didn’t go to a Mennonite college after I graduated from high school. My parents, like many conservative Mennonites, were convinced that Mennonite higher education posed a greater danger to my Christian commitment than did secular and evangelical institutions. So even though I had considered both Bluffton (Ohio) College and Eastern Mennonite College (now University), Harrisonburg, Va., as possible options, I ended up spending my college years at Malone College, an institution about which I have many good memories.

Fortunately for me, in my adult years I found my way into a Mennonite college as a faculty member. Through teaching at Bluffton and in visiting other Mennonite campuses, I have come to cherish the unique gifts that Mennonite church colleges contribute to the world of higher education. It has become clear to me that Mennonite church colleges are among the best possible contexts for young people of all backgrounds both to find a wider wisdom about the truths of everyday life and to develop a loving loyalty to the church of Jesus Christ.

I am also concerned that churches, parents, and students have not understood what is at stake when faced with the choice between secular or evangelical education on the one hand and learning at a Mennonite church college on the other. The choice is clearer than many people suspect. Mennonite colleges promote a generous and self-sacrificial commitment to the mission of the church as their highest ideal; most other institutions, whether secular or Christian, do not.

Separation from the world: As a student at an evangelical college I was encouraged to think about the world from a Reformed perspective on the creation. God created the world as good, I was taught, but after the fall, human sin distorted the institutions and cultures that ordered the created world. In that Reformed perspective on the creation, God’s plan of redemption made it possible for Christians to see within the corrupted creation the original intention of the Creator. Thus, according to this view, we Christians must now work at restoring all of life to God’s good intention. As this “all of life redeemed” perspective was interpreted to me, the church is just one of many human institutions that God seeks to redeem, rather than the primary agent of God’s reign in the world.

On a number of occasions as a student at Malone I was told explicitly that the Anabaptist view was heretical because it contradicted the premise of this Reformed theology of creation. It is wrong, I was told, to say that certain institutions—the military, for example—should be rejected in principle as legitimate vocations for Christians. More fundamentally, I learned at Malone, Anabaptist theology did not properly acknowledge the goodness of all God’s creation and focused too narrowly on the church as God’s primary agent of mission and transformation.

For many years I enthusiastically accepted this perspective until I read John Howard Yoder’s writings and realized that the Anabaptist understanding of church and world as articulated, for example, in the Schleitheim Articles, is more complicated than the straw man set up by the Reformed critique of Anabaptism. Anabaptist theology acknowledges the goodness of creation but aspires, nevertheless, to the perfection of Christ. The sword, for example, is said in article seven of the Schleitheim Articles to be ordained by God and can be used for the good; however, the Christian disciple rejects the sword as outside Christ’s higher law of love.

I believe the Mennonite colleges have absorbed the worldview of the Schleitheim Articles. At Mennonite colleges, students come to understand the good creation of God in all its glory and falleness; at the same time they are urged to consider the higher way of Christ as embodied by the church. More than
seeking in the creation a dim reflection of God’s original intention, students at Mennonite colleges are urged to identify with the new creation that is to come and that is already recognizable in the work of the church.

At Bluffton College, for example, undergraduates can obtain a criminal justice major in which they study the realities, both good and evil, of the American criminal justice system. Along the way they are also introduced to alternative models of justice, models that grow out of the higher way of Christian forgiveness and restitution found in the life of the church and given expression by such church outreach programs as the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program. This approach mirrors the kind of learning I find in academic departments of all the Mennonite colleges. Whether students are studying human communication, physics, history, music or educational theory, they are provided with resources for understanding and cultivating the material and social landscape of God’s good-but-fallen creation at the same time that they are urged toward a life of faith that strives for Christ’s perfection.

In that sense, students at Mennonite colleges are called to separation: separation of church from world, separation of mission from vocation, and separation of Christ’s perfection from God’s creation. Such separation is the first step in offering young people a clear choice between a pilgrimage of faith and a lifetime of security. Rather than integrate faith and learning so as to feel comfortable in the world, our students are encouraged to find faith beyond learning so as to resist conformity to the world. Thus, students at Mennonite colleges are urged to inhabit the creative tension between being in the world and not of it.

**Humility in scholarship:** In reaching with students toward Christ’s perfection, Mennonite church colleges by necessity are modest about their calling and purpose. In a church whose theology demands suspicion of the arrogance of higher learning, Mennonite colleges have learned to ask of themselves the very questions that the colleges’ critics have been asking. At a recent consultation on Mennonite education at Goshen (Ind.) College, I heard faculty members and administrators from Bethel College (North Newton, Kan.), Fresno (Calif.) Pacific University, Hesston (Kan.) College, Goshen College, Bluffton College and Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) discuss with passion and concern how to teach the liberal arts without destroying the tender faith of students. At Bluffton, faculty and staff regularly discuss the spiritual and intellectual development of specific students, always seeking the best strategies for strengthening that student’s character or encouraging this student’s faith.

