

A PRESIDENT'S SABBATICAL JOURNEY

After serving as President for six years, I requested a leave to spend time thinking about the next phase of progress at Oklahoma Christian University (OC). The Board of Trustees granted a leave during the fall of 2008 to research key areas at other faith-based colleges.

The chair of the Board of Trustees sent the following guidance:

I'd like to see you go into this period with a list of the top five things you want to accomplish in your remaining tenure as President. The list might be longer than 5, but you need to resist it becoming a comprehensive list. Coming out of this period, I'd like to see if that list has changed any and also that you have written some fairly extensive thoughts on how best to accomplish those goals, how other schools are addressing those goals etc. It seems that this time should be preparing your for a final push in these areas.

In response, I condensed pages of ideas to the following major goals for the remainder of my tenure at OC:

- Inspire and challenge the faculty and staff to excellence and greatness, and nurture a culture of risk-taking, scholarship, entrepreneurship, creativity, trust, empowerment, and academic and spiritual freedom in the search for truth.
- Revise the curriculum and co-curriculum to be more student-centric and more intentional and effective in accomplishing “The OC Graduate.”¹
- Rebrand the University to help our audiences recognize that OC is a beacon of truth, faith, liberty, and love, and an institution of excellence in scholarship whose students, faculty, staff, and alumni are making a difference for good in our community and our world.
- Increase endowment from \$56 million to over \$100 million.
- Bring several facilities up to modern standards and develop a master landscaping plan and plans for development of vacant property near the campus.

I visited 25 faith-based universities² during 24 working days between September 3 and October 13, 2008. During that time my wife Nancy and I travelled 5,500 miles by car and flew to and down the west coast from Seattle to San Diego. The visits typically included campus tours and discussions with presidents, provosts, and other senior administrators. During the discussions I covered a series of 37 questions³ that had been provided before the visits. The quality and depth of responses to the questions varied significantly from campus to campus, and some questions were not applicable at some institutions. A few campuses provided us with typed or written answers, while others responded in oral discussions. The research was not intended to provide scientifically verifiable results. A majority of the schools are among the strongest academically, financially, and spiritually in the country, and therefore, the observations reflect some of the best practices among faith-based institutions.

Underlying many of the questions is deep concern for the profound influence of an increasingly secular culture on faith-based institutions. I believe that both modernism and post-modernism are two of Satan's primary weapons against Christianity. {One of OC's current mottos is 'Faith[fully],' meant to signify that OC is seeking to fully embrace all that faith demands—whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

¹ The OC Graduate is an outcome objective for all graduates of the University. It is attached as Exhibit A.

² A list of the universities visited is attached as Exhibit B.

³ The questions are attached as Exhibit C.

Such ideals and concepts are not generally encouraged by today's western culture, thus demanding that faith-based institutions must be counter-cultural. }

Bible classes and chapel must be vibrant tools for spiritual development and be supplemented by the entire curriculum and co-curriculum in the battle for the minds and souls of our students. Because most graduate education occurs in secular institutions, attention must be paid to what kind of worldview new faculty bring with them. Thus, several questions were intended to find ways institutions intentionally teach and model a Christ-centered worldview. {The goal is for all of us to live proleptically – to live with the certainty of faith, knowing the outcome, and equipping our students for a journey with a guaranteed destination. }

A second underlying issue is the economic challenges facing private higher education. What are some of the most effective ways of creating efficiencies in the academic and co-curricular operations without major sacrifices in the specialness and quality of offerings? These new realities demand that we as educators perceive our roles as mentors, guides, enablers—rather than primarily as experts and professionals.

Below in no order of importance are the principal observations I made during my visits.

Mission and Vision. Most schools took great pains to develop well-articulated mission and vision statements to guide their future. The spiritual and cultural purposes are carefully embedded in those statements. OC's mission and vision documents are expressed as well as most of the schools visited. However, my assessment of the schools making the most impact on their students and culture are those whose faculty and staff fully embrace the vision and mission. Their leadership has been consistent in encouraging and enabling the community to assimilate the mission and vision into the culture. The institutions enjoying the greatest success in spiritual and academic development have focused on a consistent mission and vision for 10 or more years. At those schools, the campuses are permeated with the mission and vision; nearly every employee—and many students—can articulate them. Everything each of these schools does is an extension of its mission and vision, and those guiding ideas are evident everywhere on campus.

