



EXPANDED EDITION

With new chapters from Christian college leaders

CAMPUS LIFE

IN SEARCH
OF COMMUNITY

Edited by
DREW MOSER
and
TODD C. REAM

Foreword by
DAVID BROOKS

CARNEGIE FOUNDATION FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING



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PART ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

A PURPOSEFUL COMMUNITY

MARK L. SARGENT AND EDEE SCHULZE

For nearly three weeks the smoke had drifted from the east, rising out of Los Padres National Forest and the grasslands and homes of Ventura County. The Thomas Fire had ignited some forty miles away from our campus in Montecito, and had steadily been consuming the backwoods even as it stretched toward the sea, well on the way to becoming the largest wildfire in California history. By the middle of December 2017, Christmas décor on the streets of Montecito and Santa Barbara was coated with ash. The sun hid behind opaque skies. Pedestrians, far fewer than normal, were wearing masks.

By then, we had already sent students home. Literally hours before the start of finals, we quickly asked faculty to improvise and offer exams remotely. At that time, our primary concern was the impure air and our students' health, not the threat of the flames. Many faculty and staff remembered the Montecito Tea Fire of 2008, a sudden flare-up that rode sundowner winds onto the campus and claimed several buildings and fifteen faculty homes. However, at this moment few of us feared the Thomas Fire would spread as far as Westmont.

But all that changed suddenly one morning nearly a week later, as the winds turned erratic, and the flames jumped the fire line on the Santa Ynez foothills and descended the slopes toward the college. As several of us gathered in a downtown office, we watched the televised images of oaks, eucalyptus, and chaparral engulfed by flames less than a mile above campus. Through our second-story window, we could actually witness the frontline of the wildfire as it raced westward across the hills, flying up ridges and filling the canyons in a matter of seconds. The foliage of the previous spring, such splendor after nearly five years of drought, had become fuel. Fortunately, the winds shifted, the flames reached

former burn scars, and the firefighters eventually gained the upper hand. By the end of the day, our prayers for the preservation of the college had turned to prayers of gratitude.

For much of our lives, as we have worked on Christian college campuses, both of us have thought extensively about the purposes of Christian higher education. But in those hours of vulnerability during the fire we actually found new joy in being part of a purposeful community. It came in the urgency of the hour, as we adjusted plans, faced new risks, and spent prayerful moments together. In the future, when we look back at these uncertain days, we may well remember them as occasions when we felt the greatest commitment to the promise of the institution.

Writing after many hard months of ministry in Corinth, the apostle Paul reminded the Romans “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28 NIV). That certainly reassures us that good can come from hardship, even threats to our campus. It also affirms that God’s purposes are larger than our aspirations, and a purposeful community originates as much in our love for God as in our own calculations. “Many are the plans in a person’s heart,” the proverb states, “but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails” (Prov 19:21 NIV). A purposeful community needs plans and strategies to set a course, but also the humility to recognize that blueprints, efficiencies, and achievements may be less vital than receptive hearts.

In that respect, we appreciate the notes of collegiality and empathy in Boyer and his collaborators’ definition of a purposeful community. Reflecting on their thoughts, we posit such a community has an institutional mission statement that is widely known and shared and is fulfilled collaboratively as a communal activity so all students have access and can achieve their goals.

AN INSTITUTIONAL MISSION STATEMENT THAT IS WIDELY KNOWN AND SHARED

All told, Christian colleges have done well at crafting mission statements that convey the desire to nurture hearts and minds to contribute to the building of God’s kingdom. Quite frequently, when accrediting bodies visit Christian campuses, review teams salute the communities’ embrace of their mission statements. At their best, these statements become fundamental drivers of the colleges’ planning, and the most eloquent statements offer language that infuses other core documents and practices. Far from simply a bureaucratic obligation or a pragmatic guide, mission statements frequently offer a poetic center.

There are, though, plenty of challenges in using the mission statements as compasses for institutional purposes. Among Christian colleges, most of the

statements are sufficiently generic that they do not always differentiate one institution from another. Many colleges could easily swap statements without changing character. Furthermore, budget pressures and the shifting terrain of higher education led many institutions to alter their educational priorities, and at times the new and emerging institution strides less securely within the lanes of the historic mission. The ideals of the liberal arts, still invoked in many mission statements, become hazier as schools move rapidly toward applied programs, even as swelling enrollments, online options, and off-campus sites stretch long-held convictions about community and pedagogy.

Many of these changes, of course, have revitalized colleges, expanded horizons, reached new learners, and renewed faculty. However, most evolving institutions still have work to do to ensure innovations are linked to a shared understanding of mission. It is not merely a matter of justifying new ventures with references to the most elegant or generic themes in the mission statement. That is done often—and easily. It is more difficult to link innovation to the purposeful community. The cultural strands that bind an institution—the traditions of shared governance, familiar roles and responsibilities, curricular and cocurricular partnerships, and commonly prized customs and ceremonies—can fray easily with sudden change. Rapid transformation, fueled by a sense of urgency, can also empower innovators in the midst of greater autonomy, and sometimes less accountability. To sustain a purposeful community, institutional leaders are wise not merely to justify changes by citing mission and necessity, but also to devote the time to finding the language and the practices that preserve and evoke the best of the past.

