

Educating for Cultural Influence

Rick Ostrander, Cornerstone University provost, August 2011

Cornerstone's Mission

Cornerstone University's public statements center around the word *influence*. For example:

- Our identity: a university with a "passion for global *influence*."
- Our mission: to "empower men and women as *influencers* in our world for Christ."
- Our vision: to attract men and women who "*influence* our world for Christ."

Clearly the idea of preparing graduates to influence the world is what Cornerstone University is all about.

Cornerstone is not unique in proclaiming such an educational mission. Indeed, just about every Christian college purports in some way to prepare students to make an impact on the world. This goal is expressed in various ways, such as the stated desire to produce "world-changers," "students of impact," or, as the title of a new book by a Christian college president puts it, "engaging the culture, changing the world."

The danger, of course, in using a term like "influence" so often is that it simply becomes a platitude; or worse yet, that without careful explanation, the term creates misunderstandings of our educational task both among ourselves and our constituents.

"Influencing Culture:" A Contested Concept

So what is actually meant by "influencing the world"? Actually, that question has been the subject of much discussion and disagreement among Christians over the years. In the mid-20th century, American evangelicals typically would have associated the idea of influencing the world with personal evangelism. Their attitude toward culture in general was one of separatism. They sought to avoid the negative influences of secular culture by creating alternative Christian institutions and establishing extensive rules for how to live one's life. Hence, the purpose of a Christian college was either to train pastors and missionaries, or to prepare graduates for a "secular" career where they could, on occasion, share the Gospel with their co-workers.

With the rise of conservative evangelical politics in the 1980s, Christians such as Charles Colson and James Dobson began focusing on the broader institutional and political dimensions of "influencing the world." It does little good, they argued, to evangelize individuals if at the same time the broader culture is becoming increasingly secular. Colson thus focused on the importance of ideas and worldviews and urged Christians to become active in advancing a "Christian worldview" in the public square in order to "reclaim the culture" for Christian values. Such a goal has become the educational paradigm for a number of Christian colleges, some of whom have intentionally focused on developing majors that equip their graduates to reclaim the "commanding heights" of culture such as law, education, media, and politics. Unfortunately, this development has led some outside observers—and perhaps internal ones—to equate "influencing the world" with the equipping of cultural warriors who take an adversarial stance toward culture and seek to dominate it.

In the past decade, some corrective voices in evangelicalism have questioned the cultural warrior approach. Andy Crouch, for example, critiques the excessive reliance on Christian worldview analysis of ideas and advocates that Christians engage in "culture making"—that is, developing God's creation in new, productive, and creative ways. The best way to influence culture for Christ, he argues, is not by combatting it but by making new and better cultural goods that win out in the cultural marketplace.

The sociologist James Davison Hunter goes further and criticizes all such Christian attempts to change the world as naïve and misguided. Societies, Hunter argues, change slowly and imperceptibly over centuries, and they do so through the influence of cultural elites and institutions—not through the work of ordinary people advocating their beliefs or making culture. The best that Christians can hope for, according to Hunter, is to exercise a "faithful presence" in society, as the Old Testament Israelites did as exiles in Babylon, and not worry

about trying to change the culture. Christian colleges, therefore, should give up their presumptuous attempts to produce “world-changers” and simply equip students to exercise a faithful presence in the world.

Clearly, the notion of “influencing the world” is more complicated than it would first seem. For an interdenominational Christian university that draws from insights across the spectrum, however, we can simply recognize that Christians are called to engage culture in a variety of ways. In faithfully doing so we can let God worry about whether our particular efforts “change the world” on a global scale. And fortunately there are enough different types of Christians with unique gifts and interests to fulfill the calling to champion a Christian worldview in the public square, to combat social injustice, to proclaim the Gospel, to minister to the poor, to make culture, and to fulfill a host of other redemptive tasks.

Gabe Lyons summarizes the situation well when he describes Christians as “restorers” who, like a builder remodeling a beautiful but dilapidated mansion, are engaged in making the world what God intended it to be. He writes: “Instead of waiting for God to unveil the new heaven and the new earth, the rest of us can give the world a taste of what God’s kingdom is all about—building up, repairing brokenness, showing mercy, reinstating hope, and generally adding value. In this expanded model, everyone plays an essential role.” Just as a carpenter needs training in order to remodel the house, so the Christian college exists to equip students to excel in the complex cultural tasks of modern society so that they can be effective restorers of God’s creation. But we should do so with a healthy dose of Hunter’s skepticism about cultural change and the humble realization that ultimately it’s up to God whether our efforts change the world.

