

Reinforcing Important Faith Themes by Connecting a General Education Common Learning
Course and the Business Major

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Abstract

Both the business curriculum and general education learning can be improved by intentionally reinforcing relevant themes students have encountered in a general education common learning course. This paper demonstrates how one institution's common learning course, which addresses Christian mission and identity, can be tied to courses in the business major.

Introduction

The general education curriculum of many colleges includes a common learning course in which all first year students enroll. Often, the course includes content related to the mission and identity of the college, themes related to Christian faith and worldview, or other central themes of the liberal arts, as well as critical thinking and writing competencies. For example, at Messiah College, the name of the course is “Created and Called for Community,” and includes a variety of readings related to creation and stewardship, identity and community, and calling and vocation. These themes are relevant not only for students in their first year, but also for business students as they consider organizational life and career choice—in fact, the content may have more meaning for students as seniors than it does for first year students. However, there is often a disconnect between courses such as this and courses in the major, which lessens both the value of the common learning and the impact of these themes for Christian faith integration in one’s discipline.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to advocate for more intentional connections between major courses, specifically business, to general education, particularly a common learning course. I will begin by briefly discussing Ernest L. Boyer’s conception of General Education and the importance of shared experiences as a component of the general education curriculum (Boyer, 1981; Wells, 2014). From there, I will discuss the value of connecting common learning courses and business major curriculum. Finally, I will discuss concrete ways in which this may be accomplished, both across the business core courses and within a particular course.

General Education

General education is touted as an enduring distinctive of higher education in the United States (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Gaston, 2015). Approximately one third of the credits required for a bachelor's degree in the U.S. consist of general education courses (Lattuca & Stark, 2014). One ideal of general education is that there is something or some set of things—content or skills—that college and university graduates should hold in common, to some extent across all institutions, but certainly within one particular institution. Boyer (1981) notes that general education is the “learning that is common to all people” because it is grounded in our shared experience (p. ix). This might be a particular set of courses, disciplines within a distribution requirement, common learning objectives, or a particular course with common content and texts that every student takes at the same point in their college journey. It is this later aspect of general education which will be the focus here. Wells (2016) summarizes the value of general education by stating that it “represents a way of framing a philosophical ideal that reflects something valuable about an education that empowers individuals—both in terms of personal liberation but also in terms of social responsibility—and gets at something bigger than any single discipline” (p. 9).

Ideals of General and Specialized Education

Boyer and others have expressed that general education ideally embodies certain attributes such as distinctiveness with respect to a particular institution, shared learning, integration, and connection. These same attributes are strengths of major programs; thus, to the extent that general education and major curricula contain these characteristics, they can mutually reinforce each other.

Distinctive and Shared. Bowen (2004) regards general education as shared learning that is unique, reflecting institutional identity. For a Christian college, general education, particularly a common course that all students encounter early on, has an important role in framing the mission and values at the heart of the institution. According to Wells (2016),

The liberal arts *resonate with the Christian ideal to “not be conformed to the self”* (Eph. 4:22a, NRSV), to be freed from selfish desires and delusions. *The liberal arts advance the formation of identity and character, encouraging students to explore queries at the heart of being disciples of Jesus: what are my convictions? how I will live and act?* The liberal arts *resonate with the Christian ideal to be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that we may “discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Rom 12:2, NRSV). The liberal arts offer a means to *developing critical minds with strong convictions about the world, including how the world we live in falls short of God’s vision.* The liberal arts *cultivate the ability to learn over a lifetime.* Our calling as Christians is to continually learn and grow in order *to bring the world ever more in line with the reign of God.* The world’s challenges are not static; thus, the analysis of the issues facing local, national, and global communities demands continuous learning (italics in original).

Christian business students also need the encouragement not to conform to self but to frame decisions in a way that is consistent with God’s vision. Students within both general and specialized education benefit from developing ethical approaches to decisions, critical thinking, global awareness, communication skills, and vision-setting skills, a perspective of lifelong learning. Christian colleges undertake character and character formation in diverse ways, but are most effective when students recognize and develop “the intellect and character necessary to express Christian commitments in responsible decisions and actions” (Messiah College, Abilities of the liberal arts, n.d.). Having a core course taken by all students, with themes that are repeated throughout the curriculum reinforces the centrality and interconnectedness of these key ideas. Major courses that are also institutionally distinctive also attract students as well as create an attractive “product” for employers.

