



Ignatius Loyola, Rockhurst University.

# Can Jesuit Institutions Afford Formation for Mission?

By Robert Niehoff, S.J.

Every spring, we find more stories about universities in enrollment or financial crisis, another public challenge to the value of university education, or some tale of university leadership mismanagement. This last year on top of all of the fiscal and leadership failures, we heard about an unimaginable admissions scandal, targeting some of the most selective and high-profile universities. Last spring we saw the withdrawal of Jesuit sponsorship at Wheeling Jesuit University. These are just a few of the challenges that all but a few lucky universities have faced.

Another financial milestone was crossed last spring when the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) reported that the average financial aid discount provided with institutional funds exceeds 50 percent of the listed tuition and fee costs at NACUBO member institutions (400-plus private, nonprofit universities). By and large, except for the few highly selective private institutions, the combined financial pressures of a declining traditional college-age student body demographic and the growing competition for students has resulted in static annual tuition revenues and even tuition revenue declines at many private institutions, including some Jesuit schools. These are pernicious and pervasive fiscal challenges for Jesuit universities.

On a more positive note, *America* published an article on the three women presidents at U.S. Jesuit universities, a historic threshold event (*May 27, 2019*). While celebrating this momentous leadership development, Emma Winters notes that there is a “need for a new leadership style” in the face of higher education’s institutional challenges.

In these more challenging times for AJCU schools, a university board’s fiduciary obligations are far more than good fiscal stewardship and selecting a president. Regional accreditors now expect boards to craft a strategy that will achieve the institutional mission, especially its service to its students. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) states this commitment in the first of their standards for accreditation:

The institution’s formally approved statements of purpose are appropriate for an institution of higher education and clearly define its essential values and character and ways in which it contributes to the public good. (WASC, Standard 1.1, 2013)

Our Jesuit universities must try to achieve their mission with limited resources and yet ensure their fiscal sustainability. Thomas Curran, S.J., president of Rockhurst University, captures the challenge well: “Caring for the apostolate means attending to our current budgetary concerns, as well as ensuring our sustainability in every sense of the word. ... The cre-

ation of our annual operating budget...begins with identifying priorities.” (*Conversations*, Fall 2019)

A key priority is the formation for mission of faculty, staff, and students through deepening the campus’ understanding of and commitment to its Jesuit and Catholic character. Mission commitment is essential.

In 2010, AJCU presidents approved a document titled “The Jesuit, Catholic Mission of the U.S. Jesuit Colleges and Universities.” The presidents stated:

The full responsibility for the policy, governance, and operation of each of our colleges and universities rests with its board of directors, trustees, or regents as established by articles of incorporation and by-laws. Each of these institutions is legally and functionally independent of the Society of Jesus. ... Most importantly, it holds in trust the Catholic, Jesuit character of the college or university and has a responsibility to understand, assure, provide resources to support, foster, and assess this character. (9)

Clearly, the boards bear full responsibility to assure the continuance and flourishing of the Catholic Jesuit character of the institution. AJCU boards now have some assistance in this task.

In the same Fall 2019 issue of *Conversations*, James Miracky, S.J., shared his perspective of the Mission Priority Examine (MPE) Process initiated by the Society of Jesus. Every MPE, Miracky notes, focuses on the following two questions:

- *Do you want to continue to be a Jesuit, Catholic University?*
- *If so, what are the two to four mission goals (and accompanying strategies) that you will prioritize for the next few years?*

By using the “Some Characteristics” document, which gives a foundation to the Examen process, the MPE has helped AJCU institutions evaluate the depth of their campus’ inculcation of Jesuit, Catholic values in the institution with a focus on leadership, academic life and campus cultures, service to the Church and society, and Jesuit presence.

Of course, substantial mission formation programming was already taking place prior to the MPE



process. The enumeration of these mission formation activities is a bit long, but instructive:

Each of our colleges and universities has created responsibilities, structures, and programs for the hiring, orienting, and developing of faculty and staff according to our Catholic, Jesuit mission. We make available special retreats, seminars in Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit education, programs and colloquia which seek to enhance Catholic, Jesuit identity, development and scholarship opportunities, service and immersion experiences, special events that focus on our mission, and we utilize university convocations, conferences, liturgical celebrations, and award ceremonies to articulate our Catholic, Jesuit identity. Some of our colleges and universities have established individual institutes of Jesuit and Catholic studies. At the same time, we take advantage of several regional and national programs of formation in Jesuit leadership for colleagues in higher education, such as the AJCU Seminar on Higher Education Leadership

and the Ignatian Colleagues Program. (AJCU, The Jesuit, Catholic Mission of the U.S. Jesuit Colleges and Universities, 2010.)

Even amid fiscal challenges, mission formation is essential to the regional accreditors as well. Fiscal challenges may require institutions to make difficult choices, and mission formation programs will always need to be scaled to fit the size and resources of their institution, but formation for mission beginning at the board level is not optional.

AJCU institutions cannot afford not to prioritize and fund a robust mission formation program. In addition, AJCU schools can collaborate to develop more and more effective mission formation programs, and encourage each other to be truly Catholic and Jesuit institutions living up to their “essential values and character” to the public good.

*Robert Niehoff, S.J., former president of John Carroll University, 2005-17, is the provincial assistant for Higher Education for the U.S. Jesuits West Province and consultant to the president of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the U.S. for Higher Education.*



Seattle University