Chapter IV

CLAIMING THE UNIVERSITY’S DISTINCTION:
PURPOSEFUL LEARNING, INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION
AND STUDENT RESEARCH

Pacific Lutheran University claims both a distinctive mission—a powerful determination to awaken students to an unfolding sense of meaning and purpose in their lives—and an intellectually challenging and creative faculty. To serve that mission, PLU also claims distinction and excellence in its fundamental understanding of knowledge and learning and in carefully selected dimensions of its academic program, particularly international education and collaborative student/faculty research and creative projects.

A DISTINCTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATION:
SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

Implicit in the commitment of the university to educate students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care is a certain purposeful perspective on knowledge and its acquisition. In their time at the university, students should, of course, learn certain bodies of knowledge, learn how to become increasingly knowledgeable the rest of their lives, and learn to apply knowledge in actual societal contexts. Something even beyond this, however, characterizes the academic ethos at PLU: knowledge and learning *themselves* are understood to be purposeful. Though nonetheless academically rigorous and open-minded, knowledge and learning are unapologetically understood as situated in people’s values and connected to their agency in the world. PLU does its work on behalf of the planet and of people everywhere now and in the future.
This understanding is not just idealistic rhetoric. It manifests itself in the academic life of the university in distinct ways. It undergirds PLU’s membership in the Associated New American Colleges and is reflected in its commitment to integrate liberal and professional education. More directly, it calls on people to think hard and critically about what knowledge is important enough to learn.

**Person-Focused, Holistic Learning.** While traditional bodies of knowledge established within disciplines are certainly a vital part of the learning enterprise, they should not determine scholarly work without being questioned and challenged. This understanding also requires great attention to how to go about academic work. Above all, that work is person-focused. While academic work and discipline need to be distinguished from the cocurriculum, learning is still a holistic process in which what students do outside their course work can profoundly influence both what they learn and what they choose to do with that learning.

While knowledge is purposeful, it is not to be understood in a merely “instrumentalist” fashion—aimed uncritically at a pre-ordained, univocal, dominant goal such as employment or career achievement. Education ought to educate one not only for work, but for understanding what one works for in the world.

This purposeful nature makes a PLU education intellectual, practical and moral. It requires that students wrestle with issues of value throughout their studies and that they develop the skills and sensibilities necessary to use their learning discriminatingly and courageously for the genuine benefit of the world around them.

Such an education is not “soft” because of its purposeful and moral dimensions; rather, it involves the most rigorous intellectual learning. It begins with questions about knowledge and learning itself amidst the academic life: what is the nature of what can really count as “knowledge,” and what are the more rather than less important things for people to learn in a university education?
Questions of Value. Questions of value infuse the very enterprise, and university life needs to acknowledge and engage them from the start. Moreover, matters of value are not to be seen as needing any less rigorous examination than any other subject matter—they are not the addition of something merely subjective or personal to a very different mass of objective, academic content. “Valuing,” in fact, is explicitly one of the five academically fundamental “integrative learning objectives” (ILO’s) adopted by the PLU faculty to assist in integrating the university’s understanding of its various curricula and pedagogies. (The other four ILO’s—critical reflection, expression, interaction with others and understanding multiple frameworks—also reflect an integrated, purposeful education.)

A Sense of Vocation. At the same time that a purposeful, moral education is academically rigorous, it cannot be focused only on intellectual examination of questions of value. The pursuit of those questions in a context where thoughtful service, leadership, and care as well as thoughtful inquiry are at the heart of the enterprise pushes faculty and students to develop positive views—critically develop them, of course—about how actually to act in the world. Students are nurtured to develop their own sense of vocation, the meaning and purpose in their lives. As a vital part of that development they are encouraged and supported to step out courageously into action, performance, and practice of various sorts. Here again the university’s ILO’s can be cited: valuing is explained there to include the trans-intellectual dispositions to “develop a habit of caring for oneself, for others, and for the environment” and to “approach moral, spiritual, and intellectual development as a life-long process.”

There is no single set of programs at the university that can achieve this kind of moral and civic learning, and it certainly cannot be “pasted on a student’s character, somewhat as she or he might learn calculus. Rather it is a complex combination of cognitive and emotional learning.” It naturally leads to an emphasis
on international education and undergraduate research, two areas of distinction that will be articulated in detail below. It will be bolstered by the project on “Exploring Vocation at PLU,” funded for 2003-2007 by the Lilly Endowment, which will enhance the attention of students to the intellectually rich and deeply personal challenge for each of them to develop a sense of vocation through their university education. In addition, numerous other particular things can be done to assist the development of critically purposeful learning.

