

# Strengthening Catholic Identity

---

## 12TH OF A SERIES: STUDENT ACCESS AND ADMISSIONS

At a time when students, parents, and even the federal government are demanding greater accountability and evidence of value, Catholic colleges and universities have both an opportunity and an obligation to present themselves to prospective students and their families in a way that highlights the distinctive nature of their Catholic mission. As a result, the admissions office plays a key role in communicating Catholic identity.

Today, admissions officers confront questions on a range of issues, from the traditional—academic requirements and financial aid—to more complex issues of persistence and graduation, average debt and default rates, and student outcomes. In confronting these challenges, admissions offices should focus on those values and strengths that distinguish their campus from their secular counterparts. Specifically, admissions offices at Catholic colleges and universities should review their practices and policies around four main areas: admissions materials and marketing strategies; applicant review and financial aid practices; recruitment and outreach; and student outcomes.

### Admissions Materials and Marketing Strategies

A good place to start is by reviewing the marketing materials used by the college. This includes print material, but also electronic, social media, and website resources. The careful use of images, history, student stories, faculty successes, and so forth is critical to an effective marketing campaign, but grounding these elements in the unique missions of our institutions is essential for Catholic campuses.

For instance, the majority of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States were established by religious orders, many of which have service to those of modest financial means as a founding principle. Grounded in this history, campuses may speak of diversity and inclusion, developing ethical leaders, and helping make the world a better place. These particular missions often provide a powerful story around which to build an effective marketing program.



## Applicant Review and Financial Aid Practices and Policies

If campus mission statements are rooted in the commitment to human dignity that is a tenet of Catholic Social Teaching, then a warm and hospitable ethos should permeate the admissions and financial aid process at Catholic colleges and universities.

Admissions staff should be well versed in reviewing each applicant in a holistic manner, reflecting the care and respect we hold for each individual. Beyond grades and test scores, efforts should be made to find the right fit, valuing student's participation in activities that focus on social justice, service, and a commitment to help others. Even denying a student admission should be done in a personal and respectful way that reflects the values of the institution.

While financial aid is a difficult area for parents, students, and staff, especially in light of rising tuition and reduced federal and state support, carrying this same personal, caring ethos through to the awarding of aid can further solidify an institution's reputation as warm and hospitable. The tone and language of communications from both the admissions and financial aid office can go far in helping families realize they will be cared for throughout their time at the institution.

Again, the mission statement—especially those that evolved from an explicit commitment to educate those in difficult financial circumstances—can be instructive. Embrace of that historic mission should remain a guiding force for financial aid practices, and drive efforts to keep access to Catholic higher education affordable.

## Recruitment and Outreach

Each institution is limited to some degree by its staffing and budget, but as institutions look to strengthen their Catholic identities, and therefore their competitive edge, they should make sure that they are searching for students in the most appropriate places. Of course, this means making sure admissions officials visit as many Catholic high schools as possible, but there are many other ways to reach an audience of "good fits." Increasingly, first-generation and minority students (many of whom are Catholic) are reaching out to community-based organizations for help with the college search process. Colleges and universities should make sure they are connected to these groups and help where they can: conducting financial aid or essay-writing workshops, providing materials, and giving presentations.



In addition, organizations such as the National Catholic College Admission Association (NCCAA) sponsor recruitment trips to places like Puerto Rico and Latin America. Both trips provide excellent exposure to many Catholic high schools with a history of sending students to campuses on the U.S. mainland. These are reasonably low cost and well-run programs that can help broaden an institution's outreach. NCCAA also provides opportunities to its member schools to connect with hundreds of high school counselors during the annual National Association for College Admissions Counseling conference.

## Student Outcomes

All institutions are being held accountable for the success and job placement of their graduates, and Catholic institutions have advantages here that again can differentiate them from their competitors. First, holistic education experiences provided through liberal arts, broad-based curriculums give students many of the skills that employers seek: critical thinking, writing and communication, and in many cases language skills. In addition, students who graduate from Catholic campuses have strong backgrounds in ethical behavior and service.

Most Catholic colleges and universities also have large, passionate, and committed alumni networks that help students as they begin their careers. These alumni know the wonderful education they received and look to attract well-prepared graduates to their organizations. Perhaps most importantly, Catholic institutions can point to benefits beyond jobs and salary. As was highlighted in a recent study sponsored by NCCAA, "Values That Matter," 92 percent of Catholic college alumni believe their Catholic higher education was a good investment. They believe they developed lifelong benefits from their college experience that include values, ethics, spiritual development, a sense of self and community, and a commitment to service that continues to shape and enhance their lives. It is in these stories, and these outcomes, that Catholic institutions can truly differentiate themselves.

Remaining true to one's mission in a time of extreme market uncertainty is not easy. However, doing so is crucial for Catholic colleges and universities to survive. Admissions offices can help that effort by reassessing their practices and procedures to ensure that they communicate Catholic identity.



One Dupont Circle, Suite 650  
Washington, DC 20036  
tel: 202.457.0650  
email: [accu@accunet.org](mailto:accu@accunet.org)  
[www.accunet.org](http://www.accunet.org)



Transforming Challenges Into Opportunities  
12535 15th Ave. NE, Suite 211  
Seattle, WA 98125  
tel: 206.432.3565  
toll free: 800.916.3472  
email: [info@TheReidGroup.biz](mailto:info@TheReidGroup.biz)  
[www.TheReidGroup.biz](http://www.TheReidGroup.biz)