

Holly Tate:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, Vice President of Business Development here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen, talks with Dr. David Dockery, the founding President of the International Alliance for Christian Education and professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Dockery has served 37 years in Christian higher education. William and Dr. Dockery share how educators can lead, serve, and communicate well with students and families amidst a global crisis. He provides tangible ideas that can benefit students and provide community in a time of isolation. This conversation reminds us to depend on the Lord's faithfulness and convey a sense of hope to students and families as they navigate this transformational time of life. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag Vandercast, and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind the scenes content. We'll even post today's behind the scenes video of William and Dr. Dockery in that Facebook group. So without further ado, here's William's conversation with Dr. David Dockery.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, hey everybody. Thanks for joining us today. We're so glad you're here. And so glad that we've got one of our friends that has become a good friend over the last year or so, David Dockery, joining us. David, thanks for making time for us today.

David Dockery:

Oh, it's a privilege to be with you, William. Thanks so much for the invitation.

William Vandebloemen:

Yes, absolutely. And this probably is one of your first podcasts. It's certainly the first you've done with us since you moved. Tell us, some of our listeners may not know anything about you or what you've done. Give us a quick synopsis of your career and then what your most recent moves have been toward.

David Dockery:

Sure. The beginning of this fall semester is the beginning of my 37th year in the work of Christian higher education, so I've been around for a while. I began teaching at a college in Dallas, Texas in 1984, and then was invited to join the faculty at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, 1988. Eventually became Dean and Provost there a couple of years later. So I served in administration for almost three decades. In December of 1995, I was invited to serve as the president at Union University and served there for 18 and a half years before becoming president at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for about five and a half years. So in January of 2020, a new organization or alliance was launched, a new network, called the International Alliance for Christian Education. And I was named the founding president of that group. So that's what I'm doing now, as well as teaching some doctoral courses at Southwestern Seminary in Fort worth, Texas. So that's how we got to Texas, which I think was your allusion. So yes, we're in a new hometown, 50 days here in Texas. It is much warmer than it was along that north shore of Chicago, I can tell you, but we're glad to be here.

William Vandebloemen:

When I first moved to Houston, gosh, it's almost been 20 years now, my neighbor said to me, "We have two seasons in Houston." And I said, "Oh yeah?" And he said, "Yeah, we have summer. And we have August."

David Dockery:

August is really hot.

William Vandebloemen:

Oh my goodness, it's bad right now. But you know, Texas is still the best country on earth. I wouldn't trade it for anything. So thanks for joining us. I'd love to hear some thoughts from you about reopening and what schools are doing. You've kind of got your finger on that pulse, but before we go there, I think it would be helpful for people to understand this IACE. So we jumped into the world of Christian education search both on an elementary, secondary, and then a higher education front in the last few years. So I've been learning all the new associations and in secondary world, you've got SISA and you've got the great big one, and then you've got in colleges, you've got this and that and the other, but this is a kind of a new idea within all these associations. Is that right?

David Dockery:

That is right. I've been privileged to be a part of the others and appreciate them and admire their work. I was honored to serve as the Chair of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, the Chair of the Christian College Consortium, as well as the Consortium for Global Education. So I've been a part of those as a Board Member for well over 20 years. But in 2019, several schools leaders came together and said, "We need to find ways that we can work together, not only as Christian colleges and universities, but let's work across the Christian education spectrum, including primary and secondary schools like the Association for Christian Schools International, ACSI, as then with seminaries and divinity schools as well.

So the International Alliance for Christian Education, that's what IACE stands for, International Alliance for Christian Education, actually serves preschool, early education, all the way to PhD programs. And it's an umbrella organization that has come together in an attempt to connect the world of Christian education, which has functioned in a rather silo fashion. We believe we're better together if we can synergize our efforts, bring unity, strengthen our work around confessional commitments, around Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and find ways to resource this work, particularly through efforts of faculty development, professional development for leaders, and then presidential and board leadership as well.

So our work is off to a great start. We have about 60 institutional members as well as a number of organizational and partner members who are committed to Christian education or the work of intellectual discipleship in this country and around the world. So we have an umbrella organization that right now oversees about 5.7 million students.

William Vandebloemen:

Wow.

David Dockery:

There has never been something to come together like this that brings all aspects of Christian education together. It's very exciting to see it come into place and the Lord has blessed our work and we're very, very encouraged.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, so I grew up Presbyterian, and boy, nobody's as good at church splits then Presbyterians, we do it frequently. And so whenever there's a new association, you just assume it's a group that's broken off

from some other group, but this really is a brand new thing. This is no, no, no, no, not this group or that, it's let's get all the disciplines together, which from my selfish perspective is so easy for me to want to be a part of because if I've got a great client that's a Christian high school, they need to be in touch with the best Christian colleges, and the colleges need to be in touch with the best Christian seminaries. And so hearing this integrated approach, it's just a thrilling thing. And to have you running it as the first person to head things up, I think promises to show some really good growth over the years. You all are planning on even having your face to face board meeting in February if we can get the pandemic a little bit under control, is that right?