Human Connection. Another of Boyer's (1988) ideals is that all students understand their shared connections as human beings. For a Christian College, being created in the image of God (*imago dei*) is particularly significant. This reality is a major theme for a common course in the general education curriculum, and one that can be reinforced both in other general education courses and within the major discipline. Business core courses such as management and marketing are particularly relevant venues for such emphasis.

Integrated. Integration is viewed by many to be an important component of the college curriculum. Boyer (1988) saw an ideal of general education to be integration, which speaks to pulling together the various experiences, themes, and intellectual proficiencies. The Carnegie Foundation (1977) emphasized integration of knowledge as well as shared experience. Others advocated for a curriculum in which students would encounter a "framework on which to place knowledge stemming from various sources and teach them to think critically, develop values, understand traditions, respect diverse opinions" (Cohen & Kiskar, 2010, p 242). Good practice in general education is intentional, "looking inward at institutional context and outward at societal needs" (Wells, 2016, p. 52), and distributed through multiple venues.

Integration is not only valuable for common learning, however; it is also valued for a business major. Business majors typically require a strategic management capstone course that integrates the various business disciplines. To take Boyer's integration ideal a step further, there should be intentional synthesis between common learning and the major. Knowing of its relevance to the major would help students appreciate the common learning content further (rather than trying to get general education "out of the way"). Encountering the common content once again in major courses would serve to emphasize the relevance of this content. Scholars have specifically advocated a bridge between general education and more specialized education

in the major (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Bell, 1966; Gaston, 2015).

Integration takes on another dimension at a Christian institution where the major discipline is embedded in faith and Christian worldview. How much more complete when every area of learning is connected together within a framework of Christian faith. Thinking critically about faith integration does not necessarily come naturally (Smith, Chun, & Chandler, 2016). Applying faith principles from the earliest general education course through to the major capstone course, allows students to develop increasing levels of skill as they move toward graduation and career.

Disconnection

Valuable though the ideals discussed above may be, the reality does not live up to the promise. Dockery (1999) notes that “the fragmentation of knowledge should alarm all committed to Christian higher education, for it strikes at the foundation of our purpose” (p. 12). General education often is seen as the “neglected child” and the “spare room” of the college experience, in contrast to more “important” courses in the major (Wells, 2016). A common course with no apparent connection to a major or identifiable skill may demonstrate this effect even more so. Unfortunately, the making of connections between general education and the major is lacking in many college curricula; thus, common learning courses become merely a course that a student must “get through” unfortunately without any attention to connections outside of the course. When a common course is so central to the identity of the institution, the institution should endeavor get much more “mileage” from the course. When institutions implement Boyer’s ideals, general education and specialized major courses work **with** rather than against one another (Boyer & Boyer, 1996).

An Example of a Common Learning Course

At Messiah College, this type of shared experience is assured by having all first-year students take a course *Created and Called for Community* (CCC). In that course, every class follows the same syllabus including the timing of the readings, the assignments and the other shared activities (a convocation with the provost and Service Day). This is intended to set the context for learning at Messiah College and to help the student understand some of the foundational principles that drive our educational mission. This shared experience is all the more valuable as it plays out on a residential campus where even students in different sections of the course find themselves reflecting on the same topics and can converse with one another about these topics in the dining hall, library, or dorm.

The following describes the overall goals of the Created and Called for Community Course (Messiah College, 2016):

The Created and Called for Community course applies the intellectual skills learned in First Year Seminar to content directly related to Messiah College's Mission, Identity, and Foundational Values. This is done in the context of a medium-sized discussion-oriented course designed around the themes of creation, community, and vocation. Students learn that because they are created in the divine image, they are God's agents for service, leadership, and reconciliation in the broader community. The course is designed to ask questions of life and learning, those questions which students engage in order to participate fully in their academic pursuits. The central question to be considered is: "What is my vocation as a faithful steward of God's creation?" Through examining literary, historical, artistic, philosophical and theological works, students engage the biblical themes of forgiveness, compassion, non-violence, peacemaking, justice, and racial and gender reconciliation through the lens of the College's unique religious identity and foundational values, with a particular focus on the importance of community. In this context students work toward enhancing their ability in the basic intellectual skills: how to read critically, think logically, and communicate effectively. In addition, students focus on how the Christian faith can and should be related to the intellectual life. In short, Created and Called for Community is designed to encourage positive attitudes toward the Messiah College academic experience.

A further description of the Learning Outcomes for CCC (Messiah College, 2016) is provided in Appendix 1. Readings are of a variety of genres and authors including Gerald Sittser, Desmond Tutu, Alice Walker, Plato, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Augustine.