Relationship With Founding Fellowship. Most of the schools professed a deep commitment to strengthening their spiritual purpose and maintaining their relationships with their affiliate denominations. Interestingly, the only schools still requiring all full-time undergraduate faculty, staff, and boards to be from their founding fellowship are those affiliated with the Churches of Christ, a fellowship with no hierarchical structure.

Several schools were ecumenical in every regard (though with roots in one or more denominations), but those with affiliations typically looked for a “critical mass” (typically a minority) in the general faculty, with a majority “critical mass” (or in some cases 100%) in the theology departments, top administration, and governing boards from the affiliate fellowships. Nearly all of the schools hire only professing and active Christians, typically from relatively conservative evangelical groups. 'Reformed schools tend to seek those with a 'reformed theology.' Among non-Church of Christ schools, Union University had the highest critical mass with 60% of the general faculty, all of the theology department, and all of their board from the Baptist fellowship. A handful of schools maintained the affiliate relationship by board appointments from the church hierarchy and multi-million dollar contributions from the denomination. Very few of the schools were satisfied with just a church credential and academic competence for selecting faculty. Faculty candidates had to demonstrate a life of devotion and involvement, along with an understanding of and commitment to integration of faith into the particular discipline. A common theme from these discussions was the importance of the church constituency understanding that the school is a university and not the church. That tends to be a recurring problem between the denominational schools and members of their denominations.

Board Governance. Most boards have adopted Carver's governance by policy principles. Most of the boards meet 3-4 times per year and are appointed in various ways, ranging from self-perpetuating to a majority appointed by the affiliate denomination. Involvement of their boards in giving, community influence, policy direction, and maintenance of the faith mission are important to all of them. Critical in all cases were relationships with and respect and support for the president and his or her vision and leadership.

Faculty Governance. The involvement and authority of faculty in policy and decision-making ranged over a wide spectrum. However, the majority of presidents and senior administrators described the involvement in terms of the administration listening carefully to, respecting, and receiving advisory input from the faculty, with final decisions resting with the executive administration and/or the board.

Most administrations defer to faculty expertise in general curricular decisions and in activities that affect only the faculty, but have purposefully retained final authority on such matters in order to preserve and advance the mission and financial integrity of the institution. Administrative decisions contrary to faculty input on academic matters are rare, but do occur. There was minimal delegated legislative authority, and decisions of whether to continue, restructure, or begin new programs were decided by the president or executive staff after consultation with faculty directly affected and with academic and financial administrators. About half of the schools had Faculty Senates (or an equivalent), but in nearly all cases the authority of the Senate was advisory, not legislative in nature. The presidents attend faculty meetings at most institutions and chair the faculty meetings at several.

Maintaining Spiritual Mission. The schools with intentional faith commitments used some or all of the following tools to ensure fulfillment of the spiritual mission:

- board committee interview (or paper review) of new faculty hires;
- requiring faculty and administrators to sign a statement of faith, upon hiring and/or annually, containing basic Christian beliefs;
- senior faculty conducting rigorous interviews of prospective faculty with very focused questions regarding their spiritual walk;
- faculty release time and/or stipends to attend seminars and new faculty classes (conducted by senior faculty) which focus on the integration of faith and learning specific to each discipline;
- it is not assumed that new faculty—even though committed Christians—understand the concept or know how to integrate faith and learning;
- it is essential that there be a constant focus on the spiritual mission;
- they take great advantage of faith integration seminars and faculty/staff training programs from the CCCU;
- they are intentional about coordination of curriculum and co-curriculum—i.e., the faculty and staff are very much a team to accomplish mission and vision; and
- student and colleague assessments include specific questions of faith integration, spiritual mentorship, and church involvement.
- in most schools there is a conscious effort to focus on what is central—what calls them together in Christ—with lesser focus on issues that tend to separate Christians.

