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ABSTRACT

Academic achievement has too often been a metric by which students define their self-worth. For some students, this focus manifests itself through perfectionism, attaining high grades, and overvaluing extrinsic learning rewards. Students who consider their self-worth to be contingent upon their academic performance often suffer from withdrawal, stress, depression, and anxiety. The external and internal pressures placed upon students regarding academic achievement can be devastating. Recent criticisms of grading, its efficacy, and inconsistencies might lead postsecondary educators to reconsider how they assess and communicate competency to their students. Christian institutions of higher education in particular have unique opportunities to speak to students' perceptions of their identity in ways that reframe the impacts and effects of grading on personal well-being and sense of self-worth. This article serves as a call to action for Christian universities to instill a more robust understanding of Christian identity and the *imago Dei* concerning how and where students find their self-worth—in *whom* they find their worth, rather than in *what*.

A Tragic Narrative

Like many students, Kathryn DeWitt formulated a plan for her life before graduating high school. She had a passion for mathematics that she hoped to transform into a teaching career. She enthusiastically enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania after being admitted from the waitlist. DeWitt and her parents dreamed of her gaining admission to a prestigious Ivy League institution. In an effort to maximize and take full advantage of her time on campus, DeWitt joined a co-ed social club, made new friendships, joined the same Christian collegiate group as her parents, and began to keep herself busy with her studies. Her endeavor to perfectly chart out her future came together just as she thought it should. DeWitt shared, "I had the idea that I was going to find this nice Christian boyfriend at college and settle down and live the life my parents had led" (Scelfo, 2015). However, the plans she envisioned did not account for the challenges she would face.

DeWitt was an academic all-star student throughout high school and acknowledged the extreme academic expectations and pressures placed on her. Her parents kept close

guard over her activities, placed great importance on her academic success, and encouraged her to attend a top university. DeWitt then placed many of those same expectations on herself as she began her studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She reflected, "It was like self-fulfillment: I'd feel fulfilled and happy when other people were happy with what I'm doing [sic], or expectations they have are met" (Scelfo, 2015). Perfection was a foregone conclusion. And then she failed her calculus midterm.

DeWitt admitted, "I had a picture of my future, and as that future deteriorated, I stopped imagining another future" (Scelfo, 2015, para. 24). Following her failing grade, DeWitt became depressed and overly anxious—her life began to spin recklessly out of control as she neared the winter break during her first year. She had worked, played, and studied hard, but felt like her effort was never enough to gain approval from friends and family. DeWitt's despair offered a moment of twisted clarity—a way out of the anxiety, depression, and failure: death. DeWitt recalled researching to learn whether her tuition payments might be refunded to her parents if she committed suicide. She blamed herself for her academic failures. She felt shame and imagined her death as a release from her struggle with academic perfectionism and "Penn Face"—a campuswide epithet for acting happy and self-assured while feeling depressed or stressed (Scelfo, 2015). Upon returning to the university for the Spring semester, DeWitt set out to take her life. However, days into the semester, another student struggling with many of the same demons would act first.

On January 17, 2014, Madison Holleran leapt off the top level of a parking garage in downtown Philadelphia. She was 19 years old and in her second semester at the University of Pennsylvania, just like DeWitt. She wrote goodbye messages and even left gifts for those close to her as an apology for her actions (Fagan, 2015). Holleran's struggle with perfectionism and image is intimately known by many college and high school students struggling with anxiety and depression in high-performance environments. Fagan (2015) wrote:

> Madison was beautiful, talented, successful—very nearly the epitome of what every young girl is supposed to hope she becomes. But she was also a perfectionist who struggled when she performed poorly. She was a deep thinker, someone who was aware of the image she presented to the world, and someone who often struggled with what that image conveyed about her, with how people superficially read who she was, what her life was like.

Holleran's death was a shock to the campus community. That such a polished, accomplished student-athlete would take her life was bewildering—but also eye-opening.

Rampant mental health crises are taking place across American higher education institutions (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Coupled with rises in anxiety disorders and depression is an increased demand for counseling services on college campuses—often at rates unsustainable by many campus counseling centers (LeViness et al., 2019; Lipson et al., 2019). Nearly six of every 10 college students report that they have been diagnosed or treated by a counseling professional for mental illness during college (American College Health Association, 2017). Over the last two decades alone, the national suicide rate has risen by more than 35%, from 10.5 suicides per 100,000 U.S. standard population to 14.2—with rates increasing at the greatest rate among high school—and college-aged students during the last decade (Hedegaard et al., 2020). At the University of

Pennsylvania alone, six students took their lives within only 13 months following Holleran's death—a metric no university wishes to promote. A campus culture of academic perfectionism and competition is fed by attaining the highest of grades and exhibiting insincere versions of self. Esteem among peers is pursued regardless of the cost to mental health.

