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Laurie R. Matthias

Trinity International University

Karen Wrobbel

Trinity International University

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Abstract

The overriding purpose of Christian liberal arts colleges in the United States is to offer a comprehensive education to their students. Inherent in this goal is the deliberate integration of Christian faith with academic content; it is, after all, what differentiates Christian institutions of higher education from their secular counterparts (Muntz & Crabtree, 2006). The mission statement of Trinity International University (TIU) in Deerfield, Illinois is to “educate men and women for faithful participation in God’s redemptive work in the world by cultivating academic excellence, Christian fidelity and lifelong learning.” The Division of Education that prepares candidates for certification to teach in K-12 schools in the state of Illinois defines its more specific mission thusly: “to develop highly qualified Christian teachers who view teaching as a mission; they nurture their students, reflect critically on their practice, and facilitate classroom experience to maximize the potential of all learners.” Implicit in this conceptual framework is that faculty members will engage in their own integration of faith and learning so that they can model what it means to be Christian teachers.

In February 2009, as professors in TIU’s Division of Education, we informally surveyed a group of traditional undergraduate education majors during a department chapel session to discover their perceptions about the integration of faith and learning within our department. We were curious to find out whether or not what we believed we were doing in our classes regarding the integration of faith and learning was in fact impacting our teacher candidates. After defining the concept of the integration of faith and learning in broad terms, we asked them what has helped them become “highly qualified Christian teachers” within our education program. Their responses primarily focused on the more external aspects of demonstrating personal faith; i.e., professors’ leading in devotions at the beginning of classes and modeling Christian behaviors and attitudes. Admittedly, we were somewhat disappointed with their answers, concluding that our teacher candidates were not viewing integration as an academic endeavor that requires deep intellectual as well as spiritual analysis (Hasker, 1992). This concern led to a desire to explore their perceptions further in a more formal way, leading us to review the literature on the integration of faith and learning in Christian colleges and universities and to conduct this particular research study.

Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of the Integration of Faith and Learning as Christian Vocation

Laurie R. Matthias, Trinity International University and Karen Wrobbel, Trinity International University

Introduction

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beginning of classes and modeling Christian behaviors and attitudes. Admittedly, we were somewhat disappointed with their answers, concluding that our teacher candidates were not viewing integration as an academic endeavor that requires deep intellectual as well as spiritual analysis (Hasker, 1992). This concern led to a desire to explore their perceptions further in a more formal way, leading us to review the literature on the integration of faith and learning in Christian colleges and universities and to conduct this particular research study.

Review of the Literature

History of the Integration of Faith and Learning:

The earliest colleges and universities in the United States (e.g., Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, and Princeton) were founded with a spiritual as well as an academic purpose; thus, from the beginning the fusion of the two spheres of a student’s life was taken for granted. However, during the progressive age in the late 1800s and early 1900s, due to a number of influences such as an emphasis on narrowly focused scholarship from German research universities, the influx of new European ideologies such as Marxism and Darwinism, and the financial practicality of keeping young colleges, particularly those in the mid-West, operational, many institutions gradually began to lose their Christian identities (Burtchaell, 1991, 1998; Marsden, 1994). It is this slow process toward secularization that contemporary Christian colleges and universities are attempting to avoid. Thus their very identities depend upon intentional integration of faith and learning in every sphere of the student’s experiences, especially in the classroom.

Theoretical discussions about the integration of faith and learning have been ongoing for about four decades, initiated and popularized by Wheaton College’s professor of philosophy Arthur Holmes (1977, 1987). Energized by clarion calls from Mark Noll’s (1994) *The Scandal of the Evangelical*

Mind and George Marsden's (1997) *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, personnel at Christian institutions of higher education in the United States have experienced a renewed focus on their unique mission over the past two decades. In the Protestant tradition, theorists have often acknowledged the considerable historical contributions of the Reformed perspective that focuses on a worldview approach (Dockery & Thornbury, 2002; Wolterstorff, 1999). Other works have explored different denominational perspectives on Christian scholarship, most notably a volume edited by Hughes and Adrian (1997) that contains contributions from authors from a variety of institutions with denominational ties, as well as Jacobsen and Jacobsen's (2004) *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation*. The latter work, written from an Anabaptist perspective, sparked quite a bit of controversy in the literature, primarily because it was questioning the viability of the Reformed worldview model (Jones, 2006; Thiessen, 2007). Some authors have challenged the dichotomous thinking of other writers, calling for a more inclusive approach rather than a separation into personal versus propositional (Jones, 2006), positivist versus constructivist, or theory versus action (Matthews & Gabriel, 2001). Overall, the conversation around this issue has been profitable in highlighting the complexity of both the theoretical concept as well as the practical aspects of the integration of faith and learning, this primary task of the Christian college or university. We at TIU find ourselves in the midst of the same struggle that our colleagues at many other institutions face. While we are associated with a particular denomination (the Evangelical Free Church of America), both our ethos and population are broadly evangelical. And as was evident from our initial reactions to the informal survey we conducted among our education majors, in our views of the integration of faith and learning we are also wondering if we have, in fact, created a false dichotomy in our minds between cognitive and practical approaches.

