

*Institutions that successfully educate students to lead “the good life” attend to their campus’s culture, curriculum, cocurriculum, and community. The authors of this article explore nuances of these four C’s.*

By Larry Braskamp, Lois Calian Trautvetter, and Kelly Ward

# Putting Students First: Promoting Lives of Purpose and Meaning

**H**OW can higher education faculty, staff, and administrators create campus environments that guide students in their development within chosen disciplines and careers as well as in ways that contribute to a common good? How can we help students find a sense of calling in life? What does it mean to cultivate a sense of purpose in students? Are there ways to simultaneously prepare students for disciplinary excellence, a successful career, and a meaningful life? As we report in our recent book *Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully*, many campuses are exploring these questions in order to look critically at the educational process and take direct steps toward preparing students for a life that encompasses a sense of purpose and meaning. By examining how the campuses in our study organize and situate themselves to meet this goal, we discovered that the answers to such questions call for a holistic approach to student development. Such an approach, in turn, calls for a whole campus of whole persons to develop whole students. In this article, we offer our 4C framework (culture, curriculum, cocurriculum, community) and examples from some campuses in our study to help all educators—

faculty, staff, and administrators alike—consider how to create campus environments that help students develop lives of meaning and purpose.

## MEANING, PURPOSE, AND HOLISTIC STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

AS A GUIDEPOST toward thinking about the desired ends of a college education, we borrow the term “good life” from Peter Gomes, a faculty member in the Divinity School and the College of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University and minister at Harvard’s Memorial Church. In its most general sense, “living the good life” means living a life of purpose and meaning. To many, the good life includes a consideration of religious and secular humanistic perspectives. It also focuses on how each of us can reflect on and make commitments about the big questions of life that encompass such issues as contributing to the common good, maintaining life as a participating citizen, and developing a sense of individual and social responsibility. In *Education and Identity*, Arthur



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Chickering and Linda Reisser note that developing purpose is a developmental task for college students. The concept of developing purpose is an approach to thinking broadly about life in ways that encompass vocational plans and aspirations as well as personal interests and interpersonal and family commitments. The college experience can help students grapple with how to reconcile the personal and the professional and how to create a good life.

A holistic view of student learning and development that helps students integrate experiences in and out of the classroom as well as inner and outer life experiences is key to helping students develop purpose and meaning. In his book *In Over Our Heads*, Robert Kegan articulates a holistic and integrated approach to development that recognizes the mutually reinforcing nature of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. For students to grow cognitively and to integrate knowledge in a way that reflects learning, they also need to grow interpersonally by considering themselves as part of a larger whole and intrapersonally by establishing a belief system that acts as a filter, guiding choices and experiences.

Cultivating this complex and expansive form of learning requires that educators intentionally structure campus environments to help students integrate multiple dimensions of self. How can campuses work toward such a goal? We offer the following examples derived from case studies of ten church-related colleges that are committed to a holistic view of student development and learning. The institutions were chosen because they have a history of addressing fundamental issues such as the roles of faculty and student affairs educators as well as how their curricular and cocurricular practices reinforce learning and development. They provide settings from which we can learn how to educate students so that they are well prepared for a career and a life as a good citizen and a person of character.

The ten institutions, ranging in size from 1,800 to 6,500 undergraduates, were selected to reflect varied geographical regions, church denominations, sizes, and affinities with the sponsoring church. The institutions are Bethune-Cookman College (Florida), College of Wooster

(Ohio), Creighton University (Nebraska), Hamline University (Minnesota), Hope College (Michigan), Pacific Lutheran University (Washington), Union University (Tennessee), University of Dayton (Ohio), Villanova University (Pennsylvania), and Whitworth College (Washington). Each campus that we visited emphasized the importance of all educators working to foster holistic student development and demonstrated a willingness to wrestle with the messiness of creating environments that help students find meaning and purpose in their life as well as grow in their intellectual understanding.

