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TOM CRADY AND KARL STUMO¹

“We’re Looking for a College—Not a Vocation”: Articulating Lutheran Higher Education to Prospective Students and Parents Seeking Relevance

American higher education is in a unique time of challenge. This is not a secret. Think of the staggering national economy, the radically shifting demographics of college-going students, the atrophy in many cases of family incomes of our students, the evolving paradigms of teaching and learning through technology, and of course this heightened environment of accountability driven by both the government agencies and disconcerting markets of students. All those challenges have certainly sharpened the ways in which our institutions need to and are providing evidence of outstanding learning. These outcome-based measures affect students on our campuses, but they also can sharpen the message of the long term, post-graduation “benefits” of our students.

The title of this talk is meant to be somewhat provocative. But it is also a title that seeks to address in many cases the clear challenges of articulating the value and nature of the distinctions of our Lutheran higher education institutions. What you won’t receive is some tightly designed set of “best practices” in “messaging” the merits of Lutheran higher education at your particular university or college. Our 26 ELCA colleges are all unique; as a result, there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for expressing the message of our schools—no green or red Lutheran Book of Worship with marketing tactics and standards that we all could consult. That being said, we are encouraged of late by discussions of

the various core elements of Lutheran higher education and how these elements can be expressed within different populations. We will address some of these core elements below.

Our goal today is to share some background to the ways in which our Lutheran colleges are currently expressing their shared Lutheran heritage and Lutheran approaches to learning within our diverse market. As a result, our presentation will ask important “market-orientated” questions.

Given the overarching theme of “commodification in higher education,” we must ask ourselves if our contexts of learning are indeed unique. We will also ask how our “messaging” is perceived by certain students and the marketplace. Finally, we will examine some of the very contemporary understandings and distinctions of Lutheran higher education and we will ask how we might better connect those core elements to the questions, needs, and wants of perspective students.

Recruitment within the Marketplace (Stumo)

From an enrollment perspective, the commodification of higher education is related to differentiation and distinction. If there is no relative quality difference between and among our college options for students, a commodification theory would suggest that those students and their parents will likely choose the lowest cost option if the institution (1) has the relevant

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major, (2) is the right distance from home and—the most difficult to define—(3) simply “feels right.” Given this reality, our institutions have depended on the important distinctions of their location, their size, their majors, their perceived academic reputation, and—forgive me—their “brand,” a word to which many on our campuses have some resistance.

This cost-benefit analysis by students, parents, and recruitment officers alike brings a number of challenges. In a recent publication, Javier Cevallos, president of Kutztown University, a public institution in Pennsylvania, writes:

We are all familiar with the changes the Millennials bring with them. Chief among those is a sense that higher education is no longer a privilege, or even a right, but rather a commodity that can be acquired in many ways and under many delivery systems. Commoditization, thus, means that our stakeholders do not perceive a difference between the “outcome/product/service” we offer, and those offered by our peers or competitors. If we focus only on specific course content or acquiring a specific set of skills, of course they are correct. The rising cost of higher education also contribute to the sense that anyone can simply buy an education. Millennials also bring unparalleled technology savvy, and when combined with a concept of education as a commodity, this creates a totally different environment, one which challenges some of our most dearly held traditions. (Cevallos 14)

This says it well. What makes an institution unique? Certainly there are core elements of Lutheran higher education, but do we know whether these are unique? Or whether those on the outside perceive them as unique? When is the last time you sat through an admissions presentation from a large state university with a robust marketing budget? An online admissions video from Arizona State University highlights students professing to have found meaning and passion in their life, a call to impact the world and the community around them—what Lutherans might call “the neighbor.” These are the messages used by Arizona State, the single largest traditional public research institution in the country.

