A College at Risk Retrospective

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an insect perishes to the perilous jaws of the spider.

wound in grips of absolute darkness

bound by strings of misery

living on the edge of ...

screaming, struggling, suffocating

skittering, smelling, stalking

the web of life means death to those who are caught

Toni Christensen

Artwork by Nicole LaPage Schluter

A College at Risk Retrospective

Charles J. Kunert, Ph.D.

Note: Ten years ago, in April of 1988, I offered a homily in The Chapel of the Upper Room entitled "A College at Risk." It was originally presented on the fifth anniversary of the report of the National Commission of Excellence in Education entitled "A Nation at Risk." The homily called for a return to the core values and traits of Concordia as a college of the Lutheran Church; a college dedicated to academic excellence within the framework of the freedom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What appears below is a retrospective on that homily, an updated version of the original homily. It is framed in a much more positive view of what Concordia University currently is doing and anticipates what course it must pursue if it is to remain true to its mission.

Mark 10:15—"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

April, 1998 marked the 15th anniversary of the report of the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report, which received much media attention, was entitled "A Nation at Risk." After thoroughly examining the status of American public education, the authors of the report concluded that the United States was in danger of losing its position of power and prestige in the world due to an incredible decline in the basic skills of students graduating from our elementary and high schools. Secretary of Education William Bennett, a man who holds five doctorates in various fields, immediately called upon the education system of American to go "back to the basics." He was talking about a return to the traditional emphasis on the three "R's"—reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Most educators would agree that unless students understand the basics, they could not be expected to compete with others in the world who do. In basketball, coaches recognize the same concept. They have a term called "fundies" to describe those skills that are so fundamental to the way the game is played that players without them cannot compete. In basketball, the fundies include ball handling, passing, shooting, rebounding, and defensive footwork. Each year in practice, countless athletes are made to repeat these activities over and over again until they are perfected. This allows the team to progress to more sophisticated techniques found in complicated offensive and defensive plays. Great coaches like John Wooden, Pat Summit, and Dean Smith continually harp on this point when they present at coaching clinics.

Without mastering the fundamentals, neither basketball players nor schoolchildren will be able to successfully compete in their chosen fields of endeavor.

Today I wish to propose that Concordia University continues to be a "University at Risk." We remain in danger of losing our ability to compete both as an academic institution in the field of higher education and, perhaps more importantly, as an instrument of God in battle for the souls of human beings.

To be sure, positive strides have been made to reinvigorate and reinforce our central core values in the form of our recently adopted Mission Statement: Concordia University is a Christian university which prepares leaders for the transformation of society. A new vigor can be observed in the chapel program by any who choose to participate with the worshipping community here. Small group ministry has begun and may blossom into a campus-wide, dynamic opportunity for spiritual growth and renewal. Many students seem dedicated to the notion that service to others is a more admirable goal in a career than self-gratification. Faculty and staff members often share the importance of their faith with students and others. Students, faculty, and staff have been involved in joint activities of service to the community.

Academically, rigorous new assessment procedures point the way to curricular improvement. Student involvement in hands-on research, creative productions, and scholarly literary endeavors have transformed the way many students view the education endeavor. No longer do they view themselves as
mre recipients of information. They have become producers of new insights and understandings, real sculptors of the shape tomorrow will take. New computer-assisted learning technologies are available to all students and faculty, as a new fiber-optic cable has bisected campus.

Yet if we are to remain a dynamic and vibrant entity in the realm of American private higher education, we must be cognizant of the very real dangers posed by a lack of focus on the fundamental values of our hallowed institution. We must also recognize the signs of malaise and indifference to those values that are a continuing threat to our visibility.

While progress has been made, our job is by no means complete. Far too many students, faculty, and staff have failed to become a true part of the Concordia community in its deepest, spiritual aspects. On a good day, perhaps only 10% of the community gather for corporate worship. Dorm devotions, once a dynamic and vibrant part of the spiritual dimension of life on campus, are relegated to a few groups working on a sporadic basis in the privacy of their rooms. The bold witness to their faith by faculty members in the classroom has sometimes been replaced by an attempt to avoid offending those in the classroom who might not want to hear about Jesus. After all, we certainly don’t want to end up sounding like some televangelist. Rather than risking the possibility of giving offense, we remain silent.

In the academic arena, the risks are equally great. Increased numbers of students means larger class sizes and more papers to grade. The temptation to revert to those tried-and-true notes from past presentations rather than joining the students in the growth process can be too much to resist. The computer itself offers an opportunity to escape to the netherworld of the Internet. Surfing the Web takes precedence over scholarly research. We find it is much less stressful if we don’t challenge the students to the highest levels of academic achievement. After all, who will know the difference?

This continuing risk threatens our very existence. I am therefore calling on Concordia to return to the basics. In this case, the fundamentals which I am promoting are not the three ‘R’s’ but rather then three ‘T’s’—teaching, trusting, and telling.

Our primary focus as an academic institution must be on the venerable profession of teaching. That is what we do. It is far too easy to become distracted with bureaucratic activities and technological gadgetry. We must dedicte ourselves anew each day to enhancing the art of teaching students and all that implies. Each time we plan our day, we must ask ourselves as faculty how it is we may improve our teaching skills. Students must determine what the best course of action is for improving their learning. The task is never complete. It demands our fullest attention. It may sound simple, but the art of teaching and appropriate learning is not accomplished without strenuous effort.

The text above calls us to a simple, naive trust in the Lord. Perhaps the words of the famous hymn put it best: “I am Jesus’ Little Lamb.” Singing this hymn is an admission of our absolute inability to figure out God and know Him except by trust. Of all the farm animals, the sheep is perhaps the least capable of caring for itself. And the lamb is totally dependent on the shepherd for its care and nurture. A former basketball player of mine who raised sheep at home told of the lamb her family had to take into the house in order to make sure it was properly fed and didn’t get lost in the woods. Jesus is saying that in our text. Little children are similarly dependent on their parents for their direction and sustenance. And that is how we are to be with God. We are to trust. We are called to a complete unabashed recognition of our total dependence on God for everything we are and do. There is no need to get sophisticated about the idea; no need to couch it in the flowery language of theology. Trust, if it is to be fundamentally sound, must, first and foremost, be simple and child-like. As children turn over all of their cares and worries to their parents, we should do the same with our lives, turning them over completely to God’s care and guidance.

Finally, the third fundamental I call for a return to is telling. Jesus directs us plainly in Matthew 10:32, “Whoevers acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.” In order for us to be true to our Mission Statement and be known as a “Christian university,” we must be ready to make a bold proclamation of Jesus as our Lord to all around us. This is particularly true in the recruitment process. If we do not tell prospective students in loud, strong terms who we are and, more importantly, what we are, we have no right to call ourselves a Christian university. If we do not share our personal faith with our students in plain and uncompromising terms, we should not exist as an institution, for we will have failed our mission.

Teaching, trusting, and telling—the three T’s that can truly make us great. To proceed without due care of these fundamentals places us at great risk.

justification of noncapitalization

Lenore Edman

our very language is set up to isolate to prioritize to capitalize set up so i am more important than you not to mention our gods our trademarks our brand names

how can it be known whether i ask the question or whether it is you

i know i am not your opposite but it might be i am your complement it is even conceivable that you and i are the same it matters not who asks but you and i we both we all must seek the answers
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