Leadership as Ministry in the Catholic College/University

I don’t think I have ever been in the “closing” position before and after looking at the other sessions and hearing some of them, I am humbled. This conference has provided you with many valuable insights and important opportunities to talk with one another.

My time with you will take a slightly different approach than some of the other sessions. I will share a good bit about my own personal journey in Catholic higher education and my increasing awareness of my work as ministry – or vocational – I will be using these words interchangeably.

Some of you know that I used to do a session at the Boston College Institute for Administrators in Higher Education on “Administration as Vocation.” When I was first given that opportunity some 13 years ago,
it forced me to consider my career choices and experiences in a different light – it required a deeper reflection on what was really operating as I carved out my career path. It indeed was vocational – a label that, at least for me, brought me a little bit of discomfort. After all, sisters, priests, brothers were called to a vocation – was my calling in life a similar thing?

Many years ago, an associate pastor we had, Fr, Kim, delivered a homily that has stayed with me. He reflected on the reading from Amos, chapter 7. Amos had been a shepherd and a tree cutter – and God called him to be a prophet and Amos protested, saying he was no prophet. Fr. Kim reminded us that we are all called (vocation) to be prophets - to give witness to the presence of Christ. Time and time again God called the most ordinary people to bring his word to others. By virtue of our baptism, we are all called to be minsters of the Church through our work.
Monika Hellwig, a much revered theologian and the former president of ACCU (now deceased), also reminds us in her writings that in the Christian context a vocation is a calling to follow Christ – common to all of us by virtue of our baptism. (Hellwig, Teaching as Vocation, p. 179.) Following Christ means continuing the work of building the church. Dr. Hellwig suggests that there is nothing closer to building the church “… than the passing on of the heritage and the formation of the People of God of the future.” (Hellwig, p. 180) Is this not our role? Is this not what we have chosen to do? To insure an environment of high academic quality in the pursuit of truth and knowledge and done so in the context of the Catholic intellectual tradition and congregational charism – in your work, the Mercy charism.

There are three central elements, in my opinion, that are operative in this ministry of leadership in Catholic higher education: choice, commitment or covenant, and community. Let me examine each of these - from my experience and the living of it.
But before I do that, let me ask you a question – to get you thinking along with me. Why do you do the work you do and where you do it, and how you do it – whether as an administrator, faculty, board member, or a congregational leader connected to a Mercy college or university?

Choice.

The leadership we provide at our Catholic colleges requires a conscious decision that carefully examines the mission of these institutions. When I started my career, I cannot honestly say that I was abundantly clear in my own mind about this choice. I was, however, drawn to Catholic colleges and the environment of learning they provided. I started my career at Gannon College – now a university – during the turbulent 60’s and 70’s and at a time when Gannon had just moved from being an all male institution to coeducation. I won’t belabor you with the stories of some of the horrific situations I faced in Student Affairs - which all of our colleges faced at that time - but the stresses on student life of that era
helped me become more aware of the importance of what Catholic colleges had to offer to students. These were places that understood that the integration of faith and reason was a more complete way to truth and led students to more balanced lives. I began to realize how fundamental this was to my thinking and that I had something to offer students in these settings. I say students because initially as a young professional that was my focus. I now realize that our work influences all who are part of our communities.

As my career progressed and I looked at other opportunities, something always brought me back to choose the position at the Catholic college. That something, I realize now, was about mission – a mission that was intentional and unapologetic in its concern not solely with intellectual development but with the heart and soul also, and with developing a sense of responsibility to others. My guess is that something similar has operated for you.
Later in my career, when I was interviewing candidates or meeting with prospective Board members, a main focus in my conversations with them was on the issues around mission. And if you think back to when you interviewed for your current position, you could have accepted positions at any number of other places, but you chose a Catholic college. The effectiveness of your work will be tied largely to how closely you resonate with the mission of your college, how much you believe in it, how much energy you draw from it in your daily work. Some might call that passion – a much overused word these days. What I do know is that “lack of fit” with the mission almost always leads to frustration and a lack of engagement. And so, choosing carefully and thoughtfully about where you want to invest your time and talent is critical.

