

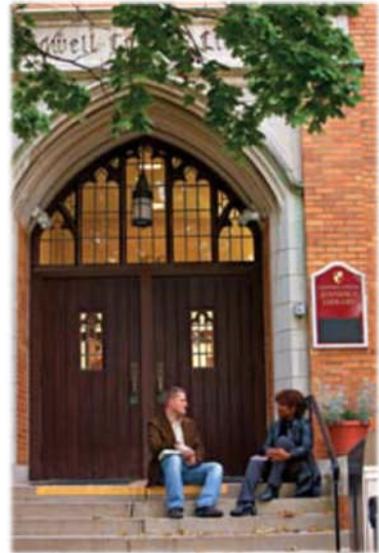
Strengthening Catholic Identity

1ST OF A SERIES: MISSION OFFICER

In the decades since the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990, Catholic colleges and universities in the United States have focused concerted attention on the four essential characteristics of the Catholic university:

1. Christian inspiration of the university community
2. Reflection on human knowledge in the light of faith
3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church
4. Institutional commitment to service (ECE, 17)

Fulfilling these characteristics has meant that leaders at various levels assume responsibility for ensuring an institution's educational mission and Catholic identity. While shared in different ways by each member of the university community, from the Board of Trustees to a recently enrolled first-year student, Catholic mission and identity is a special responsibility of the president. When the entire community works in harmony to fulfill the mission, the resulting spirit is vibrant and alive, readily apparent in the campus culture. Achieving such a result requires the kind of collaborative teamwork that only conscious leadership promotes and develops.



Leadership Team

There are four roles in particular which bear a major responsibility in regard to the mission; their collaborative teamwork in mission and identity promotion is essential.

- President
- Chief Academic Officer
- Mission Officer
- University Chaplain

In this issue, we begin the series with a focus on the mission officer. In subsequent issues of this leadership series, we will explore more fully the roles of the president, boards of trustees, chief academic officer, university chaplain, as well as other leadership officers.

Mission Officer

The formal position of mission officer is relatively new, rarely dating back further than the 1970's. Prior to the creation of this position, members of the founding religious orders of men or women carried the mission. Today 159 of the total 220 member institutions of ACCU have a mission officer. Though titles vary from "vice president for mission" to "special assistant to the president for mission," the responsibilities are similar in that they devote special care to the Catholic mission at their campus.

Location in Administrative Structure

If possible, be a member of the President's Cabinet: This prominent position enables the mission officer to be an active participant at the most significant level of administration in the university. In that role, ideally holding a vice presidential appointment, the mission officer benefits from the vantage point of university-wide operations and has an opportunity to exert influence on the policy deliberations that shape and guide the university.

Key Responsibilities

Trustee Formation and Development: The mission officer has an important opportunity to collaborate with the president with regard to the board of trustees. The mission officer can assist in orienting new members to the institution's mission and heritage and can provide boards with the requisite formation to carry out their roles as stewards of the mission.



Sponsoring Orders and Congregations: The mission officer needs to be in regular conversation with the chief representative of the sponsoring religious orders or congregation, and/or of the diocese. There may be a particular spirituality and charism that distinguishes the sponsoring order, and thus, shapes the identity of the college or university itself.

Academic Core: Teaching and scholarship are at the core of every university. The four characteristics mentioned in Ex Corde must find their expression in these essential activities. In this realm the mission officer, to be credible, must be competent and skilled in facilitating and bridging these conversations. Establishing a strong working partnership with the chief academic officer, deans, and faculty leadership is an indispensable factor in ensuring the centrality of the institution's mission.

Best Practices

Below are several ways in which mission officers make the mission a priority on their individual campuses. Perhaps they will be useful in your unique context.

- Create a representational campus-wide advisory committee to serve as conversation partners with the mission officer;

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- Collaborate with university chaplain and campus ministry staff to provide students, faculty, and staff with pastoral care and opportunities for spiritual growth;
- Enlist the cooperation of knowledgeable individuals on campus such as from departments of marketing, human resources and student life;
- Encourage campus and personnel initiatives such as:
 - ✓ mission seminars both for orienting new faculty and staff as well as engaging veteran faculty and staff members;
 - ✓ endowed Chairs, fellowships, and targeted funding for faculty summer research grants;
 - ✓ service-learning and internship opportunities for students, especially in areas of the country and world where vulnerable populations are in need;
 - ✓ mission awareness week or an annual mission day for the entire campus
 - ✓ the dedication of a portion of each Board of Trustees meeting to unique dimensions of the mission and the inclusion of a significant block of time on this topic during Trustee retreats;
 - ✓ the participation by administrators and faculty in formation programs such as the LaSallian Leadership Institute, the Ignatian Colleagues Program, or regional leadership formation coalition programs
 - ✓ the dedication of time to learn more about mission through programs such as ACCU's Rome Seminar and the Institute for Administrators in Catholic Education (IACHE).

Characteristics

In light of these responsibilities and expectations, it is clear that the mission officer must be a person who:

- is familiar with the culture and operations of a contemporary American Catholic college or university;
- has training in and a deep understanding of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition;
- has strong networking skills for collaborating with a wide variety of colleagues within and beyond the confines of the institution;
- is politically astute and demonstrates sophisticated understanding of American academic cultures.
- is aware of how the Church operates and is comfortable working in collaboration with local dioceses and/or sponsoring congregations.

We encourage each Catholic college and university to examine its own situation and determine where and how it might strengthen its own unique approach to making sure the Catholic mission flourishes.

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