THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN TRANSITION: THE CASE OF SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY

Charles T. Eby and Paul Siff
Sacred Heart University
Fairfield, Connecticut

The last three decades have witnessed dramatic changes in Roman Catholicism and, particularly, in the American Catholic experience. A new Catholic tone was introduced during the period of the Vatican Councils in the 1960s that expressed a spirit of openness and flexibility in the functioning of the institutional Church. Yet in the 1970s and especially in the early 1980s this spirit has been viewed by the Church hierarchy as being "too free" and currently American Catholicism is experiencing a tightening in both religious teaching and hierarchical authority.

Catholic Higher Education is intimately involved in these shifting tides in Catholicism. The rise of the American Catholic colleges and universities in the 19th and 20th centuries is well known. Generally these institutions of higher learning were established by religious orders for the purpose of preparing Catholic laity for the realities of the modern world. Each operated within a distinctly Catholic character thereby insuring a continued period of religious indoctrination beyond the lower educational levels. But, like American Catholicism in general, the times are no longer the same. Originally, the American Catholic Church had been the "church of the immigrants" dealing with the needs of the various Catholic ethnic groups who arrived on American shores. As such, these immigrants represented the lower socioeconomic levels of American society. Catholic education provided first through the parochial system and then through universities and colleges a visible avenue of mobility upward. Later twentieth century society, however, has seen the absorption of these immigrant Catholics into the mainstream of American life with a significant majority rising to the ranks of the middle class.[1] The needs and desires of this new Catholic population have prompted Catholic institutions of higher learning to adapt to circumstances quite different from those under which they had been originally founded. As Raymond A. Schroth commented in a recent article,

> "the common wisdom in higher education circles has predicted, as a result of the demographic dip in the college-age population, that a good many colleges must either radically adapt their curricula, special programs, and marketing strategies to attract new students or become intellectually excellent enough to beat the competition or die."[2]

So from a very traditional kind of Catholic higher education which was strictly clerically-controlled and stressing openly Catholic values and beliefs, Catholic universities and colleges now face the harsh realities of the economic marketplace. How will Catholic character and identity intimately connected with such institutions of higher learning survive this challenge?[3] Compounding this economic hardship are a series of proposed directives emanating from the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. Two deserve particular attention. The first affirms that no Catholic university can consider itself "a purely private institution" and the second, even more alarming, that Catholics, who teach theological subjects at "any institution

of higher learning must have a mandate from the competent ecclesiastical authority."[4] Both these suggestions point to a desire for stronger hierarchical authority in Catholic Higher Education.[5]

It is against this brief backdrop of the shifts in the spirit of Roman Catholicism and the development of American Catholic Higher Education and its modern problems that we would like to present the story of a small Catholic university which in many respects is a microcosm of these issues. That is, the birth and growth of Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

The origins of Sacred Heart University may be traced to the founding of the Diocese of Bridgeport in August, 1953. its first bishop, Lawrence J. Shehan, formerly Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, brought to his new post a strong interest in furthering Catholic education. By mid-1954 the Diocese, whose boundaries coincided with those of Fairfield County, had planned an ambitious program of school construction. The centerpiece was to be Notre Dame High School, a large, coeducational institution complete with on-site housing for the nuns and priests who would staff it. Toward this end, a fifty-eight acre tract of land was purchased in the northeastern reaches of the town of Fairfield; a formidable, diocese-wide fund drive gathered more than $4 million; and in September, 1956 the completed high school welcomed its first classes. Thousands of diocesan families undoubtedly shared the joy Bishop Shehan recalled experiencing upon seeing the Notre Dame complex rise to completion.

In 1961 Bishop Shehan returned to Baltimore as that city's bishop. His successor, Walter W. Curtis, Auxiliary Bishop of Newark since 1957, also possessed a strong interest in Catholic education, particularly at the post-secondary level. A native of Jersey City, New Jersey, Bishop Curtis had graduated from Seton Hall University, studied in Rome, earned a doctorate in theology at The Catholic University of America, and taught for fifteen years as a seminary professor.