Soon after Holleran's death, DeWitt committed herself to be hospitalized for suicidal ideation. DeWitt's decision to *live* would consequently open opportunities for her to advocate for the mental health and well-being of other college students. Most recently, DeWitt served as a research assistant at the Center for Mental Health Policy and Services at the University of Pennsylvania. DeWitt's story is sorrowful, yet ultimately redemptive. However, one must wonder whether the damage concerning her self-worth, academic achievement, and perfectionism could have been prevented. In light of these devastating stories, Christian institutions of higher education have unique opportunities to speak to students' perceptions of their identity in ways that reframe the impacts and effects of academic achievement on their personal well-being and sense of self-worth. This article serves as a call to action for Christian universities to instill a more robust understanding of Christian identity and the *imago Dei* concerning how and where students find their self-worth—in *whom* they find their worth, rather than in *what*.

An Introduction to Grading

Grades are often understood as serving a dual function: to provide feedback to students and to measure performance or achievement (Bailey & Garner, 2010). In a reflection on grading, Cahn (2011) said, "A grade is not a measure of a person" or of their moral character, but rather of "a person's level of achievement in a particular course of study" (p. 25). Although grading systems seem innocuous, students often view these systems as mechanisms that reduce them to mere numbers and letters—either consciously or subconsciously. An A is better than a B, and a B is better than a C; that a single letter can hold such meaning is extraordinary. Grading systems can abjectly motivate students to achieve for the sake of good performance rather than deep learning (Bain, 2004). Granted, some sort of grading or assessment system is necessary for evaluating student comprehension and application of knowledge. Perhaps grades should only be understood by their function—as a tool for feedback and measurement of academic achievement. Nevertheless, in practice, grades have a much more pervasive emotional influence over students' lives.

Schinske and Tanner (2014) recounted a history of grading that reaches back to the exit exams of Harvard in 1646. However, the first true record of a grading system in higher education surfaced at Yale in 1785. Yale President Ezra Stiles examined the graduating class and assigned one of four grades to its students: *Optimi*, second *Optimi*, *Inferiores*, and *Perjores* (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). One does not require a degree in Latin to understand this system of ranking students separates the optimal students from those considered inferior. The common A through F letter grading scale of modern times did not gain popularity until much later and happened largely as a result of the rapid growth in the number and size of colleges and universities at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

This exponential growth signaled a need for a more systematic metric for communicating students' achievements among institutions (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Although not without controversy, this popularized grading system has been widely used for nearly 70 years. Both positive and negative arguments abound regarding the efficacy and reliability of grades (Brookhart et al., 2016; Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Some scholars argue that grades are psychologically harmful to students, while others contend that grades lack integrity due to grade inflation (Kohn, 2018; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). Still others purport a negative impact of grades on student motivation (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Chamberlin et al., 2018). This list could and does go on. The issue at stake here is not the form or method of measurement, but the communication of that measurement to students. Whatever problems exist concerning grading metrics and practices, they are largely overshadowed by the effect grades have on students' sense of self-worth.

The Miscommunication of Grades

In their book *Cracks in the Ivory Tower*, Brennan and Magness (2019) highlighted the negative incentives that plague higher education. Negative incentives create poor environments. Of their extensive critique, the communication breakdown between students and professors regarding grading is of interest. Brennan and Magness (2019) noted both faculty and students act as if grades communicate some universal standard of meaning when they realistically do no such thing. Grades simply mean different things in different classes taught by different professors.

It is most alarming that faculty often assign artificial quantitative measures in place of meaningful qualitative descriptions (Brennan & Magness, 2019). Grades are only as useful as what they communicate to students, to other faculty, and even to those outside of higher education. Simplifying academic evaluations by assigning percentages and letters leaves students with very little context for what those measures mean. Students who receive an A in one course may receive a B in another for remarkably similar work. Academically comparable students take courses with different professors and finish with entirely different grades, ultimately impacting the inimitable grade point average (GPA; Brennan & Magness, 2019). The GPA often comprises a collection of course grades—some across disciplines and others across institutions. Different courses taught by different professors using different grading scales are somehow made *comparable* using the GPA. The inconsistencies of grading certainly invite inquiry into the validity of calculating and utilizing GPA as a legitimate standard of measurement (Brennan & Magness, 2019).

