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ANN HILL DUIN AND ERIC CHILDERS

Reinventing Lutheran Liberal Arts: A Preliminary Report on Project DAVID¹

We begin with comments from Dan Currell, a graduate and current trustee of Gustavus Adolphus College:

My college years were spent on a hill in a small town. I was in the company of 3,000 other people—students, faculty, staff—and we were set apart. The only thing on the agenda was to continue being Gustavus Adolphus College, whatever that meant. I didn't know who first set that agenda, and I don't recall a lot of active reflection on what it meant. What did it mean to be a residential, liberal arts college in the Swedish Lutheran tradition? We discussed that a little bit, but mostly we just did it.

Now I am a trustee. A lot has changed, but the basic character of the place hasn't. Whatever it meant to be Gustavus in 1990—well, it still means that in 2013. On the horizon, I can see a lot more reflection about what exactly it means to be Gustavus. Everyone can sense the powerful forces affecting colleges; some would say they threaten to destroy the four-year residential model altogether. Some expect this to happen fast.²

Like Currell, the authors' college years were spent at ELCA liberal arts colleges in small towns: Ann's at Waldorf College and Luther College in Iowa, Eric's at Lenoir-Rhyne University

in North Carolina. Each of us took part in the many distinctive opportunities offered by these residential, liberal arts institutions. We are proud, supportive alumni.

This past summer, Ann had the opportunity to attend The Vocation of a Lutheran College conference held at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where professors, administrators, and staff across ELCA colleges gathered to address the theme of "Vocation: A Challenge to the Commodification of Education." During one session a culminating slide placed the following themes as representative of distinctive institutional commitment to Vocation: global perspective, community, service, leadership, and values. And yet, discussion that followed that presentation indicates that these themes are not distinctive to this set of ELCA institutions.

And so, we repeat a question from Currell: "What are we for? What's the goal? Since there are now innumerable other (and cheaper) ways to be educated, why are we doing *this*?" Currell concludes: "The colleges with a compelling answer to that question—where all 3,000 people know the answer—are going to be fine."

In this essay, we write about a new research initiative called Project DAVID and preview some of its initial findings about

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the way ELCA colleges and universities are strategically reinventing themselves to meet current and emerging challenges.

Project DAVID and a Goliath of Challenges

Project DAVID is about showcasing strategic reinvention underway across higher education. Phase one, focusing mainly on a set liberal arts colleges and universities that are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), asks these questions:

- How are these colleges and universities reinventing themselves?
- How do faith and learning components impact reinvention?

This work builds on Eric Childers’ findings on the impact of leadership on organizational identity as described in *College Identity Sagas* (2012).³ We use a set of themes—Distinction, Analytics, Value, Innovation, Digital opportunities (thus, DAVID)—and associated framing questions to identify how these institutions are positioning themselves for future success. We plan to share results in several ways: this introductory essay, a collection of contributed chapters as part of an eBook launched early 2014, presentations and workshops at upcoming conferences and association meetings, and an associated web (blog) site for continued conversation.

A liberal arts education empowers individuals and prepares them to lead amidst complexity, diversity, and change. Our country’s liberal arts colleges and universities provide students with broad knowledge of science, culture, and society; in-depth

knowledge of a specific area; a strong sense of social responsibility; and communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills. Amid the challenges and opportunities of our global era, our society and the world is in great need of graduates with this depth and breadth of knowledge.

The purpose of project DAVID is not about arguing that one set of institutions is better at empowering and preparing individuals than another; the purpose here is to showcase strategic reinvention underway as a means to foster conversation among institutions about the keys to their future success and the degree to which those keys are shared. This first phase of study focuses primarily on liberal arts colleges and universities that are part of the ELCA; therefore, a key question surrounds how faith and learning components impact identity, distinction, and ultimately, sustainability. These institutions face increasing demands for assessment, accountability, meeting accreditation requirements, relevancy and return on investment. These are transformative times with major factors demanding increased performance and targeted outcomes. Continued success quite simply means continued sustainability amid the “perfect storm” of external factors that will only increase.

