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# COMPLEXITIES OF HIRING FOR MISSION

*There are internal and external restraints*

By Chester Gillis

**W**hile Jesuit colleges and universities have a legitimate interest in hiring for mission, that process is complicated in at least three dimensions: the academy, society, and the student body.

## ***The Academy***

One might argue that if Catholic universities want to ensure that the majority of those who apply for tenure are Catholics, then they must consciously recruit Catholic faculty. Such a strategy is complicated by a number of external and internal constraints. In most jurisdictions, for universities that accept federal aid (as most do) to ask a candidate if he or she is Catholic would breach government policies that prevent search committees from asking questions of candidates ranging from marital status to *religion*. Even if they could legally ascertain that a candidate is Catholic, there is not univocal understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Does it mean knowledge of the tradition, weekly Mass attendance, agreement with all church teachings, service to the poor, participation in pro-life activities? Into what Procrustean bed would the university fit Catholic candidates?

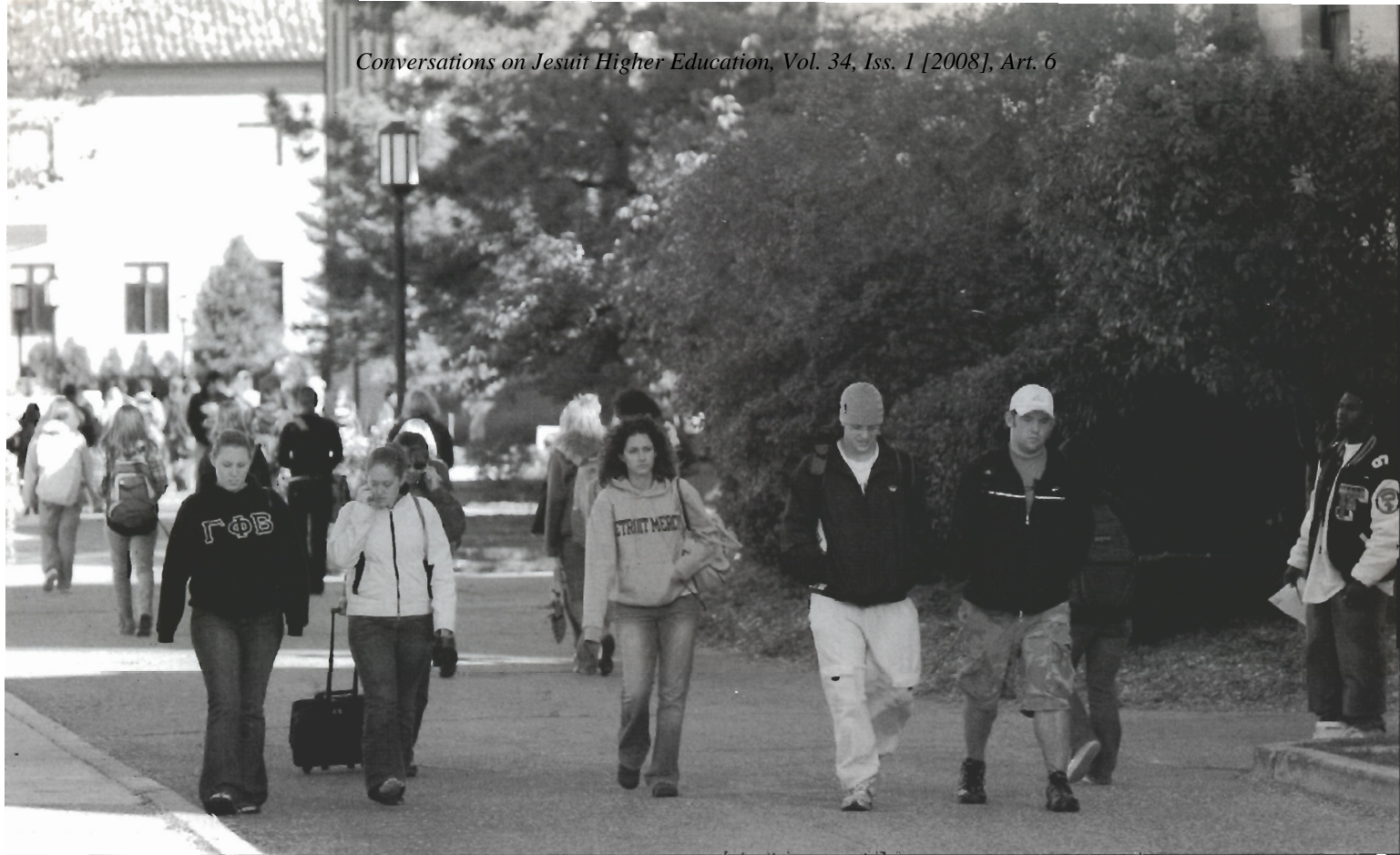
Like it or not the larger academy influences Jesuit universities. Many of the finest graduate students in all fields seek their education at the most prestigious universities in the United States and abroad, regardless of the religious affiliation (or lack thereof) of the institution. They earn their PhD's at the most competitive institutions, almost all of which are non-Catholic. And, in a tight job market, many

