

Strengthening Catholic Identity

9TH OF A SERIES: CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING



Catholic colleges and universities prepare students to engage with the society and culture around them in an authentically and thoughtfully Catholic way. The concern for social justice, both as an institutional priority and a curriculum hallmark, is among the more readily identifiable characteristics of Catholic higher education.

In response to the social, economic, and political issues of our time, the Church offers a body of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) that can help Catholic colleges and universities in their mission to form students, encourage research, and develop their institutional culture.

Student Formation

CST reminds us that participation in public life is a moral activity, and so students are invited to view their eventual careers and callings as vocations in service of the common good. CST can be applied across disciplines in ways both particular to the standards of those disciplines and as a means to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation. Education from the framework of CST can also incorporate a service-learning approach, which helps students experience solidarity with their community while developing an intellectual framework for addressing social issues. In this way, Catholic colleges and their students can address both academic and community needs, thus engaging in an education that intellectually and practically meets the standards of CST.

In preparing Catholic students to engage justly in their society, CST addresses several issues that are of particular contemporary relevance. The foundation of CST is the dignity of the person, and so Catholics must always work to promote what Blessed Pope John Paul II called the “culture of life.” This entails persistent commitment to the common good and an emphasis on cooperation, rather than the competition and individualism that so often prevail today. Students must be prepared to engage in their disciplines and face social issues in light of this uniquely Catholic framework.

Among your graduates, can you identify individuals who are leading lives of service and solidarity? Do you find occasions to celebrate their endeavors?



Themes

- CST emphasizes **the dignity of work** and the need for all people to participate in the economy according to their capacities with an eye to the common good, solidarity, and a preferential option for the poor. *As individuals educated in CST, do your students begin to realize the need for an emphasis on creating a just market rather than emphasizing maximum profit?*
- **Care for creation** is a primary tenet of CST and so ought to be a focus for Catholic institutions in shaping scientific research and ethical studies around environmental issues, especially emphasizing the disproportionately harsh impact of climate change on the poor. *Do your curricula and research agenda emphasize issues of sustainability?*
- Catholic institutions ought to stand in **solidarity with migrants** regardless of their immigration status in order to combat the social injustices that often underlie and accompany migration. *Does your college or university extend opportunities to migrants—through education and scholarships or through advocacy—to uphold their personal dignity? Does it teach solidarity with the marginalized?*
- **Discrimination** is also a threat to human dignity, solidarity, and the common good, and must be addressed as a social justice issue across disciplines. CST can help students realize not only the injustice of discrimination but also how they might address its root causes in pursuit of more just institutions and practices. *Are there student organizations, faculty, and staff on campus that take an active role in promoting respect for those who are the targets of discrimination?*
- CST is committed to **peace**, which includes not only the specific focus on just war and nonviolence but also working for just peace. Catholic colleges and universities can help reflect on and develop this tradition, while equipping students to address injustice and work to build just social institutions. *Does your campus promote cross-disciplinary collaboration on peace-building efforts?*

CST promotes **human dignity and rights** throughout the world, because humans are inherently and equally worthy of respect by virtue of their creation in God’s image. Rights must be balanced with duties to the common good, and so human rights studies at Catholic colleges and

universities ought to teach students the connections between CST and modern ideas of human rights.

Do your students understand how to employ the teachings of CST to work for the protection of human rights and dignity?

Research

A primary task of colleges and universities is the support of research, and CST can help provide questions to guide research through the principles of solidarity, concern for the common good, and the emphasis on a preferential option for the poor. Again, these are not merely intellectual principles but rather should be employed pragmatically, for instance by incorporating community groups and organizations into research endeavors.

How are the themes of CST reflected in the research agenda of your institution?

Institutional Culture

All aspects of Catholic colleges and universities ought to be informed and guided by CST. This extends beyond academic pursuits into institutional management. For example, practices surrounding employment, labor, environmental concerns, and neighborhood relationships can all be modeled after CST principles of justice. The concepts taught in the classroom ought to be practically employed so that institutional culture may serve as a living witness for CST principles.

Does your institution consciously model behavior around these teachings in such a way that you continuously serve as a practical example of CST?

Advancing the Common Good

As society confronts various difficulties and inequities, CST can help equip students to face these challenges and pursue a calling to promote the common good. In this way, Catholic colleges and universities help bring about justice by preparing students with a strong foundation in CST and by embodying CST principles within their own culture.

For more discussion of this topic, ACCU offers *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Teaching: A Vision Statement* as a resource for incorporating CST into Catholic higher education. See www.accunet.org to review the statement.



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