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LAMONT ANTHONY WELLS

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Maintaining Our Lutheran Identity: A Source of Strength

We gather in commitment to address a matter of profound importance—the well-being of the dedicated staff, faculty, and administration within the realm of Lutheran higher education. Our mission extends far beyond the boundaries of traditional academia; it encompasses the nurturing of the human spirit through rest, creativity and innovation, religious diversity and pluralism, and the preservation of our Lutheran identity within the academy.

In our exploration of these critical dimensions, we can draw wisdom and inspiration from the profound insights of the authors in our book *So That All May Flourish: The Aim of Lutheran Higher Education*. In this resource we have an opportunity to reflect upon the broader context of Lutheran higher education especially among the Network of ELCA colleges and universities (NECU). However, as we embark on this journey, we must first acknowledge the painful reality of Finlandia University's closure this year, a poignant reminder of the challenges we face in this endeavor together.

Rest: Nurturing the Soul of Educators

In the relentless pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, it is easy to overlook the importance of rest. The trends of teacher burnout in the academic world are deeply troubling, and their toll on our educators is undeniable.

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Burnout not only erodes the well-being of individuals but also undermines the very quality of education we provide.

As we aspire to a state and season of flourishing in our lives we must recognize that all of God's creation need rest from our mental, emotional, professional, and physical labor. The realities of professional burnout within multiple areas in our academic institutions are key indications of the need to draw from faith traditions and practices that support renewing principles. As a network we have the opportunity to strengthen and encourage each other not to ignore the toll our dedication and commitment to our mission takes on all of us. It is only when our colleagues are well-rested and rejuvenated that they can guide our students towards their full potential. We cannot effectively nurture the minds and souls of our students without first nurturing ourselves.

It is a recognition that transcends time, echoing the sentiments of Martin Luther himself, who said, "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." These words underscore the necessity of spiritual renewal and rest even amidst the busiest of schedules.



Creativity and Innovation: Embracing Change for Growth

Creativity and innovation are the lifeblood of education, and they must be embraced wholeheartedly. In a world marked by rapid change and evolving challenges, our commitment to fostering a culture of creativity and innovation is paramount. Innovation is a key cornerstone of Lutheran higher education. Our institutions have a rich history of adapting to changing times while staying true to our values.

In so many ways, we must see innovation on our campuses and curriculum as essential, not because it can guarantee a successful education environment, but because it refreshes the fact that we all are called to continue to learn and grow. Embracing innovation allows us to remain relevant in an ever-evolving educational landscape, fostering an environment where all can flourish. Stagnation is the enemy of progress, and our role and calling in higher education is not just to impart knowledge but also to inspire growth through innovative thinking.

Religious Diversity and Pluralism: Celebrating Differences

One of the powerful hallmarks NECU institutions and growing value in Lutheran higher education is our commitment to religious diversity and pluralism. Our campuses are enriched by a tapestry of faiths, creating an environment of dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect. This commitment aligns harmoniously with the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who famously said, "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

As we navigate the vast seas of diversity, we should echo the sentiments of recently published resource, "So That All May Flourish," emphasizing that each person's faith journey is unique and deserving of recognition and respect. This inclusive approach not only enriches our educational experience but also fosters a profound sense of belonging.

Maintaining Our Lutheran Identity: A Source of Strength

Balancing our faith with our academic pursuits can be a delicate task, but it is also a source of strength for our institutions. We must remain steadfast and rooted in preserving

our Lutheran identity within the academy. This identity is not a mere adornment but a cornerstone that sets us apart in the world of higher education. Our commitment to Lutheran values, theology, and social statements is what makes our institutions unique. It is a beacon of light for those seeking an education rooted in faith, curiosity, and openness to different ways and possibilities.

Belonging: Inclusive Communities

In our commitment to well-being and flourishing, we must create inclusive communities that foster a deep sense of belonging. NECU is expanding our diversity in strong ways with several schools growing their enrollment within populations of people in the global majority. Supporting affirmative action is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic imperative, harnessing the talents and perspectives of individuals from all walks of life. With this growth we do have some challenges of being prepared to create atmospheres of welcome, hospitality, and inclusive environments. We are seeing this manifested with triggering low retention rates of students, particularly students of color, who bravely enroll at our schools. It is crucial to ensure that every member of our community feels valued, supported, and included.

The Mission of ELCA Colleges and Universities

Our commitment to these principles is not isolated; again, we all are a part of a broader network of ELCA colleges and universities. Together, we share a common mission, a commitment to nurturing well-rounded individuals who are not only academically prepared but also spiritually enriched. Our collective strength lies in our shared values and dedication to excellence in education.

The Painful Reality of Finlandia University

Before I conclude, I must address the somber reality of Finlandia University's closure this year. It serves as a stark reminder of the challenges we face in the world of higher education. It underscores the importance of our mission,

the need for adaptability, and the urgency of nurturing the well-being of our institutions including our staff, faculty, and administration.

In closing, the well-being of our educational network rests upon the pillars of rest, creativity and innovation, religious diversity and pluralism, and the unwavering preservation of our Lutheran identity within the academy. As we continue to navigate the complexities of our roles, let us remember the words of my predecessor, The

Rev. Dr. Mark Wilhelm, who said to me as I began this role as executive director, "Lutheran education is a manifestation of the church's mission in higher education." It is my hope that our mission is not just to educate but to flourish—to ensure that all may flourish.

Thank you for your dedication to Lutheran higher education, and may we continue to nurture the well-being of our staff, faculty, and administration, fostering environments where all can thrive.

• SAVE THE DATE •

Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota | July 8-10, 2024

Topic: Educational Access: Lutheran Roots, Contemporary Practices