How does the University of Minnesota articulate its academic experience to prospective students? In a word, they do it *well*. If we peruse their 135 majors, we find everything from finance to neuroscience to Italian. Their materials also speak of finding a great fit *for you*, a university Honors program for students who “have an intense passion for learning,” freshman seminars, small classes, world-class instructors, and unique topics making the freshman seminars increasingly popular among first-year students. We also find four-year graduation rates and also a

guarantee graduation within four years (so important in the mind of the parent), “if you agree to work regularly with an academic adviser, and maintain a positive student record” (“University of Minnesota”). They also highlight studying abroad (300 programs in 60 countries), service learning, getting involved in the community (again, what Lutherans might call serving one’s neighbor), leadership, living-communities, and so on. These are characteristics that are familiar to us, and other schools are conveying them well.

“Students are familiar with characteristics of ‘competitor’ schools that resemble, at least on websites and promotional materials, what we offer.”

So when our admissions counselors and folks “out in the field” work with students, those students are familiar with characteristics of “competitor” schools that resemble, at least on websites and promotional materials, what we offer. This is true not only of flagship institutions but also of strong regional universities and secular private institutions. Lutheran schools in Minnesota compete with Mankato State, St. Cloud State, and more; Concordia University in Moorhead, Minnesota directly competes with Moorhead State and North Dakota State. At Pacific Lutheran University, one of our top public competitors is Western Washington University, which is a very strong regional public setting at Bellingham, right on the Puget Sound, with 15,000 students and 160 academic programs. Western Washington is a nationally recognized institution providing excellent education at an affordable cost. Forbes and Kiplinger’s rank it as a top value in education. That gives you a sense of the landscape, “the market,” and the background for our challenging work to make ELCA schools stand out.

Enrollment and the Market (Craday)

People often ask me why I left Dartmouth to work at Gustavus. I often say I was insane at Dartmouth and Gustavus is truly a good match for my own core values. About a month after I moved to Gustavus, in fact, my son said to me: “I’ve seen you more in the past two months than I have in the past two years”—and I even lived on campus at Dartmouth. It is good to be working at a small private liberal arts college again.

I want to talk about the current national market landscape and to give some metrics concerned with what we’re facing in enrollment issues. What is most important to us with student application patterns? First, the number of applications prospective students send out to individual colleges went up

by about 10 percent from 2006 to 2012.² Last year, for the first time, Gustavus had a student apply for 24 institutions at once. Consider the price of applying for 24 institutions and that person actually came to Gustavus.

Second, we turn to the national average on yield rate. (“Yield” in college admissions is the percentage of students who choose to enroll in a particular college or university after having been offered admission.) The yield at both public and private institutions has dropped precipitously over the past 10 years. That’s highly concerning. Moreover, because the yield in the 1990s was much more *stable* than now, we could rely on it. The yield at private colleges has dropped from around 37 percent to about 26 percent—a very low yield rate. The Ivy League indicates that their yield is 70-80 percent. Given these realities, the way we shape our strategies for bringing students on campus in order to “meet enrollment” has changed dramatically. For every 1000 students we admitted in 2001, we now have to admit 450 more.

What is more, the average “discount rate” over this same period has increased 19 percent. An institution’s discount rate marks the *price* of an institution (that is, the “sticker price”) in relation to the actual *cost*—what a student and his/her family actually pay for college. The discount rate can be broken down into several different categories, including the first year discount and discount rates that do or do not include state and federal aid (and in some instances that is calculated differently).

The other component of discount rate, which is more difficult to control, is tuition remission. If an ELCA college admits students from other institutions that have tuition remission, that comes right off the top of the financial aid budget. It is also very difficult to predict. All schools are now considering ways to try to regulate discounting due to remission to a certain degree. Many institutions do regulate it; they say if you give us one student we will give you one, or we will take five students this year because that is what is in our budget and so on.

But the most interesting thing when it comes to financing education is that we are seeing families behave in ways that reflect their assumptions about cost. About 43 percent of families rule out an institution simply by looking at the price; 51 percent rule out an institution based on cost at the time applying; 63 percent rule out a college after admission; and 69 percent do so after financial aid. In other words, the timing and manner in which we communicate cost, price, and discounting to families is absolutely essential. At Gustavus, we now bring parents right into the interview with us to try to demystify these terms and explain what they can expect from scholarships, merit aid, and need-based aid. We have to think many steps ahead of where families are at a given point in time.

