

The History of Diversity and Global Engagement at Westmont

“We see human diversity as a feature of life worth savoring, a feature approved and embraced by God. . . . Christian relationships across differences are to be joyful rather than oppressive, loving rather than dismissive.” Those powerful words, embedded in Westmont’s statement on the Biblical and Theological Foundations of Diversity, convey the college’s longstanding desires to form students appreciative of human variety and disheartened by sin’s ill effects upon human community.

Across its 85-year history, a combination of institutional commitments, external pressures, and internal voices have prompted Westmont to embrace diversity more fully in word and practice. From its early days, the college’s vision was to provide a Christian liberal arts education for an inclusive, interdenominational student body, a commitment that ran afoul of prevailing prejudices among much of white American society (see accompanying article, “Westmont Persists – A Historical Reflection”) in the 1940s. Despite those aspirations, however, Westmont, like most American colleges and universities, remained overwhelmingly white in its composition and biases for many decades thereafter, a fact plainly and, at times, painfully obvious to its small number of faculty, staff, and students of color. In the midst of the national civil rights movement in the 1960s, African American student Chris Gilbert authored an eloquent plea for racial justice in the *Horizon* (Westmont’s student newspaper) that called on the college to train future Christian leaders attuned to the truth that “God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race.”

While no doubt sympathetic to Gilbert’s call, it was another quarter century before taking on the task of becoming more inclusive with greater urgency. A report from WASC, Westmont’s accrediting agency, that found a “lack of progress with respect to racial and ethnic diversity at

Westmont” served as a key catalyst for change. It noted the college’s need to consider diversity not only with respect to the composition of its students and employees, but in the content of its curriculum, tenor of its campus climate, and character of its overall institutional culture.

President David Winter appointed a Commission on Diversity to address the issue. Its more than thirty recommendations in June 1990 became the basis for many later actions during that decade including the formation of campus-wide and Board of Trustee diversity committees, the creation of the Office of Multicultural (now Intercultural) Programs, and more rigorous attempts to recruit students and faculty of color.

Coincident with these diversity initiatives, Westmont enhanced its commitment to equipping students to be globally aware and engaged. Amid World War Two, the college had defined itself as a place that “calls to those who are expecting and desiring to do the hard work of the world. It calls to those who see the great amount of pioneering that needs to be done in the world, and who will have the character and faith and vision to make such pioneering possible.” By the 1970s and ’80s, Westmont’s leaders typically articulated those hopes as a desire to form “World Christians,” young women and men able to function effectively as ambassadors for Christ within and across multiple cultures. To that end, the college enthusiastically sponsored study abroad learning opportunities and summer mission ministries, expanded its curricular coverage of world civilizations, and established an International Studies major (now offered as tracks within the history and political science majors). In the 21st century under President Gayle Beebe’s leadership, Westmont made the global competency of its students an even higher priority, identifying it as one of its five core principles. As the college mission statement puts it, Westmont seeks to prepare students for “global engagement with the academy, church, and world.” Expanded Westmont faculty-led study abroad programs provided learning opportunities

across multiple disciplines from Mexico to the Middle East, Europe, Uganda, and Singapore. At the same time, the college sought to increase its numbers of international students as well as faculty whose expertise extended beyond the Western world, knowing that such individuals would enrich the global understanding and intercultural capacities of the community.

As Westmont moved outward to more parts of the world, so, too, did it take on a new face at home. When the new century began, students of color constituted 14% of the student body. Today they make up well over 40%. That dramatic increase accompanied further gains in the institution's academic quality, belying the earlier concerns of some that diversifying Westmont would come at the cost of academic excellence, lessening the requirement of high academic admissions standards it has upheld and become known for throughout its history. Larger numbers of Black, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Latinx students made the college more reflective of California and the nation's diverse population, and more representative of the multiracial and multiethnic richness of American Christianity. Those students also helped awaken the institution to a greater recognition of the inequities long endured by their communities. Hard but necessary campus conversations on racial matters took place with increasing frequency, sparked either by national events such as the election of the U.S.'s first African American president and the tragedies of Ferguson, Charleston, Charlottesville, and Minneapolis or by on-campus controversies ranging from allegedly racist remarks made in chapel to the non-renewal of a faculty member of color and an artistic depiction of Jesus as a Northern European in a prayer chapel window. During those discussions, numerous students of color poignantly testified to the highs and lows of their Westmont experience and inspired the college to a fuller recognition of past insensitivities and a deeper commitment to weed out implicit biases in college systems, policies, practices, and attitudes. That work is far from done,

but the unprecedented flurry of actions taken by faculty and administrators during the 2020-2021 academic year to make Westmont a more just, reconciled, and inclusive community bodes well for the college's future course. True to its Christian liberal arts mission and calling, Westmont understands that it will flourish best when it celebrates and embodies the gift of human racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.