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Introduction to *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education: Tradition in a Changed Context*

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Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education

Tradition in a Changed Context

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Introduction

Education is, among all human activities, most clearly both the creator and the creature of culture. To help individuals develop their God-given gifts, to empower them to live lives of personal enrichment and social responsibility, and to hand on the tradition of wisdom from one generation to another—these are the tasks of the college or university. As we examine the ways in which we, as Catholic colleges and universities, attempt to carry out these tasks we find that we confront basic challenges arising from the very culture in which we live. We are its creature, and we seek to contribute to its on-going creation.

What was described by Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* is even more true in 1985 than it was in 1965:

Today, the human race is passing through a new stage of its history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon this manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people... Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources, and economic power. Yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens is still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before today has man been so keenly aware of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance.

Although the world of today has a very vivid sense of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. For political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems.¹

The statement itself exemplifies the problem of which it speaks; twenty years later, this quotation will be attacked as using "exclusive" rather than "inclusive" language! But with that caveat, let me say that I think it provides a clear context in which to examine the ways in which we are "educating" persons for life in such a culture.

How are we directing the "creative energies" of our students? Where in our present curricula do our students analyze the nature of their freedom and their concurrent responsibility? In what courses are they assisted in the task of reflecting on the richness of their inheritance as well as on the disparity of wealth around the globe? Above all, where do they learn the language—the key concepts—to use in a dialogue with those of different cultures?

We have lately been subjected to several reports on the inadequacies of American education. The last few have focused on higher education and are in agreement that our colleges and universities have so modified their traditional programs that many curricula have little or no coherence. In trying to service new markets, many institutions have refused to say that some studies have more to contribute to our cumulative wisdom than do others. SAT, LSAT, and GRE scores have often replaced critical evaluation and measurement of our students' intellectual growth. The challenge is to come up with the contemporary image that would identify our desired "outcome" as did Plato's "philosopher-king" or Newman's "gentleman". Who among us can describe the person who enfleshes our vision of the truly educated man or woman?

Several recent books have encouraged an exploration of such a vision. Jaroslav Pelikan in his *Scholarship and its Survival*² deals with the need for greater clarity of purpose in graduate education. A more extensive treatment is found in David Hassell's *City of Vision*³, a work of particular value for those who seek to articulate a cohesive educational mission relevant to the Christian tradition. There can be no doubt that a decisive role in the curricula of our colleges was once played by the disciplines of theology and philosophy; have they as key a role in today's culture? If so, how can we articulate it to the satisfaction of our many constituencies? If not, which disciplines or methodologies provide some coherence?

Catholic colleges and universities have always prided themselves on their fidelity to the liberal arts tradition, especially to the study of the humanities. The recent indictment from the pen of William J. Bennett, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, deserves to be studied seriously.⁴

While it is true that most Catholic colleges and universities have clung to a liberal arts core of studies in both professional and non-professional programs, the level of excellence demanded in courses in humanities and sciences may have been allowed to decline. The cultural backgrounds of our students, formed by family life, communications media, educational experience, economic and social realities may force us to accept some limitations in our admissions offices; but what we can control is the expectation we have of the student who receives a degree from our institution. The empowerment of a new generation of learners, whether they be 17 or 47 when they begin, is our mission.

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The National Institute of Education's report, *Involve-
ment in Learning,* contains 27 recommendations for the
improvement of American higher education. Useful
perhaps as an examination of conscience, they should be
looked at in terms of the cultural context in which our
particular institutions operate. Speaking of the students,
it says: "...the best preparation for the future is not nar-
row training for a special job, but rather an education
that will enable students to adapt to a changing world." Cer-
tainly not a radically new idea, but one worth think-
ing about. I think most of us would want to add that the
"adaptation," to be authentic and fruitful, must come
about as a result of reflection on the inherited wisdom as
well as on the needs of the times.

It is heartening to read in these pages of *Current Issues*
of the efforts being made by our Catholic colleges and
universities along these lines. A bit of our history is re-
counted by Abigail McCarthy in a special article commis-
sioned by the Neylan Commission (those colleges founded
by and still related to communities of women religious).

The revision of the curriculum of one large university is
described by James Loughran, S.J., formerly Dean of
Fordham College and newly elected president of Loyola-
Marymount. A radical approach to the communication
of values and the measurement of outcomes is illustrated
in the Alverno College plan, described herein by

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5This is the Final Report of the Study Group on The Conditions of
Excellence in American Higher Education presented to the Secretary of
Education and sponsored by the National Institute of Education

Margaret Earley, SSSF and Joel Read, SSSF. And the
over-arching purpose of our education—to penetrate the
culture in which we live and which we create anew—is
reaffirmed by Dr. David O'Brien.

We can only give visibility in these pages to a few of
the exemplary programs. Glancing at *The Chronicle of
Higher Education*, we note the many Catholic institu-
tions receiving National Endowment for the Humanities
grants to help in the revitalization of humanities depart-
ments. We know of other institutions involved in various
national studies such as that of the SEARCH Institute and
the Society for Values in Higher Education; in all of
these, our ACCU members are making a significant con-
tribution to the general health and vitality of higher
education.

We will find, I think, that we are doing many of the
things suggested in the NIE and Humanities reports and
doing them well. We may also take comfort in learning of
the commonalities of the obstacles to success noted in the
reports. Our efforts to achieve excellence in our educa-
tional programs are aided and supported by such
national recommendations. But, in the end, what drives
us on is our commitment to the mission of our institu-
tions: to hand on the best of our tradition, of our in-
herited culture, and, in doing so critical and creatively, to
empower our students to inspire the culture of the next
century. Let us hope that as "the human race passes
through a new stage in history" (to return to the words of
*Gaudium et Spes*), it will find some of the needed help for
the journey in our Catholic colleges and universities.

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