Locus of Integration: Most of the recent attention on the integration of faith and learning has focused on attitudes and perceptions of faculty members in Christian institutions (e.g., Lyon, Beaty, Parker, & Mencken, 2005; Matthias, 2008; Parker, Beaty, Mencken, & Lyon, 2007). Additionally, several faculty members have explored their own

integration with the particular academic discipline that they research and teach [e.g., Binkley (2007) on foreign language; Bower (2010) on graphic design; and Davis (2010) on English]. While we in the education department at TIU were indeed concerned with our faculty's integration, we were also concerned with whether or not integration was happening with the teacher candidates who were under our sphere of influence. Compelled by Ken Badley's (2009) call to specify the locus of integration in future research studies and discussions, we deliberately turned our attention to studies that had been conducted on student perception of the integration of faith and learning at Christian institutions of higher learning.

Perhaps somewhat ironically, researchers discovered that students rarely consider their own integration of faith and learning but rather tend to focus on their perceptions of their professors' integration (Lawrence, Burton, & Nwosu, 2005; Thayer, Bothne, & Bates, 2000). They express a high expectation that such integration will occur in their classes since this is a primary reason for their choice to attend a Christian college or university (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). Additionally, not only do they expect integration; they are also "discriminating consumers," who desire for it to be genuine and deep (Hall, Ripley, Garzon, & Mangis, 2009, p. 26). Indeed, they "notice when attempts are half-hearted, insincere, done out of duty, forced, or of poor quality" (Hall et al., p. 27).

When asked to identify examples of exemplary integration, students focused most often (although certainly not exclusively) on their professors' personal characteristics, the most prominent of which was their care and concern for them, both in and out of the classroom (Burton & Nwosu, 2003; Poelstra, 2009; Thayer et al., 2000). In 1997, Sorenson conducted a study of the perception of the integration of faith and learning among doctoral students pursuing terminal degrees in psychology. His findings led him to purport that the transfer of integration from professors to students may in fact have something to do with attachment theory. Specifically, "students may use faculty as subsidiary attachment figures or transitional objects, particularly the professor's ongoing life of faith, to facilitate students' integrative pilgrimage" (p. 530). Building upon Sorenson's study, Sites, Garzon, Milacci, and Boothe (2009) contend that there is an

ontological foundation for the integration of faith and learning that has previously been overlooked. In other words, who a person fundamentally is—be it professor or student—is the single most important factor for meaningful integration (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). Such an ontological foundation is “the natural out flowing of one’s faith and being into the pedagogical, relational, and community contexts of academic life” (Sites et al., 2009, p. 36). Thus the personal qualities of the individual professor (Hall et al., 2009) and the relationship between professors and their students (Sites et al., 2009) are both crucial to the transfer of integrative practices. Professors identified by their students as exemplary in the integration of faith and learning share their spiritual lives as fellow sojourners and exhibit an emotional transparency with their students (Hall et al., 2009; Ripley, Garzon, Hall, Mangis, & Murphy, 2009; Sites et al., 2009). Thus, although we have always been aware of the importance of our serving as good role models for our teacher candidates, now we were prepared to take that aspect of our lives as professors even more seriously. And we were curious to know how our own students viewed our role in the integration of faith and learning.

