

Strengthening Catholic Identity

6TH OF A SERIES: CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS

The chief academic officer, often titled vice president for academic affairs or provost, of a Catholic college or university plays a unique role in advancing the Catholic identity and educational mission of the institution.

As the leader of the faculty, the chief academic officer (CAO) must understand the traditions of academic culture: the importance of freedom of inquiry, the role of faculty as stewards of the curricula, and the place of faculty self-governance. The CAO also speaks for larger institutional concerns: the scope and quality of academic programs and scholarship, the student learning environment, and the importance of engaging Catholic identity, the Catholic intellectual tradition, and the values of the founding congregation, if present. As such, the CAO works with the president and the mission officer to advance an integrated approach to the institution's identity and mission among the faculty and academic staff.

Faculty

The faculty of a college or university are central to the institution's educational mission and to shaping its culture and character. CAOs are therefore key actors where faculty personnel are involved. They oversee faculty hiring, encourage faculty development, and make recommendations for retention, tenure, and promotion. The importance of this position in personnel matters cannot be overstated, but he or she does not lead these processes alone. The CAO must engage the president and the board of directors, and also lead an often diverse faculty by persuasion and collaboration. He or she must urge colleagues to recognize and embody the distinctive character of the campus. Given this responsibility, chief academic officers should consider institutionalizing a mission assessment that asks:

- Is hiring for mission an integral part of the university's faculty recruitment process? How and by whom are candidates assessed in terms of their fit with the mission? How is that fit balanced against the desire for disciplinary expertise and the need for diversity?
- Are mission-specific criteria integrated into faculty review procedures in ways that are fitting to their disciplines and professions? Are these criteria clearly stated in appropriate documents?



- Are explanations of identity and mission key components of new faculty orientation and ongoing faculty formation programs?
- Does the institution provide substantial support and resources to help faculty engage Catholic thought and spirituality?
- Are adequate resources provided for faculty to design courses, or modules within courses, that connect to aspects of the Catholic worldview?
- Is there significant funding for the ongoing development of faculty with respect to identity and mission, thus demonstrating the priority of mission for the institution?
- Are there professorships, endowed chairs, centers, or institutes that support scholarship, research, and the development of teaching strategies in the areas of identity and mission?

Curricula

As Blessed John Paul II noted in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, a Catholic college or university “must be both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge, and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative.” To advance a true university education, therefore, in which ideas are rigorously addressed in relation to Catholic values about the meaning and purposes of knowledge, the CAO must:

- Advocate curricula that express the distinctive, integrative perspective and key values of the Catholic intellectual tradition.
- Engage the leadership of the deans, department chairs, and faculty committees on mission-related criteria, as curricula are evaluated and new programs are created.
- Give attention to the vitality of departments such as theology and aspects of philosophy that are significant components of Catholic higher education.
- Encourage the inclusion of mission-appropriate perspectives within the curricula of graduate and professional programs, as well as undergraduate programs.
- Support co-curricular programming in collaboration with student services that provides community outreach and service learning.
- Identify strategies to assess programs that measure institutional influence on student development.

Qualities of Chief Academic Officers

Given the key role of the chief academic officer in advancing mission and identity, one must ask what qualities are important in a CAO. This is a critical question, as this position turns over in Catholic colleges and universities, on average, every five years. Here are some suggestions:

- A track record as a respected academic leader, such as dean, department chair, or program director at a comparable institution.

- The ability to gain the respect and confidence of faculty while communicating the priorities of the president and trustees.
- A leadership style that brings out the best contributions of others and helps faculty and academic staff grow professionally.
- Familiarity with and desire to deepen knowledge of the Catholic intellectual tradition and advance the founding charism (Dominican, Benedictine, Franciscan, Mercy, Jesuit, and so forth).
- A personal commitment to education that exemplifies Catholic values.
- Respect for the Catholic ecclesial status and a desire to partner with the president in ensuring positive interaction with the local bishop and sponsoring religious congregation, if present.
- A capacity to function with executives in a presidential cabinet to advance a holistic student experience that reflects the values of Catholic higher education.

The chief academic officer holds one of the most demanding positions in any college or university. Many groups on and off campus make claims on the CAO's time and attention so that he or she must prioritize a complex environment of tight budgets, strategic choices about



emerging fields of knowledge, calls for greater accountability, and new technologies, among other concerns. Add to this landscape the unique challenge of incorporating the Catholic view of higher learning, which emphasizes that knowledge fits into an integrated truth and must serve humanity.

Catholic education can never ignore ethical and moral considerations. The perspectives of the Catholic tradition must be offered as part of a dialogue with the larger culture. Through such a dialogue, the Catholic approach to philosophic, social, artistic, and theological analysis is preserved and renewed. The success of the chief academic officer is seen, ultimately, in graduates who become truly competent in their field and are prepared to put faith into action.



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