Yet, the GPA is still highly revered outside of higher education. Students' grades help them to attain not only college degrees but also desirable jobs. High GPAs often separate the haves and the have-nots. When measures such as GPA are incentivized, students are driven to value academic success, good grades, and high performance over learning. These incentives confuse the extrinsic value of performance for the intrinsic value of learning. Students are not at fault for understanding and treating grades this way—for they have been trained and incentivized to do so (Brennan & Magness, 2019). Unsurprisingly, students consider their self-worth to be closely connected to their

academic performance in college—for grades are how they are immediately defined by society and their peers following graduation.

The Impact of Grades

In a pedagogical and ideological review of performance grading in higher education, Lynch and Hennessy (2017) suggested that students define their academic success using grades and that the grade itself often becomes a kind of capital—shared with peers for gains in social status or used as fodder for job interviews. Performance grades are inherently problematic when developing learner-oriented environments. Lynch and Hennessy (2017) recognized this difficulty in shifting the emphasis from receiving good grades to learning, for the two are not always synonymous. Students who consider themselves consumers first and learners second often treat their college education as a path to a credential rather than a journey toward knowledge. The question arises: Are we grading or degrading our students? Lynch and Hennessy (2017) called attention to the difficulty in accurately measuring skills such as reason, reflection, and decision-making using quantitative measures—contending that this problem has accentuated and overemphasized traditional grading systems (i.e., an *"if we can't measure some skills, let's weigh the others even more"* approach). Lynch and Hennessy (2017) suggested that a return to the liberal goals of higher education over popular utilitarian and vocationally focused goals might lead to a more well-rounded evaluation system and, ultimately, well-rounded students.

In their study on the impact of grades on student motivation, Chamberlin et al. (2018) found that instead of enhancing academic motivation, grades often increased student anxiety and stress—and adversely affected feelings of self-worth. One student remarked:

> When my competence is rated in letters D through A, it's really easy to get stuck in a mindset where I feel that I'm unintelligent or I feel that I'm not capable based on the grade. Regardless of how much I've actually learnt. … Grades really never brought me happiness, they mostly brought me sadness. (p. 8)

This student's remarks highlight the reality that seeking fulfillment through success is often an endeavor that ends in emptiness. Students feel this way largely because of the high stakes their grades represent. In fact, Lang (2013) found that by increasing the number of assessments or grading opportunities—and lowering the stakes of each—students feel more comfortable within the learning environment. Formative assessments offer just that: *formation*.

Chamberlin et al. (2018) also noted that providing written feedback to students without an attached letter grade led to more positive student experiences. However, when providing letter grades *alongside* written feedback, "a student's need to protect or celebrate the normative judgment of self-worth associated with a grade overpowers the importance of feedback" (p. 11). Grades rule supreme, even when paired with intrinsically valuable written feedback. When students treat and consider their earned grades as something more than trivial measurements of academic performance, they can become extrinsically motivated toward something they mistakenly believe has intrinsic value.

An Introduction to Self-Esteem and Self-Worth

Unfortunately, stories similar to those of Kathryn DeWitt and Madison Holleran are all too common among college students. A quick Google search yields many *recent* results related to college students taking their own lives due to the stress of perfectionism, performance expectations, and depression (Alaimo, 2020; Chen, 2018; Cummings, 2020; Schwan, 2020). These factors can place an unbearable weight on students already grappling with the transition to college. That college students often consider their grades and academic performance as contingencies of their self-worth is at best troubling and at worst life-threatening. Gaining an understanding of self-esteem and the perspectives students hold during college is helpful when considering ways to reframe and redirect how students view and realize their self-worth.

Self-esteem has been defined as "the appraisal of one's own personal value, including both emotional components (self-worth) and cognitive components (self-efficacy)" (Eromo & Levy, 2017, p. 280). Self-esteem is one of the oldest concepts in psychology and can be traced to William James—often designated the father of modern psychology. In 1890, James poorly defined self-esteem as "a ratio or relationship between our achievements and our aspirations" (Eromo & Levy, 2017, p. 256). That is, self-esteem is directly linked to the success one has in relation to their expectations of success. When stated otherwise, one can raise their self-esteem by either lowering one's expectations or increasing one's achievements (Eromo & Levy, 2017). Self-esteem is composed of the attitudes one has about one's self.

