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Rank: Assistant Professor  Chair/Professorship: 

Date Submitted: November 15, 2012

Start Date: June 2012  Completion Date: Research (August 2013) Dissemination (August 2014)

Title of Project: School’s Out Forever: The Decline of Catholic Education in the United States

Budget

| 1. Supplies (itemize below)  | $ |
| 2. Printing & Copying  | $ |
| 3. Journal Page Charge  | $ |
| 4. Travel (itemize below)  | $ |
| 5. Per Diem (itemize below)  | $ |
| 6. Other Costs (itemize below)  | $500 |
| **TOTAL**  | $ |

Budget Justification: (Please do not attach other budget pages.)

I would like to request the additional $500 in research expenses to help defray the costs of interview transcriptions. As the fieldwork for this project will be conducted locally, interview transcriptions will be the primary project expense. Comparison of various services yielded an estimate of approximately $100 per hour of interview (http://verbalink.com/services/transcription-services). These additional funds would cover transcription of five of the proposed interviews.
Where will the results be published, exhibited or performed?

This project will result in at least two conference presentations, a book manuscript, and possibly a public forum on campus. Preliminary findings will be presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Boston in November 2012. This will represent a first deadline for processing the data collected this summer and gathering feedback from experts in the sociology of religion. Based on this feedback and hopefully feedback generated from within the Loyola community in Fall 2013, I will submit one chapter from the book manuscript for consideration for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. The submission deadline is in January for the conference in San Francisco in August 2014. I plan to submit a book proposal to several university presses in Fall 2014.

The research I am proposing deals with the future of Catholic elementary and secondary education in the United States in general, but will also speak specifically to the future of these schools in New Orleans. It should be of great interest to many at Loyola and in the community given local and national discussions of education in New Orleans. One possibility might be to arrange a public lecture or to put together a panel on education in the city that would also include experts on charter schools and other private schools. The Institute for Equality and Equity in Education at Loyola could be approached about sponsoring this initiative.

What other sources of funding (internal and external) have you identified for this project?

I have been invited to represent the Catholic school sector in a larger project sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. The Case Studies in Character and Citizenship Education Project may have funds available to defray the costs of transcription and conference travel. At the time of application, I do not believe any of this funding will be available in Summer 2012 making the Marquette Fellowship a critical source of support to get this project off the ground.

List years and amounts of prior Loyola University faculty grants (for the last three years):
Not Applicable. I joined the faculty in 2012.

Does your research involve human subjects? __X__ Yes _____ No. If yes, funding for this project is contingent on receiving IRB approval. If you have IRB approval prior to submitting your proposal, please attach the approval memo to your application. If you do not have IRB approval at the time of your submission, please complete the IRB protocol as soon as possible after your proposal submission.

I will pursue IRB approval for the interview component of this project before February 2012. I have delayed doing so to allow time to identify and investigate local stakeholders and provide the IRB with the most detailed possible overview of whom I will interview and the questions I will ask.
Project Summary

This proposal details the second stage of research for a book project that attempts to highlight the sociological causes and consequences of the decline of Catholic schools across the United States. The book manuscript will include discussion and analyses of quantitative data originally presented in my dissertation as well as insights gleaned from a second stage of research that uses the Diocese of New Orleans as a case study. The goal of the research, in the short term, is to flesh out what it means to stakeholders such as church and school leaders, alumni, parents, children and members of the larger community to confront a school closure. Preliminary discussion with a press has suggested this is necessary to improve the marketability of the book. Over the long term, respondents involved with this study might also form a longitudinal sample for examining the consequences of school closures over a period of decades and the first piece of a larger project that compares closures across school sectors (public, private, and charter). The project stands to make important contributions to the sociology of education and the sociology of religion and to launch my own scholarly research agenda. It also speaks directly to two of the ideals of Jesuit education: linking faith with justice and a special concern for the poor and oppressed. The fieldwork, done locally, also stands to contribute to addressing issues of equity in education, a concern of the community at large.
Project Narrative

At their peak in the mid-20th century Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States enrolled twelve percent of the school-aged population. In 2010, they educated roughly five percent of school-aged children. In the mid-1960s, there were over 13,000 Catholic schools in the United States. In 2010, they numbered fewer than 7,000, and projections suggest a sustained pattern of decline. In my dissertation I documented this dramatic change in the American educational landscape. I digitized one hundred years of data from *The Official Catholic Directory*, and merged this information with data available from the United States Censuses, and other secondary data sources, as well as archival documents and local newspaper accounts. The dissertation considered how demographic, organizational, and religious change have led to dramatic declines in this key component of the private school sector in the United States. I argue that because these schools have had documented successes in serving under-served minority and poor populations, these changes have important consequences for educational inequality in America and for broader debates about the American Catholic church’s commitment to domestic social justice concerns. My dissertation research was entirely based on contemporary quantitative data and archival sources. As I begin the process of turning this project into a book manuscript, I plan to conduct additional fieldwork that would incorporate interviews with key stakeholders such as church and school leaders and parents. The aim of this additional research is to flesh out what it means to individuals, families and communities when a school is closed. The key question is, what are the consequences when “school’s out forever”? The Diocese of New Orleans is currently contemplating the fate of 15 “at risk” schools, making the area an important place to conduct this fieldwork and this summer an important time to get started.

There are two key reasons for studying school closures more systematically. First, school closures actually appear to be a relatively common event. Richard Valencia (1984) suggests that over 7,000 schools affecting 80 percent of the nation’s school districts were closed in the 1970s. More recently, Lakshmi Pandey and colleagues (2009) looked at a random subset (N=2000) of the 15,000 schools that participated in a 1990 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey of private schools. Based on this sample they conducted an extensive search and found that nearly a quarter of the private schools had closed by 2004. Increasingly, it also appears that urban districts across the nation are closing schools due to declining populations, competition from charter schools, and accountability regimes such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act that target schools with chronically low achievement (Enberg et al. 2012). In sum, while a large number of American school children are likely to experience disruption to their academic lives and a significant number of neighborhoods may face the challenge of how to handle a formerly occupied school building, there is little research on the consequences of closures.

