The Necessity of Faculty Professional Identity for Students’ Spiritual Formation

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Abstract

With a missional commitment to the training of students to the person of Christ, the Bible college movement must continue to adjust to the needs of our students to maintain our opportunity to engage in this formative task. With a changing culture emphasizing availability, flexibility, and affordability of education and the motivations for pursuing education adjusting to reflect an emphasis on job skills and financial security, Bible colleges must respond to provide affordable education to meet the demands without losing the heart of spiritual formation within biblical higher education. Although using part-time and adjunct faculty reduces overall costs, the negative impact of this role on the professional identity development of the faculty influences the ability for faculty to foster the professional identity and spiritual formation of students. Maintaining full-time faculty with the job security, availability, professional formation, and relationships to students are critical to the mission of biblical higher education.
The Necessity of Faculty Professional Identity for Students’ Spiritual Formation

The core commitments to biblical training, the Great Commission, holy living, and ministry formation or training provide the foundation to the Bible college movement (McKinney, 2018). As McKinney (2018) suggested in his exploration of the past, present, and future of our movement, these commitments provide an anchor to sustain and support the necessary adjustments and innovation critical to retain viability in the changing culture and climate of higher education in the future. With emphases on career development and professional placement driving the enrollment choices for today’s students (Barna, 2017), strategies for incorporating ministry preparation and spiritual formation with these cultural demands are critical for maintaining the mission of holistic student development and the professional identity development literature provides a useful framework to conceptualize these formational elements.

Within this literature are the additional caution regarding hiring trends in higher education with concerns expressed regarding limitations for the transmission of professional identity development when faculty lacks the security, belonging, time, and acceptance of full-time employment (Scott, 2018). The necessity of established faculty professional identity for the active transmission of professional identity development goes beyond the secular concerns for burnout, job satisfaction, and increased productivity (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008) for biblical higher education as professional identity development incorporates the critical process of “[equipping] leaders to live a Christian identity wisely in a professional capacity with multicultural fluency” (Greggo, 2016, p. 30). This article will explore the critical connection between strategies for effective professional identity development among bible college faculty and the fulfillment of our core commitments to the spiritual development and formation of a future generation.
Biblical Higher Education

As the mission of the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) states, the purpose and mandate for the Bible college movement are to provide credible and engaging education that is “biblical, transformational, experiential, and missional” (ABHE, 2018). Biblical higher education is grounded first and foremost in the person of Christ as represented through His Word and understood through His creation but seeks to both inform through content but also transform through relationships between the students and faculty or staff of the schools. However, as the research demonstrated, students and their parents are not seeking to attend Bible colleges to gain either knowledge or spiritual formation, but to gain job skills and experience for gainful employment and financial security (Barna, 2017; McKinney, 2018). The options of spiritually formative or professionally preparative educations do not need to be competing demands for students and their parents. “Intellectual formation and spiritual formation go hand in hand” (Bracey, 2018, p. 31). As Greggo (2016) suggested, the goal of formative biblical education is not to prepare one for ministry or profession but to “equip leaders to live a Christian identity wisely in a professional capacity with multicultural fluency” (p. 30).

As in the days of the Israelite exile (Jeremiah 29:4-7), and in the founding of the church within a secular context (Romans 13:1-7), Christians are called to “walk in a manner worthy of the Gospel” (Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27) while contributing to the public discourse, professions, and cultures of the day, providing influence and relationships as God allows. The acknowledgment that prospective Bible college students have the same career intentions and financial motivation as their secular peers reflects the need to contribute effectively as believers in our culture. As followers of Christ, we must work so that we can eat and for this work to provide an opportunity to impact the world for Christ, we must work in and among those who do not know the Lord (1
Peter 3:15-16). This shift in motivation and intention for college reflects changes in the cultural climate of our country as different from the origins of the Bible college movement, but this does not mean that it is a bad thing (Barna, 2017). Bible colleges must be able to provide the professional tentmaking skills necessary for effective engagement in our society while also be uniquely suited to support the holistic development of our students through biblical, transformation, experiential, and missional education (McKinney, 2018).

For a Bible college education to compete in our competitive higher educational climate, we must embody the benchmark of excellence highlighted by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 3:23-24, providing excellence in our craft as both followers of Christ and as professional educators as the motivation, focus, and intent of our teaching is not to receive the praise and glory of men, or an increase in enrollment, but to honor the Lord who we serve. Bible colleges should be attracting students not only because we have the unique holistic spiritual formation, and biblical content young adults need in this culture, but because our programs are ahead of the curve in establishing the trend for how Christians and the Bible are relevant and necessary for living life well (McCracken, 2013). For the Bible college movement to survive these changes and begin to impact students and the world for Christ, we must consider the educational environment in which we foster both professional and spiritual development. With the rising costs of education and the increased flexibility for online education and adjunct faculty, many schools are shifting from a traditional full-time faculty or tenure model to a contingent or part-time, adjunct model of education (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset, & Beishuizen, 2017). This hiring approach allows schools to control overhead costs using a supply and demand model for faculty, but the loss of belonging, availability, space, and opportunity for building relationships for faculty with both faculty and students has a
significant impact on the professional identity development of the faculty as well as the professional identity development and spiritual formation of the student (Billot, 2010; Greggo, 2016; Tomlinson, 2013).

