

Our Goal is Quality Christian Education

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I have been at Milligan College now for four years. During that time we have been involved in a number of efforts which have caused us to think, and re-think, who we are and where we are headed as a college. Most of us in this room can remember well our concerted self-study which certainly was a focused effort, albeit one that centered around a construct of standards or criteria that were perhaps not of our making. Still, this self-study caused us to think seriously about our strengths and weaknesses. Similarly the processes leading up to our Lilly grant and recent efforts to gain approval for our MBA program, not to mention the NCATE self-study a few years ago and myriad other discussions that have taken place in Academic Committee, the President's Cabinet, and in faculty meetings, have been opportunities for us to revisit time and again our focus. A thumbnail sketch of these many studies and discussions could lead to a fairly simple summary statement: we are a good quality Christian liberal arts college with a desire to be a very high quality Christian liberal arts college. I view it as my main charge to help us, together, to think about what it means to maintain and increase our quality as an educational institution.

The recent discussions about the Theological Exploration of Vocation, the Lilly grant program as it is more commonly known, have emphasized appropriately our special role as a Christian institution. We are not a college which simply educates students to enter the world without a purpose. The language of calling, of hearing God's direction for our lives, is the perfect language for a school which seeks to find and hear God in a world often bewildering in its many ways of ignoring God. In this discussion of calling we are being encouraged to

sharpen our message about the purpose that undergirds our concept of education. This is very important because it is part of the very mission of the college.

But I sometimes fear that the emphasis on theological calling, which concentrates on the Christian focus of our institution, might overshadow another essential aspect of our institution – that we are a College, a place of higher learning, a liberal arts institution which seeks to push and prod our students to think and learn and gain mastery over academic subjects. And our success as a College is inextricably linked to the degree to which we help students think and learn: whether it be by leading them, or cajoling them, or forcing them, or inspiring them, or – more probably, some complex combination of all the above. Simply put, our success as a College must be measured in great part by how well we educate our students. It doesn't matter if we have a lot of students or a few, if we have diverse students or a homogenous student body, if we have brilliant students or simply average – our success is whether we have been able to lead those students to be successful students in the subjects that we offer.

Now I think Milligan does a very credible job in educating students. But I want Milligan to be known as more than credible, more than good. I want Milligan to be known as a College which does a truly outstanding job of educating its students. I want to challenge all of you, all of us, to grasp that vision as one which can be accomplished – with hard work, and tough choices – but it can be accomplished here.

A. A Quality Education

What are the constitutive elements of a quality education? What are the building blocks with which we can work to move us to the highest ranks of quality in our educational

endeavor? Let me address some of these building blocks – and this will certainly not be an exhaustive discussion – under three main headings: Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes.

1. The first element which contributes to a quality education is that of Input. It is perhaps the aspect we are most comfortable talking about. In this category we would include faculty, infrastructure, and expertise. Lead me touch briefly on these.

One of the strengths of Milligan College has always been its faculty. I frequently have the pleasure to say to people who want to know about Milligan that it has a truly excellent faculty. Of course part of that excellence is basic preparation. We now have over 70% of our full-time faculty holding terminal degrees. And we have at least 8 more “in the oven”:

Carolyn Woolard is now ABD, having passed her exams this summer; as are Charlene Kiser and Melinda Collins, who is working on her dissertation during her sabbatical this semester; Vikki Sitter has passed her exams and lacks only one course to be ABD; Phyllis King and Sue Rasmussen are both in doctoral programs in nursing, Sue having taken an educational leave for that purpose; and Bob Mahan and Jeff Snodgrass recently entered doctoral programs in Accounting and Occupational Therapy. We can and should take pride when faculty earn their doctoral degrees, as Jeff Miller did this summer. 70% is a good percentage of terminal degrees, but not fantastic. I am committed to helping our existing faculty obtain terminal degrees, and selecting faculty that are already holding terminal degrees. But along with preparation is disposition. The Milligan faculty is as committed to teaching the whole student as any faculty I can imagine. You are truly a joy to work with, and one of the key assets of this College. Clearly one of the most important parts of my job is in hiring and retaining good faculty. We certainly cannot have a quality education without a quality faculty.