As the new bishop surveyed his diocese, with its burgeoning population, he was struck by the relative paucity of Catholic higher education facilities, especially for students in modest circumstances who might wish to live at home while pursuing their studies. To remedy this deficiency became Walter Curtis' overriding dream. His own background suggested a model; the accomplishments of Bishop Shehan provided a site.

Bishop Curtis greatly admired his alma mater, Seton Hall University. Located within the diocese of Newark, Seton Hall possessed two attributes he found attractive; it was of great service to the Diocese, and it had become increasingly staffed and administered by members of the laity. This latter feature embodied a new direction within American Roman Catholicism. The idea of a similar college for the Bridgeport Diocese, locally oriented, lay controlled, and in this instance entirely for commuting students, began to form. Might not its graduates, constituting a new class of Catholic professionals, become the diocesan laity's future leaders.[6]

From the outset Bishop Curtis had considered the sprawling Notre Dame campus better suited to a college than a high school. Close to the Merritt Parkway and located on Park Avenue, a major north-south artery, it would be accessible to Bridgeport and neighboring communities, from which the prospective student body would be drawn. Most important, the site was available. As the bishop observed, "we need the college now and not five years from now."[7]

In October, 1962 Bishop Curtis, from Rome, announced both the plan to open a college the following September, and its name, "Sacred Heart." The choice of name had a dual origin: Sacred Heart Parish in Bloomfield, New Jersey, which was Walter Curtis' first pastorate, and Sacred Heart University located near Milan, Italy. All early references spoke of a college; however, an unexpected difficulty arose when it was learned that to create a college in Connecticut involved a lengthy process and would delay the opening an entire year. Instead, despite the absence of plans for any graduate programs, a legislative bill to incorporate Sacred Heart as a university was filed on January 23, 1963. The necessary provisional accreditation from the State Board of Education was hastily gained a week later at a meeting held in Governor John Dempsey's office. With support from the presidents of Fairfield University and the University of Bridgeport, numerous local political leaders, and the state AFL-CIO, the bill won approval in Hartford on March 14, 1963, and Governor Dempsey signed the charter creating Sacred Heart University. Selected as the first president was Dr. William H. Conley, a distinguished educator of national reputation.

The University's emergent shape was a blend of the innovative and the orthodox. Certainly its diocesan, lay staffed and administered nature, literally unique, partook of the former and imparted an attractive idealism to the enterprise. On the other hand the curriculum, with a demanding core program of sixty-four credits, many of them required (including two years of theology), and majors programs in English, History, Mathematics, Business Administration, and Accounting, broke no new ground. As for the institution's basic thrust and mission, there was some initial sentiment on the board to create an elite university, but the needs and backgrounds of the prospective student body pointed in a different direction. The admissions policy, in the words of one early observer, would be "flexible enough to admit students whose records were higher in potential than in performance."[8]

Who were the 173 students, who began classes on September 16 in a wing of the still functioning Notre Dame High School, and would soon bestow on their basketball team the name "Pioneers?" Why did they choose a new and seemingly provisional university? It was not because of low tuition; Sacred Heart's yearly cost in 1963 was comparable to that of its two neighboring universities. It may well have been the comfort of familiarity; a majority were graduates of local parochial high schools. As the bishop had anticipated, most were first generation college attenders; post-secondary education would constitute a new experience for their families as well as themselves. Curiously, the early student body was, and would remain for some time, predominantly male, a situation that eventually reversed. Another factor that would change over time was the early choice of career goals. At first, the largest number chose teaching. From the outset, Sacred Heart offered no education major, mandating instead a traditional liberal arts major for education candidates, supplemented by the courses necessary for certification. The second most popular career field was business administration.

