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From the Publisher

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From the Publisher

As you read this issue of *Intersections* and explore the reviews of influential books about national trends in higher education, I invite you also to consider the implications of the widely used phrase, “the model is broken,” to describe the current reality of higher education. The phrase has its merits and utility. It gets the attention of trustees, administrators, and faculty and causes them to face up to the problems of our enterprise. And the phrase is difficult to ignore when the powerful and influential Association of Governing Boards touts it loudly, but “the model is broken” has its problems.

First, it tends to generate an atmosphere that blames the victim. Hence the rush to blame colleges and universities and their supposedly profligate ways for “breaking” contemporary higher education. Even worse, it generates recommendations for whole-sale change in higher education. ELCA colleges and universities are not infrequently challenged to abandon our long tradition of educating the whole person so that we can shift to the delivery of technical knowledge in preparation for specific jobs. Such a change would mean losing our integrity as we joined with forces that no longer consider higher education a public good but a private benefit and a commodity.

The mantra of “the model is broken” also distracts our attention from the actual difficulties ELCA higher education faces. First, the phrase tends to hide the truth that the gradual decline since the early 1980s in federal and state governmental support for higher education is a significant factor in the financial complications we face. The declining trajectory of public financial support for

higher education reflects the growing acceptance of the perspective that higher education is a private benefit, to be purchased by individuals, and not a public good worthy of public investment. Second, “the model is broken” assertion masks that demographic changes are primary drivers of the enrollment, and therefore revenue, challenges troubling our schools. Nothing in our model created these demographic changes or the decline in financial support from government, but the wide use of the phrase implies otherwise.

To say it differently, the constant refrain of “the model is broken” mitigates against the development of wise responses to the challenges facing ELCA higher education. Yes, a wise response will inevitably require changes in what we do. But in the spirit of “there is nothing so practical as a good theory,” ELCA higher education will find its best response to demands for demonstrating the practical relevance of our education by modifying our existing model (our “theory”), not by discarding what we do in favor of an entirely new model.

Our style, form, or model of educating the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—in the liberal arts attuned to pre-professional education has educated leaders for church and society since the cathedral schools of medieval Europe grew into the first iteration of universities in Spain and France a millennium ago. Nothing is broken. To assert otherwise is fear-mongering masquerading as analysis. The “model” has successfully adjusted through the centuries to new situations, and we will do so again in early twenty-first century America.

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