Likewise, decades later, Carl Rogers included self-esteem as a component of self-concept in his work in the mid-20th century. The three components that compose self-concept are as follows: "(a) self-image (the view one has about himself or herself), (b) the ideal self (what one wishes to be), and (c) self-esteem or self-worth (how much value one places on himself or herself)" (Eromo & Levy, 2017. p. 257). The first two concepts pair together to support and complement self-esteem. Abraham Maslow (1987) also acknowledged self-esteem as a primary human need in his renowned hierarchy of needs. Self-esteem is closely associated with respect, confidence, status, and importance and has remained a dominant concept in psychology—defined and applied in numerous ways (Eromo & Levy, 2017).

In their work on the impacts and effects of self-esteem, Baumeister et al. (2003) found that high self-esteem *stemmed* from good academic performance, rather than *leading* to good academic performance. Self-esteem was found to be reliant to some degree upon how students performed academically. In addition to this finding, high self-esteem was found to be a great predictor of happiness and an inverse predictor of depression and was positively connected to persistence in the face of failure (Baumeister et al., 2003). Although high self-esteem does seem to be predictive of a better life, it does not necessarily follow that self-esteem induces that life. Yet understanding where students find their self-esteem or its component of self-worth and how they sustain it over time is crucial to learning how to reframe it within a Christian context and framework.

Peripheral Works on Student Self-Esteem

There have been multiple other works written concerning student self-esteem. Although not all can be accounted for here, some have relevance to this conversation. Weisskirch

(2018) authored an article concerning grit, self-esteem, learning strategies, and attitudes in relation to achieved course grades. In his quasi-experimental effort, Weisskirch improved upon the nascent research concerning the link between self-esteem and increased academic achievement. In fact, he found that students with higher self-esteem and a greater amount of grit accomplished greater academic achievement. Weisskirch (2018) hypothesized a particular component of grit—one concerning perseverance and passion for long-term goals—might contribute to an individual's self-awareness of their potential for academic achievement. Interestingly, as substantiated further in the studies to follow, students who achieved higher grades only recognized a slight increase in self-esteem (Weisskirch, 2018).

In a similarly constructed study, Stupnisky et al. (2013) examined students' self-esteem and academic autonomy in relation to their predictive effect on well-being. Stupnisky et al. found that students' self-esteem was predictive of their psychological and physical health, while also predicting stress. Last, Chung et al. (2014) examined the development of self-esteem in a sample of students during their time in college. They found that college students, on average, experienced a drop in self-esteem during the first semester of college but rebounded and experienced slight, incremental gains over the remainder of college. Many students expressed high levels of self-esteem entering college and high expectations for their academic performance—which, unfortunately, left them open to the lowering of their self-esteem when performing more poorly than anticipated (Chung et al., 2014).

Self-esteem and self-worth are multifaceted concepts. They have been well studied, and increasingly consistent results are found regarding the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem. The primary focus for the Christian university working to reframe student self-worth should be centered on the construct of contingent versus true self-esteem—often understudied in the field of higher education research. Contingent self-esteem refers to a sense of self-worth based on external standards, while true self-esteem refers to inherent self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 1995). For the Christian university, grades and academic assessments should not be the primary contributors to students' self-worth. Instead, students should recognize and be reminded of the true, inherent self-worth they have in their Creator. Regrettably, this experience is rarely the case.

Contingencies of Self-Worth in Higher Education

Contingencies of self-worth can be understood as "represent[ing] the domains in which goals are linked to self-worth" (Crocker et al., 2003, p. 894). For students in college, those goals are often related to grades and academic success. Drawing on self-determination theory, Pyszczynski et al. (2012) asserted that people tend to function better when their self-esteem is based on the core, intrinsic parts of themselves rather than on the superficial, extrinsic aspects such as grades and academic achievement. Students who achieve academically do not always have a matching sense of increased self-worth. In an attempt to measure college students' contingencies of self-worth, Crocker et al. (2003) found seven primary domains important to students: competencies (such as academic grades and achievements), competition and superiority, approval from others, support from family, appearance, God's love and acceptance, and virtue. Contingent domains, according to Crocker et al. (2003), are themselves more meaningful than self-worth contingency in

general. For instance, a greater contingency on competency or competition over that of God's love or virtue is noticeably more problematic than if the reverse were true.

