Is the quality of a Luther College degree recognized? To pose that question in Luther’s early years would have resulted in an unqualified “yes.” But the question requires another qualifier. From whom did the founders want this recognition? And the answer to that question would have been the members of the Norwegian Lutheran Church. Faculty were proud of their graduates. They went out to become the Synod’s pastors and school teachers, as well as community leaders, and, in some instances, presidents of their emerging sister colleges.

As the years passed and the college continued to be Americanized, it became increasingly necessary for it to seek recognition in the larger academic community. Membership in Phi Beta Kappa, the national honor society established at only 280 U.S. colleges and universities, bestows that academic recognition. Dean O.W. Qualley, himself initiated into PBK as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, began in the 1950s and 1960s to hire PBK faculty who could apply for membership. Finally those faculty members began the rigorous application process, and after an extensive written description of the college, a thorough three-day visit to the campus, and a vote at the national convention, Luther was granted a chapter. On April 19, 1983, the president of the national PBK installed the Eta of Iowa chapter.

In 1999 Luther further enhanced its reputation by becoming a member of the Annapolis Group. An organization of leading national independent liberal arts colleges, it hosts member presidents and academic deans twice a year to discuss emerging issues in education and practices and programs common to their institutions.

Wider academic recognition not only brings honor to the school, but also provides educational opportunities for both faculty and students. Luther is a member of the Midstates Consortium for Mathematics and Science. Founded in 1988 and supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Consortium allows students to participate in annual research symposia and to share research with other member schools. Professional development opportunities are also available for both faculty and students.

In 2010, the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) invited Luther to become a part of their group of academically excellent liberal arts colleges. Besides providing opportunities to share in discussions of issues facing higher education, ACM makes possible academic programs and research opportunities for faculty and students alike. Ruth Caldwell, Professor of French, will be the first Luther director of an ACM study abroad program in Florence, Italy in this year’s spring semester.

Luther’s Norwegian Lutheran founders probably did not register very high on the “toot your own horn” scale. But they would almost certainly be quietly proud of the academic quality of Luther and, particularly, of the many alumni who have profited from her education and gone out to serve society with their gifts.