

CULTURE AND CHARACTERISTIC OF MERCY HIGHER EDUCATION

As those within the Mercy Colleges and universities reflect on their identity as Catholic and as Mercy, a persistent question arises, “How will we know we are faithful.” Over the past several years, those vested with the role of mission coordinators on the campus have been discussing this question. The following paper was developed to review the assumptions underlying the need to discuss how we might be faithful to our identity as Mercy and Catholic and to suggest a process for assessing such faithfulness on each campus.

The paper is divided into three parts: first, a series of assumptions; second, a set of characteristics that must be present in order to permit an institution to claim the name “Catholic” and “Mercy;” and, third, two resources for assessment.

Assumptions

Assumption #1: Mercy Colleges/Universities will be sustained into the future in the Catholic tradition and the legacy of Mercy by dedicated men and women who have been resourced in the legacy of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy and who demonstrate Catholic belief and practice in their personal and professional lives. In no way does this assumption necessitate that all on the campus claim the Catholic tradition as their religious reference. Rather in the true Catholic tradition, expressions from other religious traditions will be welcomed on the campuses. However, the primary symbols of the institution will claim Catholicism and if the institution is to remain Catholic into the future, Catholicism will need to be of significant influence on the campus.

Assumption #2: The imprint of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy upon the Mercy Colleges/Universities will endure into the future only if the prevailing values of the Mercy charism are written into the continuing charter documents of the institutions and monitored by a governing body dedicated to the alignment of Mercy values with behavioral indicators and policies and integration of these values into decision making.

Assumption #3: The institutions collectively will have a better chance of sustaining their Mercy legacy as well as their Catholic identity if a model of sponsorship –that is, a model of governance and decision making providing for significant influence over the institutions—can be developed to encompass all the institutions. Such a model embracing all the institutions will provide the synergy necessary to:

- a) Increase opportunities to deepen the understandings of mercy and justice for faculty, staff, and students of all the institutions;
- b) Provide the power of moral suasion that comes from belonging to something greater than oneself;
- c) Provide a sense of identity as *Mercy* Colleges/Universities.
- d) Foster collaboration and shared use of resources across the “system”

Underlying the assumptions listed above is the belief that Mercy Institutions must be very clear about the values they want the institutions to embody; otherwise they will be in danger of drifting from their foundational moorings.

Culture Must be Catholic

The culture of an institution of higher education associated with the Sisters of Mercy must first of all be Catholic. Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, was dedicated first to the mission of the church. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and other contemporary church documents can assist Catholic colleges and /universities with an understanding of that which must be present for the culture to be Catholic.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae argues that every Catholic University, as a university, is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities.¹

Furthermore, Catholic colleges and universities must possess the autonomy necessary to guarantee academic freedom as long as the rights of individuals and the community are preserved within the boundaries of the truth and the common good.

Ex Corde goes on to say that since the objective of a Catholic college or university is to preserve a Christian presence in the academic world, every Catholic college and university must have the following essential characteristics:

- "1. a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church; and,
4. an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life."²

¹ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, #12.

² *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, #13.

For the Culture to be *Mercy*....

Within the culture of being Catholic then, what does *Mercy* add? That which is distinctive about the Sisters of Mercy within the church is their fourth vow obligating them to “service to the poor, sick, and ignorant.”

Sisters of Mercy sponsor institutions to address their enduring concerns and to witness to Christ’s mission. All who work within the Mercy Colleges and Universities are asked to model mercy and justice and to be guided by Catherine McAuley’s preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women.³

There could be a variety of ways to accomplish this, e.g. ensuring that the very process of education is liberating and calls forth persons to the fullest use of their gifts and talents; ensuring just wages and benefits for every employee; ensuring service learning and attention to what systemic changes are necessary in society for all to thrive; ensuring scholarship opportunities for those on welfare, single mothers, those with no resources for educational financing; ensuring consciousness raising opportunities for faculty and staff to help them become more aware of those who have less, etc.

