

MORE THAN A VOTE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE 1995 AMALGAMATION

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ABSTRACT

The 1995 amalgamation of Northwestern College (NWC) and Dr. Martin Luther College (DMLC) into Martin Luther College (MLC) was a major turning point in how the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod trains future pastors and teachers. Most of the writing about this event focuses on the structure of the new college and the joining of the pastor-track and teacher-track programs, but far less attention has been given to what the change felt like for the people who lived through it. This thesis examines the personal impact of the amalgamation through surveys and interviews with students and faculty who experienced the final year of NWC and DMLC, and the first year of MLC. Their memories show strong emotions on all sides, yet they also speak of much growth and positivity. By listening to their voices, we can better understand what they went through.

INTRODUCTION

For many decades, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) trained its future called workers through two distinct colleges: Northwestern College (NWC) in Watertown, Wisconsin, and Dr. Martin Luther College (DMLC) in New Ulm, Minnesota. NWC existed to prepare men for the pastoral ministry, emphasizing biblical languages and doctrinal study. DMLC trained future teachers for WELS elementary and high schools. Though both served the same church body, they developed unique identities, traditions, and cultures.

By the early 1990s, the financial pressures of funding two separate colleges and the desire to combine ministerial schools led synod leaders to consider amalgamating the two colleges. After years of deliberation, the WELS, at the 1993 Synod Convention, voted to combine NWC and DMLC into a single college on DMLC's campus in New Ulm, MN. In 1995, that decision became reality, and Martin Luther College (MLC) was formed. For some, the transition felt practical and necessary. For others, it felt sudden, painful, and deeply personal.

The goal of this paper is not to argue whether the amalgamation was right or wrong, but to listen to the voices of those who lived through it. Through surveys and interviews, students and faculty in both the last year of DMLC and NWC and the first year of MLC revealed a variety of emotions: grief, confusion, resilience, and gratitude, to name a few. **In this thesis, I will**

demonstrate that the 1995 amalgamation of Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College reshaped the individual experience of the students and faculty through loss, adjustment, and eventual adaptation, revealing how major institutional changes impact people on a deeply personal level.

Research Method

This thesis is primarily based on qualitative research conducted with individuals who lived through the 1995 amalgamation. I created a survey with questions¹ and sent it to 324 former students and faculty who were on campus during the final year of NWC or DMLC, or the first year of MLC. 109 responses were received and became the primary source base for this project.

To supplement the survey results, I conducted seven interviews with selected participants whose responses filled the gaps where survey responses were brief or incomplete. The surveys and interviews were supported by written sources from that time, including personal correspondence and student publications such as the *Black and Red*. Because the most visible struggle occurred among those from NWC, there is a greater volume of documentation from the NWC side. Fewer written reflections came from the DMLC side, as most involved with DMLC viewed the amalgamation as largely positive.

1. see Appendix 1.

After collecting the material, I organized responses into themes: loss, culture, adaptation, and reflection, which shaped the structure and content of the paper.

LOSS AND COMMUNICATION

Hearing the News and Reactions

The announcement of the 1995 amalgamation of NWC and DMLC marked a significant moment of upheaval for students and faculty of both schools. For many pastor-track students at NWC, the news was met with disbelief, frustration, and anger. One student recalled the moment vividly: “I recall first hearing about amalgamation when I was in the Wittenberg dorm my sophomore year...it was so traumatic. Wayne Borgwardt and WELS President Karl Gurgel...decided that they’re going to amalgamate, and they voted on it at synod convention. So, it’s going to happen next year. So, it was like a year and a half before we actually had to move.”² Another student recalled, “[I learned of it] at Northwestern and it was a punch in the gut,”³ capturing the immediate emotional shock that came with hearing the announcement. The sense of shock was echoed by another NWC student who remembered Dean Lindemann’s announcement at chapel: “I am not sure how I first heard about it (amalgamation) but I have a strong memory of Dean Lindemann wearing prescription sunglasses (he said he broke his normal glasses but some suspected he was hiding tears) at the end of evening chapel announcing to the student body that

2. Interview with Interviewee G, November 2025.

3. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

it was going to happen. I was initially very against it and was angry that it was going to happen.”⁴ The intensity of these reactions reflects how deeply students were tied to NWC.

But not all NWC students reacted with strong emotions. Some reactions were neutral: “[I had] no strong feelings about Northwestern closing.”⁵ One member of the 1995 class of NWC approached the announcement with practicality because he would graduate before moving to New Ulm: “[I] knew it was going to happen. Nothing I could do about. Just worry about getting work done and passing tests to graduate.”⁶

Even before the decision to amalgamate was finalized, students experienced a mix of anticipation and uncertainty. Some had been aware of discussions circulating in the community: “I followed the synodical conversation pretty closely. I was very much against the idea. I understood the desire for a consolidated campus, but it seemed crazy to me to move out of our demographic center,”⁷ while others were surprised despite prior exposure to rumors: “I’ll never forget one of my high school classmates telling me about the results of the vote in late July or early August after the convention [in 1993]. I had run into him at a softball tournament we both happened to be at, and he brought it up. I honestly hadn’t given it much thought up to that point and was a bit confused.”⁸ These differing levels of awareness highlight how personal experience

4. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

5. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

6. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

7. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

8. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1996 graduate

and social networks shaped initial reactions, with some students caught off guard and others bracing for the outcome.

Teacher-track students at DMLC responded to the announcement differently, often with a mix of curiosity, caution, and optimism. “I heard about it while at DMLC. Initial thoughts: it was something that was talked about for a while, I just never thought it would happen. [I] also had a hard time envisioning both colleges on one campus.”⁹ Another DMLC student in 1995 put it this way: “I didn’t really think that much about it. I kind of thought it would be a big deal. I just said it wasn’t that intense for me.”¹⁰ Another student worried more about the practical side of it: “I don’t remember how I heard, but I thought ‘it’s about time’ and wondered where it’d be located. I remember hoping it wouldn’t be in the middle of nowhere, like New Ulm.”¹¹

Faculty perspectives reveal another dimension of the experience. Many faculty members, especially NWC faculty, opposed the amalgamation while maintaining professional composure, navigating the tension between personal concerns and their responsibility as teachers and professors. One NWC faculty member recalled, “[I] don’t remember exactly when amalgamation became a thing, but [I] was very much opposed to it. Understanding that there are pros and cons to everything, [I] felt that the cons far outweighed the pros when it came to amalgamation.”¹²

9. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

10. Interview with Interviewee A, November 2025.

11. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

12. survey respondent, MLC faculty

One NWC student remembered seeing professors struggle with visible expression of opposition: “I remember certain professors...being very vocal and angry about their opposition.”¹³ But despite strong feelings, faculty often worked to support students through it: “As a student at NWC, our faculty especially kept us updated on the discussion.”¹⁴ The pressures of personal concern and professional obligation show how the faculty had to navigate these times.

There were also positive experiences. Some students, particularly those at DMLC, found the amalgamation as an opportunity to think about switching over to the pastor-track: “I remember that I had always wrestled with being a pastor...I really didn’t know anyone at Northwestern and so it was more comfortable to go to DMLC. I got there, and I made a very, very good group of college friends, and so we were just enjoying life, having fun, and I certainly didn’t want to uproot that.”¹⁵

Overall, these reactions illustrate the deeply human side of the amalgamation. Pastor-track students at NWC often experienced intense emotional disruption, while the teacher-track students at DMLC approached the changes with measured curiosity. Positive experiences coexisted with frustration, anger, and worry, demonstrating that the personal effects of the amalgamation were deeply felt.

13. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

14. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

15. Interviewee A.

Institutional Loss

The decision to amalgamate in 1995 confronted both NWC and DMLC with the sudden realization that something familiar and deeply loved would no longer continue as before. For many, the sense of loss was personal, embedded in place, tradition, and history. A NWC student publication called *The Black and Red* summarized the atmosphere there clearly: “The mood here at Northwestern remains one of grave concern and sadness...many things we love will come to an end; things will not be the same.”¹⁶ One NWC student remembered, “At NWC, there was a lot of nostalgia at it being the last year, and a fair amount of animosity that our college had been ‘killed’.”¹⁷ Another noted that “we felt a loss for our alma mater. Our class was grieving for it even before we graduated. We felt like students without a college.”¹⁸ The amalgamation not only combined schools; it disrupted personal connection to place and memory.

