

Holly Tate: Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, Vice President of Business Development here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, William talks with Dr. Michael Lindsay, the President of Gordon College. William and Dr. Lindsay discuss the future of Christian education, hiring in a Christian education sphere and advice for young leaders. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag vanderblast and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind the scenes content and giveaways. Here's William's conversation with Dr. Michael Lindsay.

William: Well, hey everybody. Thanks for joining us today. We're super excited to have actually a friend of mine from a long time ago, lived here in Houston and taught at a school that's next to my neighborhood, went to church on the other side of my neighborhood and we got to know Michael Lindsay just as colleagues more than anything. And Michael, I'll let you introduce yourself and what you do now, but I'll forever know you as the guy in the neighborhood.

Dr. Michael L.: Thanks, William. Well, it's great to be here. I serve now as the president of Gordon College, a Christian liberal arts college on the North Shore of Boston. I'm in my ninth year and I'm loving every minute of it.

William: And we were talking before we started the show. So how long is it before you're no longer the new guy in academia? Because you guys are a little more methodical than some institutions.

Dr. Michael L.: We do hold on for a long time but I think at this point, I've been here and whatever we've got are either results of my problems or ones that I need to fix by now. It's funny because academia does churn people quickly in leadership. The average college president is there for less than five years. So I feel like that I'm nearly doubling the average length of a president, which is gratifying because it feels like you can start to begin to see the flywheel turning. It's an important season in higher education. I believe more deeply in what we're doing than I ever have before.

William: So, let me hit pause on that. Average stay for a college president, is that in Christian college education or all college education?

Dr. Michael L.: Yeah, it's all university leadership in the United States. So the Chronicle for Higher Education publishes these kinds of data points along the way and it's just around five years now.

William: Wow. Wow. Why is that?

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I think that it's a very demanding job. It requires a lot of intellectual variety and you have to be able to do many different things with some degree of competence if not excellence, and it's a very demanding pace. You know? Most days I start before 7 AM and functions could go until nine or 10 o'clock at night.

And you do that five, six days a week consistently week in, week out, month after month.

William: Wow. Wow. Pastors only have to work on Sundays so.

Dr. Michael L.: Right.

William: Yeah. Well, tell us a little bit about your story Michael, because it's pretty interesting how you ended up where you are and then I'd love to throw the spotlight on Gordon itself because I don't think enough people know about the school. So tell us about you and how you ended up where you are now and the journey that led to your current place.

Dr. Michael L.: I'm very much an accidental college president. I was a faculty member at Rice University, teaching sociology in Houston. I thought I would be there the rest of my career. My wife is originally from Texas. We had been living in Princeton, New Jersey where I did graduate work and we thought we had come home and would be there forever, but after I'd been on the faculty for five years and during that time I'd had an opportunity to do some interesting work with fundraising and a little bit of work on helping to draw students to the university. I was approached by the search committee at Gordon to apply for the position and I thought it was something that maybe 10 to 15 years from now I'd be interested in but it was just not the right time for me.

Dr. Michael L.: But I had a really significant insight from the Lord. My 32 year old cousin was killed in a car accident tragically and it really caught me by surprise. He was like a little brother to me. I'm an only child and I performed a wedding for him and his wife and he left her as well as three young kids behind, and his death, which occurred in the season when the search committee was reaching out to me just made me realize we're not promised tomorrow. So if I'm at all interested in the opportunity to lead an institution I need to be open to the Lord's leading on his timing which may not be necessarily mine.

Dr. Michael L.: So I called back the search committee and said, "I'd be honored to apply if the opportunity presents itself." And they were still interested in talking with me. I submitted an application and I really thought it was just a test drive to see what it would be like to go through the process. But over the course of the next three or four months, the Lord really began turning our heart toward Boston. I'm originally from Jackson, Mississippi so some folks say that folks from Mississippi talk funny, but I'm here to tell you it's the folks from Massachusetts who talk funny. The idea of living in a place where they have snow for several months a year, I just thought, "That's not for me." But then I guess provincially the Lord really began helping us to see the opportunity. Gordon could be a good fit and our background and interests seem to align and thanks be to God. He lead us here and has sustained us in the time since.

