
Faith-Based Institutions, Institutional Mission, and the Public Good

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Abstract

Rooted in historical foundations and demonstrated by continued government financial support, one purpose of higher education is to contribute to the “public good,” or support and further social causes and human flourishing. This notion has received renewed attention in both the literature as well as in professional practice. Given the variety of institutional structures (e.g., public, private, religiously affiliated, nonprofit, and proprietary), the influence of institutional mission varies. Yet, aside from institutional leadership, an institution’s mission is potentially most significant in influencing public good. Faith-based higher education institutions often have missions that are inextricably interconnected with service and community engagement. With these missions, faith-based colleges and universities are distinctively positioned to address social issues, engage in service to the local and global community, and to involve students, faculty, and administrators in this shared purpose. These institutions are uniquely accountable and have the greatest potential in this outcome precisely because of their faith commitment that both informs and motivates their policy and practice. In this essay, the role of faith-based institutions of higher education in promoting public good is explored. In addition, an analysis of both opportunities to enhance public good, as well as obstacles and challenges faced are provided.

Introduction

The role of the institutional mission is to shape the work of the institution (Lopez, 2001; Kreber & Mhina, 2007; Woodrow, 2006; Ferrari & Velcoff, 2006). Faith-based colleges and universities are guided by missions that are informed and motivated by their faith convictions (Delucchi, 1997; Firmin & Gilson, 2010; Wilson, 1996). Further, Wilson (1996) suggested that a religious organization’s mission statement is the implementation of the practical reflection of that religion. Thus, the many faith-based colleges and universities are the practical application of the sponsoring religion or faith-community’s religious and cultural expectations and aspirations.

While initially Protestant in origination, the landscape of faith-based higher education in the United States of America now includes accredited institutions representing Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim religions (Thelin, 2004; Zaytuna Website, 2015). These faith-based institutions are propagating the distinctive theological and cultural ideologies of their sponsor through the pursuit of their missions. Yet overlap in mission exists even among these diverse institutions. These colleges and universities are all affiliated with Semitic or Abrahamic religions with an emphasis on scripture (Levenson, 2012). It is within the passages of their various sacred texts that these religions find models, examples, and even commandments toward serving others and supporting a local and global “neighbor.”

Therefore, American faith-based colleges and universities are in a unique position to be particularly effective in their work of serving local communities and preserving a global good precisely because of their faith-informed and motivated missions. The missions of faith-based institutions are uniquely powerful, harnessing a combination of the hope inherent in education and the gravitas of eternity, the synergy of which is much more potent than either aspect individually (Daniels, 2015).

However, a preface of qualification is necessitated. Prior to exploring how faith-based colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to work effectively toward a shared public good, an acknowledgement of the current reality is also necessitated. Within the current faith-based institutions in America, substantial variation exists in both understanding and interpretation of the definition of public good and missional commitment to and active work toward a public good. Ultimately, this diversity is simply reflective of the robust diversity of faith-based colleges and universities in America and, further, the plurality of denominations, faith-traditions, and religions that undergird these faith-based institutions.

Literature Review

Faith-Based Higher Education in America

According to Hunt and Carper (1996), “Religious colleges and universities have been an integral part of the American higher education scene for over three hundred years” (p. 1). Many of the earliest institutions were created by various Protestant denominations in order to provide ministerial training, including some of the nation’s most prestigious universities such as Harvard and Yale (Hunt & Carper, 1996; Mardsen, 1996; Thelin, 2004). In the subsequent centuries, diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious sponsors established colleges and universities to expand educational opportunities for their (often immigrant) communities and to provide cultural and ministry or religious training reflective of their nation of origin (Hunt and Carper, 1996). A proliferation of religious colleges and seminaries followed, reinforcing the cultural and religious distinctives of their founding Protestant denominations or Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, and Mormon faith traditions (Thelin, 2004). According to Hunt and Carper (1996), “Many of these religious colleges and universities have continued to the present time, and, indeed, a cursory review of one of the many descriptive catalogs on colleges and universities will reveal that approximately one-third of the higher education institutions in the United States still claim to have some religious affiliation” (p. 2). In a pattern similar to the founding of these other religiously-affiliated institutions, the first Muslim institution recently received regional accreditation, reflecting the increase in the Muslim population in America (Zaytuna Website, 2015).

An interest in the role of faith and religion in higher education has increased in recent years (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, Bryant, Szelényi, & Calderone, 2005), while current world events and related American foreign policies have significantly increased national and even international attention on certain religious groups (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). However, although these faith-based colleges and universities differed in sponsoring denomination or underpinning religious-tradition, significant overlap exists in both purpose and beliefs. For all of these institutions, the purpose for their founding was to provide ministry training or a cultural and religious education for the betterment of their community.

