

2012

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Tipson, Baird (2012) "Sustaining Sustainability," *Intersections*: Vol. 2012: No. 36, Article 11.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2012/iss36/11>

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BAIRD TIPSON

Sustaining Sustainability

In this essay, I am going to address something that is absolutely vital to the well-being of faculty members at Lutheran Colleges: securing the resources to support your work, including the work of environmental sustainability. Securing such resources is absolutely vital, yet usually looked down upon. When I was having breakfast last week with a retired faculty member at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, I mentioned that most faculty members I knew—at both colleges and seminaries—considered the people who garner resources for our colleges somewhat *unclean*, analogous to the people who clean latrines. Someone has to do it, but they're mighty glad it isn't them. He didn't disagree.

As a former president of one Lutheran college and former provost of another, writing to members of Lutheran colleges, I decided that this essay should begin with a scriptural text. So I chose Romans 12:2. In the words of the Authorized Version of 1611, that passage reads: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." College presidents are perpetually interacting with this world, and in my fifteen years in the job, I rarely had the luxury of avoiding the challenges of this text.

Victor Ferrall, the former President of Beloit College, wrote a book that I suspect all the presidents and many of the trustees of your colleges are reading: *Liberal Arts at the Brink*. I won't go into the depressing details; suffice it to say that colleges like ours are having a hard time. They're spending more money than they're taking in. I think most of you are aware of the way Lutheran colleges used to operate, or at least liked to imagine

that they could operate. Faithful Lutheran parents believed that Lutheran colleges provided the best academic and social environment for their children, so that a good percentage of Lutheran children went to Lutheran colleges. Local congregations were generous with financial support, and so were the local synod and the national church. A good deal of the president's job involved visits to congregations; he often preached or spoke to Sunday School groups. Ethnicity had a good deal to do with this: Danish-American, Swedish-American, Norwegian-American, even once upon a time German-American families tried to keep members of the next generation in the ethnic family by sending them to colleges that would preserve their ethnic heritage.

If they ever existed in quite this idealized way, those days are gone forever. Local congregations, synods, and the ELCA continue to cut, if not entirely eliminate, support for our colleges. Lutheran parents and their college-bound children are more likely to look to *U. S. News and World Report* than they are to the Bible or the national anthem from the old country. So where do we get the means to stay open, let alone to support initiatives in environmental sustainability?

I here describe three projects that foster an academic environment for sustainability and explain how the resources were secured to make them possible. Because they are all from the institution where I most recently worked, Washington College, they are "secular," but since Washington College is a small, not enormously well-endowed liberal arts college like most of yours, I think these examples are apposite. Each of them relied on a different means of support. And each of them raised issues about

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conformity to the world. To protect the privacy of the individuals and organizations with whom we worked, I'm going to be vague about names and details, but that shouldn't impair your ability to understand the ways resources for the projects were acquired.

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All three of these projects are part of the Washington College's Center for the Environment and Society. Because it sits on a relatively unspoiled river in a rural county on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Washington College chose some years ago to emphasize the study of the environment and the effects of human interaction with the environment. The center's mission is to foster this work. So I will describe first the center's partnership with Chino Farms, second the development of what came to be known as the Chesapeake Semester, and third the acquisition of a work boat, the *Callinectes*.

Decidedly “In the World”

The college's Field Research Center sits within Chino Farms, a remarkable combination of Audubon bird sanctuary, working farm, and research center on 5000 acres along the other side of the Chester River from the college. Over the years, several Washington College faculty had done research on Chino Farms, but although they had coexisted for decades, there was no formal relationship between the farms and the college. The owner of Chino Farms lived in another state but frequently visited Chestertown, and the director of our center began having lunch with him. It became clear that he was concerned for the long-term sustainability of Chino Farms. (We fund-raisers have our own vocabulary for donors, drawn mostly from agriculture; we “cultivate” donors; we “harvest” gifts. Donors generally don't like to think too much about their own demise, so in our language “long-term sustainability” generally means what happens after the donor dies.) Was the college really as serious about

its commitment to the environment as it professed to be? It was time for the president to get involved.

As I got to know this potential partner, it became clear to me that our interests were not identical. Some of his interests—for example, providing a test site to burn switch grass as fuel—were beyond the college's present capacity. But there was a lot of overlap. As he and the college got to know one another better, due largely to the efforts of the center's remarkable director, we began talking about a formal agreement. That agreement was finalized just about the time of my retirement, and now students and faculty at the college have unparalleled opportunities for senior projects, internships, and significant research. Since my retirement, the owner has come onto the college's Board of Visitors and Governors. Initially, the college had no connection to this donor other than his geographic proximity; it was the college's commitment to serious engagement with environmental issues that gradually pulled him in.

Another of our director's dreams was the creation of a unique academic experience for a small group of seriously committed students (see: <http://chesapeake-semester.washcoll.edu>). For an entire semester, these students would devote all their academic work to a comprehensive study of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. They would learn to understand the natural ecology of the bay: what kinds of animal and plant species thrived in the bay; how water quality affected populations of grasses, finfish, and shellfish; what effects climate change was beginning to have. But they would also study the human ecology of the bay: how human beings—past and present—exploited the bay's resources to support themselves; who ultimately made decisions about those resources; how writing about the Chesapeake Bay—literary imaginings of the bay going all the way back to John Smith—shaped attitudes toward it. In the event, they even spent a week-end in the woods building temporary shelters and foraging for food, just as bay inhabitants had done before the arrival of Europeans.