William: Well, as a guy who thinks about a career progression and placement, you know, we'll help churches or schools or whatever, find their top staff. If you tell me a guy's from Jackson, Mississippi, I'd say, "Well, Boston's absolutely the natural choice."

Dr. Michael L.: Yeah, exactly. Isn't that funny?

William: Well, and even more, I mean, this is really fascinating. Think about it. So you go to Princeton, people may not know it, but the Presbyterians actually started Princeton when it was the College of New Jersey a million years ago. And if I remember right, the Congregationalists started Harvard and the Episcopalians started Yale, and the Presbyterians started ... It was all faith-based education in the early days, but I think it's a fair statement to say that Princeton University is not the center of Christian education at the moment.

Dr. Michael L.: It is not. I had an interesting experience there. Most of my career had been at highly selective research institutions and I have to say I have just discovered great joy and a great deal of enthusiasm for the kind of education that a school like Gordon can provide.

William: So, okay, so just then to walk the path. You're at Princeton, you're doing high-level learning there and research. You end up at Rice again, now we're in the Bible belt. Some people would say the buckle of the Bible belt, but again, Rice, not really the capital of Christian education, right?

Dr. Michael L.: That's right. Yep. It's a little slice of the upper west side in the middle of Houston, Texas.

William: Well, my father in law went there as did my brother and sister in laws and we live right next door and I run around the campus at least twice a week. So love the school. No knock on Rice, but here you are at arguably one of the flagship Christian universities in the country. What in the world was their search committee thinking?

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I think that they were interested in maybe finding somebody who had a particular profile, a different kind of background than maybe they'd been looking and these are jobs that require different kinds of skills and so they thought that I maybe had the right kind of background and experience and-

William: Did you have an uphill battle with them at all in that, okay, you're not in Christian education, you haven't been a part of the CCCU or any of those kinds of things? Was there any, is this guy going to fit question that was going?

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I don't know what they said behind closed doors, but I would say that the interview that I had, which was several hours in length, was a cordial, warm exchange of ideas that felt like it was an extended conversation among people who are partners. And I was gratified, I had really prayed that the Lord would

give me a very clear sense because this was a significant turn in my professional journey and I wanted to know this is not Michael's idea, but this is really what the Lord would want. So I asked him if it was possible for both them and for the board to be unanimous in their decision, and when they called to tell me they very quickly told me it was a unanimous decision of the search committee and then eventually unanimous support from the board and that was a good confirmation to me.

William: That's great. For those who are unfamiliar with either the Ivy and Ivy-ish, we'll call Rice, world and then jumping into the deep end of Christian education? What are the big differences you've had to learn between what's going on in secular academia and Christian education?

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I would say the thing that I love about Christian education is that we do so many wonderful things at a ... We stretch resources so much more strategically for kingdom impact and I would love to be able to have the endowment that Rice or Princeton had, but somehow the Lord has been able to meet our needs and my best students at Gordon are on par with my best students that I taught at both Princeton and Rice. I believe the quality of what's happening in our classroom is on par there. It's a difference of institutional resources, and I'd say of global recognition. Part of the reason why I came to a school like Gordon and I should say, I feel very engaged in the work that I'm doing and really grateful the Lord has opened up this door for me, but one of the things that I like the most about it is that I can be my complete self.

Dr. Michael L.: When I was on the faculty at Rice there was a part of me that I really did not disclose to others, I didn't talk about very much and I was not able to live into the fullness of who I am as an individual, and being able to be fully myself and to also be engaged in the life of the mind and the life of faith. It makes a huge difference. My wife, Rebecca and I both are products of having Ivy league graduate degrees, but we both believe that for the undergraduate experience we very much hope that our daughters will go to a Christian institution because the kind of formation that occurs in that critical window when a young person is thinking about big questions and has worthy dream, you really want that young person to be shaped by people who share your values and your sense of making a difference in the world.

William: So that's probably a good segue to you filling us in on Gordon itself. People know Gordon-Conwell Seminary, but if you say Gordon college, that's not going to register way down in Texas except now that you've been making trips to Texas for nine years. But let listeners hear a little bit about the college origins, mission, what you see going forward.