The Christian Vocation Model: Considering the many factors we discovered in our review of the literature on the integration of faith and learning, we turned our attention toward finding a model that would address these factors and that would also resonate with the specific aspects of our Division of Education’s conceptual framework. Was there a model that considered the history of integration, the recent discussions of the importance of faculty roles, and the previous studies of student perceptions? We believed that we found what we were searching for in the Christian vocation model created by Sherr, Huff, and Curran (2007). Drawn from the findings of a qualitative study of 120 student participants from seven members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, the model identifies four primary areas of integration for the professor: (a) relationship with God, (b) relationship with students, (c) integrative curriculum coverage, and (d) classroom setting. Sherr et al. considered the combination of these four areas as one of Christian vocation, the high calling of all faculty members in Christian colleges and universities. They purport that “providing students with an educational experience that helps them identify, commit, and fervently pursue their

Christian vocation requires faculty who are fulfilling their Christian vocation as educators” (p. 27). We anticipated that this model closely aligned with our department’s conceptual framework, but we wanted to discover if our students’ perceptions aligned with those of the participants in Sherr et al.’s study. Additionally, we wanted to further explore their perceptions of the integration of faith and learning within their education courses.

Methodology

To explore these issues, we identified three research questions.

1. How well do our teacher candidates’ perceptions of faculty integration of faith and learning correlate with Sherr, Huff and Curran’s (2007) model?
2. How does this model intersect with TIU’s Division of Education’s conceptual framework?
3. How closely does the model for faculty transfer to the candidates?

In order to answer these research questions, we chose a mixed design research methodology, gathering quantitative data through a survey and qualitative data through two follow-up focus interviews. We prepared a 14-question survey that provided descriptive data of the participants and also closely aligned our questions with either the aspects of Sherr et al.’s Christian vocation model or the Division of Education’s conceptual framework, or both. We considered surveying candidates electronically, but chose the paper-based approach so that surveys could be distributed in classes. The survey was distributed in all undergraduate education classes during a one-week period in September 2009; candidates who were enrolled in more than one education class completed it just once.

In keeping with typical research protocol in education, we received permission from TIU’s Human Rights in Research Committee to conduct this research with our teacher candidates. Permission from the participants was received from the first page of the survey document that introduced the survey and provided a place for candidates to sign, indicating their consent to participate as well as their decision regarding participation in a later focus group interview. The survey introduction page explained that we would

detach the initial page from the actual survey so that survey data would be anonymous. Using departmental lists of declared majors and undeclared students who had expressed an interest in education, we sent two e-mail follow-up requests to candidates who had not completed the survey. Quantitative data were analyzed using typical descriptive statistics via SPSS software.

After an initial review of the quantitative data, the researchers conducted focus group interviews with two different groups of candidates, all of whom had indicated their willingness to participate. The groupings of candidates were based on availability of the candidates. A total of 18 teacher candidates participated in the interviews, 15 females and three males. Nine were either freshmen or sophomores, and nine were juniors or seniors. Informed consent forms were signed before the sessions. The researchers asked the focus groups six open-ended questions from an interview protocol. Questions were created after analyzing the survey results; we wanted a fuller understanding of the reasons behind those results. Each session lasted about one hour. The sessions were recorded and transcribed for evaluation using constant comparative analysis.

Results

Survey responses were received from 133 candidates. Almost half (46%) were elementary education majors, TIU's largest program. The others were distributed among TIU's six other education programs in secondary and K-12 education. Many of the respondents (69%) had taken four or more education courses at TIU; there are four foundational courses, so this indicates that they were beyond the initial sequence. More than half (56%) had studied under four or more different professors, of 10 possible full-time faculty members who could have impacted candidates.

It was evident from responses that the integration of faith and learning is important to these candidates. Most (76%) said that their Christian faith is of primary importance in their life, and all indicated that they had some level of Christian faith. Integration of their own faith and learning mattered "very much" to 71% of the candidates, and "somewhat" to 23%. Of those who identified their Christian faith as "very important," most said integration of faith and learning mattered "very much" to them.

Candidates defined what it meant to them to be a *Christian* teacher by marking as many responses as applicable on an eight-item list. To these candidates, being a Christian teacher is:

- displaying attitudes & behaviors that are like Christ (96%)
- conducting oneself with excellence and professionalism (90%)
- maintaining a close relationship with God (88%)
- creating a warm, safe classroom environment for students (87%)
- discerning educational theories from a Christian perspective (65%)
- sharing personal faith stories with students if & when possible (65%)
- maintaining a biblical philosophy of education (59%)
- integrating theological principles with educational principles (50%)

When asked to prioritize what it meant to be a *Christian* teacher (e.g. most important), their priorities were:

- maintaining a close relationship with God (#1 for 57%; 79% had it in their top three)
- displaying attitudes & behaviors that are like Christ (#1 for 26%; 93% had it in their top three)

The responses also indicated how candidates viewed their education professors' integration of faith and learning. When asked how professors integrate faith and learning, candidates responded:

