

Shared Mission: Catholic Higher Education in Partnership with Catholic NGOs

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Abstract

As practitioners of Catholic Social Teaching, Catholic nongovernmental organizations are excellent resources for Catholic colleges and universities seeking to integrate social justice into educational programs and institutional practices. In this article, the partnership between Catholic Relief Services and Cabrini College is presented as a case study. This partnership has generated or enhanced a host of campus programs (in advocacy, technology, solidarity-study travel, narrative writing, and a new social justice-centered curriculum) that are catalyzing growth for students and faculty in understanding the causes of and responses to global humanitarian issues. This kind of collaboration exemplifies a new era in which Catholic higher education is called upon to cultivate competence and compassion, and to expand criteria for excellence in teaching, learning, and institutional life to include engagement with the vulnerable.

Social justice education requires formation as well as information. It requires the shaping of understanding, compassion, and will, as well as the acquisition of knowledge. Students benefit from contact with mentors who can introduce them to the world from the perspective of the poor, and who can speak from experience about the paradigm shifts that often follow such eye-opening awakenings. Faculty can benefit from such mentoring as well, as most come to teaching through specialized academic research. Outside of selected fields, few faculty members have studied or engaged with social justice issues in a sustained way.

Serving the vulnerable can be found in the mission statements of virtually all Catholic colleges and universities—and is an “essential characteristic” of a Catholic university, according to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.¹ Yet, putting this mission element into practice can be a challenge. Catholic humanitarian organizations are a helpful resource that Catholic

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¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1990), sec. 14.

colleges and universities can turn to for assistance in addressing the experiential dimension of social justice education. Committed to empowering those in need, such organizations can be found in every diocese. They are frequently seen in the public square as advocates for the vulnerable, and they are increasingly open to working with educational institutions. Catholic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are role models of the practice of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Not only do they represent the preferential option for the poor but they also pursue complex and sometimes controversial principles like strengthening social networks and balancing rights and responsibilities.

For all these reasons, Catholic NGOs are in a position to help Catholic colleges and universities strengthen their social justice programs in ways that nourish the minds and spirits of faculty as well as students, and challenge them to act on behalf of the common good. This article will explore the value of mission-centered institutional relationships in a case study of the partnership between Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Cabrini College.

The Partners

As the official international relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic Church, CRS has continually expanded its mission to meet growing world needs since its founding in 1943. Initially focused on resettling persons displaced by World War II, CRS now works in marginalized communities in nearly 100 countries, in collaboration with local dioceses.²

The agency has also widened its vision through a model of “dual constituency” that includes collaboration not only with communities in need, but also with American Catholics, seeking to help them “live their faith in solidarity with their brothers and sisters around the world.”³ As an expression of this strategic commitment, CRS sought to form partnerships with selected American Catholic colleges and universities early in the new millennium. In April 2005 an agreement was signed with Cabrini College, and soon thereafter with Villanova, Seattle, and Santa Clara Universities, and with the University of Notre Dame. CRS has also developed less formal relationships with many other U.S. Catholic institutions of higher education.

² Catholic Relief Services, <http://www.crs.org>.

³ Catholic Relief Services, “Mission Statement,” <http://crs.org/about/mission-statement.cfm>.

As with other institutional collaborations, Cabrini College's success in becoming a CRS partner owes much to the convergence of serendipity and hard work. Two institutions with such differences in size and visibility might never have met without the good graces of a "match-maker," through collegial connections with nearby Villanova University. At the same time, conversations with CRS might not have progressed beyond initial introductions if not for Cabrini's established record of innovative initiatives connecting classroom and world. Despite its small size, this institutional culture is rooted in the College's legacy from missionaries whose goals, projects, and inspiration parallel those of CRS and other Catholic humanitarian NGOs.

