

# "Whither Wheaton?" examines Litfin era

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As the selection of Wheaton's next president approaches, an article called "Whither Wheaton?," evaluating President Litfin's 17-year tenure, was published on The Society of Mutual Autopsy (SoMA) Web site.

The article, written by Andrew Chignell '96, associate professor of philosophy at Cornell University, characterizes Litfin's interpretation style as more of a "magisterial approach" as opposed to a "wiggle-room" approach, citing various instances in Litfin's administration when decisions were sent down to the faculty from the administration without attempt to gain faculty approval and even despite faculty dissent.

The article was set to appear last year in "Books and Culture," a publication under Christianity Today International, but was pulled by the CEO Harold Smith at the last minute.

Chignell, desiring to get the article published before the Board of Trustees selected the next president, sought an online medium and was picked up by SoMA.

"Managerial style ('top-down' vs. 'relational') is not the central question here, though it does seem importantly related. The central question, rather, is this: How magisterial must an administration be regarding the interpretation of core commitments in order to keep the institution on course? Or, put another way, how much wiggle-room for reasonable, charitable differences in interpretation can be allowed while still preserving a school's distinctive confessional character?" Chignell said in his article.

Although Chignell begins the article by providing examples of some of Litfin's actions perceived as "liberal" by some, such as revoking the rule against on campus dancing, he goes on to give instances of professors being fired for integrating the evolutionary model with faith in the classroom and for converting to Catholicism. He also cites the story of a professional candidate not being hired due to views on homosexuality, along with other decisions made on school doctrinal commitments, as instances when interpretations were handed down from the top.

The article has sparked responses across the spectrum. "The notion of a magisterial administration is a complete red herring," said President Litfin. "There is no magisterium

operating here determining a grid through which dogma is formed, but the college saying 'here's where we stand. Is that where you stand?'"

According to Chignell, the "top-down" system in place has created a suppressing environment for faculty.

"I do think that we have a number of faculty who feel that they are not trusted by the administration, that they are suspected by the administration, and this is not necessarily the administration's fault," English professor Alan Jacobs said. "I think this has been an issue for years here that I would like to see us look for some way to address constructively."

Geology professor Jeff Greenberg feels that many faculty have felt stifled by the trustees and administration in many ways. "Good visionary quality

comes out of the faculty, and it's not appreciated enough by the administration," Greenberg said. "If your institution doesn't have a prophetic sense, I think you're stagnant."

Other faculty members do not feel that Wheaton has been a dominating environment.

"I didn't feel like there was a climate of fear," biblical and theological studies professor Timothy Larsen said. "Within limits, there's a lot of freedom... but you have to say [things] in ways that are measured and statesman-like."

With regards to the specific issues raised by Chignell, some feel that the measures taken by Litfin were beneficial to the College.

"I don't know any faculty members who want wiggle room. What we want are reasonable boundaries, and I think that for

the most part we have overwhelmingly reasonable boundaries," Jacobs said.

Applied health sciences professor Bud Williams said he also approved of the course Litfin's term took.

"We're like a big, slow-moving ship; it's hard to turn. What you have to do is stay on course and go back to your roots," Williams said. "We have to follow the guidelines of what has been set forth in the charter."

Others feel that the specific issues raised in the article are minor gradations.

"Andrew [Chignell] is saying, 'Wouldn't it be great if the thermostat was two degrees cooler,'" Larsen said. "Litfin came in and said, 'It's a little chilly; let's make it a couple degrees warmer... There isn't liberalism at Wheaton, just a lot of fear of liberalism.'"

Greenberg said he feels that the central thesis of Chignell's article is important, but that the details are distracting.

Litfin felt that the details presented in Chignell's article did not adequately represent the issue at hand.

"My whole stance is to put this into a broader perspective," Litfin said. "What I want to see is these issues engaged, and it's puzzling to me that this article didn't do that. I think Andrew's article served us by raising the questions, and I really want to see them addressed and debated in public... unfortunately this is not what Andrew's article is. I wish it were an engaging of the issues."

The timing of "Whither Wheaton?" has caused some apprehension about the impact it could have on the trustees' decision.

Larsen feels that the article is not a helpful intervention as far as the board is concerned.

"It could reinforce in their minds that there is a liberal influence that they have to hold back," Larsen said.

Greenberg does not want the article to sway the trustees' decision, but is optimistic that it will open lines of communication under the next president. Despite tension over the article, all sides are hopeful for the future.

"I want a president that can make Wheaton significantly more academic than it is now... I don't want a president who thinks, 'Wow, I made it to Wheaton,'" Larsen said. Read the article at <http://www.somareview.com/whither-wheaton.cfm>