The Higher Ways and Thoughts of God

Belhaven College Kickoff Banquet 2006
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Transcript

My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts

Isaiah 55:9
2006-07 Verse of the Year

The view from her second story window didn't change much during the 75 years she lived there. She was only 17 when her father built a new house – way down a gravel road somewhat out of town on Pinehurst Street. As the only daughter, her parents wanted her to have as her bedroom the most prized room in the new house – the only room with a cross breeze. And she lived, and wrote from that room until she died at the age of 92.

From her window, Pulitzer Prize winning author, Eudora Welty, looked out at Belhaven College every day of her life. And her writing desk and typewriter were positioned so that her view could be lost in the live oak trees that protect Preston hall from the changes of time.

Eudora wrote about the view from her window, saying, "Our family house and the Music Building of Belhaven College stood directly across the street from each other. Drifting out through the open windows of the practice rooms opposite and, floating across Pinehurst Street, in through the open windows of my upstairs room where I sat at the typewriter working, came the clear, searching, repeating sounds of piano practice." But her favorite writing season, in her unairconditioned room was summer, when the neighborhood was especially quiet because, as she said, "it was too hot to go forth." (That hasn't changed much either.)

When the Eudora Welty House was opened for special college tours last spring, we all saw her desk – now roped off to leave it preserved just as she used it. But wanting to see our campus just as Miss Welty viewed it all those years, I was already behind the ropes and leaning back in the chair before the curator reluctantly answered my request to do so – and I looked out at that unchanging view, and thanked God that He has created, preserved, and blessed this institution through all these years.

From that view, the College hasn't changed at all. Yes, you could see the green roof of the new student center, and if you leaned way forward, you could catch a corner of the Irby Complex we put up a decade ago. Piano practice has moved from Preston Hall into soundproof cubicles, women students no longer wear gloves, plus there are now men on campus, and the faculty parking lot has evolved from Model-Ts, to Hudsons, to Beatles, to Saturn's. But other than that, Eudora's view was the same year, after year, after year, after year.

And although from her window she couldn't see the enormous change we've made in facilities, programs, and mission, I doubt that Eudora Welty ever felt it as a stagnant view. The tour booklet says, "Eudora Welty kept her writing desk next to broad windows and she loved looking out, but didn't want her desk facing the window." As Eudora once wrote, "I like sitting sideways so the world is always with me."

Miss Welty's gift as a writer was her ability to have the world with her, and to see it in ever-fresh ways. She could see in relationships the struggle beneath the veneered surface of contentment. In objects and places she could see the beauty that was mixed in with the grim and dust. And she could see in the most simple of moments, the complexity of ideas that shape who people become.

While her view may have appeared limited from her second story window, Eudora Welty was among an elite handful great-American authors, because in what she saw, her thoughts were higher than the thoughts of others.

In college teaching, coaching, administration and service we too can feel like our view doesn't change. We look out our window of responsibility and it looks the same as it did the year before and the years before that – the same kickoff banquet, workshop, and orientation; the same syllabus, lecture, and test; the same twice-a-day practice, season, and roster; the same chapel, missions trip, and club; the same floor to vacuum, parking lot to patrol, or leak to fix; the same audition, rehearsal, and final-performance party.

College life can be terribly stagnant if we only see the obvious. And if we feel imprisoned by what appears to be an unchanging view, the best we can hope for in this new-year is to muster up just enough energy to do it one more time.

Yes, the nature of college life is that we must to do again most of the things we did last year and the year before – but like Eudora Welty, our thinking and our reach does not need to not be limited by the sameness of our view. Rather, it is the desire to reach for something greater than the routine that will allow us to impact the world far beyond the scope of our window.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote the words of the Lord, which challenge us to how to respond to the sameness of the view from our window. God said, "My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

God has so much more for us to do and understand than what we can see from the view of our unchanging window.

- He calls us to allow His ways to fill us – replacing the confines of our limited outlook.
- He calls us to capture His thoughts – displacing the shallowness of our human perspective.

And in seeking his higher thoughts and ways, He calls us to so embrace God's desires, so that our heart response mirrors His love and grace.

When we will seek after the mind of Christ – our view will be opened to ideas, opportunities, and service that are immeasurably higher than our best thoughts, and higher than our best ways. For you see, there is such a quantum leap between our best, and God's best, it's almost hard to picture the level at which God understands our world.

