

2015 State of the College
The Best of Times to be a Christian College
Our Educational Mission for the Common Good

Welcome to Community Day 2015! Today, we gather to worship and celebrate the launch of a new academic year. I am thankful for each one of you and your contribution to make this the best of times for Messiah College.

When we think of the nature of the phrase best of times, Charles Dickens' famous lines quickly come to mind:

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. . . ."

Honored as one of the 100 best opening lines by the American Book Review, these simple phrases from *A Tale of Two Cities* have etched themselves into our collective consciousness.ⁱ While we are not engaged in the type of epic struggle experienced by Dickens' characters, we can relate to the concept that the best of times often coincide with the most difficult or frustrating.

Some of us might even use this antithetical phrase to describe the experience of raising children. For Kelly and me, parenting our only child has certainly encompassed the most rewarding moments of our lives, and some of the most humbling ones as well. Loving our children (whether as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or mentors) is a gift, and teaching them is a privilege, but sometimes the education doesn't go exactly as planned. For example, when Brooke was four years old, she began to smuggle home small toys from her preschool classroom, and we initiated serious conversations to impress on her the concept that stealing was wrong. Then one day, when she and her father were shopping, he witnessed her slyly slipping a Chewbacca Star Wars figure into her pocket. He swiftly addressed the action with a stern response and threat of punishment. Brooke immediately dissolved into tears and quickly promised that she was so very sorry and would never steal again. Feeling quite proud of his parental success, Kelly was keenly disappointed when, moments later as they walked out into the parking lot—Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo came tumbling out of Brooke's pant leg. Oh yes, parenting and teaching a preschooler, or a child of any age, can simultaneously be "The best of times" – and also "the most exasperating."

On a more serious note, I want to suggest that this can be the best of times for Messiah College—even though formidable factors and a rapidly changing external context might suggest otherwise for higher education in general and for Christian colleges in particular. I have been contemplating this conclusion since last winter when two keynote speakers addressed this topic at separate gatherings for college presidents.

Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, presented the provocative idea that *"This is the best of times for following Jesus."* In a related article, he argued that *"If you look at the New Testament and ask 'What is the church?' . . . [it's] people living their lives as an act of worship and response to Jesus Christ and seeking to live as daily disciples in community and for the sake of their world."*ⁱⁱ In his speech, however, he also described an increasing sense of exile for the church as our society experiences *"A shift from a time in which many of our institutions were surrounded by a well-formed, intentional Christendom that is now largely cracking and eroding."*ⁱⁱⁱ But Labberton argues that this degree of exile is actually a gift, *"an opportunity to be re-attuned to the one we're claiming is the Savior and Lord of our lives, and that calls for a new way of living."*^{iv}

On another occasion, Thomas Kepple, president emeritus of Juniata College, made the equally bold claim that this is the best time to be in higher education. As evidence, he cited the well-documented, positive benefits of a return to a collegiate emphasis on engaged teaching. He also pointed to the affirmation of the private college educational paradigm, a model whose deep personal engagement continues to offer value that cannot be equaled by the impersonality of massive online courses or by for-profit universities.^v As one dramatic example, the for-profit University of Phoenix recently reported a 54-percent decline in enrollment.^{vi}

As I reflected on the comments of these two presidential colleagues, I became increasingly convinced that indeed this can be the best of times for Messiah College, even as we negotiate complex challenges. First, it's the best time to incarnate our mission and to demonstrate what we have to offer the church and society. Second, it's the best time to celebrate our accomplishments as a Christian college dedicated to educational excellence. And third, it's the best time to aspire and plan toward a promising future as we prepare our students to serve, lead and reconcile in an increasingly pluralistic, fragmented and technologically charged world. Today, as we consider these themes, Pulitzer Prize-winning commentator and humorist Art Buchwald's words are particularly relevant: "*Whether it's the best of times or the worst of times, it's the only time we've got.*"^{vii} And, similarly, I would suggest that as Christians, we need to respond to Jesus' call in "the only time we've got"—this very present moment!

This can be the best of times for Messiah College precisely because our current external environment calls for us to renew our commitment to living out our institutional mission. Our distinctive Christian heritage prepares us to honor our theological roots, while simultaneously recognizing the blessing of the many Christian traditions that comprise our community. At a seminal time such as this, we cannot rely on autopilot faith or casual Christianity as we incarnate our foundational beliefs and practices.