## THE 4C FRAMEWORK

CREATING a campus environment to foster undergraduates' development of purpose and meaning is based on the principle that it takes a whole campus of whole persons to develop whole students. Administrators and educators create a collegiate environment for purpose, on purpose. We use the 4C framework, which is inclusive yet strategic and practical enough for educators—faculty, staff, and administrators—to better understand and plan for creating an effective learning and developmental environment. We briefly describe each of the four C's of the framework—culture, curriculum, cocurriculum, and community—and then present examples from the colleges we studied to illustrate how institutions embody the four C's.

**Culture.** The first C in the 4C framework is culture. The word *culture* is often used to represent the shared values, character, mission, and identity of an organization or group of people. *Culture* describes the ethos of a campus as well as its social norms and accepted ways of doing daily business. It also includes vision, the intended future of a college, and the creation and maintenance of a campus environment to meet its desired goals. The leaders of an institution, particularly in how they portray and communicate the legacy of the institution, ask questions such as these: Why do we exist today and desire to do so in the future? What makes us unique and distinctive? The leaders of each of the colleges we studied saw their mission as helping students to know themselves—who they are and what their purpose in life is. This mission includes helping students to be self-aware in a global context; to develop their intellectual abilities; to cultivate social, civic, and moral responsibilities; and to examine faith claims. Many, such as Creighton University, have used mission as a driving force in discerning their future direction.

**Culture at Creighton University.** During the academic year 2004–05, the Faculty Senate of the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University formally adopted an identity statement. In this statement, they characterize the college, using the concept

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of vocation. The college “conceives of three basic, related divisions of our vocations as faculty, staff, and students of a Catholic and Jesuit University: Priority of Person, Nurturing Peers, and Affirming Faith” (*Putting Students First*, p. 46). The college worked throughout the 2004–05 academic year to develop a strategic plan and to make the identity statement a living document. The college has undertaken this work within the institution’s larger vision that Creighton University will be, according to an interview statement made by the president, “one of the top five faith-based master’s comprehensive universities in the United States and the Jesuit school of choice in the region.” The College of Arts and Sciences “will be at the center of this willed future” (*Putting Students First*, p. 46).

The college has identified four strategic issues and initiatives (*Putting Students First*, p. 46):

- Engaging the Catholic and Jesuit intellectual traditions
- Fostering an optimal community of inquiry
- Embodying *cura personalis* (the Latin phrase for “care for the whole person”) in our college communities
- Providing effective structures to enhance leadership

In interviews, faculty leaders told us about the energy and commitment to the college that this exercise has generated. One faculty member in the Department of Theology stated, “Having a religious identity is not incompatible with intellectual rigor. Our distinction is our intellectual traditions. We want to contribute as a college and institution through our uniqueness” (*Putting Students First*, p. 46).

**Curriculum.** The curriculum is considered the most important part of the sociocultural environment in helping students to meet a college’s desired learning and developmental goals. Joan Stark and Lisa Lattuca state that curriculum represents “academic plans in action” (*Putting Students First*, p. 7). Academic plans are entrenched in the institutional mission and in larger

societal contexts, with faculty continually trying to construct appropriate bridges between the college’s legacy from the past and its vision of the future. More recently, concerns about curriculum have focused on how to educate students so that they become responsible citizens with a moral compass or set of values. Stanley Katz, president emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies, argues that the academy may do well to reconsider the place of values in curriculum and to advocate a more humanist posture in undergraduate programs: “If we believe that values do have a role in education, then the challenge may be to rehistoricize and rehumanize the undergraduate curriculum” (p. B6).

Curriculum—its design and implementation—is a fundamental component of a college’s commitment to holistic student development. What content is taught and how it is taught—the pedagogy—is the essence of the curriculum. The colleges we visited tended to have special types of academic offerings that were tailored for students at different developmental stages (for example, first-year, sophomore, and senior experiences). Usually, these experiences encourage students to integrate knowledge and understanding, delineate the practice of particular worldviews, engage in reflection, and apply knowledge to their personal life. Hope College’s senior seminar is an example of an academic offering that allows students to express understanding of their faith.