Such a semester involved a good deal of travel to places like Richmond, Annapolis, and Washington where political decisions were being made, as well as to many locations on and around the Chesapeake Bay. It ultimately came to include a trip to another major estuary. We first planned to take students to Baja California, but drug cartel violence caused us to think again, and we ultimately established a fruitful relationship with an estuary system in Peru. Obviously, such a semester could not be sustained with tuition money alone.

By envisioning summer workshops for teachers and income-generating summer activities for adults, our director produced a model that promised to become self-sustaining in a few years. But where to get start-up costs? We turned to a national foundation

with whom we had a long-established relationship, and after a good deal of back-and-forth, including writing and rewriting our proposal, we received the needed funding.

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Why was our grant proposal successful when many others had failed? First, we had an excellent long-term relationship with this foundation, a healthy “track record.” Just as my predecessors had done, I made a point of visiting their offices in New York and staying on good terms with the grant officers who would decide on our proposal. Second, our commitment to the liberal arts—which this particular foundation cherishes—had been unwavering for more than two hundred and twenty-five years. But third, and most important, our proposal was sound, carefully-thought out, and unique in integrating many of the liberal arts into the study of something the college was clearly in a position to do, namely, provide students with the opportunity to learn in great depth about a topic right at our doorstep: the Chesapeake Bay. Our demonstrated commitment to academic excellence and the academic rigor of this proposal led the foundation to grant us the resources needed to get it off the ground. In other words, we *met the world’s terms.*

Risking Conformity to the World

My third example ended up supporting both of the first two. The Director of Washington College’s Center for the Environment and Society is by training an underwater archaeologist, and he recognized the importance of getting access for our students and faculty to a state-of-the-art workboat. The center had some makeshift vessels such as pontoon boats and small motorboats that could go out on the Chester River and take water and bottom samples, but we clearly needed something that could transport larger numbers of students farther down the river and out into the Chesapeake Bay, something equipped with serious scientific equipment for twenty-first century research. He dreamed of a vessel of about forty or fifty feet, with a powerful engine that could move everything quickly down the twenty miles river from Chestertown to the bay.

There was obviously no way buying and operating this kind of boat was going to come out of the college’s operating budget. But wait: If we had such a workboat, it could be made available to local teachers, who could in turn bring high-school science classes for an opportunity on the river. Local farmers and watermen would profit from our research. This would benefit our entire region. So I approached our congressman, at that time a wonderful representative named Wayne Gilchrest who had been a former high school civics teacher at Kent County High School. How did he feel about an earmark for a workboat?

I don’t know how *you* feel about earmarks. However you feel, I suspect you wouldn’t have any trouble fitting this kind of request into the category of “conforming to this world.” Fortunately, Congressman Gilchrest was a committed environmentalist who had worked for years to preserve a natural flyway down the entire eastern shore. He understood why it was important for watermen and farmers to learn everything they could about Chesapeake Bay ecology—he was intimately involved, for example, in efforts to rebuild the oyster population in the bay—and how the present generation of high school students will be called upon to make important decisions that pit environmental preservation against other pressing social needs. The college had made a point of keeping him involved in our environmental affairs and had previously hosted a workshop where he brought together farmers, watermen, and environmentalists to address challenges to the river and to the bay.

Working with a congress person fits somewhere between working with an individual donor and working with a foundation. For one thing, the college is likely to have a more intimate understanding of the particular federal program into which an earmark can fit than is the congressman himself. We worked with someone who specialized in finding niches in federal programs, crafted our request appropriately, and then helped the congressman and his staff understand exactly how we were asking them to proceed. We also had to get our two senators on board. Neither was unsympathetic, but both had many other priorities that must have seemed more pressing than environmental education in Maryland’s most rural county. And then our congressman had to insert his bill into the long list of similar requests from his colleagues. It’s entirely possible to go all the way through such a process only to fail at the end because the congressional leadership has decided to limit earmarks in that particular appropriations cycle.

We didn’t fail, and my wife Sarah got to christen the workboat *Callinectes*. The name is Greek for beautiful swimmer, and *callinectes sapidus*—the “savory beautiful swimmer”—is the Chesapeake blue crab. Actually, my wife tried to christen the *Callinectes*; the champagne bottle wouldn’t break on the fiberglass bow and had to be smashed in another manner.

Of course, once you have a workboat, you're still faced with the challenge of operating it. Large boats have often been called holes in the water into which you throw money. When the college is not in session, various plans are afoot to take paying passengers out on the river and the bay, and grants that include using the boat will have to request money for its operation. By the way, where the foundation expected a detailed, academically respectable, thirty page proposal, the congressman needed only a paragraph. It was up to me to make the case in person that carried that paragraph along.

