

Response to Laura Nichols

Julian Bourg

Laura Nichols brings a comparative and data-rich intervention to the table. She contrasts two realities: on the one hand, the contemporary tendency of higher education to reinforce class stratification; on the other hand, the ways that American Catholic higher education in an earlier era facilitated economic opportunity and class mobility, especially among immigrant populations. She furthermore compares Catholic, private, and public colleges and universities today, as she zeroes in on Hispanic and first-generation students. Catholic schools have higher graduation rates (including among Hispanic students) than non-Catholic schools, but also smaller proportions of low-income and first-generation students. This map is ultimately submitted to a mission-related question: do Catholic colleges and universities have special responsibilities to facilitate class mobility as an expression of the pursuit of the common good? They ended up achieving this from the nineteenth century through the postwar era, but today we seem in danger of failing to do so.

To be sure, the nineteenth-century model may have reflected a combination of unrepeatable circumstances. Public higher education only developed gradually, and many Catholics were excluded from private universities (it would be interesting to know more about Catholics and public institutions). Likewise, immigration patterns and economic development were rooted in a now-passed industrial era. In spite of real challenges, between the 1850s and 1950s, Catholic ethnic communities from Europe ultimately benefited from more general economic and political progress. Education in general reduces income and wealth inequality, and Catholic schools participated in this larger historical process, certainly playing a unique role in the transition from minority ethnic enclaves to Americanized suburbia. Yet, alongside real continuities in American immigration between the nineteenth century and today, there may also be important

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differences to consider: cycles of economic contraction since the 1970s and forms of racialization that Irish and Italians never had to confront.

Similarly, in spite of real continuities in Catholic worldviews between the nineteenth century and today, there may be further differences to observe. Has economic mobility been a main driver of Catholic educational mission or one of its happy by-products? Undoubtedly since the 1890s, Catholic social thought has asserted economic equality and human flourishing not just as values but as institutional goals. There is probably a healthy discussion to be had about different aspects of Catholic mission that, although envisioned holistically, may pull against each other: for instance, (1) preferential treatment of the needy (*caritas*), (2) human flourishing (does this mean opportunity or equality or mobility, or all or none of the above?), and (3) the salvation of souls (for which materialism may be irrelevant). It matters which aspect of the whole picture one emphasizes: are Catholic colleges places where we give rich kids a conscience or where poor kids get the chance to join the middle class? A holistic worldview has to answer: both. In addition to serving as on-ramps for economically disadvantaged children, Catholic education also has long trained economic and political elites. The gospel does not call for a radical redistribution of wealth, except for all the places where it does. One advantage of the Catholic intellectual tradition is its capacity to engage and integrate new ways of understanding the world; it is thus important to continue to supplement the gospel message with the perspectives of contemporary social scientific and humanistic knowledge. We can distinguish, for example, social mobility from equality; we can question the limits of a meritocracy which gives comparative advantage to students who begin with a head start in terms of financial and cultural wealth; and we can distinguish different types of “front row” and “back row” kids who have different needs and challenges while each remains a deserving human being.

Nichols delivers powerful evidence that our schools are in danger of losing track of a crucial aspect of Catholic mission when we reinforce and replicate twenty-first-century American class stratification. It is an appeal to values and principles, and one that is hard to disagree with. Class stratification diminishes human flourishing. Much of the present dilemma in the United States, however, stems from institutional patterns and constraints of the higher education landscape that surpass Catholic schools. American Catholic colleges and universities are, after all, also *American* colleges and universities; they are not exempt from competition for students, fundraising and alumni pressures, the pull on students between education and professionalization, the giant footprint of athletics, and so forth. Over the past 40 years, the United States has experienced some of the greatest stratification and concentration of wealth in its history—a political-economic reality that uniquely affects poor and immigrant families. High tuition costs place college education outside the reach of many, yet they also help subsidize lower-income students (the “discount rate”). Such mild forms of economic redistribution do not do much to address the overall historical situation of wealth stratification and concentration. Something in this unsustainable model is going to give sooner or later,

although in the short term lowering tuition costs risks creating the appearance of lower “value” as schools compete for the best students.

Between a holistic mission that loves rich kids as much as poor ones, on the one hand, and the inescapable patterns and constraints of American higher education on the other hand, Nichols is right to imagine nudging our institutions toward a distinctive “niche.” In the end, doing so will depend on the capacity of university presidents and trustees to make courageous decisions to lead in the face of considerable pressures. Leadership is hard, and real limitations cannot be underestimated. But Catholic colleges and universities have a card others cannot play: the social gospel. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators can remind our institutions of our distinctive calling, that its aspiration to holism is always incomplete and that, when push comes to shove, priority *should* be given to those most in need. Institutions that explicitly embrace moral commitments are accountable to those commitments. Catholic institutions experience in particular ways the call to integrate the *ought* to which we aspire with the world that *is* (a world that includes constraints and limitations but also possibilities for action). A holistic worldview demands integration.

The fact that 60% of American Catholics under 18 years old are Latino and only 2.3% of them attend K-12 Catholic schools—this is a stunning statistic. Latino students who make it to Catholic colleges and universities have better graduation rates. We need more Latino students in Catholic primary schools and better recruitment of public school Latino students to Catholic colleges. What will this cost and who will pay for it? The answer is in the kind of concrete, intentional, and innovative programs Nichols mentions: LEAD at Santa Clara, Arrupe College at Loyola Chicago, etc. Even though, as she says, “Catholic colleges do not appear to have a directive or mandate to function primarily as a lever for social equality and mobility,” at the same time, Catholic colleges have the “potential ... to contribute to economic social mobility.” It is a “leadership opportunity.” There are always good reasons not to lead. But the tension between the broken world and the healing power of the Kingdom motivates a Church that seeks God in all things.