Studies and articles abound regarding the intense challenges facing all of United States higher education, with most recent collections pointing to the need to realign programs and experiences to the needs and changing value propositions of learners. Table 1 includes forces, challenges, and factors outlined by three such authors: Jeffrey J. Selingo (2013), editor at large for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, identifies five disruptive forces that “will change higher education forever;” Donald Norris (2013), President and founder of Strategic Initiatives, and colleagues emphasize six major challenges

SELINGO’S FORCES	NORRIS ET AL.’S CHALLENGES	POPENICI’S FACTORS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sea of red ink 2. The disappearing state in public higher education 3. The well of full-paying students is running dry 4. The unbundled alternatives are improving 5. The growing value gap 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students and their families can no longer afford a degree 2. American higher education is facing a sea of red ink 3. American higher education has failed to assess student learning 4. Most institutions lack organizational agility and will 5. Higher education has been unable to leverage technology 6. Higher education has failed to learn from the disruptive innovations pioneered by the for-profit institutions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decreasing affordability of higher education 2. Growing unemployability and marginalization of recent graduates 3. Continuing changes in marketplace conditions 4. Emerging higher education alternatives 5. An increasing desire of learners for practical, innovation- and entrepreneurship-rich experiences

facing higher education; and Stefan Popenici, author of *What Undermines Higher Education* (2013), emphasizes that “there is an increasing (and justified) concern that all will change soon.⁴ New data and analysis increase the anxiety that the current monopoly of higher education will be lost and just a few universities [and colleges] will survive. No one knows which, how many or even if any university [or college] will have the chance to celebrate the middle of this century.”⁵

In 1990, David Breneman asked the provocative question: Are we losing our liberal arts colleges? His research indicated that, given “their offering a curriculum that does not cater to current student concerns with the job market,” they may be disproportionately affected by this changing educational environment, and that the very existence of this educational model may be at stake.⁶ More than 20 years later, Vicki Baker and colleagues revisited the viability of liberal arts colleges, stating that “Many powerful threats to the liberal arts college have been active in recent years. These include the cost of residential education; competition from new education providers, including online and for-profit educational programs; and a job market in transition to a knowledge and service-based economy.”

Noting the source of creativity that many liberal arts colleges represent, Baker et al. emphasize that “If the liberal arts college as an educational alternative dies out or morphs into another type of higher education institution, an influential ‘test kitchen’ for innovation in undergraduate education will disappear or, perhaps, become too peripheral to play a leadership role.” They urge academic leaders “to take steps to renew and reinvigorate these valuable institutions before liberal arts colleges disappear from the higher education landscape or shrink to the status of a minor educational enclave that serves only the academic and socio-economic elite.”⁷ Again, the purpose of phase one of Project DAVID is to showcase strategic reinvention and reinvigoration underway in ELCA institutions.

We must keep in mind, amid the disruptive literature, that liberal arts institutions have great resilience. As John Thelin stated in his 2006 essay on the resilience of the independent liberal arts college:

Faced with a fluid landscape of higher education systems, especially in the public sector, independent liberal arts colleges have been highly effective in maintaining and revitalizing their mission of baccalaureate education. Their resilience has required innovation in the curriculum and the structure of their campuses and has alerted attention to changes in the external environment of state and federal policies as well as in private philanthropy.⁸

We also must keep in mind that liberal arts institutions have ample opportunity to foster Distinction and attend to Analytics, Value, Innovation, and Digital opportunity. There is no doubt that a multiplicity of potential themes exists by which we could showcase strategic reinvention and collaboration underway across these ELCA institutions. But this set of themes follow in response to the factors, forces, and challenges facing our institutions, challenges that emphasize the need for analytics, innovation and agility; the need to leverage technology; and the importance of a clear value proposition and fostering clear distinction.

The use of “DAVID” is no casual reference. In 1 Samuel 17, David faced Goliath, a giant warrior who was greatly feared. Armed with attention to Distinction, Analytics, Value, Innovation, and Digital Opportunity, institutions can also surely face the factors, forces, and challenges pressing down on them.