Infrastructure , as well, is important – at least as a way of allowing good education to take place. You all know what an improvement Derthick Hall is from its “pre-renovation” days. Air conditioning is not essential to learning – but hot afternoons take a lot away from students’ attention and teachers’ enthusiasm. We are slowly making headway in improving our facilities. And we are adding along the way other minor enhancements – more multi-media rooms, new “toys” in many of those rooms, more support for the computer infrastructure. We are not whiz bang state-of-the-art at Milligan, but we are not that far off, and we are making good progress. We are certainly dealing with better facilities and computer infrastructure than many colleges.

A third element in the area of “inputs” to a quality education is expertise. In this category I am thinking of the way that we stay current with our academic fields and the degree to which we learn our craft as teachers – our pedagogical training and expertise. I think this is one area we are only beginning to adequately address. Too few of us attend conferences, stay current in our fields, or learn about pedagogical theory. And of course we know some of the reasons. First there is a teaching schedule that is on the high side for most colleges, though perhaps normal for small church related colleges. It is hard to attend conferences and keep current when one teaches 4 to 5 courses, and have advisees and committees as well. Secondly there is the low financial support for faculty development. Less than five hundred dollars per year does not go far for a major conference at a large city hotel, with travel. But we will never move toward really high quality education if our faculty don’t keep up with their fields. To move toward this goal I need to begin collecting better information about what you as a faculty already are doing in this area. Beginning this year I

will update the Faculty Development Report to ask more specifically for information about all conferences and training that faculty members engage in during the year. And I will commit to moving toward more generous allowances as well – though let me also remind you that if you are presenting at a conference you might be eligible for the ACA travel grant. But despite the constraints, let me urge you to remain active in your academic field – not just in private reading, but in public conversations where you can learn from others not only about the “what” of your discipline, but also the “how.”

2. The second element in quality education is Process. Here again we know the main elements of the process of our educational delivery: the classroom teaching, the curriculum, and the use of learning resources. And to this we must add the student environment which is a crucial part of determining how students learn. Again, let me touch on these briefly in turn.

First on the list, appropriately, is classroom teaching. We are a teaching school, and at least from anecdotal comments I hear wonderful comments about our teaching here at Milligan. In general, student evaluations suggest that most of the time students are excited about the kind of teaching they receive. But are there ways that we can improve on our classroom teaching ability? I would suggest that, as professionals, it is our job to constantly seek to improve in this central defining role. Frankly I think the student evaluation is a weak measurement tool. Partly because students don’t really know enough about a discipline to properly evaluate what is necessary to gain competence. And partly because student evaluations tend to function as popularity polls. There is a version of the student evaluation process which adds some precision – the IDEA system developed by Kansas State University. It helps evaluate how well students rank learning opportunities in a variety of ways, and cross

references that information with what the faculty thinks is important. And finally, it gives one some reference standards from a national data base of similar courses by discipline. This kind of student evaluation might help us learn a bit more about how we are doing, and what we are emphasizing in our classes. I am considering moving toward this student evaluation system one semester a year (it is not cheap), probably beginning next school year. I have shared it with the Academic committee, and would be happy to share information about it with any of you.

But another way that we can gain some helpful information about our classroom teaching is from our peers. We are one of the very few colleges that does not have any system of classroom observation or evaluations. I proposed to the Academic Committee this summer that we need to move in that direction. What I propose is that at least once each year we invite peers into our classrooms to observe us teach, to receive some written comments about our teaching and the classroom experience, and to engage afterward in constructive talks about this observation. I will offer some guidelines for this later this semester – and I would welcome your comments and suggestions about. Not only will such observations help us gain some insight into our own teaching, but as we observe others we might pick up new ideas that can be useful. Simply put, if teaching is a major focus then we should be engaging in significant conversations about how we teach and what works. Observations by our peers will help that process.