According to Sallie Mae’s 2013 Summary Report on “How America Pays for College,” attitudes about borrowing money to finance college have changed dramatically over the past several years. While 86 percent of students strongly agree that college is an “investment in the future,” and 62 percent are “willing to stretch financially,” only 58 percent of students (and 49 percent of students’ parents) would rather borrow money than not attend. The number is down 9 percentage points from just 5 years ago (“How America Pays” 13). For institutions with an endowment of more than 300 million dollars, the endowment income into the operating budget allows much more flexibility with financial aid, both in terms of merit-based and need-based scholarships. But for schools with more modest endowments, it is nearly impossible to fund college education without taking out student loans, even as 42 percent of students and 51 percent of parents resist doing so. Clearly, too, the financial crisis of 2008 was game changer in admissions. Many parents were *unable* to borrow against their homes because home values dropped. For all practical purposes that has not changed today; even if it has, the Sallie Mae statistics and many other sources tell us that families are simply *unwilling* to borrow.

“While 86 percent of students strongly agree that college is an ‘investment in the future,’ and 62 percent are ‘willing to stretch financially,’ only 58 percent of students (and 49 percent of students’ parents) would rather borrow money than not attend. The number is down 9 percentage points from just 5 years ago.”

To take one extreme example: The family of a Gustavus applicant had a \$700,000 home and they seemed to be making \$400,000/year. Despite these assets, they didn’t want to borrow anything, they didn’t want to pay their parental contribution, and they wanted financial aid from us. I wanted to say, “I’m sorry—go sell a car or something.” I didn’t say that—but I almost did. And so, even families that have the ability to pay are not seeing college as a value given the cost. This is quite different than what we saw a decade or two ago, and it is incredibly disconcerting.

This trend also affects other students at the college or university. Schools that are tuition-driven often rely on wealthier families to help with net tuition revenue so that the institutions can fund students who don’t have the ability

to pay. Given new reluctances, we have to use new strategies to talk about why it is a value to invest in college.

What are students and parents looking for in a college education? The leading reason students give for attending their particular institution is its good academic reputation (63.8 percent mark it as “very important”). That really doesn’t vary much from regional to national trends. The second reason is to get a good job, with 55.9 percent reporting this as very important. What I hear often is that parents do not want their son or daughter moving back into their house after he or she graduates from college. Actually, the most frequent comment is that parents want their daughters and sons to graduate in four years so they don’t have to pay a fifth year of tuition.

Another leading reported factor in choosing one’s particular college or university is the amount of financial aid offered, with 45.6 percent of students ranking it as very important. This reason can actually undercut retention since financial aid does not necessarily guarantee a good fit between student and institution. So, if the student is basing their decision to go to a certain college based on the financial aid package, it might be her or his third choice and we worry about attrition later on. Other factors include the right size (38.8 percent), access to graduate/professional school (32.8 percent), and preferences of parents (15.1 percent). At Gustavus, we advise against simply following parents’ recommendations; in our experience those students were likely to leave more frequently. Finally, a relatively small percentage of students were attracted to their school for its religious affiliation; only 7.6 percent of students find it very important. Now that may seem disturbingly low. However, the cooperative institutional research program at UCLA, where these statistics come from, is administered before the institutions influence on that student (Pryor 41).

At Gustavus, 52 percent of our students are Lutheran and that has remained with 2-3 percentage points over the last 20 years. And yet, when I talk to parents and families, the church-relatedness of Gustavus rarely comes up. What I think happens is that parent expectations and values assert subtle influence over a very long period of time. If it is simply assumed that a child might go to a Lutheran college, then that child might apply and enroll without explicitly considering its Lutheran-relatedness.

