Over the years many friends and acquaintances with high school-aged children about to embark on their search for a college have asked me: “Rick, which colleges or universities should we be considering for my child?” They look to me for an answer with rapt anticipation as if I were Warren Buffett about to disclose a couple of good stock deals that will boost their portfolio’s performance (something, I might add, that we probably all could use right now). With nearly 30 years under my belt in higher education working for and with a disparate array of institutional types, I know they want to tap into my past to help guide their future. I feel like the horse racing insider at Churchill Downs standing next to the novice handicapper as he or she reaches out for that one tip that will help them complete their bet on the Trifecta. “Bet on the Number 12 horse”, is what they want to hear. But as silently amused as I am by the question, I know the parent and child are struggling with an immensely important decision that will help shape the child’s future. What they are looking for, of course, is information that will provide them an advantage in selecting a school that will yield a happy kid, a decent college education, and an edge over the competition to get that child a good job. How powerful I feel for a split second as I am viewed as The Sage. Yet, my answer is always the same, and inevitably leaves my inquisitors flat: I simply reply, “Choose the school that is best for your son or daughter.”

Parents and prospective students have good reason to struggle with this decision. With over 4,300 higher education institutions and a dizzying array of institutional types from which to choose, it is no wonder they are confused. The different missions of the research university, community college, state university, private institutions, for-profit online university, and other higher education types appeal to a broad range of academic interests and personal needs, and our country is blessed by having such choice.

For those seeking a private, liberal arts experience, the decision making process is even more difficult. One has only a mere 1,533 colleges from which to choose, the largest higher education cohort among all institutional types in America. Westminster College is among this large and highly competitive group. But how does that parent and child differentiate among the choices if a small, private liberal arts education holds the most appeal? More specifically, given my own experiences, biases, and knowledge of higher education, what would I tell that parent and child if I really wanted to give them an advantage? I would share with them the heart of the message I bring to you this morning.

There are three essential principles, supported by research, that speak to the importance of a liberal arts education generally and a Westminster education, specifically. The framework for our work at Westminster in the coming years will be built upon each of these three principles. They are, in order of ascending importance, as follows:
NUMBER 3: the breadth of the student experience provided determines the depth of the learning outcomes sought;

NUMBER 2: a liberal arts education best uncovers intellectual talent not revealed through traditional measures of intelligence;

NUMBER 1: the impact of the individual teacher remains the greatest catalyst in changing a student’s life.

Let’s briefly explore each of these and their implications for Westminster’s future beginning with our capacity to change students through meaningful campus experiences:

The American Council on Education and UCLA co-sponsored a landmark ten-year longitudinal study of the impact of college on students in the 1970’s that remain to this day a benchmark in the field of higher education. The study involved over 200,000 college students from 300 different types of institutions nationwide resulting in the seminal book entitled “Four Critical Years” by Alexander Astin. Examining the role that a college education plays on 80 outcomes across measurements of behavior, achievement, academic competency, satisfaction and other dimensions, the findings conclusively demonstrated that intellectual and psychosocial changes as a result of attending college are profound. But you already know that.

What you may not know is that measurements of student change across a host of growth dimensions were most highly correlated with the nature of the experience and involvement a student has while attending, even after the effects of student and institutional characteristics were considered. The study’s results further concluded that institutional size is inversely related to involvement measures. Astin concluded, “Practically, all the [change] effects associated with college attendance are more pronounced among students at smaller, private institutions.”

More recently, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini published their compendium of original and recent research entitled “How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research”. When discussing the role college plays in changing students, their conclusion was that “the impact of college is largely determined by the individual effort and involvement [of the student] in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus.” They go on to say, “If individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college, then it is important to focus on ways…to encourage student engagement.”

Armed with empirical evidence that smaller, private colleges contribute most substantially to indices of positive change for students and that such change is linked to the
breadth of experiences they receive while attending, how can we apply this knowledge to Westminster’s future going forward?