David Dockery:

That is right. We had our first initial meeting in Orlando, Florida in February of this year, we had about a hundred institutions and organizations represented, including some of our international partners who came from areas across the global south. It is institutions that are serious about distinctive Christian education. And we believe that if we hook arms together, and the key word in our name is alliance, can create this network, this Alliance, we'll be together than trying to do things in isolated ways.

William Vandebloemen:

And it's an alliance, not just a Baptists or Presbyterians. I mean, when you say confessional standards, that that doesn't mean one form or expression of Christianity, right?

David Dockery:

Our two foundational documents are one, a commitment to the Nicene Creed, which is the confession of faith adopted by more Christians than any other statement. It traces its roots back to the Fourth Century. It emphasizes our commitment to a Trinitarian God as Creator, Revealer, and Redeemer, and to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully a man. And so that serves as our foundational statement.

And then secondarily is our commitment to the Lausanne Covenant, which represents our international and global commitments. It was a statement put together by leaders like Billy Graham and John Stott about three decades ago and is adopted broadly across the evangelical community with strong commitments to the truthfulness of the Bible, the uniqueness of the gospel, and the importance of living out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Those things bind us together. And so we have multiple denominations are represented in our alliance and some nondenominational entities as well. So it is a broad group within a larger picture of Protestantism with the opportunities for some others to join in even as affiliate members.

William Vandebloemen:

That's great. As I look at your career just as an amateur of knowing what you've done. It looks like, when you went to Union, it grew quite a bit while you were there. Correct?

David Dockery:

My first year, our enrollment was about a little over 1900. My last year was a little over 4,300. So we more than doubled enrollment, more than doubled our assets, more than tripled the land value, and budget almost quadrupled.

William Vandebloemen:

And that's during a time when Christian higher education was not growing at that rate, correct?

David Dockery:

Not at that rate at all. So I was there from 1995 to 2014. So that included some pretty lean years after the financial meltdown in 2008, but by God's grace we had 16 straight years of enrollment increase from 1998 to 2013.

William Vandebloemen:

So I'm framing this up so people who don't know you will realize you know how to grow things when things aren't growing. So what in the world do you do if you're trying to make sense of school during this pandemic? I'd love to hear, you've got your finger on the pulse of all levels of education. So I'd love to hear what are you hearing about schools opening with children, and then let's talk about universities for a minute. And what, if any, new pivots, to use an overused word, are going to stay and what aren't?

David Dockery:

Yeah.

William Vandebloemen:

So talk to me about those things.

David Dockery:

Right. Well, the reports that we are receiving, most schools are trying to start this week. They're quite varied. Surprisingly and encouragingly a number of schools, and a number of schools in various regions are up. We've seen enrollment up as much as 10% in some areas. And we're very excited about that.

William Vandebloemen:

Now, I'm going to interrupt you, is that because people are upset with the current public school options that they have so they're opting to go into private, and by default then Christian, or is it a more distinct decision to be in a Christian environment?

David Dockery:

I think it's the second. I think we'll know more the reasons for it when we're able to say the full enrollment picture, which probably won't be available for another three weeks, it takes about that long to process these things. But just initial reports, we do have some markers of encouragement which I think, frankly, people were not expecting. So we're celebrating that news.

There are some however that are down, and will add to the challenges that Christian education has been facing over the past 10 or 12 years when all enrollment has basically been plateaued or declining. So we'll get a fuller picture, but you asked about the one thing that is probably here to stay is that there seems to be a commitment to hybrid delivery systems, that is to bring people together in person when and where possible, socially distanced, with plexiglass in front of the teacher, covering over chairs about every fourth one, so that only a third of the chairs in a room are available to be used.

So people are very serious about following the right protocols. And I think that that gives confidence in leadership and administration who are willing to do that. But at the same time, it's trying to provide some in person education, there's also this online component, or even a simultaneous kind of

Zoom communication, like we're doing right here, that would allow it to extend beyond that classroom and people to participate either voluntarily outside of the classroom because of their concern about the virus or because they're in a location that makes it hard for them to travel at this particular time.

William Vandebloemen:

What are you seeing of the schools that are doing it right so far, and it's really early, I understand that, but are there common markers of whether it's a president of a university or a chancellor or a head of school, or are you seeing common markers of leaders that are doing a good job so that people could kind of take notes and learn from the best?