The pioneer class faced a fairly rigorous--as well as rigid--regimen of courses. English, History, Mathematics, a modern foreign language, and Theology comprised a seventeen credit hour schedule. The study of Philosophy would wait until these other subjects were mastered. Despite some degree of selectivity in admissions, a number of students required remediation in Math and English, taking five hours a week in one of these subjects and

occasionally in both, and if necessary, getting extra help from faculty after class. In some instances, parents, having no experience with the demands of college, expected their children to participate in weekend family events as they had done in high school ("to Grandma's house for lunch or dinner") when the fledgling scholars really needed weekend time for study. "Some of the people that I remember had difficult times," a member of the first graduating class reminisced, but "the patience of the faculty ... and their interest in what we were doing ... eventually made a number of us good students."[9]

One feature of early campus life--straitlaced student discipline--seems quaint by the standards of twenty-five years later. A dress code, reminiscent of parochial schools, existed: skirts for women, ties and jackets or sweaters for men.[10] In addition, the student government created a formidable list of behavioral infractions, with a discipline committee to bring malefactors to justice. Besides wearing "improper attire" students could fall afoul of regulations against talking in the library, damaging property, being improperly parked, smoking in prohibited areas, bringing alcohol anywhere on campus, eating outside the lounge or cafeteria, littering, card playing or dice throwing, "boisterous obscenity", and a final catch-all "behavior not becoming a university student". Those caught in the act by agents of the student government were summoned before a three-judge court of their peers which, finding a defendant guilty, could impose fines ranging from fifty cents to $2.50. The first such tribunal met at the end of January, 1964 to judge six accused students, all of them male, who crimes were unspecified in an Obelisk article on the proceedings. Justice was porous: of the six, one who pleaded guilty had his case dismissed; those found guilty were fined half a dollar each, though one wrongdoer refused to pay and had his case referred to Dean Maurice O'Sullivan. But the most fortunate of the lot simply did not appear and the charges against him were dropped.

Levity aside, such rules and procedures suggest that perhaps the first class, hardly out of high school and attending college in a high school building, surrounded by high school students, may have had some difficulty separating themselves from the ambient mentality. Thus an anonymous letter to the Obelisk in February, 1964 complained of male Sacred Heart students in the halls "in a provocative way," ogling women students (known as "the girls") even though the Notre Dame administration had "absolutely prohibited" any such male-female fraternization. The letter suggested that Sacred Heart might profit from following this example. Perhaps the occasional instances of rowdyism by a few--reports of assaults with perfume-filled squirt guns, wrestling matches in the lounge, as well as disrespectful carriage towards co-eds--may be seen as the consequence of college life's slightly loosened bonds.

The Catholic character of the new university was openly emphasized during these early days. The campus served as a focal point of many diocesan functions and ceremonies. Even the campus radio station, WSHU-FM, featured the "Catholic College of the Air," a radio lecture and home reading program.

Unrest and challenges to authority on and off campus were, of course, endemic to this era and Sacred Heart, though touched more lightly than many other institutions of higher learning, nevertheless felt the currents of change. The Vietnam War hung like a great grey cloud over college life at the end of the 1960s. Sacred Heart students, though generally inclined toward conservatism, demonstrated a desire for peace. In a straw presidential poll taken in May, 1968, in which over half the full-time students voted, peace candidate Eugene McCarthy won a plurality, followed closely by Robert Kennedy;

together they received nearly 58% of the votes cast. Nixon, Johnson, Rockefeller, and Wallace trailed far behind.[11] The 1969 Vietnam Moratorium Day on campus featured an outdoor folk concert, attended as well by students from other area colleges, and a peace liturgy. Over 1,000 turned out for the event and heard Bishop Curtis ask for the eventual outlawing of war.

The killings of four students at Kent State University in May, 1970 galvanized campuses nationwide with demonstrations frequently supplanting normal activities. At Sacred Heart students voted overwhelmingly not to strike (close down the campus) but the great majority of "no's" asked that other forms of protest be taken.[12] On May 5 class schedules were maintained; some professors taught their syllabi but others conducted teach-ins. A procession of over eighty cars left Sacred Heart for the Stratford National Guard armory where a funeral ceremony was held. Back on campus an all night vigil took place beneath the flagpole in memory of the slain students. Obelisk editorials of the time freely criticized Nixon's Vietnam policies and urged Congress to set a deadline for the withdrawal of American troops.[13]

The most serious student demonstrations of these era derived from on-campus grievances and challenges to the traditional authority of school administrators, not U.S. presidents. Sacred Heart was no exception. Despite the innovative commitment to lay control, expectations of the proper relationship between the administration and the faculty and student body reflected assumptions rooted in notions of obedience and authority. Not all faculty, particularly your idealistic instructors, willingly accepted this, or a "top-down" administrative style which accorded little responsibility to those below. For its part, the administration appeared uncomfortable with some of the more outspoken faculty.

