

Introduction

“What makes us different?” Along with their secular counterparts, Catholic colleges and universities across the country strive to demonstrate their uniqueness, their particular *niche*, their singularity. Additionally, Catholic colleges and universities endeavor to show how Catholic identity animates all areas of their institutions. One might be tempted to think that debates over Catholic identity or developing curricula that incorporate Catholic perspectives are more recent questions and somehow unique to our time. Michael Rizzi provides a brief historical overview of Catholic higher education in the United States from 1789 to the present, illustrating that many of these present-day questions were debated time and again in years past. The author offers some insights on how these historical debates can help frame and better understand modern questions regarding university mission and Catholic identity.

Bernard Prusak raises provocative questions about Catholic institutions’ claims that they “transform” their students over the course of the undergraduate experience. While one might laud this aspiration, we can also ask whether Catholic colleges and universities should even strive to change hearts as well as minds; and if so, by what means and to what purpose? The author begins by clarifying terms, and then argues that faculty cannot always avoid considering students’ hearts, and in fact a case can be made for “humanistic programs of transformation” at Catholic institutions. At the same time, Prusak identifies the underlying clash between the academic/professional culture and the humanistic culture as the principal hurdle to overcome if a program of transformation is to succeed. He concludes with some suggestions for how to realize a distinctive Christian humanism on Catholic campuses.

Primarily, students learn from their interactions with faculty and residence life staff, but students’ experiences are not limited to classrooms or residence halls. Students are keenly aware of how faculty and staff interact with each other, how they treat one another, and whether, by word and example, faculty and staff serve to form “an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ.” Gary Umhoefer, retired human resources director at St. Norbert College, offers insights about the effect of teaching by example across all sectors of an institution. Reflecting his many years of experience, the author proposes some specific approaches for creating and sustaining exemplary workplaces on Catholic campuses.

The next article explores ways in which core or general education courses can help students refine their own intellectual understandings when confronted with opposing ideas and perspectives. Bethany Kilcrease suggests an approach to the core or general education program that aims to help prepare students to navigate a pluralistic world and ultimately develop skills and dispositions required for contributing to the common good. Using her own course on the Protestant Reformation as illustrative, the author shows how learning about diverse religious perspectives creates “provocative encounters” whereby students examine their own worldviews in light of new knowledge and perspectives and come to a deeper appreciation of the world, themselves, and truth itself.

The Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), founded by Eboo Patel, partners with colleges and universities to foster interfaith engagement across every facet of campus life. The next two articles discuss Patel’s understanding of interfaith conversation as a way to build bridges across religious differences. John Hopkins first examines the value of listening through the lens of Gadamer’s hermeneutic tradition, and then uses the Benedictine tradition to suggest techniques for “deep, attentive listening” that supplement Patel’s model of dialogue. The author suggests two practical strategies for implementing rich interfaith conversations on Catholic campuses. The second article related to IFYC argues that the creation of intentional interfaith communities of practice on college campuses is an apt and effective means to form students as interfaith leaders. Emily Jendzejec relies on the theoretical work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger on situated learning communities of practice in order to demonstrate how Interfaith Youth Core effectively enables and encourages interfaith cooperation.

In August 2016, Saint John’s University (New York) hosted the Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity. Recently, Villanova University instituted a Sports and Spirituality program through the offices of campus ministry. These are just two examples of the growing interest in connecting experiences on the court, playing field, and other sporting venues with experiences of God and relationships with others. The final article in this issue discusses the Sports Outreach Initiative at Gonzaga University that aims “to prepare university students to provide participants of faith communities with resources to aid in building the character of individuals through sports participation.” Jimmy Smith teaches a course as part of this initiative. The course combines the study of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) with physical activity programming for Catholic elementary school students. The course expanded students’ knowledge of CST, while enhancing their physical, emotional, and spiritual lives.

Edward J. Mahoney
Associate Editor