candidates for tenure-track positions willingly give whatever impression they think is necessary to a hiring committee to be selected. If that means expressing interest in and support of Catholic identity, some will go along but will not follow through, once hired. When hired, usually they are part of the institution for at least five years as untenured assistant professors.

Universities are judged academically by the quality and productivity of their faculty. In economics, finance, foreign relations, and languages this means hiring the best and the brightest faculty. When hiring a chemistry professor, given the opportunity to hire a Nobel Prize winning chemist or a devout Catholic with lesser academic credentials, whom should the university hire? If the university wants to compete for the most qualified students, it must continually improve the credentials of its faculty. The recently published *The Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College*, favored by the Cardinal Newman Society, lists twenty-one Catholic colleges it deems truly Catholic. Not one of the recommended schools ranks among the top tier of American colleges and universities. Most Catholic families, however, want both Catholic identity and academic excellence for their children. The combination is not an easy one to achieve, but it is a balance worth pursuing.

Professionally, faculty answer primarily to the academy, not the church. When tenure decisions are

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rendered, they rest on the criteria established by the academy. Peer reviewers do not judge the worthiness of a candidate for tenure on the basis of his or her religious belief or practice. If Catholic universities want to inject this criterion into the mix, they would be ethically required to disclose to external reviewers that, at their institutions, religious identification plays a part in the tenure process and may trump purely academic achievement. Given this scenario, I suspect that many potential evaluators would decline to participate.

When hiring senior faculty, one has a known record of achievement, but recruiting is complicated by a number of factors including the fact that the person sought does not need a job, may not want to move, may have

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a spouse who is also an academic, and will likely receive a generous counter-offer to remain at his or her present institution. When recruiting at the senior level, geography also plays a role. Some Jesuit colleges and universities are not located in major cities, and some faculty want a city environment. Some, such as my own (Georgetown) are located in attractive but expensive cities. Faculty may not

want to bear the high cost of housing and the daily commute associated with the location.

In every university there are faculty members who do not invest themselves in the institution. They identify exclusively with their discipline and research. For them, it does not matter if their institution is Catholic, private, or public. They could move their shingle to another institution and hardly notice. They rarely attend university events, do little committee work, and seem invisible on campus with the exception of the classroom (and, for some even that is a place to try out their research rather than teaching the basics). They are not hostile toward the institution and its values, but indifferent. It provides them with a salary and the freedom to research and publish. They are solo practitioners in a university that sees itself as a group practice. They may be Catholic, but their Catholicism does not factor into their involvement with the institutions' goals. Colleges and universities need the name recognition of these professors and regularly tolerate their absence or indifference as a cost of their scholarly contribution.

### **Students**

Students live in a multi-religious, globalized world. The faculty has a responsibility to educate them in and for this world. Well-informed Catholic students want to know about the wider religious world. Practically, that means

courses in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism as well as in Catholic theology. Jesuit institutions that have achieved recognition in the academic community have not done so by thinking only of their Catholic identity. At the same time, these universities are known among their peer institutions and their students as religiously affiliated institutions. When students arrive at Jesuit schools, they know they are Catholic because they encounter Jesuits, learn that the university supports research and action on social justice, cannot purchase artificial birth control on campus, are required to take Theology courses, have campus ministers in their dorms, often have a curriculum with a Catholic studies program, sometimes have centers that explore some aspect of Catholicism and lecture series that address Catholic concerns.

