

# Strengthening Catholic Identity

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## 3RD OF A SERIES: BOARDS OF TRUSTEES

### A Unique American Model

Catholic higher education in the United States offers an unparalleled example of partnership among laity, dioceses, and religious communities. In particular, boards of trustees, made up predominantly of generous and committed community representatives, hold the primary responsibility for preserving and promoting the Catholic identity and mission of an institution. Nowhere else among the multitude of Catholic institutions of higher learning worldwide is this the case to the same scope and degree. This situation is a special embodiment of the results of Vatican II, Catholic tradition, and American innovation. As a result, the expertise and personal investment of board members keeps Catholic higher education in the United States strong and vital.

The *Application of Ex corde Ecclesiae for the United States* contains particular norms recognizing the important role of college and university trustees. Their responsibility and oversight entails the Catholic identity and mission of the institution, as well as student well-being and the academic range, quality, and financial stability of the campus.

Boards encompass an assortment of members. They include men and women; educators and executives; leaders in business and finance, government, and the arts; representatives of service and non-profit organizations; Catholics and persons of other or no religious affiliation; alumni; and citizens at large. What they share is knowledge of and love for the mission of the institution; resolve to contribute their time, talent, and treasure; and willingness to give of their expertise in planning, community building, fund raising, and stewardship.

### Key Responsibilities

The primary oversight responsibilities of the board include:

- Ensuring diligent stewardship of the institution's Catholic identity and distinctive educational mission.
- Hiring, reviewing, monitoring, and supporting the president.
- Preserving and enhancing the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.
- Honoring the charism of the institution's founders by preserving it as the legacy of tomorrow.
- Working closely with the founding order to articulate a statement of common purpose and to negotiate conditions of sponsorship.
- Confirming the president's appointment of senior officers in accordance with the bylaws.
- Establishing and evaluating responsible fiscal policies and practices.
- Safeguarding the quality and relevance of the institution's academic programs.
- Tracking students' academic development and personal growth.
- Collaborating with the president in fund raising.

- Helping elevate the institution's visibility and influence within the wider community.
- Performing periodic and rigorous self-assessment to ensure continued adherence to mission, identity, and strategy.

### **Board Stewardship of Catholic Identity and Mission**

The primary responsibility of the board is to preserve and foster institutional identity and mission—which includes the selection and support of a president who understands, appreciates, and is committed to Catholic identity and mission as the driving force of the institution. Some boards may support the president in mission leadership by suggesting that he or she hire a senior-level mission officer who becomes a member of the president's cabinet. Others may delegate the lead responsibility for identity and mission to a standing committee, charging it with nurturing the extent and pervasiveness of the identity and mission within the college or university's core activities, and regularly updating the entire board in this regard. On a number of campuses, board members have established centers or endowments to study and enhance the charism, spirituality, or mission of the institution's founders.

### **Tangible Ways Boards Help Uphold Identity and Mission**

While managing the responsibilities mentioned above, board members should also be mindful of the Catholic identity and mission within and throughout all interactions. For instance:

**Ask Probing Questions about Mission:** During conversations about all aspects of the university, board members must be deliberate in making sure that the institution's identity and mission are considered.

