

Strengthening Catholic Identity

5TH OF A SERIES: PRESIDENTS

Promoting and pursuing institutional mission is the responsibility of all members of the university community, but it is the president who bears the primary duty to personify, articulate, and celebrate the Catholic mission. Although not a single-handed task—the responsibility is closely shared with members of the president’s cabinet and guided by the board of trustees—it is the president who must keep the mission as his or her top priority, woven through all decisions and interactions on and off campus. Doing so ensures that the Catholic mission remains a central and defining characteristic of the institution.

A Calling

The calling to the Catholic university presidency is much more than a job in senior administrative leadership; indeed, it is considered a vocation for many. This role is a fairly new phenomenon for laypersons. Although some lay presidents were once religious themselves or have attended formation programs related to a particular charism (such as the Ignatian Colleagues Program), most laypeople come to the presidency without formal religious formation. Likewise, the network of Church-related resources for clerics and vowed religious serving in presidencies is not in place for laypeople. Fortunately, numerous formation programs for new and aspiring presidents do exist to help cultivate the knowledge and networks presidents will need, unique to the Catholic mission. Not to be overlooked, laypeople do bring with them *new* skills and networks from other professions that make them well-suited to lead the complex organizations that are Catholic colleges and universities today.

This is a presidency like no other. Many institutions choose to underscore the uniqueness of this presidential mission responsibility by inviting her or him to include a public proclamation of their commitment to the Catholic mission within the inauguration ceremony itself. Others elect to stress its import within the interview and hiring process.



While extremely rewarding both professionally and spiritually, the public nature of the presidential role can also pose great challenges to the person called to this vocation. Partnering with other presidents and engaging in gatherings (such as ACCU’s Annual Meeting) with colleagues at similar

institutions or in schools that share the same sponsoring charism can provide a chance to share perceptions, problems, and best practices.

Unique in Nature

Each president is faced with prioritizing responsibilities, identifying needed skills and resources, and ensuring that she or he has what is needed to carry out the tasks at hand, especially

leadership of the mission. Many new presidents take the deliberate and careful step of creating a mission and identity committee while also engaging in extensive personal study and formation. As the public face of the institution, the president also must be well-versed and comfortable making presentations about the religious dimensions of the mission. More than half of Catholic college and university presidents have a trusted mission officer whose charge is to support the president in his or her promotion of mission through educational and programmatic initiatives on campus.

Sharing the Mission

Regardless of which audience the president is engaging, he or she must introduce the Catholic university's mission to all. To students, presidents articulate how career preparation fits within a Catholic understanding of educating the whole person for life. For the board of trustees and administration, the president can identify and create opportunities to experience the mission in action. For faculty, either directly or through the deans, the president must encourage and promote ways that faculty can integrate the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Catholic Social Teaching throughout their course requirements. In addressing alumni, presidents must celebrate graduates for demonstrating the university's Catholic mission in their lives after graduation. Moving each constituency toward awareness and embodiment of mission—through stories, actions, and concrete examples—is a precious opportunity afforded the president whenever addressing members of the university community.

A Snapshot of Presidents¹

- Average age of presidents: 61 years old.²
- Last position was a presidency: 54% in higher education overall; 12.8% in Catholic higher education.³
- Lay presidents in Catholic higher education: 61%
- Female presidents: 26% in higher education overall, 33% in Catholic higher education
 - Of the female presidents in Catholic higher education, 49% are vowed religious

In addition to these constituencies, fundraising affords a unique opportunity to genuinely share and honor the mission. Given that this activity occupies most of the president's time, he or she can convey to donors their opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves and to contribute to building a better world; the president does well to articulate these points in relation to the Catholic mission.

Relationships with Bishop and Sponsoring Religious Congregation

As mentioned, presidents must engage with partners to advance the mission work of a Catholic institution. Among those relationships, two stand out: the relationship with the bishop and with the sponsoring religious congregation. The bishop and the president must reach out to each other to ensure each is kept abreast of mission-related topics, including events, activities, speakers, and honorees at the university and the diocese. The president's welcoming attitude to the bishop for liturgical celebrations, as well as informal visits to campus, helps create a culture of hospitality on campus.

Likewise, if there is a founding religious congregation, close communication with the founding community helps ensure that the legacy of the founders continues with vibrancy. Open conversation in a climate of trust allows the diocese, the order, and the university to pursue commonly shared goals.



A Shining Light

With great hope, the Church entrusts the leadership of the Catholic university to faithful and skilled lay and religious, male and female, presidents. From across all professions and backgrounds, presidents bring with them great gifts, talents, and knowledge to embody and articulate the Catholic mission each in their own way. Catholic higher education continues to be a shining light of faith and scholarship in large part because of the tremendous commitment and dedication of its presidents.

FOOTNOTES:

¹Cook, B.J. (2011) The American College President Study: Key Findings and Takeaways. <http://www.acenet.edu/the presidency/columns and features/Pages/The American College President Study.aspx>; Nelson, L. (June 22, 2012). "Where Have All the Women Gone?" Inside Higher Ed. [http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/22/catholic_colleges_worry_number_female_presidents_falls.](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/22/catholic_colleges_worry_number_female_presidents_falls)

²Across all U.S. higher education.

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One Dupont Circle, Suite 650
Washington, DC 20036
tel: 202.457.0650
email: accu@accunet.org
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
www.TheReidGroup.biz