Similarities also exist within their faith traditions, although disagreement remains as to the exact amount of overlap or the theological implications of these similarities. These colleges and universities are all affiliated with Semitic or Abrahamic religions, religions which claim a direct lineage to Abraham and share similar beliefs about monotheism and the character and continuity of a single God, the centrality of scripture and revelation of these sacred texts, an ethical orientation associated with choice between good (obedience to God) and evil (disobedience to God), and an eschatological world view that includes the history and the destiny of this world and the people in it (Levenson, 2012). Regardless, it is within the passages of their sacred texts that these religions find models, examples, and even commandments toward serving and supporting a local and global “neighbor” (Luke 10: 25-37) and it is within their eschatological world view that

the religious institutions implement their faith in actions that work for a shared public good (Levenson, 2012; Volf, 2011).

Faith-Based Higher Education in America and the Global Public Good

The primary principles in the sacred texts that undergird the sponsoring religions and faith traditions demonstrate a prioritization of care for others, particularly the poor and the oppressed, and a dedication to human flourishing. Although these faith traditions share some sacred texts and disagree on others, both the shared and individually accepted scriptures repeatedly command adherents toward justice and mercy, in acknowledgement of the dignity of every person as created in the image of God and with the purpose of bringing the blessings of the kingdom of God to earth.

The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), or Jewish scripture, stated that people who do not serve others who are in need will be punished with separation from God, "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered" (Proverbs 21:13). The Old Testament prophets repeatedly called for care for others, such as in Isaiah 58:6-7, in which Isaiah contrasted hypocritical faith practices with a command for justice, stating: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?" In the New Testament, the Gospels provide numerous examples of Jesus' dedication to human flourishing. With His ministry devoted to the holistic physical, mental, and spiritual healing of others, Jesus "came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan to connect care for others and eternal life, specifically using an expansive and inclusive definition of "neighbor." Similarly, in Islamic history, Muhammad served as an example in his care for humanity and attention to the needs of others. According to the Quran, Chapter 16 verse 90, "Surely Allah enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good (to others) and the giving to the kindred..."

Finally, although all of the currently accredited faith-based colleges and universities in the United States are associated with Abrahamic religions, this connection between faith-tradition and serving others, or commitment to human flourishing, is not necessarily exclusive to Abrahamic religions. The ethic of reciprocity, or the golden rule, is common both within and outside of the Abrahamic religions, in eastern religions, the writings of Confucius and the Greek philosophers, and modern theologies and philosophies (Wattles, 1997). Thus, the central premise here is simply that the currently accredited faith-based institutions are all sponsored by religions in which their central authority (the various sacred texts) call adherents to care for others and a commitment to social justice.

Further, the Abrahamic religions all share an ethical orientation associated with a choice between good, which is obedience to God, and evil, which is disobedience to God (Levenson, 2012). In this choice, choosing good and being obedient to God includes a commitment to justice and mercy and service to others (as modeled and commanded in the various sacred texts). Therefore, within the eschatological worldview of these faith traditions, the adherents must follow God's commandments and work toward these components of social justice in order to gain their eternal reward.

Thus, the various shared and individually accepted scriptures, ethical orientations, and eschatological worldviews all support a grand narrative that fosters a humanistic approach aligned with that described in the Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good? UNESCO Report (2015), one "based on respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice,

cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future” (p. 9). In the interconnected world of today, preserving a common and global good is dependent upon an approach that includes an integration of both social justice and globalization. From a faith-based context, Groody (2007) encouraged the perspective of “a faith that seeks understanding oriented toward a love that produces justice” (p. xviii) and asserted that globalization cannot be fully understood without examining globalization’s relationship to social justice. Specifically, he posited that the negative aspects of globalization (i.e., oppression in the form of unjust market practices), are a human problem and therefore cannot be remedied with better economic, political, or environmental planning. Instead, Groody (2007) suggested human problems be addressed through (a) renewing our relationship with God, (b) renewing our relationship with others, (c) renewing our relationship with the environment, and (d) renewing our relationship with ourselves. This framework is particularly applicable to faith-based higher education institutions.

Similarly, Goudzwaard, Vennen, and Van Heemst (2007) discussed the negative elements of globalization or the “shadow sides of progress” (p. 24). In particular, Goudzwaard et al. (2007) asserted that “more money, technology, science, and market forces—solutions that until recently seemed self-evident—often cause global poverty, global insecurity, environmental ruin, and the tyranny of financial markets to deteriorate even further” (p. 24). Goudzwaard et al. (2007) suggested that society, in an effort to address global poverty, terror, and environmental degradation, has often underestimated the importance of “what goes on at the deepest level in people’s hearts and minds, what engages and moves them, what captures their imaginations, fills their hearts, and satisfies their expectations” (p. 26).