For many pastor-track students, the depth of loss and grief came from watching traditions disappear almost overnight. Northwestern’s student life was full of tradition and energy. One *Black and Red* article described the energy of homecoming week at NWC: “Probably the most entertaining events of the week, especially for the faculty, were those of the class participation competition...before the week began, the Dorm Council chose a theme for the week. This year’s theme was “Famous World Leaders.” Each class was encouraged to select a leader from history

16. *Black and Red*, September 1993, vol. 97, no.2, 42.

17. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

18. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

and to do whatever they could think of to show their class spirit as it related to the leader they chose. At the end of the week three anonymous faculty judges would decide which class did the best job.”¹⁹ Other students remembered float competitions during homecoming, the WELS Classic basketball tournament, snow volleyball, snow sculptures, snow softball, learning Northwestern cheers on the soccer field, the RAGS, and the homecoming pig roast at Riverside Park. These traditions were a big deal to NWC students, showing their school pride. One wrote, “NWC men were NOT happy—NWC had amazing school pride.”²⁰ Another said, “[We] lost the school spirit and pride for ‘old Northwestern.’”²¹

Some described the loss as losing a family legacy, like the teacher-track student who shared that “there was much sadness...especially for my family as we had four generations of pastors attend NWC.”²² The family connection ran deep. One NWC student remembers “they (fathers and grandfathers) would gather around the (football field) fence, and they’d watch their sons and grandsons play for Northwestern College. Those were lost and it wasn’t the same at MLC.”²³ Traditions like these had been a bridge between generations at NWC. These reflections align with a student quote from the *Black and Red*: “The grieving process has been going on for

19. *Black and Red*, October 1992, vol. 96, no. 3, 68.

20. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

21. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1996 graduate

22. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

23. Interviewee G.

some time now...it's not much unlike losing a loved one...a slow, sad coming-to-grips with letting go of something we hold near and dear to our hearts."²⁴

Teacher-track students also voiced grief. One DMLC student remembered, "I think that I felt sad that the identity of the college was changing—the name, mascot, traditions, etc."²⁵ Another reflected on how the shift affected expectations of student life: "It kind of stunk that all of our traditions, except the pig roast, were gone...when those things are taken away, it was hard to stay positive."²⁶ A third DMLC student summarized that it was hard "understanding that many of the cherished traditions from both campuses would be lost."²⁷ The grief was real on both sides, rooted in love for the place they went to school.

Faculty perspectives added another layer to this sense of change and loss. Some professors at NWC were described as openly emotional or resistant, as one NWC student remembered that "the old Northwestern profs went off in class about it as Northwestern was winding down and as MLC was starting up."²⁸ Another said, "Some of them (professors) reacted very strongly against amalgamation...kind of smiled approvingly when we, as the student body, reacted angrily."²⁹ The classroom became a place where this loss was felt most sharply. Yet not

24. *Black and Red*, September 1993, vol. 97, no.2, 47.

25. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

26. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

27. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

28. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

29. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

all responses were defined by frustration. One faculty member described the moment more with reflection than frustration with “the feeling that we had ‘lost the good old days’ and were piloting through unknown waters.”³⁰ Another faculty member reflected, “I would suppose that the feeling I had was one of mostly sadness at the loss of the dear institution. And yet also a sense of inevitability...once the decision’s made, well, then you go with it.”³¹ Often, acceptance and grief coexisted.

The transition also meant losing professors who chose not to relocate. One NWC student explained, “We lost some of our NWC professors. We loved our professors...it upended our world.”³² Some of these beloved professors included Dean Ed Lindemann, Professor Paul Eickmann, Professor Don Sellnow, and Professor James Korthals. DMLC students experienced this as well, and one student noted “loss of teachers for both schools.”³³ When beloved professors stayed behind or retired, academic formation felt interrupted, no matter what school one came from.

Still, not every memory was full of sorrow. One DMLC student remembered, “It was special to have the last concert and be part of the last class of DMLC.”³⁴ An NWC student fondly remembered “so many lasts. Last homecoming. Last winter carnival. Last Forvm production.

30. survey respondent, former MLC faculty

31. Interview with Interviewee B, November 2025.

32. Interviewee G.

33. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

34. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

Last basketball game (where NWC absolutely crushed WLC, by the way).”³⁵ Many students enjoyed these “lasts” as moments of closure.

One of the clearest moments demonstrating how Northwestern College students interpreted amalgamation was the appearance of a casket at the final NWC graduation service in May 1995. Rather than viewing the amalgamation as a relocation, students, faculty, and NWC understood it as the death of an institution they loved. A member of the last graduating class of NWC recalled, “Normally, college graduation should be a happy time. However, we had to walk to our graduation past a casket that had been placed by some alumni in front of the gym entrance.”³⁶ What should have been a commencement became a funeral.

The image of death did not exist in isolation. It reflected language already used on campus. In a letter to WELS President Karl Gurgel, Dean Lindemann wrote, “We’ll simply bury her (NWC) and go on...only those who really appreciate her will want to come to her funeral.”³⁷ Dean Lindemann went on, “The amalgamation of the colleges means the death of NWC...here at Northwestern we see the corpse every day.”³⁸ The casket at graduation matched the vocabulary already circulating on the NWC campus: Northwestern was not moving; it was dying.

35. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

36. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

37. Ed Lindemann to Karl Gurgel, 23 November 1993, Box 1, S021 The Amalgamation Collection, Synod Archives, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Waukesha, WI.

38. Lindemann to Gurgel, 23 November 1993.

Faculty reactions after the last graduation service confirmed this feeling. One 1995 graduate remembered, “The first people who greeted us going through the line after the service was done were the faculty members, most of whom were crying...a day which would have been a joy just so happens to be one of the most depressing days of my life.”³⁹ Many of those professors had taught, advised, and worshiped with students for years. Some of them would go up to New Ulm with them. Some would not.

Graduation typically marks the beginning of adulthood and vocation. The casket publicly acknowledged that NWC’s identity, traditions, and culture would not continue as they had. Northwestern was not moved but laid to rest, and on that last graduation day, many people came to grieve a place they loved.

In the end, the loss was shared among NWC students and faculty, and among DMLC students and faculty. They lost the traditions and institutions they had poured their lives into. What students and faculty deeply loved was changed.

Uneven Impact

39. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

But overall, the 1995 amalgamation was not experienced uniformly. For many NWC students and faculty, the closing of their campus meant a perceived loss of culture, tradition, and place. One student bluntly stated that in the last years of NWC, the atmosphere felt like “gloom and doom, all is lost,” while others were “fearful about losing tradition we held dear and—more importantly—fearful we would lose the singular focus of preparing pastors.”⁴⁰ The recurring fear was that the move would erode NWC’s identity. One NWC faculty member voiced this concern before the vote to amalgamate, arguing that if “the pastor track is moved to Dr. Martin Luther College’s campus, the pastor track will lose its identity. New Ulm is synonymous with the synod’s teacher training college.”⁴¹ There was also a fear of losing the brotherhood, which many students regarded as essential. Years later, that brotherhood still has weight. The sense of fraternity, humor, and mutual accountability at NWC remained something that “still exists today among those who graduated from there.”⁴²

From the teacher-track side, the transition was often interpreted through a different lens. Many DMLC respondents felt that the merger prevented institutional decline and even preserved something important. One teacher admitted relief rather than grief, noting, “I know some felt traditions were wiped out...some families who had generations go through the system felt a

40. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

41. John Braun, “School Structure: Placing the Pastor Track at Risk,” 27 May 1993, Box 1, S021 *The Amalgamation* Collection, Synod Archives, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Waukesha, WI.

