

Goodwin, Larry. "Transformational Community."

Transformational Community
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By
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What difference, if any, does it make that education at our schools takes place in a Benedictine context?

I want to share reflections on this question, and then invite you, as leaders at our schools, to join the conversation. Here are the three points I want to make:

- Benedictine education is communal.
- Its purpose is transformation.
- Its necessary next stage is inclusive excellence.

I'll begin with a brief history of how the Hallmarks paper came to be. The presidents of the 14 North American Benedictine colleges and universities have been meeting annually for the entire 18 years that I have been president at CSS. In the early part of my tenure, our meetings were mainly social gatherings. We'd meet at a different campus each summer, talk about what was going on at our schools, eat and worship together, and enjoy a play or a rodeo or a picnic together. We shared a common heritage, but fierce Benedictine autonomy kept us from engaging seriously in any joint programming or cooperative thinking. "How about coordinating our study-abroad programs?" Silence. "What about a joint marketing effort?" Silence. "Maybe we could buy supplies together and get a good price." Nothing.

We were a band of brothers and sisters in search of a cause.

Then one summer we started talking about demographics and the declining number of professed religious at our campuses. We began to ask what we presidents should do now to help insure that in future decades our schools would remain meaningfully Catholic and Benedictine—even though the presence of our sponsors would be greatly diminished. At last we found our common cause.

This leadership formation institute is one result of our discussions. But the first step was the Hallmarks paper. We asked a group of five Benedictine monastics—men and women from several of our schools—to draft a paper identifying the essential marks of Benedictine life. The result was an essay that singled out ten hallmarks.

But Benedict was an abbot, not an academic, and his thoughts were developed in a monastery, not in a college. Our task as presidents was to adapt his monastic insights for an academic context.

To do this, we invited the abbots and prioresses of our sponsoring monasteries to join us at our summer meetings to help us translate the hallmarks into our campus settings. The lion's share of that work took place here at St. Scholastica in 2006 when we last hosted the annual meeting of the Association. Teams of presidents and monastic leaders worked through each hallmark and tried to translate its monastic meaning into the college context.

"Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition" thus reflects the work of both monastics and academics, although it has a single voice provided, appropriately, by its final editor, Brother Dietrich Reinhardt, who was both a monk and president of Saint John's University. Shortly after the paper was completed, Dietrich died of cancer. The torch was passed.

The final version of the paper contains the following passage:

To be sure, a school is a different social and cultural entity than a monastery. However, an institution of higher education founded and sponsored by a Benedictine monastery cannot help but be influenced by the fundamental concerns of the monastics. Therefore, the core values that animate their life – **love, prayer, stability, conversatio, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community** – find a home in Benedictine colleges and universities and can be seen as hallmarks of educational vitality and fidelity to their mission.

After reading and reflecting on the paper many times, I've come to think that the ten hallmarks are really ways of making essentially the same point. What's important here is not a list of values that we should memorize, but rather their consistent portrayal of what it means to be a Benedictine learning community. And here is the point: *Education in the Benedictine tradition is communal and transformational.*

Community is the central reality of the Benedictine educational experience.

St. Benedict literally wrote the book on community life. Benedict's genius was his insight that God is best sought and served in a community. Benedict began his religious career as a solitary hermit living in a cave thirty miles east of Rome, but he became famous as the abbot of a community and the author of a *Rule* that has become the blueprint for most of western monasticism, because it lays down the basic norms for living together in the pursuit of holiness.

As we've said, however, a monastery is a different entity from a college. A monastery is about the pursuit of God, a college about the pursuit of truth. But many of Benedict's insights about monastic community are remarkably relevant to an educational community.

Benedictine education is communal, not solitary. It is cooperative, not competitive. Rather than telling entering students, "Look to your right and to your left: half of you will not be here by the end of the year," we should say, "Look to your right and to your left: these are the people who will help carry you to the finish line." As leaders, we need to model and to encourage behaviors that strengthen community and discourage actions that are corrosive of community.