In the same vein, our curriculum is a process toward the goal of education, not the end goal itself. In the past few years we have examined our curriculum to be sure that it emphasizes the key elements of our concept of education. I have suggested, and you agreed,

that a liberal arts education needed to allow significant freedom for students to explore a variety of topics. So we deleted the required minors, and we have been working very hard in the Academic Committee to resist majors becoming too large – in fact we have set some caps on the number of credit hours in a major. Because writing and critical thinking are such important parts of a college education, the Humanities faculty revised its curriculum to include two writing courses – 101W and 202W. These came at a cost of some of the lecture time. But this kind of hard thinking about what is important in a college education and what components need to be emphasized is part of our collective task.

I believe we have a strong curriculum, and that it is under constant review and revision. But we still need to ask some tough questions. For instance, are we offering sufficient opportunities for our students to confront ethnic and cultural diversity and to learn to synthesize that into their own way of thinking about the world? We all know that our student body is remarkably homogeneous -- we have few minorities or foreign students, and few opportunities to confront minorities or foreign students. We have a “diversity” requirement, but generally on a few courses are used to meet this requirement. In what way might we really struggle with this issue in our curriculum? Can we encourage new classes? Can encourage students to study abroad? We have great opportunities through the CCCU, yet virtually no students take advantage of it. Can we find meaningful linkages in our curriculum to expose our students to other subcultures of the U.S.? Might we find ways to put our students into inner city experiences that would be helpful in emphasizing cultural and ethnic diversity? Might we find other ways of achieving this goal, both curricular and co-curricular?

One suggestion of mine for our curriculum has been floated before both the cabinet

and the Academic Committee – that of “house courses.” Many colleges allow for purely elective courses to be created jointly by students and faculty to be taught primarily by the students in dorm settings. This allows for creativity in subject matter, involvement of students, and the movement of the “education” outside of the formal teacher-classroom structure to something that is broader and more ubiquitous. I plan to continue talking about this proposal with students and the Academic Committee more during the year. Again I welcome your input and comments.

The third area of the process of education is that of learning resources. A large center of learning resources is, of course, the library. Unfortunately our library is limited in space, at times environmentally unfriendly, and less than adequately stocked in books. But we are making progress and will make progress in this area. We have increased our funding for books and journals, and the librarians in cooperation with the library committee are working to fairly decide how to use those funds. Let me encourage each of you to spend time in the library to learn what the strengths and weaknesses of our holdings are, and use your library budget to suggest purchases to make the library functional. Take some time to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the data bases available through our library – we have many full-text data sets, but sometimes they include current material and other times they don’t. In your academic area you need to know what is available, and if it we are deficient – let us know. And perhaps most importantly, use the library as part of the process of learning for your students. Send them to the library. Force them to use the resources there as part of their “active” learning.

We have added new moveable shelving downstairs to open up more room for stacks

and study space. We will be making the Welshimer room available for student study. We are considering other changes in the physical setting that might gain more room for the library. And due to the SACS self-study, we have to address the long-term problems of space and environment in the library before too many years pass.

But learning resources also include our computer system, the network, and the many programs such as Blackboard that allow us to expand or enhance our teaching in the classroom. This summer we significantly upgraded the network capacity, and we have also increased our capacity to the outside world via the internet. This is in part a response to the larger demands on the system from media files and general expectations. We continue to upgrade classrooms: last year we added an “elmo” document projector in Hyder auditorium; we added an electronic whiteboard in the Hardin OT Lab classroom; we added a new projector unit in Derthick 208; and we are planning to replace the TV’s in Hyder with high quality tv’s to augment the new projector in there. Blackboard is a program that is probably underutilized here on campus, and I would encourage you to experiment with it if you haven’t before. Last year the ACA had a trial workshop on teaching and technology in Montreat. This will be offered again, and I urge some of you to consider taking the time to attend. The ACA Summit, which will be held this year in Abingdon, also helps faculty learn about the variety of learning resources available. Computer technology is never a substitute for good teaching and good study habits. But it can be a resource that, when used judiciously, can enhance our teaching and our students’ ability to learn.