Dr. Michael L.: This is the college's 130th anniversary year, founded in 1889 as a missionary training school. And Gordon would be considered one of the top Christian institutions of higher learning in the world. There are two institutions that are Christ-centered that are nationally ranked by both US News and Princeton

Review, Wheaton in Chicago and Gordon here in Boston. Gordon has a globally diverse student body. We probably have the highest percentage of international students of any Christ-centered institution. About 14/15% of our student body comes from outside the US/ 70% of our students come from outside of Massachusetts. So it's a nationally representative body and we have about 90 different areas for academic study. Everything from traditional liberal arts programs such as visual arts and economics, and English literature and philosophy to more applied fields like finance and accounting, pre-health opportunities as well as experience and professional tracks, pre-engineering, those kinds of things.

Dr. Michael L.: We have a wonderful group of students who are deeply committed to Christ. Gordon is one of only three nationally ranked institutions that have only Christians within the student body, and we do that because we know that faith grows the best in the context of wider faith. But unlike other Christian institutions, we're in the most pluralistic part of America. We're very much a city on a hill in New England. When our chapel services meet, the largest gathering of evangelical Christians in a single moment in all of New England. So there's a lot that happens at Gordon and to the extent that a single institution represents the gospel to the world of higher education, I think Gordon plays a particular role. Boston is the global capital for higher education. Home to more colleges and universities than any other place on the planet. Home to more college students per capita than any other place in the world. Within that milieu, Gordon is a lighthouse in this part of the world.

Dr. Michael L.: 50 years ago, Gordon Divinity School merged with Commonwealth Theological Seminary and spun off as a separate institution to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. We still have a wonderful partnership with our friends at Gordon-Conwell. Gordon now offers graduate programs and fields such as education, finance and leadership, as well as a full range of undergraduate and pre-collegiate programs. We're located on a beautiful part of the country on the North Shore of Boston. We're about three miles from the Atlantic ocean, about 450 acres. We have five spring-fed lakes. We have lots of places where students can run or cross country ski if they want to in the winter. We're located very close to the mountains in New Hampshire and Vermont, and students can also go and read books at the beach.

Dr. Michael L.: So it's a really great place. I say to our students, "We're blessed to be able to go to college in a part of the country where other people come to vacation." And in a really great spot. We welcome faculty from many world-class institutions. Dr. Sarita Kwok is the chairman of our music department after being associate Dean of The School of Music at Yale. Dr. Russ Tuck, Chairman of our computer science department took early retirement from Google after he led the team that helped develop Gmail. So you can literally study computer science at Gordon from the guy who created Gmail, which I think is [crosstalk 00:14:40].

William: Wow. Wow. Well, so as you've moved into this role, like I'm thinking of I did not undergrad at Wake Forest, which had been a Southern Baptist school. Which has been where you identified your local congregation when you were in Texas. I think Southern Baptist and it's not so much a Southern Baptist school anymore. Now we've got a daughter at Baylor, which had been very much a Southern Baptist school. Still a little bit tied to it. I think maybe even still a member of the CCCU, but not got the same feel that I felt when I've been on your campus. What are the challenges that you have faced as it seems that a lot of faith-based schools are like, "To keep market share we got to ... We're facing compromise." I don't know, that might be a too pedestrian way to state it.

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I think that really different institutions have different ways of understanding their identity, but for us being centered on Christ is really fundamental to who we are and that's been central to Gordon for 130 years and Lord willing, it'll be central to the next 130 years. Gordon aspires to be a place that can show to the wider world of higher education how to be a thoughtful Christian engaging with contemporary issues in the academy and in society. So we have a shared system of faith. We're not sponsored by a particular tradition or denomination or church. So we welcome students from the full spectrum, from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox to Charismatic and Pentecostal. About 50 different Christian denominations represented on the Gordon campus.

Dr. Michael L.: Within that milieu, however, I'd say that there's a shared commitment to the centrality of Jesus, a real commitment to prayer, to Bible study, to worship, and also a real commitment to trying to take their learning and the scholarly work that our faculty undertake in a way of trying to serve the global church. Not every institution has that calling, but that's the distinctive thing about Gordon. We exist to stretch the mind of talented young people to help deepen their faith and then elevate the contribution that they can make for the wider world. We call that the Gordon Commission, it's what we believe as an institution we've been commissioned by God to do, and so far the Lord has really blessed the work that we're about.