42. survey respondent, former MLC faculty

sense of loss at the tradition. I was not impacted very much.”⁴³ Another observed, “Honestly, I was happy that the school would merge in New Ulm as it made me feel that I was not losing my school (just a name change).”⁴⁴ The continuity of campus and mission meant DMLC did not experience institutional death as NWC did. As one DMLC student put it, “We lost being a Lancer. But, my college campus still existed. It was just going to look a bit different now.”⁴⁵ What was a closing to NWC was a preservation to DMLC.

Still, the teacher-track perspective was not free from complexity. Some DMLC students reported some displacement. One teacher-track student recalled, “being the final graduating class of DMLC, we felt forgotten,”⁴⁶ especially as the focus turned toward MLC. Even those who supported the amalgamation sometimes recognized the hardship imposed on others. One faculty member remembered efforts to express empathy, saying the goal was to help those “uprooting everything.”⁴⁷ And while some teacher-track students experienced excitement at the idea of a larger campus and new relationships, others observed tension, noting that “DMLC was a happier place before amalgamation...after amalgamation there were definitely some that did not even look at someone in the eyes when passing in the hall.”⁴⁸

43. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

44. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

45. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

46. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

47. Interview with Interviewee F, November 2025

48. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1997 graduate

For pastor-track students especially, the disruption was more personal than structural. Students worried about losing “camaraderie” and the pipeline to the seminary, now six hours away instead of forty-five minutes.⁴⁹ Separation from family was a common concern: “The distance from home to college increased (1 hour vs. 6.5 hours)”⁵⁰ and “my travel time home went from 1.5 hours to 6+ hours.”⁵¹ For some, the cost was practical. Jobs were lost, financial aid was altered, scholarships were replaced. One student remembered losing “almost all my scholarship money,”⁵² while another lamented, “my parents did not come as often for my events nor did I go home as often.”⁵³ In contrast, teacher-track students rarely expressed this degree of upheaval. One teacher admitted simply, “I did not feel any loss at all. I think the Northwestern guys felt the most loss.”⁵⁴ Pastor-track voices who didn’t feel a sense of loss at the relocation were rare.

Where one campus saw the future preserved, another watched its past uprooted. Where one group experienced stability, another endured dislocation. The degree of loss during the amalgamation was not universal. It was differentiated by location and identity.

49. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

50. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

51. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

52. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

53. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

54. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1997 graduate

Expressions of Response and Remembrance

Tattoos

For many NWC students who lived through the 1995 amalgamation, the emotional weight of the times led to different ways of expressing their thoughts. More than one student recalled a surge of Northwestern tattoos, describing it as a way pastor-track men tried to preserve traditions as they felt them slipping away. One noted, “There was a big push to get NWC tattoos,”⁵⁵ while another remembered “the guys at Northwestern getting tattoos of the Northwestern seal and the Trojan that last year.”⁵⁶

Homecoming

The last NWC homecoming also stands out as an act of remembrance. One student recalled how their class built “a scale replica of the bell tower on the Watertown campus” from wood and cardboard, writing “the names of every NWC graduate from its 130 year history, one name in each brick.” He remembered pulling “a few ‘all-nighters’ to finish... but it was well received and well worth it.”⁵⁷

55. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

56. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

57. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

Emotion also showed itself in protest. One NWC class designed a float showing “a Northwestern Trojan with a huge weight dangling over its head, ready to crush it,” labeled with the letters “FSC,” which stood for Feasibility Study Committee, who studied the possibility of the amalgamation. Their own words captured their feelings: “We were angry and sad. We were also a bit rebellious.”⁵⁸

Songs

Parodies of songs also preserved the emotions of the times. One song, called “Alma Madduh,” written to the tune of “Camp Granada” responded with sarcasm and humor. Lines such as “Help us muddah! Help us fadduh! What have they done to our alma madduh? It gave us our education, but now they say we must support amalgamation”⁵⁹ captured how these students dealt with these hard times.

Another song, “Alma Mater, Dear,” sung to the tune of “American Pie” showed more grief than humor. Its refrain went like this: “Bye, bye, alma mater, dear, drove back down to Watertown while the college was still here; and good old boys were dryin’ their tears, sayin’

58. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

59. “Alma Madduh,” undated, Box 1, S021 The Amalgamation Collection, Synod Archives, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Waukesha, WI.

“This’ll be Northwestern’s last year. This’ll be Northwestern’s last year.”⁶⁰ These creative songs captured the emotions of the NWC students.

COS Parties

Emotions even appeared in COS party themes. One student remembered the COS party theme “EsCOStology: We’re not extinct yet” with a Jurassic Park logo.⁶¹ Another remembered another party, titled “COSta la Vista baby,” which ended with students shouting along to a chorus from an REM song—“it’s the end of the world as we know it...and I FEEL FINE...”⁶²

The Sprinter Kidnapping

When the amalgamation of NWC and DMLC was announced, students knew that their Watertown campus was not coming with them. Dorms, classrooms, and the chapel could not be moved. Some traditions and routines would not follow them to New Ulm. But there was one thing some NWC students did not want to leave behind: the Sprinter statue.

60. *Black and Red*, May 1995, vol. 98, no. 9, 309.

61. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

62. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

According to a student's recollection at NWC, students acted because “the school was moving to New Ulm, but not the Sprinter.”⁶³ For a group of NWC juniors, that was unacceptable. They wanted something familiar and physical to be with them on the New Ulm campus. A simple sentence explains the motivation: “Feeling jaded, a group of NWC juniors decided that the Sprinter should be coming along.”⁶⁴ This was about carrying a part of their identity with them. NWC was closing, and much would stay behind. If the students could take the Sprinter, a part of the Watertown campus could make the move with them.

The plan was carefully organized. One recollection records that “the company hired to move the property of the college was not going to move the Sprinter...it was too difficult and too risky due to the size and make of the concrete statue.”⁶⁵ But the students believed they had the tools, strength, and motivation to move it themselves. They formed a plan quietly. They needed a truck, a lift gate, moving dollies, and mattresses for padding.

The Sprinter was relocated on campus temporarily during construction. “It was stored at the back of the cafeteria, and it looked like he was being punished as a disobedient boy, sent to a corner.”⁶⁶ But one night, around 1:00 am, a truck rolled behind the cafeteria. The students lifted the statue using a pallet jack, eased it up the hoist, padded it with old dorm mattresses, and

63. Anonymous participant, personal written recollection submitted to author, November 2025.

64. Anonymous, written recollection, 2025.

65. Anonymous, written recollection, 2025.

66. John Braun and Joel Otto, *Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod 1850-2025* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2024), 226.

secured it inside. The plinth, however, was too heavy. “They tried to wedge other objects between the plinth and the dollies...the plinth fell...a corner had broken away.”⁶⁷ Another interview confirmed these details: “[It was stolen] from behind Dean Lindemann’s home...the plinth slipped off, and it broke the corner.”⁶⁸ The base was then hidden, the broken piece was saved, and only the statue itself left campus that night.

When the news broke that the Sprinter was gone, the faculty, headed by Dean Lindemann, demanded the statue’s return. There were warnings, discussion of consequences, and intense interest in finding who was involved. One student even remembered a chapel where Dean Lindemann said, “There are thieves among us.”⁶⁹ But even as Dean Lindemann scolded the student body for it, “you got the sense that underneath he was bursting his buttons with pride that his boys had managed to pull it off.”⁷⁰ When the students confessed, Dean Lindemann said “that he would try to help get the Sprinter moved.”⁷¹

In the official history account, the moment is described plainly: “After the last class graduated from NWC in 1995, the Sprinter reappeared in New Ulm...the chipped corner was repaired.”⁷² NWC closed, but the statue stood again, now outside the gym at Martin Luther

67. Anonymous, written recollection, 2025.

68. Interviewee G.

69. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

70. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

71. Anonymous, written recollection, 2025.

72. Braun and Otto, *Christ Through Us*, 226.

College. In the early years of MLC, old NWC students would gather around it and “were often heard singing ‘Cheer for Old Northwestern’ around the Sprinter late at night.”⁷³ The story of the Sprinter kidnapping shows the pride the NWC students had in their school, and that they made sure something from NWC would stand where they were going next.