How do we aid students? There’s need based aid, merit aid, loans, external scholarships and so on. Merit aid is particularly important when it comes to financing our colleges. Why? Let’s say that a college’s price is \$49,695. A “full pay” family is still offered \$5,000 in merit based scholarships. They tend to feel fairly positive about that and so, when they enroll, they generate a lot of net tuition revenue. When we award merit aid, we use very sophisticated regression models to determine the aid based on a student’s academic qualifications, their parents’ ability to pay, and a variety of other variables to determine how much it takes to get a student to pay her or his deposit. I would argue that without merit aid—unless you’re an Ivy League school—you simply cannot enroll the class that you need to enroll to make budget.

The Lutheran component is extremely important to many of the Lutheran colleges and universities. We don’t always talk about it explicitly but it’s implied throughout everything one sees on our campus; at Gustavus, our core values are in our dining hall and campus center and they are espoused by different constituencies on campus. But talking about our Lutheran identity directly proves to be a turn off for some students. When students say to me, “I really feel comfortable here,” I know that they can attribute that to our core values.



- Is Lutheran, not sectarian; it favors the Lutheran tradition and Lutheran values, including religious services, but does not seek religious uniformity (all members of the campus community are invited to daily chapel and other religious observances, but participation is voluntary);
- Has as its goal combining a mature understanding of faith with intellectual rigor to the benefit of society, believing faith and education inform each other;
- Purposely explores moral development;
- Honors individuals, but believes that individuals find fulfillment in community;
- Values diversity and welcomes students, faculty, staff, and administrators of other faiths or no religious tradition, yet expects all faculty, staff and administrators to support the mission of the college;
- Appreciates humor, including directing some of that humor toward itself.

Lutheran Identity as Officially Articulated (Stumo)

There are some misnomers about how institutions go about articulating their Lutheran college values. Even if the articulation of college identities has changed over time, conversations about Lutheran higher education still happen in church basements—sometimes over hot dish. Still, it is necessary to articulate our identities in the right way to the right audience, and the first way we do that is through our mission statements. Tom and I spent time looking over the websites of many of our ELCA colleges and picked out what we believe are some representations of expression of mission as well as the expression of our Lutheran values on other webpages.

“Even if the articulation of college identities has changed over time, conversations about Lutheran higher education still happen in church basements—sometimes over hot dish.”

When reading these, we need to attend to the old classic balance of “feature and benefit.” Augsburg College in Minneapolis does a nice job of balancing feature and benefit; the college educates students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders. This experience is supported by an engaged community that is committed to international diversity in its life and work. Augsburg education is defined by excellence in the liberal arts and professional studies and is guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran church. It is also shaped by its urban and global setting. A prospective student might see this missional statement and say, “What’s in it for me?” Luther might ask, “What does this mean?,” as he does again and again in the Catechism writings.

Many at Augsburg have expressed Augsburg’s distinction. I think “The Augsburg Promise” as articulated by President Paul Pribbenow has gone a long way in

articulating this distinctiveness. It unfolds through three components. The first is the *concept of vocation*, inherited from our Lutheran theological tradition and embedded in the Augsburg curriculum. Vocation is not about self-fulfillment but a deeply nuanced way of helping students explore their gifts and commitments, understand the arc of their lives, and embrace how their work in the world has significance. The second expression is academic excellence, or rather, “academic growth and achievement in terms of both access—how our students are welcomed as part of our diverse community—and excellence—the standards we set and the support we offer to ensure that their education is of the highest order” (Pribbenow). The third component is about equipping Augsburg students for the lives that they will lead in the world. An education grounded in the liberal arts must aim at ensuring that our students are educated across a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. At the same time, a college community like Augsburg must consider how students are informed with certain skills and habits that will prepare themselves for citizenship and leadership. There is “feature-benefit” language here and we all need to sharpen that.