One of the valuable contributions of general education to a “liberal” education is the potential to take such “common” learning and to make connections across a variety of disciplines. The CCC course is the only course on campus that is identical for each and every student and potentially is the singular connection with all other courses. The topics discussed in this course are foundational enough that connections can be made with almost any other course on campus. For example, in CCC, students have a discussion on what it means to be “created in God’s image.” Discussions about human resource management policies and practices can refer to Scripture, but also back to the discussion students will have had in CCC, even if they were not in the same section or even year. This making of connections to other parts of a student’s curriculum can make learning come alive and take on meaning outside the CCC context, both elevating the importance of the CCC class, but also modeling for students what it means to take these foundational issues seriously since they do apply outside of a class that students are “required” to take.

Integrating Ideas from CCC into the Business Major

Often, we already discuss similar themes to the common course within our business courses, but without knowing what topics or readings have been previously encountered by students. Thus, it may simply be a matter of reminding students that, for example, the idea of *imago dei* is not new to them. Now, however, it may become more meaningful when tied to their discipline and to the practical implications for the workplace. A theme such as “calling”

that may have had less impact on first year students has increased resonance for students in a chosen major and especially for seniors as they approach graduation.

To provide an idea of how themes might relate to the business curriculum, please see **Table 1**. This chart contains a row for each of the core courses for majors in the business department. Each of the columns represents one of the components (i.e., creation, community, calling) of the CCC course. The individual cells in the chart provide reflection questions related to each of the components for each course. These questions provide points of connection between the topics discussed in CCC and the content of specific courses in the field of business. The table illustrates the merits of themes like creativity and stewardship being applicable to both one's business career and broader life decisions. Students will experience membership in many communities and identities throughout their life, but their Christian community pervades all of it and they will spend a significant portion of their time in a work community. Calling is a complex concept, encompassing one's career certainly, but is also a broader concept that students need to grapple with, including understanding that can change over time. Students would find value in being encouraged to take the holistic view but also to connect their major discipline within the context of their life as a whole, and considering faith and worldview in as it relates to life choices.

A departmental discussion is a useful vehicle to consider both integration within the major and to connect themes from general education that exist across the major curriculum, essentially generating a type of curriculum map similar to Table 1. However, an overall strategy of broadly integrating the business core course to the CCC learning objectives is not the only way to make disciplinary connections. Departments can also address the relationship of aspects of the common learning course to specific major courses (i.e., beyond the business core). For

example, a Human Resource Management major or concentration can tie common course themes to courses in Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior, Compensation & Benefits, Employee Relations, and Leading Organizational Change within a Human Resource Management program. Likewise, course objectives across a single course could be connected to general education common course themes. **Table 2** provides an example of how specific topics or learning objectives of a Human Resource Management course could be connected to aspects of the CCC course. It would not be necessary to fill in every cell in the table—focusing on the strongest connections would make the most impact.

Finally, skills aspects of general education within a common learning course such as CCC can also be reinforced in major courses, building on the foundation provided. Smith, Chun, and Chandler (2016) note that genres typically found in general education courses such as classic poetry and literature enhance emotional intelligence and ethical awareness. Soft skills and critical thinking skills are vital for business majors, and the discussion format and writing element of course such as CCC can be capitalized and built upon in later, more specialized major courses. This requires that instructors of major courses be aware of what skills students can already be expected to have attained so that these skills can be further enhanced.

In sum, intentional connections between themes found in common learning general education course and major courses benefit students as they prepare to engage the workplace upon graduation. Helping students to integrate faith with their learning, to holistically connect general education with discipline specific education, and to see their academic preparation as part of their Christian identity puts them on the path specified in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

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Table 1

Core Courses in Business and their Relation to Created and Called for Community (CCC)

Business Core Courses	Connection to Created and Called for Community		
	Creation	Community	Calling
Principles of Management	What is the impact of an understanding of creation on our understanding of human behavior in organizations? Created in God’s image? What does it mean to be “fallen” as social beings and how is that manifested in the field of management?	What is the value of our Christian community in understanding the scope of human behavior?	Christ calls us through the various aspects of our lives as expressed in our knowledge of who we are. How does self-awareness influence our call?
Marketing Principles	How is God’s creative impulse expressed in marketing communication?	How does market segmentation support or detract from the idea of community?	How does marketing practice consider a balance between individual needs, organizational needs, and the needs of the larger society?
Principles of Economics	How do we balance economic progress with preserving God’s creation?	What factors contribute to and undermine community?	Christ’s call often calls us to action. Belief oftentimes follows action. How might Christ’s call be influenced by various social forces?
Accounting	How is the principle of stewardship present in accounting principles?	How do we respond to the expectations of various communal authorities (business, government, professional association)?	What is the difference between a calling and a career?
Quantitative Methods	The creative act of God in the beginning can be characterized as bringing order out of chaos. How do we see this at work in statistical methods?	What is the value of using tools to discover the underlying nature of a community? How will that help us seek the good of the community?	What is the value of working in areas that may not be part of your skills or preferences? Would Christ ever call you to do things that are hard to do?
Information Systems	How is innovation in technology related to our being made in the image of a creator God?	How can information systems experts assist organizational communication?	How do I use principles of information technology in my particular major discipline and vocation to promote organizational ethics and effectiveness?