As part of this project, we have been visiting with college and university leadership across a number of our ELCA institutions.⁹ The remaining years of this decade will present each of our institutions with “Goliath facing” moments. In the remainder of this essay, we provide framing questions and additional thoughts around the DAVID themes as a means to foster conversation about the keys to future success and the degree to which those keys are shared. We invite our college and university leadership to embrace this opportunity to showcase strategic reinvention, and by so doing, work collectively to position our institutions for success.

Distinction

As part of strategic reinvention, how is each institution making a compelling case as to why and how its programs are distinctive?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defines a liberal education as one that intentionally fosters, across multiple fields of study, wide-ranging knowledge of science, cultures, and society; high-level intellectual

“As part of strategic reinvention, how is each institution making a compelling case as to why and how its programs are distinctive?”

and practical skills; an active commitment to personal and social responsibility; and the demonstrated ability to apply learning to complex problems and challenges.¹⁰ A liberal

arts education has a core focus on creating an educated and engaged citizenry; indeed, its strongest proponents reiterate that the liberal arts represent a condition of freedom.

The reality is that this most distinctive, founded in America, higher education model is under attack. While liberal arts colleges rethink their messaging in the face of criticism,¹¹ some leadership appears stymied as to what its “distinction” will represent in the twenty-first century. Others, however, remain firm and visionary: Carol Geary Schneider, AAC&U president, states firmly that the AAC&U will “make the future standing of the liberal arts a central theme” in its next phase of work:

The liberal arts and sciences are basic to participatory democracy because only these studies build the “big picture” understanding of our social and physical environment that everyone needs in order to make judgments that are fundamental to our future... American society needs to own [this] tradition and to reinvest in its future vitality and generativity... Anything less will cede this nation’s educational leadership to others—and put this democracy’s future gravely at risk.¹²

And Swarthmore President Rebecca Chopp (2012) urges her presidential colleagues to shift the playing field. In an empowering speech to her faculty, she stated that “The case for the liberal arts, in my opinion, needs to be reframed to suggest not only how well we serve individual students but also how we act as a counterforce against a culture that is commodifying knowledge and projecting a view of community and anthropology that is reductionist and dangerous.”

As each of the institutions in phase one of Project DAVID is an ELCA college, we also ask: How do faith and learning components impact reinvention?

In seeking to identify factors related to institutional religious identity at colleges and universities of the ELCA, Eric Childers (2012) investigated three central questions:

- Are colleges and universities of the ELCA preserving or diminishing their Lutheran identities?
- Do the status drivers of secularization, financial viability, and faculty professionalization affect Lutheran institutional identity at these colleges and universities?
- If the colleges and universities described in the case studies are seeking to preserve their Lutheran identities, why and how are they planning this preservation?

Childers conducted case studies of three ELCA colleges that fall at various places on the continuum of religious identity:

Concordia College (robust identity); Lenoir-Rhyne University (mid point); and Gettysburg College (pervasive secularity). His work focused on institutional identity preservation and diminishment through the lens of two organizational theories, isomorphism and critical events theory. Findings from his literature review indicated the following:

- (1) institutional players have a significant effect on shaping organizational identity;
- (2) institutional identity is dynamic;
- (3) college governing boards and presidents significantly shape institutional mission through strategic planning;
- and (4) colleges and universities of the ELCA (at variable degrees) are institutions committed to freedom of inquiry, exploration of vocation, and faithful inquiry open to people of diverse faith (and non-theistic) traditions. (38-39)

Childers specifically explored the impact of secularization, financial viability, and faculty professionalization on organizational Lutheran identity, finding that “more than any other factor, the leadership of governing boards, presidents, and other senior administrators was essential in preserving or diminishing organizational Lutheran identity at all three schools” (201); and that “an institution’s self-understanding of its identity...is a vital ingredient in fully developing its intended educational experience for students, professional environment for faculty and staff, and societal relevance in developing citizens for service in the world.” (210)¹³

Self-understanding of identity, of distinction, is vital to strategic reinvention. Thus, Childers’ previous work is foundational to Project DAVID. Given his findings on the impact of leadership on organizational identity, as this project progresses, we will give special attention to how leadership—governing boards, presidents, and other senior administrators—is attending to the major factors, forces, and challenges facing liberal arts institutions.