Tangible Displays of Faith Commitment. Most of the campuses make extensive use of scriptures, quotations, and other inspirational tangible depictions of faith commitment. For example, bronze scriptures will be found at entrances and other ceremonial and high traffic areas on campus. In most cases, it would be impossible to tour the campuses or view the websites and not be aware they are Christian institutions.

Candor. Evidences of the schools' spiritual purposes are very much up-front and emphasized in the recruiting materials and recruiters' pitch to prospective students and families. Only one school required all the students to be believers, though most strove for a critical mass of evangelical Christians.

Many require students to sign a statement indicating their understanding of the Christian nature and expectations of the school.

Chaplaincy. Nearly all of the schools have significant staff (2-10) fully dedicated to chapel and spiritual development and counseling. Generally, these schools have greater numbers of doctorally trained staff in student life who are devoted to addressing the whole student experience, reflecting significant integration between the curricular and extra-curricular experience of the student.

Chapel. Only one school requires chapel every day, though all provide chapel credit for many other types of experiences that foster spiritual development. The most common frequency was 3 times per week—often for 35-50 minutes, but in all cases students are allowed a set number of misses. A few do not require chapel attendance. Chapel content is mostly youth-oriented worship, laced with some speakers. Nearly all are highly intentional about the teaching content of chapel; the programs are coordinated with the curriculum to make sure all important spiritual development areas are covered. The president typically speaks 1-2 times per semester, usually on opening day and near the end of the term. Chapels are planned by committees—in some schools chaired by the President. The most popular and most effective programs in spiritual development are not “in the chapel,” but are some of the alternative chapel credit experiences.

Bible Curriculum. The required academic credits required in Bible ranged from 3-30 units, but the most common numbers were 9-12 units. The Bible curriculum was designed to make sure students received doctrinal and life-application lessons. Very little of the required Bible curriculum was textual at the majority of schools.

Faculty Development. Most schools have dedicated staffing and resources for faculty development. Emphasis is placed on mentoring new and young faculty, particularly in the ethos of the institution, the integration of faith and learning, and in pedagogy.

Graduate/Adult Learning. I was impressed with the number of these primarily residential, liberal arts-centered, and faith-based schools which have extensive graduate and adult learning programs to supplement the higher cost of the undergraduate programs. The net revenue from such programs was modest to amazing (one institution netted over \$20 million each year). The ability to express the spiritual mission in these programs varies widely, but efforts were made in all cases to incorporate faith into the curriculum. There were several schools which defended these programs as a natural service outreach and expression of mission, though none denied the importance of these programs in revenue generation to support the core mission.

Distance Learning. Very few are extensively into distance learning (via technology), but all except a handful are very seriously exploring how to use technology as a delivery mode. Several already use distance learning as a tremendous outreach and revenue generator.

Entrepreneurial Spirit. All of the schools that are maintaining strong enrollments and making significant progress stress the need for faculty and staff to be entrepreneurial—looking to stay relevant to the marketplace and embrace new opportunities, eliminating some activities, and constantly re-examining how they do their work—all without diminishing their mission. Many schools provide incentives to faculty to propose and initiate new programs and new concepts. For example, some schools budgeted \$50,000-to-\$250,000 per year in funding for new ideas/programs, with awarding of the funding available on a competitive basis to all departments.

Diversity. Nearly all of the schools (excluding Nyack and the schools in California) struggle to increase the ethnic diversity of faculty and students. Often this lack of diversity seems to be a reflection of the state of the churches. Growing their own minority faculty with graduate school stipends and networking are the only techniques that seemed to be working. Many have staff focusing on recruiting or serving ethnic minorities. Most schools have 60% or more females in the student body and are seeking

ways to attract more male students. Often the objective for addition of football has been to increase the proportion of males in the student body and to increase overall enrollment.

Student Recruitment. Many are moving to more campus visits and sophisticated technology platforms to reach greater numbers of prospective students. Due to cost, there is less use of traveling recruiters and printed materials, though both are used as needed. Recruitment is generally focused on the spiritual development possibilities on the campus, as well as the academic strength and opportunities for internationalization and leadership development.

