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State of the Question

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MISSION MATTERS AND MATTERS OF MISSION

By Jack O'Callaghan, S.J. and Timothy Wadkins

When the National Jesuit Seminar began to think about a theme for this issue, we began with the idea of best practices: the various ways that mission “matters” on our campuses. As the discussion progressed, however, the more fundamental “matter” of mission itself raised its head and demanded our full attention. What does mission mean? How does mission relate to questions about who we are as Catholic, Jesuit and American colleges and universities? If we cannot agree about who we are, can we speak coherently about what we ought to be doing in our educational enterprise?

For example, what does it mean to hire for mission? Should we hire non-Catholics or faculty from other or no religious traditions? How does mission relate to academic freedom? Will mission factor in to tenure and promotion decisions? How does mission affect issues of compensation, unionization, and the salaries of support staff? Does a mission centered primarily on the Jesuit values of care for the whole person and social justice effectively diminish the more transcendent concerns of traditional Catholicism?

The more we discussed these specific things the more we realized we had stepped into a quagmire of conflicting opinions about the more general matter of mission itself. We did not conclude that our twenty-eight colleges and universities were like rudderless ships with no identities, hopelessly adrift in the secular seas of American higher education. But we were convinced that although they all sail under the flags of

Catholic, Jesuit and American identity, and agree that our common enterprise as Jesuit institutions is to form graduates who are “people for others,” they are charting different courses and navigating in different ways.

We can not claim to have solved the perplexing conundrum of mission and identity, but perhaps we can help to frame the conversation better by suggesting that Jesuit colleges and universities are precariously situated between two, very important and sometimes conflicting pressures that push them in various ways.

One is the pressure to maintain a theological and ecclesiastical identity. What does it mean for a university to be both Jesuit and Catholic? Obviously there is a spectrum of opinions on this, and the articles in this issue by Moleski, Gardner, Fox, and Stancil get at the question in very different ways.

The second is the pressure to achieve excellence. Obviously, all Catholic and Jesuit colleges and universities want to recruit good students and prestigious faculty, especially if they hope to compete in the market place of higher education in the United States. But what are the stakes in the quest to conform to and compete with other, more secular institutions? What parts of our Catholic tradition and identity must be jettisoned or sacrificed when we

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Christ the King Chapel at Canisius College.

strive to become like Stanford or Princeton? The articles by Lannon, Sundborg, and Chadwick offer different perspectives on the challenges involved in infusing what they believe to be a Jesuit and Catholic identity into institutions that are also highly competitive centers of academic excellence.

Of course, it might be concluded that such an array of opinions is an indication that Catholic identity at Jesuit Universities has been sacrificially submerged beneath the seas of secularism. In the haunting question posed by Martin Moleski, S.J., are not all of these conversations about mission superficial attempts to dress up and preserve the dead corpse of Catholicism on our campuses?

Two articles in this issue take exception to these conclusions. In a weighty historical piece, Charles Currie, president of the AJCU, documents how the issues of mis-

sion and identity developed and became so heated in the Post Vatican II academic world of Catholic education. Despite the conflicts, he maintains that in serious, albeit flawed ways “we are trying to create something that has never existed, a Jesuit, Catholic identity, forged with colleagues in a pluralistic, postmodern university setting, while facing all of the challenges of a globalizing world.” Jennifer Haworth and Megan Barry bring needed empirical data to the discussion and suggest that, if the doom-sayers are right and we have already lost or are about to lose our identity, as some of our country’s most prestigious and once-sectarian schools have, it won’t be for lack of trying: mission-conversations and mission-oriented programs abound at our 28 Jesuit institutions. And voices from students, faculty, and administrators seem to verify that, somewhere between theory and practice, mission and identity still matter very much. ■