

ENVISIONING NEW FORMS OF LEADERSHIP IN CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

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The impact of increases in lay leadership in Catholic higher education is an issue of considerable debate. Opponents of the change believe that the traditional identity and mission of Catholic institutions may be significantly altered if lay leaders fail to intentionally nurture Catholic values and practices. Others believe that lay leaders may strengthen and enact the institutional mission just as effectively as could vowed religious leaders. This article provides an overview of a recent study about the perceived impact of lay leadership at one Catholic university. A history of the issues at hand and the methodology of the study are included along with a review of the primary findings. The outcomes of this study can inform the work of institutional leaders in higher education by identifying factors that appear to be important to preserving institutional identity in the midst of significant change. The article concludes with recommendations for vowed religious and lay leaders seeking to preserve and share institutional mission.

INTRODUCTION

At some point during their existence, nearly all institutions of higher education wrestle with the question of identity. “The focus of this debate is primarily ideological and involves ‘lack of consensus as to the substantive content of the ensemble of religious beliefs, moral commitments and academic assumptions that supposedly constitute Catholic identity’” (Gleason as cited in Henkin, Dee, & Manzo, 2001, p. 4). Catholic institutions, in particular, often find it much easier to define what they are not, as opposed to what they are (Connelly & Dooley, 1972). This debate was further exacerbated by the issuance of the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* by Pope John Paul II in 1990 (Henkin et al., 2001), as well as the increasing secularization of students, professors, and administrators who no longer affiliate predominantly with the Catholic faith (Danneels, 2001).

Of particular significance to the identity development of Catholic institutions of higher education is managing the transition in leadership from

governance by religiously appointed individuals to lay leadership. In recent years, the dwindling number of qualified clergy has spurred many Catholic colleges and universities to change institutional charters and allow members of the laity to hold senior administrative leadership roles. According to Morey and Holtschneider (2003), at the beginning of the 21st century, more than half of the Catholic college and university presidents were laypersons. A number of questions concerning the future religious character of Catholic institutions of higher education throughout the United States resulted from such change.

Supporters of the transition from clergy to laity assert that lay people may, in fact, bring more credibility in the development of the religious identity of Catholic colleges and universities (Borrego, 2001). By the very nature of their profession, members of the clergy continually promote the religious identity of Catholic institutions in daily activities. Lay people, however, may be viewed as making more of a conscious choice about the way in which religious identity is personified on a daily basis, thereby making it a more purposeful activity (Borrego, 2001).

Opponents of such change, on the other hand, fear that the identity and mission of Catholic colleges and universities may be challenged if lay leaders fail to intentionally champion and nurture the development and growth of Catholic values and practices (McMurtrie, 1999). Hellwig, former executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, asserted,

When you have a critical mass of a religious community involved with something like a college or a university, some things can be taken for granted.... These people have a common formation, a common memory, a lifelong commitment—in fact, a community commitment—to the project. (as cited in Borrego, 2001, p. A32)

Lay leaders, however, are without the same type of lifelong commitment to furthering the religious identities of Catholic institutions of higher education. Although the differences between vowed religious and lay leaders as a whole may not appear to be significant at first glance, the difference in religious commitment may have momentous impact on the future identity of Catholic colleges and universities throughout the United States.

CONCEPTUAL MAP

A recent study about the perceived impact of lay leadership at one Catholic university offers a preliminary understanding of the challenges being faced in Catholic higher education. This summary includes a history of the issues at hand, the methodology of the study, and the findings. A number of recom-

mendations follow, designed for members of Catholic campus communities seeking to preserve and share institutional mission, that are drawn from the findings of this study.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The unknown impact of the transition to predominantly lay leadership in Catholic higher education prompted this study. Much of the literature about the transition is concerned with the potential secularization of Catholic colleges and universities resulting from decreasing numbers of clergy holding positions of leadership on campuses. Such worries stem, in part, from the fact that many Protestant institutions of higher education became more secular as a result of the diminishing participation of clergy in the life of the institutions and decreased focus on their historical religious missions. The concerns voiced by critics of the transition, however, were based primarily on historical events and speculation rather than on research specifically examining current Catholic college and university experiences. Consequently, little was known about the actual impact the change may or may not have on the future of Catholic higher education.