**Professional Identity Development**

Professional identity development occurs as professionals incorporate the perceptions, values, and beliefs that provide a sense of self within their personal life with the roles, responsibilities, and competencies of professional life within a professional environment (Karkouti, 2014). Identity, both personal and professional, is dynamic and growing, shifting and changing with the needs and demands of the social context (Dweck, 2017). Professional identity development within higher education is vital as it provides a framework and connection to established patterns and expectations, providing job satisfaction and increased effectiveness (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). With changes to the status quo of hiring practices in higher education, professional identities among academics are faltering, inhibiting their ability to prepare students for professional life by mentoring and modeling a strong professional identity (Clegg, 2008; Scott, 2018).

**Mentoring, Modeling, and Academic Training**

The process of professional identity development begins during the academic training process with faculty fostering professional identity development through modeling professional identity, academic training, research support, and mentoring students to integrate their personal and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges, 2012). However, if faculty lack an established and dynamic professional identity or space, time, and availability to provide the mentoring, modeling, and academic training of professional identity development for students, the developmental process is broken (Scott, 2018). As Trede et al.
(2012) identified, higher education is under pressure to continue teaching the theoretical and form knowledge base while also engaging students in the real world of work as active professionals. Greggo (2016) brought this one step further by acknowledging the responsibility of faculty to enhance student identity development across the personal, intellectual, vocational, and spiritual domains. This coordination or alignment of domains accurately demonstrates the complexity of professional identity development in biblical higher education, incorporating the multiple selves of personal and professional with the underlying identity as a disciple of Christ (Greggo, 2016). Professional identity development in biblical higher education carries the added responsibility of a biblical mandate for “walk[ing] in a manner worthy of God” (1 Thess. 2:12) in all aspects of our personal and professional lives, requiring faculty to model and mentor these skills and dispositions on top of delivering the content.

**Academic Status and Identity Formation**

The importance of mentoring relationships for professional development and spiritual formation in biblical higher education is well established in the literature with clear descriptions of the expectations and strategies for pursuing this calling (Bracey, 2018; McKinney, 2018). The concern of this article is not the role, method, or importance of mentoring and modeling by faculty at Bible colleges, this is well established and understood within our movement. The emphasis of this article is to express concern regarding the potential harm the practice of hiring part-time or adjunct faculty may be to the mission and vision of biblical higher education for spiritual, personal, and professional identity formation.

As colleges attempt to remain viable in an increasingly competitive marketplace, the cost savings of hiring part-time and adjunct faculty to provide flexible, on-demand instruction is hard to compare with the overhead of maintaining full-time faculty (Levin & Hernandez, 2014). The
need for cost-savings and flexibility is especially poignant for Bible colleges as the demand for a biblical education and spiritual formation, niche elements within our movement, become lost in the priorities of practical job skills and financial security (Barna, 2017). This shift means that Bible colleges are no longer merely competing with other Bible colleges or Christian colleges, but the broader and increasingly competitive market of higher education (Barna, 2017).

These concerns are all known and acknowledged within our movement, but if our mission is to continue to conform people to the image of Christ while engaging professional studies, a move to contingent faculty is a move away from this mission. As McKinney (2018) acknowledged, student development grows from the informal interactions among faculty and staff. It is through these informal interactions of modeling and mentoring, providing opportunities for the integration of learning to practice, that holistic professional identity is formed, equipping our students with a Christian identity with which to engage our world as professionals (Greggo, 2016). This transmission of integration to professional identity development cannot occur if the faculty lacks professional identity or the opening to engage the contacts with students necessary to form mentoring and modeling relationships (Scott, 2018). Pittman and Foubert (2016) demonstrated that it is through the establishment of a faculty member’s professional identity which allows for the socialization of personal and professional integration through mentoring and modeling with the next generation.

Full-time roles in higher education provide the context for the mentoring, self-exploration, socialization, and alignment with the discipline critical for effective professional identity development (Levin & Hernandez, 2014; Limberg et al., 2013). Contingent or part-time faculty, making up about 70% of the total faculty among higher education in the United States, often perceive their positions as undervalued and not belonging with low wages, long hours,
heavy workloads, lack of belonging or participation in the voice of the institution (Edmonds, 2015; Levin & Hernandez, 2014). With the average compensation per course between $2,700 and $3,200, contingent faculty seeking to earn a living teacher in higher education must carry heavy teaching loads spread between multiple institutions, limiting further their access and availability for the very relationships and opportunities critical to their professional identity development and thereby the professional identity development and spiritual formation of students through modeling and mentoring (Fruscione, 2014; Magness, 2016).

**Implications and Conclusion**

A strong professional identity provides faculty with personal and professional connections to the higher education community, improving self-care and student engagement by reducing the symptoms of burnout and maintaining effective engagement in the field through research and advancement (Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernández, 2013). For an education to be biblical, transformational, experiential, and missional, the faculty must first experience these elements in their engagement with the institution and with one another, enabling the transmission of these values within a context of belonging, security, and satisfaction in their professional roles. If the field of higher education is beginning to recognize the need to align its practice with its philosophy more effectively, may biblical higher education lead this charge. May the Bible college movement be the first to adjust to the research as it reflects the biblical concepts of relationship, community, belonging, and value for those with whom we entrust the transmission of our desire to foster the next generation of Christian leader. As Barna’s (2017) study acknowledged, the trends of a new climate of learning require adjustments to how we deliver biblical higher education. These trends do not change our purpose of forming people and communities in the likeness of Christ but do require adjustments to our methods and means
(Barna, 2017). Biblical higher education must model faith and scholarship, pursuing excellence in our content and our delivery (Bracey, 2018). Excellence requires care for the fostering of professional identity development first among our faculty, allowing our faculty the context for growth necessary to model and mentor this professional identity development as an integrated formation of Christ in us to the next generation.
References


