

“The Idea of the Catholic University in the 21st Century”

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ABSTRACT:

Serving Faith at Catholic Universities in the Twenty-First Century: Analysis of a Pragmatic Approach Seeking Unity and Inclusion

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Given the rise in focus on the importance of identity issues, it is not surprising that much attention has been directed to the significance of the mission statements of Catholic universities.

In nearly all of these mission statements, some reference is made to the role that faith plays in the identity of the school. Faith is typically taken to be an essential component in the search for truth and the expression of social justice within the university community. In this context, faith means the Christian faith—specifically, the faith of the Catholic church. For those faculty, staff, and students who do not share the Catholic faith, this can lead to alienation or a sense of exclusion. As a result, issues focusing on faith can contribute to negative climate issues on Catholic campuses due precisely to the inability of the academic community to come to a consensus on the role that faith should play in the identity and life of the Catholic university in the twenty-first century. Movements led by Catholic faculty, staff, and students to advance and strengthen the importance of the role of faith at a Catholic university are sometimes seen to be implicit, or even covert, attempts to systematically exclude, marginalize, or alienate non-Catholics at the university. Unfortunately, the divisiveness that permeates the political and social landscape of the United States in general is similarly reflected on the campuses of Catholic universities.

Given these conditions, it is more important than ever to find ways to move beyond divisive stalemates and find common ground and shared principles. Towards that end, leaders at some Catholic universities have begun to employ pragmatic principles to address the conflicts over the role that faith should play on Catholic campuses in the United States in the twenty-first century. Adopting a pragmatic approach is not surprising, given that pragmatism, as articulated by William James, John Dewey, and others, is a uniquely American approach for discerning the value of truth and for solving significant, divisive disputes. Pragmatism promises to find common ground on issues that make a practical, concrete difference in the lives of the disputants, while recognizing the differences in the commitments and principles each side holds. Pragmatism looks to find the "cash-value" that comes from truth, and seeks to identify productive solutions that lead to consistency, stability, and flowing discourse. Pragmatism acknowledges that what works in some eras simply does not work in others. Pragmatism admires the way that science, from time to time, changes in its framework to account for the data at hand. In like fashion, leaders at some Catholic universities are recommending a pragmatic approach, asking to see if it would be productive to conceive of faith in an inclusive sense that reflects the current dynamics of pluralism and global awareness. Although there are some loud voices opposing it, the pragmatic approach gains more support and influence each passing year. This paper focuses on the philosophical presuppositions and entailments underlying this pragmatic approach to the role of faith at Catholic universities.