Interestingly, the thesis that renewal of the human spirit or spiritual transformation is directly related to addressing the ills of globalization, championed by both Groody (2007) and Goudzwaard et al. (2007), has deep roots dating back to the writings and teachings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Groody (2007) recounted Chardin’s vision of the transformation of the whole world, which preceded his writing “The Mass of the World” (p. 233) and noted that “such a vision, in light of globalization, sees the current historical developments as part of a spiritual evolution by which the world is gradually transformed into Christ” (p. 234).

Thus, a robust precedent exists among faith traditions for the prioritization of a local and global “neighbor” and a commitment to human flourishing. Skorton (2007) explained the call of responsibility unique to colleges and universities in this way:

...the development of human capacity is not only the most effective way to ameliorate global inequalities, but is also a prerequisite for any enduring improvement of the standard of living at the local level. Colleges and universities should be enlisted to fulfill their potential as one of our most effective and credible diplomatic assets by providing university teaching, research, and outreach to resolve socioeconomic inequalities around the world. (p. 28)

So the sacred texts and faith traditions of the religions that sponsor the current accredited American faith-based colleges and universities command adherents toward justice and mercy, in acknowledgement of the dignity of every person as created in the image of God and with the purpose of the positive transformation of this world to be more reflective of the kingdom of God. As a result, many faith-based colleges and universities have mission statements reflective of the ethical orientation of their sponsoring religion, in which actively working to bring the blessings of the kingdom of God to earth is a priority.

The Missions of Faith-Based Institutions

Public, private, non-profit, for-profit, and religiously affiliated institutions of higher education, both historically and contemporarily, generally espouse an institutional mission, purpose, or set of core values or objectives. A mission statement is often required by regional accreditors (Morphewe & Hartley, 2006) and an institution's vision is often reflected in the details of its mission statement (Kibuuka, 2001). The role of the institutional mission is to shape the work of the institution (Lopez, 2001; Kreber & Mhina, 2007; Woodrow, 2006; Ferrari & Velcoff, 2006). Faith-based colleges and universities are guided by missions that are informed and motivated by their faith convictions (Delucchi, 1997; Firmin & Gilson, 2010; Wilson, 1996). Even further, Wilson (1996) suggested that a religious organization's mission statement is the implementation of the practical reflection of that religion. Thus, the many faith-based colleges and universities are the practical application of the sponsoring religion or faith-community's religious and cultural expectations and aspirations.

Although the first higher education institutions founded in America were Protestant, the landscape of faith-based colleges and universities now includes accredited institutions representing Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim religions. These faith-based institutions are propagating the distinctive theological and cultural ideologies of their sponsors through the pursuit of their missions. Conversely, the missions of these colleges and universities are both informed and motivated by their faith foundations. As a result, the missions of faith-based institutions are uniquely powerful (Daniels, 2015). The missions of these institutions harness a combination of the unique nobility and hope inherent in the ideals of education and the gravitas of eternal work. The synergy of this combination results in a mission that is much more potent than either aspect separately and results in higher engagement and motivation among the students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

Therefore, faith-based colleges and universities are in a unique position to be particularly effective in their work of serving local communities and preserving a global good precisely because of their faith-informed and motivated missions. For those faith-based institutions at which social justice and a common good are prioritized, the faith foundation fosters commitment to the institution and the mission of service. As a result, a virtuous circle is reinforced and perpetuated, in which motivation and dedication to both the college and the cause proliferates. Additionally, the visibility and oftentimes accountability that is typically associated with mission fulfillment provides further incentive toward measurable effort in this area.

Faith-Based Higher Education and the Public Good: An Analysis of Opportunities

Substantial diversity exists within the landscape of accredited faith-based higher education in America. Additionally, variation exists as to the prioritization and/or explicit commitment of the institutions to service, social justice, or a global or common good. However, the missions of many faith-based colleges and universities in America, as specified by their mission statements, support education policies and practices that align with the "humanistic and holistic approach" outlined in the Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good? UNESCO Report, with a foundation of "peace, inclusion, and social justice...going beyond narrow utilitarianism and economism to integrate the multiple dimensions of human existence" (p. 10). Further, some institutional mission and culture also embody Volf's (1994) idea of soft difference. Rather than dividing the world into hard differences, his/her group and the alien, these institutions pursue their missions within the approach of diversity characterized by soft differences, which allows space for individuality and practices mission as a constant invitation. With these missions, faith-based institutions are distinctively positioned to address social issues, engage in service to the local and global community, and to involve students, faculty, and administrators in this shared purpose. The substantial variation in the initiatives, programs, and opportunities offered at these

institutions reflects the diversity of the institutions themselves, but all with the intent of serving a local and global “neighbor.”

