

Programs, professors help students connect worldview convictions with actions

Life lessons

Introduction by Greg Orwig, '91
Director of Communications

calling
faith.....
conviction

Whitworth professors expect a lot from their students. And those expectations increasingly extend beyond the classroom and even beyond graduation. Through the re-invented Core 350 course and the Murdock and Lilly grant programs, Whitworth faculty are challenging students to put their beliefs into action in their relationships, money management, community involvement and politics.

One of the Whitworth faculty's best teaching techniques is to model this integration of conviction and action in their own lives. In the essays that follow this article, four professors explain how their worldviews influence the way they think about politics and the upcoming presidential election. Not surprisingly, professors from the same religious and scriptural foundations often arrive at radically different political positions. But one of the college's great strengths, says Whitworth Vice President for Student Life Kathy H. Storm, is its commitment to engage complex issues from multiple perspectives with a goal of dialogue and intellectual or spiritual growth.

What may be surprising is the degree to which faith can distract or even discourage people from civic and political engagement. Responding to their sense of growing secularization and moral relativism in American culture, evangelical Christians increasingly emphasize individual sin and salvation over institutional political and social reform. The popularity of the *Left Behind* book series, about the end times, may reflect this evangelistic focus.

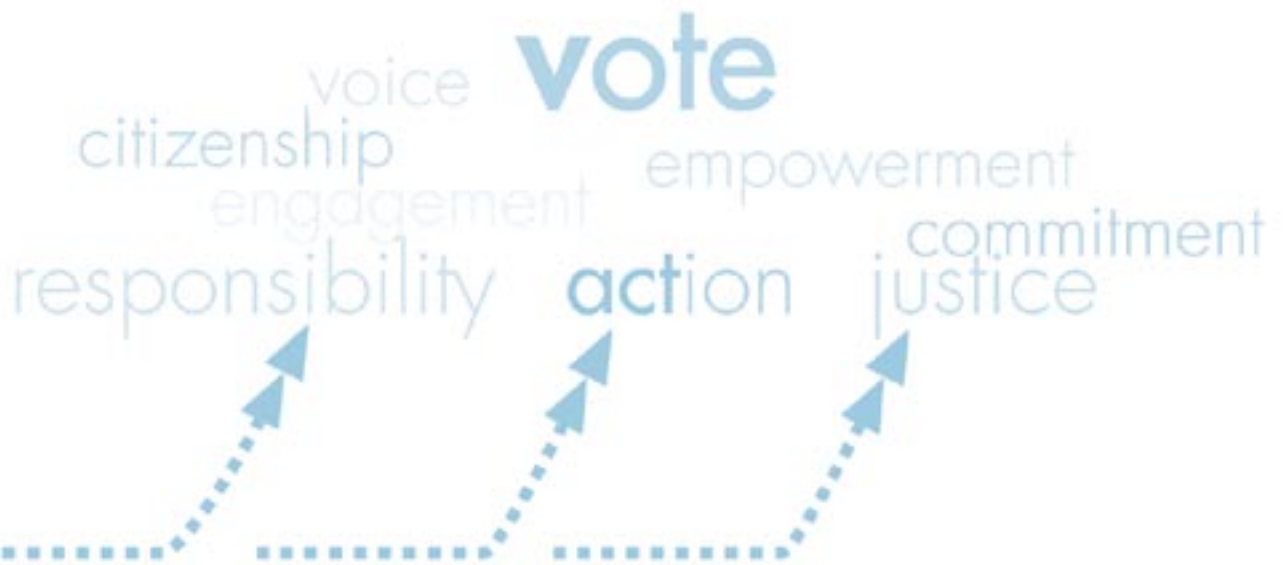
Whitworth recently approved an institutional identity statement that affirms its evangelical roots and the importance of a personal relationship with Christ. But the statement also embraces the college's Reformed tradition, which emphasizes that all Christians are called to participate with God in redeeming social and structural sins such as poverty and racism.

The Lilly Discerning Vocation Program, Murdock Lives of Commitment Project and new Core 350 course build on research showing that students who haven't made connections between their convictions and actions by their early 20s probably never will.

The Discerning Vocation: Community, Context and Commitment Program, funded by a \$2 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, supports mentoring, internship and service-learning opportunities, speakers, faculty development and other initiatives to help students understand vocation as a calling to connect one's gifts, abilities and theological beliefs to the larger needs of society.

Julia Stronks, professor of political studies and director of the Murdock Lives of Commitment Project, sees a clear calling in scripture for "all Christians, not just pastors and social workers," to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and comfort





the afflicted as well as to share the Good News.

This spring, Stronks is teaching a class of Whitworth students and members of First Presbyterian Church and Bethel AME Church to identify and strengthen community assets, such as businesses, religious institutions and neighborhood leaders, that can revitalize three high-poverty areas of Spokane. In addition, more than 100 students have already participated in the Street Kids Project, working with Class of 1994 Whitworth alumnus Mark Terrell's Cup of Cool Water ministry to provide food and companionship to homeless youth.

The Lives of Commitment Project, funded by a \$1 million grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, also has provided training for 28 faculty members to teach freshman seminars on issues of justice and faith in their academic disciplines.

In many ways, the freshman seminar is the introduction to Whitworth's revised Core, or Worldview Studies, Program, while Core 350 has become a capstone course in connecting conviction to action. The first two courses in the Worldview Studies Program – Core 150 and Core 250 – remain focused on the history of the Judeo-Christian and Rationalist traditions, respectively, but have been revised to incorporate science and technology content from the former Core 350 course, among other changes. The new Core 350 now focuses on the application of one's worldview to contemporary economic, political and social issues.

Led by Professor of Political Studies Michael Le Roy, '89, the Core 350 team employs a variety of innovative learning techniques. In the first unit, students divide up into interest groups related to energy, transportation or the environment and draft position papers to advise the U.S. president on topics such as whether to sign the Kyoto protocol on global warming. Students are challenged to apply what they learned in Core 150 and Core 250 to explain the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions underlying their policy positions as well as the ethical implications of their recommendations.

In the second unit, students meet intensively with their discussion groups to complete a research project on topics ranging from the war on drugs and regulation of financial markets to media censorship, art scandals and genetically modified food. This section of the course is particularly successful, Le Roy says, because it takes advantage of faculty expertise and students' interests.

The third unit focuses on collective decision-making and the

tension between individual and community interests. Using a scenario based on New York University Law Professor Derrick A. Bell's book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, students are divided into race and class groups that reflect the U.S. population and are asked to decide whether they would trade African Americans for gold and technology that would solve the world's environmental problems.

"There were some interesting perspectives that I didn't expect to hear," says Gene Emmans, a senior majoring in international business and political studies. "It was helpful to look at issues faced by minority groups and others who don't have a lot of power."

Whitworth's emphasis on connecting convictions to actions is already making a difference. In December, nearly a dozen student organizations sponsored a Festival of Shalom in the HUB. Participants offered information as well as immediate opportunities for students and staff to do something to help people in need.

"I'm encouraged because it does seem like people are responding positively," says Brittney Peterson, a junior political-science major and chair of the new Political Activism Club. "People who aren't raised to watch the news and to pay attention to politics probably don't naturally make connections between faith and politics. But it's harder now for Whitworth students to avoid being asked how they live out their faith, and it's easier for them to find opportunities to take action."

Read on to learn how four Whitworth professors seek to live out their faith convictions in terms of political action.

