

WESTMONT COLLEGE
STATEMENT OF KEY TERMS AND IDENTITY

What does Westmont mean by describing itself as an *evangelical, liberal arts* college committed to *diversity*?

In order to help all members of the college communicate Westmont’s mission and identity more precisely and effectively, the Strategic Planning Committee (2007-present) recommended the college draft brief statements **to sharpen and focus our grasp of these terms and encourage a continuing community dialog to promote a common understanding of the college’s identity.** The purpose is not to *restrict* discussion of Westmont to “evangelical,” “liberal arts” or “diversity” because the college’s mission and vision involve many more aspects than these three. Nevertheless, they rank among the features at the heart of Westmont’s character, and they have a variety of possible meanings, roles and connotations. So it’s worth considering how the college understands them and their relationship to the institution.

Westmont takes these three terms so seriously because they are matters of faithfulness and discipleship to its mission. Because they go to the heart of the college’s identity, they cannot be independent of one another. Rather, each of these commitments has energized and shaped the others in the college’s community life and history. Westmont’s core mission originally was evangelical and has remained so.¹ Collegiate education in the liberal arts quickly became the trustees’ means to achieving that mission. The shape and fruit of that means emerged as, among other things, an embrace of the Kingdom of God’s rich diversity and a longing for its even fuller expression. In turn, deepening appreciation of this diversity — of the variety and connectedness of one another as well as our disciplines and walks of life — has been inspiring and retraining Westmont’s academic disciplines, educational goals and strategies, and evangelical perspectives. To the extent the college *becomes* more fully evangelical, more steeped in the liberal arts and more richly diverse, it will *be* more “Westmont.” To understand these terms better, then, is to comprehend the college’s community and task more truly.

Evangelical

Evangelical Christianity brought Westmont into being, characterizes its faith and continues to sustain its community. Evangelicals represent a variety of intersecting streams of renewal — revival of the church by the power of the good news and regeneration of the world by the same power — as communities and cultures worldwide have responded to the good news in distinctive ways. Accordingly, the word “evangelical” has a variety of meanings and connotations — theological, historical, sociological and political — that shift over time and in different circles.ⁱⁱ As an institution of critical thinking, Westmont should play a leading role in the constant debates over which traits belong in which category and in raising mature disciples within evangelicalism’s various streams. As an institution unaffiliated with any particular church or Christian organization, with members throughout and sometimes beyond evangelicalism’s confessional and institutional spectra, Westmont aptly reflects evangelicalism’s historical transcendence across particular streams, organizations and denominations.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet for all this historical complexity, evangelicals do exhibit common qualities. One respected way of delineating evangelicalism highlights four characteristics that evangelicals consider essential marks of authentic Christianity.¹⁴ Each resonates with Westmont's articles of faith (italicized below), and in each the college finds aspects of its identity and mission that shape it as an institution and inspire the work of its community of scholars and students:

- In affirming that Christ's life, death, and resurrection *conquered the powers of darkness, paid the penalty for our sin, and demonstrated God's love for the world*, Westmont shares and extends the evangelical "stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross." The blood of his cross is the college's foundation. Westmont's mission and philosophy of education are shaped by the reality of Christ's lordship, sustained by confidence in God's grace and motivated by a longing for wholeness awakened by the Kingdom's present hope for all things.
- In affirming that *the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, brings us to faith in Jesus Christ and conforms us to the image of Christ*, Westmont concurs with the classic evangelical insistence "that lives need to be changed" by the good news. Trusting in the Spirit's whole work of engagement, conversion, maturation and fruitfulness, we maintain the gospel's priority as we pursue the life, love and learning it awakens in us. We support each other's faith while encouraging bold exploration of its applications and problems. And we enjoy and seek academic, social and spiritual unity while striving to respect each other's diverse histories, testimonies and competencies and our various disciplines in the liberal arts.
- In affirming that the Bible *is God-breathed and true, without error in all that it teaches and the supreme authority and only infallible guide for Christian faith and conduct*, Westmont displays and refines evangelicals' "particular regard for the Bible" as uniquely "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." In humble confidence we seek to understand scripture for all that it truly is and to relate it faithfully to all areas of our learning and life. The college's academic curriculum, learning standards, chapel program, community life statement and even school motto all depend materially on scripture as the canon that illumines our feet and path like nothing else.
- In affirming that *the church is called to bear witness to Christ* by praising, preaching, discipling, healing, serving, liberating, and caring for creation, Westmont manifests the evangelical commitment to "expression of the gospel in effort." Our personal church involvements, our evangelism (spreading of the good news as such), our witness and service in our neighborhoods and academic and professional fields, our campus ministries, and our institutional traditions of shared governance and reciprocity are all rooted in evangelical respect for the power of the good news, for every believer's responsibility of discipleship, for the gospel's special resonance among the needy who are poor, sick, lost or alone, and for the spiritual gifts distributed freely across the body of Christ.