Tenure. Tenure or long-term contracts existed at all but one of the schools visited. Many were either developing or already had a very robust post-tenure review focusing on faculty contributions to the academic and spiritual development purposes of the schools and on faith-informed content in their disciplines.

Faculty Compensation. Though about half of the schools still retain an on-paper egalitarian pay structure across disciplines for faculty, every school has had to carve out numerous exceptions and be creative to attract faculty in some disciplines such as nursing, engineering, and business. Most are changing to a discipline-specific and merit-based system in response to current recruiting and retention challenges.

Residential Life. All schools confirmed the value and importance of residential life to spiritual development, and most had 65-80% of the students living on campus. Many require large numbers of student leaders (student government, residential life staff, athletic captains, student organization leaders, etc.) to go through extensive spiritual and leadership training in order to set the right tone and environment for the campus. This has been successful in developing campus student leaders and in influencing the student culture on campus.

Behavioral Issues. All schools experienced some amount of drinking, drugs, and sexual misbehavior. Most struggle with modern clothing styles. Most were depending upon individual counseling in residential life to deal with these. Harding uses two days of gender-segregated chapel to deal with issues of sexual purity and modesty. The students submit in advance questions for the other gender, and for two days a panel of young men respond to the women's questions and a panel of young women respond to the men's questions. It was reported that there were some exceptionally erudite answers given, and it was the best thing they had tried.

Athletics. Every campus except one was enthusiastic about its athletic programs (NCAA Divisions II and III and NAIA Divisions I and II) and what the programs contribute to campus life. In every case, the administrators said the programs contribution to the academic and spiritual missions of the school depended primarily on the quality of the coaches and their commitment to the institutional mission.

Branding. Most of the institutions are engaged in highly intentional branding efforts that emphasize academic quality and spiritual development. Regularity and consistency of message are key.

Endowment. Only a handful of the schools have an endowment commensurate with their size and age. Many are investing in facilities and programs, pursuing a strategy to get more students and enhance the reputation, and afterwards focusing on growing the endowment.

Pricing and Discounting. Most of the schools in the research group have tuition rates of \$20-25,000 and have tuition discounts ranging from 18-35%, though there are some whose economic models are much different and financially much less robust. Mostly, they are tuition-dependent institutions with reputations and brand loyalty that keep a healthy enrollment and solid year-to-year financial results. Though all complained of the impact of the economic downturn on their institutions, the higher tuition institutions have much greater financial flexibility to invest in people, programs, and facilities. The

strongest financial models reflected most or all of the following—higher tuition, lower discount, major contributions from affiliated fellowships, significant net revenues from graduate and adult programs, less debt, and most fundraising devoted to strategic operations and/or facilities.

Critical Issues. There was consistency among the administrators’ assessments of the four most critical issues facing Christian higher education in the next 5-10 years, though the order was occasionally different:

- Affordability
- Financial viability
- Legal challenges to the right to hire co-religionists
- Maintaining focus on the spiritual mission

Leadership. Nearly all of the schools that I would consider successful had a long record of highly respected and focused leadership, there was great respect for the presidents by their executive teams, and there was excellent teamwork and lack of territoriality among the executive staffs and academic departments. The presidents typically make specific opportunities to interact frequently with faculty. People genuinely like one another. Leadership, vision, creativity, and teamwork permeate the best of the schools.

Relative Position. There is a wide disparity among the schools in terms of financial resources and reputation, which are generally correlated. Generally, and expectedly, the schools that were established 100 or more years ago have better reputations, facilities, endowments, and assured permanence, and the younger schools still struggle to reach the ‘tipping point.’ While OC is one of the youngest schools in this cohort and trails most of the schools visited in academic reputation, size, and financial strength, OC has come further faster than most of the schools. OC can be proud of its accomplishments and its relative standing. It is my observation that OC is conducting most of our academic and spiritual development mission as well as, or in some cases better than most of the schools we have seen. While we certainly have things to learn from these schools and some best practices to embrace, OC is competing well and can compete with the best in most every endeavor we undertake, even with fewer resources.

