

The Curriculum of Northwestern College:
Its Foundation and Defense

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The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in its 1993 convention voted to open a new amalgamated college for the training of its called workers. One of the results of this decision is that the 1994-95 school year of Northwestern College, its 130th year of existence, will also be its last. Although undergraduate training for the pastoral ministry will continue on the new campus in New Ulm, Minnesota, the college itself will cease to exist. Most of its faculty, and hopefully all of its returning students, will resume their duties at the new location in the fall of 1995.

The Synod, and the Boards involved, are resolved to make sure that the preparation of students for the pastoral ministry is not interrupted. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility of some small changes due to readjustments to the newly created institution. It is therefore good at this point to look closely at the past of Northwestern College, to remember its original purpose and to recognize the efforts made to maintain its integrity as a feeder school for our Seminary. This paper will focus on the history of the curriculum of Northwestern College over the one hundred and thirty years in which the Lord has blessed it.

THE EARLY YEARS (1864-1869)

The earliest years of Northwestern were characterized by their rockiness. The founders of the new college, its Board of Trustees, and the Synod itself did not agree on the purpose of the school or the procedure to be used in education. It was obvious that extra years of education were needed to prepare young men interested in attending the newly established seminary. This could be carried out well by the college, and many properly saw this as its primary purpose. There were, however, others who had grander visions for the school. This can be seen in the original announcement made in the very first issue (September 1) of the Gemeinde-Blatt:

The aim which the Board of Trustees proposes for this institution is to fit the scholars entrusted to them for every higher walk of life by comprehensive and thorough instruction. Their interest is to organize and govern the institution so that it may rank with the best institutes of this country in respect to educational efficiency.¹

These high ambitions were more than shared by Northwestern's first president, Adam Martin, who was brought in from Hartwick College in New York. It was his idea to call the new school a university, although the founders decided to abandon the lofty-sounding "Wisconsin University" in favor of "Northwestern University." Martin wanted the college to prepare young men for any possible profession. To carry out this plan, Martin would model Northwestern after the American universities which were sprouting up everywhere at that time. In defense of his plan he told the Synod convention of 1866,

A college in the American sense of the word is an institution for a so-called higher education. It is neither a European university nor a German *Gymnasium*, but a peculiarly American scholastic institution that partakes somewhat of both of them but concerns itself with the needs of practical life, in that it aims at a higher education that is closely fitted to the local conditions in our land, including all that which this requires, and excluding all that which is foreign to it....The church has always had the say in educational matters, and in this country, too, that denomination of the church will become best known, and put its peculiar stamp on the life of the people, that does most in the way of educating the prominent men of the land.²

Still Martin recognized that a priority of the college was in preparing men for the ministry: "However, the highest and holiest interest of our church in the possession of a college is the need of servants of the Gospel. How many of our best, ablest, and most highly trained minds have to suffer under the obvious impression that they are strangers in a strange land!"³ Note that already at this point it was seen to be wise to give our future pastors a liberal arts training.

Unfortunately, however, Martin placed too much emphasis on the idea of an American college. He was not content with just a school for preparing pastoral students, he wanted to train young Christians for any calling. To him, the college should cater to the majority of students on campus. As a result of this way of thinking, Martin pushed the curriculum in a direction which made it difficult for the college to fulfill its primary purpose. For instance, most of the classes were offered in English only. This was prohibitive to the majority of those studying for the ministry, young men who came from German-speaking farms. In 1867

the Board of Trustees decided on their list of obligatory courses. This list included world history, geography, German, and English grammar. The English students could be excused from the German, but the opposite was not true.⁴

The other problem at the time which affected the curriculum for some years was financial. In order to drum up support for his idea of moving Northwestern University to Milwaukee, Martin proposed that the Board sell scholarships. A donation of \$100 would pay for four years' tuition for one student. A gift of \$500 would bring the donor a "hereditary, negotiable and perpetual right of free instruction for one student."⁵ The money was collected, but Northwestern was then obligated to provide the type of education that had been promised to the purchasers. This would limit changes to the curriculum in later years.

