

Presbyterian Outlook

“What does it mean to be a church-related college?”

By Dr. Tim Summerlin

Fall 2008

What does it mean to be a Presbyterian-related college or university these days? On the one hand, we are told that our increasingly secular age has reduced such links to tepid “values” affirmations (call that *The Dying of the Light* syndrome). On the other, we are reassured that college students widely affirm their spiritual interest and that colleges with strong faith connections are increasingly popular (the *God in the Quad* factor). How do we reconcile such disparate trends, and how do they play out in our denomination?

As you would guess, there is no simple answer to those questions. Just as congregations, presbyteries and synods struggle to follow their missions wisely, so do PCUSA-related institutions of higher education find their own paths. These range from acknowledging the historical roots of a church relationship to explicitly affirming a commitment to a “rigorous Christian education.” In between lie many versions of “intentional” affiliation, often guided by a covenant periodically reaffirmed with presbytery or synod.

At Schreiner, for example, the relationship is anchored in a synod covenant and strong PCUSA representation on its board. Our holistic, student-centered philosophy supports campus ministry, church relations and Christian vocations programs. Specific grants are available for PCUSA students. We partner with congregations and individual church members to fund the educational costs of qualified Presbyterian Pan American School graduates. As only some 8% of our students are Presbyterian, campus ministry is richly ecumenical. Happily, both the number of campus ministry programs and total student participation are growing significantly. Interest in our religion major and seminary study among graduates are also. We consider our highly regarded Learning Support Services program for students with learning disabilities to be an expression of our faith affiliation.

Similar programs, of course, are echoed at sister colleges across the country, though each profile is unique. Some institutions are known for a strong Biblical component to their core. At others coherence is sought by requiring faith statements of faculty. Service learning components are nearly universal. The higher percentage of Presbyterian students at some institutions may shape campus ministry. Individual institutional history is a major factor in defining these relationships, but my experience persuades me that the respective presidents take seriously the challenge of living out their church relatedness, whatever the model.

Basically, all of these institutions are committed to the principle that one can get a quality undergraduate education without parking one’s faith at the door. As Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities (APCU) executive director Gary Luhr puts it, they have a common goal: “To produce good people who will make the world better.” And membership in APCU is a common thread connecting almost all of the sixty five PCUSA-related institutions. Annually, the presidents of approximately half of that group

meet, and part of each session is directed to wrestling with just what the relationship can and should mean. Indeed, this topic will constitute the entire focus of next April's APCU conference.

These leaders are realists, and none of them begins such discussions by asking, "What can the denomination do for us?" Direct financial support from the church to higher education is not part of our experience, as it is in some denominations, nor is it expected at a time when denominational membership is in decline and the church is trimming its own staff. A silver lining to that cloud, however, is that this reality causes us to step back and ask, "How do we, as centers of learning that affirm our tie to Reformed Christianity, actively demonstrate that tie?"

APCU's strategic plan stresses partnership with the church. Member colleges have long contributed to the General Assembly Council's mission goals of Leadership and Vocation, Justice and Compassion, Spirituality and Discipleship, Evangelism and Witness in scores of ways, and they have the potential to do much more in ways consistent with their educational mission. Recent expanded dialogue between GAC and APCU (with executive director Linda Valentine attending our meetings and APCU's Luhr attending GAC meetings) suggests that interest in promoting this partnership is mutual.

Let me offer one illustration of what can grow from such a partnership. Last year, Presbyterian College secured a grant from the Lilly Foundation to support conversations among congregations, seminaries and church-related colleges concerning the impact of globalization on the church. At present, five APCU institutions (each teamed with a seminary and one or more PCUSA congregations) are pursuing their respective projects.

Schreiner University, for instance, has been privileged to team up with Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and congregations in Kerrville and San Antonio, Texas. We have created a new course entitled "The Ethical Implications of Globalization" to be taught next spring and to include travel to Saltillo, Mexico. The goal of all five of these projects is to stimulate a common discussion of one of the formative realities of our time, one that the church must face imaginatively to maintain its authentic voice. These seed projects have the potential to develop into larger collaborations that mutually benefit Christian witness and academic inquiry.

Last month's Theological Education issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook* presented a set of perspectives from Presbyterian seminaries. The stories varied, but the recurring subtext was "change." Change in student demographics, curricula, faculty, hot issues, and concepts of ministry are inherent in the seminaries' pursuit of their mission. That fact is no less true for the colleges or the larger church in their respective missions. One hopeful change that I see on the horizon is the growing recognition that PCUSA-related colleges and universities can be first-class learning institutions and, in their individual ways, help articulate and promote values embraced by the church.