First, many of you may know of the numerous ways we involve our students in service-learning projects, student research, our four-year residency requirement, leadership opportunities in dozens of student organizations, and practical experiences such as our Biology Field Station and the student-run TV and radio stations. These are just a few examples of meaningful avenues of engagement which contribute to the change outcomes our students enjoy. And though such experiences can be found at most colleges and universities to varying degrees, Westminster College has a long history of significantly integrating those opportunities into student life. The College recently embraced experiential education as a core value through the establishment of the Drinko Center for Teaching and Learning. But that Center remains in its programmatic youth and represents an enormous opportunity for the College going forward.

Benjamin Franklin once said, “Intelligence without education is like silver in the mine.” One of our jobs is to mine that intelligence and bring it to the surface. That’s what good teaching does. But that intelligence – that silver – is only best utilized when it is transformed from a raw state to a point of useful application. The strongest education occurs when a connection is made between knowledge and application. We therefore must commit ourselves to maximizing that link in our curriculum and overall student experience.

A central problem with infusing the traditional classroom content with an experiential component is in assessing the outcomes derived. Assessment remains among the most difficult conundrums in all of education and this is why we are witnessing increasing encroachment by legislative bodies to exact some form of accountability from the academy through standardization. But students are very different with diverse intellectual gifts and interests, and the most effective educational organizations will be those that can account for, and teach to, those gifts. Which brings me to my second principle: that a liberal arts education best uncovers intellectual talent not revealed through traditional measures of intelligence. To briefly introduce this principle, let share how my own thoughts developed on this matter.

I love college football. I love golf. I learned early on that I have very little athletic ability so I never attempted to play football. I have played, and continue to play, golf but suffer with the fact that I have no ability there either (it hasn’t stopped me from demonstrating that fact to my friends and business associates). While writing a profile on me for the student newspaper, The Holcad, the student editor asked me: “What is something you’d like to have that you don’t have.” I said “Athletic ability”. The good Lord has cursed me with the love of some games and the inability to play them. But I was
a pretty successful and not half-bad musician in an earlier life that ultimately made his way into college administration.

Which raises a question once posed by a beloved professor of mine at Penn State by the name of Dr. Bills Toombs, for whom I conducted research through the Center for the Study of Higher Education. He observed over the decades a relationship between musical talent and administrative aptitude. Bryce Jordan, president emeritus of Penn State, held three music degrees. James Moeser, president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had a Ph.D. in organ performance. John Lilley, most recently president at Baylor, held three degrees in music and was a onetime concert pianist. Don Randell was president of the University of Chicago and holds three degrees in music from Princeton. And the list goes on and on.

I was intrigued by Dr. Toombs’ observation, and began to explore the question of why certain aptitudes may be linked, landing upon the extensive work of the renowned Harvard psychologist and educator Dr. Howard Gardner who, over the years, developed his Theory of Multiple Intelligences, or “MI.”

In a nutshell, MI theory rejects the notion that the definition of “smart” is limited to the traditional constructs of mathematical and/or verbal aptitudes as normally coveted in high IQ, SAT or ACT scores. Rather, Gardner believes that human cognitive competence is better described in terms of a set of seven abilities, talents, or mental skills that represent different capacities to process certain kinds of information. These abilities range from the traditional logical-mathematical aptitude through musical, athletic, and other realms, and represent inborn attributes that do not change with age, training, or experience. As Gardner says, “It is important to consider individuals as a collection of aptitudes rather than as having a singular problem-solving faculty that can be measured directly through pencil and paper tests.”

My point in sharing this is my belief that the type of education we provide at Westminster and colleges like her allow for the surfacing and development of different aptitudes and, to me, represents the single greatest argument for why a liberal education is so valuable in helping young people find and develop their own individual intellectual gifts. My education at Susquehanna University helped me to uncover certain aptitudes, though hitting a golf ball well was not among them.