The Ernst Years

The differences between Adam Martin and the German speaking Board of Trustees became more and more apparent. Martin objected to the insistence of the Board that he translate the classics into German in his classes. He still held to his dream of turning Northwestern into an American college, a dream not shared by many in the synod. The immigrating Germans of the synod were not interested in American educational ideals; they were only willing to fund the college if it was to be used to prepare pastoral students.

Meanwhile, the synod was also becoming more sure of its doctrinal stance at this time. Martin did not approve of this confessional trend, and he threatened to leave the synod. He eventually did, and in 1869 synod president Bading announced to the Board that Martin had been discharged for inability to teach. It was time for change at Northwestern.

Reorganization

Professor Lewis Thompson was temporarily given the duties of president after the departure of Martin. He began the work of reorganizing the college along the lines wanted by the Board. He was greatly assisted already at this point by his ^{SUCCESSOR} predecessor, Professor Augustus Ernst. Thompson came from a Norwegian family and could speak very little German, so Ernst became the faculty representative in the matter of the curriculum revision.

Major changes were in store for the young college. German became the favored language of instruction. In fact, starting in 1870, for over forty years all classes were taught in German except for English, mathematics, science and American History.⁶

The change to German was very understandable. Not only did this accommodate the majority of the students, and aid in preparing men for preaching in German congregations, it reflected the other great change of the institution in that year.

Northwestern University would no longer follow the model of the American colleges but rather the example of the German Gymnasium. This would comprise seven years of education -- the years between

elementary school and the seminary. President Toppe wrote in his essay presented to the 1965 synod convention,

Early in its history Northwestern College was given its raison d'etre and supplied blueprints for its educational program. It was to supply pastors for the synod that established and maintained it; it was to make its graduate pastors-to-be proficient in languages, particularly in the biblical languages; and its format was to be that of the German "Gymnasium."⁷

The Gymnasium was the perfect system for what the synod wanted its school to accomplish. The college was to prepare men for the higher learning of the seminary. The wide range of subjects in the German Gymnasium would help our pastors to be well-rounded. The emphasis on languages was perfect for producing men who knew how to study the Bible as it was originally written. The strong background in history trained our men to see God at work in the world around them. The Gymnasium program turned out young men who knew how to think.

Because of the many scholarships handed out previously which needed to be recognized, Ernst recommended in 1870 to the synod that it maintain a separate Academy (English high school) and an English college. The catalog for the year 1871 could then say:

Northwestern University comprises three departments: a German-English Obergymnasium (College), a German-English Untergymnasium (Preparatory Department), and an English Academy (Normal and Scientific Department). The Gymnasium aims to communicate to its students a thorough general education that will fit them for the pursuit of the highest professions. The ancient classical languages, as the exponents and conveyers of the highest culture of the human mind, are especially fostered in this department, with due attention also to the exact sciences (mathematics and natural sciences).⁸

Northwestern under Ernst

Once the major reorganization was in place, Northwestern was in a better position to fulfill its primary purpose. Ernst worked hard to turn the school into what he called a "workshop of the Holy Spirit."

The curriculum was a difficult one, designed to challenge the students. The weekly course load of a senior in 1871/72 seems overwhelming: three periods of religion (Christian doctrine and church history); eight periods of Latin (including written essays and speaking Latin); six periods of Greek; three of German; four periods of English (including translations from German into English); two periods of physics; three of psychology; and two of Hebrew. That adds up to thirty-one periods each week.⁹

The professors made the students work for their education. For example, some Greek and Hebrew classes for upperclassmen were taught in Latin, instead of just English or German. Arthur Hoermann observed in his history of Northwestern, "Visitors of the institution were amazed at what they found: teachers that wrote and conversed in Latin of Ciceronian purity and students that answered in kind and used classic idiom in review lessons before the class. The speech of ancient Rome in Watertown in 1870!"¹⁰