**Curriculum at Hope College.** Hope College’s course catalogue notes that the Senior Seminar focuses on “personal assessment of one’s education and life view” (*Putting Students First*, pp. 114–115) and is intended to serve as the capstone to the Hope College experience. Each seminar is built around a unique theme, but all are designed to help the student “(1) consider how the Christian faith can inform a philosophy of living, (2) articulate his or her philosophy of living in a coherent, disciplined, yet personal way, and (3) . . . understand secular contemporary values in Christian perspective” (*Putting Students First*, pp. 114–115).

Carol Simon, a professor of philosophy at Hope College, has developed her senior seminar course to examine the question “How good should the good life be?” The course is titled “Saints, Heroes, and Ordinary People.” Students read a number of biographies, novels,

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and stories that illustrate how various people, some Christian and some not, have lived their lives, in order to “stimulate their thinking in pursuit of the three goals” (*Putting Students First*, p. 114–115). Some of the texts include Philip Hallie’s *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, William Kennedy’s *Ironweed*, and Michael Shaara’s *Killer Angels*.

Students write six reaction papers to their readings and a short statement on what they think is the essential content of Christian faith. The statement can be from a believing stance or a distanced stance. Each student is to “display a college-level understanding of Christianity, whether or not the student personally believes it to be true” and “articulate a philosophy for living in a coherent, disciplined, yet personal way” (*Putting Students First*, p. 114–115). The seminar emphasizes discussion and sharing among class members, and each student is required to write a “life view paper.” The course’s syllabus concludes by stating, “Your life view paper should be yours. Please do it in a way that allows you to do your best at expressing yourself and grappling with the issues of the course and of your life” (*Putting Students First*, p. 114–115). In writing their final paper, students are encouraged to use the following questions: “What is important enough to me to spend large parts of my life on? What criteria or guidelines will inform the important decisions I make in my life? Will I have specific long-term goals or will I just take life as it comes? If I have long-term goals, what will they be? What place will personal and family relationships have in my life? How important will work or profession be in my life? Will I work to live or live to work? How important will it be to me to help those in need? What will the moral principles be by which I act? What place, if any, will my religious beliefs have in my life?” In this class, the religion—Christianity—is not studied as an object, with students and faculty examining it as a scholarly exercise. Instead, students have an opportunity to use Christianity as a set of beliefs to guide and direct their lives.

**Cocurriculum.** Cocurricular involvement is not just about being engaged in multiple activities; rather, it is about becoming involved in activities and organizations that help students more fully explore particular interests and connect their in-class and out-of-class experiences. Ultimately, student involvement in the cocurriculum can help support the more formal learning embedded in

curricular experiences. It is also a prime location for the intrapersonal and interpersonal growth necessary for holistic development. Cocurricular experiences take place in locations such as the library, computer labs, residence halls, chapels, recreation centers, dining halls, and off-campus housing units.

We differentiate between two aspects of the cocurriculum: *places* to be involved beyond the classroom and *activities* to be involved in beyond the classroom. The first relates to environment and where students’ life beyond the classroom takes place (for example, residence halls, faculty offices), and the second encompasses the pursuits that constitute the cocurricular experience (for example, student government, athletics, intramural activities, group projects, volunteer service). The very word *cocurriculum* suggests connection with the curricular experience; some aspects of the cocurriculum are tied quite closely to coursework (for example, study groups), whereas other experiences have an educational component but are only loosely tied to the curriculum (for example, guest speakers). It is often the cocurricular experiences that relate to learning (for example, study sessions) but are beyond the classroom (for example, in a professor’s office) that are most significant in helping students address the bigger questions in life. Student affairs educators play an important (yet too often overlooked) educational role by creating campus environments that foster holistic development.

Integration of the curriculum and cocurriculum is important as a means of helping students integrate their public and private lives. Alexander Astin argues that it is important for students to gain balance and integration between their “interior” and “exterior” lives (p. 2). The “interior” is where students make meaning of issues related to identity, morality, spirituality, values, and the like (issues that are often thought of as personal and private). In contrast, the “exterior” is related to objective, observable behaviors such as those related to classroom learning and student programs (issues that are viewed as more public). When integration and balance between interior and exterior occur, students can more effectively manage what might be viewed as personal (for example, faith development) in public domains like the classroom. Students can then more successfully combine cocurricular

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experiences with curricular experiences and maximize their learning and development across contexts. The University of Dayton's cocurriculum offers students an opportunity for this type of integration.

**Cocurriculum at University of Dayton.** The cocurriculum at University of Dayton is designed to reflect the university's mission and campus culture. The introduction of the brochure *Our Community: Written for Students, by Students* states, "The community that exists on our campus is very intentional; it is an essential component of the Marianist culture on campus" (*Putting Students First*, p. 141–142). A Marianist university is "founded around the principle of service through education." The campus ethos reflects the motto "Learn, lead and serve." The motto describes a way of living that does not need to be particularly religious. It does stress engagement in the larger world, solving problems, and caring for others. In interviews, students, faculty, and staff often described the university by using the following words: *community, friendly, family, caring, hospitality, inclusiveness, openness to all faiths and ethnic backgrounds, egalitarianism, practical in orientation and outlook, social, and building community.*

First-year students live in traditional residence halls (double rooms on a corridor with communal bath facilities) situated at the core of the campus. As sophomores, students participate in a housing lottery to gain assignments in a facility with four-person suites; a high-rise with six-person apartments; four-person garden apartments; or a traditional residence hall. Juniors typically live in apartment facilities in the south residential neighborhood or seek out a landlord-owned house. Seniors have first pick of the university-owned houses in one of the three neighborhoods. Because most of these homes have porches, the culture at University of Dayton is known as the "porch culture," which signifies welcomeness to all students. Dayton alumni, students, staff, and faculty all talk about the "porch culture" as University of Dayton's signature.

University of Dayton fosters a living-learning environment that reflects the Marianist worldview. In fact, it has recently constructed two new buildings with spaces that reinforce this concept. In Marianist Hall, the first floor is the bookstore and space for social interactions. The second floor contains 10,000 square feet of flexible learning space, fully equipped with the latest technolo-

gies. Students living together on the same floor attend classes in the building, resulting in increased interactions among the students. "It is so Marianist," one faculty member stated. The other recently opened space is the Art Street Building, located in the midst of one of the neighborhoods where seniors live. In this building, students who are not art majors take classes in art, and exhibitions display the art of students, faculty, and other artists. The building also contains a student-run café where students gather. Throughout a four-year period, representatives of students, student affairs, academic affairs, and ministry met to design the space to reflect the mission of the university (that is, to create a living-learning environment that meets the total needs of the students).

**Community.** We refer to community in two general areas. First, the community of the campus encompasses the relationships that develop within a context of camaraderie and collegiality at the institution itself. Second, we describe the community expressed through the relationships that colleges and universities have with communities beyond the campus. The notion of community conjures images of collaboration and the sense of a collective effort to create an environment that is welcoming and inclusive. Although the community of the campus is shaped by the culture of the campus and the norms that dictate how and to what extent people interact, it is distinct from the culture of the campus. Whereas culture refers to the overall impact of the underlying mission and focus of the institution, community describes the working relationships and the sense of cohesiveness they engender.

How institutions interact with communities beyond the campus is critical because it is an avenue for fostering holistic student development. What occurs on the physical campus can be complemented and reinforced by what happens when students become involved in communities external to the campus. On the campuses we visited, community service thrives. In fact, the ethic of service and community outreach was a prevalent part of student, faculty, and staff life. We were impressed with the level of interaction and goodwill that existed between the institutions and their respective communities. For example, faculty and staff at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, model the importance of community participation.

**Community at Union University.** Part of Union University's mission statement, which sets forth the goal of providing "Christ-centered education that promotes excellence and character development in service to Church and society" (*Putting Students First*, p. 180–181), is enacted annually in its hometown community of Jackson, Tennessee. An event known as "A Day of Remembrance" offers one example of student, faculty, and staff involvement in the community. The first Day of Remembrance in November 2003 involved fifty service projects and 800 participants. The second year, this special event involved more than sixty projects and 1,000 students, faculty, and staff.

