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Coinage of a Dordt Degree

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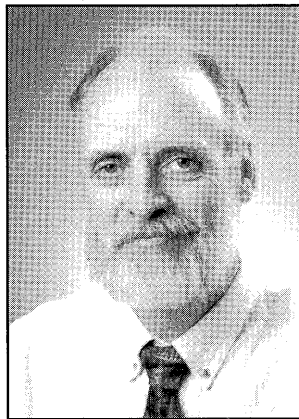
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**Editor's Note: This article is the 2001 Dordt College commencement address by Dr. Calvin Jongsma.*

The Coinage of a Dordt Degree



by Calvin Jongsma

*Families and Friends, Faculty and Staff,
but especially Graduates:*

Introduction

Today is a special day for you, a day of new beginnings. Your graduation is a sign of God's love, extended from generation to generation.

You are graduating today with an Associate of Arts degree, a Bachelor of Arts degree, a Bachelor of Science degree, or a Master of Education degree. That's what I'd like to talk about, not whether you

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really deserve these degrees but what these degrees certify and what makes their being conferred on you by Dordt College any different than if they came from DeVry University or Grinnell College or the University of Waterloo.

What is distinctive about a Dordt degree, and what can you do with it?

You may be thinking that I am asking these questions a few years late. Maybe you and your parents did some comparison shopping among colleges before you came here, but now that you're ready to leave, it's too late to do anything about the kind of education you have received. Well, yes; but maybe you could think of this as an opportunity to reflect on what you've done and examine the details of your warranty. You've purchased an education—though like all big acquisitions, you may be paying it off for a while—and now you're ready to try it out and see how it works. What can you realistically expect from it?

Foci of Collegiate Education: Three Strands

You just heard the words "arts" and "science" when I mentioned the different degrees being awarded. Do these terms indicate a two-culture rift between the sciences and the humanities? Yes. More than that, they hint at two different ways of thinking about higher education that came to be joined in an uneven synthesis. But these aren't the only strands; there is also a third trend in higher education that has generated its own tension. We'll look at each of these three viewpoints in turn.

The oldest way of thinking about education goes back to the Greeks and Romans. They thought an

educated person should study the liberal arts: these were the subjects that made one truly free, that liberated one from, and elevated one above, the work-a-day world. Three of these arts are now classified as humanities: grammar, rhetoric, and logical argumentation. The other four arts were mathematical fields: number theory, geometry, music, and astronomy.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, mathematics received the short end of the stick, and a liberal-arts education came to be associated primarily with the study of classical literature. By studying writings from a golden era, students would absorb classical ideals and would have their maturing characters shaped and nurtured to make them virtuous. A liberal-arts education was backward-looking; it attempted to take the best that past civilizations had to offer in order to prepare students for their civic responsibility. A Christianized version of this approach, which combined biblical faith with pagan wisdom, was adopted by Oxford University in the late Middle Ages and by Harvard College in the early modern period. A liberal-arts education focused on civilizing the whole person and aimed to produce Christian gentlemen, not teach facts about particular subjects or prepare people for careers. Teachers were mentors and generalists, not specialists trained in a certain field of study.

The collapse of the classical liberal-arts approach came in the nineteenth century with the rise of the research university in Germany. The Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century had been extended by Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century, and the result was felt in the educational arena after the French Revolution. The enormous success of mathematized physical science in understanding the clockwork-like structure of the world led many to emulate its scientific method as the way to pursue all truth. This approach was widespread: it was not restricted to just physics or natural science. Literature moved away from poetic flights of fancy to embrace plain speech and the essay, and dictionaries and grammars were written to standardize proper usage of language. Business enterprises began to use scientific analyses of all aspects of the production process to decrease costs and increase profits. Morality became a matter of maximizing utility, determined by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. The scientific approach to knowing ourselves and the world thus became

authoritative, supplanting both Scriptural revelation and classical modes of thought and models of behavior. The scientific research ideal was adopted in U.S. schools such as the University of Michigan and Johns Hopkins University during the last half of the nineteenth century. The purpose of these schools was to develop and transmit specialized knowledge. Education now focused on subject matter, not students, and it was forward-looking, incorporating the latest discoveries. Students and professors were jointly responsible to acquire the truth about a field, using rigorous methodology. Instructors were now trained as specialists, and their first responsibility was to their academic profession, not their students, who come and go.

Older liberal-arts institutions also caved in to this new pressure, even schools that concentrated primarily on undergraduate education. A traditional liberal-arts core was retained, but now students attended college mainly to major in particular fields of study. Schools began to include a mixture of classical courses and progressive specialized studies. Those who favored the liberal-arts approach criticized the new trend for leading to fragmented and over-specialized knowledge, but there was no holding back the tide. In fact, what had earlier been a fairly holistic liberal-arts curriculum now became another set of subjects for students to take. Literature, history, and philosophy became specialized fields of study alongside of mathematics, biology, and economics, each with its own method of inquiry. In this way, the old liberal-arts approach to education was incorporated into and co-opted by the new research model, even though the resulting synthesis came to be known as a liberal-arts approach because it favored developing a well-rounded education rather than specializing in one area. We'll call this synthesis the *liberal-arts-and-science approach* to distinguish it from the older approaches.

