Christian Colleges and Universities Are Good for Society

By Barry H. Corey

America’s Founders laid the footing for our nation to become one of the most diverse and inclusive countries in the world. And for decades, California has been a leader in expanding that foundation to make America even more welcoming to people from all walks of life. Unfortunately, there is now proposed legislation pending before our elected lawmakers—Senate Bill 1146 and Assembly Bill 1888—that would diminish the progress California has made toward fostering a society that is inclusive for all.

I recently spent time at the State House in California as one voice of the dozens of universities in California whose ability to believe and act according to deeply held faith convictions is being threatened by these proposed laws. Many perceptions of faith-based colleges—such as Biola University where I serve as president—are quite skewed. The stereotype is that such institutions are academically weak, Bible-thumping places full of bigots and legalists. To cut off state or federal aid to these institutions, or to force them to shed some of their old-fashioned Christian convictions, in the minds of those with such stereotypes, would be no great loss for society.

Put simply, they’re wrong. Contrary to these labels, faith-based institutions of higher education are making profound contributions to the common good of society, contributions not in spite of but because of our deeply held faith convictions. Our presence in society enriches it rather than diminishes it. We provide economic vitality to our communities. Our graduates leave our schools with servant-leader hearts, many of them seeking careers in public service or non-profit organizations.

Tolerance, inclusion and diversity of thought are bedrocks of American culture. Indeed, these principles must also extend to a tolerance and inclusion of all viewpoints, even if they’re unfashionable and even if they’re based on time-honored religious beliefs. I’m not alone in this conviction: New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently made a similar argument:

"Universities should be a hubbub of the full range of political perspectives from A to Z, not just from V to Z. So maybe we progressives could take a brief break from attacking the other side and more broadly incorporate values that we supposedly cherish—like diversity—in our own dominions.

Differing beliefs and values are vital for our society. The robust Christian thought that is fostered and embraced at places like Biola University—and, more specifically, in our John Templeton Foundation-funded Center for Christian Thought—is not just good for Christianity; it’s good for society. The rich landscape of higher education in America is one of the hallmarks of our nation. We would be a weaker democracy if faith-based colleges and universities were not part of our great diversity in higher education. In this pluralism, we are unlike any nation in the world.

Christian colleges strengthen society by producing graduates who are knowledgeable in their fields but also good citizens. Grounded in a clear ethical framework (the teachings of Christ), Christian colleges see education as being about more than just credentials or job preparation, agreeing with former Harvard dean Harry Lewis (in Excellence Without a Soul) that “the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to turn eighteen and nineteen-year-olds into twentyone and twenty-twoyearolds, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.”

As New York Times columnist David Brooks recently told a room full of Christian college presidents where I was listening intently, the sort of character formation found in Christian colleges and universities is rare and yet desirable.

“You have what everybody else is desperate to have: a way of talking about and educating the human person in a way that integrates faith, emotion, and intellect,” Brooks told us. “From my point of view, you’re ahead of everybody else and have the potential to influence American culture in a way that could be magnificent.”

Another societal good that comes from faith-based higher education is that our graduates are often motivated by their faith to take jobs or volunteer in social service and nonprofit sectors. Many of our students are inspired by the example of Jesus who “came not to be served, but to serve.” This service orientation is rooted in Christian history, which for more than 2,000 years has been about serving the common good of society through faith-based hospitals, schools, charities, homeless shelters and relief agencies. It is also a Christian belief in the God-given dignity of every human being that motivates institutions like ours to fight against bigotry and bullying, choosing to love and care for each person, including those who believe differently.

Half of the top 20 baccalaureate colleges listed in the Washington Monthly college guide, a ranking of schools based on their common good contributions in terms of social mobility, research, and service, are members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. Christian colleges have always been and continue to be about looking outward and seeking to love and serve others, and they do this selflessly, as Jesus did. I have the honor of leading a university with over 6,200 such students. At the same time, we hold to time honored Christian principles, rooted in Scripture, that guide our community standards.

To lose the presence of strong Christian institutions of higher learning in California—or for them to be legislated out of their distinctiveness—would be a significant deprivation for the diversity of our great state. It would be a blow to the common good of a society that benefits from the faith-driven virtue and activism of tens of thousands of students who each year graduate from Christian colleges with plans to enter classrooms, boardrooms, courtrooms and operating rooms with a desire to serve a purpose far beyond themselves.

Barry H. Corey is the eighth president of Biola University, in La Mirada, Calif. and serves as first vice chair of the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities. He is the author of the recently released book, Love Kindness: Discover the Power of a Forgotten Christian Virtue.