Evaluating the Mission and Identity of a Catholic College or University

From MISSION AND IDENTITY: A Handbook for Trustees of Catholic Colleges and Universities

By Monika Hellwig

To respond to the vision depicted in Church documents, institutional officials need some concrete, practical suggestions on implementing the vision that they can adapt to their particular institution. The following lists suggest some specific examples officials might use to evaluate their institution’s Catholic mission and identity. The first list presents general categories of the Catholic character of the institution. The second suggests some specific indicators. Because our colleges and universities have various purposes, programs, and student bodies, it is very unlikely that a particular institution will match all of these elements and indicators. The lists, however, do suggest practical ways of realizing the Catholic mission of the institution.

Five Elements of the Catholic Identity of a College or University

1. **Public Profession.** To be clear about it, and to enlist the collaboration of all concerned, the Catholic identity must be stated in constitutional documents, information given to board members, the faculty handbook, promotional literature, and information given to students. Besides being stated in words, the Catholic identity needs to be expressed in worship on campus, in public ceremonies, in the curriculum, through policy decisions, in dormitory life, in counseling services, and so forth.

2. **Engagement with culture and scholarship.** To be truly and fully a Catholic college or university, the institution must ensure the presence of Catholic wisdom and critique is brought to bear on all aspects of human knowledge as represented in the curriculum.

3. **Fidelity to the gospel as transmitted in Catholic tradition.** The Catholic college or university not only should teach the Catholic tradition in doctrine, morals, social justice, and worship, but it also should model it. This applies to board decisions, internal management, the conduct and relationships of administrators and faculty, the treatment of other employees, and the services offered to students as well as the demands and expectations expressed concerning their community and behavior on campus.

4. **Service to Church and society.** The Catholic college or university needs to relate to the Church as People of God, to the Church as hierarchy, and to human suffering of all kinds. For instance, scholarly, resources should be made available to respond to the pastoral needs of the Church, to help with Catholic education at all levels, and to help solve problems of human suffering. Faculty should see this as coming within their scope, and students should be encouraged in volunteering, offered “immersion” experiences, taught the principles of Catholic social teaching, and guided in social analysis.

5. **Transmission and exploration of the broader Catholic cultural heritage.** It is the special province of the Catholic college or university to keep alive in succeeding generations the cultural heritage of the Catholic community in philosophy and theology, in literature and the
arts, in the study of nature and the society, in ritual and symbolism, in spirituality traditions, and the full celebration of the Christian calendar.

A Checklist of Indicators that a College or University Is Catholic

- It proclaims its Catholic identity publicly and clearly in official documents and brochures.
- Catholic worship is prominent on campus.
- There are substantial course offerings in Catholic Theology, reflected in library holdings.
- Catholic philosophers are given a place in honor in the curriculum and library; courses in foundational ethics are offered to all students; and courses in professional ethics are offered in the various graduate fields within the institution.
- Courses in other disciplines engage the ethical and value questions related to their fields.
- Catholic literature, art, music, and drama are present in the curriculum, library, and campus.
- Research is expected to be in accord with Catholic priorities and human need.
- Hiring of faculty and administrators take the mission of the institution into account and explains it to candidates for positions.
- The liturgical calendar is observed.
- There is a conscientious selection of role models in awarding of honorary degrees, selection of speakers for public lectures, and so forth.
- There is constant attention to issues of social justice, peace, and outreach to the needy.
- The college has a continuing relationship with the hierarchy, contributing scholarship and research on matters of the church concern.
- The college relates in practical ways to the Catholic community and Catholic organizations.
- There is a high quality of ecumenical and interfaith sensitivity and collaboration.
- It is evident that major and minor decisions are made according to the values and priorities of the Catholic tradition.
- The culture of the campus encourages friendly and respectful relationships with concern for the total well-being of each individual.
- As much attention is given to the least gifted as to the most talented student.
- There is a strong sense of solidarity and collaboration with other Catholic institutions of higher education--- for instance, membership in the higher education conference of a sponsoring congregation, in the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, in the International Federation of Catholic Universities, and so forth.

Mission and Identity and the board-education project of which it is an integral part have been made possible through the generous support of the Teagle Foundation, Inc., an anonymous foundation, George E. Doty, Sr., and Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, Inc. (FADICA).