We are living through a paradigm shift to what many term a "post-Christendom" era in the sense that Christianity no longer holds a highly respected, central place in our nation's public life or discourse. A recent Pew Research Center study indicated a decline among Americans who affiliate with Christianity—most notably among mainline and Roman Catholic traditions—while also identifying a marked increase in unaffiliated respondents and those from non-Christian faiths. But, the study also determined that 70 percent of the U.S. 5 Tw[p)Tj1 or 14.58 0that5grec90003 Tn atia

students master college-wide educational objectives before they graduate. We have good news to report about both in-class and out-of-class learning. Take a look at one sampling of outcomes from the past academic year.

measuring the quality of a college education based solely on graduates' income levels, we should consider the caliber of the intellectual virtues graduates develop—such as “love of truth, honesty, fair-mindedness, humility, perseverance, courage, good listening, perspective-taking and empathy.”^{xiv} At Messiah College, we receive consistent feedback that our students and graduates bring these distinctive virtues to their vocations as described here by Travis Peck, principal of Harrisburg's Downey Elementary School.

Video here of Travis Peck

Messiah College works closely with Downey Elementary School as part of the White House sponsored Together For Tomorrow initiative.

In this initiative and many others, Messiah College is well-positioned to practice the deep listening and hospitality that promote the common good. Deep listening goes beyond mere information acquisition to empathic understanding—the type of listening in which we seek to step outside of our long-held assumptions for the sake of authentic learning. Last winter, NPR's Michele Norris spoke of the importance of listening during her keynote address at the School of

In graduate programs, Messiah College concluded another record-breaking year by registering 592 students who enrolled in more than 7,000 credit hours in FY15—an increase of approximately 30 percent as compared to FY14. Overall, we achieved 108 percent of our budgeted goal—a significant accomplishment!

I do want to emphasize how important effective retention of students is to our overall enrollment strategy. The College's Student Retention Team, chaired by Jim Sotherden is leading our institutional effort to ensure that our students have the necessary support to be successful. Recently, we have focused specific attention on increasing first-generation student retention. Like many of you, I was a first-generation college student, so this topic takes on a personal sense of responsibility for me. My grandparents immigrated to the United States (NYC) to work in domestic service and hourly jobs. Neither of my parents graduated from high school. They did not always understand their book-loving daughter, but they encouraged my love of learning, even though they were unable to offer much educational counsel during my college experience. Approximately 15 percent of current Messiah students are in similar situations. To assist our first generation students, we have implemented new initiatives including academic coaching, peer mentoring and an early alert system. From 2011-2013, our retention rate for first-generation students increased by 11% — a wonderful testimony to this community's care for our students.

In addition to realizing positive strides in recruitment and retention, we celebrate achievements in developing high-caliber educational programs designed to meet student and societal needs. Our College Ministries team helps to set the tone for an excellent education offered within a vibrant faith community. The new chapel program encourages worship, contemplation and reflective reading. In discussing this approach, College Pastor Don Opitz hopes students will come to view chapel participation as an educational opportunity. From an array of programming, students will be able to select Christian formation experiences that include congregational worship times, cognitive studies of the Christian faith's implications for life and culture, and educator-led Bible and book studies. When I consider our mission to educate students toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith, I think of the transformation that happens in the lives of students like Jeremy Tan, a junior international business major from Kuala Lumpur.

Jeremy Tan video here

Messiah College also promotes academic excellence through our recently established Teaching and Learning Center. Amy Ginck, senior lecturer in Spanish, and a Center fellow, says, "*I believe that a Messiah College distinctive is the excellent classroom teaching and passion of our educators. Students feel that they matter. They are supported, challenged and encouraged.*" In her role as a fellow, Amy co-facilitates programs such as an inaugural two-day teaching seminar for new faculty and Teaching Tuesdays, weekly opportunities for educators to discuss different pedagogical approaches to enhance student learning. In traditional and online courses, Professor Ginck engages students' interest through effective use of technology. For one project, students post photos to VoiceThread and write accompanying narratives in Spanish. Here is a brief example of a resulting virtual conversation about the sport of fishing with family members.