From Conformity to Covenant

I know I've only scratched the surface, but I would suggest that in all three situations, which I think are representative, the college is "conforming" to the world, and that the question of *how far* to conform poses interesting ethical issues. To use another biblical concept, the college, represented by the president or another fund-raiser, creates a kind of "covenant" with the donor, one ideally governed not by strict legal constraints but by mutuality of interest. Although it may appear to you that the college is simply approaching donors with its hands out, my experience has convinced me that each party to the covenant gains important benefits. Our individual donor gained the satisfaction that comes from having contributed voluntarily to something that mattered deeply to him; having seen the pleasure donors derive from such gifts, I would never underestimate that satisfaction. Most of us have made such contributions, however modest, to our churches, our undergraduate alma mater, or some other

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institution that is important to us. The donor's generosity also gave him confidence that the important work he had overseen during his lifetime would continue after he was no longer around to supervise it. More commonly, this happens when a donor endows a scholarship or a faculty chair, thereby making certain that a student or faculty member in an area of importance to him or her will continue to benefit from her or his generosity forever. Pragmatically, there are also tax benefits involved for the donor, and those of you with an arithmetic bent would probably find the study of the various kinds of possible annuities and trusts of more than passing interest.

The foundation gains the satisfaction of forwarding its own mission and of taking significant credit for the success of what it

funds. If, as is true in this case, your mission is to advance excellence in liberal arts education, you take pride in working with an institution to achieve results that confirm the importance of what you are up to.

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And the congressman? Not only has he advanced something important on his own agenda, but he has directed federal dollars to his district. We made sure he was present at the christening so his staff could take publicity photos, and in retirement he serves on Washington's Center for the Environment and Society advisory board.

I close with two requests for faculty teaching at our institutions. I hope I've given you a sense of how some environmentally-focused problems can be both funded and sustained, and how this process involves a certain conformity to the ways of the world. It's very likely that colleges like ours will sustain—or fail to sustain—themselves through the next several decades based on their success at raising money largely from *individual* donors. And the individuals most likely to support you will be your alumni, in other words the very students you will be teaching this coming fall. Those of us who write compelling essays and score well on tests like to believe that our best students will be our most successful graduates. But that is often not the case. I work out during the week at the newly-remodeled Gettysburg College athletic facility, and I'm told that some of the most visible names on the wall, the donors to the facility, were not particularly good students. Let's be realistic. There are many kinds of intelligence, and the one most likely to earn A's in class is not necessarily the one most likely to succeed in the marketplace. So first, do your best to inspire all your students; you never know which one might strike it rich someday and endow a chair in your honor. Seriously, the more you can show your students, by your example, the extraordinary benefits of attending a Lutheran college, the more likely they are to want to make sure those benefits are available for their children and grandchildren.

Second, I suggest that faculty consider, at some point in their careers, getting involved in academic administration. Those who are in the formative years of a faculty career can put this off; they

need to concentrate on teaching and on research. But at some stage, I hope all faculty will consider how to contribute to the kind of enterprise I have been describing. Initially that might involve writing and administering a grant. Some dean's offices provide for faculty members to rotate in and out as assistant or associate deans. Serving as a department chair or the chair of an important faculty committee can also be a springboard to a stint in administration.

I say this because I see a disturbing tendency for boards of trustees to look beyond college walls for their leaders. Even after the meltdown of our financial system, outsiders still imagine that "colleges need to be run more like businesses." Desperate for money, trustees may also be tempted to look for experienced fundraisers who may have little direct experience of academic life. Of course, some experienced fundraisers such as Randy Helm of Muhlenberg College (formerly Vice President for Development at Colby College) who holds a Ph. D. in ancient history from the University of Pennsylvania, or Lex McMillan of Albright College, (formerly Vice President for Development at Gettysburg College) who wrote his English literature Ph.D. thesis at the University of Virginia on C. S. Lewis, have made

excellent college presidents. But I believe that our colleges need as large a pool as possible of dedicated faculty members, teacher-scholars who love to breathe academic air, who have also taken a turn in administration.

I am all too aware that faculty culture disparages administration and that faculty members condescend to those of us who have, as my nephew once put it, "turned to the dark side." But if you want administrators who are sympathetic to your concerns, *be those administrators.*

I want the person who meets with individual donors, congress people, and foundations not only to be passionate about teaching and scholarship but also *to have done it.* I want that person to know just what it is that may have to be conformed a little to this world, and I want them to be skilled at creating an outcome that includes a good measure of what the Hebrew Bible calls *chesed*—covenant faithfulness—to both parties.

Works Cited

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About the Artist

Seth Fitts is a southeastern United States artist who currently resides in Georgia. He graduated from the University of West Georgia in 2003 with a BFA in Painting.

Seth's body of work explores the realms of the human condition, the soul, the spirit, and imagination. Seth works in mostly traditional techniques of art making, combining them in mixed media applications. The substrate that is used varies due to Seth

using reclaimed material in addition to wood, paper, and canvas.

Seth is also aspiring to be an illustrator. There are book projects he is working on which hopefully will come to fruition within the next year.

You can view his work at www.sethfitts.deviantart.com and www.sethfitts.com.