RECOMMENDATION: THAT THE UNIVERSITY FOSTER EXPLICITLY THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICALLY PURPOSEFUL LEARNING.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- **Integrate the study of ethical perspectives with subject matter and student projects throughout the curriculum and cocurriculum. Offer workshops in designing courses and assignments that integrate questions of value with particular subject matter areas and advance students’ developmental stages in ethical thinking.**

- **Develop, through workshops, seminars, and special speakers, a richer understanding of the active learning strategies that intentionally link rigorous academic reflection with service to the community.**

- **Celebrate and highlight faculty, student and staff commitments to all forms of service in campus programming and publications, and focus visiting lectures and public programs often on vital contemporary societal issues.**

- **Support engagement with service learning as one of the viable choices available for individual faculty in considerations of tenure and promotion.**

Amidst the contemporary culture of higher education, the challenges involved in implementing this dimension of the university’s vision are admittedly daunting. In the search for knowledge and understanding, the academy has increasingly devalued the holistic and revered the specialized and the technical. It has also tended to homogenize excellence and prestige. PLU, by contrast, must have the courage to say that good education takes place in a specific cultural context, including a specific educational culture.
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

If knowledge and learning at PLU are purposeful and the university exists to benefit the planet and people everywhere, it is hardly surprising that one of its academic emphases is international education. Based on the notable initiative of numerous faculty and the strong interest of its students, PLU, with little central direction or institutional guidance, has achieved considerable strength in international education.

Since the late 1990s more than a third of graduating baccalaureate students have had an international study experience, and international students now comprise over 6 percent of the student body. In recent years, more than 20 faculty annually (roughly 10 percent of the full-time faculty) have taught January-term courses abroad. For a comprehensive university with many local students and professional school majors, these numbers rank PLU among the most internationally active schools in the nation. In addition, on campus the university offers eight foreign languages, an International Business concentration within the BBA degree, cross-disciplinary majors in Chinese Studies, Global Studies, and Scandinavian Area Studies, a minor in the Americas, and an International Core curriculum that students may use to satisfy many of their general university requirements.

Growing Support and Interest. In the past year international education at PLU has been propelled forward by the formation of The Wang Center for International Programs, supported by a $4 million endowment gift from Peter and Grace Wang. Sizable support from the Freeman and Teagle Foundations, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Agency for International Development provide multiple-year enhancements of Chinese Studies, international academic internships, the International Core, and the program on the Norwegian Approach to Democracy and Development that is connected with Namibia. Previous grants
have supported the use of non-English languages across the curriculum and the infusion of international content into the curricula of various majors.

Research done as part of the American Council on Education’s long-term study on the internationalization of U.S. higher education helps place PLU’s growth in international education amidst the interests and behavior of U.S. college and college-bound students generally. In the ACE national study, nearly half of students entering four-year colleges wanted to study abroad, yet only 3 percent actually did. Similarly, nearly 60 percent of students entering college planned to continue foreign language study, yet only 8 percent did. Moreover, when forced to state which one activity during their college years was most important, only internships were selected by more students than study abroad.

Cultural Immersion and Global Issues. It is important to understand that the university’s excellence in international education is driven by a deep commitment to and respect for all humanity. At this particular time in history, dedication to international education aligns with the desires of students and the needs of globalization. PLU’s commitment to the whole enterprise of international education, however, is deeper and wider than those particular interests at the beginning of the 21st century. The university’s mission of educating for lives of service and thoughtful inquiry about the whole human condition demands that the international study experiences it offers involve not only considerable immersion in other cultures but challenging examination of the largest, most difficult global issues. It will thereby enhance students’ capacity and sense of responsibility to assist in furthering constructive solutions to those issues.

**Recommendation:** That the university focus on specific activities to help it achieve distinction in international education, with the involvement of the Wang Center and the International Education Committee of the Faculty, and with widespread participation from academic schools and departments.
POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- **Expand participation in the international core (especially by professional degree students) and infuse general university requirement and major courses with international material.**
- **Set a specific target for participation in study abroad programs** (a target of over 50 percent of graduating baccalaureate students has been suggested).
- **Provide students in all majors with the realistic opportunity for at least one international study experience that enhances their understanding of other cultures or languages.**
- **Expand the university’s own semester-long study away programs, and work to integrate on-campus curricula with the content of both our own study away programs and the PLU-brokered international programs.**
- **Create a seminar or sustained discussion group for students returning to campus from study abroad to provide them an opportunity to share with others and formally process their experience; encourage returning student participation in local communities and community projects that relate to their international study.**

Various challenges will need to be met if the university is to succeed in pursuing such an agenda. Financial considerations for the university will require that most of the growth of student participation in international study be in PLU’s own semester, January-term and internship programs, not in the study-away programs of other institutions that PLU brokers. While J-term international courses are popular with students and faculty and might indeed expand, the proportion of study-away experiences that they constitute must not increase if the university is to gain a reputation for educating students into deeper international understanding.