Despite the fact that Northwestern was now heading in a better direction, many changes, additions and readjustments would be needed in the years to follow. The issue of the scholarships

remained a problem, for instance. A number of parents complained that the English department wasn't getting enough attention and demanded a refund of their money if changes weren't made. Meanwhile, on the other side, pastors and others were insisting that the English Business Department was hurting the institution financially. The latter group was satisfied to learn that the English schools were completely funded by tuition and scholarships -- only the Gymnasium was being supported by the synod. The first group seemed to be mollified after Professor John Ott came on the scene (in 1885) and added much-needed backbone to the English Department.¹¹

The synod convention in 1902 approved the addition of a "Septima" class. This was actually the eighth class in Northwestern's version of the Gymnasium -- the Prima class was divided into Ober Prima and Unter Prima. The faculty observed that a number of students coming into the Sexta year were not fully prepared. This extra year, then, would catch them up to where they should be. The Septima class was dropped in 1916 when it was perceived that the grade schools were doing a better job of educating their students. However, in 1919 an eighth year was added at the top (above Ober Prima), partly to help distinguish between the four years of college and the four years of preparatory school.

There were some proposals for change along the way that did not come about. The Board decided not to allow the addition of a medical college on the campus in 1906, showing their resolve not

to follow the grand schemes of Adam Martin. In 1907 and for perhaps the next four years, there was a push to add a practical seminary. This, however, was eventually defeated. Likewise the synod decided against a proposed amalgamation of Northwestern and Doctor Martin Luther College in 1919. The thought then was that Northwestern would be swallowed up by the larger body of students on the other campus. Another defeated movement in 1919 was one in favor of adding a modern classical department to Northwestern.

A perpetual question throughout these years was that of English and German. Which should be the primary medium of instruction? German held the highest position for many years. However, after the beginning of World War I, it became increasingly difficult to obtain the German text books necessary for classes. Starting again in 1919, some classes were taught in English as well as German. Besides, the Board's report in the Synodal-Bericht of 1927 that more and more younger students did not know German well enough.¹² The solution at that time was to teach the prep school boys better German, so they would be prepared for College where they still taught in German. The "Uebergang ins Englische," as it was called would not be complete until after 1938, when all classes were instructed in English.

Dr. Ernst stepped down from the presidency in 1919, after serving in that capacity for 48 years. He did more than any man in shaping the curriculum of Northwestern College. Historians in later years could say, "Was unsre Schule in Watertown heute ist, ist sie unter Ernst geworden."¹³

Curriculum Changes in Later Years

The college catalog of 1920 included a revised statement of purpose: "The aim of the Synod was and is to impart a liberal education in a Christian spirit, and especially to prepare students to take up the study of theology." Notice the word "liberal." As the statement says, this was not a new concept, just a new term. The liberal arts degree given to graduates today reflects the same type of education offered in the old German Gymnasium. So Northwestern entered the new century with its objectives and methods intact, unlike most other similar educational institutions. Still, some changes were necessary.

The report of the Board of Trustees to the synod in 1931 spoke of one such adjustment.

A change in the curriculum, which was spoken of at the Professors' Conference, is planned. Instruction in Latin shall be changed from eight to six years, and instruction in Greek from six to four years. According to this plan, more time will be won for other subjects, especially for instruction in German. Instruction in Latin will begin in the Sexta year, Greek will begin in the first year of college.¹⁴

Along these same lines, efforts were made to space out the languages as much as possible. The faculty observed that the students suffered when they were forced to start instruction in two different languages in the same year. To avoid this problem, Latin was introduced in the first of the eight years (as noted above), German would start two years later, instruction in Greek began in the first year of college, and Hebrew classes were not added until the second to last year of college. While it was still possible to have more than two languages in one semester, a

student would not start more than one at a time.

