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CATHOLIC COURSES ARE THE HEART OF OUR MISSION

By Timothy R. Lannon, S.J.



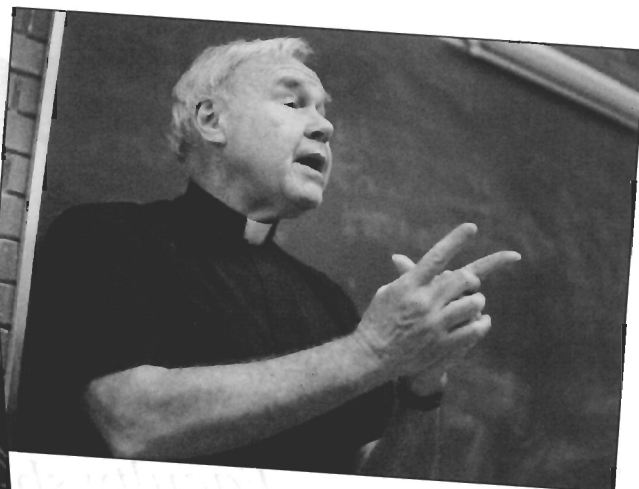
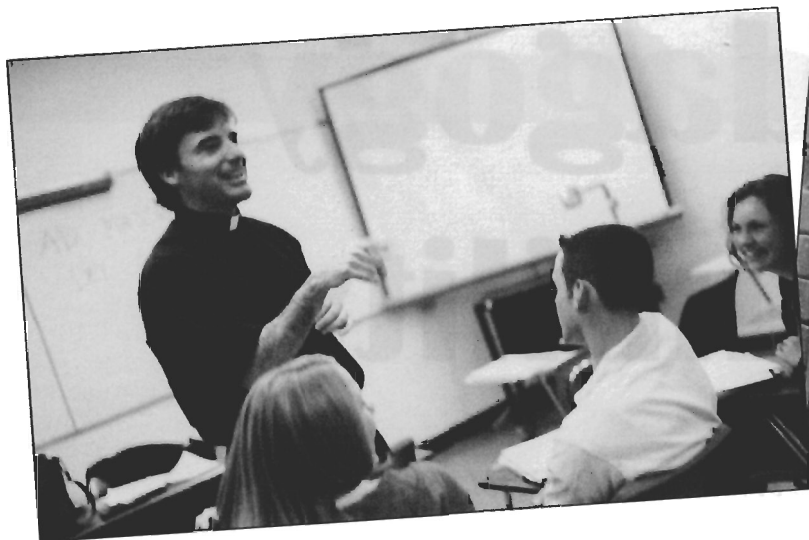
Each day, as president of Saint Joseph's University, I ask myself this question: How might we improve the quality of the overall educational experience we offer our students? It is difficult to answer that question without knowing the answer to the following two questions: What are we about at Saint Joseph's, and what is our mission?

Like most of us in Jesuit higher education in the United States, I continue to be influenced by the remarks made by Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., at Santa Clara in 2000. One statement in particular has stayed with me: "The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become." The essence is not *what* they become, but *who* they become.

The United States is blessed with the finest higher education system in the world. Our students are able to receive excellent educations, whether they attend Saint Joseph's University or another fine university. So how are we, as Catholic and Jesuit institutions, different? That difference is our mission.

Most recently, when I think about mission, I think about our Catholic and Jesuit identity in 2025 and beyond. During the ensuing years, we will continue to

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Above: Two Jesuit professors (right, Seminar member Joseph Feeney, S.J.) captivate their classes at St. Joseph's University.
Below left: The church tower at St. Joseph's.

have fewer Jesuits on our campuses, we will face increasing specialization of the disciplines at our universities, and we may find ourselves living in a culture even more unsupportive of our values.

Consequently, I find myself focusing on three critical areas. In the past, I thought it was vitally important to have a critical mass of Roman Catholics on our faculty and in the administration. I still think that is important, but today I consider it even more important to have a critical mass of colleagues who have experienced and live out the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. I am convinced we can thrive as Jesuit or Ignatian institutions with fewer Jesuits if we have lay men and women who are inspired by the Spiritual Exercises.

Another area of importance is a liberal arts education. Unfortunately, specialized knowledge becomes dated almost upon graduation. However, what endures is the ability that our students develop at our institutions to read well, think critically, speak well, listen well, integrate their knowledge, and remain intellectually curious throughout their lives. We offer our students courses that enable them to wrestle with life's issues: faith and reason; moral behavior; and religious traditions. Further, I think that every graduate of Saint Joseph's, Catholic or not, should have some understanding of the Roman Catholic tradition in the intellectual and cultural sense.

These past four years we have been engaged in a curriculum review process, and I am delighted that the new proposed curriculum includes courses required of all students in "Faith, Justice, and the Catholic Tradition;" "Religious Differences;" "Moral Foundations;" "Philosophical Anthropology;" and "Faith and Reason." These are courses at the heart of our mission as a

Catholic and Jesuit university. These courses differentiate us from other institutions.

Lastly, we need to sustain the Catholic intellectual tradition. This vital tradition is not only located in philosophy and theology departments, but throughout our university community. When I think of mission, I think less of a Catholic Studies department and more of scholars in individual departments who are committed to doing research and teaching courses related to Catholic topics, for example, an English professor whose scholarship interest lies in Catholic writers.

The mission of any Jesuit college or university comes to life in the classroom, the administrative offices, the residence halls, and on the playing fields. Our colleagues, on behalf of our students, bring this mission to life. It is my hope that during my tenure as president, in collaboration with my colleagues, our mission will have been strengthened and well positioned for 2025, even for 2050.

Last year prior to the celebration of our Commencement, our speaker met with a group of graduating seniors. During their discussion, she asked, "What keeps you up at night in relation to life after graduation?" One response was, "I'm not worried about my choice to become an accountant; I'm worried about how service will fit into my life as an accountant. Service has become a big part of my life and I don't want to lose that." It is conversations such as this with our students, alumni, faculty and staff, that reinforce for me that we at Saint Joseph's are on the right track in strengthening our mission of intellectual pursuit, moral discernment reflecting Christian values, and a transforming commitment to social justice for the years ahead...all for the greater glory of God. ■