The major upheaval, however, came from the students, not the faculty. This may seem curious: by background and inclination, the SHU student was not inclined toward rebellion. In November, 1967 The Student Council president, addressing a tri-university symposium, observed that at Sacred Heart "we the students have been fortunate to avoid any outbursts and make gains through responsible action."[14] Fourteen months later the outburst, though certainly not irresponsible, came. On the morning of March 22, 1969 nearly one hundred students converged on Vice President Maurice O'Sullivan's office and refused to leave until their demands for more student and faculty rights were met. Specifically, they called for greater student-faculty power in the areas of personnel decisions, administration, and curriculum; support for demands of black students on campus; and lastly, a meeting with President Conley and the board of trustees.

The next day, the protesters having vacated Dr. O'Sullivan's office, the demands were distilled to two: establishment of a tripartite University Senate and a meeting with the trustees. Over 350 students rallied and signed a petition of support. Although classes continued undisrupted, the campus was clearly in a state of high agitation; rumors abounded of the presence of FBI agents, SDS provocateurs, and other outsiders. One student leader threatened to "take the matter into our own hands" should the demands be rejected. The administration, though highly displeased, wisely acceded in principle. Sacred Heart would have a University Senate.[15]

An aspect of Sacred Heart's self-definition that defies easy resolution was the question of its "Catholic identity." Eventually this thorny issue embroiled the University in a very serious legal battle.

The problem arose out of a matrix of ambiguities: a college founded by a local bishop, now head of its trustees, housed in diocesan property, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic in its faculty, staff, and student body, nevertheless had no formal ties to the Diocese of Bridgeport or to any other Catholic institutional body. Bearing an unmistakably Catholic name, dependent on the goodwill of the local Catholic community, yet created at a time of increasing ecumenism and imposing no overt religions test for admission or hiring, Sacred Heart would inevitably send forth mixed messages..

This difficulty surfaced early on. The first catalogue spoke of "the philosophy of Catholic education;" the second one substituted "Christian" for "Catholic" (today SHU is described as "rooted in the Catholic tradition" but "committed to the concept of equal educational opportunity for all").[16] Certainly in those halcyon years its leaders' public pronouncements invoked explicitly religious aims; students were urged to "undertake a Christian apostolate", to have "influence for God," to "meet the challenges against God and religion inherent in the modern world." In 1967, Bishop Curtis characterized Sacred Heart's atmosphere as "openly Catholic ... in spirit and tradition."

Yet the actual situation was not so simple. True, the campus ambience was unselfconsciously Catholic and notwithstanding the lack of formal diocesan ties, Sacred Heart would never honor a person associated with an organization like Planned Parenthood or an advocate of choice in the matter of abortion. However, in those things most central to education, no limits were imposed on academic freedom. Neither the Religious Studies nor the Philosophy Departments, the two most likely loci of indoctrination in a Catholic school, in any way permitted sectarian values to find a place in their courses. Attendance at daily mass was entirely optional and apparently few students chose to participate.

What, then, was religiously distinctive about Sacred Heart's identity and mission? Whatever it was, it proved elusive. A study group appointed in the late 1960s by President Conley deliberated at length about the relationship between spirituality and academics but ultimately found itself unable to reach a rational conclusion.[17]