Jesus and Cultural Influence

Perhaps a better way to envision our cultural task is to consider the model for everything we seek to do as a Christian university: Jesus Christ. When we consider how Christ influenced the world, several cultural approaches emerge:

- **Proclamation:** At times Jesus publically proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom and his role in that. As he announced in the synagogue in Nazareth, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...” Jesus claimed that he had come to seek and save the lost from sin, and he proclaimed the gospel message to all who would listen.
- **Ministry to the poor:** Jesus spent much of his time meeting the physical needs of “the least of these” in society through healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and other acts of compassion.
- **Crossing cultural barriers:** In his conversation with the Samaritan woman and his dinner at the home of the tax collector, Jesus crossed the cultural barriers of Jewish society by associating with people considered “unacceptable” by the religious leaders of his day.
- **Withdrawal:** At times Jesus withdrew from the crowds to focus on his own relationship with God or to teach and mentor his disciples in the counter-cultural ways of the Kingdom.
- **Active resistance:** At times Jesus intentionally and aggressively opposed the cultural system of his day, such as when he healed people on the Sabbath and drove the money-changers out of the temple.
- **Passive non-resistance:** In contrast to his aggressive resistance, Jesus could be surprisingly passive in his response to culture—most notably during his trial and crucifixion in which he offered no reply or resistance to his accusers.

The Early Church and Cultural Influence

In the centuries after Jesus’ departure, his followers formed an alternative culture that, over the course of time, transformed the Roman Empire. While not a perfect community, they did effectively extend and institutionalize some of Christ’s approaches to culture.

- **Demonstrating compassion:** Early Christians distinguished themselves by their care for the poor, marginalized, sick, and outcasts of society.

- **Crossing ethnic and cultural barriers:** In a stratified society where slaves and freemen rarely mixed and women were powerless, early Christians made the church a place of hospitality regardless of ethnicity, gender, or class. They cared for one another and often sacrificially extended aid and care in the pooling of resources and generous provision to those in their community who were in need.
- **Making culture:** Early in its existence, the church produced intellectuals, scholars, and theologians who confidently extended Christian thought into new areas and influenced the ideas of the classical world. As the Roman Empire collapsed, it was the Christians who valued and preserved the classical cultural inheritance.

A Modern Example

What is clear from the examples of Jesus and his followers, therefore, is that no single approach to influencing culture is sufficient. Christians must be adept at a variety of ways of acting in the world, and know when each approach is appropriate. That is why ultimately Cornerstone University equips students not just with knowledge or skills, but with *wisdom*. Our graduates must excel in a wide variety of areas and have a depth of insight about their world to understand what stance is most appropriate at a given time. “Influence” is complicated and happens in a variety of ways, sometimes visibly and sometimes not.

Consider, for example, a graduate in Journalism who receives a job at a local newspaper. He will influence the world for Christ in a variety of ways:

- **“Faithful presence:”** God designed the world for humans to live in community, and one important element of that community is the ability to communicate truth to each other through accurate and compelling stories about the world. The Cornerstone graduate will be educated to do his job well and to “bless” his workplace by demonstrating Christ’s characteristics of love, generosity, and humility at work. Moreover, his vocation itself will exercise a positive influence in the world and contribute to human flourishing. In other words, his career has intrinsic value to God, not only as a platform for evangelism.
- **“Faithful resistance:”** The Cornerstone graduate will also be educated to recognize the subtle ways in which his particular corner of creation is “not the way it’s supposed to be,” in the words of theologian Cornelius Plantinga. Members of the media sometimes highlight the absurd or the trivial in order to gain more audience share. Or they violate ethical standards in order to get a scoop. The Cornerstone graduate will at times “faithfully resist” the status quo by focusing on a complex, difficult story that deserves attention despite the lack of potential market share; or by respecting a person’s privacy even when that means losing a story. In these little ways, he brings Christ’s influence and redemption on this particular corner of creation.
- **Evangelism:** The results of faithful presence and faithful resistance will at times attract the notice, and perhaps the curiosity, of non-Christians and provide opportunities for the verbal proclamation of the Gospel. The Cornerstone graduate, therefore, will be equipped to articulate his faith in ways that are compelling, relevant, and winsome to the non-believer in a post-Christian society.
- **Family:** In addition to influencing the world through his profession, the journalist will earn a living that enables him to support a family. The Cornerstone graduate will realize that one important way that he influences the world is by nurturing a healthy marriage and raising Christian children who will themselves exercise a positive influence in the world.
- **Church:** The Cornerstone graduate will realize that ultimately, Christians exercise their presence in the world through the vehicle of Christ’s body, the Church. He will recognize the local church as a “peculiar people,” in Rodney Clapp’s words, that presents an alternative example to the world of people functioning in community the way they were meant to be. Thus, he devotes his time, talents, and resources not just to his career but to the church as it ministers to the poor, advocates for justice, and proclaims the Gospel.