We turn now to my own university, Pacific Lutheran University. The middle name of PLU can be both a strength and an absolute challenge. The Pacific Northwest is sometimes referred to as the “none zone,” meaning that when residents are asked about their religious affiliation, the leading response is to check “none.” At PLU, we say that we are proud of our middle name. It speaks directly to our Lutheran heritage and that tradition’s call and commitment to academic excellence, academic freedom, and a learning atmosphere where all perspectives on faith and reason are expressed openly. This is what Lutheran education has been all about since Martin Luther. Obviously, we also try to lift up those elements of Lutheran higher education in an inclusive way.

On the Gustavus Adolphus webpage entitled “Lutheran Heritage,” one finds an interesting balance of missional language and outreach language. The mission insists

upon freedom of inquiry and criticism in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Now I'm going to challenge the accessibility of one of the descriptions; the site "explains" that the Lutheran tradition "prefers paradoxes to dogmatism or ideological 'certainties.'" I know Gustavus's academic profile is a little higher than PLU's, but that description seems less than accessible to even great students. At any rate, lower on the page one sees articulated the way Gustavus expresses this Lutheran tradition. It has the goal of combining a mature understanding of faith with intellectual rigor to the benefit of society. It believes that faith and education inform one another. I certainly think a student can break through all of that. This is a model website for many.

I also want to commend Wartburg on some provocative language. The main message is that Wartburg is "A Welcoming Place." It highlights the claim that, "Lutheran or not," it is a place for you. Then, consider what we recruitment officers call "positioning": "Just as Notre Dame doesn't apologize for being Roman Catholic, Wartburg doesn't apologize for being Lutheran. While we are unapologetic about our identity as a college of the church, we are equally vigorous in our efforts to welcome and include others." That is compelling. That is language that breaks through denominational backgrounds. I wouldn't doubt that the Wartburg staff uses that language directly in interviews and at college fairs and in their work with perspective students.

Lutheran Identity as Commonly Misunderstood

Our official websites and promotional materials articulate these mission statements and explanations of our Lutheran identities rather well. But it is another thing to ask whether the message is well received—especially by prospective students and their parents. As a way of testing this, we asked the recruitment and enrollment staffs at Pacific Lutheran University and Gustavus Adolphus College about marketing Lutheran higher education. Specifically, we asked our colleagues: "Do perspective students and parents understand the tenets and values of Lutheran higher education? Do you believe that students are willing to pay more [for these tenets and values]?" Here are their responses:

- "In general the students and parents I work with have very little understanding of the tenets and value of Lutheran higher education. They're much more interested in majors, student life, athletics, arts, and especially outcomes that happen as a result of attending our Lutheran college."
- "I believe that even students of parents who attend Lutheran schools are decreasingly willing to pay for it. In fact, my old pastor preached against student debt, particularly referencing 'those expensive Lutheran schools.'"



A Welcoming Place

Lutheran or not, there's a place for you here. Wartburg College is a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Just as Notre Dame doesn't apologize for being Roman Catholic, Wartburg doesn't apologize for being Lutheran. While we are unapologetic about our identity as a college of the church, we are equally vigorous in our efforts to welcome and include others. We recognize God's image within every person. Students, faculty, and staff of all races, ethnicities, faiths, sexual orientations, gender identities, and philosophies are welcomed and invited to participate in a process of critical reflection on their most foundational commitments in life. We are committed to diversity and inclusion on our campus, not in spite of our heritage but precisely because of it.

- “I don’t believe that students that choose our Lutheran college do it specifically for the tenets of Lutheran higher education; they choose our schools because it simply ‘feels right.’”
- “Washington State has been recognized as one of the most un-churched states in the United States with a declining church membership. The combination of having Lutheran in your middle name and an un-churched state makes it difficult to recruit perspective students who are not otherwise connected to or familiar with Lutheran higher education. Students pass by our table during college fairs because they think our middle name (‘Lutheran’) makes us a bible school.”

