and applications
- Higher levels of faith integration and encouragement toward new stages of faith development
- Integration of head knowledge with heart knowledge and faith-in-action knowledge

Those are just a few examples of how excellence in online graduate education expresses our biblical worldview at Dordt. I guess the bottom line for transformational higher education can still be found in the Dordt founders’ vision: “all of the students’ intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.” That’s transformational!

Endnotes

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