Cultural Influence as an Educational Program

Many more aspects of the Journalism major's life could be included, such as community involvement, economic choices, participation in the political process, recreational activities, and more. But even this limited example expresses the basic truth about cultural influence: It occurs in a variety of ways for different people, sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly. That is why in educating students for cultural influence, Cornerstone University focuses on developing **six key qualities** in our graduates that we believe are essential for living effective lives of global influence in today's culture. In sum, our graduates will be:

1. *Wise and spiritually mature followers of Christ.*
2. *Critical and innovative thinkers.*
3. *Creative beings who express beauty and develop culture.*
4. *Skilled professionals who engage culture in their vocation.*
5. *Cross-cultural communicators and collaborators.*
6. *Faithful stewards of emotional, relational, and physical health.*

These six outcomes are embedded in Cornerstone's curricular and co-curricular programs. Here are a few illustrative examples:

- All first-year students enroll in "Terra Firma," a first-year seminar consisting of four components: Christ, Character, Community, and Culture. Students are introduced to the notion of cultural influence and the ways in which Christ engaged culture. They also participate in a cross-cultural service learning project in Grand Rapids.
- A number of core curriculum courses focus include "in Culture" in the title, such as Writing in Culture, Science in Culture, and Imagination in Culture. The purpose of these courses is not simply to educate students in a particular discipline but to understand the subject in relation to culture and the Christian's cultural task.
- Global study and outreach trips develop students' cross-cultural abilities so that they emulate Christ in effectively crossing cultural boundaries. These skills will become increasingly important in today's rapidly-globalizing society.
- The Chapel program not only provides students with opportunities for worship but seeks to nurture wisdom and maturity in students by providing biblical instruction and exposing students to a wide variety of worship practices.
- All students take "Christian Beliefs and History," a core class that exposes students to the basics of Christian theology and the history of the Christian faith. The course nurtures in students a robust confidence in the truths of historic orthodoxy and an ability to communicate those truths in modern culture.
- Each department at Cornerstone has a Capstone Seminar in the major that draws together their educational experience and helps students make the connection between their various courses and the notion of effective, appropriate cultural influence. The course thus challenges students to consider how they will be "influencers in the world for Christ" through their chosen vocation.

In addition, these six key outcomes serve as the framework for our assessment of student learning. That is, Cornerstone seeks to evaluate each student's progress in developing these qualities not just in particular courses but throughout their Cornerstone experience. Our goal is that upon graduation, every student will have assembled a learning portfolio demonstrating his or her progress in the six outcomes. Furthermore, we will use these portfolios to evaluate our overall effectiveness as a university in achieving these goals and to adjust our programs as needed.

Conclusion

If Cornerstone is to be truly a Christ-centered university, then the notion of “influencing the world for Christ” must not only decorate our public documents but animate our educational programs. The world is complex, however, and so too is the Christian’s relationship to it. Cultural influence, therefore, takes on a variety of shapes and forms depending on the context. No simple formula exists to ensure that Christians appropriately and effectively influence culture. Education for global influence must be varied, complex, and at times indirect.

Two decades ago, “leadership” became a popular concept, and many schools developed programs designed to teach students to be leaders. What educators discovered, however, was that the concept of leadership was complex, multi-faceted, and depended on many other underlying skills and qualities. They found that leadership was often best taught “sideways,” as it were; that is, by focusing on actual content areas and skills and bringing in leadership indirectly, when appropriate.

Cultural influence also is often best taught sideways. As we educate graduates who display spiritual maturity, critical thinking, creativity, professional skill, cross-cultural agility, relational health, and above all *wisdom*, we will advance the Kingdom of Christ and fulfill our calling as a Christian university.