A medium-sized Catholic university in the Midwest was the site chosen for this study which took place from July 2002 to January 2003. The growing presence of lay faculty and staff during the last half of the 20th century, as well as the passing of a charter enabling a layperson to fill the most recent vacancy in the president's position, created a campus environment in which the debates about the ways to maintain a truly Catholic learning environment were currently taking place. Twelve people, 4 tenured faculty members, 4 senior administrators, and 4 members of the board of trustees, participated in the study. Both lay people and vowed religious individuals were included in each of the three participant groups. Through a series of audio-taped interviews, participants shared their perceptions about the transition in leadership and its effects on the culture of Catholic higher education.

This study explored the participants' perceptions related to the effectiveness of lay leaders' abilities to foster and maintain a campus environment reflective of the Catholic tradition. Opponents of the change believed that the traditional identity and mission of Catholic institutions may cease to exist if lay leaders fail to intentionally nurture the development and growth of Catholic values and practices (McMurtrie, 1999). Others, however, believed that lay leaders who are committed to the religious traditions of Catholic institutions can further their missions just as effectively as the vowed religious leaders (Borrego, 2001; McMurtrie, 1999).

Three research questions were developed to understand the character of the Catholic university and the challenges faced by lay leaders involved in

the transition to predominantly lay leadership. First, what do Catholic university administrators, faculty members, and members of boards of trustees believe is the essence of the Catholic college or university experience today? Second, what role does the primary institutional leader play in the creation and perpetuation of that meaning? Finally, what are the perceptions of the ability of lay leaders to strengthen and enact a campus environment reflective of the aforementioned essence of the Catholic college or university experience?

The essence of the contemporary Catholic university or college experience reflected the unique qualities of the founding Catholic order of the university. The majority of the participants had 8 or more years with the university and, therefore, colored their descriptions to reflect their lengthy experiences with the institution. Three sub-themes were consistently noted by the participants, and are encapsulated by the phrase “learn, lead, and serve.” Each sub-theme was based extensively on the concept of community, a key component of the institutional philosophy. The connection between faith and intellect was also a significant part of the learning experience.

“Education of the whole person” was commonly used by participants to describe the commitment to the academic development of students, as well as their emotional, social, and cultural development. Students were recognized as unique in terms of proficiency and attainment levels and were challenged to grow according to individual needs and abilities. Additionally, what students learned was noted as just as important as the manner in which they learned. A key part of the process was teaching students to apply knowledge practically, taking into consideration not only the economic impact, but also the ethical and moral impact the solutions may have within their communities.

A focus on moral and ethical leadership within one’s community and service to one’s community were also noted as important components of the essence. All members of the campus community were expected to lead by example, taking into account the impact their actions may have on both themselves and their communities. Likewise, students, faculty, and staff were encouraged to participate in service as a member of campus organizations, as well as to take personal initiative outside of their university experiences. Both experiences were identified as key aspects of the essence of the experience described by participants.

The roles institutional leaders play in the creation and development of the aforementioned essence were also discussed by participants. Participant responses overwhelmingly indicated the following two perspectives: (a) top-down leadership and (b) nucleators. Institutional leaders were perceived to play a significant role in the creation and perpetuation of the institutional

ethos. Two participants also suggested the possibility of preserving the institutional mission through the commitment of nucleators, or small pockets of people who embody the mission throughout the institutional hierarchy. Although considered effective by some, dedication from the top was considered a more successful means of maintaining the essence by most of the participants. The dual commitment to the preservation of the institutional mission of both groups, leaders and nucleators, however, was deemed by participants as the best way to ensure that institutional identity is not lost in the current time of transition. Encoding the characteristics of the mission in all parts of the university hierarchy was perceived to strengthen its personification overall.