A Day of Remembrance was established by Union University as a gesture of giving back to the Jackson community, particularly the businesses and individuals who had provided assistance after a tornado caused more than \$2 million in damage to the campus on November 10, 2002. A Day of Remembrance is a significant university event; on that day, most classes are suspended to allow students and faculty to be wholly involved in service projects. The day begins with a gathering for worship in Savage Memorial Chapel. In 2004, Union University provost Carla Sanderson addressed those attending the opening chapel service, stating, "What you do today will matter deeply to someone, even if you are working on campus" (*Putting Students First*, p. 180–181). Then students, faculty, and staff worked side by side on service activities—sawing, hammering, planting, and completing various projects on campus and in the community. A Day of Remembrance has been made an annual event in order to reinforce the mission and identity of Union University. The dean of students stated, "It truly shows how leadership is being a servant." Of course, the university's hope is that service will not wait until the next Day of Remembrance but will continue all year long.

### CREATING CONVERSATIONS FOR HOLISTIC STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

"IT TAKES A WHOLE CAMPUS of whole persons to develop whole students" conveys a philosophy of creating a campus that intentionally guides students in finding purpose and meaning in their lives. Putting students first

is an important first step that anchors a commitment to create collaborative environments among and between faculty and student affairs educators. Our study of ten colleges revealed that the starting point of this commitment is a campus community that agrees to focus on the question "What is best for our students?" To these colleges, part of this focus meant respecting students for who they are and for where they are in their lives.

The colleges also have defined student learning and development in terms of meaning and purpose, using a variety of words such as *vocation*, *spirituality*, or *religious development* to convey the "good life." The key is that students' inner life is not to be separated from their outer life. In a recent review of the spiritual and religious development of students, Larry Braskamp argues that being and doing are mutually reinforcing; who one is represents a critical element in understanding one's goals, motivation, and source of meaning as well as the foundation of the "good life." This perspective is beautifully communicated by John Johannes, the provost of Villanova University, who stated in an interview, "We encourage students to let their intellectual life be guided by their hearts. Students are learning and developing in college for a purpose: that is, to be of service to the world."

At the colleges we studied, faculty and staff are encouraged to be whole persons in their roles—that is, to express their own cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions in their relationships with students. Relationships built on trust, respect, and openness among faculty, staff, and students are critical in fostering holistic student development. It is also easier to challenge and encourage students when there is rapport among students, faculty, and staff. To get to this point, however, frequent and in-depth interactions between educators and students are necessary. Obviously, the classroom is an important place for faculty and student interaction. But from the perspective of students, far more important are the informal interactions that faculty members have with their students in dining areas, residence halls, office hours, faculty homes, and similar places. Student affairs educators have many more opportunities than most faculty for informal interactions that can aid in developing these essential trusting relationships.

The cocurriculum is a prime location for the intrapersonal and interpersonal growth necessary for holistic development.

Finally, the colleges in our study created an integrated community of support and challenge. They created a balance between intentionally creating dissonance to push students to go beyond their current comfort zone or expectations and providing all the types of support—social, emotional, and academic—that students need when they feel “in over their heads,” to borrow a phrase from Robert Kegan. Faculty and student affairs educators all strive to both support and challenge students, instead of adopting a disconnected view in which faculty do the challenging and student affairs educators do the supporting.

In summary, we argue that once the academy puts students first in ways that focus on student learning and development, then culture, curriculum, cocurriculum, and community that promote holistic learning will emerge. We close with reflective questions that may serve as a starting point for campus conversations that focus on holistic student development:

- What are the mission and vision of your institution? How do they influence the culture of your institution?
- Who at your institution do you consider to be champions or leaders in guiding students in their search for meaning and purpose?
- How are faculty at your institution expected to guide students intellectually, socially, civically, physically, religiously, spiritually, and morally?
- How do your institution’s mission and vision influence curricular and cocurricular priorities?
- What are the key issues—challenges, barriers, or opportunities—that your institution needs to address in order to create a campus and a set of programs that foster holistic development?

- How do you encourage and prepare faculty to work with students in the cocurricular context at your institution?
- How is community defined at your institution? What can you and your colleagues do to cultivate an even greater sense of campus community?
- How is your campus addressing the big questions of the “good life”?

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