Maybe it helps to envision that contrast this way – we don't talk about it much, but even within this room, there are lots of different levels of thinking. We have faculty here who have written books that engage top scholars all around the world. We have computer specialists who, in five mouse clicks, can fix a problem that would take the rest of us a day to figure out. We have coaches that seem to be talking a foreign language when designing an offense. And, we maintenance technicians who can explain structural footings for a building in greater detail than Wynn Kenyon could untangle Aristotle's metaphysics.

Clearly, we all think at very different levels, but I heard a bit ago examples of the very lowest level of thinking in the entire world. Thinking that is so simple, it is not just stupid, but it is funny. That would be the thinking of those who write the instructions for products. Here are some real examples of this level of thinking written on packages:

Salt Shaker Wa rning: High in sodium
Toilet Plunger Do not use near power lines
Fruit Roll-Ups R emove plastic before eating
Zantac 75 Do not take if allergic to zantac
Rain Gauge S uitable for outdoor use
Airlines Peanuts In structions: open packet, eat nuts
500-piece puzzle Some assembly required

We hear those instructions and ask how anyone could anyone think at such simple levels, not to mention wondering how some people can read it and say, "oh, I'm glad they told me that!"

And in contrast to God's thoughts, that is about at the level of our best thinking. But in Christ, we are offered His thoughts to direct us, and His ways to guide us. And oh, what a difference it makes in the limited view of our window, when we seek the higher thoughts and ways of God.

God knew we could never understand his higher thoughts and ways if he didn't show us by example. So in Jesus, we have a pattern to follow – a life so complex and deep that our library could not hold all the books written about just His three years of active ministry on this earth. But teaching through parables and example, Jesus lived in divine higher thoughts and ways.

This summer I've been thinking through some of those higher thoughts and ways of God demonstrated through the life of Christ.

- Jesus had an unwavering purpose that could not be diluted by his enemies or his friends.
- Jesus had a spirit of service that completely dissolved status.
- Jesus lived at a depth of grace and forgiveness that doesn't make sense in our selfish emotions.
- Jesus operated with a schedule that was based on eternity, rather than on a to-do list, days, or years.
- Jesus was grounded in a bedrock of unchanging Godly truth.
- Jesus was a student of the scripture because He knew it really was the word of God.

As Christian College faculty, coaches, administrators, and all the folks it takes to serve this effort of education, we need to always be seeking after the higher thoughts and higher ways of God in everything we do. Jesus told his disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." There is no shortcut to the higher thoughts and higher ways of God.

Our best thinking, and the best ways of our specific expertise, is simple, immature, selfish, limiting, and, like the product instruction writers, even silly, in comparison to how God wants to live and work among us with his thoughts and ways.

And while we know that is true, do we really work that way every day? Too often I think we are satisfied building on the best thoughts and ways of higher education, or even the best practices of Christian higher education, rather than desiring God's higher thoughts and ways.

- Are the ways and thoughts of your teaching limited to following the pattern of the best faculty member you ever had in college?
- Are the ways and thoughts of your syllabus confined to trends of your discipline?
- Are the ways and thoughts of your coaching reflecting only the idealized pattern of Joe Patterno.
- Are the ways and thoughts of Harvard or the University of Phoenix setting our target for education?
- Are the ways and thoughts of how we use money limited only to the donor's or the bank's requirements?
- Are the ways and thoughts of the Federal Department of Education setting the boundaries for how we deal with students in their finances and behavior?

- Are the ways and thoughts of the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges our standard of success?

While I am convinced Belhaven College has at its core a desire to seek after God's thoughts and ways, I know we are all tempted to drift back to a limiting industry standard type level of thinking and doing. But this institution will only continue to cut a wide swath in building the Kingdom, and being a bright shinning beacon for Christ, if we are personally and collectively passionate every day, about desiring the thoughts and ways of God.

Let me recount a bit of God's leading for Belhaven in suggesting to you five steps that need to be followed if we are to look beyond our limits, and instead, be captured by the thoughts and ways of God:

1. RELEASING – To follow God's thoughts and ways, we have to let go of our own. The grip has to release, because we must have an open hand before we can hold something new. But when we are proud of the strengths we bring to the table, we hold so tightly to our defensive posture that the best God has for us stays out of reach.

   It has been nearly 20 years since the College made the hard decisions to bring our mission back to its evangelical roots. It was a time of turmoil as both board members and faculty resigned over the change, others had to be asked to leave, and a whole new way of thinking and doing had to be build into the fabric of the college. We are all forever indebted to the courage of Dan Fredericks, who was the architect of that dramatic change and absorbed the brunt of the aggressive resistance. But like prying a favorite toy from the hand of a strong willed child, eventually Belhaven College released the past, and had an open hand God could fill for the future.