Choice also operates after the initial decision to join a place. There are daily significant decisions that you are asked to make that you will weigh differently because you have chosen to be at a Catholic college. I can only share with you some that I faced as the president of Notre
Dame. The setting of residence hall policies will speak volumes to students about the respect we expect them to have for themselves and others. Are you prepared to talk with students - and others – openly about these issues – or is it easier to turn the other way and ignore what happens in the residence halls? Health insurance issues – what will you or will you not cover? What services do you provide in your health center? How will issues of sexuality be addressed on campus? What kinds of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are appropriate? What’s the process for deciding on speakers or the awarding of an honorary degree to a Catholic who is pro-choice or pro-death penalty - or who has been publicly at odds with the Church?

The questions shouldn’t only be about what we can’t do, but they must also be about what as a Catholic institution we are called to do. Are you prepared to act on issues of justice? Paying a living wage and how to define that? How will your investment policies be guided – will they be consistent with those of the Mercy congregation even if you think your endowment will earn more by not having this potential additional
constraint? Will you be drawn into the game of increasing selectivity for prestigious purposes or do you find a way to successfully serve the low-income student who is capable but not always as well prepared – and needs much more institutional aid and support? Do you develop majors in such areas as non-profit management or social entrepreneurship where there is a real need, but other fields might produce more net revenue for you? How do you structure conversations around war and peace in a way that can be constructive? Or on race or politics? How do you prepare students to meet the needs of society – the poor, the disenfranchised? Where does Campus ministry fall in your planning? Which facilities will you invest in – are Christian art and architecture important? (I will come back to this in a minute.) I in no way suggest that there is one right answer to all these questions I have raised – and certainly no simple answers. But we think about these things differently because of where we have chosen to be – because we use the lens of our mission as backdrop for everything we do.
Let me say a bit more about architecture, art, and sacred spaces as a way to provide ministerial leadership. Early in my presidency, we embarked upon a renovation of the chapel – an intentional and important choice for us in reaffirming our Catholic identity. The chapel had undergone an unfortunate and unseemly renovation in the 60’s. A beautiful vaulted ceiling chapel had been reduced to a dark, uninviting space with a dropped ceiling to accommodate air conditioning. Beautiful original floor-to-ceiling art work had been destroyed, stained glass windows from Germany had been altered and pieces thrown away – well you get the picture. We knew the chapel needed to be renovated. In my first few years, we invested in technology, a new science center addition, and a residence hall renovation. We also launched a campaign, and successfully made a request for a lead gift of $2 million to renovate the chapel. We were roundly criticized for raising money for this project when there were so many other pressing needs the College had. My senior team and I knew this was a critical step to take symbolically – and practically – putting faith and spiritual life at the center of our work; we decided to move forward with the project.
As part of the renovation, we commissioned a mural behind the altar depicting the Annunciation. Mary is young – she looks like one of our traditional-aged students – she is Jewish – and she is accepting God’s call with a trustful “yes.” In this decision of hers, this one young woman made a choice that transformed the world. Sister Maura Eichner, a School Sister of Notre Dame, a poet, and who taught on our campus for more than five decades, writes this of Mary,

… she leaned to the curve of living, resilient to fear, laughter, suffering…

Each one’s journey is a thing wholly without precedent. She looked at the sky for compass. None. She, too, created a road to travel by. (p.61, From a Woman’s Life in Hope is a Blind Bard)

This poem, the mural, and, of course, the chapel itself have spoken volumes to Notre Dame students about God’s place in their lives and the singular importance of choice and of engagement in the world. The School Sisters of Notre Dame were founded on the belief that educating
women (persons) will transform the world. This phrase appears in the Notre Dame dining hall in a graphic design that also celebrates its internationalism - another conscious choice to use art to deepen students’ educational experience.

Use all the tools you have to reflect your Mercy tradition and Catholic identity - we all have them – you just have to think about them strategically. It is the ambience, the environment, and symbols that also educate our students every day – it is an essential part of our ministerial leadership and every bit as important as new buildings, athletic fields and the like.