Strengthening the Brotherhood

Even simple details from that final year show how Northwestern students responded not by fading, but by strengthening their sense of brotherhood. One alum remembered “monthly steak dinners—not cheap cafeteria steaks, but real steaks,”⁷⁴ likely purchased to use remaining funds before closure. Others remembered constant pizza parties, sometimes campus-wide, which “strengthened the bond between the students and the faculty in ways not otherwise seen before.”⁷⁵ One voice remarked, “Overall it was a great experience to be part of the 1994–1995 school year at NWC,” noting how “people went ‘all out’ that last year.”⁷⁶ NWC school spirit increased rather than diminished during its last years.

73. Anonymous, written recollection, 2025.

74. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

75. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

76. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

Communication and Rumor

In the months surrounding the 1995 amalgamation, communication shaped perception as powerfully as the decision itself. Students and faculty lived through the transition as a personal upheaval intensified by how information, or the lack of it, traveled. Many at Northwestern College felt kept at a distance from the process, unsure whether their voices mattered or whether those in authority understood the change as something more than administrative. “I don’t think you understand or appreciate the hurt. I didn’t understand it myself for quite some time. But after listening to students and faculty for months, I have come to two conclusions. On the one hand the men here are asking, as you heard, what did we do wrong? What did we do to bring down the wrath of a synod on our heads?”⁷⁷ Dean Lindemann’s words captured a feeling many NWC men expressed: confusion mixed with a sense of being judged without explanation, as if their school had failed expectations.

This confusion grew because official information arrived slowly, while informal conversation moved quickly. Rumors filled the gaps left by formal channels. Some students believed that slander about NWC shaped the final vote. One pastor remembered hearing that delegates were led to believe NWC students were “out of control frat boys” and that “putting them on campus with women would civilize them,” even though he felt that picture was unfair and unchallenged.⁷⁸ Without clear correction or transparent reasoning, many concluded that the

77. Ed Lindemann to Karl Gurgel, 23 November 1993, Box 1, S021 The Amalgamation Collection, Synod Archives, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Waukesha, WI.

78. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

narrative moved unexamined into the public conversation, which led to hard feelings. “I don't blame any of our Northwestern guys or their supporters for feeling like some things happened in a less than beautiful way, I don't blame them at all...”⁷⁹ Moments like these fed a belief that the system listened without truly hearing.

Not everyone processed it the same way. NWC students often expressed a sense of loss in terms of identity and autonomy. One student said, “The loss of choice. It was that we lost our choice in the matter. I think that was a huge loss.”⁸⁰ One teacher-track student described the atmosphere after the decision as feeling “like a divorce—like, how are we going to divide everything up and figure out what's next?”⁸¹ Faculty expressed their thoughts. One professor reflected later that the faculty had “plenty of opportunity to talk with colleagues,” but little reason to believe speaking to synodical leaders mattered because “the decision had already been made.”⁸² Unfortunately, this led some to lose trust in synodical leaders.

Yet not all reactions were the same or hostile. Some acknowledged that, while the process felt closed, leaders were still faithfully working within their calling. One pastor-track student, looking back, believed, “We expressed ourselves often, but I don't think the student voice counted much. And maybe that's not all bad. We weren't always mature.”⁸³ A teacher-track

79. Interview with Interviewee C, November 2025.

80. Interviewee G.

81. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

82. Interviewee B.

83. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

student likewise noted that although she did not recall being given an option to share opinions, “looking back... the lack of not being able to share opinions was really not that bad... I trusted that the synod leaders and people in charge were making the best decisions for the called worker training schools.”⁸⁴ These voices remind us that disagreement over structure did not always equal distrust in spiritual leadership.

The perceived disconnect between leadership and those living the change strained both trust and unity. President Braun acknowledged that the resolution clarified some questions but left students with “many more questions... which the resolution did not answer.”⁸⁵ President Gurgel visited the NWC campus to field questions, and it was appreciated. The visit mattered because it signaled listening, but afterward, one student asked, “How can we have any real trust when we (NWC students and faculty) haven’t been trusted by those now advocating the same?”⁸⁶

In the end, communication was not only about information but about belonging. Many pastor-track students and faculty questioned whether their perspective carried value. A letter noted that “no one stood up for us” when damaging narratives circulated, and that such silence “was hurtful and discouraging.”⁸⁷ Others recalled that “everyone realized what we said had no bearing on plans.”⁸⁸ These statements reflect the feeling of being spoken about, not spoken with.

84. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

85. *Black and Red*, September 1993, vol. 97, no. 2, 42.

86. Lindemann to Gurgel, 23 November 1993.

87. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

88. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

CULTURE CLASH

Two Worlds Collide

The amalgamation in 1995 forced two separate campuses with distinct cultures into one, attempting to create a new culture. When the schools amalgamated, these distinct cultures collided sharply, leading to uncertainty about purpose, status, and mutual respect. The result was a campus where students often evaluated one another not simply by personality or friendship, but by track, tradition, and expectation.

Many pastor-track students felt their core identity threatened, describing themselves as misunderstood and displaced. One recalled that “certain (soft) individuals didn't like NWC and others I believe were envious of our tight knit culture and so they were looking to destroy it.”⁸⁹ Another reported, “they couldn't/wouldn't understand why we needed to be so close as brothers.”⁹⁰ That closeness was not easily transferred to a new place, especially when some felt unwelcome or judged for it. One student noted that people “seemed unhappy and angry,” observing upperclassmen who appeared “disgruntled at the amalgamation.”⁹¹ The NWC students

89. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

90. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

91. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

now found themselves trying to fit into a system that did not yet know how to recognize or accommodate that bond.

Teacher-track students experienced this collision from the opposite side. To many, NWC students arrived not just as newcomers but as rivals who seemed to carry pride and superiority. One teacher-track graduate remembered that “there was a sense of superiority from many of them (NWC).”⁹² Another admitted, “as a guy and a football player there were a lot of us that were upset about our rivals joining us on campus,”⁹³ These impressions sometimes grew into resentment, especially when pastor-track students displayed behavior interpreted as dismissive or aloof. A teacher-track student reflected that early interaction “did lead to a negative view of pastor-track upperclassmen as a whole.”⁹⁴ From their perspective, DMLC was the home campus, and now it was being reshaped by a group that did not choose to be there and did not hide their frustration.

Academically, expectations also clashed. Each track valued different forms of rigor and relevance, and this difference quickly became visible. One pastor-track student observed that in shared courses, “one of my classes that I considered a blow off class (science—because it was not as relevant to my program) was taken very seriously by the teachers who were science

92. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

93. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

94. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

concentrates.”⁹⁵ This perception was mutual. A teacher-track voice recalled that “academically there was a noticeable difference in the workload between pastoral ministry and educational ministry students.”⁹⁶ In mixed classrooms, some even felt that “academically there were classes that held lower expectations of pastor-track than teacher-track.”⁹⁷ When a professor joked that struggling pastor-track students could “always quit and become a ditch digger or join the teacher track,” it highlighted how academic identity could easily become a tool for comparison or dismissal.⁹⁸ Both groups valued their work, but valued it differently, and those differences often surfaced as tension rather than understanding.

Faculty experienced their own adjustment as they entered shared departments and mixed classrooms. One pastor-track graduate noted that “sometimes the professors would talk about their dissatisfaction with the amalgamation... It definitely made the attitude of pastor track those first few years a little bitter.”⁹⁹ When policies differed, students noticed. A pastor-track student recalled, “the NWC profs adopted a ‘foreign language attendance policy’ that was much stricter than the DMLC profs... This led to a sense of elitism among the pastor vs teacher-track students.”¹⁰⁰ Even when interaction appeared civil, one teacher-track student described it as “fine

95. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

96. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

97. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

98. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

99. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

100. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

on the surface,” but marked beneath by “underlying resentment and an ‘air’ about them.”¹⁰¹

Faculty and students were learning to work together, but shared responsibility did not immediately create shared values.

In this early stage of amalgamation, neither group was fully prepared to integrate the other. Pastor-track students carried a sense of tradition and rigor that felt endangered, while teacher-track students defended their home campus and were wary of perceived superiority. Faculty watched both tension and growth unfold, navigating their own adjustments while trying to maintain classroom stability. The clash was not simply academic, nor merely social. It was a moment when two cultures discovered how difficult unity can be when tradition, pride, and purpose stand side by side without a shared history to hold them together.