- displaying attitudes & behaviors that are like Christ (94%)
- sharing personal faith stories with students if & when possible (90%)
- conducting oneself with excellence and professionalism (90%)
- maintaining a close relationship with God (89%)
- creating a warm, safe classroom environment for students (87%)
- maintaining a biblical philosophy of education (75%)
- integrating theological principles with educational principles (70%)
- discerning educational theories from a Christian perspective (68%)

Candidates perceived that the most frequent ways professors integrate faith with learning is through displaying attitudes and behaviors that are like Christ (#1 for 33%; 85% ranked in their top three), and conducting themselves with excellence and professionalism (#1 for 20%; 52% ranked in their top three). Candidates would most like to see their professors display Christ-like attitudes and behaviors, maintain a close relationship with God, and create a warm, safe classroom environment for their students. Eighty per cent of the candidates indicated that all or most of their education professors had been exemplary in integration of faith and learning. Almost all of the respondents (94%) thought their education professors model what it means to be a Christian teacher “very strongly” or “somewhat strongly,” and most (93%) had definitely or somewhat been inspired by education professors’ integration of faith and learning to integrate their own faith and learning.

We observed a correlation between teacher candidates’ perceptions of faculty integration of faith and learning and the Christian vocation model created by Sherr et al. (2007). The data indicated that the candidates viewed teaching as a Christian vocation, the heart of the model. In describing how they saw TIU’s education faculty integrate faith and learning, they mentioned all four areas cited in the model: relationships with God, relationships with students, the classroom setting, and integration of faith and learning curriculum coverage. The strongest areas where candidates identified faculty integration were relationships with God and relationships with students. The classroom setting was also mentioned by candidates, but to a lesser degree. When prodded during the focus interviews, candidates did address integrative curriculum coverage.

The Christian vocation model clearly intersects with TIU’s Division of Education’s conceptual framework. The Division has a three-pronged conceptual framework, identified in our mission statement: “The Division of Education seeks to develop highly qualified Christian teachers who view teaching as a mission; they *nurture* their students, *reflect critically* on their practice, and *facilitate* classroom experience to maximize the potential of all learners.”

The first prong of the framework focuses on student nurture. The model emphasizes relationships with

God and with students, a key component of nurturing. Christian teachers, according to the candidates, demonstrate their relationship with God by displaying attitudes and behaviors that are like Christ (identified by 96% of the respondents) and maintaining a close relationship with God (88%). In relationship with students, Christian teachers create a warm and safe classroom environment (87%) and share personal faith stories with students if and when possible (65%). Respondents in the interviews often commented on their Christian vocation as nurturers; one senior stated, “I think that’s one of the first things Jesus did is love people, so like that’s what we have to do is love the kids, especially the ones that drive us insane.” A sophomore defined nurturing as “loving the unlovable, speaking truths, staying dedicated, consistency, loyalty, selflessness; all these things are part of nurturing and all those things are biblical.”

The Division’s conceptual framework also emphasizes critical reflection, which aligns with Christian vocation and vocational competence identified in the model. Descriptors of a Christian teacher identified by candidates that align with vocation and competence include conducting oneself with excellence and professionalism (90%), discerning educational theories from a Christian perspective (65%), maintaining a biblical philosophy of education (59%), and integrating theological principles with educational principles (50%). Arguably, the most insightful response during the interviews came from a senior who articulated his personal integration of faith and learning as a part of his reflective practice:

Christ calls us to be holy as he is holy. I think that because we’re sinners causes us to reflect “okay, well what area of my life am I not surrendering to him to become more like him?” [I want] to be reflective on what not only my Christian life but be reflective as a teacher. And I think this is maybe the most important thing as teachers to understand and to know because it causes us to be better teachers just like reflecting on our personal lives causes us to be better Christians.

Finally, TIU’s conceptual framework emphasizes facilitating classroom experience to maximize the potential of all learners. The model includes the classroom setting as well as competence. Attributes

that candidates identified earlier also apply to this area of the conceptual framework: attitudes and behaviors that are like Christ, excellence and professionalism, warm and safe classroom environment, discerning educational theories from a Christian perspective, a biblical philosophy of education, and integration of theological principles with educational principles. One of the overriding themes from the interview transcripts was how our candidates viewed our praxis; in other words, they clearly saw the integration of faith and learning more readily when we displayed Christian attitudes and behavior in the ways we created a classroom environment. One comment from a junior illustrates this point: “The deeper thinking things . . . coming from professors doesn’t mean nearly as much unless you can see that they’re actually living it and they really truly believe it.”

