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Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Members of the Roundtable responded to Laura Nichols's and Julian Bourg's essays with unanimous concern about how Catholic colleges and universities actively seek out and welcome students whose families struggle financially. One respondent pointed to the efforts of the Yes We Must Coalition,¹ which gives attention to the challenges of students eligible for Pell Grants—those who meet a financial need determined by the U.S. Department of Education. Another respondent later pointed to the fact that most of the top Pell Grant-receiving institutions were public, meaning that many low-income students do not attend private institutions. Are Catholic institutions sufficiently attentive to poor students? The Roundtable considered this question at length.

In the background of the conversation, often identified specifically, was the realization that Catholic colleges and universities must confront significant financial challenges simply to keep afloat. The neuralgic mission question that several participants named had to do with the balance of wealthy and poor students, and how that balance reflected the overall social dimension of the college mission. One participant, for example, raised the question of what graduates of our institutions do after they leave campus: do they engage in social change? Two participants pointed to a new instrument offered by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, namely the Catholic Identity Mission Assessment tool (CIMA),² which will allow campuses to track students' formation from first year through graduation, and then to follow up with alumni to learn how they regard the formative experience of their university years. At present the data is limited, but within a few years we will know more.

The attention to upward economic mobility for poor students is certainly a good, but some participants suggested that alone it may not be an adequate measure of university mission. Social mobility, argued one participant, is often conflated with equality; but to do so is to accept an underlying premise of meritocracy. If a person is smart enough, goes the argument, then there ought to be no barrier to his or her social advancement. Such an argument, she pointed out, presumes that smart people should advance, and leaves out those who do not have academic skill or whose gifts may be in nonacademic pursuits. She shared the story of her diverse parish where the parish council was comprised of doctors, gardeners, and house painters. Using this example, she questioned

1 <http://www.yeswemustcoalition.org/>.

2 <http://accunet.org/CIMA>.

the prejudice that education constitutes a person's social worth. Perhaps, she argued, colleges ought to draw poor students; but they ought not reinforce the prejudice that social worth is possible only through education. Others agreed, and noted that the larger social challenge may be less about educating everyone equally and more about changing social attitudes that looked down on those without education.

Returning to some of the statistics that Laura Nichols provided, another participant shared his dismay about the completion rates for low-income students. Several shared concern about the overall cost of education, and the increasing gap they see on their campuses between very rich students and low-income students. A number wondered whether Catholic colleges could compete with public institutions, especially in light of debates about free college education in places like New York state. One participant expressed particular concern about the disparity at his institution, where almost three-quarters of the students come from the upper 20% of the income ladder, with a mere 2% from the bottom 20%. It affects the culture, he observed—and many agreed that there are significant problems for poorer students who feel lost amidst the assumption of wealth. One participant wondered what a comparison with Canadian universities might yield, since their education system is based on a different tax structure. Others pointed to the challenges of poor students overcoming cultural challenges: having money for the bus to go home at holidays; affording books; being able to go out to a restaurant; having enough clothes to last a week or doing laundry on a regular basis. Meanwhile, rich students talk about vacations. Poor students, according to one participant, often feel “invisible.” All our conversations about diversity, argued another, do not touch the issue of economic diversity, and our institutions are at a loss because of this lacuna. Among other things, one person pointed out, campuses that assume wealth may have a dearth of gratitude as a formative practice.

Part of the structural issue that participants named was the discounting system, which sends false messages to prospective students. Those who are first generation, for example, may see an untouchable price tag and consider private education entirely out of reach. One participant called it “an inflated system”—one which advertises, for example, a price of \$30,000 but later offers \$25,000 worth of financial aid. It has lost sight of its original function, which was to help talented poor students to attend a college. One participant raised the question of whether there was an alternative: what if, he asked, students educated in Catholic colleges pledged to work for a certain time in Catholic schools, health care, or other institutions which subsidized their student loans, not unlike government subsidizing of volunteers in programs like Teach for America?

Graduation rates among students from disadvantaged backgrounds are related to questions about promoting student retention, noted one participant. She pointed to several predictors of student success as particular priorities for poor students: student research with a professor; excellent advising; and others. These priorities call professors to personal engagement with students, particularly those who might otherwise feel invisible. In a related vein, other participants pointed to the way that the Church retains

its membership (or not), and how Catholic schooling at any level is one predictor of success. The challenge is particularly acute for Hispanics, noted another, because the vast majority do not have opportunities to attend Catholic schools. Even if they did, noted another, they would not encounter faculty and staff who looked like them or spoke Spanish. At all levels, there is a challenge to have a faculty that represents the population we seek to invite. If students perceive too great a distance between their professors and themselves, is it likely that a personal connection will happen?