If one is to subscribe to the belief that intelligence can be measured across multiple dimensions and not just in terms of IQ, one could also argue that the small liberal arts environment in which we work is uniquely qualified among the plethora of higher education organizational types to coax and nurture the development of these aptitudes given the broad mix of academic and co-curricular offerings we provide.
Now some may argue that only the most elite colleges provide its students with a substantial advantage in subsequent outcomes upon graduation by virtue of their vast resources, nationally-learned faculty and pool of student applicants at the top ranges of the SAT scale. I disagree. In fact, the research by Pascarella and Terenzini cited earlier clearly confirmed all previous studies that “aside from …small effects, little consistent evidence suggests that college selectivity, prestige, or educational resources have any important net impact (over less highly selective institutions) in such areas as learning, cognitive and intellectual development, majority of psychosocial changes, the development of principled moral reasoning, or shifts in attitudes and values.”

Don’t get me wrong. Elite institutions play an important role in serving a certain gifted clientele. But Westminster, and schools like her, clearly demonstrates a capacity to compete with the elite brethren in eventual life outcomes. One need only look at the many success stories of our alumni, starting with our own Board of Trustees, to understand that this is true.

So, we have thus far established the importance of on-campus experiences as an agent of student change, and the need to be responsive to the concept of multiple intelligences in the selection and education of our students. Finally, I turn to the Number One most critical factor in the success of current and future students, and what, in my judgment, makes Westminster such a special place: our faculty.

Let me share two quick stories with you to set the stage:

It was slightly over a year ago that I sat in a restaurant off 7th Avenue in New York sharing dinner with a graduate of Otterbein College, my previous employer. Her name was Chris Jansing and she was finishing her assignment as daytime anchor of MSNBC before embarking on her new role as senior West Coast correspondent to NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams. I already knew Chris so the conversation was relaxed and reflective. I asked her, “What do you feel was the secret to your success, Chris?” She replied to me, “I owe much of it to my English professors at Otterbein,” and she named some names wondering where they were now. “Without a firm foundation in English and the guidance of my professors, I never would have progressed this far. It was my ability to write more than my on-camera performance that moved my career forward.”

When I was at the University of Louisville, I was in the home of Dr. William Pedigo, a graduate of the University’s School of Medicine and, prior to his death, was the most beloved and respected physician and diagnostician in the city. Though elderly and frail at the time, I had asked him a similar question about the secret to his success as a doctor over the fifty years he practiced medicine. He said that’s easy. It was John Walker Moore, Professor of Medicine and Dean of the Medical School. He recounted the following story I never forgot:
The old Louisville General Hospital had, as most hospitals did in that era, large wards holding upwards of 60 beds in a room. One day while on rounds, Dean John Walker Moore stopped into one large ward to check up on the young Bill Pedigo, who was an intern at the time. Stopping in his tracks upon entering the room and lifted his head, sniffed, and yelled out, “Pedigo! You have a case of typhus on this floor!”

Dr. Pedigo respectfully told him that there were no cases of typhus on the floor to which Dr. Moore replied, “You’re wrong. I can smell it.” Indeed, after reexamining all the patients on the floor, the case of typhus was discovered. Dr. Pedigo wondered how he knew. Dean Moore later told him that typhus carries a scent of acetone, and that’s how he knew.

Bill Pedigo said to me that his success as a doctor and diagnostician came predominantly from this revered teacher who taught him that the practice of medicine is best done through the application of the senses, and that the best physicians never use a laboratory for diagnosis, only to confirm the diagnosis.

These are just two stories among thousands I have heard in my years doing alumni and development work on the impact that faculty have on students. The first speaks to the importance of the content conveyed in the classroom. The second speaks to the application of that content to one’s life. Seldom have I ever heard a graduate primarily reminisce about a building. The question I ALWAYS have received when I’m on the road: “Is Professor So-And-So” still teaching there?”

Significant research exists to support the important role that individual faculty play with student development. Quoting from “Four Critical Years”, Astin states, “Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable or any other student or institutional characteristic.” Recent studies by Pascarella and Terinzini confirm that. It is important to note that student relationships with other staff of the institution also contribute to the positive experience they enjoy, according to the literature. The take-away message here is that the nature and quality of faculty and staff and their involvement with the student determines the quality of education provided. We must never lose sight of that fact.