Because each of these qualities belongs at the heart of all flourishing Christian faith, all are woven into the fabric of Westmont's allegiance, mission, and identity. Yet all four are goals as well, present imperfectly in individual disciples, churches and even the whole evangelical movement. The gospel's transforming work addresses our own shortcomings in calling us to repentance and spurring us to greater faithfulness.

Liberal Arts

As is the case with “evangelical,” the term “liberal arts” has varied definitions and emphases.^v One way to understand it is by thinking carefully about the two words that make it up. “Arts” is an old word for “skills.” The liberal arts are certain kinds of intellectual skills, and a liberal arts education aims at developing these skills. Since the rise of the modern university in the 19th century, these intellectual skills have been thought to be best cultivated in a residential setting through a curricular emphasis on the humanities, disciplines often understood as having intrinsic rather than instrumental value. But the liberal arts tradition has always included other strands. The ancient world, for example, thought such an education equipped individuals for civic service, while the medieval liberal arts stressed the natural sciences as much as it did the humanities. Indeed the curriculum of the humanists, the origin of today’s humanities, was a protest movement against the medieval liberal arts. And the purpose of a medieval liberal arts education was far from impractical. The skills developed — literacy and quantitative skills — were essential for occupations students would later hold. So historically the “arts” in liberal arts includes ends like vocational application and domains of inquiry like the natural sciences. “Liberal arts” at Westmont most definitely embraces the social and natural sciences, as well as the need for skills and sensitivities that equip students for effective application of what they are learning.

“Liberal” is a synonym for “free.” But it has had very different connotations over the history of liberal arts education as well, resulting in quite different strands in the liberal arts tradition. From the very beginning, the term has been contested. For some in the ancient Mediterranean world, the liberal arts provided an education in areas valuable for their own sake, not for some further end. For others it referred to free men; liberal arts were the skills needed for the occupations of free men, in particular civic leadership. These distinct meanings ran through the liberal arts tradition for many centuries. In the 18th yet another meaning of the term emerged: liberal as *liberating*. During the European Enlightenment, some understood the purpose of education as freeing students from intellectual constraints. A liberal arts education came increasingly to mean critique of the status quo and unfettered search for truth. There are valid historical reasons for these connotations, but each only partially captures the meaning of liberal arts, and none grasps the heart of the term.

As a Christian college in the evangelical tradition, Westmont’s commitment to “liberal arts” emphasizes the integration of knowledge — integration that merges faith and learning, doing and thinking, sciences and the humanities, individual and community. This understanding values and emphasizes the intrinsic connection between learning and vocation first articulated by the ancient Greeks. While it appreciates knowledge for its own sake, Westmont’s mission compels the college to put knowledge to work in the world — in academic guilds, local communities, churches at home and abroad, and society at large. This is not a narrowly vocational education, but rather the broadest, most holistic induction into habits of mind, heart and hand that prepare students for the full range of tasks that will demand their most creative thinking, most faithful witness and most skillful application in the coming years. Providing students with such a rigorous curriculum encourages them to become life-long learners. As we know, and as many Westmont alumni attest, this sort of education occurs best in community. True education, the acquisition of wisdom, cannot occur in isolation. We learn from, with and for one another in order to better serve God’s church and God’s world.

Diversity

Learning at Westmont is not merely a matter of facts and skills. It also includes practicing the virtues of humility, self-examination and repentance. By committing its students, faculty and constituencies to this hard work, Westmont animates its mission with an eschatological vision of a whole, restored world that draws us forward toward more godly ways of learning, living and loving. Living with and learning from each other is absolutely central to our mission and identity as an evangelical, liberal arts college. ^{vi}

Recognizing that evangelical colleges have historically lacked ethnic and racial diversity, increasing such diversity has been an explicit goal at Westmont for the last 20 years. In addition, the college encourages students to develop a greater awareness of and engagement with global diversity. With these priorities, the college expects its graduates to:

- Gain the understanding and skills to engage individuals and groups unlike themselves in ways that affirm others as persons created in God's image.
- Approach others respectfully and avoid the natural tendency to deal with differences by vilifying, romanticizing or victimizing.

In purely educational terms, diversity in curricular offerings, in the student body, and among faculty and staff, is strongly linked to educational effectiveness. Beyond the value of diversity for educational effectiveness, however, Westmont grounds its commitment to diversity in a biblical vision of God's kingdom. Bearing witness to this kingdom is in itself an act of restorative justice. Living toward this kingdom in our daily lives requires personal and communal sanctification.

Westmont welcomes all to the table, acknowledging that understanding and celebrating difference is a critical avenue to knowing God and being liberally educated persons. The celebration of difference needs to grow out of a deep understanding of the histories of each individual and ethnicity. It's not simply a quick and easy enjoyment of food and culture. Rather, it requires individuals to be willing to step outside of their own cultural framework and experience to begin to understand another person. This process happens in relationship and through experience and requires those who grow in understanding to be advocates for those who have been misunderstood. It's essential that our campus climate empowers and encourages all to contribute their unique voice to the conversation.