William: Not without struggle though, right? I mean you've had to take make some hard calls over the years.

Dr. Michael L.: We were targeting about five years ago by group of LGBT activists because we have a traditional sexual ethic on our campus. We believe that sex should be reserved to folks who are married and we believe marriage is between a man and a woman. That's not a radical idea for the church and not a radical idea for Gordon College, but in an environment, particularly in a place like Massachusetts, which was the birthplace for the marriage equality movement in the LGBT community, they were folks who really wanted to force the college to change. And I would say we were an experiment. Could enough outside forces apply enough pressure on an institution to get it to change one of its practices that might in the end create a domino effect for Christian institutions across the United States? I'm really grateful for the support that we felt from so many

other believers at other institutions and folks who came to our support and we needed it. I will say one of the things I've become convinced of is that it's important for believers to support one another when you're on the front line of attack or at least deep criticism, and we felt that in 2014 and 2015. So far we've been able to demonstrate it's possible to embrace both the grace of Jesus Christ as well as the truth of the gospel in a thoughtful way.

William: That's so good. I want to cover a different subject, Michael, because one thing I'm learning is we become familiar with and study the world of Christian higher education is that you mentioned five years is turnover for president of any university. What I'm finding is the cabinet-level positions might even have more churn than that, particularly within the Christian context. Are you finding that that's the case?

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I've been very blessed to have stable leadership on my cabinet, but certainly those positions are extremely demanding. Student life for student development, advancement, enrollment, academic leadership, these are tough positions and I would say, all of us in higher education are having to figure out how to do more with less. We have fewer net tuition revenues that are coming to institutions as we've had to increase the financial aid to help keep the college education affordable within the reach of middle-class families. So it requires a particular kind of skillset. I think that all of us who are in leadership are looking for cabinet officers who are bright and talented, but also who are resourceful and strategic. I can't think of a single institution of higher learning today that is not trying to figure out how to stretch their resources more effectively.

Dr. Michael L.: So we're looking for people who are entrepreneurial, who can create programs or opportunities with relatively little investment and in turn use the results of those new initiatives to be able to fuel further enhancements down the road. Whether you're developing a new graduate program in nursing or starting a new student leadership program for undergraduates, or developing a pre-collegiate program for high school students.

William: So when you're interviewing or if you've had stability, you haven't been interviewing, but if you were giving advice to a president that's interviewing for a new provost, a new Dean of student affairs, this sort of thing. What would be some of the things you would look for in an interview? How would you find that resourcefulness? What are you going to be asking that's going to tell you yes, this is a kind of a scrappy scholar if you will?

Dr. Michael L.: Yeah, so I oftentimes will ask candidates to tell me about times when they have had to create something out of virtually nothing, and as far as I'm concerned that could be starting a volunteer hospitality ministry at your church or it could be a new business that you launched at a for-profit firm, but we're really looking for examples of where you've had to create something out of very little investment. Second question that I'm oftentimes looking for is how many times has this candidate found themselves in an environment where they've had to

demonstrate resilience and grit? I think that the key to Christian higher education will be in some ways maintaining the faith and sticking with the vision through the ups and downs of demographic changes. Today there are 2 million fewer students in college in America than there were five years ago, and that figure is going to continue to decline as we see the birth rate is declining. So we have to figure out how can you create the kind of educational offering people want even if you have to do it with fewer resources? Those kinds of things, whatever your job, whatever your role, is going to be something will be important for candidates as they're thinking about new opportunities in higher education.

William: That is gold right there. And what would be like ... You've learned some things, you've interviewed quite a bit in the nine years you've been there. Talk to Michael nine years ago and say, "Hey man, don't step on that rake because it's going to hit you in the face. It's going to look like a good idea and not be a good idea in interviewing." But have you learned some things like, "Man, I used to look for this, but no, no, no. Not anymore."