Any discussion of Lutheran college identity must include the notion of vocation. Derived from the Latin word *vocat*, which means “to call,” vocation is understood to be the way Christians live out baptismal identities—whom God calls them to be—through relationships and occupations in service to God and neighbor. Vocation is about how God calls us to be helpful workers, responsible family members, steadfast friends, good citizens, and cheerful servants to neighbor.

In a crowded and competitive marketplace where value is so central to the decision-making conversation, how are Lutheran colleges and universities different from competitors? The ideal and potential of vocation is the key to this difference, distinction, and identity. For ELCA schools,

vocation and value are inseparable. Vocation matters at Lutheran colleges and universities, where each is free to create environments where students can ask critical questions about life's purpose, can wrestle with questions about meaningful work, and can discern their own call to service in the world. Guided by mentoring faculty, exploration of vocation should spark in students' minds the questions: "To what and for what am I called in this life, and how will my life reflect that calling?"

Project DAVID keeps vocation central to the conversation of identity, reinvention, and value. How can colleges accustomed to articulating their missions in the context of vocation imagine new ways to engage "calling and purpose" as part of their organizational identity? How can schools for which vocation is not central work to reclaim this Lutheran bedrock as part of their reinvention efforts?

Analytics

What role do analytics play in creating and sustaining each institution?

A key component in providing a compelling case for strategic reinvention comes from attention to analytics. Jacqueline Bichsel (2012) defines analytics as "the use of data, statistical analysis, and explanatory and predictive models to gain insights and act on complex issues" (6). Institutions committed to reinvention are those that identify baselines and benchmarks, determine trend lines, and commit to pursuing a deep understanding of what matters and what makes a difference. Using data to drive decision-making behavior, these institutions identify patterns and take "actionable intelligence" to enhance student success and institutional achievement.¹⁴

“What role do analytics play in creating and sustaining each institution?”

Analytics is about paying attention to learning and to fostering a culture of improvement. It's about using analytics to create an environment that best supports student and faculty success. Attention to analytics signals institutional commitment to collect, organize, and analyze data that is meaningful, useful, and obtainable. Attention to analytics signals commitment to student-centered learning and engagement.

For ELCA institutions, the bottom line is that any reinvention is predicated on having, retaining, and graduating students. Therefore, the number one commitment is to student success; this includes faculty and alumni engagement with enrollment management; and student engagement with academics, faculty, and peer groups. Academic and learning

analytics can be used to refocus resources on specific areas that impact having, retaining, and graduating students.

Moreover, attention to analytics signals attention to affordability. According to the College Board, the average cost of attending a four-year private nonprofit college increased 66 percent over the last decade, while family income declined an average of 7 percent.¹⁵ Even with the recent economic recovery, the Pew Research Center (2013) notes that while "the mean net worth of households in the upper 7% of the wealth distribution rose by an estimated 28%... the mean net worth of households in the lower 93% dropped by 4%."¹⁶

According to Jeffrey Docking, president of Adrian College, our liberal arts schools "are all getting to around \$40,000 a year, in some cases \$50,000, and students and their families are just saying 'we can't do it.'" Small classes, special programs, and amenities make these schools among the most expensive in higher education; however, most offer discounts to meet enrollment goals (Adrian College's cost is \$38,602, including room and board, but the average student pays \$19,000).¹⁷

These discounts increase each year: the most recent annual survey of private colleges and universities by the National Association of College and University Officers found that "the average tuition discount rate—institutional grant dollars as a share of gross tuition and fee revenue—for full-time freshmen enrolled at private colleges and universities grew for the sixth consecutive year...reaching a new high of 45 percent." According to this survey, "86.9 percent of first-time, full-time freshmen in 2012 received some form of institutional aid, with the average award amount equal to 53.1 percent of the sticker price."¹⁸

In addition, these discounts make it more difficult for students from low-income families to attend college. A 2013 report from the New America Foundation, in examining data from the 2010-11 academic year, found that at about two-thirds of the 479 private, nonprofit colleges and universities analyzed, students with annual family incomes of \$30,000 or less had tuition bills that averaged more than \$15,000 a year even after all forms of scholarship and grant aid were factored in.¹⁹

To address affordability, some liberal arts colleges are using a shared practice assessment tool to determine need, objectives, and potential partnerships with other institutions.²⁰ For example, the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) assists institutions with a Shared Academics (TM) model made possible through strategic collaboration, driven by shared knowledge, and supported by emerging technologies. Other schools are cutting tuition and/or promising free classes to those students who need to stay beyond four years to complete their degrees.