As a professional connected to a Mercy college, your choices become nuanced differently, considering factors beyond simply what shapes good programs, policies, and facilities. How do you and will you foster Catholic identity, the mission of your institution, and the Mercy charism- activities that must be among your top priorities? Regardless of your position at your institution, these are the kinds of issues you
must consider, even if they are not directly related to your list of “office” responsibilities or your role. For you see, when you choose a Catholic college – whether this is your own faith tradition or not - all who work there have a responsibility to carry out the Catholic and congregational traditions and values. We, as leaders, need to be part of the process of developing our campus communities’ understanding of Catholic social teaching and the Church’s perspective on an array of important issues; senior leadership and trustees, faculty, and Mercy sisters carry a significant role in this regard.

This brings me to my second critical element in this ministry of leadership:

**Commitment or covenant.** Again, I am not certain I understood the significance of this when I started my career at Gannon University, nor when I began my work at St. John Fisher College. It was while I was at Fisher, though - and I clearly remember the moment - that I understood that I had made a covenant with the Basilian fathers. When I accepted
the presidency at the Notre Dame, I never had any doubt about the commitment I was making - the covenant into which I was entering with the founding congregation. To be successful in our positions, I absolutely believe this essential commitment to mission, and in your case, to the Mercy sisters and their guiding vision, must be at the very heart of your work. It provides the compass, or the navigational chart, that will keep you on course. Again, let me try to make this more concrete by talking about my own experiences.

When I was at St. John Fisher College, the discussions around *Ex corde Ecclesiae* were beginning again in seriousness. I was also a member of the Board of the Lilly Network of Church Related Colleges and I, along with Fisher faculty, had participated in several of their conferences. We had also participated in *Collegium*, a forum for faculty in Catholic colleges. All of this was in concert with activities on campus to engage the entire community in a consideration of our Catholic identity and the Basilian tradition. It was in this context that I remember an especially engaging discussion one evening with two of my Basilian colleagues.
After dinner, we were talking about the future of Catholic higher education, in particular St. John Fisher College. My good friend and colleague turned to me and said, “Our tradition will carry on because of people like you who have embodied our spirit. We put our trust in you.” I remember being struck by the enormity of this responsibility – and yet I also knew it was what I had been doing in Catholic higher education for a long time – if not always consciously.

When I joined Notre Dame, I clearly understood that I was making a professional – and perhaps more importantly personal - commitment to be faithful to the Catholic tradition and to carry on the values and traditions of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. I was, however, struck – quite frankly by surprise – once again at the enormity of this responsibility at a trustee retreat. The SSNDs have been working on issues of sponsorship for some time and decided in the early 2000s that it was time to engage the Board in these discussions – for they ultimately would carry the final responsibility in insuring the SSND charism continued. The response of the trustees when they heard that they would
share in the responsibility for continuing the SSND charism brought me back to an earlier time in my understanding of commitment – back to that dinner conversation with my Basilian friends. The trustees were caught off guard, they were surprised, and in one trustee’s words they were overwhelmed with the “heavy” responsibility this carried and uncertain that they were prepared or ready for it. The Sisters responded that in their judgment the trustees had been living out this responsibility for some time. We must remember that our Boards are the ultimate holders and protectors of the mission of our institutions, which includes the influence of the Mercy charism. And so, we must have on-going discussions among all members of our college communities – board, faculty, administrators, congregational leadership - around this issue of sponsorship. It is part of our commitment. Just a note about the Board. One of the ways you can help trustees engage around issues of Catholic identity and Mercy values and traditions is for you to be clear when making presentations about how your decisions, proposals, recommendations considered these things through the lens of Catholic
and Mercy values before finalizing them. The more we do this, the more trustees will think along the same lines with us.

This commitment – or covenant – is required of all us. It is the only way our institutions will thrive with their founding missions in tact – and it is the only way, quite frankly, that choosing to work at one of these colleges makes sense. Otherwise – why go there? When we make this commitment, we become part of a team that will plan strategically and implement that plan to further the mission. It is our task to help educate the rest of the community (and this includes students) on these issues and to help them understand and accept the responsibility they have to carry out the central tenets of the mission. There are all kinds of ways this happens – opening academic convocations, other celebrations, discussions around policy, and simple everyday conversations.

