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Center for Worship grounds musicians in God

December 01, 2008 | Teresa Dunham

Liberty University's Center for Worship is a unique voice in higher education, providing what no other school in the nation offers — a separate Department of Worship and Music Studies.

“We only focus on one task, and that's training people to be worship leaders and ministers of music,” said director Dr. Vernon M. Whaley.

With approximately 600 undergraduate and graduate students — as well as 14 fulltime faculty and six adjuncts — the program that kicked off in 2004 in a former campus hang-out called David's Place expects its first graduating class this academic year.

For students who have been at the Center for Worship since the beginning, there's no doubt that a spirit of harmony and a unique calling is in the hearts of all who attend there.

“First, we base their admittance on calling,” Whaley said. “We'll take you where you are, and we'll equip you so that when you leave here you can do what God called you to do.”

If a student is called to lead worship, then Whaley feels called to teach that student — and the students are diverse, ranging from the quintessential “Mr. Cool” who wants to strum a guitar and sing the latest songs on stage to those with more traditional yearnings who want to lead worship by playing the organ in a large cathedral.

Students who desire careers in classical music or music education are served by the Department of Music and Humanities.

Though a pure heart is more valued than a pure voice, the Center for Worship cultivates both.

“Dr. Whaley always says when we’re doing choir that we’re evangelists of great tone. We’re to sing with excellence so that people are not distracted by wrong notes. They really can concentrate on the full message ... because of the quality of our singing,” said junior Neil Durner, 20.

Maintaining high standards, the Center’s music theory instruction covers everything from Beethoven to the Nashville Numbers, jazz harmony and contemporary praise and worship music. Students perform junior and senior recitals, presenting a strong combination of classical and contemporary worship literature.

“I’ve loved all my classes that I’ve taken. The professors and the faculty are all really encouraging. The music classes are difficult, but you can see how they’re really going to apply to your life later,” said junior Eliza Buckler, 19.

The secret to the Center for Worship’s success is that course offerings are driven by the job market demand. Pastors, ministers of music, denominational leaders and Christian organizations were asked to identify the skills they look for when securing worship leaders — musical talent, people skills, administrative ability, technology — and courses were designed accordingly.

Each undergraduate worship student chooses a specialization in worship leading, intra-cultural studies, women’s ministry, worship technology, youth ministry, business, theatre, Biblical studies or pastoral training. Other areas being considered for specializations in the future include Christian Music Industry (songwriting or artist development) and African-American Worship Studies.

The Center for Worship partners with Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary to offer graduate worship degrees with specializations in Ethnomusicology, Church Planting, or Leadership. The Ethnomusicology emphasis strategically equips Liberty music students to serve as music missionaries.

“We’re training people to be practical in their local settings,” said Whaley.

One of the program’s greatest strengths is the high-profile Partner Faculty that teach in undergraduate and graduate classes each semester — respected professionals including Ricky Skaggs, Babbie Mason, Al Denson and Buddy Greene. Charles Billingsley, worship pastor at Thomas Road Baptist Church and Artist-in-Residence at Liberty, regularly visits and shares with students.

The Center’s full-time professors are educated at some of the nation’s finest music schools, and they have experience as current or former worship leaders. Worship musicians such as Vince Lewis, assistant professor of guitar, have played with iconic jazz musicians including Dave Brubeck and B.B. King.

Beyond the practical advice and instruction that professors offer, students learn on the front lines in internships at some of America’s largest churches, missionary agencies and other ministry

groups in the country. The Center for Worship organizes its internships based upon the church's needs and the student's corresponding gifts.

There are currently more than 2,900 openings for worship leaders in evangelical churches across the country, Whaley said, so students have strong career options when they leave LU.

"We get a call or two a day from a pastor or church making a request for a worship leader or music director," he said.

Above all, a solid Biblical foundation in worship and commitment to developing music ministry skills remains the focus at Liberty's Center for Worship.

"Part of being a worship leader is having an understanding of Scriptures," said associate professor Don Marsh, explaining that the degree helps students choose songs that glorify God and are scripturally sound.

Musicians are sometimes reputed for having an "artist's temperament," but the Center for Worship strives to keep that in check with classes devoted to developing leadership skills, a heart for God, time management and priorities for ministry.

"We know that our gifts were given by God and that we can't take a lot of credit for it — in fact, no credit for it," Marsh said.