

April 2018 Blog

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In my inaugural address on April 6, 2006, I referred to a common experience parents have with young children. Parental directions are often followed by the question, “Why?” Typically, every response is followed by another “why” until the parent’s final response is simply, “Just because.” I propose then, as I prepare to retire, that I leave with this most important caveat—a similar line of questioning can be applied to the role of the university in our society. And this University—above all else—must understand and recommit to its true purpose.

Why does the university exist? To prepare students for jobs. Why? To prepare the next generation of leaders. Why? To transform and shape lives. Wonderful—but why? The University, however, must not resort to “just because.” It cannot. If it does, it will ultimately and most certainly flounder.

The turmoil of American higher education today is too fierce for Gardner-Webb going forward if it does not have a true anchor. It will find itself fighting on all fronts of the higher education marketplace and attempting to be the proverbial “all things to all people.”

Several years ago I first suggested that Gardner-Webb University’s *raison d’être*, its purpose, is To advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education. At the time, I proposed this very casually, almost as though it were self-evident. Over time I have become even more convinced of the importance of a strong sense of purpose that transcends the University’s stated mission. In fact, I believe that the sense of purpose is the most important guiding principle for the University. Accreditation groups and other thought leaders in higher education suggest that institutions should be evaluated in light of mission, and that plans and decisions made by an institution should be made accordingly.

These perspectives are correct. However, mission is not the ultimate foundation—purpose is. Mission may be regarded as the most appropriate means—most appropriate for the particular time and set of circumstances—for carrying out the institution’s purpose. Accreditation’s requirement that the governing board periodically review the mission statement reflects the fact that the concept of the mission may indeed change.

However, if purpose changes, the very character and nature of the institution change.

Where Gardner-Webb is concerned, the wording of the statement of purpose may be fairly recent, but its meaning has been fully embedded in our values, history, teachings and people since its origin in 1905.

As I conclude my career at Gardner-Webb, the most important perspective and advice I can provide is to be faithful to our purpose.