Such a context demands that we faculty members view the rich resources of our academic disciplines from within the larger perspective of the church’s mission to students. While the primary work of the college is academic training and research, the primary mission of the church is discipleship building and maintenance. And while the church ought to view the college as indispensable to its mission, the college should not be fused with the church. If a Mennonite college in all of its programs acknowledges the priority of the church’s mission, the church in turn should acknowledge that the college’s function is not exactly the same as that of the church. The college stresses academics. The church emphasizes discipleship. A church college in the Anabaptist tradition stresses academics in the context of discipleship.

Because of the priority of the church’s mission, academic disciplines in Mennonite colleges are never viewed as ultimate arbiters of God’s truth. Such ultimate discernment is the responsibility of the church. Academic disciplines from biology to theology can tell us much about how the world of God is ordered and transformed. But academic disciplines cannot explain the blessed miracle of regeneration or the radical commitment of discipleship. The world of God is not the body of Christ. For this reason, Mennonite colleges are never satisfied with a mere analysis of the way things are or simple preparation for vocation. Instead our institutions call students and faculty to the perfection of Christ, before whom scholars and researchers must bow.

Such humility in scholarship explains why Mennonite educators find disciplinary imperialism distasteful. During my years in graduate
school, I became weary of the turf battles and interdisciplinary wars in the institutional marketplace, where acquisition of resources was dependent on arguments for the ultimate value and status of one’s own discipline. It was a great relief recently to hear Bluffton faculty members explain to a consultant on our campus that the college’s pay equity policy prevents any faculty member from getting paid more simply because of the prestige of his or her discipline. Our faculty members also had to explain why they were uninterested in using an accreditation process to leverage more attention and resources from the administration. What an exercise in counter-cultural reasoning!

**Mission as priority:** I think one of my parents’ greatest concerns was that a college education would turn me away from the church. That concern has been incorporated into the heart of Mennonite educational institutions and it is a concern that drives every interaction I have with students. Unfortunately, because parents and churches are often misinformed about Mennonite college campuses, our young people often end up at evangelical or secular institutions that undermine commitment to the church. Such institutions weaken support for the church either by urging students to view the work of Christ as dispersed throughout the larger culture or by replacing the church with an academic discipline as the ultimate arbiter of truth.

At Mennonite colleges, universities and seminaries, from Fresno to Harrisonburg, I have seen faculty and administrators stressing the commitment of their institutions to the mission of the church. At Bluffton we say, for example, that we are preparing students not only “for life as well as vocation” but also for “the purposes of God’s universal kingdom.” At Goshen the motto is “Culture for Service.” At Fresno Pacific, this commitment to the church by taking up voluntary service and missionary assignments or by joining the work of Christ as dispersed throughout the larger culture is evident in the call to Christian discipleship.

**Students on all our campuses are gaining practical and theoretical skills for the vocations of the 21st century in communities of learning infused by the call to Christian discipleship.**

I am pleased to report that the vision and mission statements of our colleges are being incarnated in the vibrant and energizing cross-currents of campus and classroom life. At Goshen, faculty are meeting to plan a conference on Mennonites and the family that they hope will provide guidance to churches and students. Last spring at EMU, pastors and professors met to discuss the relevance of the gospel in an era of pluralism. Here at Bluffton last summer nearly 200 faculty members, pastors, church workers and students gathered to probe the relationship between Anabaptist commitments and postmodern culture. (See *The Mennonite*, Oct. 20, 1998.)

My Bluffton colleague across the hall, Lisa Robeson, is researching how such popular medieval literature as stories about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table carry within them the critiques of a war-obsessed feudal culture. Biology professor Todd Rainey is studying the implications of research into social biology for explaining constraints on human ethics. Poet and English professor Jeff Gundy is thinking through the relationship between the production of literature and the character of the church. Religion professor Denny Weaver is working at Anabaptist alternatives to mainstream orthodox theology. And students on all our campuses are gaining practical and theoretical skills for the vocations of the 21st century in communities of learning infused by the call to Christian discipleship.

I find myself engaged in frequent discussions with colleagues at Bluffton and at other Mennonite colleges about how we bring the way of Christ into our classrooms to challenge our understanding and knowledge. Often during those discussions we rejoice at those students and graduates from many different backgrounds who mature into Christian disciples, finding their way into the service of the church by taking up voluntary service and missionary assignments or by joining the work of a local congregation through confession or baptism. In the witness of such students who love and serve the church our Mennonite colleges find their reason for existence.

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