

## **Calvin College**

### **Review and Reflection Paper: Eight Years Later**

**November 21, 2000**

*We commit ourselves to doing even better  
those things that we are doing well.*

*An Expanded Statement of the Mission of Calvin College:  
Vision, Purpose, Commitment (1996)*

For an institution that's doing quite well, what's the next step? Self-congratulation? A celebration, to share the news with a few friends? Maybe a little well-earned rest?

At Calvin College—which could cite on its resume a prodigious list of accomplishments—this question wouldn't even stir up a discussion. Everyone at Calvin already knows the answer and finds it not in the least remarkable. The expanded mission statement articulates a principle that, among Reformed Christians, almost goes without saying: When you're doing well, you keep working to do even better.

What's more, you do so without expectation of any particular reward. "We must be academically excellent *because we are Reformed Christians*," emphasized President Gaylen Byker in his 1996 Calvin inaugural address. Calvin professor David Hoekema, writing in the Christian Reformed Church's magazine, *The Banner*, explains that for Reformed Christians, "Excellence is a divine calling":

God deserves our best, and so do our students and colleagues. . . . We must develop our gifts to their fullest, and we ought never to place before

each other work that is merely good enough to get by. . . . [E]xcellence celebrates the talents God has given. Slapdash work communicates a disrespect for students and colleagues that has no place in a Reformed Christian community.

(“Reformed Education: What Makes It Distinct?” *The Banner*, September 13, 1999)

In 1992, when members of CRANE first studied Calvin College and the CRC’s approach to Reformed Christianity, we noted the pervasive excellence on campus, from the school’s immaculately kept grounds to its meticulous self-examination to its rigorous and thoughtful academics. Our *Review and Reflection Paper* affirmed,

We applaud Calvin College for its astutely phrased mission, for its conscientious maturation, and for its faithfulness to a difficult, vital task: the guiding of students beyond a perhaps perfunctorily inherited faith, through intensive intellectual awareness, and toward a knowledgeable, complex Christianity.

The few challenges we mentioned in that paper, not surprisingly, were not surprises to Calvin. Administrators, faculty, staff members, even students realized that the college needed to broaden its recruiting to include students from traditions other than CRC, to create a more intentional campus community, to seek and genuinely welcome students and faculty from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, and to stretch its internal culture to more consciously acknowledge, respect, and cultivate the differing gifts of all its people.

From our two intensive visits to campus this year, our awareness of the changing marketplace of Christian colleges, and our reading of recent Calvin reports, addresses, publications, and other materials, we can see that in the

past eight years Calvin College has progressed exactly as one confidently might have predicted: What the institution wasn't doing so well, it has worked diligently to improve; and what it previously was doing well, it's now doing even better. Calvin is also succeeding at some things that are entirely new.

The people who attended our recent focus groups eagerly shared their assessment of what's going well at Calvin. The *range* of positive remarks, in fact, astonished us; at few other institutions—even the healthiest ones—we have heard such broadly enthusiastic endorsement. When we tried to select a few representative comments celebrating various facets of the college, our list kept getting longer and longer. But because we well know Calvin's genuine humility and its tendency to downplay words of praise, we decided to let the abundant compliments stand. Both the length and breadth of this list, we believe, speak powerfully about the many things this college is doing very well indeed:

- “Plenty of places talk about integrating faith and learning. But it really happens here—and without any loss of intellectual energy or courage.” – *faculty*
- “When I have dinner with students, they say that Calvin has a level of *dynamism* far beyond what they've noticed when they visit other colleges.” – *administrator*
- “We have a very strong faculty—and a high number of them are able to articulate the college's goals. That rhetoric is present in the daily life of the classroom.” – *administrator*
- “Only six or seven percent of our courses are taught by part-time faculty. For us, it's a quality issue.” – *administrator*

