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How religious colleges and the  
“Missionary Generation”  
can bridge the divide between  
Red and Blue America

BY ALAN S. CURETON, PH.D.  
President, Northwestern College

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3003 SNELLING AVENUE NORTH | SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA | 55113-1598 | 651-631-5100 | WWW.NWC.EDU

Another book on higher education hit the bookstores amid critical acclaim from *The National Review*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*. Yet this book is truly different. Finally a voice outside the proverbial choir – a Harvard-educated journalist/scholar not connected to the religious right – is seeing the academic excellence, cultural relevance and potential impact of religious higher education.

Naomi Schaefer Riley’s book, *God on the Quad* (St. Martin’s Press, January 2005), describes why religious colleges and the “Missionary Generation” are changing America for the good. Despite those who believe university campuses are lost to postmodernism and hedonism, she discovered that something good is happening on these campuses!

As I read the book I rejoiced at the fruit of Riley’s research. Exploding myths and shedding stereotypes, she reveals aspects of religious colleges that I encounter every day as president of Northwestern College, a faith-based religious college. I see students with moral principles and academic excellence grounded in faith and personal conviction. They desire to serve God, society and the workplace with commitment, intelligence and zeal. In Riley’s own words, I, too, predict and expect these students will “bridge the recent divide between Red and Blue America.”

While I am well aware of the positive impact our students and alumni make on the world, it is confirming to know others are acknowledging the vital role religious colleges, like Northwestern College, are making in both higher education and the American experience.

In visits to 20 deeply religious colleges – Jewish, Catholic, Baptist, Mormon, Evangelical, Buddhist – Riley found that the students’ moral and ethical values, rooted in their faith, is a guiding and positive force. They acknowledge a divine purpose. They have hope and confidence in the future that are often missing in the majority of today’s college students. And the common claim that such colleges shelter their students from the world inside a protective bubble is soundly refuted.

Contrary to many assumptions, the academic requirements at religious colleges are rigorous. The business program at Northwestern College, for example, requires more mathematics than most undergraduate colleges. Our alumni report that some of their graduate school coursework has already been covered at Northwestern. Believing we must seek to understand before we can lead, business ethics was a required component in our curriculum long before the Enron and WorldCom scandals forced federal regulations.

Like many religious colleges, Northwestern College is intentional in striving to provide academic quality as personified in America’s finest universities. This quality is seen through our faculty, whose academic and research credentials include Oxford University, the University of Genoa-Italy, Russian-Christian American University and Cambridge University.

Our graduates, as reflected in a 2004 Fulbright Scholar, go on to attend Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, the University of Chicago and the Royal Academy of Music in London.

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Northwestern alumni are forging careers as lawyers, engineers and chiropractors. They include a partner with KPMG, the world’s foremost financial services firm; a network producer with CBS News; and an NCAA Division I university chancellor. They find jobs in their degree fields shortly after graduation: 87 percent of our 2003 education and 86 percent of our 2003 business graduates are employed full-time in their major field of study.

Our students are activists. They may not stage high profile sit-ins or protests, but their activism is people-based, driven by their personal faith convictions. Activities of public service range from raking leaves for elderly homeowners to orchestrating a fund-raising effort generating thousands of dollars for a Florida college pounded and damaged last summer by four hurricanes.

When feminism was marching across campuses a half-century ago, Northwestern’s march dates back to our beginning in 1902 when women graduates set sail for foreign countries – many single – to serve as medical missionaries. They shared their faith by treating the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the orphans and widows and housing the homeless. Our alumnae pioneered radio stations in Asia, conducted English language studies in China, and today hold prominent government positions in the U.S. State Department, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and the Singapore Attorney General’s Office.

Northwestern students have cultural discernment and speak thoughtfully about diversity, sexuality and politics. They bring their views of open intellectual inquiry and democracy into the classroom, scholar symposiums and lecture series. They have explored the “life of the mind” under such visiting scholars as Mark Noll, professor of Christian thought and history at Wheaton College; George Marsden, Professor of History at Notre Dame; Baylor University’s business ethicist Richard Chewning; social policy consultant Star Parker; and racial reconciliation/community development advocate John Perkins.

Our graduates are not fearful of the outside world. In fact, they embrace it with their faith supporting them. Northwestern alumni report the news from war-torn Pakistan and Baghdad, and dare to bring quality family-friendly films into Hollywood. They reach out to help the poor on the streets of Calcutta and the jungles of Ecuador.

Religious colleges like Northwestern serve, shape and strengthen culture here and abroad. Through our halls pass the “Missionary Generation” who effectively integrate faith with learning and living. As Riley concludes, “If the perpetuation of liberty depends on the continued propagation of virtues like integrity, loyalty, courage, charity, and self-restraint, then America’s religious colleges will be a vital component in this country’s future.”

And therein lies the preeminent responsibility of religious higher education – and our bright hope in the future.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Alan Cureton has over 25 years of experience in higher education, including vice president for university advancement at John Brown University (AR); vice president of student services and vice president for administration at Sterling College (KS); extern coordinator for the dean of students' office and policy analyst for the Office of Science Policy and Research at Iowa State University; and dean of students and director of Title III at Northwestern College (IA).

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