2. BELIVING – If we are going to follow God's thoughts and ways, we have to believe a better way is possible. That sense of anticipation, expectation, or even just trusting hope, is the step God wants us to take if we are to believe Him for a new outcome. If we are not willing to believe a treasure greater than our own can be found, we are not going to take even the first step in the search.

   I don't think I'll ever forget that executive committee meeting of the Board of Trustees when we first talked about trying secure a major bond issue to jump-start a renewal of Belhaven. To imagine that any bank would loan a college in our shape $15 million was ludicrous at that time. But as the discussion developed, we moved to finding God's thoughts and ways by believing, if only reluctantly, that He could do something far beyond our reasoning. And eventually, God crafted the most convoluted banking coalition Jackson has ever seen, in order to get us out of the starting blocks.

3. LISTENING – Talking is not the path to finding God's ways and thoughts. Instead, we understand God's higher plan by listening: through God's Word given to us in the Bible, by hearing God's people with an open spirit, and by prayerful reflection that brings insights. When we have released and then believe, we will hear God's voice differently.

   I often wonder why God chose us to be a leader in racial reconciliation. There would be many other areas were we could do well, and have a lighter load to carry. But through the listening ear of our board and leadership faculty we have made our way down this remarkable road. There have been risks, traps, and obstacles all through the journey, and I know especially our African American faculty and staff continue to face some of those in their stand for Belhaven in the broader community. Our road must always be negotiated with an attentive ear to the thoughts and ways of God in every interaction, because although we've done well and become a national leader, it is only God's grace and your sensitivity that has kept us from having an incident that could set us back years.

4. WALKING – We serve a God of action, not of theory or contemplation. The God, who created this complex world, designed it to be a place of liveliness. And He doesn't want us to just study it, but expects us to respond with action to what we learn. When we do, He opens more opportunities. But when we don't move,

and just put our promises on an every accumulating pile of unfulfilled desires, we drift back into the best way we can muster on our own.

The day we opened our new student center is the moment we saw dramatic change in the spirit of this place. Those of us who were here at the time talked about wondering where all these students came from, because until then, they had been hiding away in their residence halls or commuting cars. But that student center was a bold step of courage. The College had never raised that much money before, even though two previous capital campaigns had promised a student center. We had never had in our history a gift over a million dollars, but we had four of them in that range for the building. And although it was months and months of uncertain days, we just kept moving, mostly with very small steps, toward that overwhelming goal.

5. TRUSTING – The purpose of seeking, finding, and following God's thinking and ways is to glorify Him, not for our own gain. Thus, when our desires are God honoring, He will reveal his way to us. But if we seek after Him, and after crossing the finish line, attempt to claim the credit for ourselves, the windows of heaven close. When God is glorified, the possibilities are beyond our imagination. Because when the task is so big that all will say in unison, "only God could have done it," then we are aligned with God's ways and thoughts. We must be people who are trusting that God's outcome is the very best way, and live in the assurance that He will carry us because He is honored.

   I believe the thing that makes me the happiest about Belhaven's progress through these years, is that we've gotten to the point now where the change is so dramatic, the mission is so intertwined with our core, and the reach is so broad, that people outside our campus realize God alone is leading this College. From news reports in the Clarion Ledger to The Weekly Planet there is no question this is a Christ-centered college. From the national Racial Harmony award to the evaluation of the Arts accrediting bodies, there is recognition that bold faith in Christ is at the center of all we do. From enthusiastic donors to even some skeptical alumni who write me from time to time, there is no longer uncertainty that God has put His hand on Belhaven College to do something remarkable.

Jesus taught us that we can hold in our hands the higher thoughts and ways of God. But this only happens when we have

- released the pride we have in our own ability
- believe God has something much more important for us than the best future we can envision,
- hear differently as we listen to the council of Godly people and His word,
- walk with anticipation to do something of significance,
- and trust that God will get the glory for the outcome.

When we look back a what God has done through Belhaven College during these years, the significant advances as a whole, or the life-changing one-on-one interactions of relationships with students and each other, have always come from these steps of releasing, believing, listening, walking, and trusting.

I never know exactly where God may be leading us next, because it seems there are always surprises, but tonight I want to share with you five important issues I see for the year ahead that will have lasting impact for us all. And to warn you, I'm not lobbing softballs tonight, but want to challenge us all to not settle for anything less than God's ways and thoughts.

But one important preface before I highlight these five topics -- I bring these issues to you always mindful that THE most significant work of Belhaven College is not done in the big sweeping programs or initiatives. But rather, our mission is most significantly implemented in the one-on-one interaction you have with students everyday, the teaching moments of a practice or game situation, the energy of a classroom experience, the care of an advising decision, the careful stewardship of resources and facilities that make you seem possessive over what God has given us, or the biblically grounded handling of a conflict which is part of living and working together. This is the most important work of Belhaven College.

So with that understanding, let me focus your attention on five specific challenges for the year ahead. And I would call us to approach these five topics following this same pattern of releasing, believing, listening, walking, and trusting:

First, I want to talk with the SACS Reaffirmation

There is nothing more important as the centerpiece for this year than our ten-year review by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. This is serious business and the stakes are high as we respond to the standards of SACS. But at the same time, our clear mission and methods do not always fit the square corners of accrediting evaluation.

We have had a wonderful team guiding us through this significant SACS progress, and we are all indebted to both their tireless efforts and expertise. And I'm sure many of you have spent considerable time developing and writing sections of our compliance report, which will be delivered to Atlanta in early September – or maybe you didn't fully realize that your Focus Unit Audits, your Goals and Objectives statements, or your Annual Outcome Assessments, are all part of the SACS report.

But the question I want to challenge you with is this: what did God teach you so far through this evaluation progress in preparation for SACS? If you say not much – you didn't do it right. You didn't go into the process releasing enough of your way, or listening enough to the council of others to be open to what might be improved.

If you say, I did learn some things, but then as you look at the year ahead, you realize that completing your Annual Assessment Outcomes has not changed anything about how you plan to do your job this year, you might need to rethink how you walk with what you learned.

But to make it an even more strenuous project, I would ask this – was the SACS standards you were seeing to meet, your minimum or the maximum? I sure hope we could do much better than teaching, mentoring, and serving as required by SACS in every college of the south. That is just the starting point; if we are trusting God is to be honored by what we do.

But along with the compliance report we've nearly finished, we now have ahead of us two steps where we can excel. One is in further implementation of what we've learned through the SACS evaluation – so just when you were ready to close up the Focus Unit Reports of your SACS file, we all need to get it out again and drill deeper. Between now and when the evaluation team comes in April, we have the opportunity to lift the level of what we do even further.

And then secondly, the Quality Enhancement Project required by SACS will begin in a few weeks. This campus wide effort to study and improve how we prepare students to understand the essential aspects of the biblical worldview, and to develop and articulate their own worldview in their careers and relationships, is not a project to cross off your to-do list, so we can get on to the real work – it is the real work. IF we can take advantage of this moment, we can let God use this process to help define a new standard for measuring and focusing Christ-centered higher education.

As you work with this SACS and QEP process this year, I hope you will looking to see if you have released your resistance to evaluation. Do you believe God could teach you something through the SACS process? To gain God's desires for your calling, how can the evaluation process of SACS change the things you do in a significant way? And finally, are you trusting and praying that God would be honored through this reaffirmation process?

But then one more step, and this is the toughest challenge of the SACS process.

A recent focus in business thinking is to move beyond branding to what is called Business Essence. For example, Nike started as a shoe company that slowly added on other products. But Nike has gone beyond the branding of that swoosh, so that it no longer represent a specific product, but rather it communicates an idea. What Nike would

define as their essence – *accomplishment*. So whether it is a commercial with Tiger Woods, a runner in inner city, or a special needs child, Nike wants us to think *accomplishment* when we hear their name.

And although it is exceptionally hard to describe, at Belhaven College we have an essence that goes far beyond our brand, and it is an essence that higher education desperately needs.

Maybe the easiest way to understand our essence is to look at the contrast to what we are all about. In a new book authored by the former Dean of Harvard University, he says, "Harvard has lost, indeed willingly surrendered, its moral authority to shape the souls of its students. ... Harvard articulates no ideas of what it means to be a good person."

And then he goes on to summarize American higher education this way, "There is too little accountability at most schools. ... Trustees often abdicate their responsibilities, while College presidents have become glorified fund-raisers. Most professors are narrowly educated experts with little experience outside academia and are poorly equipped to help college students sort out their lives. ... Meanwhile professors teach what they want to teach based on their own interests, not on the needs of their students."

Belhaven's essence is at the complete opposite end of the spectrum from Harvard. And maybe this year God will give us an insight for best capturing in a word our essence, but as a starting point, I like thinking about the essence of Belhaven College as being – purposeful.

- We are purposeful because we teach from biblical worldview grounded in timeless Truth.
- We our purposeful because we prepare, and then challenge our students to a lifetime of meaningful service.
- We are purposeful because we are a leader for the Church in the Arts, missions, curriculum, business ethics, and racial reconciliation.
- We are purposeful because we develop God honoring relationships in the classroom, athletic field, or residence hall.
- We are purposeful because this is a calling, not a job.
- We are purposeful because we are about God's thoughts and ways.

But no matter how we define our essence, it is going to take the higher thoughts and ways of God for us to communicate that big idea to the SACS evaluators. But more importantly, it will take our unrelenting desire for God's higher thoughts and ways, if we are to genuinely incorporate that essence into every aspect of what we do.

Second, I want to talk with you about Virtual Education

This is not the wave of the future, but it is the current tide of higher education. But unfortunately, like when adult program started 20 years ago, too many schools are after online students primarily as a new revenue source, rather than being driven by mission.

I'm pleased to tell you that though a long process that had us painfully release our plans and find God's, Belhaven College is ready to launch our virtual education program. And it is mission driven to the core.

This isn't our first run at the virtual education world. We had plans to be an early adopter years ago, and Dan Fredericks and I made too many trips to Orlando to partner with a for-profit company in this venture. And God seemed to be opening all the doors for us to move ahead.

Everything was smooth and was falling into place for us to ride the wave of the dot-com stock market and of those who were making basketfuls of money with the first programs.

But days before we were to sign the contract, the tech stock bubble burst, the investors pulled way back, and our plans went into the trash. In those years following, the largest universities in America lost millions of dollars with their online degrees, because students could not sustain a totally self-guided program.

Slowly we began to find our way back into the online education world as the technology caught up with the transforming interaction we want between faculty and students at Belhaven College.

And so our virtual education team and faculty have develop a creative model that combines online class meetings, with self-directed lectures from our faculty, with live student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions, along with video and audio presentations, as well as the traditional load of reading and projects.

Though virtual education, we can reach scores more students than could ever come to one of our campuses.

And just to confirm God's direction, last December, at about the same time we were blindsided by the an out of the blue warning from SACS, which I believe was about as appropriate as using a shotgun to kill a mosquito, a letter arrived from that same accrediting body, giving us approval to offer full online degrees for not only the Associates and Bachelors level, but for our Masters programs as well.

God desires for Belhaven College to have a quality online educational product, driven by mission motives, and free from external partnership management, is so much better than our original intention online.

As we move into this new arena, we need to be releasing our worn path of education delivery, believing God will allow us to serve students we'd never reach otherwise, listening to each other as we find the best ways of building this model, walking with boldness even when it seems unsure, and trusting that God will be glorified as we take the essence of Belhaven College to a much broader constituency of students all across America and around the world.

Third, I want to talk with you about Bailey Magnet School, which, for those of you who are new, is the huge high school on State Street across from our Center for the Arts

This is a fun project to watch – even though I really haven't got the foggiest idea where it is going to come out.

There was a time when I used to spend sleepless nights worried about something like this. I used to work every angle at a fevered pitch, and lay out every what-if scenario. But I couldn't be more relaxed, because enough years down the path, does teach us to look back with a higher level of trust in God's providence and grace.

I think I still know which levers to pull at which time as God directs, but it is wonderful to rest in the assurance that the Lord will guide the discussions about us acquiring this 100,000 square foot Jackson landmark.

- I've seen God give us a Center for the Arts we never imagined when we couldn't begin to afford to build one – and then, when we still didn't have enough space for the Arts, he gave us a second building with one gift.

- I've seen God put together a long-term deal with the City of Jackson for us to have a football stadium, and the funds raised for artificial turf – and then the Lord even helped us to get a half-million from the government for the school district to pay for their part of the deal.

- I've seen God pull together seven banks in Jackson that hardly got along, to do a deal with us that somehow survived the politics and infighting of that coalition – and then a few years later to build us to such financial strengths that we could, as the commercial says, "have banks compete" for our business.

- I've seen our employees more than double during past decade, and we still have finished the past seven years in the black, including the year just finished when literally the sky did fall. And with care of our loaves and fish, have been the only school in Mississippi to give a raise every year for 11 years.

- I've seen us develop a solid partnership with the Institute for Professional Development that allowed us to broaden our reach, now on four campuses, and gives us provision to have right of first refusal for every third city where they start a new program.

That list could go on and on, and so when it comes to the Bailey Magnet School option, it is just going to be fascinating to see what God has in mind.

- It is interesting to me, that if the Lord hadn't opened the door for us to buy the funeral home on Riverside Drive at a liquidation price, we couldn't meet the parking codes if we took over Bailey. And of course, we've already put together a major deal that gives us a level of ownership in the football stadium.

- It is interesting that the number of classrooms in that Bailey facility would meet out needs for year to come. And that while Katrina knocked out our science building campaign, along comes this facility that could save us millions of dollars from building science labs from scratch. Bailey is just what we need to broaden our athletic program as well as our music program, and provide a conference center that would fit perfectly our desire to be a center of non-traditional learning among the Church – and support our online program with a technologically advanced facility.

- And it is interesting that while many organizations have said they wanted the building, no one except us has come forward with a package of benefits for the city that would meet the political demands of what is a very emotional decision for some.

I believe God calls us to using our full efforts, and we are doing everything possible to go through the doors that God is gently opening. So we are <u>walking</u>, but we started with <u>releasing</u>, <u>believing</u>, and <u>listening</u>.

And if this wonderful facility comes our way, we will rejoice. And if it doesn't we'll also rejoice. Because either way, we can be <u>trusting</u> in God's higher thoughts and ways to orchestrate the outcome – and in that result we can have confidence that God will be glorified.

<u>4) Admissions</u>

I'm very proud of our admissions team. They are a dedicated group of folks who have done a wonderful job with quality, integrity, and enthusiasm. And I'm deeply thankful for our coaches, who do a ton of recruiting as part of their responsibilities, and have excelled in hitting all their targets. In fact, the last two first-time freshman classes have been the largest in the history of the school – and if our projections hold, we will hit a new record for this fall also.

And while we have made some solid progress, I really believe that the Lord has much more in store for us, and God is leading us in a new direction that will turn this steady growth into incremental leaps forward.

Through a God ordained series of events, I met this spring a consultant unlike any other I've ever seen in admissions, all the way back to when I was personally responsible for admissions 25 years ago. We invited them to campus to meet with our admissions and financial aid folks, and we all came from that discussion believing we can make some dramatic changes in new student recruiting.

Miller/Cooke is a small firm of three people who work with only a handful of schools every year. Their desire is not to have long-term clients, but to understand us, redirect us, train us, and then get out of the way. And they have never had a client who has not succeeded or one who has needed repeat business.

These folks have a new and different paradigm for marketing, recruiting, and financial aid packaging, and to combine their insights, with our well skilled team we are on a new trajectory for admissions.

With the implementation of this new model, we're not working harder, for that would be impossible, but we are working smarter. For instance, from their analysis, the consultants discovered that in all the college fair travel we did last year, we only yielded 11 students. But every college sends a recruiter to every college fair, so we were just following the standard practice. We now have a very different ways we can spend those travel dollars and time.

Like all colleges, we have always sent letters from the admissions office to nearly every student across the Southern states. But research show that most of those letters were never opened unless a prospective student was already familiar with Belhaven.

Instead, this year we have 85,000 letters going to students in select pockets all over the country based on their local options for Christian higher education and the cost of education in their region. But those letters are not coming directly from us. Instead they are going on our behalf, from the President of the Christian Film and Television Commission and from the Director of the Billy Graham Center. They will get opened.

Starting for the class of fall 2007, we have retooled our financial aid structure to put more focus on building a student-body that hovers in the 22 to 26 ACT range, which will lift the lower end of our academic spectrum so that our faculty are not required to reduce their teaching to the level needed for the marginally equipped students. This should be a welcome change academically and as it relates to retention and student satisfaction, even though focusing the award dollars in this 50 to 75th percentile of ACT scoring students, will also keep us from offering some of the mega-scholarships we have in the past to that handful very high end students.

From the experience of other schools, we expect our initial inquiries will be followed up with 45,000 phone calls – calls made from a professional admissions firm off campus who will authorized to pre-award academic grants to prospective students. This will free up our admissions team to focus on the campus visit, at which time we can further enhance a prospective student's financial aid with special interest grants, and a large amount of need based money. All the while, our budget for financial aid will not increase overall.

The level of training we have heaped on our admissions team is enormous, and their attention to detail is encouraging. We have dramatically streamlined the application process, are now requiring a tuition deposit of both new and returning students, have simplified our costs into one tuition number, rather than it broken out by tuition and fees, and because we expect residence hall space to be at a premium, we will eliminate the reduction in the scholarship of students who move off campus.

Following this new pattern, the experts anticipate that our campus visits will dramatically increase this fall, and they feel confident that in the next four years, we should be able to grow our traditional full time enrollment about 40% to a stable 1,300 students. And if that happens, God will be honored – and we will all be much happier!

Most of us see admissions is someone else's job – but it is really not, because all the admissions team and coaches can do is to get prospective students here, and the rest of us have to deliver what we promise. So here is a more specific way in which you need to be involved in this effort.

The research of our consultants tells us that there are too many different pre-conceived images of Belhaven. And Susanne Sullivan is leading her team in some great training to assure we have a much more consistent message. But that concern goes way beyond marketing, and goes to the core of what we do every day.

Let me be specific:

The big firm of Noel-Levitz does an annual Student Satisfaction Survey measuring our student's responses in contrast to higher education in general and to the other member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

And in that survey, we don't look enough different from the national norms. All we say we want to be is not always getting lived out when student's expectations are measured against their satisfaction.

I'm going to have tomorrow morning a copy of the summary report from this study for you, and it may be insightful as we spend the day looking at our Top 40 Best Christian Workplace findings with Al Lopus.

Parts of the report are very encouraging, namely students reported their satisfaction levels were high on some very key measures. But there were some tough criticisms too, and to address these items, it is going to take a desire to find God's thoughts and ways, and do some serious releasing, believing, listening, walking, and trusting.

Finally, I want to talk with you about At Risk Students

If there was one thing that frustrates me we can't get a better handle on, it is the at risk student – because yesterday's poorly prepared and poorly motivated student is becoming today's normal student.

When I mention "at risk students" most of us assume that means remedial education – and for some students it might. We can't roll back the tide of the erosion of most high school education, and so we can either turn our back on those students, accept them and wait for them to drop out, or find a better way to make them successful.

But for many of our students, the problem is not academic preparation, or IQ, but it is clarity of purpose for their future, and the motivation to be successful. Other students have emotional, financial, or family stresses that block them from achieving in our classrooms. And while the happy faces of expectation will greet us this week, if the burning passion for God's calling in not yet on fire in their heart, they will struggle at best, and fail at worst.

I know the great things our faculty can do with students who need support, guidance, attention, and motivation, and even at the awards convocation this past spring, you showed off a few of those students. I know what our coaches can do to mentor and turn a student's life around when they invest in them. I know what our student life team does in helping students work through some very serious and complex personal issues.

But maybe it is because so many more students fall into that "at risk" group, either because of academics, socially, or home issues, that while one of us is propping up a student on one side, others don't know they need to be helping to hold up the other side. I've observed that when we get all sides working among the faculty, student life, athletics, and even the business office, we can help nearly anyone get on track. But too often, the process is so messy, that we are unsure how to help.

The reality of the problem haunts me. Because, of every three students that drop out, one will ever return to college and the other still stop out for at least a year. Both will struggle for a long time to overcome the sense of failure, not to mention the $10,000 bill they will need to pay off before they can even go to a community college.

I believe we serve a God who of thoughts and ways who could teach us how to be more effective with these students.

I'd wish there was an easy answer to this one, but there is not. But lives and futures are at stake and we need to strengthen our imperfect efforts, and we need to be seeking God's higher thoughts and ways in how to help these students.

I want to offer to you a few of suggestions that I hope we can drill down further this year.

First, to the faculty: there is some remarkable new work being done by Dr. Carol Twigg that is showing dramatic changes in the success of under-prepared students. Although looking at major universities rather than schools like ours, she and her research team have identified the key courses where students are failing, and have developed a more effective way of teaching those courses.

I will have a paper from her I'll distribute at the faculty workshop in which she advocates total redesign of key courses to include: active learning structures, computer-based learning resources. mastery learning rather than traditional testing. systems for on-demand help, and alternative tutoring.

This is not a model for us to take hook-line-and-sinker, but there are portions of it that are worthy of consideration as you structure your classes, and in doing so, it will leave your precious time more available for the higher end learning, rather than the catch-up work.

I believe we have marvelous classroom experiences on the whole, but with the shifts in student learning styles and the growing number of at risk students, I pray you would take a deep breath and study her work in a spirit of releasing, believing, listening, walking, and trusting.

The second suggestion I have is for the faculty and all the rest of us too: we need to turn up the level of penetrating mentoring. The costs are too heavy in the lives of these students who don't make it, as well as the ones who do make it, but are not being pushed to fulfill their potential.

We need to have the courage to ask harder questions. We need to not hint, but be more forthright in giving direction. We need to not just hope and pray, but intrude and push – or as students would say, you just have to get in their face.

I'm extremely proud of what our coaches did last year to address the language issue with some of our athletes who have grown up in a sports culture where foul language is expected. And I'm glad they are not letting up this year, because you are building life long lifestyle patterns that will serve our students forever.

Expecting responsibility-building characteristics in our students is vital for their success, and so we also need to be aggressive in our classroom attendance policy, which is consistently shown as the single most important factor in college level academic success.

And now, with our new computer system in place, we can help to assure that all students are learning the accountability they are going to need on the job the day after graduation. So faculty, you need to not just take the roll and hand it off to a coach or intervention counselor, but swallow hard, and challenge students who are not in class to be good stewards of their life.

We need to not turn our backs on the tough things because we are fearful of offending. If we don't help students to develop expectations for a quality life, where are they going to learn it? And there is nothing more rewarding than to help a student untangle the mess, and put them on a new path where God can use them for the purpose He created that person.

This morning early I hosted the Resident Assistants and Directors for breakfast as I do every year. And after sharing some of the plans for the year, I gave them an opportunity to ask questions about anything they wanted to talk about. Now, through the years, I've done scores of Q&A sessions with student groups and student forums and had about every question you could imagine, but this morning I got a question I've never been asked – but I think it is the most important question students are most wanting answered by me, and by each of you.

The question wasn't the normal inquiry about buildings, programs, costs, procedures, parking or food service – she just asked, "Do you love us?"

To answer the deepest question of our students, "do you love us," we need to be releasing, believing, listening, walking, and trusting in penetrating mentoring that will be life transforming for students. I am convinced that it is demanded from us if God is to entrust these students to us. It will take courage, it will be uncomfortable at times, and it will be messy. But it is just the kind of way Jesus taught that ministry should be.

Conclusion

As we look at these five priorities before us this year, I pray we will resist the inclination to tackle them with our best ideas, or the best practices of higher education. But instead, we will seek after Gods thoughts and ways, and say with the Psalmist, "I am but a foreigner here on earth; I need the guidance of your commands." (Psalm 119:19)

The pattern of releasing, believing, listening, walking, and trusting has guided Belhaven College through these past years in wonderful ways and God has blessed us far beyond anyone's greatest expectation. And as long as we remain humble before God and live in total dependence on Christ, we will continue to enjoy His thoughts and His ways.

One of the great authors Eudora Welty used to read when she lived across the street was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who captured the essence of this relationship with God when she wrote in The Rhyme of the Duchess, "And I smiled to think God's greatness flowed around our incompleteness. Round our restlessness His rest."

As we start this school year, let's affirm our commitment together, and individually, to seek after God's desires for Belhaven College, and never settle for the world's best thinking and ways.

The hopelessness of the world's best, gripped me in a poignant email that circled the Internet a few years ago, which I just never could delete. It came up on my screen this way:

> The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy it less.
>
> We have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, but less time. We have more degrees, but less sense; more knowledge, but less judgment; more experts, but more problems; more medicine, but less wellness.
>
> We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We've learned how to make a living, but not a life; We've added years to life, not life to years.
>
> We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor. We've conquered outer space, but not inner space. We've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul. We've split the atom, but not our prejudice. We have higher incomes, but lower morals. We've become long on quantity, but short on quality.
>
> These are the times of tall men and short character; steep profits and shallow relationships. These are the times of world peace, but domestic warfare; more leisure, but less fun; more kinds of food, but less nutrition.
>
> These are days of two incomes, but more divorce; of fancier houses, but broken homes. It is a time when there is much in the show window and nothing in the stockroom; a time when technology can bring this letter to you, and a time when you can choose either to make a difference, or to just hit delete...

Our neighbor Eudora Welty said, "I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within." And she had it partly right, for daring is not defined by the scope of the view from a Pinehurst Street window, but it starts when we are willing to break free from the pattern of the world's best ideas and systems, and find God's higher thoughts and ways.

I pray we will each begin this new year with a renewed commitment to approach every project, every program, and every person, with a desire to let God show us how His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts.

I'd invite you to stand together and pray a prayer of commitment for this school year. Our friend and board member, Dolphus Weary, the president of Mission Mississippi, is going to pray for us, and then Dr. Chris Shelt will lead us in what has become the traditional conclusion of this evening, singing together, Bless Be the Tie that Binds.