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Chapter 10

Trustees and Mission:
The Ideal and the Real

By Charles L. Currie, S.J.

As the president of Utopia Catholic College finished with “spell check” and moved the cursor to the “print” icon, she breathed a sigh of relief. She was printing the latest report on Utopia’s board and its successful leadership of the college, and she was eager to share the report with her board chair and the provincial before they enjoyed their semiannual dinner together.

As elated as she felt about this report, the president couldn’t help but think of her first report five years earlier. Who would have thought things could have changed so dramatically only a few years later?

Now she had a chair and a board that were not only strong and effective, but also truly interested in the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission of Utopia. The current provincial was a beloved former faculty member who understood and appreciated Utopia and higher education. All three had an excellent working relationship based on respect, excellent communication, and genuine trust. All three were focused on what was best for Utopia, its students, faculty, and staff. And they truly liked one another.

There were few nuns left at Utopia, but they were cheerfully and generously preparing for the day when there would be even fewer, by effectively sharing their charisma with their lay colleagues, more and more of whom were catching on to what made Utopia special.

While the president was finishing her report, the board chair was clearing his desk after a busy day’s work at his downtown office. He was looking forward to the meeting and dinner with the president and provincial, both of whom he had come to know and respect. He was proud of how things were going at Utopia under his chairmanship. He and his fellow board members felt good about their investment of time, talent, and resources in an institution that merited their full commitment and enthusiastic support. He was happy with the progress being made and had a clear idea of where Utopia was headed. He was encouraged by the shared sense of purpose that almost universally permeated the board, the administration, and the faculty. The special Catholic and sponsoring-group mission of the college made Utopia noticeably different from the other schools and organizations he had served as trustee or director.

Charles L. Currie, S.J., is president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities in Washington, D.C.

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The provincial also was looking forward to the meeting and dinner with her two friends. In her difficult task of leading the stewardship efforts of her congregation in the face of diminishing numbers, she was delighted that Utopia set a lofty standard for the kind of partnership the sisters were seeking with all the various institutions they were sponsoring. She felt good that her colleagues at Utopia responded generously to the invitation by the sisters on and off campus to the ongoing conversation about the founding charism of the college that further specified its Catholic mission and identity.

She felt that she and her congregation were doing everything possible to keep their tradition alive at Utopia, even though there would be fewer and fewer of the nuns involved with the school. Fortunately, the congregation’s charism was very much at home within a campus environment, and they had been working hard over the years to make it known, understood, and appreciated by their colleagues.

The Real World

We all know that Utopia does not exist, but our imaginary scenario describes the ideal for Catholic and other church-related colleges and universities. In actual fact, the relationship among the board chair, president, and provincial may not reflect Utopia’s high level of respect, good communication, and trust. The struggle to survive or move to the next level of excellence can crowd out the concern to foster the distinctive mission of the school, even though the two goals should complement one another. The board may not be as interested in fostering the Catholic and sponsoring mission of the school as it should, and the sponsoring group may not be as effective in fostering the founding charism among colleagues as it might. The board may not have a clear sense of the distinctive institutional mission, and there may be some degree of tension between the institution and the sponsoring group.

This concluding chapter suggests some ways Catholic colleges and universities might address the practical realities as they pursue the ideal of a successful institution energized by a clear and distinctive Catholic and sponsoring-group mission. Observations and suggestions are based on the experience of many institutions of different sizes, shapes, and cultures. In drawing conclusions on the various ways in which institutions successfully foster their mission and identity, we will consider governance structures, the board’s specific role in fostering the institution’s mission, models for fostering the mission, hiring to meet the goals of the mission, and practical ways of keeping the mission alive and active.

Governance Structures

Organizations depend on effective structures, programs, and people for their success. Our nation’s Catholic colleges have explored several organizational and governance structures in the past 35 years. Fortunately, these colleges have in the main been blessed with women and men who could make these structures work for the good of the institution.