Mostly, this covenant to thoughtfully carry on the tradition is fine-tuned and deepened in community.
And so my third and final point: **community**. Sister Mildred Haipt, who had been at the College of New Rochelle, reminds us in her essay, *The Vocation of Teaching*, of the importance of community in education. She quotes from a pastoral message, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, “Community is at the heart of Christian education not simply as a concept to be taught but as a reality to be lived. Through education, men [and women] must be moved to build community in all areas of life; they can do it best if they have learned the meaning of community by experiencing it.” (Haipt, *The Vocation of Teaching*, p.191.)

This ministry of leadership requires thinking carefully about the kind of community we want to create. What do we hope to achieve and how will we do that? At Notre Dame, we thought carefully about how we assisted students in understanding and embracing the core values of the University – intellectual and professional excellence, respect for the dignity of every individual, service to others as a necessary expression of our humanity, using one’s education for positive and constructive change – or as the School Sisters would say “for building the earth.”
This community is built through many initiatives: the relationships between faculty and student, student and staff, faculty and staff, student to student, trustee and administrators – essentially how we conduct ourselves with one another; convocations and celebrations on campus that highlight such things as honor code, diversity, and Catholic identity; academic and co-curricular programs that focus on global issues and service. We all have these kinds of activities on our campuses, but we are called to be intentional – when we can be – about how we structure these things to continue to imbue the educational environment with our core and distinguishing elements. And among all of us, our core values are more similar than not. What makes them distinctive is the interpretation of them in light of our individual institutional missions.

Your leadership role – at a Mercy college – is to provide that interpretation through the Mercy lens in the creation of community.

That is part of your stewardship.

I also suggest to you that the use of prayer builds community – prayer comes in many forms. We began every senior staff meeting with a
prayer and each member of the staff took a turn in preparing the prayer. I was always struck by how carefully prayers were chosen and how often they connected with the SSND tradition. I know that most other meetings on campus began with a prayer or a reflection, including faculty meetings. When we pray together - in thanksgiving or asking for God’s grace and wisdom - it reminds us again that we are about God’s work. It also reminds us that each person at that table, or in that room, is about that same work and that we accomplish it in the strength of community.

I know in talking with Notre Dame students – and with others – that it was the forcefulness and the deep reach of the community that made their educational experience or their work experience richer, more expansive, and individually challenging to who they were.

As I conclude, I borrow from Gordon Smith, who was dean and a theology faculty member at Regent College in Vancouver and who wrote a chapter called, Thinking Vocationally. In this chapter, he
suggests that to think vocationally, one must have the capacity for retrospection – “the ability to see and appreciate our own stories and footprints of the Spirit through the course of our lives.” [Mary Catherine Bateson, if any of you are familiar with her work, talks about the importance of the skill of reflection in making sense of - or composing – our lives.] Smith also says we must have “the capacity to be fully present” in the current situation using retrospection to give that present context. And finally, Smith reminds us that to “think and act vocationally we must think and act intentionally.” It is what we know about being effective in any other work that we do – we must be purposeful and focused.

Our Catholic institutions are great institutions – for you, Mercy colleges in particular. We are fortunate to be called to use our leadership gifts at these kinds of institutions. I can honestly say that I have never felt that I was somehow working out of the mainstream of colleges as some would charge. Quite the contrary, I always felt that the work that captured my attention – mind and heart - was at the very center of what our society
most needed – preparing students with the requisite knowledge and competencies to be productive, contributing members of society – who understand the significance of God’s presence in their lives and their individual responsibility to each other. All of this happens, quite frankly, in the routines of the everyday life of this vocation or ministerial calling that considers choices thoughtfully, remains committed to furthering the Catholic and congregational traditions, and prizes the building of community. So I leave you with the words, again, of Sister Maura. Her poem, What My Teachers Taught Me, I Try to Teach My Students, speaks to all of us as leaders.

Feel the meanings

the words hide. Make routine a stimulus. Remember

it can cease. Forge hosannahs from doubt.

Hammer on doors with the heart. All occasions invite God’s

mercies and all times are his seasons.

(p. 61, Hope is a Blind Bard.)
This ministerial leadership is noble work. It is our calling to be intentional about “making routine the stimulus” in developing our students minds, remembering our work is as much about the heart as it is the intellect, and all of it is God’s work. It is important and significant work that we do.
References


Smith, Gordon T., “Thinking Vocationally,” in *Courage and Calling*.