Those are voices “from the field,” so to speak. I (Stumo) too find that the “Lutheran” part of Pacific Lutheran University often presents an obstacle in the minds of our perspective students. And yet, once I articulate what “Lutheran” means in the curriculum and student life, it becomes a point of distinction. But note that distinction happens only *after* I or another articulates what Lutheran means. And many of us agree that that is a really hard thing to do.

What then Shall We Do?

Those in admissions and marketing on our campuses need to dig deeply into the good work that is being done in articulating Lutheran identity in a curricular and collegiate context.

Take “vocation” as a leading example. Many of us in recruitment and enrollment find it difficult to speak meaningfully with prospective students about vocation. Or at least when we use that word, it seems to lose the essential connotations and context that should go with it: critical and humble inquiry, otherness, diversity, service, justice, and so on. In fact, I would argue that Jesuit colleges and universities have done a better job “leveraging” service and justice in comparison to Lutheran institutions. Still, there are exceptions. Paul Pibbenow makes a really nice argument for *semper reformanda* (“always reforming”) as one of the tenants of our common callings (Swanson). In short, the history of the church in higher education is well positioned for ongoing reforms that benefit the common good. And many of the same pieces are articulated by many of us in different ways: critical questioning, freedom of expression, protection of learning, a sense of community, the intrinsic value of the whole creation, the gifts God gives humans, discerning one’s vocation, service throughout one’s life, and so on. And so, we have the tools to be able to “position” vocation well.

Still, communications professionals will tell us that the articulation of our Lutheran identities needs to be based in solid strategies of message development and message identification. We have to do our homework, we have to listen to what our market says and value what it says is valuable. But how do we do that? Many institutions talk about the market research that asks students, parents, alumni, and other constituents those “messaging” questions. We ask current students, “Are you experiencing what we said you would experience in the recruitment process?” That will test the *validity* of an institution’s messages. We also present messages to perspective students through market analysis, asking: “Do these messages resonate with your interests, values, and aspirations?” That tests the *relevance* of messaging. So we spend much time asking which messages are accurate, which are important, and which test well against the interests, aspirations, and values of our perspective students.

“The articulation of our Lutheran identities needs to be based in solid strategies of message development and message identification.”

We need to connect those messages about the needs of the market to the strengths of our Lutheran higher education contexts. This is the “blocking and tackling” of leveraging our identities, although we typically use the terms “credible,” “relevant,” “differentiating,” and “compelling.”

When we ask a family, “Are you willing to pay more?,” we have to have a good set of reasons why they should be compelled to invest in our school over one that may present itself with similar characteristics at a lower price. That is the commodification connection. And then, of course, we need to analyze our communication channels: How do these conversations happen?

What gets the most visibility: print media or electronic conversations through social media? Obviously the media of our stories have changed over the years, and this might change the stories some themselves. Many of our perspective students and their parents are looking for those authentic stories about the nature of our institutions through the voices of our current students, which is probably most likely to happen on Twitter. Often our best ambassadors are our students and alumni. We need to enable them to tell their own authentic stories through multiple media. Then, the rest of us need to connect the dots between their stories, the core elements of Lutheran higher education, and the questions that

our perspective students are asking. Finally, we also need to “message” to those who influence prospective students—to their coaches, folks in church circles, counselors, high school teachers, community college advisors, and—not least importantly—to eventual employers.

Some will say of all of this risks the “commodification of Lutheran higher education.” We happen to think that they are tactics just strategic enough—just savvy enough—to ensure that a new generation of students will be able to find their callings and a life of meaning and service by choosing to attend Lutheran colleges and universities.

Endnotes

1. Editor’s note: The authors collaborated on their research and made this joint presentation at the 2013 Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference. The author’s name is given next to a section title that he presented exclusively.

2. Statistics in this section are taken from Sallie Mae’s national study of college students and parents (see “How America Pays” below); from the Cooperative Institutional Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (see Pryor below); as well as from data collected at Gustavus Adolphus College and peer institutions.

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