Concomitantly, the second reason school closings are an important phenomenon of study is that school closures appear to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. In addition to affecting children, it appears that school closings are much more common in poor and minority dominated communities. In their study of private schools Pandey et al. (2009) found that the surviving schools were more likely to be located in counties with lower poverty. One study of the Archdiocese of Chicago found that schools that have

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1 Bruce Nolan “15 Catholic Elementary Schools are Struggling to Survive” *The Times Picayune* April 30, 2012.
closed there were concentrated in poor central-city neighborhoods and in neighborhoods with larger numbers of Blacks and Latinos (Brinig and Garnett 2010), a finding that was supported at the national level by analyses conducted as part of my dissertation research. Coalitions of community members in Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Atlanta, Washington and Baltimore have all filed Title VI complaints with the Department of Education on the grounds that closing underperforming schools discriminates against African-American and Hispanic students. While public school closures are often cast as opportunities to close underperforming or failing schools and thereby improve academic achievement (Enberg et al. 2012), Catholic schools are generally considered to be exemplary schools in terms of student achievement, especially for urban minorities.

It would not be accurate to say that Catholic schools have been quietly or thanklessly educating America’s urban poor. Indeed, the former leader of the Archdiocese of New York, Cardinal John J. O’Connor once famously challenged the city to send him the lowest performing five percent of children in public schools and watch them succeed in Catholic schools. Current New York Archbishop, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, has also made a concerted effort to publicize the work of Catholic schools in the New York media. In a May 2010 op-ed that appeared in the *New York Daily News* he writes: “We have never asked for a baptismal certificate at the door. We don’t educate children because they’re Catholic, but because we are. Ninety-four percent of these children are minority populations. More than two-thirds are below the federal poverty line.”

Local newspapers across the nation often feature similar “booster” type stories. If the image most associated with Catholic schools in Hollywood movies is a strict disciplinarian nun, the image most associated with Catholic schools on websites and brochures and in newspaper accounts is of a poor minority student, presumably from a bad neighborhood, defying the odds and graduating from high school and heading to college. Some of sociology’s great qualitative accounts of urban poverty feature vignettes about Catholic school triumphs. For example, William Julius Wilson (1996:135) found that black students from Chicago’s Catholic schools were viewed more favorably than those from public schools. He notes, for example, a suburban department store manager who says “the minorities that go to parochial school test as well as the whites. They come here dressed as well, and this is a totally different act. Now this is a difference that I can spot, is between your parochial and your public school.” Also in Chicago, Holy Angels School educated many of the residents of the notorious Robert Taylor Homes documented in *American Project* (Venkatesh 2000). Elsewhere, journalist Patrick McCloskey (2008) has documented the successes of at-risk young black men at Rice High School in Harlem. The school, run by the Christian Brothers, boasted for many years a 100 percent college acceptance rate, a particularly impressive feat given the educational achievement gap traditionally observed between young black men and other

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groups (Noguera 2003, Stolzenberg 1975). The school closed under financial strain in 2011.5

Synthesizing the vast sociological literature that emerged on Catholic schools in the 1970s and 1980s, while it appears that while there is no universal “Catholic school effect”, these schools do appear to produce some notable successes for urban minority students. As the Hispanic population in the United States, the majority of whom are at least nominally Catholic, continues to increase the Catholic school effect has the potential to benefit a constituency with traditionally low educational attainment (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Recognizing this possibility, a small group of scholars and activists have begun challenging the Catholic Church to do better at providing educational services to Latinos (Notre Dame Task Force 2009). In many dioceses these efforts are part and parcel of efforts to stave off school decline. The question remains, however, what happens when these efforts are not successful? It is necessary to begin to track what happens to individuals, communities, and even the Church itself, when schools close.

This research is based on a mixed methodological approach. As a specialist in research methods who teaches in the areas of social research methods and techniques and social statistics, I have the skills and training necessary to implement a study that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The quantitative portion of this research is complete and I am not requesting funding to support that work. The qualitative portion of the work—interviews with stakeholders has not yet begun. In this second stage of research I would reach out to the Diocese of New Orleans and interview leaders at the diocese about issues that have resulted in 15 elementary schools being labeled “at risk”. I would also attempt to interview all 15 principals of these schools. With the co-operation of the diocese and schools, I would contact parents about the possibility of participating in an interview. If the diocese or schools were uncooperative I would find parents to interview by attending meetings organized to discuss school closures or recruit parents from social media groups often formed to rally to save a school. Prior to relocating to New Orleans to begin my position here in Fall 2012, I experimented with recruiting subjects. I conducted a small number of pilot interviews using these techniques in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia which in the Spring of 2012 was dealing with the possibility of closing up to one quarter of its schools. I have also conducted interviews with school officials in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. In short, I am confident that this is a viable research design and that if I am able to obtain sufficient research support that I will be able to successfully execute this project.

Project Timeline and Scholarly Output

Spring 2013: Seek Funding, Develop relationship with Diocese of New Orleans, Begin Interviews
Summer 2013: Continue Interviews, Begin Transcriptions
Fall 2013: Analysis, Presentation at Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Meetings, Internal Loyola Presentations
Spring 2014: Analysis, Drafting of Chapters, Drafting of Book Proposal
Summer 2014: Presentation at American Sociological Association Meetings
Fall 2014: Submit Proposal and Sample Chapters to University Presses

References