At Westmont, we hold in healthy tension the celebration of difference and the bond we share in Christ, believing that it allows us the freedom to fully share our differences. The challenges related to our differences are part of our fallen nature, and we have a God who desires to redeem His people that we might more fully reflect His person, whole and complete, deep and diverse, creative and growing.

Westmont

An institution's true identity emerges over a specific history rather than from a committee's imagination or aspirations. The words used to summarize it — including the three terms treated here — are rarely adequate even when they're accurate. Moreover, Christian identity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who calls, restores and equips us uniquely for service in the eternal kingdom by

grace and not our own achievement. Westmont has forged its identity over decades spent pursuing a particular vision of Christian education, which shapes our institution and guides our future.

This legacy is as much caught as taught, as much shown as said. The lives and testimonies of individuals in the college community best express it. Nevertheless, it shows up in describable ways such as Westmont's five distinctives: *Christian, liberal arts, undergraduate, residential* and *global*. Alumni report that the college fosters an environment of spiritual and intellectual confidence that prepares graduates to engage and investigate openly rather than constricting imaginations and communicating defensiveness or insecurity. Because the college is *centered* on Jesus Christ, it's *open* to surprising signs of his Lordship, and vice versa. The curriculum frees and trains the community to think more deeply *and* holistically, more critically *and* appreciatively, more traditionally *and* creatively. Commitments, traditions, a unique location and its small size shape Westmont's character as a genuine *community* of faith, education and the world. The college both sustains its commitments and exercises genuine gratitude, hospitality and candor toward those who may not fully share them, including them whenever possible. Learning, worshipping, eating, living and traveling together produce mutuality, grace, understanding, accountability and growth uncommon in many collegiate settings. Faculty appreciate students' earnestness and their willingness to invest impressive levels of time and hard work in class, athletics and service for God's glory and the benefit of others.

"Not that [we] have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at [our] goal" (Philippians 3:12 TNIV)! Westmont falls short of its mission and goals. Nevertheless, even its challenges and failures have helped refine the college. Through them God has helped Westmont glimpse a vision of what it could be: a stronger, fuller and more discerning institution of faithful learning and learned faith. This encourages staff, students and supporters to continue pursuing a mission that offers such hope and potential for the future.



i The college was incorporated for training in Christian work, the quickening of the missionary spirit and the publication of evangelistic and academic literature. According to its Statement of Faith, Westmont is "committed to Jesus Christ and belonging to the worldwide evangelical Protestant tradition."

ii Historically, the label describes a variety of intersecting streams of lasting influence within worldwide Christianity. All these streams flow into and through Westmont: the Protestant Reformation especially in the British Isles, the Wesleyan revival and the First and Second Great Awakenings in North America, centuries of world mission movements, the effects of slavery, civil war and reconstruction on the Christianity of both whites and blacks in the American South, the rise of Pentecostalism and the charismatic renewal, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, the neo-evangelical movement, the Jesus movement, and the rise of the Christian right. Some of the traits that arose through these events have proven essential to healthy Christianity. Some have contributed to the particular vibrancy of evangelical faith. Some have proven embarrassing. Some stand in tension with others. Many reach beyond the circles of those called evangelicals, producing a resemblance and a closer kinship between evangelical Protestants and certain believers in other Christian traditions.

[iii](#) This does not mean that Westmont is ‘nondenominational’ in every sense of the word. The term can connote institutional independence from any other formal Christian organization, frustration with the phenomenon of denominationalism, or indifference toward the historical commitments, distinctives and internal affairs of particular fellowships of churches. As a community that proudly includes members with lifelong commitments to a variety of old and new Christian traditions and fellowships, the college can be ‘nondenominational’ in only the first sense.

[iv](#) “There are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.” David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2-3.

[v](#) One reason to consider the use of the term is because so many of its connotations run counter to how it functions at Westmont. For example, some interpretations of “liberal arts” are aimed at academic assumptions that don’t apply here — that the humanities are more important than the social sciences or natural sciences, or that education must be completely divorced from practical concerns. Other connotations are more sociological, but equally problematic. “Liberal Arts” is all too often read as short-hand for elitist, Eurocentric or male-dominated. These interpretations contradict Westmont’s educational aims.

[vi](#) In Westmont’s 1995 Long Range Plan, the college committed to be “creatively and energetically responding to the significant issues related to diversity — including both ethnic and gender diversity.” The plan also states that “Westmont strives to be a community informed and enriched by thoughtful and intentional study of and interaction with multiple cultures. As a liberal arts college rooted in Christ, we celebrate diversity as an aspect of God’s creation; we strive to create community out of rich diversity as an aspect of building God’s Kingdom in the world; we value the range of perspectives on the world that stimulates intellectual and personal growth; and we seek for faculty and staff to apprentice students in the art of dealing with diversity in constructive ways. It is an aim of Westmont to prepare graduates who will function intelligently, effectively and for the good of our increasingly intercultural world.”

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