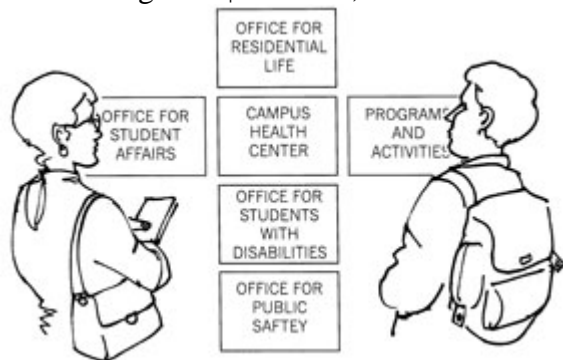


The making of a Catholic campus

Tom Gallagher | Mar. 19, 2010



(Pat Marrin)

The issue of Catholic identity in higher education has often been tied in recent years to the display of religious symbols such as crucifixes, or to attempts to ban controversial groups, such as gay-friendly organizations, or invitations to politicians deemed less than orthodox in their abortion views.

Answering the question "What makes a Catholic campus Catholic?" goes well beyond religious symbols and hot-button issues and it takes more than the local bishop, the college president and the faculty.

In reality, the key agents determining what makes a campus Catholic often are student affairs professionals, who are responsible for the care, nurturing and overall life of students within the charism of a particular Catholic institution.

After all, undergraduate students spend some 15 hours, give or take a few, inside a classroom during any given week. This means that for more than 150 hours they are engaged in college life outside the classroom.

Student affairs departments are responsible for the dean of students, dormitories and residential life, campus programs and activities, health centers, public safety, and services and issues affecting students with disabilities. Many of those departments get a great deal of help from an organization focused on increasing the knowledge and understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition and applying this understanding to day-to-day work with students.

For 10 years the independent Association of Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities, based at Franciscan Siena College near Albany, N.Y., has been focused on practices and programs well-grounded in, and respectful of, the Catholic identity of their institutions.

Over 150 Catholic colleges and universities are members. The student affairs association is affiliated with the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and collaborates with the Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

"The real value of the association is that we've created ways to integrate Catholic identity as part of our work,"

said Maryellen Gilroy, chair of the association's board and vice president of student affairs at Siena College, where she manages some 60 student life professionals.

"Through our annual conference, activities and Web site, ASACCU provides our members with opportunities to deepen their understanding of the Catholic tradition as it applies to their professional practice," said Gilroy.

Both large and small Catholic institutions benefit from the association's work.

"ASACCU is a lifesaver for us," said Timothy Seaworth, vice president for student development at the University of Mary in Bismarck, N.D. This college, founded by the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Priory, has 1,500 students on its main campus and 16 student life staff members.

"As the only Catholic college in North Dakota, ASACCU has helped my staff and me with professional development and to connect us to other professionals around the country," said Seaworth.

"Many student life professionals come to a Catholic campus with diverse backgrounds, some with a clear understanding of a Catholic mission, some not," said Laura Wankel, vice president of student affairs and enrollment services at Seton Hall University, South Orange, N.J. Seton Hall, with 10,000 students, is the oldest U.S. diocesan university, under the Newark archdiocese. Wankel has approximately 100 student affairs professionals in her department.

Central to staff development, Seaworth said, is the association's "Principles Project."

Three years ago the association, under the leadership of Sandra Estanek, assistant professor and director of the master's program in college student personnel administration at Canisius College, and Michael James, then executive director of the Center for Catholic Education at Boston College, co-chaired the project that developed the "Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities." (See below.)

"The principles do not serve as an imposition on student affairs professionals," said James. "Rather, they serve as a framework and development tool for what student life professionals can do to bring Catholic social and moral teaching and intellectual tradition to the student life profession."

At Seton Hall, Wankel created a statement of values and mission centered on service, community and social justice, faith and values and self-efficacy, as a framework for her department.

"Staff training and development is an ongoing process," said Wankel. "Our goal is to turn 'no' into 'know' why Catholic campuses do certain things in a certain way," she said. "We need to go beyond just policies and procedures to the values that create the policies and procedures."

Seaworth agrees. "The principles project helps people engage in conversation about difficult topics, which is when learning begins," he said.

The North Dakota institution has as its charism "servant-leadership" and refers to itself as "America's leadership university."

"With fewer Benedictine sisters on campus these days, it falls to laypeople to model and transmit the values of hospitality, responsibility, service, prayer and community," said Seaworth.

But what does this mean with respect to practical student challenges?

"We focus on the common good and the respect and dignity of each person," said Gilroy.

In the last two years, the University of Mary campus ministry has become intentional about offering its students the opportunity to attend programs to discuss topics suggested by students. These opportunities are marketed as three separate programs: Morals and Mocha, Love and Lattes, and Benedictine Buzz.

If Catholic identity means more than symbols, it also doesn't exclude them. The residence life office at Siena, working with campus ministry, began offering students the option of having their rooms blessed at move-in time. "We were surprised at how many students, both Catholic and non-Catholic, wanted to have their rooms blessed," said Seaworth. The college also offers popular Sunday evening Masses in the residence halls.

Following the example of Siena College, the University of Mary adopted a policy in its residence halls that specifically identifies sexual activity between unmarried persons as contrary to community standards. Previously, such violations were handled as "visitation policy violations." The university intentionally addresses the issue as one of moral decision-making and refers students for pastoral counseling, if necessary.

Researchers Estanek and James have begun a new project -- to measure the impact of the principles project on campus life. More on that when there's data to share.

[Tom Gallagher writes for *NCR*'s regular Mission Management column. His e-mail address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities

1. Welcomes all students into a vibrant campus community that celebrates God's love for all.
2. Grounds policies, practices and decisions in the teachings and living tradition of the church. Builds and prepares the student affairs staff to make informed contributions to the Catholic mission of the institution.
3. Enriches student integration of faith and reason through the provision of cocurricular learning opportunities.
4. Creates opportunities for students to experience, reflect and act from a commitment to justice, mercy and compassion, and in light of Catholic social teaching to develop respect and responsibility for all, especially those most in need.
5. Challenges students to high standards of personal behavior and responsibility through the formation of character and virtues.
6. Invites and accompanies students into the life of the Catholic church through prayer, liturgy, sacraments and spiritual direction.
7. Seeks dialogue among religious traditions and with contemporary culture to clarify beliefs and fosters mutual understanding in the midst of tensions and ambiguities.
8. Assists students in discerning and responding to their vocations, understanding potential professional contributions, and choosing particular career directions.

Source: www.asaccu.org/Principles.pdf