As this volume has made clear, until the late 1960s, the typical Catholic college or university was essentially an extension of the sponsoring religious community and was owned, operated, and staffed mainly by members of the congregation. There was normally one civil corporation, and board membership most often was confined to community members. Lay “boards” were advisory at best.
In the late 1960s all of this changed, as David O’Brien describes in Chapter 2. The Second Vatican Council’s vision for lay leadership, the desire to “mainstream” our schools, growing pressures to develop more professional faculty and administrators, and a benevolent interpretation of canon law led most Catholic colleges and universities to “separately incorporate.” The institution and the sponsoring group no longer shared one civil incorporation, but each sought distinctive incorporation. They structured or restructured statutes and bylaws, transferred ownership, developed various formal and informal agreements, and established different varieties of reserved powers for the sponsoring group. All the while, a new partnership between the laity and clergy/religious was emerging.

These developments created no little tension, but the result has been an extraordinary period of growth for Catholic higher education. Some commentators have claimed Catholic identity has suffered in the midst of this progress; others say Catholic identity actually has become stronger because it is more intentional. They say the same is true for sponsoring groups. In either case, we come to today when a decline in the number of members of sponsoring groups has led to increased concerns about fostering the founding mission and the Catholic identity of Catholic colleges and universities. Ex corde Ecclesiae has challenged these institutions to do this better, and sponsoring groups are more concerned about exercising responsible stewardship toward the institutions they founded. The institutions themselves, in their quest to survive and then become as excellent as possible, are concerned about maintaining and fostering their founding missions and then extending them.

The varying degrees of influence sought by founding congregations come under the rubric of “sponsorship,” a term that has no official status in either civil or canon law but which has developed over the last 30 years to describe different ways the congregation or order relates to the institution in mutual efforts to keep the founding charism alive. There is no universal model for how this is done, but there are two broad governance options that are pursued.

The single-tiered governance model has one board responsible for the institutional mission. As Charles Wilson pointed out in the previous chapter, in American civil law the board holds in trust the purposes for which the institution was founded, which includes the Catholic/sponsoring group component of that mission. The sponsoring group itself is especially concerned to promote the Catholic, sponsoring-group component of the mission, because it serves as the interpreter of the sponsoring charism of the institution. To recognize the legitimate interests and concerns of the sponsoring group, statutes or bylaws sometimes prescribe that the board have a certain number of sponsoring-group members, and there often are formal agreements freely entered into by the board and the sponsoring group.

Some bylaws allow for a form of “bloc voting” that requires the prescribed number of sponsoring-group members plus one for certain significant votes.

As Alice Gallin points out in Chapter 3 and Melanie Morey and Dennis Holtschneider observe in Chapter 5, some schools have been moving to a two-tiered governance model. An “inner board,” or “board of members,” or “the corporation” reserves certain powers to itself and leaves all other responsibilities to a board of directors or trustees that serves as the second or “operational” board.” This model is meant to protect the interests of the sponsoring group.
Sometimes this arrangement has worked well, but many times it has not. It runs the risk of rendering the second board less effective by discouraging board members from fully committing themselves when someone else is “pulling the strings.” This would seem especially likely to happen if the institution were to move from single-tiered to two-tiered governance, because such a move could be interpreted as a vote of no-confidence in the single board in the discharge of its responsibility for mission.

If reserved powers indeed were to be used, it would seem well to keep them to a minimum and to work at keeping the second board as strong as possible. Fifty-six different varieties of reserved powers have been identified, with the most common being amendments to governing documents, purchase or sale of property, institutional mission and identity, merger or consolidation, and dissolution of the property.\(^1\) Especially delicate are powers relative to the election of trustees, the selection of a president, and the purchase and sale of property. The use (or abuse) of such powers could emasculate the operating board of the college or university.

Whether single-tiered or two-tiered governance is in place, the relationship between the board and the sponsoring group cannot be totally defined by juridical rights and obligations. It is more effectively based on mutual trust sustained by ongoing communication and support. Alice Gallin has suggested that the relationship might better be called “partnership” than “sponsorship.”