Social Integration

The amalgamation of Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College placed two distinct cultures into constant contact, forcing pastor-track and teacher-track students to reevaluate social expectations, comfort levels, and personal behavior. For many former NWC men, the introduction of women onto a previously all-male campus reshaped daily interaction in ways they had never prepared for. As one pastor recalled, “I also wasn't sure how comfortable I was

101. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

around women at the time.”¹⁰² Others expressed relief rather than anxiety, welcoming the presence of female peers. One student reflected, “I think that I was relieved to be going to a school that included females.”¹⁰³ These differing reactions reveal a fundamental tension at the moment of integration—not simply male and female, but pastor-track identity meeting teacher-track identity with no shared history to guide them.

Perception of culture played a heavy role in the transition. Several students from DMLC viewed the former NWC atmosphere as closed off and strange, with “men who seemed to be part of a closed-off culture.”¹⁰⁴ Others feared the opposite outcome: that introducing women to the campus would encourage superficial interaction and social distraction, turning them into “[a market]” or leading to “more fights between teacher guys and pastor guys.”¹⁰⁵ Both sets of concerns reflected a deeper anxiety about what might be lost: heritage for NWC students, and stability for DMLC students. A tension emerged between longing for continuity and excitement for change, neither fully reconciling the other.

The adjustment carried moral and behavioral implications as well. Some students believed integration would refine conduct and reduce harmful habits, noting that the absence of women for so long had allowed destructive patterns to grow unchecked. One former NWC

102. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

103. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

104. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

105. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

student suggested that before the amalgamation, “the whole male thing kind of became a little bit too much after a while,” and saw co-education as “a little bit of a blessing.”¹⁰⁶ Elements of campus life at Northwestern, like drinking and behaviors considered unhealthy, were things that perhaps “were good to have gone away.”¹⁰⁷ This reflection stood in contrast to others who viewed the new environment as loosening accountability rather than tightening it. One teacher-track student argued that for the pastor-track, “It became a party for the pastor track that they had 4 years of partying before they had to become serious.”¹⁰⁸ These interpretations, set beside one another, show how the same change could be read as progress or decay.

At its core, this cultural collision forced two groups who had developed separately to learn how to see one another. The merger did not automatically unite social identity or erase tension, but it introduced the first conditions for such unity to someday form. In the experiences of students and faculty, gender, training track, and institutional memory no longer remained separate realities. They bumped into each other, questioned each other, and slowly and uncomfortably began to reshape one another.

Clashing Traditions

106. Interviewee G.

107. Interviewee G.

108. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

The cultures of NWC and DMLC did not merge smoothly. The result was not one new identity, but the difficult and sometimes awkward blending of pastor-track and teacher-track students and the faculty who served them. Many who entered the combined campus quickly realized that the habits, humor, workload, and school pride of each institution were not easily interchangeable. One student commented, “You could sense the culture shift from NWC, which was student-driven in many areas of the school, vs. (D)MLC, which, from my perspective, seemed to be more teacher-driven than student-driven.”¹⁰⁹ The feeling of imbalance created both frustration and confusion, as students tried to figure out what parts of the old school to hold onto and what needed to be let go.

Tradition became the clearest battleground. Many DMLC student remembered none of their traditions surviving at all: “There’s no DMLC tradition that carried over than I can remember.”¹¹⁰ However, one DMLC professor claimed nothing had actually been lost, only reshaped: “I would just say I cannot think of truly a tradition that we lost. It was more keeping both and understanding them.”¹¹¹ For NWC students, preserving Northwestern's spirit felt like a duty. One student stated, “We absolutely were not going to throw away NWC tradition/traditions simply because they had moved us.”¹¹² Another remembered, “Others didn't appreciate our sense

109. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

110. Interviewee A.

111. Interviewee F.

112. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

of humor. They wanted to create new traditions and just move on.”¹¹³ When traditions were transplanted into new soil, they did not always grow. Cheer squads like the RAGS, once celebrated, suddenly felt misplaced. As one participant explained, “The Rags, male cheerleaders...felt desperate and out of place...Almost all the remnants of NWC culture felt weird or out of place.”¹¹⁴ Yet, on the other hand, some teacher-track students believed the blending of customs was fair and even handled wisely. One DMLC student recalled the merging of athletic identity positively: “Neither school got to keep their mascot, which was probably a very wise decision.”¹¹⁵ Even so, there remained voices who felt loss more sharply than progress, especially when new traditions failed to develop quickly enough to replace what had been left behind.

The culture clash of amalgamation was not one-sided. Some pastor-track students grieved a fading brotherhood and “tried to keep it up.”¹¹⁶ Some teacher-track students felt overshadowed or looked down upon. Others, both pastor-track and teacher-track, believed the blending was ultimately fair and necessary. The truth lies somewhere in the middle: both schools brought depth and beauty into the merger, and both lost pieces of themselves in the process. What emerged was not the triumph of one culture over another, but the uncomfortable start of

113. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

114. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

115. Interview with Interviewee E, November 2025.

116. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

something new: a campus still learning how to remember its history while also looking toward its future.

Shared Space Without Shared Culture

Despite uniting two campuses into one physical location, the early years of MLC reveal that proximity did not guarantee unity. Students and faculty describe a campus where buildings were shared, but culture was not, where two communities moved alongside each other more than with each other. A pastor-track student observed, “in the first year of MLC there were really two colleges operating on one campus; the merger had not fully taken place administratively.”¹¹⁷ Many remembered life not as one school, but as two distinct institutions forced into contact without a shared identity to hold them together.

For many NWC students, the move to New Ulm meant entering a space that did not feel like their own. Some arrived carrying loss and frustration, which quickly colored their social interactions. One recalled, “The Northwestern/pastor-track guys stuck close together. We were bitter and let everyone know we didn't want to be there.”¹¹⁸ Another described lingering displacement, remarking, “I felt like the sense of belonging I was looking forward to as a pastor-track NWC student was lost and replaced with nothing solid.”¹¹⁹ Another noted the emotional

117. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

118. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

119. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

dislocation, saying, “I also felt like I was intruding on someone else's campus. Not to be dramatic, but it was like a student from the University of Alabama transferring to Auburn.”¹²⁰ Students repeatedly noted that even shared worship could not close the gap. “At the opening year of MLC, I remember the NWC upperclassmen who transferred from NWC all sat together in the front right section of the auditorium for chapel services... it felt awkward, as if the group was trying to be separatist or elite.”¹²¹ Students also witnessed “NWC and DMLC faculty sitting in different ‘sections’ for chapel.”¹²²

Teacher-track students, however, experienced the disruption differently. Rather than losing a campus, many felt that something familiar was suddenly occupied by a culture that did not integrate easily. One teacher-track alum remembered that “DMLC was a happier place before the amalgamation,” where greetings in the hallway were normal, but after, “there were definitely some that did not even look at someone in the eyes when passing in the hall.”¹²³ For others, the change meant a subtle cooling of friendship where no hostility existed, only distance. “As the amalgamation approached, my friendships cooled a bit as I knew that many of the Northwestern students were pretty disappointed about it.”¹²⁴

120. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

121. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

122. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

123. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1997 graduate

124. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

Even so, not every memory was marked by conflict or disappointment. Several students noted that over time, the atmosphere improved as the last NWC classes graduated. “Once all those who had been at NWC graduated, it became a much better culture.”¹²⁵ Others reflected that despite the struggle, the transition eventually brought stability. “It was just a weird time... not all bad in that first year, but there were certainly some bumps in the road.”¹²⁶

Still, the early years at MLC reveal a clear truth: shared buildings alone could not replace lost identity. Yet even within this fractured atmosphere, voices testify that the discomfort of those first years did not define the future. Culture did change. Community did eventually form. But in 1995, students did not yet share a school — only space.

125. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

126. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

SOCIAL, ACADEMIC, AND SPIRITUAL ADAPTATION AND GROWTH

Year of Survival

The first academic year after amalgamation is remembered by many as a season defined less by flourishing and more by endurance. Students and faculty from both schools entered the new MLC campus knowing that the familiar life of Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College had suddenly become one shared place. One student described those first months as “kind of like a shock to the system,” adding that it was “more of a survival year than a year where someone was thriving, and that goes for everybody.”¹²⁷ His words capture the tone of a campus still grieving separation while learning how to function together. The year of survival was not marked by polished unity or a smooth transition, but by the hard work of forging ahead in the face of a reality nobody could reverse.

Social life felt the impact of change most immediately. Northwestern pastor-track men in particular carried the weight of relocation, and that emotional burden shaped early interactions. A NWC student remembered how “the first year of MLC the NWC guys were super bitter. The 2nd year a bit less (but still not happy) the 3rd year (when I graduated) a bit less (but still not

127. Interviewee A.

happy about it).”¹²⁸ Survival meant patience. Teacher-track students often watched the frustration with empathy, even when initial interactions were strained. “I knew they would not be happy about moving to New Ulm, but they figured it out. We all figured it out” (teacher 1996). No one adapted instantly, but most found themselves adjusting through shared classes, shared worship, and the unavoidable reality of daily proximity.

Academically, the merger created a campus still putting itself together while classes were already in session. One pastor reflected that “in the early years of MLC, administrative services and student services were not well-developed.”¹²⁹ Students from both tracks suddenly found themselves attending classes together, yet their expectations, schedules, and academic cultures differed. Survival meant learning to work within a system not yet finished. Over time, the initial disorder gave way to curiosity and even appreciation. A pastor who lived through the transition described how the second year brought a visible shift: “We started socializing with teachers and wondered why we hadn't before.”¹³⁰ Another later noted that shared classrooms gradually formed natural interaction between programs: “Since pastors and teachers could take classes together, the interactions were more natural as the years went on.”¹³¹ The work of survival slowly became the work of learning and relating.

128. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

129. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

130. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

131. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

Even celebrations reflected both tension and progress. Homecoming in 1995 carried anxiety over whether old traditions could survive, yet the event became a memory of joy. One pastor recalled loving “all the festivities of the first homecoming in 1995,” even while recognizing that “there were a lot of concerns about each former school being able to carry on their old traditions.”¹³²

By the end of the first year and into the next, change did not necessarily feel easy, but it became livable. A teacher observed that “after a year or so, you could see people coming together more.”¹³³ Another reflection added that although differences remained, the separation between tracks had narrowed significantly “by my senior and fifth years.”¹³⁴ The year of survival eventually gave way to years of rebuilding. Adaptation did not come quickly, but by surviving the difficult first stretch, pastor-track and teacher-track students, along with faculty, gained the foundation to move toward integration, friendship, and stability.

Collaboration and Connection

Early collaboration became a key factor in the transition. One student remembered working with representatives of the DMLC drama and yearbook programs to form newly unified organizations, saying that they planned “a schedule of productions for the following year, once

132. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

133. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

134. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1999 graduate

amalgamated.”¹³⁵ Even in small decisions like renaming publications or choosing mascots, individuals from both campuses took ownership of building something shared. Others participated directly in choosing the Knights as the new identity, with one student recalling time spent “at MLPS and we chose the ‘Knights’ and the colors of black / red / white.”¹³⁶ These memories suggest that cooperation, even when unfamiliar, provided momentum toward a new institutional life rather than simply preserving the old.

Faculty perspectives also reveal adaptation happening on multiple levels. Some found themselves on panels or committees, offering insight. One professor described being invited for personal check-ins with both presidents, saying the experience made her feel valued and heard as leadership sought “to make this transition as smooth as it could be.”¹³⁷ Another assisted Northwestern faculty in relocating to New Ulm and even noted that local banks reached out to help, observing that New Ulm “bent over backwards to help with the process.”¹³⁸

Social life, however, may have been the most immediately noticeable change, especially for NWC men arriving on a mostly female campus. Many pastor-track students openly acknowledged the shift. One noted, “Since we were now going to school with girls the NWC students did tend to bathe more often.”¹³⁹ Another commented that social life expanded because

135. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

136. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

137. Interviewee F.

138. Interviewee F.

139. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

new friendships naturally formed. DMLC students similarly felt the difference; one said simply, “Socially it was great. I made a lot of friends that were pastor track.”¹⁴⁰ Others enjoyed a “broader network of male friends,”¹⁴¹ something DMLC women had not experienced at the same scale before. These positive reactions show real relational growth as two ministry tracks learned to occupy one shared space.

Academically, the amalgamation created new possibilities but also highlighted differences in preparation and approach. Some students appreciated the addition of electives or superior instruction in areas they felt had been lacking. One pastor-track graduate reflected that the science and math departments at MLC taught more effectively than at NWC.¹⁴² Another valued taking Psychology of Learning with a New Ulm professor he would never have met otherwise.¹⁴³ Musicians likewise expressed enthusiasm, noting that “the music program at MLC was far superior to what we had at NWC.”¹⁴⁴

The impact of adaptation is perhaps clearest in the way relationships broadened across tracks, shaping future ministry. One teacher-track graduate noted that seeing the pastor-track culture helped her better understand her future colleagues.¹⁴⁵ Another noted that the friendships

140. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

141. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

142. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

143. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

144. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

145. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

formed were lasting, breaking down caricatures held on both sides.¹⁴⁶ Faculty recognized similar blessings. A professor who once taught only teacher-track courses described enjoying “a broader representation in the classroom” and forming relationships with colleagues he would not otherwise have known.¹⁴⁷ Students echoed this theme from their own angle: participation in sports, music, and student government required working with classmates from the other campus, and these partnerships knocked down some of the previously held false caricatures.

Even subtle cultural habits changed through daily life. Some pastor-track students admitted that attending college alongside women encouraged them to be more courteous, responsible, and aware.¹⁴⁸ Another reflected that the amalgamation made pastor-track men more “well-rounded,”¹⁴⁹ pushing them to grow in ways an all-male environment could not.

Spiritual Grounding and Growth

The spiritual life of the new campus did not remain untouched by the amalgamation. Some students felt that the challenges surrounding amalgamation actually sharpened their spiritual focus. One pastor recalled that “NWC was always a place where we were immersed in the Word, worship was central, repentance was insisted upon when there was sin, we bonded with each

146. Interviewee G.

147. survey respondent, former MLC faculty

148. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

149. Interviewee E.

other as Christian men, where Christ was the focus. When we were betrayed, those things became all the more our focus.”¹⁵⁰ His reflection shows how disappointment and disruption did not weaken faith but instead drove students back to the Word with renewed dependence.

For others, the most noticeable change was the worship experience itself. The combined student body changed chapel into something fuller and louder. A teacher-track student remembered, “Spiritually, I do remember chapel services sounding much more powerful with the added male voices.”¹⁵¹ Another said, “spiritually I feel like chapel became a more focused thing that people did deliberately.”¹⁵² Here, spiritual growth came from the simple reality of more Christians gathered to hear the same gospel.

Students who once heard only one institution’s preachers now encountered a wider span of preaching. One pastor-track student wrote, “It was neat to hear some really gifted professors get to give chapel in a packed auditorium for 1000 people... and I enjoyed hearing some other profs preach that I would have otherwise missed out on.”¹⁵³ Faculty additions opened new opportunities for hearing the Word, and teacher-track students benefited as well. One pastor noted, “teachers (students)... were very thankful that they were able to sit in classes of some of

150. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

151. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

152. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

153. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

the pastor track faculty and just simply grow in God's Word."¹⁵⁴ Spiritual formation expanded as classrooms and chapel became shared spaces for future pastors and teachers alike.

New Identity and Community

As the newly formed Martin Luther College moved forward, students and faculty found themselves reshaping their lives within a community that was no longer simply Northwestern College or Dr. Martin Luther College. Some described these early years as an unexpected chance for renewal. One student reflected, "We wanted to begin something new."¹⁵⁵ Another added, "From where I sat, there was an opportunity to start anew at MLC."¹⁵⁶ Even in the midst of disruption, hope and possibility emerged.