The best of these schools did not achieve their current status by luck, time, location, windfall, or superior wisdom or intellect, but rather by faithfulness to mission, consistent effort, patience, and a willingness to dream beyond their current vision. It was reinforced to me that OC’s people (faculty, staff, and trustees) are just as intelligent and wise, but that they need to dream bigger dreams and pursue greater visions beyond our current ability to foresee. Most administrators below the level of president had heard of OC, but were not familiar enough to opine on OC’s quality or reputation. Most of the presidents were aware of us through the CCCU, or in a few cases because our athletic teams compete well in NAIA national tournaments.

Looking back on the journey, I realize there are still unanswered questions. As one would expect, I did not get simple or complete answers to all the questions or the underlying issues. Today, it is the questions I should have asked that make me wish to make the journey again.

In response to the Board Chair’s guidelines, the goals for my remaining years have not changed, but there are many better insights about their importance and some of the necessary steps to achieve them.

I am deeply grateful to the executive teams at each of the universities we visited. They gave graciously of their time and wisdom. I am also deeply grateful to the executive team at OC, who worked together so well during my absence.

I encourage Trustees to send your presidents on similar journeys after the first two or three years on the job. Some experience in the role is essential for perspective, but the earlier the journey, the sooner the institution will benefit. It should not be considered a sabbatical (though I encourage more time for reflection and observation than trying to visit so many schools in such a short period of time), but rather an important investment in the future of the school.

*Mike E. O'Neal, President
Oklahoma Christian University
January 2010*



OKLAHOMA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
— Since 1950 —

THE OC GRADUATE

Since its founding in 1950, Oklahoma Christian University has sought to fulfill its mission to “transform lives for Christian faith, leadership, and service.” Educating and nurturing the heart, mind, and soul, OC encourages its graduates to be like Jesus Christ, who “increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). Christian faith and scholarship, exhibited through academic and spiritual excellence, is the heart of the University’s mission. While students will pursue and attain this excellence to varying degrees, we identify here the qualities desired for all OC graduates.

THE OC GRADUATE KNOWS . . .

- The **liberal arts**, which enrich life and prepare for the inevitable challenges, opportunities, and changes of life.
- The specialized knowledge, research methodologies, problem-solving strategies, and practical skills that enable **competent living** in modern society and **successful competition** in the global marketplace.
- How to **communicate** clearly and **think** independently, critically, and creatively.
- How to **live and work harmoniously** with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs without compromising truth.
- The **great themes and doctrines of the Bible**, including the message of grace and the Lordship of Christ.
- The history and identity of a *cappella* Churches of Christ and their **restoration** heritage.

THE OC GRADUATE IS . . .

- Committed to **intellectual and spiritual inquiry**, nurturing the mind and spirit throughout life.
- **Devoted to Christ**, seeking to emulate Him and embody the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).
- Dedicated to **truth, righteousness, and excellence** in every facet of life.
- A **faithful steward** of the blessings, resources, and talents received from God.

THE OC GRADUATE BELIEVES . . .

- The **Bible** is the **revelation** of the nature and will of God, the incarnation of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit, and is the **authority** for Christian faith and practice.
- Life has **meaning** only through a **relationship with God**, recognizing that the pursuit of knowledge in any field is ultimately a quest for understanding of God and His creation.
- **Faith and learning are integral** and cannot be separated with impunity.

THE OC GRADUATE LIVES . . .

- As a **servant-leader** in family, church, profession, and community, making a difference for good in the world, both locally and globally.
- With **integrity**, by acting consistently with beliefs and in covenant relationship with God.
- In **humble submission** to God’s will, diligently serving him and all humanity by following the two greatest commandments: to “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind,**” and to “**Love your neighbor as yourself**” (Matt. 22:37 & 39).