For example, Grinnell College, with a historical United Church of Christ founding, was once the center of the Social Gospel reform movement (Morgan, 1969), which understood the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:10, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”) as a religious rationale for social justice work (Tichi, 2009). This application of Christian ethics on social problems (Handy, 1950) included local and global issues (Morgan, 1969). Today, Grinnell College “aims to graduate individuals who can think clearly, who can speak and write persuasively and even eloquently, who can evaluate critically both their own and others’ ideas, who can acquire new knowledge, and who are prepared in life and work to use their knowledge and their abilities to serve the common good” (Grinnell College Website, 2015). This commitment to the public good is perhaps best exemplified in their popular post-grad service opportunities, including the Grinnell Corps, with domestic and internal service programs, which predates the Peace Corps (Grinnell College Website, 2015).

An emphasis of service is also evident in the mission of Brandeis University, a non-sectarian Jewish institution (Brandeis University Website, 2015). Brandeis University is particularly committed to global engagement, with “sustained partnerships – between faculty members and students, between students and alumni, and between Brandeis and other universities, governments or NGOs” as the foundation of the “Global Brandeis” initiative, which offers “opportunities to think, experience and act in the world” (Brandeis University Website, 2015). This emphasis results in innovative study options, like the Sorenson Fellowship, which funds an internship at a non-profit organization selected by the student, to “tackle issues of international importance.” Additionally, Brandeis provides unique national and international resources, like the Brandeis Institute for International Judges, which “provides members of the international judiciary with the opportunity to meet and discuss critical issues concerning the theory and practice of international justice” (Brandeis University Website, 2015).

Gonzaga University is explicit about its “Catholic, Jesuit, and humanistic heritage and identity,” and defines its success in terms of creating “an exemplary learning community that educates students for lives of leadership and service for the common good” (Gonzaga University Website, 2015). This commitment to human flourishing seems to permeate the Gonzaga identity, for both the Gonzaga student outcomes “The Gonzaga experience fosters a mature commitment to dignity of the human person, social justice, diversity, intercultural competence, global engagement, solidarity with the poor and vulnerable, and care for the planet” (Gonzaga University, 2015), but also the institutional operations “Grateful to God, the Gonzaga community carries out this mission with responsible stewardship of our physical, financial, and human resources” (Gonzaga Website, 2015). Their Center for Global Engagement demonstrates a comprehensive approach, with institutional, curricular, and administrative goals that are measured. One specific example of this commitment is exemplified in Gonzaga’s partnership with the Opus Prize. The purpose of the Opus Prize is “to inspire the next generation of faith-based social entrepreneurs” through recognizing the “unsung heroes” who are “working to solve today’s most persistent problems” (Opus Prize Website, 2016). The participation of eleven Catholic university Opus partners demonstrates the strong precedent of the Catholic faith emphasis on social justice and human flourishing.

Seattle Pacific University also has a robust reputation for service, as evidenced in the institutional mission statement: “Seattle Pacific University is a Christian university fully committed to engaging the culture and changing the world by graduating people of competence and character, becoming people of wisdom, and modeling grace-filled community” (Seattle Pacific

Website, 2016). Although this mission toward service seems imbued in both the academics and co-curricular programs at the institution, a unique example of this infusion is within their Center for Integrity in Business. The purpose of their Center for Integrity in Business is to train businesspeople “to lead with integrity and to shape a more just and flourishing world” (Seattle Pacific University Website, 2016). Thus, in contrast to perhaps a more common and basic approach to business, the Seattle Pacific Center for Integrity in Business approaches business as a service “that honors people as unique image-bearers of God,” that should be a “vital force for good in the world,” with a unique value proposition “for economic opportunity and wholesale human flourishing” when “animated and shaped by Christian principles and values,” and ultimately to “stand for what is noble and right” (Seattle Pacific Website, 2016). This unique foundation results in a comprehensive center, respected in the business community, active in faith discussions, and offering students a different avenue through which to dedicate themselves to service.

These examples represent just a few of the missions and practical application of those missions of the many accredited faith-based colleges and universities in America. Specifically, these religiously affiliated or historically sponsored institutions of higher education, rooted with rich faith foundations and deep missiological purposes, effectively leverage their service orientation to realize public good, particularly in light of opportunities presented by globalization. However, despite these (and many other) positive examples of mission fulfillment toward human flourishing, the obstacles and challenges in both this missional approach and the practical application and programmatic work are significant and must be managed.