Many students recalled the gradual but steady development of unity. The first graduating class began forming shared practices and symbols, including medallions at commencement, something one student remembered as possibly the beginning of a lasting tradition: "We may have been the first class to receive graduation medallions... I believe now continues on the MLC campus."¹⁵⁷ New customs did not erase the past but instead marked the growth of something different. As another student described, "Getting past some of the traditions that were lost

154. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

155. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

156. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

157. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

obviously takes a little time. I believe most of those old traditions that died were replaced with better ones.”¹⁵⁸ This sentiment was shared by both pastors and teachers, reflecting acceptance and even gratitude for what emerged over time.

Over time, unity deepened, even if it happened slowly. A teacher remembered, “I think a positive outcome was that there was more acceptance of the amalgamation toward the end of my senior year. There was less bitterness and more fun. People started to socialize together more.”¹⁵⁹ Others saw blessing where pain had once been dominant: “In retrospect it brought our class closer together, and in time, we did see both individually and collectively that there were blessings that came with amalgamation.”¹⁶⁰ The campus did not simply survive the transition. It grew through it.

In the end, students themselves shaped what MLC became. One teacher-track student recalled serving on the student council and intentionally pushing for unity, saying, “We spoke of... ‘ONE team’ a lot during that year.”¹⁶¹ Another student, looking back, concluded simply, “Martin Luther College has developed its own unique culture.”¹⁶² The merger did not erase the past, but it did form something new in the shared purpose of their future ministry in Christ’s church.

158. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

159. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

160. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

161. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1996 graduate

162. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

LONG-TERM MEANING AND LASTING IMPACT

Lasting Negative Feelings

The long-term impact of the amalgamation remained deeply personal, and for some who lived through it, the change never fully settled into peace. Years later, some continued to question whether the decision itself had been right. One teacher-track student reflected, “Looking back, I don't know if this was the correct move.”¹⁶³ A pastor-track student expressed similar discomfort, recalling that “honestly, I can't really think of one (positive). The whole thing seemed a pretty steep downgrade to me in every facet.”¹⁶⁴ Over time, some pastor-track and teacher-track voices continued to hold negative feelings about the amalgamation. This shows that the legacy of amalgamation was not all positive, but very complex and deeply human, woven into the memories of those who lived through it.

Yet even as sorrow ran deep and resentment lingered, the final worship services at NWC offered a different viewpoint. Some of the final worship services at NWC reflected a confidence in God's faithfulness despite all the rapid change. Professors and leaders did not deny the loss the campus was experiencing. Instead, they addressed it directly and then pointed students to something greater than a location, building, or school name.

163. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

164. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

At the 1995 Commencement service, NWC President John Braun acknowledged the end clearly: “As we bring a close to Northwestern’s history, we don’t want that reflected light to go out just because the pastoral training in our synod moves to a new location.”¹⁶⁵ His words accepted the reality that something long-standing was coming to an end. Yet he did not call it extinction, but a transfer of light. Northwestern’s identity—its goals, training, and confessional commitment—should not disappear simply because its campus did.

The closing sermon by President Braun made that idea visual. He said, “After we are finished in here, the lights will be turned out not only in the gymnasium but in the long history of Northwestern. This little college will be relegated to the pages of history...as we walk down the steps, out the doors and away from here, don’t let the light go out!”¹⁶⁶ Another NWC pastor-track student remembered President Braun saying those words.¹⁶⁷ The statement reflects two truths simultaneously: Northwestern’s institution was ending, yet the light of the gospel training it provided was not dependent on any one location. President Braun did not pretend that identity was unchanged; he asserted that God’s faithfulness did not vanish with it. God would continue working through his Word and his church.

Another service was remembered by many and reinforced this same idea. One NWC pastor-track student recalled, “There was an additional special service marking the end of the

165. *Black and Red*, Final Issue, Commencement 1995, student publication of Northwestern College.

166. *Black and Red*, Final issue, 1995.

167. respondent survey, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

college at which John Jeske preached on Isaiah 40. ‘All men are like grass...the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord endures forever’.”¹⁶⁸ NWC’s identity, buildings, and traditions would wither, but God’s Word does not fall, and that is a truth much older and steadier than any school.

The impression that these sermons gave was not one of nostalgia alone. One pastor-track student summarized it this way: “Overall, I was given the impression that this (the amalgamation) was something pretty momentous...perhaps somewhat risky...but there was a lot of determination to make sure that the new college would carry on the heritage of confessional Lutheranism.”¹⁶⁹ The church NWC served, and the gospel it trained men to proclaim, would continue without a doubt. The light of NWC was not to be mourned into extinction, but carried into a new place, because God’s faithfulness was not tied to Watertown, but to his promises. In this way, the closing worship services did not erase the loss, but they planted the first seeds of perspective that would grow with time.

How Time Changed Perspective

Over time, many individuals who lived through the 1995 amalgamation found that their distance from the moment allowed them to see it differently. Initial reactions back in 1995 were often

168. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

169. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

negative. While the transition was painful for both sides, the years that followed show that time did not erase emotion but reshaped it, allowing many to view the amalgamation with new clarity.

Some came to interpret the change through a lens of gratitude. One pastor-track student reflected that “our good and gracious Lord formed/forged MLC into his servant to serve the church,”¹⁷⁰ a statement rooted in confidence that God used the merger as part of his larger plan. A teacher-track student wrote, “I still remember fondly all the days of DMLC, but I know that to sustain the ministry of the colleges, that the change was a positive one.”¹⁷¹ Some pastor-track respondents expressed a similar shift: “I think overall it is positive. I didn’t agree at the time, but God has definitely blessed it.”¹⁷² For them, time allowed recognition that institutional change did not undo or diminish the church’s mission.

Faculty voices reflect this same movement. One interviewee stated, “I would never, ever say, ‘Let’s go back to the way it was before... God’s timing and God’s plan is always perfect.’”¹⁷³ Another pastor recalled that even while he was unhappy, he trusted that “the Lord’s work would still get done,” quoting one professor’s reminder that, “If this is the worst thing that has ever happened to us, then we’ve had it too easy.”¹⁷⁴ For some, the eventual change in perspective grew

170. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

171. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

172. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

173. Interviewee F.

174. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

not from circumstances but from a willingness to place the event within God's larger plan for his church.

During the amalgamation, students also shared how time had shaped their appreciation for faculty leadership. One pastor reflected, "I probably wasn't aware at the time what a challenge this must have been for the professors, but they put their faith in the Word and found their unity in the body of Christ."¹⁷⁵ Another noted that he came to respect those faculty who moved forward to New Ulm after the decision, as well as those who could not.¹⁷⁶ For students and professors alike, time highlighted not only the difficulty of the moment but also the faith and character of those who served through it.

Many who once resisted the amalgamation back then now see it as a great blessing. One pastor-track student concluded, "Now that we are past the emotion of the moment, I only see blessing in the combined campus."¹⁷⁷ A teacher-track similarly admitted that while the change was traumatic, "it was a good thing for future generations."¹⁷⁸ Still others continue to hold tension. They were grateful for the outcome, but sorrowful for how it unfolded. One NWC student captured this balance: "I just kind of wish that I would have embraced it more in a more godly way... because we didn't want to go and that really hampered the blessings that could have

175. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

176. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

177. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

178. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1997 graduate

been ours.”¹⁷⁹ Hindsight became a teacher, and the passage of years allowed many to see not only what was taken but what was given.

Blessings from the Amalgamation

With time to reflect, many who lived through the amalgamation recognized that God brought real blessings, even if those blessings arrived through struggle. For some, the amalgamation broadened the understanding of ministry itself. One teacher-track student expressed this simply: “MLC is such a better campus today with pastors and teachers being united in mission together in one location.”¹⁸⁰ That sentiment was stated multiple times across the responses. Faculty noted that unity extended into teaching practice as well: “pre-seminary and education faculty are walking more in harmony and can learn from each other and be a blessing to each other.”¹⁸¹ These reflections reveal a long-term benefit not only for students but also for those preparing them for ministry.