In another study of college students' contingencies of self-worth, Crocker et al. (2003) introduced their findings in this way:

> In the lives of most college students, few events are as important as receiving grades for their course work. Although grades are intended to evaluate and communicate the level of a student's performance in a class and where that performance could be improved, for some students grades may be interpreted as revealing their value or worth as a human being because they stake their self-worth, in whole or in part, on their academic performance. … Instability in self-esteem, affect, and belonging may, in turn, take a toll on the overall psychological well-being of these students, resulting in increases in depressive symptoms over time. (p. 507)

The troublesome reality expressed here so eloquently by Crocker et al. (2003) captures the essence of student contingencies of self-worth. Most interestingly, grades can be a detriment to students' self-worth when *bad* or unexpected grades are returned, yet they can cause very little increase in self-worth when *good* grades are returned (Crocker et al., 2003). Academic or grade contingencies concerning self-worth have greater disadvantages than advantages. Yet, students consistently view their self-worth as contingent upon their academic performance. As a result of this study, Crocker et al. (2003) concluded that academically contingent students were especially aware of the potential for failure—because failure indicates worthlessness. Consider Kathryn DeWitt's comment about being unable to envision another future after failing a math midterm exam. Students who base their self-worth on their academic achievements experience lower self-esteem when they perform poorly or fail academic tasks in comparison to students who do not base their self-worth on such contrivances (Crocker et al., 2003).

In yet another set of studies concerning contingencies of self-worth, Park et al. (2007) confirmed the findings of previous studies. Students with low self-esteem who base their self-worth contingently on academic achievement are hurt worse when they do not make the grade they anticipate compared to students with higher self-esteem who do the same (Park et al., 2007). Likewise, students with high self-esteem who base their self-worth contingently on academic achievement are left with little room for an increase in self-esteem when they do score well (Park et al., 2007). Again, the returns on self-worth contingency in academic achievement are marginally positive for those who succeed and substantially negative for those who do not.

Self-Worth Protection

As a subset of the literature related to self-worth, some studies have been conducted about self-worth protection. Self-worth protection refers to the avoidance tactics students use when they fear failure. For instance, Ferradás et al. (2016) acknowledged two possible strategies students tend to use to avoid possible threats to their self-worth: self-handicapping and defensive pessimism. Self-handicapping is "the deliberate creation of obstacles, real or imaginary, which, although they hinder or impede the individual's successful performance, provide a convincing alibi in the face of a possible poor performance" (p. 236). Consider students who intentionally wait to complete assignments until the night before they are due, convinced they work best under pressure. Yet, if they do

not achieve their desired or expected outcome, they tend not to be surprised and have an excuse readily at hand, due to their busyness and the pressure placed on them.

Conversely, defensive pessimism occurs when a typically successful student "sets excessively low achievement expectations for the tasks … [serving] as a stimulus to increase the individual's effort to prevent the negative prediction from occurring" (Ferradás et al., 2016, p. 236). Consider the law student who sets out to take the bar exam and brings with them two packs of 24 number 2 pencils—eliminating the possibility for unpreparedness. This student, although probably just in need of sleep, thoroughly prepares for and thinks through possible scenarios that might end negatively. These approaches highlight both the passivity and proactivity with which students approach potential academic failure. Unsurprisingly, a later study conducted by Ferradás et al. (2019) found that students with low self-esteem were more vulnerable to these self-worth protection strategies.

Similarly to students with low self-esteem, students who experience high levels of anxiety are significantly more likely than other students to practice self-worth protection strategies (Cano et al., 2018). In a study of first-year students' approaches to learning in college by Cano et al. (2018), students who were surface or strategic learners were found to be more likely to practice those strategies as well, compared to deep learners. Thus, students whose self-worth was contingent on their academic performance and grades were more likely to practice defensive and protective mechanisms than students motivated by learning. A student's perspective on learning at the beginning of a course can greatly influence how they interact with these self-worth protection strategies with regard to their academic achievement later on.

Aligning the Research on Grading and Self-Worth

Through the above review of the literature on grading and student self-worth, it is clear that grades have a more pervasive influence in students' lives than perhaps academic measurements should (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Crocker et al., 2003b). There is often a communication breakdown between students and professors concerning what grades actually mean (Brennan & Magness, 2019). It should be troubling when students consider their grades or academic achievements as something more than measurements of their academic performance. Students can and do become extrinsically motivated toward something they mistakenly believe has intrinsic value, placing their self-worth in something fleeting (Lang, 2013). Students who base their self-worth contingently on academic achievement are more likely to be negatively affected when they do not achieve the grades they anticipate (Park et al., 2007). Covington (2000) reminded readers of the struggle college students have with this reality:

> In effect, in our society individuals are widely considered to be only as worthy as their ability to achieve. For these reasons, the kinds of grades students achieve are the unmistakable measure by which many, if not most, youngsters judge their worth as students. (p. 181)

This environment and reality must change at Christian institutions. Christian universities have the opportunity and responsibility to transform and reframe the way students think about and discover their self-worth.