To further help the students, remedial courses were sometimes added to the curriculum. This is a variation of the Septima class of earlier years. In 1957 the Board reported that there were twenty men in remedial studies. Rather than send away young men who had not received proper education in high school, the faculty made efforts to bring the students up to where they should be. This practice has continued to the present day in the form of the "five year program."

One of the larger curriculum revisions came in 1961. In the years previous to the 1961 revision, students needed 211 credit hours to graduate. It was decided that 26-hour weeks were too much for both students and faculty. After 1961 students attended only 20 hours of instruction each week. The number of credit hours required was therefore also dropped to 157. In 1970/71 the hours were reduced further by four to 153. Another drop of four came in 1980/81 when just 149 credit hours were needed for graduation.

Furthermore, for the first time, electives were offered in 1961 as part of the curriculum. At that time the number of electives was very small, and in just a few subject areas. Of the 157 required credit hours, eighteen were to be from electives. This trend continued in later years, however. The number of electives grew and were offered in more and more subjects. Ten years later the number of credit hours of electives was raised to thirty. Also the total number of

required hours of foreign languages in 1970/71 was only 65, compared to the 106 credit hours necessary before 1961.

A factor which would do much to influence the curriculum in recent years was the accreditation process. The Board reported in the 1975 Reports and Memorials that the University of Wisconsin system, which was used by many graduates for further education, was requiring all colleges to become candidates for accreditation by September of 1976. Over the next few years the college subjected itself to numerous reviews and self-studies. Finally in 1982 the Board could announce that Northwestern College had achieved accreditation status.

In the process, the faculty was forced to look at itself very carefully. Potential problems and perennial weaknesses were pointed out by the review teams assigned by the North Central Association (NCA). Those who came to visit the school noticed that Northwestern's version of a liberal arts education differed somewhat from that of other colleges. Northwestern tended to place more emphasis than usual on languages and offered less in other areas. Another repeated comment was on the teaching style: too much time was spent in classroom, they said, and not enough in the library. These two topics will be covered later in this paper.

These years of self-inspection, however, were perhaps the largest factor in bringing about the last major curriculum modification which came in 1986. Many of the questions raised in the studies of Northwestern were recognized and addressed in this

revision. The purpose and objectives of the proposed revision were stated in this way by the Academic Affairs Committee:

Both the program of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and the work of the parish ministry require extensive reading and writing. Students and pastors read the Scriptures so that they may hear and believe God's message of salvation. In addition, they must read and analyze critically a great deal of literature about the Scriptures and on religious topics generally. They also need to commit their thoughts to writing, both to achieve clarity in their own thinking and for the sake of a clear and logical presentation of the truth to other hearers and readers. The objectives of this proposed revision of the Northwestern curriculum follow.

I. To reduce the number of credit hours required for graduation in order to increase requirements in reading and writing.

II. To accomplish the reduction of credit hours while maintaining Northwestern's purpose of preparing students for admission to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in the framework of a selective liberal arts curriculum.

III. To fit the liberal arts segment of the curriculum more closely to the present-day needs of the ministry.¹⁵

The curriculum revision reduced the number of credit hours required for graduation to 134. The faculty hoped that the reduction in hours would allow for "larger amounts of assigned readings, more practical in critical analysis of sources, and more frequent writing assignments."¹⁶ Thirty-eight of the credit hours would come from electives, and only 50-53 were necessary for foreign languages. The reason for the discrepancy in required foreign language credits was due to a new two-track system. In the past all first-year students had three language classes their freshman year in college; their fifth year of

Latin, a third year of German, and a beginning year of instruction in Greek. Starting in 1986, however, a new student could choose between a Latin track or a German one.