Academia also felt the impact of other societal developments. The third major trend in North American higher education, following the Industrial Revolution, promoted advanced vocational and professional training. At first, in the last half of the nineteenth century, separate land-grant institutions were established for pursuing agriculture and engineering. But a century later, these fields, along with other technical and vocational programs, entered mainstream post-secondary education. In the 1960s and

'70s, in order to compete with technical schools and community colleges for a shrinking pool of post-baby-boomers, colleges and universities began to add vocational programs in areas like business, engineering, and social work. Prior to this period, the only full-fledged professional program had been the teacher education program; now such programs began to swell and attract students away from traditional majors.

Vocational programs thus presented a thorny challenge for academic institutions. These programs were needed to attract more students so as to keep colleges afloat, but they also threatened to change the character of the institution. Whatever the differences between the liberal-arts and scientific approaches to higher education, they agreed on the theoretical nature of education. Instruction kept daily life at arm's length, adopting a rather general and disinterested study of its subject matter without much concern for practicalities. But this approach was diametrically opposed to the thrust of vocational training, which focused on applied skills and techniques. So if a college was going to add vocational programs, how could it do so without damaging the essential nature of the enterprise?

That the place of vocational training remains a central polarizing issue today is clear from how *U.S. News* ranks colleges and universities. Undergraduate institutions are classified either as liberal-arts schools or general schools: not liberal arts in the original sense but according to a looser definition of the term. A liberal-arts course is now any course not intended for specific vocational training. A college is considered a liberal-arts institution if at least half of its graduates obtain degrees in non-vocational fields of study. In other words, a school has to be predominantly a liberal-arts-and-science school in order to call itself liberal arts.

Education at Dordt College: Beyond Traditional Dilemmas and Toward a New Model

So how does Dordt fit into this story? When we try to capture who we are with a short phrase, we usually say, "We're a Christian, liberal-arts college." By this statement we mean that Dordt offers a broad, well-rounded education, that we don't allow students to take too many specialized courses in a major, and that we are not narrowly concentrated on vocational studies. All of this is quite true, but using

the term "liberal arts" in this way is a bit misleading and fails to recognize the history and central mission of the college. Even by current definitions, Dordt is not a liberal-arts institution and hasn't been for some time. Count up the numbers: roughly three-quarters of current graduates were in a professional or vocational program. Notwithstanding this fact, Dordt is also not a vocational school.

So just what is Dordt, then? What type of degrees does it confer? Let me sketch a few historical moments in Dordt's development before I try to answer these questions.

Dordt began in the mid-1950s as a liberal-arts-and-science junior college for training teachers, patterning itself largely on Calvin College. From the

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beginning, its founders wanted a school that stood in the tradition of Reformed Kuypertian thinking, which emphasized the Lordship of Christ over all of creation and the need for Christians to transform culture. However, not much independent thought was given at the time to the contours of the curriculum: it was accepted as a given.

As Dordt moved to become a four-year college in the early 1960s, it adopted a skeletal *Statement of Purpose*, which spelled out some basic principles to guide its development. A more expanded formulation called *Scripturally Oriented Higher Education* was written toward the end of that decade. The purpose of academic study was to prepare students for kingdom citizenship in all spheres of life. Now, higher education was described primarily in terms of transmitting scientific insight, using a broad notion of science that included any specialized area of thought. This description fit quite well with the traditional liberal-arts-and-science viewpoint.

In the late '60s and early '70s, Dordt experienced major turmoil over the nature of its Reformed perspective and the future direction of the college. In resolving the crisis in the mid '70s, the Dordt Board

reaffirmed the basic outlook taken in *Scripturally Oriented Higher Education* but asked that the outlook be clarified and refined. This clarification resulted in the document *The Educational Task of Dordt College*, which was approved in 1979.

The *Educational Task* document did more than reformulate the earlier statement; it tackled the deeper issue of the character of a Dordt College education. Similar to what had happened elsewhere, a number of vocational programs had been added to Dordt's curriculum during the late '60s and '70s, so the authors of the Educational Task felt that they needed to give a rationale for the range of subjects the college was beginning to offer. Rather than side with the liberal-arts-and-science approach or shift toward vocational training, *Educational Task* advocated taking a new approach grounded in the concept of biblical wisdom or serviceable insight. Students should experience their education in the biblical terms of hearing and doing the Word of the Lord, not in the Greek categories of learning abstract theories (thinking) and applying them to practical affairs (doing).

Knowledge, according to this biblical viewpoint, is not to be pursued for its own sake or in order to get a job but to be of service to the people of God in all aspects of their daily walk. Dordt College should develop and transmit insight, but insight that leads to wise and committed action by God's children as they fulfill their several callings. Serviceable insight is thus multidimensional. It includes practical insight, such as that provided in methods courses or engineering labs, but it also covers insights generated by biblical studies, historical analysis, poetry writing, theories of psychology, chemical research, mathematical modeling—anything that helps us understand our place in God's world and prepares us with the knowledge, skill, and motivation needed to do the will of the Lord. Serviceable insight should be the focus of career training, but it should also prepare students to take up family, church, civic, and cultural responsibilities.