Faith-Based Higher Education and the Public Good: Obstacles and Challenges

The synergistic faith and mission of these colleges and universities distinctively position them to address social issues, engage in service to the local and global community, and to involve students, faculty, and administrators in this shared purpose. However, precisely because of this unique effectiveness, faith based institutions must be particularly cognizant and cautious in the implementation of their service and support of their local and global neighbor.

The most substantive obstacles and challenges are seemingly oppositional. First, a significant challenge is in maintaining an urgency around this aspect of the mission and identifying new and relevant interpretations and applications of serving the common good, particularly in a rapidly changing global world. In a tumultuous time in higher education, a priority that is not necessarily profitable, despite the mission-alignment and genuine institutional commitment, can become secondary to more immediate demands (Gustafson, 2011). Second, for those institutions that do actively and vigorously pursue this aspect of their mission, a challenge is the avoidance in their practical application of imperialism in relation to faith and culture. As these institutions have been or are affiliated with a particular sponsoring religious community, the subordination of other (or no) religions is a legitimate issue, especially within faith communities that emphasize evangelism. Similarly, the challenge of avoiding the imposition of a United States-centric, or western-centric definition and understanding of a common or global good is also significant.

Mission-driven faith based higher education institutions must exercise sober responsibility in avoiding faith-based or cultural imperialism. In order to do this, Adrian (2007) suggested a focus on relationship, stating “in the new global environment, the Christian idea of a university can address the void evident in modern higher education while contributing to bridging the gap between globalization and traditional cultures” (p. 299). However, mission-driven faith based higher education institutions must go beyond Adrian’s idea of simply “bridging the gap” and utilize globalization as a means to work with those who are suffering or oppressed to bring reciprocal transformation. As stated in the *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?*

UNESCO Report (2015), "Societies everywhere can learn a great deal from each other by being more open to the discovery and understanding of other worldviews" (p. 30). In order for faith-based institutions to effectively and authentically work toward serving a local and global neighbor, their approach must include learning and benefit that is mutual and reciprocal.

Antone (2002) asserted that in an era of globalization "religious educators have to be firm advocates of change, liberation, and transformation both within and without their respective faith communities" (p. 235). Thivierge (2003) recommended macro-level guidelines for mission-driven higher education institutions in their response to the opportunity and responsibility of higher education institutions, including the following:

peace, which is not just the absence of war, but the presence of love;
sharing of values through the application of technology;
developing communities through relationships;
respect for cultural pluralism;
developing economic and intellectual interdependence;
openness to new thinking and new ideas;
transformational change through learning and the professions;
supporting each other through the taking of risks in the application of knowledge;
providing "hope" in the world; and
being a voice for those with none (pp. 80-81).

Similarly, Ng (2002) provided micro-level recommendations for educators: first, that educators must be educated in the complexities of a global good and be "reflective teachers in a globalized age" (p. 205); second, that across fields and curriculum, educators must intentionally bring to the classroom real world examples of globalization; third, that educators have the responsibility to remind students (particularly those from the monoculture), of the view from the other side – thus creating a balanced view of the global citizen; and finally, that issues of racism must be addressed, that "because it is something which diminishes both victims and unconscious perpetrators, religious education teachers and practitioners need to confront it by understanding it and then working actively to eliminate it" (p. 206). The educator recommendations of Ng are reinforced in the Rethinking Education UNSECO Report, which emphasizes the need for "rethinking citizenship education in a diverse and interconnected world" (p. 65).

Conclusion

Faith-based colleges and universities are distinctively positioned to effectively work toward a global good, with missions informed and motivated by their faith. Many religiously affiliated institutions are attempting to serve their local and global neighbor through a variety of programs and initiatives, often within a mutual and reciprocal approach intended to benefit both the student and an "other." However, higher education in America, including faith-based colleges and universities, has not obtained large-scale or sustained success in their efforts. This limited success may be partially attributed to the inherent diversity of the American higher education landscape. Typically considered to be a strength, the diversity of institutional missions, faith affiliations, and cultures, results in individualized priorities reflective of each college or university. However, the magnitude of the challenge of effectively addressing a shared public good and the preservation of our shared global space may necessitate a coordinated approach. Perhaps within a concerted collaborative approach the United Nations development goals might be particularly useful, providing shared definitions, language, and guidelines for coordinated future work. Ultimately, the summation of this exploration of faith-based higher education and the public good

mirrors the conclusion of the Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good? UNESCO Report (2015), with simply a call for conversation on the topic.

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