- “We have more faculty members now who aren’t Calvin grads. Professors are coming here because of our national-class scholarship and our bedrock Christianity.” –*staff*
- “Our work ethic is deeply ingrained. If we do something, we do it right. That’s the hallmark of this place: quality. We’re not glitzy, but solid.” –*administrator*
- “There’s a lot more support for faculty research here than at many ‘tonier’ places.” –*faculty*
- “I think that among Christian colleges, we have the best faculty, the best residence life, the best physical plant, an excellent education. The Fridays program is wonderful.” –*staff*
- “A lot of people have significant trust in the administration of Calvin. When we’re raising money, people ask us, ‘What do you need, and how can we help you?’” –*administrator*
- “Gaylen is a tremendous leader, very apt at raising funds. And the public image of Calvin is better now than I’ve ever seen it. We had two national championships this year, great enrollment, and a presidential debate with the Calvin logo showing.” –*administrator*
- “The president is willing to listen to students. He’s enthusiastic and interacts with us.” –*student*

- “In Admissions, we’re doing some valuable training to help shape our interactions with prospective students. This year our staff members visited 30 different schools, noticing how representatives talk about each college’s distinctives. Now, when we talk to students, we’re better able to *contrast* Calvin from other institutions.” *-staff*
- “I want to compliment the college for having put some programs in place—for minority parents, minority retention, pre-college partnering in churches, weekend programs, improvement of the Mosaic Floor in the dorm, and our minority graduate fellowship. We have a long way to go, but we’re doing well.” *-faculty*
- “We have great resources for faculty who want to use technology in the classroom.”  
*-administrator*
- “The professors here are able to stand outside Calvinism and give a broader point of view—even from places beyond the U.S.” *-student*
- “There are incredible opportunities here to do research with faculty.” *-student*
- “Calvin has shown me I can pursue whatever my deepest heart desires; I have the potential to do anything, to use my talents for it. This college has helped me discover my gifts and my self-confidence.” *-student*
- “Calvin forces you to think about *why* you believe.” *-student*
- “My professors here have treated me like a valued member of the

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community.” *-student*

- “The professors are so willing to know you.” *-student*
- “Even when I came to interview here for a teaching position, I could see that students were really interested in forming relationships with professors.” *-faculty*
- “We have a lot of students who can really rise to a challenge in the classroom.” *-faculty*
- “Most of the professors are creative, filled with information, academically challenging.” *-student*
- “Our Institutes have some very interesting projects going—including some excellent conferences.” *-staff*
- “The new buildings for science and engineering are spectacular.” *-administrator*
- “Project Neighborhood and the Mentoring Program both give me a great sense of fulfillment.” *-faculty*
- “Our off-campus study programs are life-changing—and very affordable.” *-staff*
- “The ‘responsible freedom’ policy here allows room for students to develop their own thinking, to be discerning on our own.” *-student*
- “The student life people here work hard to make you feel that this is *your* place.” *-student*
- “We have a more diverse student body than ever. It’s great to see. There’s

still not a lot of ethnic and cultural diversity—though we’ve been trying—but there’s much more variety in denominational connection and socioeconomic background. Calvin is definitely less insular.” *—staff*

That last remark, in particular, represents substantial change at Calvin. In our recent focus groups on campus, we still met plenty of students who have Dutch names and a long string of family members with Calvin degrees, but we also noticed less “insider language,” fewer quips about being Dutch, and a decided absence of what President Byker, in his inaugural address, called “a ‘chosen people’ complex.” The unintentionally divisive designation “non-CRC,” once painfully apparent, has all but disappeared. For almost everyone at Calvin, it seems, the phrase “our school” now means exactly that.

Calvin’s concerted efforts toward inclusion, however—especially those of the Admissions staff—have yielded an intriguing new problem for the college. Though many students still choose Calvin because they have a personal connection here, more and more young people are making that choice *themselves*, rather than as a result of their parents’ urging. “In the past,” staff members told us, “most of our kids came to Calvin because they were *expected to*. Now more students are shopping around and looking for a good fit. They’re selecting this college for the right reasons: academic excellence and our Christian perspective.”

