

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Conversation following Christine Pharr's and Jonathan Mulrooney's papers circled in large part around what one participant called the "hybrid" identities of Catholic institutions: that is, their attempt to balance a normative mission (serving the Church and the world) and a utilitarian one (remaining open and financially secure). Another participant nuanced this description, indicating that there are two kinds of hybridity: ideographic, in which different people fulfill the different missions; and holographic, in which all participants share in all the dimensions of mission. The latter kind, he argues, seems to be more appropriate to the Catholic college or university.

Building on this idea, another participant suggested that mission needs to be understood not as a static thing but as a living process. Agreeing with this idea, another pointed to nostalgia as the enemy of mission; he sees the nostalgia for the heroic priestly figure as president—however important he was at certain institutions—as having a hold on the imagination of some alumni. Mission is an organic, living reality among people, meaning that tradition too is dynamic and unfolding. Another suggested that she struggles against a narrative of diminishment—the sense of loss that some feel at the declining number of founding religious men or women, especially as presidents. She reminds people that the original group of disciples were Jewish fishermen, and that growth and development demand not holding onto older models but constantly returning to the founding charisms and the pressing needs these charisms can serve.

In a different vein, participants considered the role of the mission officer and the broader understanding of mission he or she serves. One noted that the mission of the university is not to convert people; but another observed that if the mission is enlivening and attractive, then the phenomenon of religious conversion is one measure of the strength of mission on a campus. Noting that some smaller institutions may close in the coming years, she noted the importance of a mission that distinguishes Catholic colleges from their secular competitors, particularly in places like New York, which is considering free tuition for state institutions.

Embedded in questions of mission, another observed, is the language many campuses use about formation. He noted that in the past, those who were formed in the mission of the institution often did not carry particular titles; they simply lived out the virtues of the university community. Often, those people were members of the founding religious order, whose access to formation was often very different from that of lay people. In

recent years, new opportunities for formation have opened up for lay people, the fruit of the emphasis on the lay vocation at the Second Vatican Council. Many campuses invest in the spiritual formation of lay faculty and staff, even to the extent that many non-Catholics appreciate such opportunities.

Still, there is a challenge to provide formation not only to faculty and staff but also to members of boards of trustees. At present, there are different models of what constitutes formation, who it is for, and how to do it. The mission officer, therefore, is fundamentally a person who establishes relationships—so said a participant who has served in that role for some time. The position has evolved considerably over the past two decades, and there is starting to be some consensus about what that person does. There is widespread agreement that the president needs to be the chief mission officer, but the person appointed to a mission position must still steward the relationships that prevail on a campus in ways that serve the institution as a whole. Such a person must be grounded in the dynamics of the institution's founding charism and community, and be responsible for considering the overall purpose of the institution in the face of increasing specialization among faculty and staff.

Turning to the question of leadership, a participant noted that leaders are people while leadership involves the actions of leaders, followers, and situations. Like a financial vice president, a mission vice president focuses the president's attention on particular dynamics that impact the life of the university. Another responded that the mission officer would then need to be the senior vice president—which is not customarily the case today—because all the activities of the university are part of its mission. The mission officer has the opportunity to discern how to cultivate leadership as well as opportunities for real ownership of the mission among followers. Such a person has to overcome the “us vs. them” mentality that can sometimes happen between faculty and administrators, and build bridges that serve the institution. A third person lamented the fact that increasingly, presidents are not drawn from faculty and do not manifest commitment to the intellectual life. If the president is the chief mission officer, he suggested, such a person ought to embody the intellectual aspirations of the university. In a similar vein, another opined, the provost ought to manifest what he described as a hologram approach to the mission, embodying a commitment to the intellectual life as well as a commitment to the larger mission of the university. Such a combination, though, is rare.

Ultimately, several noted, the mission of any university is about students, and so it must be student-centric. The broad tendency in higher education today is to sublimate intellectual life to the exigencies of the market, meaning that enrollment management is often regarded as more important than academic questions. A particular area of concern for Catholic colleges and universities is the population of underserved students, many of whom can't pay high tuition dollars to easily keep institutions afloat. Some institutions rely heavily on tuition-paying students while others have to turn to fundraising and government programs like Pell Grants. These concerns are indicative of the close

relationship that exists between the different sides of their hybrid identities. Margin and mission tend to be interrelated.