<p>Business Law</p>	<p>How do we balance imago Dei with the evidence of sin and brokenness in relationships and institutions?</p>	<p>How do business laws reflect the values reflect the attitudes of various community constituencies?</p>	<p>How do I use legal principles in my particular major discipline and vocation to promote organizational ethics and effectiveness?</p>
<p>Financial Management</p>	<p>How can we effectively steward organizational and societal resources?</p>	<p>What financial practices benefit the organization as a community?</p>	<p>How do I use financial principles in my particular major discipline and vocation to promote organizational effectiveness?</p>
<p>Strategic Management/ Capstone</p>	<p>Being created in the image of God is a responsibility. What special insights from the field of business can be offered in terms of humans being created in the image of God?</p>	<p>How can we as a community in this class encourage one another in our understanding of the field and our place in the field?</p>	<p>What do I know of calling that will enable me to take the next step in my journey out of college?</p>

Table 2

Human Resource Management course and its Relation to Created and Called for Community (CCC)

Topic	Created	Community	Called
Introduction	Human Nature: Created in the image of God/Fallen		Human Capital: Quality of work we do
Connecting to Org's Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity • Short term vs. Long term focus 	Role of diversity in competitive advantage	Mission, Vision of Organization
Business Environment	Demographic, econ, tech--part of creation	Diversity & inclusion Globalization	How do Christians view compared to others
Legal	Law & grace in OT	Laws that benefit indiv/group/society ADA, EEOC, FMLA	
Planning	Caretakers of resources	Succession planning	
Job Design	Job Characteristics Theory—Meaningfulness, Autonomy	Team structure	Specific vocation
Recruiting		Internal vs. External vs Employee recommendation	Realistic Job Preview (RJP) to test specific calling
Selection	Creativity, intelligence, character as criteria	Mutual fit between employee and organization; collegiality	Process ties to Sittser—talent, opening doors, motivation, life experience, voice of others, joyful service—play role in helping applicant assess vocation
Training	Discipleship--learning	Training topics dealing with interpersonal interaction: diversity, conflict, teamwork, socialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education as a calling (Plato) • Career dev—vocational journey as multiple steps (Sittser)

Performance Evaluation	Terminate in a way that recognizes <i>imago dei</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability & respect regarding peer evaluation • Relationship 	Quality of work we do (Sayers)
Compensation & Benefits		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equal pay for equal work Minimum wage 	
Employee Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconciliation • Policy formation (impact of created in image of God vs. fallen) 	Union-Mgmt relations	Safety & Health—Taking care of neighbor (Good Samaritan)

Appendix 1

Created and Called for Community (CCC) Course Overview & Purpose

The Created and Called for Community (CCC) course comprises the second half of Messiah College's curriculum for first-year students, following First Year Seminar (FYS). Together, FYS and CCC are designed to equip you with the intellectual skills and tools needed to succeed during the rest of your education at Messiah College. In particular, FYS and CCC as "W" courses both focus on writing. The ability to write accurately, clearly, and convincingly will serve you well both in the remainder of your college career (whatever your major), as well as in whatever vocation and profession you enter following your college career.

CCC also introduces you to the particular kind of community and institution that is Messiah College. Every college and university has its own distinctive history, identity, and mission. Messiah's history and identity are rooted in three strands of the Christian church known as Anabaptism, Pietism and Wesleyanism. Depending on your own background, one or more of these strands more or less familiar to you. We hope that this course helps you become familiar with basic elements of Messiah's identity, mission, and foundation. The purpose of the course isn't to force you to subscribe to certain ideas, but rather to cultivate a climate in which there can be better, deeper, and richer conversations about important issues precisely because they're informed by some common understandings. We hope that this process that begins this semester will continue through the rest of your college experience.

