

Sacred Heart University

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Exploring The Identity Of A Catholic University

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Exploring The Identity Of A Catholic University

November 17, 2017 | Commentary by Michelle Loris, Ph.D., Psy.D.



Our nation and the world grapple daily with prejudice, senseless brutality and violence. As we struggle with divisive issues such as intolerance related to religion, race, ethnicity and gender identity, it's easy to lose perspective, get caught up in political rhetoric or misguided advocacy, and question one's own beliefs and values.

The constant bombardment from media and communication technology can be deafening, and the polarization numbing. For a student in college, charting one's own course in these chaotic seas is increasingly challenging, frustrating and confusing. Tumultuous issues require discussion and debate, sound reasoning, philosophical and historical underpinnings and an open mind. And if you don't have strong religious or family roots, or a trusted hand to guide you, it can be a perilous journey.

As university leaders, we see that the trend among our students is toward more secularization and materialism. Many students identify as "agnostic," or "spiritual but not religious," or as "unchurched" or "non-affiliated." In many ways, they are indifferent to any institutional religion and unconvinced of any enduring or universal morality. So, in Catholic higher education today, there is much discussion about how to maintain a robust, relevant, and distinctive Catholic identity in our colleges and universities.

Research shows that many students today are focused on "getting a degree," not so much on becoming a knowledgeable and educated person. Studies in the humanities, for example, are often seen as irrelevant to students' career goals. In the cyber world they inhabit, students are primed for quick responses and facts, most often captured in 140 characters or less. Rationale and perspective are not always congruous with this generation's motives and disciplines.

Some university faculty, too, are focused only on a specialized area of study in their disciplines, and are less concerned about how this area of study may contribute to Catholic thought. Reality and truth are seen as purely subjective, relative and dependent upon

perspective. Not unlike students, many faculty favor secularization; they are not committed to the development of or engagement with Catholic intellectual life.

In such a context, we need to consider the idea of a Catholic University and how we sustain its Catholic identity. We also need to determine how we can bring Catholic intellectual life across disciplines and place it at the heart of the Catholic university. And we need to ensure that our students are exposed to this thinking, see its relevance in addressing today's challenges, and prepare them to go out into the world as leaders.

At Sacred Heart University, we have developed a curriculum that focuses on Catholic thought and enduring questions of humanity. And we are seeking out and cultivating faculty who recognize the value and vigor of Catholic intellectual life.

We are a lay staffed, and lay led comprehensive Catholic university, rooted in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. We understand that one way to distinguish a Catholic university is to place Catholic thought and Catholic thinkers, writers and artists at the center of an engaging interdisciplinary conversation. We believe that fundamental and enduring humanistic questions have no quick answers; they require thoughtful reflection, and foster open inquiry and a free exchange of views and ideas.

As such, we have created a required common core, housed in the Department of Catholic Studies. It is called the Human Journey Seminars: Great Books in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

We understand this tradition as an ongoing 2,000-year interdisciplinary conversation about God, humanity, society, and nature. Our goal is to develop a community of learners and scholars, who, with Catholic thought at the center, engage in this ongoing conversation.

Fundamental questions frame the reading, inquiry, and discussion: what does it mean to be human; what is our relationship with God; what does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose; what does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world; and what does it mean to form a more just society for the common good?

In these seminars, students grapple with enduring questions, great books and authors, and pressing contemporary issues and problems. The dynamics of these seminars, whose central activities are reading, reflection, inquiry and dialog, foster self-awareness, moral understanding, and community both within the classroom and among the faculty who lead these seminars.

Teaching the teachers

The best way to keep Catholic intellectual life at the heart of a Catholic university is to develop a faculty who see this goal as a compelling, exciting enterprise which engenders animating and engaging inquiry about the human experience.

The faculty who facilitate these seminars come from a variety of disciplines; not all are Catholic, but all are dedicated to implementing the vision and purpose of this process. They are immersed in conversations about the texts and the pedagogy; offer colloquia; accompany students to films, museums and lectures; attend weekly workshops and

conferences about Catholic thought and imagination; and participate in a three-day summer faculty-development workshop.

These are a community of scholars who recognize that conversation about contemporary issues with Catholic thought at its center can offer its students moral clarity, and help them develop a moral compass. These faculty help students learn to question, to think critically, to develop perspective, to reflect, and to see the enduring relevance and legacy of the Catholic intellectual tradition in their lives today.

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