The purpose of a Benedictine community—monastic or academic—is *conversatio*, personal transformation.

Benedictine education is a descendent of the wisdom tradition. "Like the most ancient of wisdom traditions, Benedictine education sets its sights on the transformation of the human mind and heart. Benedictine education stresses the formation of the whole person rather than the intellect alone." This ideal of the education of the whole person—intellectual and moral, head and heart—is different from the notion of value-free education that is concerned only with rational development, leaving questions of value and purpose to parents and pastors. Yes, we must teach our students to think critically and independently. But the wisdom tradition knows that rigor without direction and power without purpose are empty and maybe dangerous. Knowledge is power, and the question is how we will use our power. Many terrorists are plenty smart. This is why the cultivation of the moral virtues—imagination, empathy, courage—is as important as the intellectual virtues in the wisdom tradition.

Education of the whole person means also that college is about more than workforce preparation.

Yes, our students need to find jobs, and we must prepare them. But we get the emphasis all wrong if we make this our primary objective. The deepest purpose of Benedictine education is not utility; it is personal transformation.

So, Benedictine education is concerned with the transformation of persons. What kind of transformation, exactly? The answer is the kind of transformation that happens when we fall in love. Benedictine monasticism is about falling in love with God, and Benedictine education is about falling in love with learning and with great truths. It is for this reason that I believe Benedict's insights are transferrable from one type of community to the other.

"Love" here is not a sentimental concept; it doesn't mean feeling good. "Love" means being drawn out of ourselves in the name of something larger. The big human questions. Important ideas. The lessons of history. Great works of literature and art and music. The great discoveries of science. The ideals of the professions. Real love is hard work. The love of learning can be a tough love. Love requires us to put the needs of the beloved ahead of our egos. It requires that we deal with subjects that we find intimidating; it means admitting our ignorance, our errors, and our self-interest; it entails accepting constructive criticism gracefully. The truth is a demanding lover.

What attitudes or virtues are important in an educational community that is committed to transformation? In the list of hallmarks there are several that can only be described as "old-fashioned" and out of step with much of contemporary life: prayer, stability, obedience, discipline. "Come to our Benedictine college and learn obedience and discipline!" probably isn't a strong marketing message to seventeen year-olds. But these countercultural attitudes turn out to be exactly the ones that can lead to transformation.

Take prayer. In the monastic context, this means, among other things, *lectio divina*, the slow, meditative reading of Scriptural texts to understand what God may be saying. In the academic context, prayer can be translated as “attentiveness” or “mindfulness”—to a lecture, to a primary text, to one another. In a world of sound-bytes and tweets, students are easily frustrated by complex arguments and nuanced texts. We need to teach them discipline and obedience—yes, obedience! That is, faithfulness to a text. I remember once asking a class to read an article and then asking them what the author said about a certain topic. Up went a hand, and the student proceeded to tell me exactly what *he* thought about the topic. That response was undisciplined, disobedient, and self-centered. I directed the student to a passage where the author very clearly stated the opposite conclusion. The student later told me that his feelings were hurt because I didn’t value his opinion. But what I was asking for was not really his opinion, but rather what the text said. My question was not, “What do you think about it?” but “What is it?”

An educated person knows how to be obedient to a text or an argument before reacting to it. Indeed, academic freedom itself is a form of obedience: We follow a trail of evidence where it leads us, not where we want it to go.

The cultivation of discipline, of mindfulness and of obedience takes time, effort, and support. This is why one of the hallmarks of a Benedictine community is stability. I’m reminded of this every time I walk through the Sisters’ cemetery. We are in this together, and for the long haul. We search for wisdom together, through good times and bad. We take care of one another along the journey. We want to cultivate lasting relationships with our students and with each other. Organizations need new blood and new ideas, but there’s a lot to be said, too, for long and stable tenures.