Cabrini College: A Case Study

Cabrini College was founded in 1957 in suburban Philadelphia by the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSCs), the order established by St. Frances Cabrini in 1880. Initially a class of 37, the College now has a student body of 1800 undergraduates and 1700 graduate students. This was the lone college founded by an order known for its health care facilities, orphanages, senior centers, parish programs, schools, and institutions serving the poor in 16 countries. Cabrini College's quest to integrate the sisters' practical commitment to service as "the continuation of Jesus' own mission of being God's love for the world"⁴ into their educational programs has evolved through several initiatives during the 50 years since its founding. Each initiative was aimed at capturing the blend of study, compassion, and action on behalf of the vulnerable which Frances Cabrini had termed "education of the heart."⁵

The first was Project Outreach. This brainchild of several faculty members in the 1970s placed undergraduates at Cabrini sisters' mission sites for extended service. The second, in the 1980s, was the Seminar on the Common Good. This was the first required higher education service-learning course in Pennsylvania, and among the first in the nation. The third initiative, early in the present decade, was a conscious shift in the College's organization of its local community engagement programs from a roster of geographically-scattered sites linked to the

⁴ Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, "Cabrinian Identity and Charism," <http://www.motherscbrini.com/legacy/charism.asp>.

⁵ Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, "Province Ministries: Teaching—Education of the Heart," <http://www.motherscbrini.com/ministries/teach.asp>.

College primarily for the duration of each placement, to a cluster of organizations concentrated in one community and connected to Cabrini and to each other in sustained relationship. The outcome of this change was the formalization, in 2005, of a partnership with Norristown, PA, seven miles from the campus.

The fourth initiative, developed during the years the CRS partnership was being considered and launched, was the crafting of a groundbreaking revised curriculum called “Justice Matters,” which began full implementation in the fall of 2009. Through a four-year sequence of social justice courses, Cabrini students will be introduced to “Engagements in the Common Good,” starting with an exploration of personal identity and social location in the first year. The curriculum will then focus on community engagement in the sophomore year, systemic change and advocacy in the junior year, and integration with the major field in the senior capstone, aimed at cultivating life-long engagement in social justice.

Launching the CRS-Cabrini Partnership

During the period between the third and fourth initiatives, Cabrini faculty learned of CRS’s interest in partnerships with Catholic higher education. There were conversations with a colleague at nearby Villanova University, who had collaborated successfully with a CRS staff member when she spoke to her global poverty class. She welcomed Cabrini colleagues into her dialogue with CRS. A Cabrini faculty development “road trip” on CST was planned by a faculty member in the English and Communication Department, which took place in May 2003. The trip featured visits to CRS’ Baltimore headquarters, and to the offices of NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby organization located in Washington, DC.

Encouraged by the positive response on the part of the many participants, and by the strong support of the College’s president and administration, representatives of Cabrini welcomed discussions with CRS about establishing a formal partnership. In April of 2005, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed by top executives from each institution. The MOU offered a framework of mutual support through campus-based educational programs on global issues reflecting CRS’ experience. Coordination of the partnership was established by both institutions: with a liaison-staff person in Mission Integration at Cabrini, supported by a Partnership Advisory Committee, and a staff

liaison at the new CRS Northeast Regional office located near the Cabrini campus.

Capacity-Building Programs

Beginning modestly the first year, the partnership hosted occasional CRS speakers on campus, promoted campus awareness of the devastating Southeast Asian Tsunami in 2004 and CRS's response to the disaster, and developed an international student internship program. Increasingly ambitious programs have been generated since then. Four examples illustrate a growing focus on strategies for achieving mission-priorities identified by CRS and Cabrini, in the areas of (1) advocacy to advance social justice, (2) global connections through travel and expanded uses of technology, (3) spirituality as a critical component of reflection on service and advocacy experience, and (4) personal narratives as indicators of growth.

Advocacy to Advance Social Justice

Social justice advocacy weekend-workshops, developed by CRS partnership liaisons at Cabrini and Villanova and facilitated on two occasions (2005 and 2006) by professionals from CRS, served to introduce students from a half-dozen Philadelphia-area colleges and universities to the critical skill of advocating for systemic change. As a result of these advocacy workshops, emerging local student leaders were exposed to the work of CRS, CST, and each other as potential collaborators in social justice work.

In winter 2006, many of these students used their newly-learned skills to galvanize campus campaigns on behalf of comprehensive immigration reform, a topic which had just begun to hit the front pages of U.S. newspapers. Students gathered at Cabrini College, in front of a large mural depicting St. Frances Cabrini as patroness of immigrants, and collected hundreds of constituent letters; these were later delivered to a key U.S. Senator by a small representative delegation.