That self-selection, in combination with Calvin’s consciously broader reach, means that more top-level students are showing up in the college’s application pool. “You can see our progress in the quality of our students,” said a staff member. “Of the admitted group, our yield is up to 58 percent. That tells me that the right people are resonating with our message.” From an administrator we heard, “Our CRC yield is good, but our yield among other students is off the charts.” Filling its class from such a strong pool, Calvin can now, more than ever, pick and choose: In August an

administrator told us, “Two people on our *waiting list* this year are National Merit finalists.” “We’re not buying kids, either,” another stated. “Our discount rate is under 25 percent.”

But there’s a further complication. As a college of the CRC, Calvin has an obligation to its “covenant youth”—the offspring of the families that, year after year, helped support the school financially. An administrator said, “We’re now under 50 percent CRC students, for the first time—partly because we’re expanding our reach, and partly because this year not as many CRC students came to the table. So we’re looking for new ways to speak to our primary constituency.”

Another administrator commented, “We’re serious about being Christian Reformed, and we’ll stay that way—so we want to preserve the mix. It’s an interesting tension.”

For those who work with Admissions, enrolling a critical mass of Christian Reformed students while expanding Calvin’s diversity may prove to be a delicate—though not unenjoyable—balancing act. “Our relationship with the Church is essential to who we are,” said a staff member. “How can we communicate with our legacy people, yet move forward at the same time?”

The answer to that question, we believe, is one that by now is starting to sound pleasantly familiar: Simply take what you’re doing well, and—guess what?

During the eight years since CRANE’s previous work with Calvin, some exciting new developments have taken place. And we believe that the best is yet to come. In the words of a faculty member, “We see ourselves as an excellent Christian college, but we can be better. Our work is never finished; we’re always reforming.”

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*To be Dutch . . . was to live  
in a perpetual present participle.*

Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*,  
quoted by President Gaylen Byker in his inaugural address

The title of Calvin's current five-year plan, we believe, holds an important clue to the question "What *really* sets Calvin College apart?"

Three phrases make up the title. The first two, *Distinctively Christian* and *Academically Excellent*, comprise Calvin's well-established image—the depiction that appears in the college's materials, and the description that most readily springs to people's minds. But the third phrase, *Always Reforming*, is the real differentiator.

"Insiders"—particularly administrators, faculty, and staff steeped in CRC rhetoric—know that Christian Reformed theology includes the task of ongoing reformation and that Calvin, as a CRC college, understandably has taken that obligation not only to heart but into its everyday practice. For this group the phrase is so familiar, so expected, that it almost might go unnoticed.

But these two words, more closely examined, yield a wealth of implication. Most obviously, *Reforming* with a capital *R* identifies the *who*. As a theological concept, the word also encompasses the *why*: For CRC believers, thoughtfully participating in the reformation of one's self and of the world is the appreciative response to God and the appropriate responsibility to Creation. Furthermore, with its busy and tireless *-ing*, the word *Reforming*

conveys the *how* of Calvin College: living and working in that “perpetual present participle” so typical, as Simon Schama writes, of the Dutch culture.

*Always*, the essential companion word, could easily be overlooked as one rushes on to the phrase’s final (though never *quite* final) *-ing*. But *Always* gives us another other crucial piece of information as well: Reforming *when*? That one’s a giveaway: In all our ways, all our paths—i.e., at all times, in all circumstances, under all conditions. The assumption *and in all places* follows naturally, as one infers the remaining *where*.

Through the combined three phrases of the title, then, Calvin’s identity emerges: *Distinctively Christian. Academically Excellent. Always Reforming.*

Calvin College subscribes to a well-specified Christian mission and character and shows a strong and proven commitment to high-quality education; and beyond those two traits, *which so many other institutions can claim*, Calvin also holds something more: the humility, the hope, and the determination to profess that nothing and no one is perfect; that everything and everyone is both worthy and redeemable; that we human beings, through our continual diligence and our high standards of work, can help make all things better; and that *this* college—uniquely—bends its entire institutional strength to that task.