Humility and hospitality are also essential virtues for transformation. Why is the pursuit of truth, like the search for God, more effective in community than on our own? Because “by ourselves alone, none of us can learn what we most need to know or bring to completion what most needs to be done.” This is the beginning of wisdom. Just because we realize that no one of us has the whole truth, we need to be open to the other—be it an idea, an experience, or a person. And I mean really open—vulnerable, open to being changed, even transformed. In other words, *a community that is committed to transforming individuals must itself be open to being transformed.*

I want to conclude my remarks by spending some time reflecting on inclusive excellence, because I believe that it is the next stage in the evolution of our Benedictine learning communities. Radical hospitality entails inclusive excellence. I will use The College of St. Scholastica as an example.

What does inclusive excellence mean? For many people, excellence means “the best and the brightest”, and so, is by definition an exclusionary term. Indeed, one sure way to raise a school’s standing in U.S. News and World Report rankings is to turn away more and more students: You’re not good enough for us!

Inclusive excellence turns that definition on its head. I very much like the way Arizona State University puts it: We define excellence, not by who we exclude, but by who we include and how well they succeed. Inclusive excellence means that all students—including historically disadvantaged students—are accepted into colleges and universities of their choice at comparable rates; that they enroll at comparable rates in honors programs and study abroad programs; and that they persist and graduate at comparable rates—regardless of income level, skin color, ethnic background, sexual orientation or identity, body type, or age.

Inclusive excellence does not mean that everyone deserves an “A.” Rather, it means that college success rates should reflect differences in ability or effort, not differences in income, race or ethnicity. Inclusive excellence thus refers to *equality of access and opportunity for all students.* That’s the ideal.

The reality is that, as one report puts it, “despite years of increasing diversity in overall postsecondary enrollment, educational opportunity in the United States—and the economic and social benefits it affords—remains markedly stratified along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines” (*America’s Unmet Promise*). For example, an average student from the upper income quartile has a far greater chance of college success than an exceptional student from the lowest quartile. Here at St. Scholastica, domestic students of color have lower four, five and six year graduation rates than others.

In addition to a moral problem, this situation represents an economic threat to our country. By 2027—in just eleven years!—half of the students in United States high schools will be students of color. If we cannot enroll these students in college and educate them successfully, then our future as a diverse democracy and a productive economy is in jeopardy.

For years, our, that is The College of St. Scholastica has been inviting, welcoming, and supporting students from diverse backgrounds. These are important steps, but they are not enough. Now we need to move to the most difficult stage, transformation. *Inclusion requires transformation of the institution, rather than simply adding in the excluded* (S.M. Miller, Sociology Professor Emeritus, Boston University). A transformed community—this is what our Benedictine mission requires of us. “We must change...structures to serve students rather than trying to change students to fit existing systems” (*America’s Unmet Promise*).

What do we need to do to transform our College into a community of inclusive excellence? Here are three things we can and should do:

First, *we need to find our blind spots and correct them*. Some of our language reflects unconscious, but harmful, assumptions. A nursing student from Africa reads in her textbook that “healthy skin is pink.” What should she think?

Another example: How do we determine which students to call “diverse”? Maybe we should say that Caucasian students are diverse, because they are different from Mexican or Japanese students. As we currently use the word, “diverse” carries the implication of difference from a norm or a standard, and that sends a message to some students: You are outside the norm. You are abnormal. Rather, let’s use “diverse” in a way that includes everybody: Not “different from the norm,” but “a variety of viewpoints,” multiple perspectives in an educational endeavor. This makes diversity a good thing to celebrate, not a problem to be solved.

Over the past several years I’ve met regularly with some of our international students and domestic students of color and their allies, because I really want to understand their experiences here. Some of what they report has been difficult and painful to hear. “I feel that I don’t fit in.” “It’s hard being a student of color at a predominantly white school.” “I have to put on my mask when I leave my room.” These stories extend beyond race and ethnicity, and include also sexual orientation and identity, physical challenges, and other struggles in which students find themselves.