The Christian University Response

Christian institutions of higher education are in a unique position to speak to the realities of the misplaced priorities of identity and self-worth. We need to open a discourse on this topic in valuable, mission-focused, and practice-changing ways. Yet, the purpose of Christian colleges and universities is often unclear when there is little awareness of what it is Christian higher education distinctly provides. Smith (2009) has asserted that Christian institutions of higher education have "unwittingly bought into a stunted picture of the human person and a somewhat domesticated construal of Christian faith" (p. 217) by merely offering higher education under the vague guise of a "Christian perspective." Smith's biting critique suggests that Christian higher education has misplaced its own priorities by concerning itself primarily with *in*formation rather than *for*mation. By intellectualizing Christianity, Christian higher education has diluted its identity and distinctiveness. As a result, Christian colleges and universities generate alumni who look strikingly similar to their peers from non-religious institutions (Smith, 2009). In light of this reality, Christian higher education must inculcate a fuller, more robust understanding and indwelling of self-worth and identity in Christ.

In their book on Christian thinking and practice in the field of student affairs, Glanzer et al. (2020) acknowledged two dangers concerning the *how(s)* of Christian higher education. The first danger is to consider how Christ enlivens the university primarily through specific practices (Glanzer et al., 2020). This *Christ-added* approach merely adds Christian practice to otherwise secular activities—similar to how Smith (2009) considered the application of the Christian perspective. The other danger leans too far in the other direction—that every activity should be considered spiritual. This *Christ-assumed* approach involves little reflection, implying that spirituality comes naturally by way of practices (Glanzer et al., 2020). In light of these dangers, Glanzer et al. offered a third way: a *Christ-animating* approach that intentionally seeks out specific practices that help students flourish in Christian higher education. This approach may sound like a familiar framework for readers of Niebuhr's (1975) book, *Christ and Culture*—more specifically, Christ as a transformer and redeemer of culture. The efforts of Glanzer et al. here can lead Christian higher education leaders to consider what practices most effectively foster student self-worth, found not in academic achievement but in the Creator. Healthy identity development begins with a robust understanding of Christian identity and can be sustained through the intentional framing of practices within Christian higher education. A conversation concerning identity and self-worth must take place within Christian universities. The mere addition of a Christian perspective will not suffice, and neither will an overly spiritual disposition that waters down faith and identity.

The *Imago Dei*

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness …"
> God created humankind in his own image,
> in the image of God he created them,
> male and female he created them.
> (Genesis 1:26a, 27, NET)

The *imago Dei* frames humanity's inherent worth. To be made in the image of God is to bear dignity and worth in the eyes of the Creator. Fallen, sinful humanity remains fully in the image of God even at their worst—as "grisly shadows" (Hughes, 2012, p. 38) of themselves. Yet, Christians can rest in the liberty of the Cross. That Christ came to connect humanity once again to the Father through identification with Him (Jn. 3:16-17) means that identity and hope can be found in His death, resurrection, promise of future return, and recreation of Heaven and Earth (John 1:12; Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:5; Colossians 3:1-3; Revelation 21:3). Another beautiful representation of what being made in the image of God means is to understand humanity as those-whom-God-loves (Piper, 1971). The image and likeness of God are intimately and uniquely connected to what it means to be human. Kilner (2015), the foremost scholar concerning the *imago Dei*, considers both a connection and reflection necessitated by humanity's creation in God's image. God has a personal, relational stake in bestowing His image within man and woman. His image and likeness connect humanity to Himself and immutably separates them from the rest of creation. Kilner (2015) restated his thesis, "Many things about people are badly damaged, but their status as created in God's image is not" (p. 281). The *imago Dei* is concerned with the intrinsic, the permanent, and the inherent—not the extrinsic, temporal, and the earned. God's image cannot be tarnished or diminished or removed.

Christian higher education has an interesting place regarding the *imago Dei* and students' identity. There has been a temptation to dichotomize the competing goods of Christian higher education: Christian faith and academic progress. But there must be a third way to reconcile this identity and function—a way that allows for the pursuit of Christ-enlivened higher education that seeks to restore and inculcate a fuller, more robust understanding and indwelling of self-worth in Christ for the sake of all students who bear God's very image. This search for significance begins at Creation and stretches to the Cross.

