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Book Review

Enhancing Religious Identity: Best Practices from Catholic Campuses. Edited by John Wilcox and Irene King. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000.

Brennan O'Donnell

One of my favorite memories from the seven years I served on the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education was a brief comment by a new member at the end of his first meeting. Asked for his evaluation of the three-day seminar, this participant, a man with a long and distinguished record of thinking, writing, and talking about Jesuit and Catholic higher education, spoke eloquently about how important it is to have inter-institutional exchange of ideas and information about the identity and mission of Catholic colleges and universities. But what really engaged him about the seminar, he said, was the opportunity it gave him to become aware of people so dedicated and so passionately committed in so many ways to fostering mission. "I can't tell you how heartening it is," he said, "to know that there are others who care so deeply about this stuff." (I quote from a probably faulty memory, but I'm sure I have the spirit right.)

I kept thinking of that moment and that last statement as I read John Wilcox's and Irene King's *Enhancing Religious Identity*. The twenty-seven essays in this book provide a peek inside aspects of the lives of more than a dozen Catholic colleges and universities. The book's five sections -- an "Overview" followed by sections on "Leadership and the Board of Trustees," "The Faculty and the Disciplines," "Student Life," and "Strategies for Change"-- suggest the range of its editors' interests, and make it especially welcome to those who are seeking to understand the big picture of identity in all of its complexity. The book's main virtue is the extent to which it downplays generalizations and exhortations about what "the Catholic university" is (or was, or should be, might be, will be, or never will be again) in favor of articles and documents that give us insight into what actually goes on at present in a range

of Catholic schools. The overall message of the collection is that the work of fostering and maintaining "a Christian inspiration . . . of the university community as such" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* paragraph 13) is very much a work in progress, with many frustrations attending its considerable successes, and many huge challenges ahead. But the collection leaves little doubt that the work is proceeding with great energy and creativity, fueled by a host of men and women of good will who indeed care deeply about this stuff.

The essays were selected to be of practical use in assisting colleges and universities in their role of establishing (or preserving and strengthening) a culture in which "Catholic ideals, attitudes, and principles penetrate and inform university activities" (*Ex Corde*, paragraph 14). This, of course, is also in large part the aim of the National Seminar, and two of the articles in the book first appeared in *Conversations*. Patrick H. Byrne's "Paradigms of Justice and Love," which appeared in these pages in the spring of 1995, describes the work of Boston College's PULSE program, the grandfather of service-learning programs in Jesuit institutions. I can't remember how many times I was asked between 1995 and 2000 for permission to copy and distribute Byrne's article; suffice it to say that it was continuously in demand. Its inclusion here is a mark of how well Wilcox and King have done their work in scouring the now enormous bibliography of such articles for the most useful among them. The same could be said for the second *Conversations* article reprinted here, "Hiring Faculty for Mission" (fall 1997). This case study by Joseph J. Feeney, S.J., Owen W. Gilman, Jr., and Jo Alyson Parker of the Saint Joseph's University English department gives a candid-- and rare -- glimpse inside that department's deliberations about recruitment of new tenure-track faculty. Faced with the realization that retiring faculty were taking with them a good deal of the institution's collective wisdom about mission and identity issues, the department chose to seek to fill about half of its next several openings with Catholics or alumni of St.

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Joseph's or of Jesuit schools. The practical approach allows the authors to bypass the highly politicized morass into which more theoretical discussions of hiring for mission tend to wander to show how, in practice, implementation of policies in the spirit of *Ex Corde's* concern for preserving Catholic identity need not be a top-down enterprise. The result is a contribution to the debate that is unpretentious, refreshing, welcome, and entirely characteristic of much of the contents of the volume.

Among the most challenging of the essays is by John C. Haughey, S.J., of Loyola University, Chicago, who argues that "the issue of Catholic identity will be endless talk unless it gets down to the research choices of the faculty person and how these choices are rewarded by the institution" (159). Beginning with the premise that "there is virtually no Catholic college or university with a sufficiently compelling vision" to influence in significant ways its faculty's choice of research topics (159), Fr. Haughey's essay is a call for institutions to challenge their faculties to forge new relationships between the traditional disciplines and the Catholic university's responsibility to be a genuinely catholic voice.

For those of us who agree with Fr. Haughey, that mission talk is useless to the extent that it fails to engage the faculty where it works each day, among the collection's most valuable contributions will be several excellent descriptions of programs that do a good job fostering just such engagement. Tom Landy's and Don Briel's considerations of Catholic Studies programs suggest that such programs are thriving and are becoming centers for the cultivation precisely of the sort of relationships between scholarly activity and institutional identity that Haughey sees as the major challenge facing us. Indeed, the success of Briel's program at the University of St. Thomas is clearly on display throughout the "Faculty and the Disciplines" section of the book: in addition to Briel's essay, six of the section's nine essays were produced by St. Thomas faculty in the course of the "summer seminar" program that Briel describes. Each is a very helpful treatment from a specific disciplinary perspective of possibilities for engaging mission-and-identity issues in research and teaching. Also valuable in this regard is an essay by James L. Heft, S.M., on a successful interdisciplinary seminar on "Ethics and Religion in

Professional Education" that he conducted at the University of Dayton in 1997.

Such programs, as well as many others mentioned in the pages of this fine collection, offer a great deal of hope as well as practical assistance in the task of undertaking what Heft argues is the most important element in mission and identity efforts: "recruiting, developing, and keeping faculty who are personally and intellectually interested in both what the Catholic tradition has to offer to their own disciplines and in the distinctive mission of their institutions" (177). John Wilcox and Irene King deserve our thanks for the wealth of information and good ideas they have gathered and presented here so thoughtfully and attractively. *Enhancing Religious Identity* is an excellent resource and a welcome, clarifying contribution to the large and growing literature on these issues. It should be required reading for new faculty and, perhaps more importantly, for those who hire and mentor them.

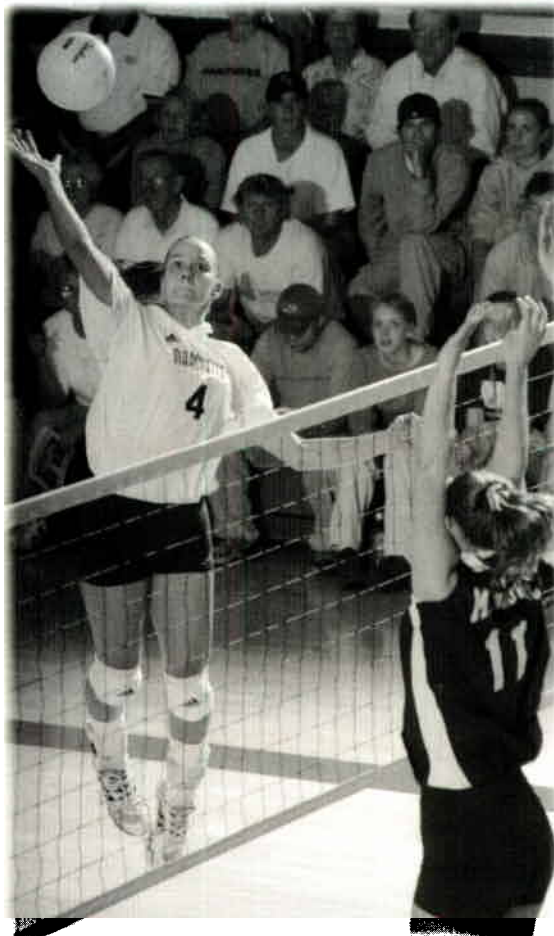


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