The quick summary of what I have called “processes,” which I have detailed here, is telling, though. Telling in its perspective. Notice that each of the processes is discussed from

the perspective of the teaching process – from the perspective of management, not the product. There is another process in education, that of the student. Major educational research has shown fairly decisively that two key components are crucial for the maximum learning by students: student engagement and active learning. These are two closely related features which are often difficult to distinguish, yet together they are decisive components for effective education. The idea of “engagement” deals with the students mental attitude toward the learning process. To the degree that a student is motivated to learn, listens actively, and has his her mind oriented toward gaining from the educational experience, that student is engaged. Engagement is really a form of “openness” to the world and to a lifetime of new ideas and experiences, and thus is a suitable end result of the educational experience. But engagement is also clearly one of the processes that allows real student learning to take place.

Active learning is related to engagement. Active learning speaks of a student’s willingness to become a participant in the learning process itself and to take responsibility for the steps in the learning process. Of course active learning might be seen in an engaged student discussion in class. But active learning can be seen in a student’s reading the required texts, of preparing a term paper, of participating actively in a group project. Notice, though, that being an active learner requires a willing commitment and the knowledge of what is expected so that he or she can truly participate to the fullest extent. Added to this commitment and knowledge, active learning assumes a responsibility on the part of the learner, a responsibility we must instill and encourage and which itself is a benefit of a good liberal arts education.

Student engagement and active learning are, as I indicated, major components in how

well students actually function as learners. As such they are processes. But in a way we could also speak of engagement and active learning as outcomes. Lee Shulman, the head of the Carnegie Foundation, in one of the papers I distributed to you noted:

“The first item on the list, engagement, is one of the most interesting and important aspects of learning. We rarely paid enough attention to it in the past, but higher education is now much more focused on “active learning” and on evidence that students are engaged in worthwhile educational experiences.... As noted earlier, however, I would argue that engagement is not solely a proxy (for learning); it is also an end in itself. Our institutions of higher education are settings where students can encounter a range of people and ideas and human experiences that they have never been exposed to before. Engagement in this sense is not just a proxy for learning but a fundamental purpose of education.”

If engagement and active learning are critical to good quality education, then it is our job to encourage it and enhance it. I suspect we already do that relatively well, but how can we be sure of our relative success? I have decided to participate this year, and hopefully every other year in the future, in a broad-based nationwide study of student engagement called the National Survey of Student Engagement or NSSE. This study is being widely used across the country in colleges and universities to gauge how well our students are engaged. I asked you to read a bit about student engagement and the use of the NSSE as means of gauging that, written by George Kuh at the University of Indiana, the director of that program. The NSSE asks questions like:

1. How often in this year have you made a class presentation?
2. How often in this year have you worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources?
3. How often have you discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others

outside of classes (e.g. Students, family members, coworkers)?

4. How much of your coursework emphasizes memorization? Synthesizing information? applying theories to practical problems or new situations?

Clearly each of these issues, and many others (and I have a copy of the survey question should any of you want to see it), address multiple facets of intellectual engagement of students with the educational environment we offer. The student responses are then compared against responses from a large number of other colleges and universities' students nationwide. From both the raw data and the comparative information we can gain a much better idea of how engaged our students are. It seems to me that this is critical data we need if we are going to strive to educate our students at the highest quality.

So with regard to the processes of education at Milligan, I think we have a strong program and are making progress to strengthen it. Of course we could do more with more money, but given our situation I think we have an excellent culture of teaching excellence, a strong curriculum, and generally good (in some cases excellent) learning resources. But perhaps we can do more, and do it better. We need to be constantly asking ourselves the question, are we as effective as we might be? This requires, in part, a culture of evidence that seeks external evidence that might either validate our efforts or point us toward improvement.

3. The third element in quality education is Student Outcomes.

Inputs and processes are not the entire story of the educational enterprise. At the end of the day it is the product, the outcomes, which will tell us whether we have actually provided a quality education to our students. The buzzword here is "value added." Have we, as an institution, delivered in what we say we do? It is relatively easy to get high marks on

standardized exit exams if the incoming student body is of a very high quality. If all we do is compare standardized scores, such as the Academic Profile, with national standards, we might simply be measuring the quality of the students we let in. Such a test may say little about how effective the college has been in educating the students – taking the raw material of students and educating them over a 4 year period. Are we improving relative to the profile of our incoming class? Doing about the same as other colleges in educating our given “raw material” of students? Or perhaps losing ground? The answers to these questions are not easily obtained, though I suppose we could test our students even more in these standardized tests. But we have to think about our value added -- what are we trying to achieve with our students, and are we achieving it? This way of asking the question implies that student outcomes, both in individual classes and for the college as a whole, would be a measure of our success.