Many pastor-track students, looking back, saw meaningful personal and social development across the pastor-track student body. Several admitted that the amalgamation addressed weaknesses that existed prior to the amalgamation: “Many of our pastors had challenges in interpersonal communication and working together with intelligent women in their

179. Interviewee G.

180. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

181. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

congregations,”¹⁸² showing an honesty about past limitations at NWC. The amalgamation forced interaction, and as one faculty member stated, “Future pastors have benefited from seeing female students on a regular basis.”¹⁸³ A different pastor observed how this changed character traits as well: “The pastor track guys are probably a little nicer now... there is less of that rugged individualism.”¹⁸⁴

Teacher-track students also spoke of change, and often with gratitude. One teacher-track student saw a deeper partnership in ministry as the most lasting mark: “I see a greater appreciation from pastors for teachers. In the past, that wasn’t always the case.”¹⁸⁵ For many DMLC students, the new environment created access to a broader network of future colleagues, with one reflecting that they now know both pastors and teachers in congregations across the synod.¹⁸⁶ The testimonies make clear that shared campus life allowed both tracks to understand one another’s work more fully, and that this understanding continued well beyond graduation.

The blessings were not only academic or professional. They were personal and relational. More than one person simply acknowledged, “I met a wonderful, godly spouse,”¹⁸⁷ and similar statements surfaced again and again. Another pastor-track student wrote, “I took advantage of

182. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

183. survey respondent, former MLC faculty

184. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

185. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1997 graduate

186. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1998 graduate

187. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1998 graduate

the opportunity to make all kinds of friends that I still enjoy today,”¹⁸⁸ suggesting that relationships formed during tension sometimes become the deepest ones. Several responses linked this bonding to the unique experience of living through trying times. As one pastor put it, “The student relationships probably grew closer, being a part of something historically significant.”¹⁸⁹

“Overall, I believe it’s been a great blessing... It’s hard to argue with the product that is coming out as pastors graduating from WLS whose foundation was laid at MLC.”¹⁹⁰ This reflection testifies to the growth that happened because two very different campuses were forced to become one. In the end, the blessings described are not shallow or sentimental. They are lived, tested, and remembered blessings.

What We Still Carry Forward

Among pastors, teachers, and faculty, the long-term reflections show that what endured was not simply an institution, but the values, relationships, and shared mission that ultimately defined it.

Both pastor-track students and teacher-track students, as well as faculty, often describe the years following amalgamation as a period of meaningful integration. Many highlight improvements in relationships between pastors and teachers — relationships that now shape

188. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1997 graduate

189. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1999 graduate

190. survey respondent, MLC pastor-track 1996 graduate

congregational life across the synod. One pastor wrote, “There still is definitely some tension and separation [between tracks], but it is much better today,”¹⁹¹ while another said simply, “Some traditions were left behind, but the foundation the college was built on, preparing future called workers, remained.”¹⁹² These reflections show that the central most point of MLC endured: the shared purpose of forming servants for Christ’s church.

Faculty, in particular, carry memories that point to lasting unity. The death of Coach Kruse in MLC’s first year became a moment that clarified what truly mattered on a newly combined campus. A faculty member recalled seeing pastor-track and teacher-track students “who all cried together,” and reflected, “If Christ had not been raised, our faith was pointless. And so was the school. But Christ has been raised.”¹⁹³ In that moment, what carried forward was not institutional history and memories but shared identity in the risen Christ. That’s the important identity that students at MLC have.

But location remains one of the most frequently remembered and discussed long-term effects of the amalgamation. Even among those who appreciate the unified campus, many wonder how geography shapes recruitment, diversity, and long-term ministry preparation. Concerns often center on distance from population centers, with one pastor noting, “Losing a college in the demographic center of our synod is a big negative,” and adding that “New Ulm's

191. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

192. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

193. survey respondent, former MLC faculty

location is a drag on recruiting, being so far from anywhere.”¹⁹⁴ Others reflect that earlier optimism has shifted over time, as one faculty member admitted he had advocated for the move but now recognizes its limitations for students from urban or distant regions.¹⁹⁵ Another voice summarizes the balance clearly: that the New Ulm setting may offer beauty and heritage, but still raises questions today about accessibility and future enrollment.¹⁹⁶ Even when expressed with caution rather than frustration, these reflections show that location remains an issue carried forward: not simply as critique, but as an ongoing conversation about how geography supports or challenges the mission of preparing workers for the church.

Those who question the decision do so because they cared deeply for what came before, and those who appreciate what has grown since do so because they witnessed unity take root where many deemed it unlikely. What we carry forward, then, is that God preserved, guided, and still blesses the preparation of workers for his kingdom. The stories, friendships, and convictions shaped during the transition now live on in classrooms, pulpits, parsonages, and congregations across the synod. The memory of the amalgamation remains, not only in debate but in gratitude for what God continued to build, even as he blended two histories into one.

194. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

195. survey respondent, former MLC faculty

196. survey respondent, DMLC 1995 graduate

TAKEAWAYS

Reflecting on the experiences shared by those who lived through the time of amalgamation, it feels right to end with gratitude. The students and faculty of NWC, DMLC, and MLC at that time carried a burden that generations today do not have to bear. Many endured loss of place, traditions, relationships, and even jobs. Many saw their campus change or close. Many carried that pain for years, and some still do. Others came to see the blessing more clearly with time.

For this reason, it seems fitting to echo the words of a teacher-track student: “We should thank them for going through this.”¹⁹⁷ We should thank the students and faculty who endured the trying times of the amalgamation so that WELS could today study, train, and grow in a single space in New Ulm. Their struggles delivered blessings to students today that they did not see when they were students. What the WELS has at Martin Luther College and its other ministerial education schools, training future called workers, is unlike anything any church body in America has.

Martin Luther College is the one ministerial education college our synod has for forming workers for the harvest field. Whatever difficulties the past holds, MLC needs support and prayers, as it is the place where God continues to raise up servants for his church. Schools and traditions may change, but the gospel does not. God still works through uncertainty and disagreement. For that reason, we treasure what the WELS has been given in Martin Luther College.

197. survey respondent, MLC teacher-track 1997 graduate

And if someday the WELS faces another transition, large or small, these testimonies given by students and faculty offer wisdom. Be patient with those who make those hard decisions. Be gentle with those who struggle to accept them. Big change is hard. Always keep Christ at the center of the WELS ministry training system, as one pastor-track student said, “Trust God blesses us, even when we don’t agree with the decision,” and after the decision is made, “work together for success.”¹⁹⁸ The harvest is still plentiful, the workers are still needed, and the Lord is still in control of it all.

198. survey respondent, NWC 1995 graduate

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONS FOR SURVEY AND INTERVIEW

1. What was your connection to the schools at the time of the amalgamation (student, faculty, tutor, staff, etc.)?’
2. How did you first hear about amalgamation? What were your initial thoughts, feelings, or emotions?
3. Can you recall any opportunities when students, faculty, or staff were able to share their opinions about the amalgamation? How did those opportunities (or the lack of them) affect your experience of the transition?
4. What changes did you personally experience because of the amalgamation—socially, academically, or spiritually?
5. How would you describe the atmosphere or sense of community during the transition and in the early years at MLC?
6. From your perspective, what were some of the most significant challenges or losses you or others felt during that period?
7. Can you recall any specific traditions (of NWC or DMLC) that disappeared or changed?”
8. What personal blessings or positive outcomes do you recall?
9. Do you recall any personal stories/memories/recollections during this time concerning amalgamation?
10. Looking back, what lasting impact do you believe the amalgamation has had—on Martin Luther college as an institution, on those who lived through it, and on future pastors and teachers?

APPENDIX 2. LIST OF ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWEES

Interviewee A (former DMLC and MLC student), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025.

Interviewee B (former NWC and MLC professor), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025.

Interviewee C (former NWC and MLC faculty), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025.

Interviewee D (former MLC student), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025.

Interviewee E (former DMLC and MLC student), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025.

Interviewee F (former DMLC and MLC professor), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025.

Interviewee G (former NWC and MLC student), interviewed by Kyle Lindemann, phone interview, November 2025

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