Jesuit colleges and universities do not recruit their students exclusively from Catholic high schools. At many Jesuit institutions most students come from public schools. Their literacy in Catholicism depends upon many factors—including family, parish, and schooling. Most are not as well informed in the specifics of Catholicism as previous generations. Many were raised on religious education programs that taught them how to be loving Christians but little about doctrinal Catholicism. They differ from their parents and grandparents who grew up in the heyday of the Catholic subculture that nurtured the immigrant Catholic population and for whom being Catholic meant strict adherence to church teachings as well as being socially and religiously different. However, it is not the profile of universities to do remedial work. Generally professors are not interested in supplying information that students should have acquired in high school.

Catholic students want to be informed about their religious tradition, but they also want to be well prepared for graduate or professional school or the job market. They make their college selections with this in mind; Catholic universities ignore the preferences of their applicant pool at their peril. Do we really want them to go elsewhere? Or do we want to have the opportunity to educate the future leadership of our society? If we want them to come, in addition to Catholic identity we had better provide the quality of education they can get elsewhere or they will go elsewhere.

### ***American Society***

Vincent of Lerins, a fifth-century monk and saint, defined orthodox faith in his *Commonitorium* as doctrines that have been believed “always, everywhere, and by all the

faithful.” Such a definition of orthodoxy would be difficult to support in the contemporary American church because significant evidence exists that doctrines are not held equally by all the faithful everywhere. This pertains even more widely to practices of the church. Unlike their grandparents, who generally held church authority as obligatory, today’s Catholic students more readily perceive compli-

ance as voluntary. The church may remain important in their lives, but it must compete for their attention and allegiance with social, cultural, and economic forces that pull them in different directions. The areas in which the church carries significant authority in their lives are fewer than in the past, and the authority is of a different type.

This is due, in part, to the fact that American Catholics are (by and large) no longer an immigrant community, that the educational level of American Catholics today is much higher overall than it has been historically, and that their economic status is greater. Like other Americans, they are subject to the post-Enlightenment heritage of increased autonomy that has contributed to individualization as a trademark of developed cultures. It may also be, however, that, despite their advanced education and improved economic circumstances, contemporary Catholic students are hostages to cultural patterns that they uncritically follow. Perhaps in their yearning to fit in, they have managed to become subject to popular thought and culture. Thus, they act like the majority of Americans, even if those actions are contrary to their Catholicism.

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Naturally, Jesuit colleges and universities have an interest in preserving their religious identity and should work towards this goal so that they do not become institutions with solely historical ties to their Catholic founders. Achieving this, however, is as complex as it is important.

### ***One Last Point***

Rejecting mere statistics as a basis for Catholic identity in his address to Catholic educators in the United States, Pope Benedict XVI said that “[Catholic identity] demands and inspires much more: namely that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith. Only in faith can truth become incarnate and reason truly human, capable of directing the will along the path of freedom.”

One initiative that Georgetown has undertaken in recent years under the direction of the Vice President for Mission and Ministry, Philip Boroughs, S.J., is to involve faculty and administrators in the Jesuit 19th Annotation Retreat. Unlike the traditional Ignatian thirty-day retreat, this is spread out during the entire academic year making it logistically easier to do. It

includes monthly meetings and dinners, personal weekly or bi-weekly spiritual direction with trained lay and Jesuit directors, and daily individual prayer. I participated in this experience last year and continue to meet every six weeks with others who have completed the Exercises in this format.

This experience brings faculty and administrators together with a common objective, but respects the individuality of each participant. It also puts them in touch with the Jesuit mission of the university. Several deans and faculty have embraced this opportunity that has Catholics and non-Catholics discussing the religious identity of the university and their own spiritual lives. Such an experience has significant benefits for a Catholic university by shaping leaders who understand and embrace the Catholic mission of the institution and also continue to work diligently for the academic excellence that the university demands. This constitutes educating for mission rather than hiring for mission and includes a diversity of religious affiliations. It is Catholicism on the ground in the university, a powerful example of preserving and strengthening Catholic identity. ■



Students and faculty confer in the hallways at University of Detroit Mercy.