

# America

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## HIGHER LEARNING

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Catholic colleges and universities on a mission

The economic challenges facing Catholic elementary and secondary schools have been well documented in the media. One op-ed piece in *The New York Times* was titled “Catholic Education, in Need of Salvation.” Since the authors focused on the elementary and secondary level, there was no reference to Catholic colleges and universities.

If the first 12 years of Catholic education are in jeopardy, so is Catholic higher education. Without doubt, economics is a

concern. And just as Catholic elementary and secondary schools have taken finances seriously and made them a priority of governance, so also have Catholic colleges and universities.

The fundamental threat that looms over the 192 members of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities is the erosion of the value-added dimension: their Catholicity, manifested in commitment to Gospel values, liturgy, prayer, theology, social justice/service learning and fidelity to church teaching.

Until recently, the founding religious congregation’s role, as the guardian of each college’s Catholicity, was taken for granted. The vast majority of the institutions were established by these congregations—Benedictines, Jesuits, Lasallians, Sisters of Mercy and others. Some 80 years ago, one accrediting association went so far as to describe the founding congregation as a “living endowment.”

Referring to the distinctive Catholic culture conferred by the founding congregation, the president of one Catholic university remarked that “this distinctiveness is like a fine mist. If you stand in it long enough, you will get soaked.” Today, a cultural drought prevails, and that fine mist is less and less



evident on most campuses. Today it is possible to spend one's career on some Catholic campuses without even getting damp.

Presidents, administrators and faculty members at Catholic colleges are chosen these days through a national search from a broad pool of diverse candidates that may or may not include members of the founding religious congregation or even practicing Catholics. To address the issue of a Catholic presence, mission offices have been established to ensure the integrity of the college's Catholic identity and the religious heritage of the founding congregation. Educational programs also have been developed; it is the rare employee at a Catholic college or university who is unaware of mission efforts underway on the campus.

After 38 years in Catholic higher education, however, I am convinced that these important initiatives are little more than stopgap measures; they fail to reflect long-term strategic planning on the part of either Catholic educational leaders or the founding religious congregations of these institutions.

These times call for a significant group of administrators, faculty and staff to commit themselves to the future of Catholic higher education in their universities. In order for these centers of higher learning to succeed, not just as institutions but as Catholic institutions, that commitment must be embedded in the college or university's organizational structure.

## **A Community of Renewal**

Many newly hired administrators, faculty and staff members may think of a mission community as a new idea, a plan of action that goes beyond essays and books about Catholic education. While it aims at action, the mission community is firmly grounded in the vision, values and mission of the founding religious congregation. The genius of the founding congregations was their ability to have a presence across the entire campus. That presence has diminished today to such an extent that few, if any, priests, brothers or sisters remain in administrative, academic or support services. "It's over; move on," the backbenchers conclude. But not so fast.

If we truly believe in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, what often seems to be an accurate surmise is more than likely to become a surprise, for ours is a God of surprises. This "old" idea of how Catholic colleges and universities were able to retain their identity through the living endowment of the founders is the inspiration for a new idea, a surprise that turns the institution on its head, yet gives assurance of a robust Catholic future.

Thus, despite the appointment of mission officers, mission committees and educational programs, there is a need to create a new, living endowment, one that will transform the sharply reduced living endowment of the founding congregation. This surprising, new living endowment could be called a mission community, whose life parallels that of the founding group, transcending, as it did, administrations, faculties and staff, which come and go.

The mission community would be a core group, assuming responsibility for the authentic Catholic culture of the college and the religious heritage of the founders. Members of the founding congregation must continue to be part of this new endowment, not as an elite group but because they are the source of the college's Catholicity and distinctive heritage. Membership would come through response by the administration, faculty and staff to a warm, embracing invitation. Transparency is of the essence. All are welcome: lay Catholics, clergy and religious, other Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, members of other faiths and those who profess no faith. Persons familiar with Catholic higher education know that this diverse group already has made a significant commitment to the vision and mission of these institutions.

When it comes to creating a community, there is no one-size-fits-all philosophy. An all-are-welcome invitation at a large university with a student body of 15,000 may elicit a response from 30 members of the administration, faculty and staff, while a relatively small college of 1,500 might have a mission community of 75. One author has written of "the wisdom of crowds." I am convinced that each mission community will have the wisdom, guided by the Holy Spirit, to respond to the unique needs on campus. A committed community is of the essence, yet there are many difficult issues to address and resolve.

The mission community should be "loosely coupled" to the institution and should not be a committee of the president or of the academic senate. If it is the guardian of the Catholic culture and congregational heritage, there is little doubt in my mind that the mission community will play a prophetic role, at times "speaking truth to power," but it will largely take the role of educating the wider college or university community and keeping Catholicity vital in all areas of life. Of course, partnering with the office of student life, especially campus ministry, will be an important strategy for reaching the students. Likewise, working with faculty members and understanding their vision of Catholic education is critical. One hopes that the Catholic intellectual life, especially Catholic social thought, will become the magnet for faculty investment in Catholic culture and its integration across the curriculum.

The mission community would meet regularly, pray in a manner that respects diversity, provide mission education for administrators, faculty, staff and students, offer reviews of college policy and strategic planning and foster a palpable Catholic culture as shaped by the religious heritage of the founders. Some members may participate regularly, while others may wax and wane in their interest. One thing I am convinced of is the power and appeal of the Catholic university, because it is ultimately about the human journey and life's meaning. However, this does not mean the future of Catholic higher education can be taken for granted. Action is required.

Without the development of mission communities, Catholic higher education will, I fear, wither away. Student acceptance rates are high, budgets are balanced and endowments are, in many cases, robust. But the window of opportunity for ensuring a truly Catholic future is inexorably closing.

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