Some of the most striking evidence of Calvin’s distinctive identity in action appears in the new core curriculum. After many years with a curriculum that was already working well, the college began the protracted, intensive process of reforming the core. The committee charged with this effort, as the new core curriculum’s prospectus states, worked from two “pieces of advice given in the literature on general education reform”:

An institution should be clear about the purpose of general education,  
and

The purpose of a general education program should be fitted to an  
institution's understanding of its particular mission.

*(An Engagement with God's World: the Core Curriculum of Calvin College,  
November 1999, p. 1)*

The result, we think, honors not only the committee's diligence but also Calvin's many years of focused faithfulness. As soon as we began reading the prospectus, a light bulb came on: We first recognized the document's inherent authenticity—a reflection of Calvin's own—and, immediately afterward, glimpsed the core's remarkable potential. In our many years of reading other colleges' core curricula, we've seen some plans more boldly innovative than that of Calvin and some more easily manageable, but none more thoroughly considered, none more eloquently set forth, and none more fitting to institutional mission and identity. Perhaps only an "outsider"—one with a broad basis for comparison—can fully realize what a singular and promising core Calvin has envisioned.

During our focus groups, insiders offered a range of opinions on the core and its progress. We learned that "this grand endeavor," as one staff member appreciatively called it, has sparked controversy from its beginnings; many people reported disappointment in the alterations that have resulted from internal debate. Critics described the core's then most recent iteration as "too complex," "hard to understand," "posing huge problems for advisement," "an extremely watered-down version of the original plan," "not very effective for the professional programs," "marred by departmental turf issues," "not interdisciplinary in the way we had hoped," and "not really all that different now from what we had before."

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Nevertheless, most people in our groups also expressed optimism about the plan, considering it “a good start,” because it springs from a common vision and defines specific *outcomes*: not only the skills a Calvin graduate should be able to perform and the areas of knowledge he or she should have explored, but also the kind of person this young person ideally should be as a result of a sustained, thoughtful, and purposeful engagement with the breadth of God’s creation. In the *Calvin News* for October 2, just before the final vote, Provost Joel Carpenter commended the core to the faculty: “It’s not perfect; there are still kinks to work out,” he wrote. But he also asserted that although the challenge of inculcating particular virtues may prove “a messier business” than following a classic core curriculum, the new core “is much closer, I think, to what we aspire to do and be as a college.”

According to the *Chimes*, November 10, the faculty senate voted the core in with an “overwhelming yea.” If some kinks yet remain, so do reasons for optimism; as a faculty member told us, “Some of the changes we want may eventually come. The core is set up to continue evolving.” An administrator echoed that view: “It’s an excellent core from any educational standard. And anyway, it’s still in the making.”

As we see it, a major source of the core’s brilliance—and of its rarity, among core curricula everywhere—is its clear and intentional reflection of Calvin College at its essential best. Just like the college, the core is distinctively Christian, academically excellent, and, crucially, *always reforming*, in several senses.

First, as Calvin’s own people have noted, it’s a work in progress, not only open to change but expecting change—and even looking forward to it—as a matter of course.

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Second, the new core both proclaims and embodies the Reformed theology that permeates Calvin's culture, which the core's prospectus tidily sums up as "the great themes of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration of all things in Christ" (p. 19). A staff member observed, "People don't work here because it's a job, but because they've bought into the Reformed worldview: We believe that whatever work you do is a vocation, and that in some way it moves forward the kingdom of God." A professor added, "Faculty at big universities complain about not having time to do 'their work'—meaning their research projects. Here, since every task is potentially helping to reform the culture, 'the work' is the whole thing."