But how do we do this? I am not suggesting here that we simply add new tests to our quiver of assessment tools. And in fact the assessment issue, while important to keep us honest with ourselves about how well we are doing, is not the center of the issue. Instead we should be asking hard serious questions about how well our students are doing when they graduate from our classes or our institution.

What should a Milligan graduate look like? What should he or she know? In what way should he or she be able to think and analyze? What tools should he or she be able to apply in thinking and working? These kind of concrete issues are student outcomes. We should, I would suggest, be able to answer explicitly and affirmatively that each of our graduates have achieved our expected outcomes if they are to wear the label “Milligan

graduate.”

As I have thought about how I might answer this question relative to our graduates, I know I can say that they have passed x, y & z courses. I know that they have been taught by good teachers. But have they, individually, reached our expected level of competency in the areas we consider to be most important? I am not sure. We know what they must do in terms of classes...but not what they must know or be able to demonstrate. For example, one of our GE Outcomes is:

“the student should show that they have an abiding awareness of how the present is linked to the past through formative ideas and events of Western – and to a lesser degree of non-Western – civilizations.”

I love that outcome... but am not sure that I would know if a given student met it. If we can't say that, then is it a functional outcome? Or is it more a general goal of our process?

I have appointed for this year a General Education Outcomes task force to look at our GE outcomes and be sure that they do what we want, and that we can feasibly measure them. Then perhaps we can ask how we would measure individual students against these outcomes. Many schools have begun requiring portfolios that require students to demonstrate that somewhere in the course of their education they have met every one of the outcomes. Notice in such a way of thinking that active learning and student engagement and personal responsibility are implicated as well. If a student is required not simply to pass the curriculum, but also to show how and where they have gained key competencies – they are involved actively in the construction of their own college education. At the same time, if we are going to hold students responsible for certain outcomes, they must know clearly and

unambiguously what those outcomes are. Only then can they, as active learners, take responsibility for their own educational outcomes.

I am not sure that portfolios are the way to go.... but I do think that we need to be thinking in terms of outcomes for the entire curriculum, and finding a way to measure those outcomes. We must be able to offer evidence that our graduates have reached our expectations for a “liberally educated” adult. Then we can say with assurance that Milligan offers a high quality education.

In the same way that the overall curriculum should be framed in terms of student outcomes, so also should individual courses if we want to encourage students to become actively involved in their learning. Goals and outcomes do different things. Goals are often framed in terms of processes, not outcomes. Can we clearly articulate what a successful student in our classes should know or be able to do at the end of the course? In a little bit we will work through an exercise that might help us grapple with this distinction. But it is a distinction that is important if we are to encourage active engaged learning. And once we have identified what they should know, then we can be more assured that our assessment is appropriate. If we are asking for factual knowledge, then a multiple-choice test might be appropriate. If we are asking for the ability to analyze or synthesize, then certainly we need an instrument that measures that.

B. Conclusion

I have, I hope, thrown out a lot to think about. But it all revolves around ways that we can move toward higher educational quality. We have the potential to be known as a truly excellent liberal arts college, one which substantially integrates faith and learning. To be

recognized as such, we must first be able to assure ourselves and others of the quality of education we provide. To summarize, I have suggested that we must:

1. Continue to move toward more terminal degrees in our faculty.
2. Actively continue to grow as professional scholars and teachers.
3. Continue to examine our curriculum, but especially in the area of cultural diversity.
4. Constantly examine the quality of our teaching and use the results to improve our teaching.
5. Increase the quality and use of our teaching resources.
6. Develop mechanisms to increase active and engaged learning
7. Refocus our attention to student outcomes.
8. Develop throughout our college a culture of evidence.

These are my goals as we enter this school year. I invite you to join me in moving toward these goals.