Liberal arts colleges also are using analytics to guide their affordability efforts. Here Rita Kirshstein and Jane Wellman (2012) provide critical insight and direction. Since 2007, their Delta Cost Project has resulted in key findings:

- Prices are going up higher than spending;
- Nearly half of spending goes for overhead;
- Lower costs per student do not translate into lower costs per degree or outcome; and
- If higher education is to be more cost-effective and efficient, the unit of analysis needs to shift from cost per student to cost per degree.

They emphasize that “the most important point is that *budget and spending decisions need to be based on data, not on rumor or public opinion or perceived impact.*”²¹

Key to strategic reinvention is data that clearly articulates an institution’s value.

Value

How is each institution articulating its value?

Concordia University administrators, Eric LaMott and Kristin Vogel (2013), note that the old perception was that a college or university would only have value with an associated high price tag.²² They argue that liberal arts colleges must clearly articulate their value as learners and their families are becoming much more concerned and discerning about the value of what they receive. Learners and their families clearly scrutinize academic analytics, outcomes, experiences and costs, and they increasingly attend to national ratings.

Note these three value proposition statements:

- For St. Olaf College: Value = a student’s financial independence, professional accomplishment, and personal fulfillment
- From the Kiplinger group: Value = quality + affordability
- Don Norris and colleagues, as part of their work on transforming in an age of disruptive change, propose the use of this value proposition:

Value = Outcomes (learning, development, employment)
x Experiences

Cost²³

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is leading exemplary work to articulate value. As

part of their Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, the VALUE project “builds on a philosophy of learning assessment that privileges authentic assessment of student work and shared understanding of student learning outcomes on campuses over reliance on standardized tests administered to samples of students outside of their required courses. The result of this philosophy has been the collaborative development of 15 rubrics by teams of faculty and academic professionals on campuses from across the country.”²⁴

Each of our ELCA colleges and universities is attending to value amid the forces of change. In a recent visit with Luther College cabinet leadership, they shared with us “Luther’s Dependable Strengths,” part of a document in support of a recent Board of Regents consultation titled “Facing the Forces of Change with Hope”²⁵:

- Centered on student learning, lives, and callings to make the world a trustworthy place.
- Educationally excellent on a spectacular campus and in a growing variety of learning contexts.
- A community of learning and a community of faith, grounded in a generous Lutheran tradition.

Documenting strengths and measuring effectiveness is clearly part of articulating value. Doing so positions an institution to work innovatively to construct and implement strategic plans for its future.

Innovation

How is each institution interpreting the challenges/opportunities and working innovatively to construct and implement strategic plans for its future?

In an essay on the next generation of liberal arts college presidents, consultants Emily Miller and Richard Skinner (2012) emphasize that the challenges facing liberal arts colleges are as much ones of imagination and intellect as they are financial:

If liberal arts colleges are to survive intact, their presidents and their governing boards will need to think critically and creatively, honor the voices of stakeholders, communicate clearly, and act with resolve—in short, they will have to demonstrate the capabilities they cite as attributes of their graduates.²⁶

Here we define innovation as applying imagination and intellect, as thinking anew, and through attention to academic and administrative analytics, reinventing an institution. Norris and colleagues emphasize that the application of

analytics and predictive modeling provides institutions with the ability to understand and optimize learner performance. Attention to analytics enables institutions to think anew, and through doing so, to enhance their investment in measuring, understanding, and improving the performance of individuals, departments, and the institution itself.²⁷

“How is each institution interpreting the challenges/opportunities and working innovatively to construct and implement strategic plans for its future?”