That "whole thing" shines through the new core curriculum. Whatever its flaws, the plan clearly furthers Calvin's Christian mission as spelled out in the core prospectus: "In the Reformed tradition of liberal arts education, the whole life of the mind combines with the whole life of service under the headship of Christ." (p. 2)

Colloquially, Calvin's language about this extraordinarily coherent core intrigues us. Although the prospectus carries a title—*An Engagement with God's World*—that could serve as the new curriculum's official name, we've never heard anyone use that phrase conversationally in reference to the plan; people simply say "the core." We found another possibility in the prospectus's suggestion that the core "should be thought of as the all-college major" (p. 52), a simple and innovative short-form designation that, if used as an informal in-house title, could help people understand the core more easily. The prospectus also likens the core to "a column that rises up through a Calvin education" (p. 16); inspired by this image, Admissions staff members have created a set of lucid graphics to use in explaining the complex core to prospective students.

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We couldn't help thinking of the core, too, when we heard an administrator describe the architectural development of the new science building: "We considered the things we needed—the classrooms, the labs, the offices—and the ideal relationships among them. Then we turned it all over to Bill Fife and said, 'Here, Bill, wrap a building around this.'" Calvin's new core, whether as an all-college major wrapped around an all-encompassing worldview, as a column of experiences and ideas rising up through a whole education, or as an educational system through which the whole life of the mind combines with the whole life of service, definitely offers students "a whole thing"—in all ways Reformed and always reforming.

The core, like Calvin itself, is *always reforming* in a third sense as well: Another illustration of the Dutch present participle in action, the new curriculum works explicitly at the ongoing task of *developing Christian minds*. The already in-progress "gateway course" brings together mind and work, students and vocations, education and outcomes within the distinctively whole Reformed worldview.

Here again, we've noted with interest the variety of ways in which people refer to this gateway course. In the November 1999 version of the prospectus, the course's working title is Christian Faith and Contemporary Issues; references from focus group participants included The Development of a Christian Mind, The Forming of the Christian Mind, and Developing a Christian Mind (this last of which, we understand, is the correct title). Even in the November 10 *Chimes* report of the faculty senate's approving the core, the title of the course lost its properly indefinite article: "Developing the Christian Mind,' the course that replaces CPOL, is already available for students to take this year."

Such subtle differences, we realize, may seem negligible. But the gateway course lays the foundation for the entire core curriculum; and its carefully

chosen title, *Developing a Christian Mind*—containing the present participle so basic to Calvin’s genetic code and the indefinite article that sets Calvin’s Reformed worldview decisively apart from narrower, less inclusive Christian outlooks—deserves correct rendering.

Summing up the college’s holistic approach to education, an administrator explained,

“In Reformed theology, everything is religious. So at Calvin we study all parts of God’s creation, and we’re obliged to work in all parts of God’s creation. There is no higher calling.” We found support for that statement throughout the gateway course textbook *Hoping to Learn*, which Neal Plantinga generously shared with us in draft form. Toward the end of his text, Neal writes, “What we do now in the name of Christ—striving for healing, for justice, for intellectual light in darkness, striving simply to produce something helpful for sustaining the lives of other human beings—all of it counts, all of it lasts.”

(p. 105).

And *all of it*—the whole, ongoing Reformed and reforming thing—constitutes the highly marketable education that Calvin College, and *only* Calvin College, can offer the world.

*This is a moment of opportunity  
for religious colleges.*

George M. Marsden, quoted in  
*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 20, 2000

Christian Reformed theology, of course, is not new to the college. Plenty of young people have absorbed and embraced the CRC worldview as a result of their years at Calvin. Among the students we met recently, almost every person could articulate a sound version of Reformed Christian belief and perspective, many with enthusiasm. Comments from a group of seniors, for example, convinced us that the Calvin education is working exactly as it should:

- “I’ve been spoon-fed CRC doctrine since birth, and I swallowed it all as fact. Here, for the first time, I was challenged to ask myself, ‘*Why* do I believe that?’ When my professor laid out the Reformed theology, it suddenly came alive for me: Here was something I could *use* in my life.”
- “Reformed education teaches that you can be a professor, a biologist, an engineer, a preacher, a corporate president—and that *all* of those careers can mean working for God. When I realized that, it was an *Aha!* moment for me.”

