A CLEARER VISION FOR INTEGRATION

In the fall of 2015, GCU’s initiative to integrate faith, learning and work moved into a third academic year with significant momentum from prior years. The summer months that preceded the fall semester provided ample time for reflection about developments in the prior year. During those months, while discussing the university’s Christian identity, President Brian Mueller worked to distinguish GCU’s approach to Christian education from models employed at other Christian institutions. Mueller explained to academic leaders and department heads that GCU may be described as a “missional community.” He employed the phrase to describe a community strategically united in carrying out a mission that centers on following Jesus Christ in what it says and what it does.

Missional communities differ from what some refer to as covenant communities wherein all members of a school commit to affirming and practicing the same faith. By contrast, GCU welcomes students from all walks of life regardless of their personal worldview commitments. In this way, the university intentionally cultivates a missional culture marked by service, grace and hospitality to all. As a missional community, GCU welcomes students, faculty and staff from all walks of life, some of whom may experience Christianity for the first time at the university.

This development is not an indication that GCU disregards doctrine or devalues traditional Christian commitments. Rather, it is to suggest that GCU places significant emphasis on the lifestyle that ought to result from right doctrine. In fact, as Mueller began challenging faculty and staff to embrace a missional strategy for Christian education, he and other leaders worked to increase clarity about GCU’s identity and commitments. A significant step in this direction involved the adoption of an Ethical Positions Statement that outlines key ethical principles and positions derived directly or indirectly from GCU’s Doctrinal Statement. The expressed purpose of the Statement is to “provide greater clarity, unity and alignment across the university on matters of ethics and morality” in order to “guide moral reasoning… across the campus.”

Two additional statements about the integration of faith, learning and work as well as the ethos of the faith-integration process were also adopted during the fall of 2015. A white paper entitled “Integration of Faith, Learning and Work at Grand Canyon University” outlines GCU’s definitions of faith and work integration, rationale for integrating and the ethos and culture surrounding integration within a missional context. Another document entitled “Statement on the Integration of Faith and Work,” demonstrates direct connections from GCU’s Doctrinal Statement to the integration of faith within the context of vocation. The second document centers on the institution’s resolves to promote human flourishing and instill a sense of vocational calling and purpose in its students, faculty and staff.

A final statement regarding faculty expectations
indicated unequivocally that “it is Grand Canyon University’s objective that the vast majority of its faculty believe in its Doctrinal Statement and Ethical Positions Statement.” Taken together these documents and statement of expectations provide increased clarity about the vision for faith integration at the university and the commitment of its leaders to provide excellent Christian education that engages the broader culture.

CLEARER GOALS AND STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATION

Integration of the Christian worldview into the curriculum became an intentional and consistent part of the programmatic development process during the 2015-2016 academic year. GCU’s centralized curriculum provides significant advantages over de-centralized models since centralization enables faculty to design a pervasive plan for sustaining the Christian worldview conversation across multiple courses in a program of study. Prior years saw an increase in focus on strategies for instructional integration but curricular integration was delayed briefly to make room for dialogue about appropriate goals for integration within GCU’s centralized curriculum.

To begin, GCU’s Christian worldview mission critical competency was revised to reflect an increased emphasis on ethical decision making and application within the context of vocation. By the summer of 2015, faculty had articulated a competency that clearly articulates the overarching goal of integration: “Graduates of GCU should be able to express aspects of the Christian worldview which affect human value and dignity, ethical decision making, academic disciplines and vocation.” With clarity about the distinctive nature of graduates who have engaged the Christian worldview throughout their time at the university, faculty leaders were in a better position to shape curricular and co-curricular aspects of a student’s experience to obtain desired outcomes.

Faculty, then, identified aspects of the new competency that were best addressed in courses such as (Christian Worldview (CWV-101) and aspects that were better suited for advanced courses within each student’s program of study. An ability to “express aspects of the Christian worldview,” for example, seems to require a focused dialogue about Christian worldview, which occurs naturally within the course by that name. By contrast, “ethical decision making, academic disciplines and vocation” are perhaps best addressed within courses related to students’ majors as they prepare for specific careers. Thus, it became clear that meeting GCU’s mission critical competency for Christian worldview integration would require careful discussion and design during the program development process. As a result, a strategic plan for integration across a program of study is now in place well in advance of individual course development.

With added clarity about the goals of integration, faculty and administrators are now better positioned to develop strategies for integration within the classroom and the curriculum. In collaboration with the colleges, the curriculum design department, then, created and implemented a process that facilitates consistent integration. This process entails a brief presentation outlining the curricular plan for ensuring integration occurs during the course of seeking programmatic approval through the Academic Affairs Committee. As a result, the process of curriculum design and development now entails regular presentation and discussion with the larger academic community for the sake of sharing ideas, ensuring accountability and enhancing consistency.

FACULTY DIALOGUE AND DEVELOPMENT IN YEAR 3

Year 3 of the faith integration initiative also featured greater attention to integration during college meetings and faculty training sessions. While integration was an important part of meetings and training in prior years, the third year saw increased ownership on the part of the faculty community. Thus, much of the burden for sustaining dialogue about integration shifted to individual colleges and faculty leaders within each academic area.