The concept of serviceable insight was put forward as a way to transcend the age-old debates between liberal arts, scientific research, and vocational training. Both the theoretical emphasis of the liberal-arts-and-science approach and the narrow pragmatic emphasis of the vocational approach were rejected in favor of an approach that would balance theory and practice within a different context. But if

serviceable insight was to become more than a slogan, it needed to permeate the curriculum. Serviceable insight ought to be the concern of each course, but should it also affect the overall structure of the curriculum? Should a Dordt education consist of specialized departmental majors and vocational programs alongside a core of distribution requirements to round out the curriculum? Or is there a way to organize the curriculum that would better translate the thrust of serviceable insight and achieve the desired result? These sorts of questions shaped the General Education Committee's agenda as it began its work in the early 1990s. The document *Educational Framework of Dordt College* attempted to develop a conceptual framework for the curriculum in line with the new approach.

As we debated curricular goals and student outcomes, we found it helpful to think in terms of four curricular coordinates: *religious orientation, creational structure, creational development, and contemporary response*. The final coordinate—contemporary response—connects most closely to the outcome sought by serviceable insight. We want to become responsive kingdom citizens, to use our insights in the service of God, our neighbors, and the creation around us; we want to understand contemporary society and the environment in which we live. This goal in turn presupposes an understanding of who we are in the depths of our being (*religious orientation*), the nature of the reality we're dealing with (*creational structure*), and how things came to be the way they are now, both for good and ill (*creational development*). A curriculum that pays sufficient attention to these four coordinates, fleshed out in a number of curricular goals, should help faculty and students develop genuinely serviceable insight. In so doing, it would provide further substance to a Reformed Christian alternative in collegiate education.

We could have reacted to the different viewpoints on the nature of higher education in a more eclectic fashion, for Dordt shares features with all three approaches. We could have said that we would use liberal-arts courses to develop character and religious perspective; that majors would provide specialized theoretical knowledge about different aspects of creation; and that vocational programs could give career training for those that want it. However, this tack ignores the fundamental incom-

patibility of the three approaches in their views of knowledge and work, leaves the religious motives behind each trend unchallenged, and denies the integral character of reality and our experience of it. We cannot relegate Christian perspective to theology courses; religious orientation makes itself apparent in every field of study from mathematics to ethics. Nor can we ignore historical development while we study the physical interconnection of forces or learn about managing a business. Christian engineers and computer scientists need to know more than mathematical algorithms, scientific data, and design procedures; they need to demonstrate care for those they serve and be committed to stewardship and the appropriate use of technology. On the other hand, doctors need more than good people-skills and a pious demeanor; I want my surgeon to have a good grounding in anatomy and be skilled with the scalpel. As each part of the curriculum, then, must strive to produce full-orbed serviceable insight, each should focus in its own way on religious orientation, creational structure, creational development, and contemporary response.

In the last few years, Dordt has begun thorough and systematic review of all majors and programs. The extra administrative work makes faculty grumble, but it also gives us an opportunity to reflect more deeply on what we do and how we might improve it. Program review and student assessment activities give us opportunities to analyze whether our courses and programs are organized to help students catch a kingdom vision. The official categories adopted by the secular press may not recognize the kind of college we aim to be, but Dordt wants to be known as a serviceable insight institute.

You graduates may have come here two or four years ago to get a satisfying and well-paying job, but that's not what Dordt's about. You may have come here to get the background you need to do graduate research in a specialized area that you love studying, but that's not what Dordt's about, either. You may have come here to become a more well-rounded person or develop your personality

through friendship and study, but that's still not what Dordt's about. Yes, we hope many of you enter a career that pays an adequate wage and that gives you personal fulfillment, and we hope that we've laid the groundwork for doing more intense specialized research, and we want you to develop friendships and explore the many facets of God's creation so that you stretch your range of interests and abilities and attitudes. But all of this is secondary. We want you first to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, to do his will as you glorify him and serve your neighbors. We want you to stand up against evil and offer hope to a corrupt generation and a lost world. We want you to be Christ's hands and feet as you strive to reconcile all things to him.

As each part of the curriculum, then, must strive to produce full-orbed serviceable insight, each should focus in its own way on religious orientation, creational structure, creational development, and contemporary response.

Spending yourself in this way requires the currency of Dordt's education: multifaceted, biblically grounded insight embodied in service. You must know whose you are, you must be at home in God's world and able to recognize forces of deformation, and you must know what time it is historically as you respond in love to the culture around you with the good news.

Graduates of Dordt College, it is our wish as faculty and staff, families and friends, that God will richly bless you and give you joy in your work as you leave here to join his people around the world in obedient service, working in his kingdom and for his sake. We give you our sincerest congratulations!