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Introduction to *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education: Presidential Visions*

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Introduction

One day when the media had been particularly hard on higher education, Paul Gallagher, ACCU's associate executive director, voiced a question: "Why do people still seem to want to be college presidents?" We had noticed the turn-over of administrators registered in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and yet we had also received news of many fine newcomers to the ranks of president in our Catholic colleges and universities. Paul suggested that we ask them why, at this moment of history, they were choosing to be leaders of these particular institutions. Their answers—major, often inaugural, addresses—furnished the content of this issue.

Several of the new presidents who responded are from colleges and universities affiliated with religious communities. It is clear that the commitment of the institutional leadership to the tradition begun by the religious community is still strong and vibrant. Those who were chosen to lead Catholic women's colleges believe firmly in the distinctive quality of the education offered there. They all express, in one way or another, the conviction that institutions of higher learning have a mission of research, teaching, and service and that they find therein personal satisfaction and hope for a more just world in the future. They see themselves as carrying on a great tradition, one that has its roots in Christian faith and its branches in contemporary culture. They believe that the search for truth and the sharing of wisdom are aided by a knowledge of and appreciation for the religious experience of the human community. Human intellectual effort and Christian faith are complementary not contradictory.

We are grateful for the gifts and commitment of these leaders. In this day of financial retrenchment and shifting demographics, the Catholic community is fortunate to have men and women of integrity who will study their particular institution and discover the distinctive niche that it can fill. From the very beginning of Catholic higher education, it has been the task of educating first generation Americans that has held our attention; today, many of our institutions continue to focus on marginal groups in our society and successfully empower new generations of students. Within the constituency of our 230 colleges and universities, we find enormous diversity in terms of size, mission, student profile, faculty commitment, and administrative and governance structures. Many of them are linked to local communities in a real partnership; others are more like oases in the world of noise and confusion. The liberal arts continue to be the core of studies in most of them; the study of religion and/or theology is still a distinctive mark; the centrality of the student is noticeable.

The goals of our new presidents, articulated here in diverse ways but in one voice, give flesh and blood to the term Catholic identity. It is clear that for them the love of learning and the desire for God go hand in hand and that they will be doing their utmost to achieve an environment in which faith and culture dialogue in freedom and civility. Tomorrow's teachers and learners are in good hands.

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