In order to understand participants' perceptions of lay leaders' abilities to create and sustain a Catholic campus environment, participants were asked to define lay leadership. The definitions commonly identified lay leaders as individuals with strong commitments to and beliefs in the mission and Catholic tradition of a university or college. Coupled with that belief was the requirement that lay leaders actively live that mission in their daily personal and professional lives.

The Catholic tradition was viewed as the foundation of Catholic colleges and universities today. In order to facilitate the most complete understanding of the participants' perceptions of lay leaders' potential leadership success in a traditionally clergy-dominated environment, the participants were asked to elaborate on their views about the evolution of tradition. Participants consistently reported that tradition evolves to fit the context of particular times. The Catholic tradition, therefore, was perceived as one that can and should expand to accept and support the transition to lay leadership.

Once lay leadership was defined and tradition was noted as dynamic, participants shared their thoughts on the strengths lay leaders bring to Catholic institutions of higher education. Participants described the ability of lay leaders to relate more to the general campus community than their vowed religious counterparts due to similar life experiences and responsibilities. Additionally, lay leaders were described as individuals who may enhance the credibility and competence of Catholic higher education. The expertise of lay leaders chosen for their business and leadership skills, as opposed to their spiritual competence, was perceived to enhance the overall academic and organizational performance of Catholic colleges and universities. A third category of strengths, openness and autonomy, was attributed to lay leaders who have more freedom to make decisions without focusing primarily on the Catholic tradition or the expectations of religious superiors.

In order to assess the likely effectiveness of lay leaders, the challenges such individuals may face as a result of their lay status were also identified.

Lay leaders may deal with challenges of time and effort. Personal responsibilities, such as family commitments, require a balance of time not traditionally demanded of vowed religious leaders whose commitment to the Church was realized through their work in higher education. Additionally, lay leaders may have to put forth more extensive effort in order to acquire adequate levels of knowledge about the particular Catholic order responsible for founding the institution. Learning the most effective means of communicating with members of the founding religious order and other institutional stakeholders may also require more attention for a lay person who is not schooled in religious communication channels and expectations. Moreover, identifying and enacting the best means of exemplifying the mission and religious philosophy of the institution may present greater challenges for leaders who are not immersed to the same degree in the principles and teachings of the Catholic Church. The challenges must be effectively addressed in order for lay leaders to succeed in Catholic higher education.

Taking into consideration the strengths and challenges of lay leadership, participants shared diverse perceptions about the ability of lay leaders to create and sustain a Catholic campus environment. Two participants voiced concerns of secularization and the future inability of institutions to graduate distinctive alumni. Nonetheless, the majority of participants shared positive views about the transition. Lay leaders may enact a Catholic campus environment that is unlike that created by vowed religious individuals because of differences in the expression of faith and institutional mission. However, participants believed the institution would remain committed to its religious foundations. Participants, overall, perceived lay leadership to be an effective means of ensuring the future livelihood of Catholic colleges and universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study reveal several implications for higher education professionals interested in preserving institutional identity and mission despite significant change. In the following section, such implications and recommendations for practices that may enhance and strengthen institutional identity in times of transition are reviewed. The recommendations are numbered within each section for the purposes of organization and clarity.

VOWED RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Despite their declining presence on Catholic college and university campuses in the United States, vowed religious leaders continue to play important roles in the creation and perpetuation of the mission of Catholic institutions. This study suggests that the roles such individuals fulfill on Catholic cam-

poses today differ from historical roles. Their influence and participation in the transition process, however, may make the difference between successful identity preservation and secularization.

Support of the transition to lay leadership by vowed religious leaders contributes to a successful and smooth transition process. Such transitions are inevitable due to declining numbers of qualified vowed religious leaders. Therefore, it is important that vowed religious groups find means of addressing the concerns of the campus community and take measures to assist lay leaders in their newly acquired roles. Members of the campus community may be more likely to recognize the inevitability of change and that transition could be a means of obtaining more effective leadership for Catholic campuses when there is open communication about the change process. Moreover, advanced preparation for change, in the form of intentional community discussions regarding the transition and community planning efforts, may serve to ease many concerns and enhance the overall transition process.

