

Reflections on certificate programs
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Dear colleagues,

I appreciate being invited to share my thoughts as you consider the potential development of certificate programs. Though I write in my capacity as director of the Gaede Institute for the Liberal Arts, I don't consider myself anything like the campus specialist on liberal arts education. One thing I have always been grateful for in my role is the widespread depth of understanding of, and commitment to the liberal arts across our faculty. As a result, it shouldn't surprise us if anything I offer here isn't already very much in play in your deliberations. Still, here are some thoughts and questions:

Given my role, I think a lot about the "liberal arts" element of Westmont's identity, but it seems to me that the fundamental question about certificate programs is how they will embody *all* of the essential elements of Westmont's identity: Christian, liberal arts, global, residential, and undergraduate. Christian? Seemingly with relative ease (one caveat below). Liberal Arts? Probably, but with care. Global? Again, probably, but would need explicit attention. Residential? Undergraduate?

Assuming certificate programs are non-residential and post-baccalaureate, it is these last two—residential and undergraduate—where it is most difficult to see mission alignment. Perhaps we are ready to soften our emphasis on these, but that does seem a significant step that should be taken consciously, and not happen as an afterthought.

We should also note that residential and undergraduate are not wholly disconnected from other elements of our identity—especially liberal arts. An important element of liberal arts education is its relational character, and our residential dimension is meant to support that character. If certificate programs are non-residential, we need at least to somehow ensure the relational and communal character of the learning in these programs. Otherwise we risk threatening our liberal arts identity, which we presumably do not wish to soften.

Another important element of liberal arts education is its integrative character—exploring relationships between different areas of learning and different aspects of life. Our focus on undergraduate education in part supports this integrative character. We get students who are still exploring a range of ideas, and who are seeking (we hope) to embed their specialized learning in a broader context. How will the integrative character of a Westmont education be embodied in a program that students will pursue after their undergraduate education? It's not impossible, but it would need careful attention.

So, the questions most evident to me are with respect to the undergraduate and residential elements of our mission. But there is a further question with respect to the liberal arts element of our mission, and that concerns Westmont's general movement towards professional education, a further step toward which, certificate programs might represent.

I am not naive about the apparent market demand for this movement, and even if there weren't such demands, I am not skeptical of the relationship between liberal arts education and professional education. That can be a powerful relationship. A liberally educated engineer, nurse, business consultant—pick your profession—is a beautiful thing. Important for our society, important for the church.

But the liberal arts:professional relationship is powerful only if the professional is genuinely liberally educated. That means a robust general education taught by outstanding faculty in the arts and sciences. How are those faculties in the arts and sciences sustained? Only, it would seem, by having sufficient numbers of students major in the arts and sciences. In short, you can't have a genuinely liberally educated occupational therapist without plenty of math majors, history majors, and sociology majors, for example.

Does the introduction of certificate programs put our arts and sciences majors at risk? If so, perhaps only indirectly. But those indirect ways might matter. Where are resources allocated? Where are fundraising efforts directed? Where are financial and personnel commitments made that might be difficult to change in a changing market? These are certainly questions you are raising.

I'll close with a last thought: our movement toward professional education might also have implications for our Christian identity. The move toward the professions in higher education generally corresponds with a general movement toward understanding higher education to be a "private good" more than a "public good"—as something that prioritizes the student's future security (especially financial security) over the student's contribution to the well-being of the communities and wider society that that student is a part of.

It goes without saying that a Christian education cannot be—solely or even principally—a private good; it is by nature other-oriented. Of course, a professional education can be pursued with an eye toward others' well-being. But it is often pursued as a private good. Let's be careful that in our move toward professional education—if certificate programs represent such a move—we aren't inadvertently threatening the heart of our Christian identity.

Thank you again for considering my reflections.

Best wishes,

Chris