To best respect people in other cultures, acquisition of a respectable level of language proficiency must accompany a high percentage of international study experiences in non-English speaking countries. Virtually all departments and schools will need to participate in international programs if PLU’s growing distinction in international education is to strengthen the university generally, not just in selected disciplines. All these challenges can be met if the university develops international education carefully and courageously.
STUDENT RESEARCH AND CREATIVE PROJECTS

Just as international education is an outgrowth of the university’s fundamental understanding of knowledge and learning, so also is its emphasis on collaborative student/faculty research and creative projects, particularly at the undergraduate level, where it is more unusual in the academy than at the graduate level.

Active Learners. If the purpose of a university education is for people to gain a sense of their genuine agency in the world, students need to develop actively as learners as quickly as possible. In the past decade the university has laid the foundation for outstanding undergraduate research, artistic performance, and original creative projects through the senior capstone seminars, the Severtson Scholarships in the Social Sciences, the Natural Sciences Undergraduate Research Endowment and the Moe Scholarships in the Arts and Communication.

Student learning in cocurricular activities—including student media, student leadership positions and community service—contribute to the foundations for student research and creative projects. By taking advantage of its low student-faculty ratio, PLU can expand these existing learning opportunities and intensify student engagement in the learning process.

In 1997, the addendum to PLU 2000 on academic distinction9 articulated active learning as one emphasis of academic excellence at PLU. Active learning, it said, “attempts to increase not only the responsibility that students take for their education but their capacity for substantive independence of thought. The active learner becomes the active questioner, not only capable of greater self-reliance but possessing more developed skills of analysis and articulation.”

Now, for PLU 2010, we wish to single out the potential of perhaps the quintessential exemplification of active learning—student research and creative
projects—both for raising academic reputation and for realizing the university’s highest ideals for its students.

**Recommendations:** That the university make student research and creative projects one of the hallmark characteristics the university.

**Possible Actions:**

- **Continue to increase the number of students taking part in undergraduate research**—a target of 12-50 percent, compared to the current level of 4-15 percent, has been suggested.

- **Compensate faculty directing undergraduate research and creative projects** (by its inclusion in their course loads, by summer pay where appropriate, or by other means).

- **Begin a new program of matching the most highly qualified and talented new students with a faculty member on a research project**—the program might start with 10-16 students (one or two in each school and division) who would be paired with a faculty member and awarded a special research scholarship at entrance.

- **Share and celebrate more visibly student research of all kinds, perhaps in a campus-wide forum similar to the Natural Science Division’s academic festival.**

- **Publish annually the best novel by a PLU undergraduate** (perhaps in a format similar to *Saxifrage*, the annual PLU student literary publication, or in a recognized external medium).

- **Provide significant assistance from a central office to facilitate and manage grant applications for outside funding of collaborative student/faculty undergraduate research.**

- **Regularly honor and celebrate faculty achievements in publishing and artistic creation/performance to reflect the fact that faculty model for students the importance and excitement of scholarly and creative production.**

- **Infuse internships, professional practica and service learning with significant elements of research and creative projects so that they also become avenues for investigative learning in which faculty and students work collaboratively outside of the formal classroom.**

**Challenges and Opportunities.** Among the challenges and points of resistance to realizing this institutional ambition for student/faculty research and creative projects are three—scarcity of resources, the alleged competition of scholarship with teaching, and the fear of an undue hegemony of those faculty who emphasize their own active research. The last is simply misplaced, for insofar as the faculty who are active scholars, performers and creators are willing to involve
students in their work, they represent an ideal of teaching and mentoring to which all faculty at PLU should aspire.

The second—competition of scholarship with teaching—is misconceived. Scholarly and creative activity stimulates and fertilizes sustained excellence in teaching, and when faculty involve their students in such activity, important dimensions of teaching and learning are enhanced.

The first challenge—scarcity of resources—is very real. In the long term, however, the university believes it can be addressed by dedicated efforts to raising program endowment for student research and creative production. More immediately, faculty can address this challenge by leading their departments and schools toward greater focus in their major curricula so that more teaching load credit can be given to faculty for supervising student research and creative projects as an indispensable part of the major.

The university holds deeply to a purposeful understanding of knowledge and learning connected to a sense of vocation and agency in the world. It emphasizes international education and student research and creative projects as particularly effective avenues through which students can prepare to lead lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care. These three claims to distinction serve as both institutional characteristics and ideals—to a great extent they mark who we currently are, but they also powerfully inspire and boldly challenge us to become a more distinctive university.