- “Every inch of the earth is the Lord’s; He created Calvin, too. Everything in the world is fallen, but we can participate in Christ’s redemptive process. Calvin educates people to fill the world with agents of renewal and to bring everything back to God’s glory.”
- “In class my professor was talking about how, through our gifts and our education, we can reach into every place in the world. All of a sudden I realized that I can be a missionary in every part of my life. My heart leapt: I don’t have to go be a missionary in Africa; I can work in a secular environment and still please God.”
- “‘Every square inch’—every place—has value in God’s kingdom. I’m Christian, and I can do that responsibly in *any* environment—wherever.”
- “When I first came to Calvin, I was planning to be a teacher in a Christian school. But then I realized that we need Christians in TV news, too. That part of life needs renewal as much as anything else. Now I really understand Reformed doctrine, and sometimes it gives me chills to know that *right now*, I’m *living* it.”
- “When I was 17, I couldn’t really have articulated the Reformed position—and even if I could have, I wouldn’t have believed it. But now, I *own* it. It’s in my life, governing my choices. Calvin taught me that.”

Committed, confident graduates; healthy numbers in enrollment and endowment; a solid, well-deserved reputation: If Calvin is succeeding this well with its existing core curriculum, its existing messages, its existing methods of promotion and recruitment, then why should the college change anything?

One obvious answer stands.

But besides that irresistible internal urge to do things *better*, some external

motives are surfacing as well. Calvin's people cited a number of reasons for honing the college's messages and methods:

- "Within the CRC, there's a loosening of denominational bonds. We're seeing a trend toward nondenominational praise and worship, mega-churches, and youth leaders who've come from other traditions. Some churches are even dropping the CRC name, calling themselves something like "The Sunshine Church" and mentioning CRC only in the small print. Young people in those circumstances aren't learning anything about the CRC perspective." *-staff*
- "A significant minority of our entering students can't articulate Reformed theology—even those who went to CRC schools." *-staff*
- "There's increased competition from other institutions, especially those that are more 'career-focused'; and our feeder schools tell us that a lot of the students say they aren't interested in Christian colleges." *- administrator*
- "I think there should still be 500 first-year students from the CRC who want what we do. They're going to Pepperdine, Duke, Brandeis, Harvard, Yale—because they think Calvin is too insular. If we can put out a broader message well, that would help." *-administrator*
- "Now that we're broadening our reach, we want to welcome students who don't necessarily have the same Christian commitment but are interested in studying in a Christian environment. It's important not to convey to those students, 'You must believe exactly as CRC believes.'" *-administrator*
- "We've gone after what I think of as 'garden variety evangelical' students,

the ‘vanilla evangelicals.’ To me, that’s a weakening. They come in with little understanding of what Reformed thinking is about, and sometimes they choose Calvin for the wrong reasons.” *-staff*

- “So many kids today are theologically unsophisticated. They can ‘talk the talk’ but don’t know *why*.” *-staff*
- “Students now are much more consumer-oriented. They want to see how their education is relevant, connected to their life. If only we had better tracking of where our students go right after graduation—whether it’s to graduate school or into a career—we could use that information to great advantage.” *-staff*

From the core prospectus, we also learned that as recently as three years ago, Calvin’s own students weren’t necessarily getting the Reformed message:

In the Core Curriculum Assessment Project of 1997, 33 Calvin sophomores . . . were asked if a Calvin College education displayed any particular faith perspective or worldview. One third of the students said they weren’t aware of any such thing at Calvin; a little over one half said they thought there was one, but couldn’t say what it was; the remaining 15% said there was one, could use some of the language in which that perspective is typically expressed, but, in the words of the assessment report, “none were able to give a complete or thorough account of the Reformed perspective of Calvin College.”