The board and the sponsoring group must be candid with one another, sharing essential information, respecting the integrity and responsibilities of each other, and negotiating honest differences. Regular contact in good times can help build a level of trust that can weather storms that may occur. Boards need to find ways to welcome members of the sponsoring group appropriately into important deliberations. Sponsoring groups need to know that influence and inspiration can be more important than control. Control can be counter-productive to the fostering of the sponsoring charism. The object is to keep the tradition alive, not merely preserve it, and for that to happen, the quality of relationships is central.

The board needs to be sensitive to the concerns of sponsoring-group members to protect their charism, and sponsoring-group members must appreciate the distinctive culture of boards and academic institutions. The latter need to relate their charism to educational objectives. A good example of this is how the Vincentians at De Paul and Niagara universities relate Vincent de Paul to today's university by using such descriptors as innovative, supportive of diversity, risk-taker, connected to the community, pragmatic, and values-driven. Mercy nuns relate Mother McAuley to today's concern for educating women and the poor. Jesuits relate the Ignatian values of seeking God in all things, pursuing the greater good, and solidarity with those in need to the work of the contemporary Catholic university.

One could argue that the governance model used at the University of Notre Dame has it just right. A group of 12 (six lay and six members of the Congregation of the Holy Cross) “fellows of the university,” hold in trust the essential character and purpose of the university. The fellows are responsible for the following: the election and removal of trustees, amending

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of bylaws, the promotion and protection of the Catholic character of the university, and the full use of the talents and dedication of the Holy Cross religious. The fellows hold overlapping membership on the board of trustees, so tension between the two groups is minimized if not eliminated, and responsibility for mission is integrated with other board activity. Note that the effort is a joint one between congregation members and their lay colleagues.

The Board and the Mission

The two purposes of the project of which this book is a part are, first, to emphasize the role of governing boards of Catholic colleges and universities in fostering the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission of their schools and, second, to help make trustees effective and comfortable in that role. Depending on the institution, board participation in mission-related responsibilities ranges from very little to very significant.

In general, with the board, as with the institution itself, some prefer to have the responsibility focused on a committee, and some prefer to have the responsibility diffused throughout the board. Both approaches can work, but there should be some accountability built into the structure—that is, there should be various ways to ask candidly and test whether a particular strategy is working. The committee model runs the risk of allowing other board members to neglect their own responsibility (not unlike the temptation of some “nonfinancial” board members to neglect their responsibility to learn something about the financial health of the institution). The full board model, on the other hand, runs the risk of so diffusing the responsibility that nothing specific happens. The best test for either model is the extent to which the institutional mission is in play when the board discusses major issues or makes major decisions.

If the committee model is chosen, then the committee (variously called “Mission and Identity,” “Mission Effectiveness,” or “Mission Integration”) needs credibility in terms of membership, charge, and integration with the other tasks of the board. Membership should not be confined to the sponsoring group, though such individuals certainly should be a strong part of the committee. The committee should reflect the composition of the board itself and not necessarily include only those board members who are most enthusiastic about the mission. If there is two-tiered governance, mission issues should not be restricted to the “upper” or “inner” board, but should include members of both boards, thus picking up some of the advantages of the Notre Dame model.

Not only is the membership of the board committee important, but so too is its charge. I have served on boards where the chair of such a committee effectively failed to engage with other board members. And I’ve served on other boards where the mission committee not only creatively educated the board in digestible portions, but also worked hard to relate its work with the other concerns of the board and raised mission issues in the midst of board discussions on various agenda items.

Which brings us to the third credibility factor of the board committee on mission: its integration with the other tasks of the board. In the ideal order (such as at Utopia Catholic College), there is an easy flow of mission concerns expressed within the other discussions of the board—financial, academic, student life, and so forth. I recall on one such board that one trustee inevitably would ask us to discuss the ethical dimensions of whatever decision or
policy was being debated. The mission committee should find ways to hold similar discussions. Is it too much to ask board members to be as concerned about the mission's bottom line as they are about its financial bottom line?

Some boards will find this integration easier to achieve without a separate committee. Rather, the entire board is expected to raise mission questions and concerns in the course of board discussions. I have experienced one board that seemed successful in this regard. But this cannot be left to chance. Regardless of whether there is a separate board committee on the mission, continuous board education concerning the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission and identity is necessary if board members are to be expected to see the connections between that mission and identity and other board concerns.

