News



by James Dearie

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The landscape and traditional way of doing business may be changing, but Catholic higher education still has much to offer communities, the country, and the world, speakers said as the 2018 Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities Annual Meeting began Feb. 3 here.

This year's annual meeting comes amid reports from around the United States that small Catholic colleges are struggling in a world where competition for funding and students has grown fierce and advances in technology have dramatically changed both what institutions of higher learning can offer, and what students expect.

"The cost of higher education continues to rise, with fewer student willing and/or able, to pay the price," Lucie Lapovsky, principal of Lapovsky Consulting, said at the outset of the gathering. In a short presentation, Lapovsky, whose company consults with colleges and universities in the search for administrators and in financial and strategic planning, noted that the number of high school graduates throughout the country is declining, and at an even faster rate in private and religious institutions which will lead to more competition for the brightest students going forward.

In turn, resources are also becoming harder to generate, as endowments are not growing fast enough for colleges and universities to maintain their current levels of

spending.

In this climate, many students are "beginning to question the value of higher education, given the large debt that the students incur," Lapovsky said, adding that uncertain job prospects are also causing some to reevaluate their desire for a degree.

Still, a college degree "has become the sine qua non for access to the middle class," said Jon McGee, vice president for planning and public affairs at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University, and author of the new book *Breakpoint,* which examines the rapidly shifting reality of higher education in the United States, adding that a recent survey found that 90 percent of adults with college degrees found that they had paid off.

Lapovsky also added that college graduates face far lower levels of unemployment, and significantly higher earnings than their counterparts with only a high school diploma. Nonetheless, new strategies to bring students in are needed, and Lapovsky cited examples of institutions rising to the challenge, often by adding new online programs, or introducing programs to make attendance more affordable.

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>
> **-- Lucy Lapovsky**
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The schools that have been successful adapting to the times "have broadened their mission, and many have strayed far outside their traditional 'lanes,'" Lapovsky said, adding that business models have also been forced to change to deal with new realities. Full-time faculty positions have fallen by a third, and tenured positions are also in decline.

"We can choose to view the challenges we face — economic, demographic, and cultural — as existential threats," McGee said, but added that the mission statements of many Catholic colleges and universities point in a different direction:

toward serving those in need or who can benefit, including the poor, immigrants, and those who are the first in their families to pursue degrees. Catholic institutions are challenged to think in "new and creative ways, not only about what [they] do, but who [they are], and why [they] do it," McGee said.

McGee's institutions provide an example of creative thinking to meet changes in student enrollment and financial situations, and corroboration for Lapovsky's statement that "going it alone may no longer lead to the best outcomes."

The partnership was expounded upon by St. Benedict College president Mary Hinton later in the day. After rejecting a proposal to merge the two institutions, College of St. Benedict, a women's college, and St. John's University, which is all male, agreed to merge some aspects of their operations together, including faculty, but maintaining their own boards, presidents, campuses and service to their respective sexes. This partnership has helped the both stay afloat the last several decades, and keeps them going strong in the changing world of higher education today.

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In the opening presentation, moderated by Fordham University president Jesuit Fr. Joseph McShane, Shannon Tabaldo, director of digital curriculum integration and development at Loyola Marymount University, discussed the breakneck speed at which technology progresses, and stressed the importance of this technology not just for colleges, but for the students they serve.

"If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow," she declared, quoting 20th century educator John Dewey.

Also, Notre Dame University theologian John Cavadini received the Monika K. Hellwig Award, which recognizes an individual who has advanced Catholic intellectual life. Cavadini is the McGrath-Cavadini director of the McGrath Institute for Church Life and a professor of theology and past chair of the theology department at Notre Dame.

All at the conference were united by their belief in the missions of Catholic colleges and universities. The question is not whether these institutions will continue to remain active and important, but how they will do so.

Trust and collaboration are called for going forward to ensure that the right kinds of business models are designed, Lapovsky said, adding that "the higher education industry will remain under stress until it can develop a new financial model to provide quality education at an affordable price."

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