Exhibit B

Sabbatical University Visits

1. APU - Azusa Pacific – Azusa, CA
2. AU - Anderson University – Anderson, IN
3. BU - Biola University – LaMirada, CA
4. CBU - California Baptist University– Riverside, CA
5. CC - Calvin College – Grand Rapids, MI
6. Cornerstone University* – Grand Rapids, MI
7. Covenant College* – Lookout Mountain, GA
8. GFU - George Fox University – Portland, OR
9. HU - Harding University – Searcy, AR
- 10.HC - Hendrix College – Conway, AR
- 11.Hillsdale - Hillsdale College – Hillsdale, MI
- 12.IWU - Indiana Wesleyan University - IN
- 13.JBU - John Brown University – Siloam Springs, AR
- 14.LU - Liberty University – Lynchburg, VA
- 15.Lipscomb - Lipscomb University – Nashville, TN
- 16.NC - Nyack College – Nyack, NY
- 17.PLU - Point Loma Nazarene University – San Diego, CA
- 18.RU - Regent University – Virginia Beach, VA
- 19.RWC - Roberts Wesleyan College – Rochester, NY
- 20.SPU - Seattle Pacific University – Seattle, WA
- 21.TU - Taylor University – Upland, IN
- 22.TNU - Trevecca Nazarene University – Nashville, TN
- 23.UU - Union University – Jackson, TN
- 24.UofS - University of the South – Sewanee, SC
- 25.WC - Wheaton College – Wheaton, IL

* Visited the campus only; no discussions with administrators.

Exhibit C
Sabbatical Research Questions

Mission, Vision, Faith Integration, and Planning:

1. Please share your vision and mission documents. What has been most effective in making them part of the culture of your institution?
2. What strategies/tactics do you use to make sure that the institution remains faith-centered? Vis-à-vis students? Vis-à-vis faculty and staff? Do you require an initial and/or annual affirmation from faculty, and if so, would you share its contents?
3. What have you done to make sure the curriculum and co-curriculum accomplish the integration of faith and learning?
4. What percentage of your undergraduates are from your faith tradition? Is that increasing/decreasing? Why? Are you trying to do something about it? What difference is the trend having on your campus? Do you have a “critical mass” target? If so, what is it?
5. What is the frequency and general content of chapel on your campus? What role does it play in fulfilling your mission and vision? What is the President’s involvement in chapel?
6. How many hours of Bible/religion are required of your undergraduate students?
7. What do you see as the three greatest challenges facing private, faith-based universities in the next ten years?

Academics:

8. What are you doing in the area of service learning? Number of staff and size of budget? How is it integrated into the curriculum?
9. How many graduate programs do you have? For graduate programs which are not religion focused, how do you intentionally integrate the programs with the institutional mission?
10. How involved/dependent are you upon distance learning, and how do you intentionally integrate the institutional mission in distance learning?
11. How involved/dependent are you upon adult learning, and how do you intentionally integrate the institutional mission in adult learning?
12. What programs on your campus are you most proud of? Why?
13. What is the diversity of your full-time faculty in percentages?
14. What programs do you have in place to increase diversity and to ensure success of the minority faculty?
15. What are the most effective means you have found to encourage your faculty to embrace change?
16. Do you have tenure/equivalent? If so, what elements of initial or periodic tenure review relate to faith commitment?
17. Describe generally your faculty compensation arrangement? Is it discipline specific? Do you benchmark and if so with whom? If any bonuses, how determined and how large?

Students:

18. What is the minimum level of ACT/SAT score required for admission?
19. What is the diversity of your student body in percentages?
20. What programs do you have in place to increase diversity and to ensure success of the minority students?
21. What programs do you have in place to serve underprepared students? How do you assess success?
22. What effective strategies do you use to increase retention/graduation rates?
23. What percentage of your undergraduate students live on campus?
24. What kind of dress code, behavior code, curfew restrictions do you have?
25. How many intercollegiate sports do you have? Nontraditional sports? What is your total athletic budget?
26. What percentage of your students are on athletic scholarship?
27. How do your athletic programs integrate with the institutional mission?

Resources:

28. What facilities on your campus are you most proud of? Why?
29. Describe your efforts to brand your institution.
30. How much do you spend annually on public relations apart from fundraising?
31. What is the value of your endowment?
32. What is annual tuition for 32 units?
33. What is your tuition discount rate?
34. What year was your institution founded?
35. Please share 2-to-3 of your most useful and effective fund-raising strategies.

Other:

36. What is your perception of the quality, academic stature, and influence of Oklahoma Christian University?
37. Other Thoughts/Observations: