



Michigan Christian Study Center: A Strategic Vision

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1. The strategic opportunity for Christian Study Centers

a. The crisis of meaning and purpose in modern secular higher education.

The university is one of the great achievements of western civilization. Originating in Medieval Europe, its purpose was to unite scholars and diverse fields of study into a universal community of truth-seekers—a vision encapsulated in the etymology of the word “university.” The English settlers of the North American colonies brought the British academic tradition with them, resulting in Harvard, Yale, and eventually several other “Ivy League” colleges. By the 20th century, American research universities, grafting German scholarly models onto the British college tradition, became world leaders in both in their scale and the quality of scholarly achievements.

Despite their considerable size and cultural influence, however, universities in the 21st century are experiencing a crisis of meaning and identity. National surveys reveal a declining confidence in higher education as a public good. Without a foundation rooted in a transcendent source of truth, universities have become ideologically fragmented. Without a higher purpose for education, professors retreat into specialized research and students focus their efforts on academic achievements that will launch them into lucrative careers. Scholars such as Richard Arum (*Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*), William Deresiewicz (*Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of American Youth and the Way to a Meaningful Life*), and George Marsden (*The Soul of the American University Revisited: From Protestant to Postsecular*) have described ways in which the modern university suffers from a lack of common vision of the good.

b. The financial and cultural challenges of private Christian colleges and universities

Meanwhile, private Christian colleges and universities, many of which were established in reaction to the secularization of public universities, face significant challenges of their own. As Jon McGee (*Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education*) and others have shown, declining populations of high school graduates and a growing consumerist mentality have created financial challenges for many independent colleges. Moreover, as modern political and academic culture grows increasingly secular, institutions with faith commitments may face the prospect of increasing threats to accreditation and government funding. For many such institutions, survival, not flourishing, is the highest priority.

c. The crisis in the American church in faithfully and wisely relating to a politicized, polarized society.

Furthermore, the American church is beset by internal polarization and a difficulty in relating in a nuanced and redemptive way to a pluralistic society. Evangelical scholar Joel Carpenter has noted that while Christians over the past half-century have made significant progress in advancing a Christian scholarly voice in the secular academy, the impact of evangelical scholarship on the American church has been minimal. The result, for a significant portion of conservative evangelicalism, has been an overly-simplistic and antagonistic stance toward modern pluralistic society. Many churches and denominations find themselves increasingly divided between the extremes of political conservatism and social progressivism.

- d. *The Christian Study Center: A new form of Christian higher education, embedded in a world-class university, drawing energy from and invigorating that university, for the benefit of the university, the church, and the world.*

The opportunity is ripe, therefore, for a new model of Christian higher education, embedded in a world-class university, drawing energy from and enlivening that university, while also modeling to the American church what it means to effectively engage modern culture. In recent decades, Christian Study Centers have emerged at many top universities in America. They are a diverse movement, and they sponsor a variety of activities such as social gatherings, academic courses, faculty forums, scholarly projects, internships, mentorships, and public lectures. At its heart, however, a Christian Study Center is not a set of programs but rather a new form of *Christian academic community* embedded within a premier university where relationships can flourish among those who seek to take the life of faith and the life of the mind seriously.

In the fall of 2022, the University of Michigan Christian Study Center, taking root in one of the world's great universities, joined this growing movement. The Michigan Christian Study Center views the university community as a partner in the work of education and seeks to practice what James Davison Hunter calls a "faithful presence" in modern academic culture. In seeking to help form students so that they might be a blessing to the world, and in seeking to encourage students in the disciplined and joyful pursuit of the truth, it will join with the University in its core mission. Moreover, it will fill a gap in the university community by offering a home where students, faculty, and staff are welcomed and encouraged to encounter the truth that we know in Christ—in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

2. The uniqueness of a Christian Study Center, *vis a vis* campus ministries

The Michigan Christian Study Center views campus ministry groups as partners and teachers in Christian formation. We seek to create a hub where ministries can unite around the common goals of promoting a vibrant Christian presence that helps to foster a flourishing university. This will involve hosting speakers together, hosting regular campus ministry strategy and prayer sessions, and providing spaces where students and campus ministers can meet. Unlike campus ministries and church congregations, we do not aim to serve as a primary source of fellowship, Bible study, or worship. Instead, we want to complement these efforts and to encourage students' ongoing involvement with campus ministries and local churches.

Furthermore, despite all the great work that the existing campus ministries and churches do at the University of Michigan, there is not enough effort dedicated specifically to integrating faith and academics. While the Christian community has invested heavily in the spiritual formation of students, relatively little attention is paid to how Christianity should contribute to the academic life of the university. Or, to connect our work to the University of Michigan's mission statement, many campus ministries admirably promote the second part of the mission statement ("developing leaders and citizens"), but devote little attention to the first part ("creating, communicating, and applying knowledge, art, and academic values").*

In addition, there is no particular *location* dedicated to the discussion and pursuit of Christian truth. Michigan students have long related the truth of their pursuits to Christ, but they have not necessarily known the hospitality of a home that provides a true sense of belonging, or the encouragement of faculty and staff Christian mentors in their fields. As a place-based Christian learning community within the university, the Michigan Christian Study Center seeks to strengthen and support the university in fulfilling its mission.

Finally, the Christian Study Center views the *university itself*—not just its individual members—as a focus of its redemptive work. Applying the insights of Yuval Levin's *A Time to Build: How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*, we are committed to the renewal of public universities such as University of Michigan as one important way to heal and rebuild the social fabric. We seek to model civil, respectful dialogue, even between those with deep disagreements, because discussion and debate are foundational to truth-seeking. Furthermore, we seek to call members of the community back to an understanding of teaching, learning, creative work, and scholarship as God intended it to be: an *intrinsic* good that brings joy to the creature and glorifies the Creator of all truth. In the frenetic culture of the

modern research university, we will model an approach to learning that balances the quest for achievement with the virtues of rest and gratitude. In all these ways, we will support the University of Michigan in better fulfilling what it has always sought to be: “the leaders and best.”

3. Engaging the university in three primary spheres.

The Michigan Christian Study Center exists to enrich and inform the academic, cultural, and spiritual life of the university community through the resources of the Christian faith, for the benefit of the university, the church, and the world. Though still in its formative stage, when fully developed, it will foster redemptive academic work within the university in three primary spheres:

- a. Educating and forming **students** as Christ-followers who love God with mind and heart through activities such as,
 - i. A physical gathering space for study, reflection, and community
 - ii. Orientation Week activities
 - iii. Mentoring by Christian faculty, staff, and alumni
 - iv. A sequence of courses in biblical and theological foundations and Christian vocation
 - v. Christian semester abroad opportunities
 - vi. Book discussion groups
 - vii. Alumni networking for graduates
- b. Supporting Christian **faculty, staff, and alumni** through activities such as,
 - i. Workshops and discussions on integrating faith and academic life
 - ii. Small group dinners to connect Christian professors across the various schools and departments
 - iii. Student mentoring opportunities
 - iv. Book discussions
 - v. Visiting scholars
 - vi. Public lectures and events
- c. Promoting the flourishing of the **university community** through activities such as,
 - i. Supporting campus ministries and promoting their collaboration
 - ii. Sponsoring vigorous, interdisciplinary, civil conversations around the big questions of life
 - iii. Sponsoring events and activities that explore the purpose of education and the modern university
 - iv. Modeling a love for learning as intrinsically good and lived out in a healthy rhythm of work and rest
 - v. Sponsoring and displaying works of art and the imagination that beautify the university campus

In the process, we hope that our work will benefit the American church by presenting a faithful, winsome Christian witness in a pluralistic setting—a “confident pluralism” in the words of John Inazu—as a model to the church of how to thoughtfully engage a secular, pluralist society.

Conclusion

The University of Michigan is one of the world’s great academic institutions, and its influence is felt throughout society. A thriving Christian Study Center in the heart of the university will benefit the members of the community and enable the university itself to better fulfill its mission. There has never been a greater need for the wisdom and ways of Christ to take root in leading universities such as Michigan; nor has there ever been a greater need for Christians to serve the members of such institutions with love, working with them to advance the common good through the work of the academy.

* “The mission of the University of Michigan is to serve the people of Michigan and the world through preeminence in creating, communicating, preserving and applying knowledge, art, and academic values, and in developing leaders and citizens who will challenge the present and enrich the future.”