Viewed from within, Sacred Heart's religious identity, however enunciated, seemed ambiguous: it served as no barrier to non-Catholics; had no influence on course content; and hardly any on curriculum. Some on the outside, however, took the school's professions of Catholicity at face value. After the University accepted a $376,000 Federal grant toward the construction of its new library, a lawsuit was filed in September, 1968 by the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union and the American Jewish Committee. It charged the Federal government with breaching the separation of church and state and granting funds under a 1963 law to Sacred Heart and three other Catholic colleges in Connecticut. The four colleges reacted by establishing a defense fund, and they hired noted Washington attorney, Edward Bennett Williams, to defend them. A panel of three Federal judges heard the case, during which President Conley's testimony underscored the uncertainties of Sacred Heart's essential nature. No, he asserted, there was no religious test for faculty or students; but yes, he acknowledged, moral and spiritual development ranked among the University's objectives, and its campus was leased from the Diocese of Bridgeport. After hearing arguments, the panel, in March, 1970, dismissed the suit, but the plaintiffs appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The case, known as <u>Tilton v. Richardson</u> (1971), ultimately produced a minor landmark

decision. By a hairsbreadth 5-4 vote the Court held the Higher Education Facilities Act, which permitted Federal grants to church-related institutions, to be constitutional. There was no evidence, argued Chief Justice Burger, that religion had "seeped into the use" of any buildings constructed with Federal monies, on the campuses in question. In Sacred Heart's case this was certainly true. The legal question was thus satisfactorily resolved. The issue of the University's identity, however, would remain.

The implications of this decision were far-reaching for Catholic institutions of higher education like Sacred Heart. A leading attorney on this matter, Charles H. Wilson, noted in his thorough analysis of this case that it eliminated the danger of a church-related college losing significant control of its decision-making process to the State. Furthermore, Tilton v. Richardson has made Catholic colleges and universities seriously reconsider their religious component. Questions of whether a Catholic institution would rethink its mission in order to meet the criteria of a "secular" place of higher learning to qualify for much-needed funding were raised. If such a decision were reached, the original religious character of the Catholic university would be lost.[18]

In many ways the university has reflected the tremendous changes which occurred in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly its American branch, since the 1960s. At that time there was a distinct loosening of what was perceived as the rigid, strict and doctrinaire structure of the post-Tridentine Church, which lasted well into the twentieth century, to a new Catholic Church that not only teaches and guides, but also listens to the needs of its membership. Curiously, the chronological growth of Sacred Heart University paralleled these shifts in the Catholic Church. The special role which lay administration and faculty have played is a clear indication asserting the Vatican II principle of "shared authority."

At the same time, however, a certain tension existed between the clerical perception of the function of Catholicism and its particular place in higher education and its lay counterpart. It is a difference of opinion that will probably remain unresolved for some time into the future. Yet Sacred Heart has developed a unique balance between its religious nature and its academic mission. Recently, Pope John Paul II emphasized that the Catholic university, like other similar institutions, focuses on the search for truth, but it does so from the tradition of Catholicism. Bishop Curtis underscored the Pope's message by applying it to Sacred Heart when he recently stated:

> Sacred Heart University's name is a pledge to establish and uphold religious values as God's plan for human life--indeed, as a goal for individual lives. University graduates need to make a living but, more, they need to make a life. The challenge is to discover the changeless values and principles that form the foundation for such a life and enhance dignity, and to encourage people to embrace them. In this quest, religion and God help, not hinder.[19]

Sacred Heart has become a place of caring in which the students are not only exposed to the rigors of academic excellence, but also exposed to an atmosphere in which their dignity and worth as human beings, composed of both body and soul is recognized and affirmed. It is this dedication which has attracted both Catholics and growing numbers of non-Catholics to the university.

Until the Fall of 1972 the prescribed core curriculum was formidable, mandating a large number of liberal arts courses. This fit well with Sacred Heart's original intent, but times were changing; students desired more choice in their curriculum. In addition, pre-professional majors, like Accounting, were breaking the 30 credit hour barrier, leaving little room in a student's program for elective courses. Review of the core curriculum had actually begun at the end of 1970; the Senate's Academic Affairs Committee reviewed curricular trends and the University's needs. By the early Spring of 1972 it presented a new core design to the entire body. The proposal, which passed with few dissenting votes, pared absolute requirements to a bare minimum and enabled students to fulfill area requirements with a fair degree of latitude. Old standbys like History, English Literature, and Foreign Languages now became options. A new degree, Bachelor of Science, was introduced for students who chose not to gain proficiency in a foreign tongue; baccalaureate students soon made it their overwhelming choice. Not only students were affected by these changes but faculty as well. Some departments found their staffing needs considerably reduced by the elimination of requirements and had to pare their numbers accordingly.