Insert Amy Ginck Voice Thread Slide 5 here (with audio)

Even as we celebrate the strength of our academic programs, we acknowledge that we can only attain the fullness of educational excellence by preparing students and ourselves for an increasingly diverse world. Our institutional commitment to inclusive excellence comprises salient compositional, educational and campus climate goals.

funded by a combination of fundraising and borrowing. Currently, we have 77 percent of the pledges and gifts we need to raise, and we expect to complete fundraising by May 2016.

The forethought invested prior to constructing these new facilities is evidence of the intentional planning we undertake to assure the continued flourishing of our College. Indeed, I believe it can be the best of times for Messiah College to aspire and plan toward a promising future of preparing our students to serve, lead and reconcile in an increasingly pluralistic, fragmented and technology-charged world. In all our pursuits, we continue to be guided by our 2020 vision to “be the first choice among undergraduate and graduate students who desire a Christian higher education.”

Even as we must affirm our mission and celebrate our accomplishments, we must also carefully plan for our future. In the year ahead, we will conclude the current institutional strategic plan, finalize a new 2016–2020 plan and conduct a campus master planning process. Some of the themes emerging from the work of the institutional strategic planning committee include:

- x Advancing Messiah College’s mission and identity in a changing culture;
- x Engaging, enrolling and retaining a changing constituency;
- x Strengthening programming and preparing personnel for a changing student body; and
- x Investing resources for a solid financial future.

Do you get the sense that change is on our minds? A few possible goals related to the strategic themes include: creating deeper ties with Latino-serving churches in the mid-state region; developing pilot programs and policies for the use of hybrid or online courses for traditional and non-traditional undergraduate populations; and recruiting, retaining, developing and supporting our dedicated employees.

Because we successfully achieved many of the goals of the current strategic plan, we have attained a strong institutional financial profile. Earlier this summer, Standard & Poor’s reaffirmed the College’s financial position with a long-term “A” rating with a stable outlook and a short-term “A-1” rating. In addition, we exceeded last year’s fundraising goal by more than \$1 million dollars and created a number of new scholarship endowments. Due to effective fundraising, disciplined debt payment and conservative fiscal management, we are now in a position to borrow funds as well as fundraise to address institutional needs and priorities.

As we look to the future, an overarching issue that influences our aspirational planning is the need to live out our mission and Christian convictions in challenging times. Christians and Christian institutions have always had to determine how to balance and negotiate their convictions with the values and expectations of the culture in which they are embedded. Today, we are certainly in the midst of such a season, particularly as we face external pressures which could limit the College’s institutional autonomy and the ability to define our institutional mission, values and related codes of conduct including our commitment to the Church’s historic understanding of Christian marriage. While we must develop appropriate responses to these challenges, our vocation as a Christian college is not to lead a culture war. Rather, our vocation is to educate our students in an environment characterized by academic rigor, spiritual vitality and compassionate care. As we endeavor to be this faithful presence, I’m grateful that we are part of a larger body of faith-related educational institutions that are seeking to maintain the freedom to fulfill our missions within our nation’s mosaic of principled pluralism. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities is working with the Interfaith Religious Alliance and other

universities, including an alliance of Catholic institutions, to articulate the case for religious freedom of faith-based colleges. Principled pluralism calls for our nation to value multiple voices and opinions including those of religious persons. But, our conversations and debates must be characterized by humility and grace, not stridency.

Be assured that I am engaging our board of trustees—who bear the responsibility for defining and nurturing the College’s mission and identity—in serious and sustained assessment of these challenges as we analyze potential difficulties that will require responses. Later this fall, Provost Randall Basinger and I will host an informal coffee and conversation time for employees to ask questions regarding the College’s advocacy for institutional autonomy and religious freedom. In addition, the provost and I will continue leading employee educational sessions about the College’s perspective on human sexuality. My fervent hope and prayer is that Messiah College will serve as a positive example of a faith-based college that embodies humility and deep listening and compassion in the midst of divisive debates within the church and our nation.

The tone and tenor we bring to all of our difficult conversations—whether in national or regional contexts or on our own campus—must be marked by kindness. We need to cultivate a culture of mutual respect in ev