Recommendations

1. Vowed religious individuals must take active roles in the leadership transition process. A number of participants talked about intentional conversations and forums about Catholic tradition and its significance in the life of the institution led by religious leaders on campus. The realization that the presence of vowed religious leaders was declining, coupled with knowledge of the particular religious order and history of the campus culture conveyed during such discussions, motivated many lay leaders to become actively involved in the preservation and embodiment of the institutional mission.

2. Members of the clergy should emphasize the importance of lay people in the preservation of institutional mission. Acknowledgement of the significance of lay people in the conservation of institutional identity may empower lay leaders to take the lead in personifying the religious identity that was once assumed by clergy. Because identities of Catholic institutions of higher education were historically fostered and preserved by members of vowed religious orders, lay leaders may not feel that they can embody the mission of an institution with the same effectiveness or respect as their vowed religious counterparts. Lay leaders are more likely to feel that they are a valued part of the campus community and may be more likely to embody and share the mission of the college or university if they believe their contributions are recognized as important.

3. Vowed religious leaders should make efforts to consistently and openly communicate with lay leaders in order to ensure that lay people are aware of and understand the expectations and unique characteristics of the founding religious order. Vowed religious spend significant amounts of time study-

ing the Catholic faith; therefore their knowledge of the faith in general, their particular order, and the manner in which that order influences the mission and philosophies of a college or university is more extensive than that of lay people. For lay people, however, such knowledge must be acquired and requires great commitments of time and effort. Participants felt that even when lay people put in great effort in order to understand and meet the needs of the particular religious order with which an institution was affiliated it was unlikely that they could truly know everything. Therefore, vowed religious leaders must take initiative to make sure lay leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively lead Catholic institutions of higher education.

4. Members of the clergy should remain active in the campus community in order to protect and nurture the Catholic identity and values. Leading religious celebrations and remaining connected as campus ministers are ways clergy can continue involvement despite declining numbers. Additionally, clergy can participate on advisory boards and continue to hold positions on institutional governing boards in order to ensure that the religious mission remains despite the decrease in the physical presence of vowed religious individuals on campus. Each of the aforementioned means of staying involved may require less time than a faculty or administrative position, thereby enabling members of the clergy to serve the Church in a number of capacities as opposed to spending all of their energies in Catholic higher education; but, they also ensure the continued influence of clergy on campus.

5. Members of vowed religious orders should develop recruitment and training plans designed to increase the number of qualified clergy available for leadership positions in Catholic higher education. The number of men and women in vowed religious orders is declining. Intentional recruitment efforts may help remedy the shortage in upcoming years. Moreover, encouraging current and future clergy members to obtain academic and business training and seek positions in higher education may enhance the overall credibility and competency of vowed religious leaders.

LAY LEADERS

The ever-increasing presence of lay leaders on Catholic college and university campuses creates questions about the benefits a new type of institutional leadership brings to such institutions as well as concerns about the challenges such leaders may face. Lay leaders may face a number of challenges as a result of their lay status; however, they may also have unique opportunities traditionally not afforded to vowed religious leaders. Therefore, it may behoove lay leaders to honestly assess such challenges and opportunities to determine whether or not they can lead in a manner that is beneficial to the institution.

Lay leaders have the latitude to express personal and institutional beliefs in different ways as a result of their unique commitment to the Catholic Church; however, such actions should be carefully considered and executed so as to not contradict the institutional mission and religious identity. Lay leaders may use the benefits of their autonomy to educate and enlighten the campus community in ways previous leaders were unable or unwilling to undertake.