Another reason for reduced numbers of faculty was the steady decline in the full-time day enrollments, traditionally the heart of a college's student body. In 1968, the number peaked at 1,772; thereafter it began to slide steadily. By September 1976 it was down to 1,119, a drop of fully one-third. The trend was cause for alarm, and the University sought to counter it in several ways. One was the increase in the numbers of evening students. The southwestern part of Connecticut was a prime potential source of adult learners, yet Sacred Heart had not been particularly successful in building an evening clientele. In fact, at the end of the 1960s the number of such enrollees was falling. Under the leadership of Art Brissette, former Chairman of the Business Department, Continuing Education grew. "Too Old for College?" asked an SHU ad in the local Sunday paper. "NEVER!" was its reply. "Why not give it a try? Give us a call ... Ask for Evening School. We'll try to help."[20] This friendly, somewhat self-effacing approach came to characterize Sacred Heart's entire effort in Continuing Education, and it worked. Between 1971 and 1974 enrollment more than doubled. Evening students praised the atmosphere at the University and the individual attention they received, as well as the quality of instruction.

Another group that the University endeavored to attract consisted of part-time day students, often homemakers with small children. To accommodate them, the University opened a nursery school in 1970 and offered special courses to ease the entry, or in some cases, the re-entry into college life of these capable but sometimes apprehensive scholars. Faculty often commented that the evening and part-time day students were the most gratifying to teach and that they added a pleasing diversity to the campus population.

Finally, Sacred Heart cast a wider net, broadening its range of pre-professional programs and major offerings in hopes of attracting additional students. An affiliation was made with St. Vincent's Hospital in Bridgeport, whereby nursing students took their liberal arts courses on campus. Sacred Heart and the American Institute of Banking established an Associate in Bank Management degree in which half the credit hours would be University courses. In the Fall of 1972, a two-year Executive Secretarial degree program began operation. It aimed to tap the growing need for trained secretarial staff among the increasing number of corporate headquarters and other businesses in

southwestern Connecticut. The early and mid-1970's saw a slew of additional efforts at expansion. New majors in Media Studies, American Studies, Religious Studies, Social Work and Nursing were proposed and implemented; a Life Work Experience component sought to maximize the educational potential older students had gained in their work lives, and a 10-65 program offered greatly reduced tuition to high school students and senior citizens who wished to take courses at the University.

In all these ways Sacred Heart labored to stem the tide of attrition, but the upturn would be some time in coming. In the meanwhile merely implementing and digesting the curriculum changes would be challenge enough. In little more than a decade the University had moved from being an academically orthodox but administratively unique Catholic institution to one struggling through innovation to maintain its foothold in higher education. The journey had been arduous, the chances for repose few, but the lessons of survival had been diligently learned and would serve well in the years ahead. Sacred Heart's breadth of vision and flexibility were among the key determinants of its remarkable successes in the late 1970s. The solid groundwork laid during the presidencies of William Conley and Robert Kidera were another factor. The third element was the arrival on campus of the University's third president, Dr. Thomas Melady, who in several ways reflected the new spirit of post-Vatican II Catholicism.

Thomas Melady injected the University with a sense of excitement and purpose that radiated throughout the various constituencies of Sacred Heart. The new president possessed very personal links to the kind of institution that Sacred Heart represented and its unique mission of Catholic higher education. His family, in modest circumstances, could not afford the cost of higher education to Melady had to avail himself of the G.I. bill to attend college. His background, therefore, was quite similar to many Sacred Heart students at that time who came from working class families and who, in turn, bore much of the costs entailed themselves often working a full-time job and carrying a full academic load at the University. Melady, in fact, felt as if Sacred Heart was a part of him. "Sacred Heart University has brought me and my family home," he asserted during his inaugural address, "to the land where I was born and to the kind of people that I love to serve."[21]