For Cabrini, this program helped build the foundation for additional initiatives, particularly student leadership immersion training on critical social change perspectives and CST. Variations of these programs were later developed in collaboration with CRS for student journalists eager to interview and lobby policy-makers and party officials on global issues in conjunction with the 2008 presidential

election. As the college developed pilot courses integrating advocacy for the new curriculum, CRS has been an increasingly valuable educational partner. Through policy and legislative-process briefings and web-updates on key provisions of pending legislation, students gained the information and skills that enabled them to share informed constituent feedback with legislators on immigration reform, food security, PEPFAR, and other issues.

Global Connections

At the end of the first year of the partnership, with the support of both CRS and the MSC sisters, Cabrini College launched an annual international Faculty Solidarity Study Tour (FSST). This program introduces a select group of professors from various disciplines to organizations and citizen-activists working on humanitarian issues in developing countries. The goal is to stimulate faculty thinking about global social justice themes for courses, research, and the curriculum itself. The program also serves to introduce overseas partners to the role of higher education in cultivating understanding of and support for the struggles of people in the developing world.

In coming years, the Faculty Solidarity-Study Tour program may be adapted to align itineraries with faculty research and course development, and with the needs of CRS and their partners serving the poor overseas. But in its very first pilot years, the program bore significant fruit, particularly regarding the use of technology to enhance global social justice education. While traveling on a bus in north-central Brazil in 2006—between visits to communities combating human trafficking—a faculty member conceived a program that would benefit both CRS and the campus community. Eventually named the Global Solidarity Network (GSN), the program gained the support of CRS and other partner campuses—particularly Seattle and Villanova Universities—and produced a participatory, course-based, learning-community model using the internet to connect classrooms on U.S. Catholic campuses with CRS experts around the world. These “Study eBroad” sessions feature intensive two-week periods of online discussions and live web-meetings between students, professors and CRS staff and partners on human rights and development issues such as fair trade, food security, human trafficking, and peace-building.

At the conclusion of each session, students are introduced to a variety of ways to act on their learning, such as lobbying on current bills before Congress. Other demonstrations of learning include articles and

editorials in the student newspaper, and videos which merited posting on campus and CRS websites. Some of these projects were publicly honored by professional associations.⁶

Spirituality

An immersion trip to Rostro de Cristo⁷ in Ecuador—a CRS partner organization developed by the Archdiocese of Boston—provides students from Cabrini and other schools with a week-long, retreat-based immersion experience in a community that offers a range of educational, professional, and recreational services to local people residing near Guayaquil.

Participating in the Rostro de Cristo program allows Cabrini to offer a “bridge” for students who have already experienced a service trip but are ready for enhanced critical thinking. Based on the model of charity, students attending this trip are ready to explore the difference between conventional dualistic thinking (“we” are different from but willing to help “them”) and a solidarity perspective. This perspective, rooted in Catholic spirituality but ecumenical in spirit, focuses on connectedness to others (“we are all one human family who can enrich each other”). Rostro de Cristo is proving to be a life-changing and faith-deepening experience for Cabrini students and staff/faculty who have participated in it. It has served to attract and form students who are ready for leadership roles in campus social justice education and campus ministry.

Personal Narratives

A fourth example of the program-generation of the CRS-Cabrini partnership has focused on writing as a connecting link between geographic and personal journeys. In search of what administrators of the partnership termed “indicators of transformation,” CRS and Cabrini developed a joint publication project in 2007, Cabrini’s 50th anniversary year. The project was designed to explore the inner dimension of social justice work through the creation and sharing of first-person narratives by a variety of voices representing Cabrini and its social justice education

⁶ Social Justice Journalism, <http://www.socialjusticejournalism.org>. This website is maintained by Dr. Jerry Zurek, Chair, Communications, Cabrini College.