Dr. Michael L.: Well, I think I would say that in my own life I tended to overestimate what I could do in a single year and I underestimated what we could do in five years. So as I talk to candidates, I'm less interested in hearing what they're going to do in the first 90 days or even the first year, but I'll ask them to give me a vision of five years into the job how will we know you have been successful? And people who are able to articulate that, that shows they're really ready to move their division or their department in a significant way, but they also have a clear understanding of the process you go about that. That really matters. One of the unique features of jobs in higher education is that there is this notion of shared governance where faculty, alumni, trustees, students, as well as administrators all have a voice in the decision-making process. If you're not familiar with that kind of context you have to learn how to develop those kind of skills.

Dr. Michael L.: I've found a number of wonderful colleagues who came out of the marketplace, particularly who were deciding that they wanted to take an early retirement from the corporate world but were really wanting to invest in the next generation. Those have been some really wonderful colleagues that we've had. Our executive vice president came out of the corporate world at Cisco. Our chief financial officer came out of asset management at a leading firm here in Boston. We've been able to get some terrific people who've had those kind of backgrounds, but I do think it requires a different kind of mindset. So in interviews, I'm also looking to see how comfortable are they in a more consultative or even consensus decision-making kind of environment.

William: That sounds a lot like we were having a conversation at lunch with a bunch of executive pastors that are here for coaching and senior pastors, I know having been one I was always very enamored with business leaders who wanted to come on the church staff. Maybe they've made a pile of money and now they want to do ... Instead of success, they want significance or whatever the bridge



is they're trying to cover. I would get so enamored with their talent in the business world I would forget to look for the soft skills, because some of what I'm hearing you described sounds like the difference between winning in the business world and being a Christian versus coming into a volunteer management role where you can't just tell people what to do. It's a consensus-driven leadership. Is that a fair analogy?

Dr. Michael L.: Absolutely. I'm looking for emotional intelligence. I'm looking for self-awareness, their ability to be able to read other people and to be able to persuade. In our kind of institutions, there is very little coercion that you can exert to get things done. It's all about persuasion.

William: That's great. Well, so one final topic. I know your time's precious and our listener's is too, but if you could go back. So you talked about birth rates a while ago, the birth rate thing is such an interesting phenomenon and the thing is there's no arguing it. You just have to deal with it. So one thing that we deal with a lot is you've got a lot of leaders in every vertical in the workforce, a lot of leaders that are baby boomers that are retiring. I am mid to late '40s and there are not a lot of me in the pool of available candidates, and then you get to millennials and there's a bunch of them. So what we're seeing in every vertical everywhere is just by supply and demand there are a lot of people getting asked to do jobs that they're not qualified for yet. So it's like battlefield promotions. Like, "Okay, now you're in a job. I know you're 33 but ..." Well, you went to your job a little sooner than the normal track for president of a major university. If you had to visit a younger Michael or if you were talking to somebody in their '30s that's about to take a significant leadership job in higher education, what do you know now that you wish you would've known then?

Dr. Michael L.: There is a wealth of wisdom and insight that you can gain from talking to advisors and for me, it's represented on my board of trustees, but I really did not seek out the counsel and advice of my trustees on the way to manage effectively. I wish I had done that earlier. I think the hardest part of my job is that I have to inspire confidence, hope, and interest among constituents, all of whom are motivated by different things. There's nothing that works for the entire team of folks that I manage. What works for my vice president for advancement is not the same motivation for my provost, and having to be able to learn how to manage in those diverse environments is something I wish I had learned earlier how to do that. I think that if I had gotten advice and input from my board and individual trustees who had spent time working in a complex organization like higher education, that would have really helped me a lot.

Dr. Michael L.: So probably the biggest lesson that I think you have to learn when you move into leadership is that what works for one person will not work for another. So you really have to improvise a lot and taking advantage of conversations with folks who have been down the path, that's really the surest way, I think, to getting the most effective kind of consulting and coaching you could ever imagine.

William: That is super helpful and, Michael, I really appreciate you making time for us today and just thankful for what you're doing in higher education. I don't think people understand it is really who can be thoughtful and scrappy at the same time? And it's probably unlike anything your field has ever faced. So thank you for giving your time and energy toward that and if we can help you in any way, let us know.

Dr. Michael L.: Will do. Thanks for having me on.

William: Sure thing.

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