The Search for Significance

One's work cannot stop when identity and self-worth are accurately communicated and instilled in Christian higher education institutions and students. In fact, there is still much to be done. The search for significance and self-worth has many barriers and obstacles to be overcome. In his seminal work on self-worth as a Christian, McGee (1990) reframed the concept through what he considers *The Search for Significance*. McGee offered four false beliefs that inhibit people from finding their true self-worth and identity in Christ. These beliefs pivot around four concepts: performance, approval, blame, and shame. To illustrate these concepts, reconsider the story of Kathryn DeWitt.

The performance trap claims that individuals must meet certain standards to feel good about themselves (McGee, 1990). The fear of failure plagued Kathryn DeWitt during her first semester at the University of Pennsylvania and was ultimately realized in her failed math midterm. DeWitt's self-worth being contingent upon her academic achievement ultimately left her to her own judgment and disdain. But God requires no perfect performance, for He has redeemed humanity despite their failures (Romans 9:16).

The approval addict desperately requires the affirmation of others to feel good about themselves (McGee, 1990). DeWitt recalled feeling fulfilled and happy when others approved of her effort and achievements. But that approval disappeared at the notion of failure. DeWitt's self-worth being contingent upon her academic achievement ultimately left her unable to contribute anything worthy of approval or value. But God is not interested in humanity's ability to gain approval from others because He has reconciled humankind to Himself regardless of ability (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The blame game happens when individuals feel that because of their failures they are wholly unworthy of love (McGee, 1990). DeWitt blamed herself for her academic failures that came so quickly during her first semester—convincing herself that she was unworthy of any approval or love. DeWitt's self-worth being contingent upon her academic achievement ultimately left her only to condemn herself to her own bitterness. But God took on humanity's blame in the form of His Son, freeing them from the bondage of unworthiness and guilt—loving them because they are made in His image and likeness (Galatians 2:16).

Last, shame is debilitating when individuals believe they are hopeless, unable to change, and trapped in an unwanted identity (McGee, 1990). DeWitt no longer envisioned a future for herself and instead looked for a way to end her anxiety, depression, and failure. DeWitt's self-worth being contingent upon her academic achievement ultimately left her feeling inferior, isolated, and lost. But God is the great regenerator who has renewed humanity in Himself, offering them exaltation, inclusion, and belonging (1 Corinthians 5:17).

The feeling of significance—one's self-worth—is crucial to the way humanity understands and finds their identity in Christ. These four concepts above are perverted when individuals misplace or make their self-worth contingent on external sources. The value each person has in being made in God's image is incomparable to what one brings to the table. God loves human beings because He created them to be in relationship with Him. McGee (1990) stated this truth beautifully: "Our true value is not based on our behavior or the approval of others, but on what God's Word says is true of us" (p. 25). Humanity is made in His image (Genesis 1:26a, 27), for Him (Isaiah 43:7; 1 Corinthians 1:9), and is to find their self-worth in Him (Psalm 139; John 3:16). To regularly communicate this truth to students through learning environments and practices is of utmost importance.

Changing the Narrative by Changing Our Practices

To rightly understand self-worth, one must understand identity in Christ. Inherent value and worth come from God. One of the chief concerns of Christian higher education institutions, then, should not be merely to rid students of academically contingent self-worth but to have students rightly situate and understand their self-worth in relation to Jesus Christ. To change the narrative of performance-focused, contingent self-worth in college students, new practices must emerge to redirect students toward the One in whom they find their worth. There are four practices Christian higher education institutions and educators can implement to underscore this truth.

Practice #1: Frequent Priming

In his work on academic dishonesty, Lang (2013) offered new practices that help to eliminate the environments in which cheating most often occurs. The strategies offered are focused on creating good learning environments and are helpful toward the end of reframing self-worth. One particular concept Lang (2013) suggested might be most helpful in frequently reminding students from where their value and worth stem: *priming*. Priming students refers to reminding them of their commitment to academic integrity concerning an exam or assignment (Lang, 2013). Yet, this practice can be a redemptive one, as well. Students can be primed to acknowledge they are honoring God with their diligent preparation and that their worth does not come as a product of that preparation. Before returning graded assignments, students should be primed and reminded that their worth is in Christ and not in the feedback they are about to receive. Perhaps even the course syllabus should be rife with references and reminders of this worth. Alongside priming, Lang (2013) also offered the concept of *low-stakes assignments*. By priming and offering more frequent formative assessments that are ungraded, students might attribute less of their worth to the grades they feel matter most. This approach might also assist in reducing the stress and anxiety that often accompany self-worth contingency.

