
Good evening. Something struck me last week as our family was walking down the sidewalk. Our son Jordan is a junior at Bethel this year, and is studying in Spain. Brenda, Leah and I were fortunate enough to be able to visit Jordan in Barcelona last week. In fact, we got home late this morning. It is now 3:00 a.m. by our clocks!

As we walked down the sidewalk in Barcelona, Brenda commented that she was glad we were able to visit Jordan because now the photographs he had been sending us would be so much more meaningful. Really his entire experience would mean more to us because we were able to experience a part of it. My guess is that almost all of you can relate a personal experience of visiting a family member or living in a different culture. My guess is that there would be a higher percentage of persons in this audience with deep experience in another culture than in most audiences this size. Here, in the middle of Kansas, we bring together vast experience. It reminds me of part of a billboard I saw in New York City – “small campus, big world!”

We were always told that the best way to learn a language is to immerse yourself in a setting where you have to speak it, and that certainly has been our experience. Jordan is immersing himself in the culture of Spain, living with a Spanish family, taking classes at the University of Barcelona, speaking and really “living” Spanish. He probably fits in so well that people don’t realize he is a foreigner as he navigates the metro system each day to get around town. In fact, he was concerned that we would stick out when we traveled with him – especially when I pulled out a big map to study on the metro, making it clear I was a tourist!

Why is that important? I’m not just telling a story about our son. I think this idea of immersion is a key to the education Bethel offers, including here on our campus in the middle of Kansas. Immersion education means something different than exchanging e-mail through online courses; immersion education means something different than getting swallowed up on a large campus where, paradoxically, more activities and more students mean less opportunity to participate; immersion education means something different than reading the text and attending class as a numbered student in a sea of faces.

Rather, immersion education deepens each person’s experience through academic excellence, opportunities for participation, relationships that develop an intentional caring community and values inspired by personal faith and spiritual growth. Immersion education helps students develop as complete individuals by emphasizing the four ethics of our mission statement: discipleship, scholarship, service and integrity. As our mission statement affirms, “Bethel seeks to be a diverse community of learners, committed to the search for authentic faith and empirical understanding, and to provide

(1) rigorous instruction in the liberal arts and selected career and professional areas; and (2) intellectual, cultural and spiritual leaders for the church and society.”

It is gratifying that the number of legacy students enrolled at Bethel College increased this year. Students whose sibling(s), parent(s) or grandparent(s) attended Bethel recognize the value of a Bethel education – of being immersed in education. Hand in hand with the increase in legacy students, the number of students in our target recruitment group, first-time freshmen, increased over 10 percent, from 108 to 119.

Yet we face challenges because overall enrollment dropped, largely because the number of transfer students did. We have studied the situation and see opportunities for better transfer recruitment strategies. The national economic crisis also affects our endowment earnings and may intensify the recruitment challenge as some students might assume they cannot afford an education like Bethel College offers.

Please help us spread the word that this is the time to invest in an immersion education like Bethel College offers. We truly believe there is a high probability that a student will attend Bethel if 1) s/he visits campus to better understand what our campus offers and 2) a parent attends our presentation on financial aid. A campus visit allows us to demonstrate our strengths, helps a student sense whether Bethel is a good fit, and allows us to demonstrate that a Bethel education is affordable. In fact, we are offering a campus visit incentive of \$100 to prospective students who arrange a campus visit with a parent through our admissions office.

You may have heard that we are planning to use the theme of our “Thresher” symbol more prominently. We have developed seven components that make up the “teeth” of the threshing stone and will be testing them with focus groups. They can be summarized with seven “C” words that could be links on our web site for each of the seven teeth: Curiosity, community, collaboration, connection, conviction, compassion, and conservation. A model is being developed to capture these components so that we can use the legacy symbol for better Bethel College name recognition. It represents the key aspects of an immersion education.

Let me highlight a number of activities on and around campus. It was a significant advance, a quantum leap, when President E.G. Kaufman led Bethel College to its first accreditation in 1938. This outside recognition legitimized the education Bethel offered and opened doors for our graduates. Accreditation continues to provide a level of validation that can only be achieved when persons outside the institution study us with care. Yet that process starts by studying ourselves. A steering committee on campus accepted the charge to prepare a self-study, a major analysis of our strengths and challenges leading up to a site visit from a team from the Higher Learning Commission in February. You can read the self-study report on our web page.

Three other programs are involved in accreditation activities as well – nursing, social work, athletic training, and education.

It's easy to make a long list of activities that show the immersion of our students in various activities. Let me give you some brief examples.