With the three Principles now outlined, let me conclude this morning by applying them to the direction for the College in the years to come:

This year shall be spent creating the College’s next Strategic Plan that will inform our collective efforts in the years ahead. The Plan will be called “Advantage: Westminster.” It will seek to identify three to six broad initiatives collectively agreed upon
to raise Westminster on its continuing upward trajectory. Using the three principles outlined this morning, I see Westminster rising in the following ways:

First, I believe that we should build upon the strong experiential education efforts already underway at Westminster. These efforts, which are manifested now in some specific disciplines and an affirmed desire by the faculty to engage students more on an individual basis, need to be formalized in all areas of the curriculum, so we provide a clear link between theory and practice, knowledge and application. “Liberal Learning … Applied” would be an appropriate phrase to convey this goal.

Central to this effort will be a commitment to grow and develop The Drinko Center for Teaching and Learning as the focal point of this initiative. I envision the Center as THE signature academic resource for both students and faculty in providing new or supplemental dimensions to the traditional classroom experience. Westminster has the capacity and talents to become a regional, if not national, leader in experiential education within the next ten years and we should explore creative ways to make that happen.

Aligned with this effort, Westminster should do what it can to develop a comprehensive institutionally directed competitive internship program for our rising seniors to provide avenues of application and broaden their student experience in preparation for entry into the workforce. Traditional internships are viewed as being of high value to students, but often lack educational or experiential depth because of the manner in which they are administered by sponsoring organizations. Working in partnership with key corporations, I would like to see us develop a curriculum around such experiences to be funded through an endowed program that will attract prospective students to the College, enrich the student experience of a Westminster education, and retain manpower in Western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio, our primary student recruitment areas. The reality is that academic institutions are an economic engine to our economy, and Westminster must assume a more proactive role in serving our region in that capacity. This potential program, if successful, would enhance our success in not only helping our students build a transcript, but help them build a resume as well.

Next, I would like the campus community to develop more definitive means of assessing outcomes, and suggest that we may wish to explore innovative ways to do so. All of American higher education is coming under increasing scrutiny to be transparent in revealing how it is that a college degree today is truly worth the increasing cost being levied to obtain one. Our graduation rate performance at Westminster ranks in the Top 5 nationally of all liberal arts colleges and the Top 10 nationally of ALL colleges and universities, according to US News, so we must be doing something right. But professional responsibility dictates that we be more specific in defining what learning outcomes we seek from a four year Westminster education beyond the awarding of the degree itself, and identify novel ways to measure them. There is merit in exploring this
challenge through the prism of Multiple Intelligence Theory. For that provides a useful framework for addressing the varied and multiple talents we seek to uncover through Liberal Learning and would be totally consistent with the efforts currently underway at the Association of American Colleges & Universities to redefine and reinforce the type of education that we offer.

On the third principle of the role of the faculty, I believe it is important to reinforce the College’s commitment to professional growth. Faculty committed and excited about their disciplines and the desire to share that excitement with their students energize the academy. Faculty willing to expand their pedagogical horizons to meet new modalities of teaching and learning will be in a better position to adjust to changes in learning behaviors with each new successive class. And changes are occurring rapidly. Westminster will need to explore new methods of content delivery in some disciplines if we are to remain competitive and insure the future revenue necessary to meet the operating and growth needs of the College.

It will be important for us to explore ways to further strengthen faculty development in both available resources and opportunities offered such that we may continue to enhance our reputation as an outstanding teaching institution. Separately, we should become more aggressive in communicating that reputation to our broader publics, for being reserved within an environment of acute competition can yield obscurity. This is a special College, and more people simply need to know that.

There is no doubt that my future will continue to find me responding to the annual parental question of “Which colleges or universities should I be looking at for my child?” Given the uncertainty of our economy, America’s changing prominence in the world relative to the rise of global competition, and the enormous challenges before Mankind in saving our planet from ourselves, a college education today is more important now than ever before. We will need to prepare our young people well to meet these challenges.

There are many colleges and universities that can do that. But given what I know, and given what I have seen thus far, I could most assuredly respond to any parent and any child by saying, “if you want an advantage, consider Westminster.” Thank you.