The following four characteristics taken together provide the essential foundation for an institution to consider itself of Mercy. These characteristics mirror those found in the *Ex Corde* document.

1. Regard for the dignity of the person
2. Academic Excellence and Life Long Learning
3. Education of the whole person: body, mind, spirit
4. Compassion and justice towards those with less, especially women and children.

³ Adapted from the *Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy*, #5 – #7.

Assessment

A process for assessing the integration of the essential characteristics of a Catholic/Mercy institution of higher education will be helpful as the Conference of Mercy Higher Education moves forward. Assessment is about clarifying and supporting those measures most effective in sustaining one's identity and promises. Thus, if the mission statement of a College or University or other important documents claim an affiliation with Catholicism and the Sisters of Mercy, it is important to be able to assess that claim.

The value of assessment is found when one can both celebrate the elements that are present and discover that which might be more present.

Each campus needs to be engaged in assessing attention to the norms of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Further work from the Conference on Mercy Higher Education in this effort will be appreciated.

Two forms for assessing the characteristics of Mercy have been developed: a matrix model adapted from the Baldrige quality award process and a series of open ended questions for institutional self-reflection. Neither is meant to be exhaustive, rather they are presented here as a means of encouraging assessment on the campuses.

The Matrix Model

Regard for the dignity of the human person will be evidenced by

1. A culture in which a diversity of people and a diversity of points of view are welcomed, respected, and celebrated.
2. Honest, multi-directional communication
3. A spirit of collaboration and teamwork that is cultivated throughout the institution
4. Decision making that promotes the voice of those to be most affected by the decision.

| Identifier | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
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| Diversity | The College/ University has a systematic process in place for recruiting, selecting, retaining, educating and celebrating a diverse community including students, board members, faculty and staff. Leaders model that processes for integrating diverse perspectives are embedded in the culture and result in excellence and innovation. | Focused efforts to recruit for diversity have resulted in a diverse student body and faculty/staff. Diversity education is a requirement for all students and for faculty/staff. Sensitivity to the cultural and religious needs of students has been integrated into the core curriculum. The college has a defined process for gathering insights and diverse perspectives. Celebrations of diversity are held regularly. | Focused efforts to recruit for diversity are underway. Diversity recognized as an asset and diversity education is planned. Events held at least annually. Leaders actively solicit diverse points of view from faculty, staff, students, wider community | Campus leaders affirm the value of diversity but few texts/speakers/ Faculty/staff evidence diverse points of view or backgrounds. Events to celebrate diversity not embedded in culture. Some processes to solicit diverse perspectives are evident but typically this is after decisions are made. | The college/ university community does not reflect the diversity of the community it serves and no focused effort has been made to recruit for diversity beyond entry-level jobs. Diversity celebrations are rare. Decisions are made without seeking out perspectives other than those from the dominant culture on campus. |
| Communication | As a result of developing systematic communication processes and open, candid and truthful communication, staff, faculty, board members, alums and students have developed a high level of trust in the administration of the college. | | | | There is little evidence that the college/university invests in ongoing communication with its constituents. |
| Collaboration & teamwork | The college/ University has systems and processes in place to assure that collaboration and teamwork are understood and practiced as the norm for all activities in planning and decision-making. | Feedback from students, faculty, staff, board members and alumnae attest to successful implementation of plans resulting in quality education and some collaborative efforts in the community. | The college/ university has developed and communicated comprehensive plans to facilitate collaboration and teamwork among students, faculty, administration, staff, board members and alums. | College/university staff, students, faculty, alums, and board members can articulate how they and their input are at times included in decisions that affect their scope of responsibility | There is little evidence of collaboration and teamwork among departments and with students. Partnerships within the community have not been formed. |
| Decision making | Processes are in place to identify, solicit and incorporate the voices of those most affected by decisions and policies. | | | | |

Academic Excellence/Life Long Learning will be evidenced by:

1. Regional accreditation and appropriate course of study accreditation
2. Continuous Assessment and Improvement Processes throughout the institution
3. A spirit of innovation throughout the institution
4. Evidence of institutional support for life long learning

| Identifier | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
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| Accreditation | The college/university displays a healthy synergy with the regional accreditation body. Faculty and staff are active participants in the improvement of higher education regionally and nationally. | | | | Accreditation is looked upon as a tedious process, something to be endured and "passed," but not important to the overall educational enterprise. |
| Continuous Assessment and Improvement | The college/ university enjoys pride in being known as a desirable place to work and study due to its attention to the signs of the times. Student satisfaction across the board is at the highest percentile. | Continuous improvement is guided by analysis of benchmark data, derived from surveys of students, faculty, staff, alums, board members and attention to the educational needs of the community. | | | There is little awareness of the dynamics and necessity of change within the college or university. There is resistance to change. |
| Innovation | The college/ university demonstrates a spirit of innovation in effectively leading the campus to a total community model of learning. Leadership on the campus effectively leads to new opportunities and models of learning. | The college/ university faculty, staff and administration demonstrate ingenuity in meeting the needs of the student community by creating opportunities and resources for new initiatives to promote learning. New initiatives are measured, evaluated, and are foundational to subsequent innovation. | Administration and faculty demonstrate a spirit of innovation by implementing new ideas, taking appropriate risks and making unpopular decisions when necessary to effect necessary change or improvement. | Administration and faculty intentionally work to create an environment in which all employees are encouraged to think innovatively and to try new ways of improving the education provided. | Administration, staff and faculty reflect an attitude of satisfaction and complacency with their current performance in the classroom environment and with the indicators of staff, student and faculty satisfaction. |

Education of the Whole Person: Mind, Body, Spirit will be evidenced by:

1. A culture recognized as one in which God is claimed as available and faithful
2. Evidence of integrity and the consciousness of ethics throughout the institution
3. An understanding of the importance of relationships and community within the campus.
4. The health consciousness of all engaged with the institution.

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| Spirituality | Student and alum feedback provide evidence that attention to the spiritual dimension of persons and dedication to education of the whole person is perceived to be as important to education as professional program accreditation. | Students, faculty, staff, alums and board members experience an environment characterized by sensitivity and an understanding that persons are more than their work. | | | There is some evidence that meetings begin with prayer or reflective exercises. Existing religious symbols and artwork are not particularly striking nor inspiring. |
| Integrity/Community ethics | Ethics and the consciousness of integrity are integral to all processes/courses. | | | | |
| Relationships/Community | Evidence of an understanding of community as foundational to the educational enterprise and a holistic workplace. | | | | Salaries/wages are reviewed objectively; there is some evidence of the promotion of community on the campus. |
| Health Consciousness | Student, faculty, staff and alum feedback indicate that health consciousness permeates the institution; the fitness center is well used by more than the athletic teams; the dining service provides healthy meals and snacks. Safety is stressed throughout the campus. | | Policies and processes are in place to assist students/faculty and staff with work/life balance. Safety policies in laboratories, maintenance areas, etc. are available. | | No one talks about or seems particularly concerned about the health of the next generation. Safety policies or procedures are not evident. |

Mercy and Justice especially towards those most marginalized by society will be evidenced by:

1. Scholarship Programs that reach out to the disenfranchised
2. Service Learning and Community Outreach Programming
3. A culture in which all resources – human, financial and material – are treated as gifts to be treasured

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| Scholarship Outreach to the disenfranchised | | | All faculty/staff are engaged in identifying and resourcing students needing assistance of any sort to successfully complete academic programs | | Appropriate assistance in student aid, placement and academic advising of disenfranchised students is successful in ensuring academic success. |
| Service Learning/Community Outreach | Evidence of a mature program of community outreach and service learning in present. | | All student must participate in a minimum of one service learning course a semester | | Community service days have been converted into service learning experiences. |
| Stewardship | | | | | Recycling and reduction in use of scarce and valuable resources is promoted and encouraged. |
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