The CCC course will encourage you to have such enriching conversations with other first-year students--both in and out of class---in part by using a common curriculum. Some of the common readings assigned are classic texts which have been read by generations of college students. Others are more recent and speak to various contemporary issues and concerns. It's hoped that the CCC readings collectively will help shape your thinking about your values and convictions, and about what pathways in life might best allow you to express the gifts and talents God has implanted in you. This is a process that will start this year, but will continue in the years to come. It's hoped that the CCC course might play a small part in this vital process.

CCC, then, is an inter-disciplinary and common-learning course. It's not designed first and foremost to be a content-rich course. Rather, it's a "meaning-making course." It's hoped that over the course of this semester, you'll receive helpful resources to address the experiences, questions, and challenges that you'll face in the future in an informed and thoughtful fashion. And it's also a discussion-oriented course. One way to become equipped for this task is to meet and engage with people and ideas worthy of shaping you and your thinking. This semester, you'll have the opportunity to develop your thoughts alongside other people--the authors whose works we read, your instructor, and your classmates.

Course Objectives

All sections of CCC share common objectives. As a result of completing the course, students will:

1. Understand the identity, mission, foundational values, and confession of faith of Messiah College;
2. Explore the biblical and theological implications of the Old Testament emphasis on being created in the image of God and the New Testament emphasis on becoming a new creation;
3. Examine the defining characteristics of different kinds of communities, including those that are faith-based, academic, national, international, ethnic, interethnic, and professional; and
4. Develop a working definition of Christian vocation as it relates to reconciliation, service, and leadership.

Theme One: Creation

The first words of Scripture in some translations say that “in the beginning God created...” And so we rightly begin exploring the theme of creation and creativity by studying the account of God’s creation in Genesis 1 and 2. We’ll examine both the natural and human creation, including the moral and ethical implications that flow from the understanding that every person is made in God’s image (or, in Latin, the *imago Dei*). You’ll also consider how to be faithful stewards of creation and ways in which you can express the creative impulse God has implanted in you.

As a result of engaging the creation theme within CCC, you will be able to:

1. Define the image of God;
2. Identify the theological implications of being created in the image of God;
3. Consider how being created in God’s image implies the dignity of all of humanity;
4. Illustrate the meaning of being called to be stewards of creation;
5. Consider how to balance economic and technological progress with preserving God’s creation;
6. Recognize the biblical directive to become and form a new creation; and
7. Explore how God’s creative impulse is distinctly expressed in your own life.

Theme Two: Community

All human beings throughout history, each of them made in God’s image, have lived within various types of groups or communities: families, groups of friends, churches, college campuses, neighborhoods, nations, and the worldwide or global community. The process of community-building brings with it both great rewards as well as challenges. Communities are inescapable, yet they place demands on us. In exploring this theme, we’ll examine the factors that strengthen and weaken community, and the challenges of community-building in a variety of settings. Along the way, we’ll consider both inspiring exemplars of community-building, as well as times and places where communities have fallen short—succumbing to segregation or racism or isolation or violence.

As a result of engaging the community theme within CCC, you will be able to:

1. Identify the defining characteristics of different kinds of communities, including those that are faith-based, academic, national, international, and professional;

2. Explore the dynamics of community, including how communities honor both difference and our common humanity;
3. Explore and identify factors that contribute to and undermine community;
4. Describe your role as a member of various communities;
5. Describe how authentic community can be created in contemporary society--locally, nationally, and internationally; and
6. Describe how to respond when conflict occurs between the expectations of various communal authorities (family, church, state, etc.) and the desire to pursue individual aspirations.

Theme Three: Vocation or Calling

Vocation refers to the call to be a Christian. Christian vocation requires us to consider not only what we do but also who we are. We're called to personal transformation by practicing spiritual disciplines and called to social transformation by addressing injustice in the world. Exploring this theme in CCC, you'll view some of the ways in which various people have served, look at where and how they've found their place in the world, look at vocation in various settings, continue the process of discerning your own vocation and place in the world, and look at some of the characteristics of Christian vocation—especially service, work, leadership, and reconciliation.

As a result of engaging the vocation theme within CCC, you will be able to:

1. Develop a working definition of Christian vocation that incorporates love of God and love of neighbor;
2. Describe the distinct call of the church within the world;
3. Consider how Christian vocation necessitates a balance between individual needs and needs of the larger society;
4. Understand that Christian vocation responds to both the needs of the local community and to the needs of the larger world;
5. Explore how living out Christian vocation involves discerning a vision grounded in a community of faith;
6. Recognize that Christian vocation is a life-long process, involving spiritual discipline and involvement in the community of faith; and
7. Consider what it means to live a life of Christian faith in a pluralist, global world.