We further expand innovation to include attention to and interpretation of disruptive forces and their impact on the institution. It is imperative that leadership understand these forces, interpret the reality of them for the institution, and share leadership as they work to transform the institution to remain relevant. Moreover, it is imperative that leadership reframe these disruptions as opportunities. Gilbert, Eyring, and Foster (2012), in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, argue that to reinvent themselves in a world increasingly characterized by disruptive change, institutions and organizations in all sectors need to craft a two-track approach to transformation:

- Transformation Track A (Reshape/Reinvent the Core Model) works to reposition the core business of the institution, adapting the current (or legacy) model to the altered marketplace. For liberal arts institutions, this means adapting existing programs, experiences, and outcomes to be competitive with the new, emerging alternatives.
- Transformation Track B (Discover Future Business Model) works to create a separate disruptive model to develop innovations that later become the source of future growth. For liberal arts institutions, this means creating offerings or programs that meet new or unmet needs that were not possible in the past but that are now possible in this digital age.²⁸

Many of the ELCA institutions being studied in phase one of this project are constructing or have a strategic plan underway, and many of these plans signal a great deal of innovation. The upcoming eBook on Project DAVID will showcase the many outstanding efforts underway, and among these, the strategic and collaborative efforts in which institutions are leveraging digital opportunity.

Digital Opportunity

How is each institution responding to digital opportunity?

John Roush (2012), president of Centre College, notes with urgency the need for liberal arts colleges to “blend the best of what technology and technological partnerships have to offer [with] the highly residential, personal, and engaging educational experience we offer students.” We contend that 2013 is a strategic time for liberal arts institutions to articulate and engage digital opportunity. Whereas previous decades required institutions to invest heavily in enterprise administrative and academic systems, liberal arts institutions may best be positioned to take strategic advantage of three opportunities: cloud technologies, social media, and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD).

“How is each institution responding to digital opportunity?”

Institutions can leverage cloud technologies and social media to maintain and enhance the highly residential, personal, and engaging educational experience. They also can enhance their incredible alumni networks, further extending knowledge of their institution’s value. A recent Educause Center for Applied Research study on the BYOE (Bring Your Own Everything) environment found that IT leadership sees great opportunity in leveraging BYOE to diversify and expand the teaching and learning environment. As users bring their own devices, exciting prospects include increasing student engagement with technology; extending the classroom to anytime, anywhere; and making campuses desirable places to engage with technology and technology-enabled learning.²⁹

Conversations with institutions to date indicate a great deal of collaboration underway among IT leaders as they are part of multiple consortia in support of sharing expertise, and in some cases, sharing of services and new learning opportunities for their students.

Conclusion

After a visit with one of the Chief Information Officers (CIO) in this project, Ann received an email message in which this CIO included four lessons in leadership that he had appreciated from a recent sermon that he had heard on David and Goliath: (1) David got close enough to the problem to see what was needed; (2) he volunteered before he knew how he would solve the problem; (3) he met Goliath in his own way,

not in the ways of his adversary; and (4) David used the gifts and skills of his own life experience.

These lessons in leadership are appropriate to the Goliath-sized challenges requiring our strategic reinvention. We look forward to sharing results and to fostering conversation about the keys to future success and the degree to which these keys are shared among our institutions. Please join us in Project DAVID. Future success depends on it.

Endnotes

1. The bulk of this essay is abridged from Duin, A. and Childers, E. "Project DAVID: Showcasing strategic reinvention and collaboration underway in liberal arts colleges," available at: <http://goo.gl/A5teX>. The citation style of the original document is here retained. The authors wish to thank Dr. Jason A. Mahn, *Intersections* editor, for his great comment, direction, and leadership.
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9. To date (November 2013), we have visited (on campus or via conference call) the following ELCA institutions (full names and locations available on the back cover of *Intersections*): Augsburg, Bethany, California Lutheran, Capital, Gettysburg, Grand View, Gustavus Adolphus, Lenoir-Rhyne, Luther, Muhlenberg, Newberry, Roanoke, St. Olaf, Susquehanna, Thiel, Wagner, Wartburg, and Wittenberg.
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