In some colleges a philosophy of integration was articulated to complement broader, university-level statements. Examples include the College of Science, Engineering and Technology’s statement about integration and the sciences and the College of Education’s educational philosophy for preparing teachers within a Christian university context. In other colleges, training materials and policy statements were created in order to ensure that instructors working at a distance enjoy the support available to faculty on the main campus. Examples here include roundtable dialogues about integration that were videotaped and added to the Faculty
Resource Center’s growing body of IFLW materials.

Additionally, faculty representatives from all colleges participated in monthly lunch and learn events focused on faith integration. In addition to brief presentations by the College of Theology, a faculty member from a different college presented on faith integration at each of these events. A series of meetings about Christian worldview and faith integration were also hosted at the Peoria and Tempe campuses during this time. President Mueller, the Provost and the Deans also participated in the dialogue at multiple points.

A final shift in responsibility occurred in the spring semester of 2016 with the formation of the faculty-based IFLW Task Force which includes representatives from all colleges. The chief purpose of the Task Force is to coordinate and lead in the process of integrating faith, learning and work across the university. This group meets regularly to identify key areas of opportunity and concern and to coordinate integration efforts across the university. Initial conversations within the Task Force centered on a perceived need to communicate details about integration more broadly so that full-time and part-time instructors are well-versed in the topic and fully involved in the effort. Some members suggested a need for all colleges to articulate a philosophy of integration that speaks to the unique characteristics, exigencies and opportunities afforded by particular academic disciplines. Other members suggested that additional input from their colleagues would be of value in charting clear a path forward.

The latter suggestion about the need for more input resulted in the launch of an IFLW survey near the end of the spring semester. The survey was designed to gather data about faculty perceptions related to faith integration. After requesting basic demographic data, questions attempted to ascertain faculty attitudes about integration and the degree to which they feel supported by the university and their respective colleges. Some questions probed perceptions about how deeply the integration process had become inculcated into the culture of the university. Members of the Task Force also conducted focus group interviews as a way of supplementing data gathered through the survey instrument. Data gathered from the process is still being analyzed due to the overwhelming number of respondents. Over 700 full-time and part-time instructors, administrators and staff participated in the survey and focus groups.

FROM INITIATIVE TO IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Significant changes have taken place during the prior year and major advancements have clearly occurred throughout the three years of GCU’s faith-integration effort. Perhaps none of the individual changes described above is as noteworthy as the overarching shift from an initiative to a key aspect of the university’s identity, mission and culture. After nearly three years, faculty and administrators sense that the initial phase of the integration process has given way to a deeper inculcation into campus culture. An effort that began with great ambition and enthusiasm more than two years ago has apparently transitioned to a more mature phase. Thus, the faith-based process previously referred to as an initiative has increasingly come to be regarded as a fundamental aspect of the university’s identity, mission and campus culture. Indeed, it would be difficult to adequately describe GCU and account for its growth and development without reference to its sustained attention to a singular foundation of Christian commitment and practice.

For instance, over the past three years, conversations about faith integration have regularly extended well beyond the classroom. As a result, GCU’s executive and academic leadership teams began to recognize that the institution’s Christian identity and mission had become central to the university as a whole and were influencing decisions at a basic level. Thus, the acronym “IFLW,” while still appropriate for classroom integration, was no longer sufficiently broad for campus-wide developments related to the faith.

Consequently, GCU’s leadership began speaking more broadly of the shared foundation that underlies all aspects of GCU’s identity and mission. As an interdenominational Christian university, GCU is diverse but has consistently cultivated unity around the core doctrines and common practices of the faith that centers on Jesus Christ. This Christ-centered heritage, shared convictions and commitment to Christian service provide a robust foundation for life and work at the university. As a result, “One Foundation” became the overarching umbrella for all faith-based aspects of the university and a firm basis for future growth and progress. This designation has not replaced IFLW altogether but
It has provided language that more adequately describes the pervasive nature of the university’s Christian identity.

LOOKING AHEAD TO COMING YEARS

Integration at the university now extends from the classroom to the larger campus and beyond as students, faculty and staff engage in community service and mission work. Faculty and students are drawn to GCU in many cases because of its clear commitments to the Christian faith and the attractive nature of a genuinely Christ-centered lifestyle. Growing participation in faculty lunch and learn events, prayer and praise gatherings, and IFLW speaker events suggests that the faculty has embraced faith integration. Students who graduate from the institution, whether they are Christians or not, regularly observe that significant benefits result from living and studying in a context shaped profoundly by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In short, the GCU community seems to have embraced the power of the Christian message and its potential for transformation.

Advancements in clarity with respect to the vision for integration as well as the goals, strategies and expectations have increased unity and alignment to the university’s mission. GCU has established a firm foundation of Christian commitment and conviction that will serve the institution well for years to come. As a result, GCU continues to expand its influence and deepen its impact on the West Valley. While room for growth remains, the university has set a trajectory for the future that is deeply rooted in biblical principles and Christian values. After three years of focused dialogue and consistent effort to integrate faith, learning and work, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Grand Canyon is emerging as the premier Christian university of the Southwest region. This can only be attributed to the power and presence of the Lord as he realizes his wise plans and purposes among us. May we be found faithful in responding to his leadership in years to come. Soli Deo Gloria.