As Tom Ingram points out in Chapter 1, many (if not most) board members are familiar with Catholic identity issues only in a vague sort of way. Their goodwill has to be supported by solid orientation, continuing education, and the good example of veteran board members. Presidential leadership is essential in this regard. Board members need to see the president as a role model who has established a hard linkage between the institution's mission and all aspects of the board's work. The mission is not something that is soft and fuzzy to talk about at times other than when the board is doing business. Especially in times of crisis, the mission has to come to the fore.

The sponsoring group has a special responsibility in the orientation and education of the board. Sponsoring members embody and keep alive the mission in witness, stories, and traditions. A board retreat can be an excellent opportunity to highlight the witness and the stories that put flesh and blood on printed copy and exhortations.

**Campus Mission and Identity Efforts**

Whether through committee or the full board, the board's mission-related activity should be linked with the institution's efforts to foster the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission of the school. As with the board, some schools have committees and offices responsible for mission and identity; others prefer to spread the responsibility among the vice presidents and deans, each of whom are expected to foster the mission in his or her own area. As with the board, each of these approaches can be successful, but there has to be some form of accountability.

The campus committee and the office responsible for mission and identity must have credibility and continuity to be maximally successful. They need to be taken seriously by faculty, staff, and students, and of course by the board. The title of the person leading the effort (variably "vice president," "director," or "coordinator") is not as important as whether the person really knows and is known and respected by the institution and has the capability to interact effectively with the board, president, vice presidents, deans, faculty, staff, and students. This obviously is no easy task.

Some schools prefer not to have a designated office or committee and hold all key administrators responsible for the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission. This approach can be successful, but it can also mean that the effort becomes diluted and ineffective. The obvious advantage of a successful campuswide effort is that there is no need to worry about marginalization. Such efforts, however, are unlikely to succeed unless there is strong presidential leadership.
Hiring for Mission

In recent years, it has become increasingly obvious that a critical mass of women and men committed to the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission is essential if that mission is to survive with any degree of vitality. In other words, a sufficient number of effective people strategically placed and capable of influencing the institution are needed to keep its mission and identity alive and well. Forty years ago, that critical mass was assumed to be present in the living witness of the sponsoring religious and/or clerics, though even then, it also was present, if in smaller numbers, in the witness of generous and committed lay colleagues.

Today, such a critical mass no longer can be assumed but must be recruited and developed. Thus, various forms of “hiring for mission” are appearing. This is not a form of circling the wagons, but within the limits of acceptable hiring practices, it means recruiting enough women and men who are both fully qualified and committed to the purposes of the institution. This process would begin with trustee and presidential selection and move through administration to faculty hiring.

Different schools can do this in different ways appropriate to their history, tradition, and culture. Realistically, it will be more difficult for research universities to do this than for small colleges, but in all cases, the point is to hire candidates who not only are excellent in what they do but who also show evidence of being committed to the Catholic and sponsoring-group identity. One caveat about pursuing hiring for mission too aggressively comes from faculty members who suggest that although they might not have been hired under such a policy, they now are enthusiastic supporters of the mission.

For Catholic schools, this does not mean hiring only Catholics or citing a strong commitment to the mission as an excuse for hiring a less than qualified candidate. Even the appearance of such misguided efforts could quickly scuttle efforts to hire for mission. The effort begins with a search for trustees who are likely, at the very least, to be committed to the Catholic and sponsoring-group identity. Trustee profiles cover a number of characteristics as the board seeks to become as strong and effective as possible, but the commitment to mission needs to be discussed early in the recruitment process, with the understanding that effective orientation can lead from an initial openness to a more informed commitment.

The process continues with key administrators such as vice presidents and deans. Again, professional competence is a primary requisite, but at least the capacity for being committed to the mission needs to be explored with all candidates. One criticism directed against Catholic colleges and universities as they quickly expanded in quality and quantity in the 1960s was that in their desire to enter the mainstream and find the “best” faculty and administrators they too often neglected to gauge the commitment of these individuals to the mission. One can argue the validity of the charge, but we should try to avoid such a mistake today.

