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IN
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*Preach
the Gospel
always,
If necessary
use words.*

Best Practices in Franciscan Education

Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2

MARCH 2012

As we strive to integrate the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition into every area of our campuses we can benefit from the experiences of one another.

Look around your college or university and when you observe Franciscan Values being applied in practical ways, share that information with your peers in AFCU. If you would like to share a "Best Practices" article, contact Sister Patricia Hutchison at hutchisp@neumann.edu.

Inside this issue:

MISSION IDENTITY A Person – Scholar Approach to Mission

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**ALVERNIA
UNIVERSITY**

An Education in the Franciscan Tradition



MISSION IDENTITY

A Person – Scholar Approach to Mission

Elizabeth Kirk Matteo, Ph. D

What does a Franciscan education look like? Though we all may find it difficult to answer this complex question, the process of exploring key features can be instrumental in guiding our everyday actions. What follows is both reflective and descriptive of my impressions as a new faculty member trying to understand the mission and values that define a Franciscan education. First, I describe how I began to understand the mission. Second, I discuss the institutional benefits of assessing stakeholders' perceptions of mission. Finally, I roughly outline my own research on mission identity. In terms of best practices, my intent is to foster dialogue about both mission education for new faculty and evidence-based approaches to mission for strategic planning and on-going assessment purposes.

First, I must admit that I was unsure of what to expect when I joined the faculty at a Catholic, Franciscan institution. I suspect this may be the experience of other faculty who arrive with little to no exposure with faith-based education. Looking back to when I interviewed for my current position, I recall being asked if I could support the mission of the institution. I answered in the affirmative, not just because tenure-track positions are hard to come by, but because frankly there was nothing in the mission and values that I could not endorse. After all, what could be objectionable about values like peacemaking or collegiality? I suspect my response would have been the same regardless of where I was interviewing. Truthfully, most university mission statements are filled with positive aspirations about educational quality and personal development. Institutions do, however, differ in how they use mission statements. No other schools with which I interviewed even asked me if I could support their missions. To me, this is significant.

During the first few months as an assistant professor of psychology I spent the majority of my time on the typical activities of a new faculty member. My priorities were mostly developing my courses and becoming familiar with the needs of a new student population. My attention could not help but shift toward mission as I saw colleagues bringing it to life in their work through service-learning and other community-based projects.

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Yet, something else caught my attention that made a deeper impression. As I compared the campus culture with the undergraduate and graduate institutions I attended, there were clear differences that went beyond being religiously affiliated, private, and smaller. The most striking was how people interacted with one another. Relationships seemed to matter more. At first, I was a bit disarmed, having not wholly identified with the culture, and was unsure about what to attribute as the cause.

The adage "*There is no greater zealot than a true convert*" might have applied to me, except that I could not easily shed all that I had come to know and be. My graduate program in experimental social psychology followed a strong empiricist tradition, and the majority of my education preceding that was about intellectual achievement and the benefits that would accrue. Thank-

fully I was eager, remained open, and there were consistent signs that the emphasis on relationships was not just a product of people being nice to a newcomer. The result was that I began to trust that there was something authentic in the experience. Instead of remaining an observer of the Franciscan mission, this enabled me to begin to define how I could be a participant in it. In retrospect, had the contrast in my experiences not been so stark, I may have overlooked what I now define as a relational-care ethos present in the campus culture.

Although I could not have articulated this view several years ago, what I first needed to learn about the mission was the value of balancing heart and mind. The notion of educating the whole person and the Franciscan ideal of “knowledge joined with love” now has meaning for me. I suspect others have also had educational experiences in which connectedness to others is overshadowed by an emphasis on personal achievement. Ironically, had I held to the mindset that enabled me to be a high-achieving student and obtain an academic position, I would have been a poor role model in the Franciscan culture. By design, a liberal education should provide the foundation for life within a community. It should not just provoke students to think about concepts like agency and interdependence, but foster an environment in which they feel them, too.

Scholar-Approach to Mission

At the same time that I was trying to understand the Catholic, Franciscan identity on a personal level, as a social scientist, I started studying students’ and stakeholders’ perceptions of it. Entry into this research is owed in large measure to Dr. Joseph Ferrari who studies this topic at DePaul University. After attending a symposium given by Dr. Ferrari at a 2009 psychological conference, another large shift in how I viewed mission occurred. Up until then I had been thinking about mission as something one does. Mission was purely about action, not self. As someone who already studied social identity processes in individuals, framing mission in terms of identity and examining it on a collective scale made perfect sense. I saw this as a perfect opportunity to merge my research interests and skills with my desire to provide a service to the institution. I did not realize at the time how significant assessment is becoming in higher education.

Regular assessment enables institutions to monitor if mission is apparent in daily operations, if perceptions shift over time, and how mission-driven initiatives are viewed by different groups on campus.

