

## Summary of Roundtable Conversation

After some initial conversation about the mechanisms of the market, members of the Roundtable focused attention on larger questions about the extent to which a government can effect positive social change, especially in light of globalization. Daniel Finn observed that change in the minimum wage, for example, is something economists are almost universally against because of its relation to a rise in unemployment; but he also pointed out that this issue surfaces moral questions that economists are reluctant to engage.

That thread regarding the moral implications of the market steered conversation toward broad questions about the pervasiveness of a consumer framework for much popular thinking. That framework, many observed, impacts such things as the way we choose (or do not choose) to view the poor and suffering, religion, and the common good. Noting that a number of Catholics have been drawn to libertarian thinking, one participant suggested that Catholic universities must be about cultural change, about promoting a new way of imagining the world not beholden strictly to *laissez-faire* consumer demand. In order to do that, they must be interdisciplinary, following the logic of the question about just wage. From a strictly economic viewpoint, that question about wages is reduced to a mathematical calculus and does not engage moral questions that might be influenced, for example, by literature, history, philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

Another participant addressed a systemic issue among Catholic universities today, noting that on his institution's board of trustees are a clear majority of senior corporate executives and a dearth of vowed members of the founding religious order. The leadership of the university, he averred, has lost a critical mass of intellectuals. The demands of the market impact Catholic universities as much as any institutions today, meaning that there is a temptation to treat the university as a business rather than a humanistic enterprise. We must be ready to speak the language of dissent, argued another participant: with Pope Francis, we must be willing to call for a change of heart in a culture of encounter with others.

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<sup>1</sup> On this issue of the role of departments of economics within Catholic colleges and universities, see also *Integritas* 4.3 (Fall 2014), especially the "Summary of Roundtable Conversation," 37–39.

A significant concern of several participants was the dynamic within our universities that reflects market imperatives rather than intellectual, social, and spiritual formation. A drive for market share within a competitive academy leads many to focus on rankings or intradepartmental concerns. Economics departments, for example, responding to students' and parents' demands for practical degrees, draw more and more resources and become the targets of other departments' ire. The result is competition and fragmentation, with the economic worldview continuing to dominate. One participant forcefully asserted that it is imperative to hold to the conviction that humanities disciplines must have primacy, and that universities must hire faculty who understand this pedagogical imperative.

From a practical standpoint, noted another participant, businesses themselves do not necessarily want students to have a narrow formation in business or economics. She recalled trying to design a better business degree and calling in many men and women who work in various corporate or government entities. Their response was that they liked English majors and others who could write and speak well. Yet there is a pervasive perception among students and parents that practical degrees matter, even as students themselves report on surveys that they hope for conversations in the classroom about spirituality and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Our challenge is to resist the logic of the market and focus on our foundational commitments to the person, to the good society, and to relationship with God.

Another thread of conversation focused on the dynamics of academic and policy discourse within our institutions. One participant called to mind the beauty of faith in facing everyday challenges with students or colleagues. Another, reflecting on his work at both a Big Ten university and at a Catholic university, appreciated how he enjoyed greater academic freedom at the latter because it afforded him the opportunity to consider a wider range of topics for academic conversation. Yet there are still challenges: another participant reflected on his "bruising" core curriculum renewal process in which there were turf wars, yielding interdisciplinary courses that were fun and hip, yet little different from those at any state school.

Returning to the broader social milieu, the conversation closed with observations about the cost of higher education today and the resulting fear that students and parents have about jobs following graduation. We must bring the cost of education down, some argued, but we must also be responsive to our mission to converse about the great things in life. In these changing economic times, there is perhaps no greater question than how to be true to our educational and ecclesial mission in the face of concerns about how to pay for it.

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2 See, for example, the work of Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm at [spirituality.ucla.edu/](http://spirituality.ucla.edu/).