At Westmont, we have tried to cultivate within faculty members, administrators, and staff members an appreciation for our heritage. The president and other executives host the Westmont Institute for all new staff members, a multi-week seminar on the heritage, mission, purpose, and ethos. A two-year seminar for new faculty, known as Wayfinding, not only covers the familiar topics related to launching an academic career, but also pays considerable attention to defining how current strategic objectives reveal nuances in the five planks of the college's mission.¹ As a strongly traditional, undergraduate, and residential liberal arts college, Westmont fully recognizes the increasing uniqueness of our model as well as the swelling pressures for adaptation in our current landscape. However,

¹The five planks of Westmont are embedded in the mission statement (identified in italics): "Westmont College is an *undergraduate, residential, Christian, liberal arts* community serving God's kingdom by cultivating thoughtful scholars, grateful servants and faithful leaders for *global* engagement with the academy, church and world."

we understand that our conversation about innovation must be rooted in a vision of the liberal arts as an incubator for creativity, not as a threat to a static and revered curricula.

The notion that a mission statement can blend tradition and innovation came up repeatedly during our planning for our newest facility at Westmont—the residence hall and conference center known as the Global Leadership Center. Westmont’s mission statement is encapsulated in several key words or planks, two of which are global and residential. Accordingly, during our planning for the building, it was essential to describe what new dimensions the facility would bring to the global and residential planks. How would the center help us cultivate a new four-year residency plan? How would it enable students returning from study abroad (more than half of Westmont students spend a semester off campus) come together in a synthesizing, shared, and transitional senior year that harvested their rich overseas experience for the community and launched new hopes and plans for global citizenship after college?

FULFILLED COLLABORATIVELY AS A COMMUNAL ACTIVITY

Mission statements provide institutions purpose as long as the college can sustain the balance of coherence, community, and liberty. This balance is extraordinarily difficult to maintain, but it is also where many of the healthiest institutions thrive. As citizens of the academic world, we desire to grant scholars the freedom to critique, speculate, and debate without reprisal, even as we expect that scholarly discourse will lead to a multidisciplinary and selfless search for truth rather than simply personal license and autonomy. We want to contribute to the robust search for truth and meaning in the academy and public life, even as we value our faith commitments as a source of coherence. A discourse that clarifies and refines purpose can be ennobling even in the midst of disagreements; a discourse that disregards institutional mission and purpose in the name of personal prerogatives can be dissembling.

How does an institution sustain this balance of coherence, community, and liberty? Above all, it requires breaking down some of the silos in academe that lead to fragmentation. Academic and student life professionals need the discipline to collaborate regularly and candidly. Both of us meet weekly to discuss potentials for new collaboration and the risks of protecting turf. We try to find opportunities—such as in faculty meetings—where student life professionals can be showcased as scholars of undergraduate culture and student behavior and values, even as the student life professionals regularly celebrate faculty members’ contributions to the students’ emotional and spiritual needs. One of our recent

endeavors has been to build much stronger ties between academic advising and the well-established Student Care Team in the student life division so that we can build retention strategies that intervene wisely and appropriately in the lives of students at risk.

The partnership between the curricular and cocurricular divisions of the college is more essential now to institutional purpose because new professional pressures can draw us into separate spheres. Student life divisions have changed dramatically in the last thirty years: more services are provided; more regulations emerged; parental engagement is more frequent; and greater attention is now required for students' needs, not the least of which is centered on the emotions and mental health. In addition, specialization and demands for scholarly production tempt the faculty to embrace isolation.

So often these pressures reshape our communities steadily without sufficient conversation. As the old saying goes, vision leaks, especially under steady, accelerating, and decentralized change. At Westmont, which has the benefits of being a small community, we have endeavored to do all we can to preserve the weekly Faculty Forum—a subsidized lunch and scholarly exchange for professors and student life professionals—as part of the communal glue. During a recent visit to campus, James K. A. Smith noted that the Faculty Forum tradition embodied one of the educational liturgical practices he writes and speaks about when he urges academics to blend inquiry, worship, and moral development.

As greater doubts emerge within the public and in some political quarters about the relevance and value of a college degree, we have greater obligations to make the case that a coherent, interdisciplinary education matters. Nurturing students' sense of vocation and helping them launch well into further study or careers have become increasingly important to us at Westmont, largely to help assure our students and families that a liberal arts education can show a return on investment. We do value the importance of helping students embrace their liberty to think and aspire for themselves.

At the same time, virtually any significant cultural or professional challenge in the coming generation is going to require interdisciplinary solutions. Any serious discourse about the challenges of immigration, for instance, needs the wisdom of the economist, the sociologist, and the ethicist, to name just a few. A purposeful community is one that inculcates in students the conviction that scholars and leaders need one another. They need one another not just for a personal sense of belonging, but also for the pursuit of truth and for the kindling of the moral imagination. How we model that shared pursuit in our forums, our curricular structures, and our academic and cocurricular partnership is critical

to our expression of purpose. How we model that shared pursuit will also determine how well our students are prepared to serve the common good.