It was not long before I realized that the landscape of higher education has become increasingly competitive. In order to compete, Franciscan colleges and universities must assess mission as part of strategic planning. On-going assessment of mission and values instead of being viewed as reductive is a way to determine objectively if institutional policies and practices align with the mission and values communicated in a mission statement. When organizational structure (e.g., governance and procedures) and culture (e.g., beliefs, norms, assumptions) align with a mission statement’s values and goals then an organization’s constituencies benefit from not only knowing who they are, but what they aspire to be. Regular assessment enables institutions to monitor if mission is apparent in daily operations, if perceptions shift over time, and how mission-driven initiatives are viewed by different groups on campus.

Research indicates that colleges with missions that are clearly understood and supported by staff and faculty report effective strategic planning (Bourne, Gates, & Cofer, 2000) and assessment practices (Carver, 2000). Other relationships also exist, for example, research by Ferrari and Velcoff (2006), found staff and faculty perceptions of mission are correlated with school sense of community. In another study, Rapp (1999) found that at least half first- year students at a private, Midwestern university had misconceptions regarding the school’s mission that directly related to their expectations. Together, these findings suggest that perceptions of mission may be used to predict other important variables associated to success of an institution.

Accrediting bodies are also placing greater pressure on institutions to articulate clear mission statements supported by educational practice and outcomes (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Accreditors, as well as governmental and private support, now look to see that an institution’s mission and core values are evident in programs, planning, and decision-making (Gow, 2009; Wang, Gibson, Salinas, Solis, & Slate, 2007). Moreover, some argue that increasing costs of education will force greater accountability on institutions to demonstrate their effectiveness not only to accreditors, but to the general public (Fugazzotto, 2009).

A more consumer-driven culture may also fuel greater accountability. Cynics arguing that mission statements are designed to be purposely vague or communicate widely held values for public appeal may find that statements may no longer be used purely as marketing tools. The reputation of institutions will depend on how well they deliver on promises made in their mission statements.

More than other institutions, those that are faith-based may arguably feel a greater sense of responsibility to understand how their mission statements are actualized in campus policy and practices because of affiliations with a church or particular religious order. Looking forward, as institutional leadership shifts from religious to mostly lay leadership, assessment will be an important part of gauging if the founding mission and values continue within institutions. The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) report conducted in the 1990's regarding the relationship between service and the Catholic mission is a great example of how assessment can be coordinated across institutions, and used to effect change (Weigert & Miller, 1996).

For the purposes of my own institution, I modeled my research on the approach of DePaul University. In 2009, with Dr. Ferrari's permission, I adapted the DePaul Mission and Values Inventory (DMV) (Ferrari & Velcoff, 2006), a 39-item measure developed for assessing perceptions of mission, values, and activities. DePaul University is a large, Catholic, urban, Vincentian institution. I adapted the inventory for use at a small, Catholic, suburban, Franciscan university. I maintained the basic structure of the inventory which is comprised of 16 items assessing *mission identity* and 23 items assessing the importance of *mission-driven activities* in the university community. I included some other measures relevant to the institution and also important demographic information such as gender, year in school, major, and religious affiliation.

Two years of online data collection yielded a significant percentage of responses from our student population. My findings have been used by the institution for assessment and planning purposes. Results of the data may also be used as a basis for comparison as new mission-driven initiatives are added in upcoming years. Dr. Ferrari and I also continue to work together and have been able to make comparisons across institutions. Although I was initially intrigued by this line of research, I never expected it to develop into a long-term research program. I encourage faculty at member institutions, especially social scientists interested in the topic of mission, to consider serving your institution's assessment efforts. Member institutions may also want to collaborate to develop larger projects involving several institutions.

General Conclusions

The picture of my own Franciscan education portrayed here is incomplete. In addition to person and scholar other dimensions I could have added are citizen and teacher. My own inner dialogue about mission has been equally enriched from interactions I have had in these roles. In terms of best practices, I do not have strict recommendations for those interested in guiding the development of new faculty at Franciscan colleges or universities. To my mind it is important, however, to start by asking the question of whether they can endorse the mission and then foster an environment in which that question is regularly revisited. My own understanding of Franciscan identity had to be learned in a bottom-up fashion - I had to first see, connect, and see value in participating in it. Admittedly I have much to learn about the theological and historical underpinnings of the Catholic, Franciscan tradition. However, I am better able to say what a Franciscan education is today than five years ago, and I can now do so with heart.

**I encourage
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Elizabeth Kirk Matteo, Ph. D. is an assistant professor of psychology at Alvernia University, Reading PA. She is a social psychologist who studies social identity. Dr. Matteo's project examining perceptions of mission and institutional identity sits within a larger research program focusing on the role of education in the development of moral identity.