⁷ Rostro de Cristo: The Face of Christ, <http://www.rostrodecristo.org>.

partners at CRS and in nearby Norristown agencies. The collection was self-published as *Stories of Transformation: Personal Narratives in Search of the Common Good*.⁸

The reflections of forty individuals were gathered into book form, framed by essays that locate the stories at various points along a continuum from reflection on one's own identity, through engaging in service, to living in solidarity. A student on a service trip in Central America records her astonishment at seeing children, with barely any money themselves, give their few coins to a disabled man. Two students in a prison-based course in Norristown—one who can go back to campus at the end of each session, and the other who remains behind bars—describe ways their stereotypes of each other were broken down by the class they shared. A staff member is overwhelmed by the voluntary poverty of a Catholic Worker service project host and by the resilience and generosity of students she is supervising. A Norristown social worker recalls a client's child, who survived overwhelming abuse, as a way to encourage persistence and hope in her work.

In one particularly moving account, a student describes the experience of learning, several weeks into her internship in Central America, that the youth program she was charged with supporting was about to lose its funding. Moving from embarrassment to rage to prayerful reflection, she came to realize that her role would now be one of a companion rather than a resource provider, and that the young people she had bonded with would continue to teach her about solidarity.

Sometimes, however, there is nothing to do but hold the mystery. A CRS staff member in New York reflected on how she was “challenged, confused, changed” as she watched her Muslim colleague, fresh off a plane from Afghanistan, prostrate herself in prayer at Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan. Another CRS worker, located in Rwanda, described her encounter with the remains of Rwandan genocide victims and how she has made her peace, for the time being, letting her agonized questions about this event go unanswered.

Teachers of social justice courses can use such stories to let students know that their lives, too, are potential textbooks, stories whose writing can trigger deep change in themselves as the writers, or in others who read or hear them. The book—or simply the narrative-eliciting

⁸ Mary S. Laver, ed., *Stories of Transformation: Personal Narratives in Search of the Common Good* (Radnor, PA: Cabrini College, 2008).

process—can be integrated into courses and trainings. This integration is taking place in pilot courses for the new curriculum.

Campus Impact of CRS Partnership

Segments of the Cabrini campus community report different assessments of the partnership with CRS, but virtually all are positive and many are interconnected. Cabrini faculty members generally credit the partnership for its role in renewing the College's (and in some cases their own) connection to the global vision of the MSC sisters. In a year of preparing courses for the new curriculum, reflections on pedagogy and teaching-resources arise, as well. CRS is viewed as a source of experts and case studies on specific humanitarian issues (e.g., human trafficking, Iraqi refugees, fair trade, water access). A number of faculty members value CRS's method as well as its programs. For example, CRS's view of the benefits of partnership is based not only a prudent resource-stewarding practice but is a corollary of the CST principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. This means that the agency routinely works through local dioceses and partner organizations who invite them, rather than simply "delivering" expertise or goods.

Cabrini takes this approach in its partnership with Norristown, PA, which students experience first-hand in local engagement/service placements and community-based research projects. These living examples of "applied" CST provide faculty with excellent case studies for courses, and are likely to be incorporated into "Engagements in the Common Good" courses in the new curriculum.

For administration and staff, and for the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the CRS partnership elicits pride that Cabrini College can partner with an NGO "giant." The work of CRS, though much larger in scale, is seen as very congruent with the Cabrini sisters' missions in spirit and purpose. CRS executives' generous and public acknowledgments of the College as an institutional partner, particularly during recent events honoring Cabrini's 50th anniversary, have been much appreciated. Administrators also value CRS as a potential resource for staff trainings that fully embrace Catholic identity while also respecting religious diversity.

For Cabrini students, the CRS partnership has been a tangible presence: for some in brief encounters (fair trade banana split events and tournaments, World AIDS Day events); for others in more extended experiences (Global Solidarity Network sessions, course-based projects,

advocacy and leadership trainings, internships, the CRS Ambassador program). While the number of students who seek CRS programs or leadership opportunities is relatively small, though increasing, those who do participate represent influential elements of student life: the editorial staff of the student newspaper, leaders of retreats and service programs, and resident assistants. They share in the pride about Cabrini's partnership with CRS expressed by members of the more "permanent" campus community. As students move toward graduation, an increasing number identify global awareness as a central element of their personal and professional identity and values, and an important component in their understanding of the Catholic faith. Tellingly, the global solidarity work some have done through the partnership regularly shows up on Facebook and other social networking/identity forums.