As long as the student met entry requirements (now only three years of high school Latin and two of German), the freshman was free to decide whether he wanted two more semesters of required Latin or three more semesters of German. This option was enabled by the seminary which offered in 1983 to lower their theological language requirements. Now they were willing to take anyone who was able to conduct research in either Latin or German, as long as they had enough exposure to them both in high school. It was decided that six college semesters would give a student "competence" in either of the two languages.

The Board summarized the effects of the revision in their report of 1987:

The curriculum revisions affect Seniors the least and Freshmen the most. The freshmen, who have had no experience with the NWC curriculum, simply accept what is required of them. They become aware of one important difference: they are not required to take both Latin and German while they are beginning their study of Greek. If either Latin or German proved difficult for them in high school, they can begin their college studies with a better attitude toward language study because they are not burdened by a course that has frustrated them.¹⁷

In the first year of the new curriculum, 32 freshmen chose the Latin option, and 19 decided to continue their German instruction.

Recent additions to the Northwestern curriculum include a "Minority Cultures" course and a two-year Spanish program. These

courses are designed to prepare some of the graduates with the ability to better reach out with the Gospel to people of other nationalities and cultures. Also, the so-called Bethany program was moved recently to the Watertown campus and renamed the Seminary Certification Program. This has had very little impact on the current curriculum, however.

One notices in all of the revisions and additions to the curriculum, however, that nothing much has changed. The purpose and the means of instruction of Northwestern University under Dr. Ernst remains relatively unaltered today. The changes that have come about were all made in the effort to teach the same truths and create the same type of thinkers in ^a world which is constantly in motion around us.

The Defense of the Curriculum

In all of its 130 years of existence, Northwestern College and its curriculum have come under attack from many directions. These attacks did not usually come from people wanting to shut the college down, of course, but from those who thought it could better fulfill its role in a different way. Perhaps the two areas most questioned have been the foreign languages and the liberal arts education.

Foreign Languages

The attack on foreign languages is not merely a recent phenomenon. Already in the first fifty years of Northwestern's

history there were those who thought the curriculum was too demanding. These people often blamed Latin and German. Most understood properly that Greek and Hebrew were necessary for a better understanding of Scripture. The other languages, however, they believed were superfluous. President Toppe wrote in an essay for a synod convention,

Complaints against the demanding language program have been heard in every decade of the school's existence -- we lose too many students for the ministry; there is no practical need for Latin and less and less for German; other subjects would be more profitable; our curriculum is a moss-covered monument to the days of Ernst and Notz, if not to the days of Melancthon and Erasmus.¹⁸

In response, the Northwestern faculty has been quick to speak out. President Ernst addressed this topic already in 1916. When asked if the students were being overburdened with language studies, he replied, "I think one ought to proceed carefully here. Our young people are not very industrious, and they are especially interested in disposing of the work in the foreign languages with the least possible effort, or giving them up entirely."¹⁹

Essays were later brought to synod conventions by Kowalke (1961) and Toppe (1965 and 1985) in defense of Northwestern's curriculum. The faculty argued in favor of maintaining the foreign language departments in their Self-Studies produced in the 1970's and 1980's. They all pointed to the value of Latin and German in preparation for the study of Greek. They reminded us of what happened to other seminaries that relaxed their language requirements. Toppe wrote,

A pre-seminary college that is not taking the road of language study will of necessity be taking some other road. It behooves us to ask whether that will be a road to increased secularization, to adaptation to current educational theories, to a multipurpose college, or to a Bible college, for example. Before we discard what we have, we ought to be sure we know the nature and tendency of an alternate curriculum.²⁰

The Self-Study Report of 1983 further explains that the study of foreign languages at Northwestern fulfills a dual role. The first one is the most obvious: it prepares its graduates to meet the prerequisites for the seminary. The second role, however, is almost as important: it contributes to the liberal arts program. When a student spends a number of years with a foreign language, he eventually moves beyond the study of grammar and vocables. After time, the student is able to appreciate the thoughts of men like Cicero, Plato, Homer, and Luther in their original languages. This expands the vision of the student to understand thought patterns and ways of living which are different from his own.