Students may feel out of place or disadvantaged because of overt acts of prejudice or racism—and we have had to deal with some ugly incidents on our campus. But students often feel marginalized just because they are not part of the in-group; they are in the minority. Those who are in the majority benefit from the systems that the majority has constructed, while those in the minority do not share the privileges.

Our higher education systems, for example, have been designed by people like me who succeed in them. But they don’t serve everyone well. Those of us who benefit from the current structures have a hard time seeing how they discourage or even alienate others. We need to identify our blind spots, recognize in-group favoritism at our school, and change our policies to benefit everybody.

Second, *we need to change the assumption that academic excellence means treating everybody the same*. I grew up believing that excellence, like justice, should be blind. Treating people fairly means treating them equally. We have standards, and if some people cannot achieve them, they must try harder. I saw the world as a meritocracy where people are rewarded for their efforts.

I’ve had a successful academic career, and I am proud of my accomplishments. But I’ve also come to understand that being white, male, and over six feet tall are not incidental to my success.

Imagine a situation where we expect everyone to be able to see over a fence. The taller people can already see over it, but the shorter people cannot—no matter how hard they try. We ought to provide them boxes to stand on. In this case, treating people fairly means treating them *appropriately*, not treating them equally.

We will not realize equality of access and opportunity by treating all students as though they are the same, because they are not the same. Some have been fed well, loved well, and encouraged from their earliest years; others have not. My father read poetry to me when I was a boy; in Tanzania, I held orphans who were so desperate for human touch that they wailed miserably whenever I set them down. If all students are to have a realistic chance at success, some students will need educational boxes so that they can see over the fence. Treating people differently is not compromising quality or standards. In the end, students have to meet the standards, but first we need to get them all on a level playing field. *Equity is needed to achieve equality*. Affirmative action admissions policies are one example.

Third, *we need to change our expectations*. A black student earns a B in a course and is asked if that is his best grade this semester; in fact, it is his worst. What did we expect of him?

We label some students “disadvantaged” or “at risk.” What fears do these labels reinforce for students? What expectations do they set? What level of confidence do they show? We need really to believe in our students—more, perhaps, than they believe in themselves.

The University of Texas conducted an important experiment. The school identified the students in its entering class who fit the profile of “least likely to succeed in college.” Like many schools, Texas created a special program for these students. But, unlike other schools, the University radically changed its messaging to the students.

The students least likely to succeed were not told that they were being placed in a remedial program; rather, they were invited to join the University Leadership Network. The message they heard was that they had been selected, not because the University was worried that they would fail, but because it was confident that they could succeed. All the program requirements reinforced this expectation: Students in the Leadership Network wore business attire; they participated in community service and internships; they were expected to move into leadership positions on campus; they had extra instruction each week because they were part of a community of promise. In exchange, they earned scholarships.

Over and over, these “at-risk” students were told that it was really possible for them to succeed and excel. As a result, many of them did. They performed beyond what their profiles would predict—mostly because the school believed in them. The University of Texas understood something important. The previous experiences of these students affected their *readiness* to learn, not their *ability* to learn. Get them ready, and their abilities will flourish.

Find and correct our blind spots; treat students equitably by listening with the ear of our hearts; raise our expectations: these are our guidelines. If we listen carefully to the voices of our students who struggle to fit in, if we imagine their world and how we might change ours for them, and if we have the courage to do so, our College can transform itself into an academic community of inclusive excellence.

Our Catholic Benedictine values compel us to do this. If our Benedictine learning communities cannot realize inclusive excellence for all God’s children, who can? Indeed, we should become the leaders in helping transform the broader society.

I hope that these reflections will be helpful for you as leaders as you think about transforming your own schools.

I’ve tried to address three essential points about what Benedictine education means:

- It is communal.
- Its deepest purpose is transformation of persons.
- Its necessary next stage is inclusive excellence. Benedictine hospitality requires nothing less.

I invite us now to discuss what community, transformation and inclusive excellence mean for us as leaders.