Overall, the CRS partnership is clearly "value added" for Cabrini College in deepening its Catholic identity and practice, through stimulating and substantive dialogue, collaboration, program oversight, assessment, and prayer with an organization that transparently centers its work around CST and that sees "the joys and the hopes, the fears and the anxieties . . . of those who are poor or in any way afflicted" as their own.⁹ Most importantly, the partnership has proven to be flexible and mission-sensitive enough to assure that all of this is designed, and continually reassessed, to connect the hearts and minds of students with the lives and giftedness of the poor.

Next steps for the partnership include continual improvement of what is working, in light of "signs of the times" both internal and global. As of this writing, both institutions join in the universal hope that the current economic situation will turn around soon, and share a fear that the "preferential option for the poor and vulnerable" may face far more difficult times as institutions struggle to fulfill their missions with unpredictable resource-streams. An important focus for Cabrini and other CRS partners is conducting partnership programs in a way that maximizes benefits to the poor. For example, a partner school can engage in peer institution outreach to other schools as a way of extending the "listening range" of the voice of CRS and thus of the world's poor.

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, (Vatican City, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1965), sec. 1.

Partnership and the Evolving Role of Catholic Higher Education

In his thought-provoking 1994 analysis¹⁰ of the challenges and opportunities for Catholic colleges and universities since Vatican II, historian David O'Brien identifies three eras in the history of Catholic higher education in the U.S. The first, focused on training men and women religious, was aimed at preserving the faith of lay Catholics. The second was dedicated to providing rigorous academic programs that demonstrated growing Catholic commitment to professional excellence. The third—our own era—aims to form citizens dedicated to the common good, reflecting Catholic concern for the well being of all people.¹¹ Partnering with Catholic NGOs allows institutions of Catholic higher education to move forward into this social justice work in ways that approach all three objectives—vocation, excellence, and social justice—not as artifacts but as living legacies that can be interpreted in new ways.

Expanding the Definition of "Vocation"

American Catholic colleges and universities may not be generating as many vocations to vowed religious life as they did in the first half of the twentieth century, but we are increasingly convinced that "serving the human family and the people of God" is a vocation for students of all majors. The sponsors of our educational institutions—perhaps especially those in missionary orders like Cabrini's—speak often of ways their work in the mission fields is carried forward by "lay collaborators" across all sectors of civil society, from parishes and schools to board rooms, TV stations, museums, and health centers. Through strategic partnerships with mission-based NGOs, students and faculty are in a position to ensure that "lay collaboration" for the good of the most vulnerable is a vital part of our shared mission.

Excellence includes Engagement

Since the 1950s, when John Tracy Ellis famously chastised American Catholic higher education for its lackluster academic standards,

¹⁰ David J. O'Brien, *From the Heart of the American Church: Catholic Higher Education and American Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

much progress has been made.¹² The shared sense of mission we are experiencing today as Catholic institutions suggests that we are expanding the definition of excellence itself. The new definition of excellence includes the expectation that students will bring to their lives a distinctive vision of and commitment to the wellbeing of all, particularly to the poor and vulnerable of society.

Putting “Social” back into “Social Justice”

If there is a single feature that distinguishes CST as *Catholic*, it is the associational principle, so eloquently captured in the opening words of *Gaudium et spes*.¹³ We are, in the face of Cain’s denial, our brothers’ (and sisters’) keepers. This “social principle” is true for individuals, and it is true for institutions. Just as friendships between individuals reveal their identity and shared goals, so partnerships between organizations can reveal what they stand for and hope for in ways that may not be as clear from separate vantage-points.

Partnership as a Sacred Act

Our Catholic institutions present themselves to the world and to each other in partnerships, well aware that while we share an overarching mission, each of us exists for the sake of a designated, beloved “other.” For Catholic colleges, that beloved is our student body. For Catholic NGOs, it is the poor. Engaging in collaborative action together for the sake of those “beloveds” is an act that is, in a sense, sacramental. There are challenges ahead, to be sure, but when we work together, we mirror the image of God for each other, and expand our capacity to do that for and in the world. Where two or three are gathered together—whether as individuals or as institutions—there is Christ in our midst.¹⁴ The light guiding our way, as educators and as those who empower the poor, is brighter when we walk the path together.

¹² John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” *Thought* Vol. 30, Autumn 1955, pp. 351-388 (Fordham University).

¹³ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, sec. 1.

¹⁴ Mt 18:20.