His vision for the University bore a remarkable resemblance to Bishop Curtis' own original dream. Sacred Heart was "a young school, supported by the Diocese of Bridgeport," he echoed, "but open to everyone."[22] Early in his presidency, Dr. Melady emphasized that there were five major concerns which he would attempt to deal with while at the University. They were the family, the diocese,the needs of southwestern Connecticut, the needs of the handicapped and ethnic heritage. He confronted these issues with an enthusiasm and elan that inspired many, and in doing so made Sacred Heart University a success. The statement does not intend to downplay the important foundations laid during the previous two presidencies. The new president recognized the talent that was latent in the institution and was able to catalyze it and make it effective. Many here still remember the well-worn Meladism "diamonds in our own backyard."

These ideas and policies resulted in a tremendous period of growth for Sacred Hear from the late 1970s into the early 1980s. In fact, at a time when most universities were suffering from serious drops in enrollment, the University, as local papers constantly reported, was "bucking the trend." In fact, on August 21, 1981, the Bridgeport Post Headlines for its Sunday

educational section blared: "SHU Filled--Applicants Go On Standby." This was rather surprising news for an institution which had undergone a serious enrollment crisis in the early 1970s and which a long range planning study had predicted would be out of existence by the middle of that decade.

The reasons for this enrollment trend, which occurred despite predictions of a rapidly dropping pool of high school students from which to recruit, were multiple. Two factors seem to be predominant. The high cost of higher education made Sacred Heart a very attractive alternative. Its tuition was the lowest for any private institution in the state and the additional benefit of its commuter status reduced the prohibitive costs of boarding at other similar schools. But, just as importantly, Sacred Heart had developed a reputation for academic excellence.

The most noticeable growth patterns, however, rested in the increased adult interest in the Division of Continuing Education and the various Masters programs. Demographic shifts occurred in the Sacred Heart student population reflected in the fact that the non-traditional college applicant was being attracted to Sacred Heart. Young people who could not afford full enrollment, nevertheless, opted to take one or two courses per semester. Adult learners, married women whose child commitments kept them at home and older adults, some in mid-career, also selected this part-time option, whether day or evening, as a viable alternative. The need for credentialing drew students from the area businesses, extremely corporate in character, who needed degrees, whether bachelor's or master's, to continue improving their career possibilities. No more clearly was this new student body exemplified than by noting that the average age of the Sacred Heart student was--and remains--approximately 27 to 28 years. Interestingly enough the increasing student age added to the family atmosphere at the University because in certain classes parents and offspring could be seen graduating together. In the early 1980s Sacred Heart well deserved the accolades it received. It had become part of the community of southwestern Connecticut in a tangible and meaningful fashion. "As Sacred Heart University enters the '80s," Dr. Melady observed, "we continue our dedication to the community and to our primary goal of academic excellence. We continue to develop career-oriented programs that meet our liberal arts tradition."

Revising the core curriculum was a task that the Senate did not relish, but between 1982 and 1985, a new proposal was devised and accepted. The revised core strengthened requirements in the liberal arts mandating particularly new courses in comparative literature and world history. Through such core changes it was hoped that students would be weaned away from their increasing interest in only the "practical courses" to a broader vision of their world and cultural heritage. Introspection and critical thought, as well as the academic search for one's identity, were deemed as valuable, if not more so, than balancing a ledger sheet or seeking the job which paid the most money.

By June, 1986 Dr. Melady who felt that he had served Sacred Heart as best he could for ten years, announced his resignation and called for new leadership and thinking for Sacred Heart's future. After a lengthy search, Dr. Robert A. Preston of Loyola University, New Orleans, was inaugurated as Sacred Heart's fourth president in September 1986.

