

Running head: PLU HISTORY

Pacific Lutheran University – A Brief History

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Abstract

This brief research paper examines the historical origins of Pacific Lutheran University, a small, private, religiously affiliated liberal arts university in Tacoma, Washington. Founded by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants in the Puget Sound region, the university has continued to retain its Lutheran identity, in spite of historical and more recent challenges. New efforts are being put in place to further promote Lutheran values, including the adoption of a formal mission statement, as well as regular planning committees aimed at exploring how to function as a religiously affiliated university in the 21st century.

Pacific Lutheran University – A Brief History

Pacific Lutheran University, located in the south-eastern corner of Tacoma, Washington, is a private, liberal arts university affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Home to roughly 3,600 students, the university offers a wide variety of Bachelor's degrees and several Master's degrees, being particularly known for intensive business, nursing and education programs ("PLU Profile," n.d.). Of the many recent events placing PLU on the national radar, the 1999 PLU Lutes (now Knights) football team won the NCAA Division III championship against Rowan University ("PLU Timeline," 2008). More recently, according to U.S. News and World Report (2010), PLU has been ranked as the 13th best college in the Pacific Northwestern region. The university also bolsters KPLU, a partnership with National Public Radio that locally broadcasts news segments and jazz-related programming.

Putting together a picture of the historical development of this university is, admittedly, difficult without key primary sources. In June of 1990, history professor Phillip A. Nordquist published *Education Through Service*, a text commemorating the 100th anniversary of PLU. Another text, written by Walter C. Schnackenberg titled *The Lamp and the Cross*, also documented the historical origins and theological grounding of the university during its first 75 years as a university. Unfortunately, neither of these texts were available, either physically (except through Lutheran institutional libraries) or digitally. Bits and pieces, however, of the genesis of PLU can be gathered from other sources, particularly the university timeline website.

Facts regarding the genesis of this institution will be shared, along with fragments of the university's long and complicated road to its present status. Naturally, not every detail can be covered. To conclude this piece, I will examine the growing concern of Lutheran identity on campus, which in turn has sparked the creation and formal adoption of a mission statement.

PLU History 4

To begin, PLU's online profile states that the university was founded in 1890 by Scandinavian (specifically Norwegian) immigrants seeking to further Lutheran values and "Lutheran education" within American higher education ("PLU Profile," n.d.). One particular question that many Lutes (students at PLU) often ask involves identifying what a "Lutheran education" entails. According to an article written by Nordquist (1996) for *Scene*, Lutheran education entailed the promotion of service to one's neighbor, in addition to the pursuit of intellectual freedom. These values served as the foundation for the mission statement that would be crafted over one-hundred years later as a result of the campus initiative known as "PLU 2000: Embracing the 21st Century" ("PLU 2020," 2010). The founder of the university was Norwegian minister Rjug Harstad, who chose to maintain a strong connection with Nordic roots, a tradition carried on to this day via the Scandinavian Cultural Center, located on campus in the University Center ("Scandinavian Cultural Center," n.d.).

Though founded in 1890, the campus struggled with securing enough funding to begin constructing a building which would house both students and classes. Finally, on October 4, 1891, the first building to be constructed on campus, known as Old Main, would begin to take shape ("PLU Timeline," 2008). Upon completion, the building would later be renamed Harstad Hall, in honor of the founder of the university ("Harstad Hall," n.d.). Old Main would house the entire university until 1912, when another building, simply known as The Gymnasium, would be constructed. The Gymnasium would provide additional learning spaces, including a science laboratory in its basement, as well as a stage ("PLU Timeline," 2008). To date, Harstad Hall remains open, displaying old Nordic architecture while serving as an all-female residence hall.

Three years later, on October 14, 1894, Pacific Lutheran University would be officially dedicated, with more than 2000 individuals in attendance ("PLU Timeline," 2008). Roughly

PLU History 5

three years later, on October 25, 1894, the first day of classes would begin, with 30 students officially enrolled in courses (only two of these students would formally graduate from the university in 1898, though what degrees they earned remains unknown) (“PLU Timeline,” 2008). Only a handful of faculty members were on staff, including first-acting President (and founder) Rjug Harstad. Tuition costs for the first year of classes cost one dollar per week, a stark contrast to current tuition rates which are estimated to be around 29,000 (“PLU Quick Facts,” 2008). Common coursework is detailed in the PLU Archives Timeline (2008), which reports that Harstad and other presidents were responsible for instructing courses on literature, languages and grammar. Regarding academics, Johan Xavier became the first appointed theologian in residence during 1909, teaching history, religion and theology, Greek, Latin and (oddly enough) zoology (“PLU Timeline,” 2008).

During the late 1890’s, debt plagued the university, resulting in President Harstad pursuing a year-and-a-half long excursion into the Alaskan wilderness to search for gold. Accompanied by Otis Larson, the two drug “3,000 pounds of gear by sleigh, pack and handmade boats” (“PLU Timeline,” 2008). Though no gold was found, the story has become legend, detailing the perseverance of faculty in continuing to support the livelihood of the university.

Beginning in 1898, the university changed its institutional name to Pacific Lutheran Academy and Business College (also referred to as PLA). This would be the first of many name changes during the coming decades. Information regarding the newly appointed academy’s emphasis is limited, though it’s clear that the school focused on preparing individuals for leadership roles in America’s business sector (“PLU Timeline,” 2008). During the early 1900’s, PLA would merge with Columbia College in Everett, Washington to become Pacific Lutheran College. Under the leadership of the fifth acting president, Ola Ordal, the university was granted

PLU History 6

a two-year collegiate status in 1921 (“PLU Timeline,” 2008). In 1960, PLC would once again become known as Pacific Lutheran University, obtaining a contemporary university-level status (“PLU Timeline,” 2008). The campus and facilities also expanded, creating space for additional students and academic ventures. This is but a small portion of PLU’s long yet rich history.

Though PLU has remained fairly unknown in relation to other universities, PLU now prides itself in its mission, aiming to “educate students for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care – for other persons, for the community and for the earth” (“PLU Quick Facts,” 2009). Incorporating this mission (as inspired by the school’s Lutheran heritage) is at the core of every interaction with students, though a tangible mission statement was not formally adopted by the university until the mid 1990’s. Nordquist (1996) notes that this was done in response to confusion or “concerns about [PLU’s] identity, purpose and direction in the larger American society.” The mission attempts to guide Lutheran education when operating in relation to a society that is quickly developing a more “global” perspective (“PLU 2020,” 2010).

Questions concerning “the middle name” of the university have been brought to the table, particularly when only 26 percent of students identify as Lutheran (“PLU Quick Facts,” 2009). The university no longer serves strictly Lutheran students, nor possesses an all Lutheran faculty. Yet, the institution remains committed to pursuing questions regarding one’s calling. One such initiative, known as the Wild Hope Project is, in essence, grounded in the Lutheran values of critical discernment, personal truth, service and community (“Wild Hope Project,” n.d.).

Though the university has experienced hardships since its inception, PLU continues to forge ahead in providing a Lutheran-inspired, service-based and vocationally centered education to students. It will be interesting to explore, in greater detail, where the university will venture in the coming years as the 2020 plan, focused on identity and service, begins to take shape.

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