SO ALL STUDENTS HAVE ACCESS AND CAN ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

In more cases than not, discussions about educational goals focus predominantly on our *purposes* for our students rather than on their membership in a *purposeful community*. For all the merits of thinking about learning rather than just teaching, the recent emphasis on learning outcomes can frequently redact the complexities and beauties of the educational process into overly simplistic metrics, more often associated with competency than with discovery. Yet learning flows from context and community. As Alexander Astin and others have shown, peers have as much influence on the cognitive development of students as faculty and staff have, and sometimes more. Strong learning communities are able to organize educational programs around commonly shared learning experiences that promote collaborative inquiry, encourage the transparent exchange of ideas, and promote empathy and moral discernment. The makeup of the student community contributes immensely to a college's educational purpose.

That should resonate in our public discourse about access and diversity. Most of our institutions still struggle to diversify faculty, staff, and students. When discussing our purposeful community, we should acknowledge the commitment we share with other institutions to provide more access. Our diversity goals are part of the larger social endeavor for equity and part of our Christian calling for justice. But it is just as vital that we discuss diversity as the academic and spiritual enrichment of our educational community and purposes. International students, first-generation students, immigrant students, and multicultural students stretch and strengthen the intellectual and moral fabric of the institution.

There are undoubtedly some significant impediments to building this community. Financial needs, fed by growing economic disparities in the United States, are restricting access. Persistence rates remain lower among some ethnic and socioeconomic groups than others. To the extent that our budgets are moral statements, a major signpost of our institutional purpose is the investment we make in the support and scholarship programs that bring together a community of learners that will challenge, inspire, confront, and ultimately mature all of us at the institution. We bring our institutions closer to the heartbeat of democracy when we find ways to include students' access to education as among our core purposes, not just our peripheral hopes.

In recent years, discussions of learning, care, and persistence were often structured around the ideal of student success. At Westmont, we have endeavored to use the student success theme as a way of unifying efforts, establishing key metrics, and identifying needs that are currently unmet. Most every educator testifies that students are more likely today to express needs for support, from psychological care to digital addictions. With the usual budget pressures, it is not possible to address these needs simply by expanding staff, but it is also negligent and self-defeating to set these concerns on the margins.

Any discussion of an educational purposeful community will eventually require us to revisit our workloads and pedagogies to ensure that we are meeting students where they can best learn. The focus on student success is a logical expansion of the widespread emphasis on retention, though it is something far more empathetic and visionary. We do not simply keep students enrolled; we want them to thrive. For some students, that will require opportunities to collaborate with faculty on published articles or chances for creative and high-end internships. For others, it will be trying to help them survive their first weeks adapting to the freedoms and rigors of college.

The language of student success is not an assurance but an aspiration, and in many respects a matter of integrity. We admit students and accept their tuition with expectations that they can find joy and value in their experience. One purpose of an American college these days is to equip more graduates for an educated workplace, including a larger portion of underrepresented groups. A vital purpose of the Christian college is to envision for all students who enter our halls a life of meaning.

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We began with the story of the fire, and it has a sequel—this one far more tragic. On the first day of the spring semester, we held a chapel of gratitude for those who helped sustain and serve us during the fire. We sang our college hymn: “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” Yet less than twenty-four hours later, a steady drizzle turned suddenly into a fierce downpour. In the middle of the night half an inch of rain fell in five minutes and sliced soil from the burned hillsides, sending a torrent of mud, boulders, and debris into the streets of Montecito. The violent stream sped down a canyon just half a mile east from Westmont.

The irony was stark: on our quiet campus, rejuvenated by rains and the energy of a new semester, it was nearly impossible to imagine the tragedy so close at hand. It would take a few hours before we fully grasped the scope of the storm: hundreds of homes near the college had been destroyed, most of them mercifully

evacuated in advance. But more than twenty lives were lost, some of them friends of Westmont families. We learned shortly that water lines had been shattered, including the ones that served the college. The freeway, a main artery between Southern and central California, would be shut down for more than a week. So, only a day after we had opened the second semester on a note of promise, we were forced to evacuate the campus again, unable to provide students potable water. It would take eight days before we could resume the semester; it would take longer for many of our neighbors to return to their homes, or in many cases the few remnants they could find.

In the days that followed, we were keenly aware that our gratitude for Westmont's preservation was matched by the pervasive lament for the devastation of our town. As eager as we were to return to normal, we understood more acutely that this semester would forge a new normal. It was hard to think about our own purposeful community without wondering more fully about our roles as neighbors. There is always the danger that we can lose sight of our interconnections and citizenship in the midst of defining purposes, expressing our uniqueness, and branding our distinctives. For many days, Montecito—one of the wealthiest towns in the nation—faced conditions so familiar to the world's poor: the loss of shelter, clean water, sanitation, and life itself. For us, the resonance between the local and the global may have never been more startling. It was a powerful reminder that conversations about purpose should not simply draw us inward in search of coherence and belonging, but should also force us outward into the discomforting corridors and pathways where Christ was always prone to walk.

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