*(An Engagement with God’s World: the Core Curriculum of Calvin College, November 1999, p. 43)*

If the CRC worldview no longer reliably appears on the educational menu at the denomination's schools and churches; if more students from other Christian traditions are enrolling at Calvin; if the trend among the brightest Christian students is still away from Christian education; if the current generation's college-bound students are seeking an education with immediate relevance to their life and their life's work; and if even some of Calvin's own students are somehow slipping by without grasping the college's unique educational gift, a fresh set of messages could prove not merely serviceable but vital.

On the subject of those messages, we heard a few general guidelines:

- "No matter what, we mustn't blow off our main constituency: the CRC students." *-administrator*
- "We've worked to strengthen our ties with the CRC; I want to bring them along with us. Our new materials mustn't undercut that CRC connection." *-administrator*
- "I want our materials to show Christian intellectualism, but not in a hoity-toity way. Calvin must look approachable—available even to unsophisticated students from small towns." *-administrator*
- "I'd like to see a contrast with the 'friendliness' message of schools like Dordt and Hope, but we should make sure that Calvin isn't intimidating." *-administrator*
- "Let's make it very clear that Calvin is not a youth convention or a church camp; it's an education." *-staff*

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- “A lot of local kids think of Calvin as ‘grade 13.’ I’d like to help them see that Calvin isn’t like that at all.” *-staff*

- “To some groups, we’re ‘too Christian’; to other groups, we’re ‘not Christian enough.’ How can we strike a balance?” *-staff*
- “We’re definitely a Christian college, but we’re not like Taylor or even Wheaton. We do things very differently from those schools—and we should draw a completely different kind of student.” *-administrator*
- “Some people carry a strong perception that private school tuition—and therefore, Calvin’s tuition—is ‘too expensive.’ But our actual cost-for-value equation is amazingly good.” *-administrator*
- “We lose students to Grand Valley and Michigan State on things like cost and athletic scholarships. I’m okay with losing those students. But we also lose those who want more prestige and diversity—and those are the students we’d like to entice to apply.” *-administrator*
- “Much of our Reformed language hasn’t translated well for 18-year-olds.” *-administrator*
- “Reformed people generally don’t ‘witness’ well. We say words like *creation*, *fall*, and *redemption*—but then we don’t know how to ‘close the sale.’ I’d love to see every person at Calvin master a simple way to articulate our perspective.” *-administrator*
- “The Reformed message has a *robustness*. It produces students who will go out and struggle with it for years. It has good explanatory and motivating power—so I think it’s worth saying.” *-administrator*

Administrators and staff members from Calvin's enrollment management division have identified two broad audiences that Calvin's new messages need to reach:

- students within the CRC, and
- other Christian students who actively want the kind of education and environment that Calvin provides.

We'd say that it's time to add a third:

- c) students and families with Christian principles *throughout the country* who may *not* be seeking a specifically Christian college, but who could recognize in Calvin a valuable academic education, a healthy environment, a community of high standards, and a unique foundation for every kind of worthwhile, ethical, and productive work.

Many such students—those who often gravitate toward large private universities, for example—could find at Calvin a quite comfortable “place to stand”: not a self-righteous place upon which to stand and proclaim or proselytize, but a thoughtful and stimulating place where one can stand with both strength and humility; a place where one can broadly observe, deeply consider, and highly aspire; and finally, a place from which one can step forward—confidently, and with purpose.

When we shared with President Byker our interest in creating for Calvin a radically more assertive national positioning program, he cautioned us, “Fine, but you have to realize that the Christian liberal arts mission of this college

hasn't changed since you worked with us in the early '90s. It's been with us for a long, long time; that's Calvin's unique strength."