David Dockery:

Yes. On the IACE website, IACE.education, not just edu, but spell out the whole word, IACE.education. Go to the COVID-19 resources page. And there we have a listing of how our member schools are responding and some, they've spent hours and hours, days and days and days, preparing multiple scenarios to be prepared for the different kinds of options that were needed. And it's showing up right now. The work that they have done over the summer is paying off. And so I think it's a tribute to leadership that is careful in their planning, committed to details, prepared for multiple scenarios. And they've done a wonderful job of communicating those plans, which gives people a sense of confidence and trust in what they're doing.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, I'm a parent, we have a 100 children, but three of them are in private education that's Christian based. And it's been so interesting. Our freshman in high school is in a school that has four schedules, and they've built, they were ahead of everybody on the virtual thing this last spring, enough so that NBC News actually came and interviewed and did a big feature on them.

David Dockery:

Wow.

William Vandebloemen:

Yeah, yeah. Lester Holt, the whole thing. But for this fall, they have four schedules that we can float in and out of, which I've not even thought about, but one, being the most normal, like it used to be, and four being totally virtual, and then other options like you're here this many days, but having the here are the four schedules and here's the varied plan and then communicating that well to the parents has made a huge difference for me. And we have one in a Christian college right now. We have a Baylor Bear, and Linda, is it Livingstone? Is that right?

David Dockery:

Right. She's the president. Yes.

William Vandebloemen:

I don't know her. I don't know how to grade her professionally as a university president, but she has done a marvelous job in communicating to us as parents.

David Dockery:

Her communication is excellent. Yes, indeed.

William Vandebloemen:

It is off the charts. I get an email every day for the last two or three weeks with a feature. I got a whole email about all the new hand sanitizer stations that were put up all over the university and where they are, and it's from her. And then the next day, "Well, we're going to feature this that we've done. We're going to feature this that we've done." It's almost like, "Oh my goodness. If I have to hear one more thing Baylor's doing, I'm going to lose my mind." And that's exactly the right kind of complaint to have during all of this. So I think that communication piece I'm seeing.

David Dockery:

Yeah. The communication piece is so important right now. And the anxiety is very high, and communication is the way to address that. But schools have done I think a great job of preparing to let students return where possible. Some of our schools on the West Coast have decided to be totally online. And they'd follow the larger public institutions in doing so, but creating these hybrid opportunities, protecting students and professors in classroom, creating some socially distanced opportunities in the student area, in the cafeteria, making sure there's plenty of hands sanitizer, making sure that there's extra staff working around the clock so the restrooms are cleaned regularly and disinfected and doing the best to address these matters and give some kind of normalcy so that education can go forth. And in our cases, I hope not just education in general, but serious, Christ-centered education, that is grounded in a Christian worldview conviction.

William Vandebloemen:

I wonder as you think through how a university, particularly on the higher education side starts to think about next year. So there are two things that would go through my mind. One, how do I recruit? And what best practices are you seeing out there that would be like, "Golly, how are we going to talk people into sending their kid here now?" Are you seeing strategies start to emerge around that? Because recruiting starts now for the next year, right?

David Dockery:

It never stops. As soon as you unpack one freshman class, you are immediately beginning to work on the freshman class for the following year. And so I think people are creating extra communication on their websites so that people know what their plans are going to be. I think everybody, without being naive, hoping and praying that by the summer of 2021 there's the possibility of a vaccine and some therapy so that it'll be further along a year from now on those matters. And even some kind of herd immunity that might have spread by that time that may move us back to some closer level of what we might call a new normal. I don't think we'll see the old practices in place by the fall of 2021. I think that will be too soon. So we'll still be doing some hybrid kind of delivery systems and continuing to create safe campuses, with the hope that we can enhance community along the way and the socially distanced part can allow people to come together because many schools are going without special student programs, without chapel, without special lectureships, and things that really augment an education and make it quite special. So kind of a minimalist approach offering classes and trying to serve students in the best way possible.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, it seems like if you're a recruiter or a principal or an administrator or any, any form of the administrative side, it looks to me like, and this is a overly generalistic observation, but it seems to me like you had schools either moving toward the University of Phoenix model or toward more ivory tower, one or the other. And now I think everybody's going to have to live in a both and world for quite a while, and maybe just for good. We're starting to see that's requiring a different kind of leader, a different kind of thinking. Is that a fair assessment? Are you seeing changes in the way leaders are having to be recruited for this new normal?