Especially in larger and more complex institutions, faculty hiring has become so decentralized and academic freedom so important that hiring academics to fit the mission presents special challenges. Faculty must be convinced that there are no hidden agendas, that mission sensitivity will not be an excuse for mediocrity, and that hiring for mission is not a subtle way to impose conformity and homogeneity. It is helpful if faculty members are
convinced that commitment to the institutional mission is not another add-on to an already heavy burden, but rather a source of new energy and support for their teaching and research. Orientation and education programs can help faculty and staff understand what the mission is and is not.

Practical Ways for Keeping Mission Alive

It would be impossible to chronicle all of the ways different schools foster a sense of mission on campus, but some are more successful than others. Effective and ongoing orientation and educational programs adapted for board, faculty, staff, and students are essential. Increasingly, films and other audiovisual materials are helpful, and online programs inevitably will be used. Jesuit schools have found help in a three-part video, *Shared Vision*, produced by St. Louis University, which can be accompanied by discussion.

The message has to be intelligible and related to the basic work of the college or university. As one example of the importance of translating clerical and religious jargon, Xavier University has produced a kind of glossary of terms titled, “Do You Speak Ignatian?”

Some of the most effective mission activity is done one on one, department by department, with messages tailored to different needs and challenges. The best style arguably is one of conversation and invitation, not simply didactic lecturing. Retreats of different kinds are helpful, especially to raise interest and involvement to a higher level. Some schools sponsor festivals and heritage weeks to share the tradition in enjoyable and painless ways. Statuary and banners can be used effectively to establish an environment that reminds folks walking around the campus that they are part of something special. The Golden Dome and the Grotto at Notre Dame are two of the best-known examples, but every campus can do this in its own way. Some schools award a medal each year to the person who best embodies the ideals of the founder of the congregation or order. Requesting nominations has the salutary effect of encouraging nominators to find out what those ideals are. Attractive publications stir up and reinforce interest, especially when they are substantive.

But nothing is more effective than reminders that are integrated into the daily life of the campus, the way people are treated, the values that are embraced, the highlighting of the mission in various talks by campus leaders or when students start quoting mission slogans to one another.

One simple diagnostic test for the success of all of these efforts is how often components of the Catholic and sponsoring-group mission arise naturally in conversations about things that matter in the boardroom and around the campus. One knows that the mission is catching on, for example, when the student newspaper criticizes an administrator for doing something opposed to the school’s mission.

The Current Challenge

In their 2000 AGB Occasional Paper “Relationship Revisited,” Dennis H. Holtschneider and Melanie M. Morey chronicled the decline in numbers of religious and priests. They noted that 28 percent of respondents to their survey reported that within ten years virtually no founding religious would work on campus or serve on the board. Within that scenario, they suggested that institutions facing such declining numbers would have three options.
- become secular,
- find ways to protect the founding charism, or
- become more universally Catholic.

This entire book is directed toward the middle alternative, suggesting “ways to protect the founding charism,” which, of course, includes the school’s Catholic identity. We know that the future will not be like the past, and many find excitement and challenge in that.

The 21st century has been called by Pope John Paul II and many others the “century of the laity.” Members of religious congregations and the clergy are being challenged to facilitate and trust the laity while they continue to offer the best of their traditions as gifts. They are challenged to be generative rather than reactionary in transitioning their legacy into new forms. Such a transition clearly involves risks, but many have noted that, ultimately, lay colleagues will determine whether sponsoring-group identities will survive. There is a window of opportunity for trustees to lead the partnership that can not only survive but prosper in new and exciting forms.

Questions to Consider

1. How much of your college or university can you recognize in the description of Utopia College?
2. From your experience, what are the advantages of a single-tiered governance structure? Of a two-tiered structure?
3. How would you describe the relationship between your institution and the sponsoring group or, in the case of diocesan colleges, the bishop?
4. Are you comfortable with the present way your board discharges its responsibility for institutional mission? With how the institution itself fosters that mission?
5. Is your college or university ready for the “century of the laity”? 