Recommendations

1. Lay leaders should recognize that their responsibility for promoting and preserving the Catholic missions of colleges and universities is one of their most important duties. Intentional efforts to learn about the religious foundations of the institution are important. Learning about the religious mission and essence of a Catholic institution of higher education is not enough. It is important for lay leaders to earn the confidence of and attain the help of vowed religious leaders in order to ensure that the faith-based needs of the institution are adequately recognized and effectively addressed. Moreover, lay leaders need the support and assistance of fellow laity on campus whose own embodiment of the institutional mission is important to the preservation of campus culture. Expectations for lay leaders from both vowed religious and non-vowed religious must be clearly articulated and realistically designed.

2. Lay leaders should openly and consistently communicate with members of the founding religious order of the institution. It is important that lay leaders seek information and knowledge from clergy to ensure the mission and essence of the institution remain aligned with the Catholic tradition. Lay leaders are not obligated to base decisions and practices solely on the teachings of the Catholic Church; however, using the knowledge and information gathered from communication with members of the founding religious order to inform decisions and practices will likely assist in the preservation of the mission and essence of Catholic colleges and universities.

3. Lay leaders must embody and exemplify the institutional mission in their daily lives and encourage others to do the same. For example, lay leaders must refer to the mission of the institution in public speeches or have intentional discussions with faculty and staff about ways to incorporate the mission into the daily activity of the institution. Modeling the mission in word and action will demonstrate its importance and perhaps inspire others to incorporate it into their daily lives as well. Encouraging all members of the campus community to personify the mission in everything they do will further contribute to the preservation and sharing of institutional identity. Intentionally incorporating the mission into curricular (e.g., service learning

projects) and co-curricular activities (e.g., campus-wide retreats) will demonstrate its significance within the campus culture and may help strengthen, rather than diminish, the Catholic identity of the institution.

4. Lay leaders should search for new ways to connect the university or college with internal and external campus communities. Participating in community functions or organizations as a parent or spouse, for example, may enable lay leaders to connect with other members of the community who had previously lacked the ability to relate to members of the clergy. Moreover, lay people provide another, perhaps more realistic, example of faith for members of the campus community. By demonstrating that, as a lay person, one can incorporate the mission and faith of the institution into his or her life in a manner that, although different, is significant, a lay leader may act as a catalyst for others to do the same.

5. Lay leaders might use their autonomy from the Church to make decisions and to take actions that, in the past, may have been more difficult. A lay leader, although committed to the religious foundations of the institution, may seem to be able to show support for all members of the campus community because of his or her perceived ability to act in a more open manner due to his or her lay status. Lay leaders may have more freedom to take what may be considered controversial actions because they are not expected to devote themselves to the teachings of the Catholic Church to the same degree as members of the clergy.

CLOSING

Many writers speculate about how the transition to lay leadership may affect the identities of Catholic institutions of higher education. However, little research exists about the actual implications of the transition. The information obtained from the participants in this study provides useful insight into the perceptions that members of a campus community have about the change, and informs recommendations about what measures may be taken to assist with the preservation of the Catholic mission and identity. The transition does not suggest an erosion of institutional identity or distinctiveness. Rather, the change could, in fact, enhance and strengthen campus culture. In order to use the transition as a means of strengthening campus culture, all members of the campus community must recognize the role they play in the transmission of institutional mission.

Lay leadership has the potential to be an effective solution to the dilemma of the decrease in qualified clergy available for higher education leadership. Lay leaders have the commitment and skills necessary to lead Catholic colleges and universities into a new, more challenging era of higher education without jeopardizing their religious identities. The transition to lay lead-

ership, therefore, may be a catalyst for enhancement and refocus as opposed to cause for surrender of ideals and values.

Catholic colleges and universities contribute to the diversity of American higher education by providing distinctive educational experiences that integrate faith and intellect. The decline in qualified vowed religious leaders committed to the mission of Catholic higher education threatens to undermine the distinctiveness of such institutions, decreasing the much needed and applauded diversity of American higher education. Lay leaders may efficiently create, sustain, and perhaps even enhance the strength of the traditional missions of Catholic institutions of higher education. With the commitment of other members within the campus communities, they may effectively maintain the historical essence and missions of Catholic colleges and universities and ensure the diversity within American higher education remains for future generations of students.

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