Liberal Arts

The liberal arts education of Northwestern today is a direct descendent of the German Gymnasium introduced to the school by Ernst in 1870. It has been generally thought that such a system helped Northwestern best do what is what created for. The faculty in 1975 stated, "By offering its liberal arts curriculum the college adds breadth to its pre-theological program and expresses its conviction, based on the synod's experience, that a

well-rounded education provides the best preparation for the life and work of a Christian minister."²¹ President Toppe spoke at length on the subject in "The Place of Liberal Arts at NWC." In this essay Toppe listed the values of such an education for a pastor to include: communication, values, critical analysis, historical consciousness, arts, religion, philosophy, literature, history, foreign language studies, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics and language in general.

However, attacks on Northwestern's liberal arts education have also been heard for many decades. Some in the synod have felt that too much time was spent on unnecessary subjects and not enough time on the Word of God. In recent years, however, the faculty has heard arguments in a different direction. The review teams from the North Central Association have frequently observed that Northwestern's curriculum is unbalanced. They claim that not enough emphasis is placed on the wide variety of subjects normally found in liberal arts education in other colleges across the country. To their minds, Northwestern should offer more opportunities for students to explore whatever interests they may have.

The faculty's self-study report in 1983 talked of the differences between Northwestern and other liberal arts colleges. First, the total number of credits (at that time 149, since then dropped to 134). Second, the heavy concentration on languages (45% of all classes in that year). Next, the large ratio of prescribed courses to electives (at that time it was four to

one). Finally, the narrow range of course distribution, particularly in the electives.

Although the faculty made some changes in these directions in the following years, they also explained why some differences were necessary. Northwestern College is in a very unique situation. As the faculty said in 1976,

Northwestern College is not a Bible college or a junior seminary, though it takes a positive confessional stance and offers some pre-seminary courses in religion and theology; it is not a standard liberal arts college, though it inculcates a number of liberal arts disciplines; nor is it a linguistics institute, though there is an obvious concentration in languages.²²

Northwestern continues to offer its broad curriculum, although the catalogs now say the school offers "a selective liberal arts program."

Conclusion

The Lord has obviously blessed Northwestern College greatly over the years. The institution had a rocky beginning, and it took a few years for it to get on the right track. When that happened, though, a curriculum was set in place which effectively prepared generations of men for their study in the ministry. Thanks to the work of men such as Dr. Ernst and other faithful faculty members, our synod has been blessed with a steady stream of pastors who can study Scripture in its original languages, who can preach and teach in a clear way, who are able to critically analyze what they hear and read. We pray that the Lord continue to guide our synod's pastoral training school as it moves to its new home in New Ulm, Minnesota.

END NOTES

1. Translation by J.P. Koehler in The History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 121.
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3. Ibid.
4. Korthals, p.46.
5. Koehler, p.122.
6. Kowalke, Centennial Story. p. 172.
7. Proceedings, 1965, p. 75.
8. Koehler, p.136.
9. Centennial Story, p. 75.
10. Spaude, p. 4.
11. Korthals, p. 102.
12. p. 18.
13. Korthals, p. 128.
14. Synodal-Bericht, 1931, p. 26 (translation from German).
15. A Proposed Revision of the Northwestern Curriculum - 1985.
16. Holding the Course, p. 32.
17. Reports and Memorials, 1987, p. 18.
18. "The Place of NWC in the Training of Future Candidates for a Call into the Public Ministry." Proceedings, 1965, p. 78.
19. Quoted by Kowalke in "An Evaluation of our Present Ministerial Training Course" in Proceedings, 1961, p. 156.
20. Proceedings, 1965, p. 79.
21. Status Study Report - NWC, 1975, p. 9.
22. The Response of NWC to the Report of a Visit, 1976, p. 2.

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