The model for faculty appears to transfer to the candidates. Overwhelmingly, the data reveal that TIU’s education candidates believe that the transfer of the integration of faith and learning from their professors comes primarily through modeling. Several respondents in the interviews mentioned how much the authenticity of their professors influenced their own pursuit of teaching as a Christian vocation. Further, what they desire to see in, and what they actually experience with, their education faculty becomes what they desire for themselves in their own classrooms. As we nurture them, they nurture their students. As we create a safe classroom environment for them, they desire to do so when they become teachers.

Implications

As we had suspected, our research findings have led us to a deeper understanding of the importance of avoiding the bifurcation of the integration of faith and learning into the more academic and cognitive versus the more practical and affective. Thus, rather than dismissing our teacher candidates’ responses as belonging in an experiential, postmodern generational perspective, we humbly acknowledge that we may indeed have as much to learn from them as they may have to learn from us. The integration process involves a healthy symbiosis of all aspects of our faith and learning, embracing more than simple definitions (Badley, 2009; Jones, 2006). Additionally, we find ourselves wondering if some of the Christian vocation model’s (Sherr et al., 2007) elements are more heavily weighted for

professors than they are for students? Our students, for example, clearly view the relational aspects as much more important to them. Would the reverse be true for faculty respondents? If so, what might the implication of that finding be for the pursuit of exemplary integration in Christian higher education?

Although on the surface Sherr et al.’s (2007) model seems to address all of the various aspects (relational, affective, practical, and academic) in its exploration of Christian vocation, perhaps there are other aspects to be considered as well. For example, the notion of educating Christian students for desire as well as for cognitive understanding has recently received widespread attention in Christian higher education circles (Smith, 2009). Are we addressing those aspects of the integration of faith and learning in our colleges and universities? What would a model that includes them look like? And how might such a focus change our pedagogical practices?

Our findings also reinforced those of other studies that purported the importance of an ontological foundation (Sites et al., 2009). Specifically, respondents who had been in our program more than two years demonstrated a much deeper understanding of the various aspects of the integration of faith and learning than did their younger counterparts. Although it may seem obvious, students who are more mature—both spiritually and academically—will integrate more deliberately and more thoughtfully. They find it easier to see all aspects of integration in their own lives, as do we as professors who are often decades older. One of our seniors expressed this concept of the importance of maturity this way:

[We don’t think of integration in philosophical or theological terms] partly because we’re young and we haven’t lived life long enough to figure out how to do certain things, and I think that also probably comes with time and just experience and learning how to do it and learning what’s right and where to walk that line of doing it professionally.

Who we are as individuals, what we have experienced, how we have grown in our relationship with God, with others, and with our areas of intellectual focus—all of this affects how we integrate. Therefore, it is important for us to realize

that our modeling of the integration of faith and learning to them and our encouragement for them to engage in their own integration, as important a task as it is, is only part of their lifelong journey.

Agreeing with Badley's (2009) assertion that we in Christian higher education should increase our deliberate assessment of the integration of faith and learning, we believe that assessing our alumni who are teaching in public schools would further contribute to the discussion of such integration as stemming from an ontological foundation.

Additionally, we believe that our findings build on those of Hall et al. (2009), specifically related to the contention that those in Christian institutions who are preparing their students for specific professions have a responsibility to link the practical with the theoretical when it comes to the integration of faith and learning. Most of our students plan to teach in K-12 public school settings where they will be encouraged to deliberately separate their personal faith from their professional lives. Therefore, we agree wholeheartedly with Hall et al.'s reminder to us as professors: "When we fail to bridge the gap between theoretical, propositional content, and their applied experiences as people and as professionals, we have fallen short of fully preparing them to practice their professions as Christians in the fallen world" (p. 27).

However, education as a field of study may, in fact, have a uniqueness not shared by other academic areas, even other professional ones such as psychology or business. We are educators in an educational setting, preparing our students to one day be educators in educational settings. Therefore, role modeling becomes multi-layered and complex, perhaps well beyond the findings of Sorensen (1997) and those who built on his attachment theory (Hall et al., 2009; Ripley et al., 2009; Sites et al., 2009). It is no small wonder that the respondents in our study overwhelmingly connected the integration of faith and learning to what they saw in us and then quickly to what they hope to be and to do in their own classrooms. Additional studies exploring this complex and unique relationship are warranted.

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