He also explained that increasingly, Calvin is gaining recognition for its accomplishments:

When Neal Plantinga and I presented the new core plan at the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities meeting, many people requested copies of the core document. In Korea, where I recently gave a keynote speech on the future role of Christian colleges, Calvin is known as the place that *does* what institutions there want to try. And this past year, in our summer seminar, we had faculty members here from all over the world. A person from a Holy Cross institution said to me, "I'd like you to call my president and tell him about what Calvin is doing, so our people will understand that this *can* be done."

"Is Calvin ready for its literature to make such a statement?" we asked. President Byker immediately responded, "It's a natural progression for this college, and we're ready to move forward. The question is, *How?* I think the competition is going to increase dramatically for students and for funding. So I want us to be high-image, but we must make sure that our image—our 'brand'—is authentic and credible."

If Calvin is indeed ready to assert that authentic and credible "brand" and, more specifically, to make the leap from regional to national positioning, the timing couldn't be better.

For one thing, Calvin itself has changed. The mission stands firm, but it now undergirds a different mix of students, a freshened faculty, and a vigorous sense of institutional purpose that has found renewed, cogent expression in the dawning core curriculum. Eight years ago, this distinctively Christian and

academically excellent college was doing its denominational job quite well; as our literature for Calvin then affirmed, the school offered students, particularly those of the CRC, “a place to stand” and helped them learn to use their individual gifts in God’s service. Now, the less insular Calvin still serves its denomination, but from a broader context: The college has begun to operate in a widening sphere that extends well beyond the CRC. Through the new core, Calvin also has more emphatically declared its commitment to *engage* with the larger world—all of it.

From that standpoint, Calvin *must* present itself more explicitly. As the larger world—little acquainted with the CRC perspective—comes within the interest and influence of Calvin, the college’s message must come through with ringing clarity.

And the world is getting ready to listen. Educators have noted the rising tide of receptivity to Christian scholarship—a field in which Calvin already is an acknowledged leader:

- In *Commonweal* magazine, January 15, 1999, James C. Turner wrote that “Wheaton and especially Calvin have been seedbeds of an intellectual renaissance within American evangelicalism . . . that has gone far beyond theology to establish a visible evangelical presence in literary scholarship, psychology, history, philosophy, and other fields.” (“Something to Be Reckoned With: The Evangelical Mind Awakens,” p. 11)
- Alan Wolfe’s “The Opening of the Evangelical Mind” (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 2000) names the Christian Reformed Church as “the tradition within conservative Protestantism that created a serious intellectual environment in America” (p. 69) and specifically describes the substantial

intellectual influence of the CRC's leading theologian, Abraham Kuyper:  
"Much in the spirit of Saint Augustine, he urged his followers to engage in  
philosophical reflection. His legacy in America includes Calvin College,  
which from the 1920s to the 1950s left its mark on an extraordinary  
number of well-known philosophers." (p. 61)

- When a large group of scholars and administrators convened at Harvard University this past October to debate the future of religious colleges—a conference at which widely known Calvin provost and scholar Joel Carpenter presented a paper—the prevailing tone was one of optimism. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 20, 2000) covered the conference and quoted historian George M. Marsden, former Calvin professor, as saying, “This is a moment of opportunity for religious colleges.”

Christian scholarship is moving into the spotlight, and consequently, a highly academic Christian college is likely to draw the public eye—emerging into new prominence, attracting a larger pool of inquirers, and perhaps finally convincing skeptics that the incalculable value of a well-planned, well-founded education justifies the cost of the investment. Both by legacy and by merit, Calvin College belongs in this role. We’d like to see this robust, extraordinary institution take the decisive action of stepping up to claim its rightful 21<sup>st</sup>-century position.

At this present-participle moment of opportunity, this threshold time when always-reforming Calvin—like its new core curriculum and like the minds of its students—is still in the making, CRANE looks forward to helping Calvin College make a new name for itself even as the college continues, intelligently and faithfully and more broadly than ever before, to make all things better.