Robert Preston approached his new and difficult task with a remarkable sense of foresight and an infectious humor. He did not mince words about the challenges facing Sacred Heart but he confronted them with a spirit of

confidence and hope. The institution's vision, purposes, administration and faculty are strong and in many ways far ahead of similar universities facing uphill obstacles. In an earlier speech he reaffirmed this assessment:

> "Sacred Heart provides the greater Fairfield County area with quality education at an affordable cost. The school is on the cutting edge of change in higher education by serving the traditional and adult undergraduate student as well as the graduate student. It is what many urban universities will be like 10 years from now as we continue to develop the learning society."[23]

Yet at the same time a stronger official "Catholic" tone appeared in presidential remarks and behavior. Speaking about abortion and other moral issues -- upon which the American Catholic community is not in complete agreement -- Preston expressed an openly strict Catholic hierarchial position on these topics in a feature newspaper article.[24] Purposely avoiding the moral issue, what was intriguing about this article was the student reaction on the part of several non-Catholic Sacred Heart students who objected to his open comments.

As the University enters another phase in its development under its fifth president, Anthony J. Cemera, and with a new bishop heading the diocese, it has been worthwhile to step back and review its history. Admittedly, the Sacred Heart experience has been quite brief and, therefore does not share in the traditions and reputations of larger Catholic institutions. Nonetheless, it sheds a great deal of light on the last three decades of American Catholic higher education. Its almost unique relationship with the Diocese of Bridgeport heightens its import as does the fact that it is more sensitive to its social and economic environment than many other Catholic colleges and universities. Its search for an identity that emphasizes its uniqueness amount its competitors, its sense of "Catholic mission", its appeal to a wide student body recruited from a much wider base than just the Catholic community, as well as its shifting academic strategies to confront the economic realities of the marketplace have been highly reflective of the difficulties facing the modern American Catholic Institution of higher learning.

NOTES

[1]Aubert Clark, "Vatican II: Its Challenge to Education," in John Donovan, ed., Vatican II: Its Challenge to Education (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 45.

[2]Raymond A. Schroth, "Tough Choices on Campus," Commonwealth, 113 (March 28, 1986): 170.

[3]Schroth, 170. Schroth concludes his initial remarks with an intriguing analysis of Jesuit universities and colleges in which he argues that many, noting in particular, Marquette University, will probably lose their Catholic character by 1998.

[4]Kenneth Woodward, "Rome's New School Rules," Newsweek, 106 (November 11, 1985): 82. See also "Catholic Universities in the Real World" (document

by the Congregation for Catholic Education), America, 154 (April 19, 1986): 313-314.

[5]For a number of brief views on this contemporary topic refer to the following articles: Theodore M. Hesburgh, "The Vatican and American Catholic Higher Education," America, 155 (November 1, 1986): 247-250; George Hunt, "America and Theological Education," America, 157 (April 11, 1987): 6-8; and William Byron, "What the Church Has to Say to American Education," USA Today, 114 (July, 1985): 82-85.

[6]"Rycenga Report," 1968, Sacred Heart University Archives, 20-22.

[7]Bridgeport Post, October 17, 1962, 2.

[8]"Rycenga Report," 20-22.

[9]William Dean interview contained in an addendum to "The History of Sacred Heart University" typescript in possession of Dr. John Mahar, Department of History.

[10]Obelisk, February 3, 1964, 1.

[11]Untitled newspaper article dated May 20, 1968, contained in Scrapbook 5, Sacred Heart University Archives.

[12]Connecticut Herald, October 7, 1969, and Bridgeport Post, October 16, 1969.

[13]See also Bridgeport Post, May 6, 1970.

[14]Bridgeport Post, November 14, 1967.

[15]Bridgeport Post and Bridgeport Telegram, March 27-29, 1969.

[16]Refer to various "mission and identity" statements contained in university self-assessments in 1969, 1972, and 1983, Sacred Heart University Archives.

[17]"Rycenga Report," 68.

[18]Review Charles H. Wilson's illuminating comments in "Tilton vs. Finch: the Connecticut Colleges Case," address to the Commission on Religion in Higher Educatioon in America, Houston, Texas, January 12, 1978.

[19]Spectrum (new title for the former Obelisk), March, 1987.

[20]Sacred Heart University Continuing Education Advertisement, Bridgeport Post, August 1, 1971.

[21]Bridgeport Post, September 20, 1976.

[22]Ibid.

[23] Spectrum, November 5, 1987.

[24] Bridgeport Post, July, 1986.