David Dockery:

I think that is the case. I think Boards have to think about what they want their schools to look like, how schools are going to work together in the future. I think there'll be more collaboration, less competition, finding ways to support each other, looking for common causes and looking for leaders who believe in those things while still being able to lead a particular institution or organization. It's a time to create a unity and synergy. That's what's going to be needed to navigate our way through these challenging times.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, and it seems like a time to hire differently. Now, I sound like all I've got's a hammer so everything looks like a nail, but there's a need now for an agility among employees, team members, leaders, to be able to shift from this to that, and I don't want to sound critical, but I don't know that any form of higher education has ever been known for exceeding agility.

David Dockery:

No, that's not our practice. We move slowly. We have old business models that pretty much are worn out. And then one of the things, many of us knew those business models needed to be changed, so if anything good is come out of this pandemic, it is helping us look at those business models and kind of put them aside and say, "How do we recreate this movement?"

William Vandebloemen:

There've been some good accelerations through this. And it's funny, we started our search work on the church side, and you would think the church is slower to change, but it's actually a little faster than you'd think. And over the last 20, 30 years they've been working on multi-site and on internet campuses and on delivery of services online at a faster clip. So we've been looking for that kind of leader for a while, and it's going to be fun to see how that transfers over into our education practice when schools start to look for the same skill sets that we've seen in some of the more innovative churches over the last 20, 30 years.

David Dockery:

I think you'll see some skills that'll really start to prepare well for professional programming and to serve some niche areas, nonprofit leadership areas, philanthropy opportunities. We've got this wealth transfer that's forthcoming over the next 20 years, people say in the neighborhood of 65, \$68 trillion. If 1% of that could come to Christian higher education, that would be \$680 billion for all of Christian higher education around the globe. But that would be something that would help secure a foundation for a longterm.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, I want to know what you're hearing from people who are leading well during this about tuition, because that seems to be one of the questions that parents of people in Christian education are not always the wealthiest parents.

David Dockery:

Not at all.

William Vandebloemen:

I mean, they're not the super high income people. It's more of a values decision, not a "I want to outsource my kid to this or that." And I know a lot of parents have to be asking, "You just aren't delivering what we thought we were paying for. Should we have to pay this much?" So at the same time, I know salaries are what they are and you can't change. So what are the right answers you're hearing from leaders when they're getting questions about tuition?

David Dockery:

Well, the personnel is a very important aspect. You can't do education without faculty. I mean, when you boil it all down, the education is what happens, the magic that takes place between a teacher and students. So investing in faculty is very, very important. And in this third decade of the 21st century, technology has to be present to support that. So those are two big costs that aren't going away. So what leaders have to find are ways to create efficiencies with that will not affect quality in a negative way, to realize that we've hit the price point on tuition. We can't go any higher. If anything, we need to backtrack on some of it and reposition the pricing, and make sure that if they're going to provide financial aid is the right kind of financial aid.

William Vandebloemen:

Well, David, if you had thoughts or wisdom to offer anybody in leadership over Christian schools right now as it pertains to this pandemic year, what are some parting words that you'd offer?

David Dockery:

Well, I'd begin and end probably at the same place and realize that while it does require exceptional human effort, we are dependent upon God, and we start there, realizing that apart from Him, we can do nothing. That we are dependent upon His faithfulness during this time. And that gives us a sense of hope that we need to communicate to those around us, those with whom we serve and our students as well. That sense of hope I pray would create a sense of resilience for people to be able to continue to move through these challenges.

In some ways we need to learn from Christians who'd gone before us. We've not known much about pestilence and plagues and persecution, and this is certainly not what some around the global South experience now and what Christians in the past have experienced. But it is something that is very real. And we learn from those who've gone before us. We stand on their shoulders. We get better vision by doing so. And so I think dependence on the faithfulness of God, creating a sense of hope, creating a mindset of resilience, communicate well, and hold hands, create synergy and collaboration where possible, and by God's grace, we'll be able to take some steps forward together.

William Vandebloemen:

I agree with everything you said except hold hands.

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David Dockery:

Hook arms in a symbolic way. We can't touch. I understand.

William Vandebloemen:

David, you're such a blessing. Thank you so much for joining us.

David Dockery:

Thank you.

William Vandebloemen:

And if you're listening today and you want to learn more about the IACE, all the notes for all the different organizations and resources we mentioned on the show will come out in the show notes. You can just go to Vandercast.com and sign up for an email, and you'll get those show notes from us on a regular basis.

David, bless you. Thank you so much for your time. And I look forward to talking to you again soon.

David Dockery:

Thank you, William. Blessings to you. It's a privilege to have been with you today.

William Vandebloemen:

Thank you.

Holly Tate:

Thanks for listening to today's conversation with Dr. David Dockery and William Vanderbloemen. At Vanderbloemen, we recently launched our sister company, Christian Teams, which is a virtual staffing solution for Christian organizations. It helps you find the right people for those support roles that keep your organization and your mission running. So if we can help you in any way with-