Practice #2: Covenant Grading

Another effective practice born out of research is contract grading (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001; Lindemann & Harbke, 2011). Contract grading—or, as it will be known here, *covenant grading*—is a system in which students select and specify the grade they would like to earn in the course at the beginning of the semester. Requirements are clearly stated and reviewed by both the professor and the student. Once an agreement has been reached, the student commits to earning that grade in the course. In one experimental study, students participating in contract grading were less likely to fail and three times more likely to earn an A (Lindemann & Harbke, 2011). This unconventional practice might offer Christian institutions of higher education a new framework from which to structure their grading systems. Contract grading offers a shift from a performance paradigm to a learning paradigm, in which students can focus on what they are learning, rather than on how they are being graded (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Contract grading acts as a covenant between the professor and the student. Just as God upholds His covenant with His people and calls His people to uphold their covenant with Him, professors and students will uphold their academic covenants with one another. Covenant grading has the potential to serve as a constant reminder of what it means to be in covenant with God and covenant with humanity—a persistent reminder to students to find their self-worth in their identity in Christ, rather than their grades.

Practice #3: Improving Rather Than Proving

Christian higher education institutions should make it a priority to communicate realistic academic expectations to students. Professors, parents, or others significant in students' lives should never expect perfection in the pursuit of academic achievement. There is a parallel that Paul recognizes here in the Christian life: while human nature is

limited from attaining perfection, one can and should pursue things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 3:12–15; 4:8). James and the writer of Hebrews acknowledge that while humanity falters in their imperfect ways, they are being perfected in Christ (James 3:2; Hebrews 10:14). Likewise, students should attend college not in an effort to prove, rather, to *improve*—to pursue excellence. Perfection and excellence are related, yet different concepts. *Perfection* requires *flawlessness*, while *excellence* requires *outstanding effort*. By communicating expectations of excellence over perfection, the value placed on grading and academic achievements can be rightly situated within the college experience.

Within that experience, student affairs leaders have great influence. For instance, Smith (2009) recognized an opportunity for priming students for the task of Christian learning within the campus co-curriculum. Student affairs leaders can create and shepherd intentional, formative learning communities in which students interact with faculty, staff, and their peers. The relationships formed between student affairs leaders and students offer great opportunities for intentional conversations about identity and self-worth. Perhaps implementing living and learning communities—composed of faculty-in-residence, residence life staff, and students—provides further instances for connecting the curricular to the co-curricular, as well as reframing how and where students find their self-worth (Shushok et al., 2009).

Practice #4: A More Fulfilling, Identity-Centric Curriculum

Last, perhaps one of the most practical ways to accomplish this goal is to create entry-level courses required for all students that assist in reframing self-worth, academic achievement, and the important identities students cultivate during college. For instance, Glanzer (2020) envisioned an entirely new general education curriculum—one that seeks to reconnect students with their chief identities, foster intellectual virtue, integrate the disciplines, and encourage stewardship of oneself, others, and the world by seeking excellence in all areas. This grand vision of Christian higher education should compel institutions to offer their students more than merely a Christian perspective or lens through which to view the world. Instead, Christian institutions of higher education should lean into deriving a more fulfilling, identity-centric curriculum that few others have ventured so far as to ponder.

Conclusion

That any student would misplace their identity or self-worth in their grades, perfectionism, or achievements is troubling, but doing so in place of their Creator—in place of the One in whom their inherent worth and identity originates—is devastating. Few institutions of higher education are going to abolish their grading systems, nor am I arguing they necessarily should. However, to reframe how students view themselves in light of their true identity and self-worth in Christ, Christian institutions of higher education must change the way they communicate that value to students. The practices discussed offer opportunities to instill a more robust understanding of Christian identity and the *imago Dei* concerning how and where students find their self-worth—directing students toward in *whom* they must find their worth, not in *what*.

In order to communicate the reality of this identity well, Christian institutions of higher education may need to reconstruct the ways in which they deliver and (re)design their curriculum. There is a unique opportunity to open a discourse that seeks to reframe students' identity and self-worth in Christ through the general education curriculum and co-curriculum offered during college. However, the complexity of each Christian institution and practices offered must be thoroughly considered by faculty. There are more questions that can and should be raised about the redemptive learning practices taking place at our Christian institutions. By initiating and contributing to the conversation, one might be able to serve students in Christian higher education in more comprehensive and meaningful ways. Students' value is not dependent upon the grades they make, the degrees they achieve, or their ability to earn others' acceptance—rather, it is in the truth and love of God, their Creator.

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