

Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education: A Way of Proceeding

The Jesuits

The Society of Jesus in the United States

PREFACE FROM THE JESUIT CONFERENCE BOARD

Dear Colleagues in Jesuit Higher Education:

In composing this document on the Jesuit, Catholic character of Jesuit higher education, we felt that some explanation of our intention would be helpful. First, this document presumes that there has been local discussion on the essential characteristics of a Catholic university as these have been enunciated in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

- A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
- A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
- Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;
- An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal, which gives meaning to life.¹

Second, we have prepared a document that invites inclusive local discussion, debate, and adaptation. By inclusive we mean that our universities *de facto* are ecumenical in their ethos. The higher education institutions that we call Jesuit are communities that represent a variety of beliefs and convictions. We are attempting here to present a document that is faithful both to our distinctive Catholic and Jesuit tradition and yet open to the values and convictions of other members of our communities who join us in our mission. Further, we believe that the faculty, staff, and boards of our institutions will be engaged only if they themselves can contribute to their self-definition and self-assessment. For those reasons, we called this document “a way of proceeding” and invite the participants to “communal reflection.” The document is an approach, not the only approach. It does indicate parameters of authenticity, but it does not dictate how these should be understood or implemented within each institution. It is meant to be a way to get people into conversation about the mission of their institutions. Third, our aim was to help those institutions whose members have been working hard to create a Jesuit culture and Catholic ethos within their institutions. While we have tried to be sensitive to the rich variety of religious and ethical traditions that constitute our faculties, staffs, administrations, boards, and student bodies,

we have turned our major focus on the mission of being a distinctive voice in North American higher education.

Fourth, we hope that these characteristics and their suggested focus questions will provide Jesuit higher education institutions with guidelines for their professional self-evaluations, their recruitment, and their fund raising.

Fifth, it is up to the leadership within each Jesuit university to use this statement as a tool for discerning the emphases and directions that their schools will take in sustaining and promoting their distinctive character as Jesuit and Catholic.

Without local leadership we will have one more document for storage, not an incentive for reflection, discussion, and action.

The Board of The Jesuit Conference

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INTRODUCTION

The 34th General Congregation and the recent addresses of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, attest to the importance of the work of higher education today and to the need for all who are involved in this enterprise to be committed to its distinctive character as Jesuit and Catholic.

What governs the enterprise of Jesuit higher education is its sense of mission.

There are three aspects to this mission.

First, it is a mission in continuity with the historical evolution of the Ignatian charism. "In 1551, the Roman College opened its doors, an emblematic figure of what would become the Society's venture in the university field. Four and a half centuries later, the Society remains intensely dedicated to the work of higher education with numberless universities and other institutions throughout the world."²

Second, the contemporary mission respects the reality of being both a university and a Jesuit apostolic work. In all its endeavors, Jesuit education is distinguished by intellectual excellence and academic rigor. "To be a university requires dedication to research, teaching, and the various forms of service that correspond to its cultural mission."³ At the same time, a Jesuit university must reflect its specifically Jesuit character. "To be Jesuit requires that the university act in harmony with the demands of the service of faith and the promotion of

must be in dialogue. Such dialogue needs discernment, the ability to judge when, where, and how the world and the gospel interact.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

The following characteristics of Jesuit higher education represent one way of proceeding in that discerning dialogue. These characteristics and the process that they invite are meant to enable each institution to locate its own sense of mission. Within each Jesuit university, groups of faculty, staff, administrators, students, and boards must engage in that dialogue out of their unique institutional histories, professional development, and local missions.

1. Dedication to Human Dignity from a Catholic/Jesuit Faith Perspective

Ignatian spirituality, the foundation of all Jesuit apostolic endeavors, views men and women as created in love and created to reflect the wisdom and goodness of God. The advent of Christ and the continued presence of Christ's Spirit enhance that created dignity. Men and women are enfolded in God's care and compassion, offered companionship as the brothers and sisters of Christ, and empowered by the Spirit to complete the work of Christ on earth. Jesuits believe that their colleagues from other religious and ethical traditions share this

The Jesuit university or college must be a place of intellectual honesty, pluralism, and mutual respect where inquiry and open discussion characterize the environment of teaching, research, and professional development. The idea of reverence was a pivotal one for St. Ignatius Loyola. For him, reverence was first an attitude of regard before the majesty of God, but it was also a regard for all that God had created as both a gift from God and a way into God's presence. Inspired by this sense of reverence, the Jesuit ideal of seeking and finding God in all things presupposes this genuine regard for the mystery within the universe. It is an ideal that gives serious attention to those great and abiding questions about the meaning of life and the conduct of human affairs. It is an ideal that encourages an openness of mind and heart to the varieties of ways in which the human spirit has named God and defined the moral life. It is an ideal that

the Ignatian tradition. Service signifies a mutual willingness among faculty, staff, and administration to enhance the entire environment of learning and service that should exist within the Jesuit university community and between it and the world outside its boundaries. There is a healthy professionalism that respects the differences in goals and methodologies among the various branches of knowledge and competencies. But the Jesuit educational ideal is also one that tries to find ways to transcend these boundaries in order to forge a community of scholarship and service.

Sample Focus Questions

- What mechanisms are in place within your institution to incorporate new faculty and staff into the overarching Jesuit, Catholic mission of your institution?
- How have faculty, staff, administrators, and board members—whether Catholic or from differing religious and philosophical traditions--been

- How does your institution help students to confront problems that inhibit their academic, social, ethical, or spiritual growth?
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- How does your institution work with its alumni to help them understand their solidarity with one another and their mission to work for a better world?
- Are there internal issues of injustice that your university needs to confront?

CONCLUSION

An institution of higher education has always provided its greatest service when it has promoted academic excellence on all levels. This practical esteem for the intellectual life has characterized Jesuit higher education from its beginnings. But the reshaping of the contemporary world according to the justice, peace, and love preached by Christ and cherished by the Church characterizes its apostolic ambition. World realities and personal faith have prompted a new understanding of Jesuit humanism, one that integrates academic excellence with social responsibility.⁵ These two goals must be in harmony in any Jesucco

and the Life [John 14: 6],’ the Logos whose Spirit of intelligence and love enables the human person with his or her own intelligence to find the ultimate reality of which he is the source and end who alone is capable of giving fully that Wisdom without which the future of the world would be in danger” from *On Catholic Universities, Apostolic Constitution of August 15, 1990, # 4*, Washington, D.C.: USCC, n.d.