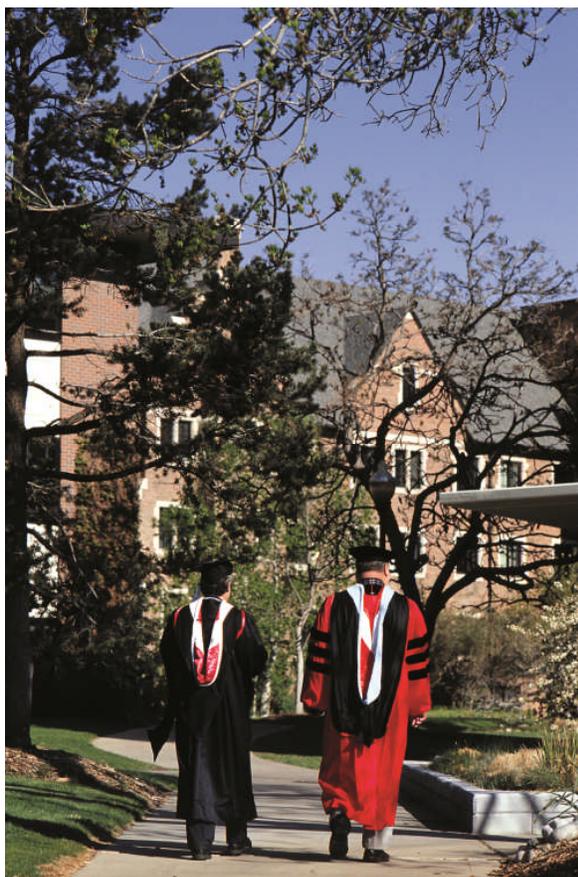
- Is the mission statement succinct, memorable, and inspiring?
- Are the Catholic identity and the mission evident in the curriculum? Where can they be strengthened and how can the board assist faculty with engaging these in the classroom, as appropriate to their disciplines and professions?
- Are faculty and staff offered sufficient development opportunities that invite them to deepen their understanding of and engagement with the identity and mission? If not, how can the board offer support?
- Do faculty and student affairs personnel effectively address the culture and characteristics of today's students?
- How does the college or university contribute to the community through service?
- Does the campus serve the needs of underrepresented constituencies and prepare students to live responsibly in a pluralist society?
- How do the careers of alumnae and alumni exemplify the values of the institution?
- What mechanisms are utilized to ensure open channels of communication with the local bishop?

**Align University Budget with Mission:** When managing the budget, trustees should bear in mind how financial considerations affect and reflect the Catholic identity and mission.

- Do expenditures support the priorities that flow from the Catholic identity and mission, e.g., in budgeting for student financial aid? In reflecting Catholic Social Teaching tenets?
- Is the quality of education proportional to the costs?
- Does the university provide funds for ongoing formation in identity and mission for its different constituencies?
- Who are the major donors and benefactors? How do they reflect the Catholic identity and mission of the institution?

**Assess Identity and Mission:** The board might also initiate a formal review of mission and identity effectiveness in various units of the institution and encourage efforts to address any shortcomings.

- Does the college proclaim its Catholic identity clearly in public documents?
- Is worship prominent on campus?
- Does scholarship evidence thoughtful engagement with appropriate aspects of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition?
- Does the college or university value its identity through the selection of appropriate recipients of honorary degrees and other designations?



Because board members hold essential responsibilities related to both identity and mission, they must be equipped to carry them out with confidence. This begins with the board selection committee identifying individuals who already embrace the mission or who are open to such a commitment. Boards are at their best when they welcome newcomers by sharing the values and stories of the institution's tradition and introducing them to people who are currently carrying on the mission in practical ways.

Beyond this introduction, it is essential to provide a systemic and intentional program to broaden and deepen the board's understanding of, appreciation for, and practical implementation of the institution's Catholic identity and mission. Sessions on Catholic identity and mission could be included at each regularly scheduled board meeting. Special events such as a retreat or pilgrimage could also be organized for board members to further enrich their understanding and commitment. Resources and referrals for board development and formation in mission and identity are available

through both the Reid Group and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

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#3: Boards of Trustees

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Catholic higher education in the United States holds a privileged position. Its leadership is entrusted in a remarkable way with a relationship among sponsoring religious communities, dioceses, and dedicated lay professionals. Together they constitute the boards of trustees in our colleges and universities. Each group brings rich knowledge and a wealth of experience to this shared enterprise. And each individual is responsible for preserving and enhancing the legacy of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition as a key ingredient in educating and forming the next generation of Church and society leaders. This is a precious and important undertaking that—thanks to the dedication, generosity, and perseverance of trustees—is a continuing success story.

*Photo: Regis University*



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)