1. The volleyball team placed first in the conference and first in the conference tournament, earning a berth in the national tournament for the first time since 1983.
2. Annette Gingerich on the cross country team reached the national tournament for a race a few weeks ago in Wisconsin.
3. Matthew Stucky and Julia Huxman are the first two students to qualify for the national forensics tournament this year, keeping the nation-leading streak alive as one of seven schools with students who qualified each year since the inception of the tournament in 1978.
4. Undergraduate research is a key component of the Bethel education. Senior seminar projects take many forms and are beginning to occur. Brett Jackson and Joel Linscheid performed their senior project as a senior recital. Jonathan Nathan presented his senior Social Work/History Seminar paper titled, "Buena Gente, Jefes Duros: The Relationship of Mennonite Farmers and the United Farmworkers Union in California." Seniors will be presenting their final projects throughout the rest of the year.
5. This semester I named two professors to distinguished chairs. I named Dr. Allison McFarland to the Distinguished Chair in Business Administration made possible by the generosity of Walt and Helen Claassen, and I named Dr. Jon Piper to a distinguished Chair in Plant Science made possible by an estate gift from Dr. Katherine Esau.
6. Don Lemons, professor of physics, is the author of his third book, *Mere Thermodynamics*, released November 10 by the publisher, Johns Hopkins University Press. The book has been called "a perfect tool for teaching a notoriously difficult subject."
7. A team of Bethel College students finished first in a computer programming contest at Emporia State University November 15.
8. The German Advent program, a Bethel Christmas tradition in its 24th year, will be held tomorrow evening at 7 p.m. in the Bethel College Mennonite Church.
9. The Board-appointed Committee on the Future of the College continues to meet, and will step up its schedule by meeting next weekend and again in January, considering a long-term view of how to ensure that Bethel College continues to thrive.
10. For the 23rd year, Bethel College students, faculty and staff invite the community to join them in the Lighting of the Green, an Advent season tradition. The event will take place next Sunday, December 14, at 8 p.m. on the college Green, in the center of the campus. Participants form a circle on the sidewalk around the Green, holding unlit candles which are then lit as the circle closes in at the middle of the Green.

11. You heard the choir tonight. The final concert of the fall semester by Bethel College's Chamber Orchestra and Wind Ensemble will also include a number by the Bethel College Percussion Ensemble. The concert will take place this Tuesday, December 9, at 7:30 p.m. in Krehbiel Auditorium.

12. Senior Josh Chittum took first place in the 2008 C. Henry Smith Oratorical Contest, asserting that resisting racism requires more than not being racist – it means being anti-racist.

13. Last month the Student Alumni Association helped arrange for over 50 Bethel graduates to return for Career night, an opportunity for students to talk with alumni about potential careers.

14. Some things evolve as our web page continues to be enhanced. You can find video clips on our web page, and press releases and other information about much of what I have identified this evening. And this year for the first time, our Christmas greetings are posted on the web page and I invite you to visit the site.

I could go on and on, with chapel and convocation and clubs and more. With all of these and other activities and achievement, it is no surprise that this year Bethel College was named one of 240 Colleges of Distinction in the country, and one of only two in Kansas. Colleges of Distinction focuses on four areas that make Bethel shine: engaged students, great teaching, vibrant community, and excellent results.

There are so many activities that engage students, that deepen their experience, that immerse them in their education. It is gratifying to see this happen in so many ways. I am convinced that this kind of education gives students confidence to know who they are, which in turn develops the gift of being able to listen and engage others where they are. I hope that is a gift Bethel can offer our students – confidence in who we are to meet students where they are.

Thank you so much for your part in all of this. As we face financial challenges, we are grateful for your continued support. I ask you to consider going above and beyond, as some have already begun to do. As the economy affects everyone's investments, and causes anxiety at all levels, there could be a temptation for individuals to back away and reduce their giving. It doesn't take much imagination to think what would happen to Bethel with the cumulative effect of that kind of individual caution. In fact, the president's Club was begun with the challenge to persons to overcome individual anxiety and join together to provide the boost Bethel needed to overcome a significant institutional challenge. You might note that the new \$5000 President's Circle has about the same purchasing power that the \$1000 President's Club level did when the President's Club was started in 1971. We face a time when courage is needed to overcome individual anxiety as our supporters join together to provide strong support for the immersion education that Bethel is positioned so well to provide.

What a privilege it is to provide space for that kind of immersion education here at Bethel, a space that encourages and challenges, and guides and prepares. In a special chapel service November 12, a faculty member, two students and I shared about our sense of call to service. I know that many people here at Bethel consider our jobs a form of service, an opportunity to be a part of something larger than our own ambition, in service in the name of Christ our Lord. I know that many of you participate in that sense of call in your financial and prayerful support of Bethel as well, and I thank you.

I would like to close this evening with a short video presentation that Dale Schrag prepared for an area church conference. So many speeches and presentations take place on our campus but don't get wider audiences. This evening we have an opportunity to share one of them with you. Dale's description helps demonstrate the value of immersion, of engaging others, of listening, of respecting. I hope you are inspired by it.

OPEN PALMS VIDEO on the web at
http://www.bethelks.edu/bc/videos/main.php?q2_itemId=197.

There are so many good things happening at Bethel. Yet we aspire to continue to do better. Thank you all for your financial and prayerful support. Good night and thank you for coming.