Are we approaching a new era of Jesuit Higher Education?

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I’d like to reflect with you, as the leaders of our 28 Jesuit higher education institutions, on our present moment. Jesuits call this a “composition of place,” a look at the terrain and the forces surrounding us—that is, the opportunities and challenges—we face today.

First, a little history. In 1968, under the leadership of Fr. Paul Reinert of SLU, then president of the Jesuit Education Association, the predecessor of AJCU, proposed to the 28 presidents of Jesuit universities—all Jesuits— that it was time to embark on a new plan for the governance of Jesuit higher education institutions. Until then, the Society of Jesus held full responsibility for these institutions. Their corporate board consisted of only Jesuits, usually 6-8 members—chosen from the local community, and appointed by the Provincial.

Reinert proposed that it was time to change the ownership and governance model to incorporate in a significant way lay men and women who would constitute the majority of Board members going forward. By expanding the Boards, Jesuit universities would be squarely in the hands of the laity and outside the direct control of the Society of Jesus. It would be clearly a partnership and one that mimicked, at least in part, what other private US universities had done by expanding the boards of trustees to include non-clerics from the founding religious group in order to gain the wisdom and experience of civic and other community leaders and educators.

The board here at SLU, along with Notre Dame, became the first to do so. Frs. Reinert and Hesburgh together had persuaded Rome to allow this experiment in the spirit of Vatican II’s call to de-clericalize the Church and give to laity their proper role in the Church and the Church’s institutions, and to better situate Catholic institutions in the constellation of American institutions of higher learning and research. Theirs was a courageous response to changing circumstances. Among those forces at play were profound changes in American society. The end of the war had dramatically changed the need and desires for Americans for a college degree. The Second Vatican Council had left in its wake a new spirit of ecumenism, refashioning the American Church to be less parochial and insular and more engaging with the broader culture. The need to blend and to compete, and to gain respect for the Catholic intellectual project was felt by Reinert, Hesburgh and others to be so critical that bold action was needed in the way Catholic higher education institutions were managed and led. At no other place and at no other time did the Church give up control of its schools voluntarily. These were unchartered waters. Looking back at the risk 54 years later, and despite what some critics have said, the experiment has resulted in putting Catholic institutions into the mainstream of higher education and scholarship in the country just as was intended.

They further explained their vision of Catholic institutions as both competitive and thoroughly Catholic in what became known as the Land-O-Lakes statement which attempted to work out how a university under Catholic sponsorship could and should be open, competitive, thriving academic communities inspired by a Catholic vision of the intellectual life but free from Church control. The
result of broadening ownership and diversifying participation in management and governance was both pragmatic and aspirational. It is difficult to imagine today how, just five decades ago, Catholic institutions operated on the periphery of the American academic landscape.

That is no longer true today. Catholic institutions of higher learning are represented in all the major categories of universities. And, Jesuit institutions in particular, are recognized nationally for their excellence and for their rigorous standards. We play a significant role in the communities where we are embedded, nationally, regionally, and locally. By 1972, in just four years, all the Jesuit institutions had revised their bylaws and created lay led boards. There was a concerted effort in all our institutions to diversify the faculty and student body in order to better represent the social fabric of America. A bold move built on a consensus of the individual institutions, in response to drastically changing circumstances. Their calculated risk that these institutions would not go the way of those institution that were founded by Protestant Churches –like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, etc. paid off. And I add, “thus far.”

James Heft, SM, in his recent book, *The Future of Catholic Higher Education*, poses what he believes is the chief question before Catholic higher education today: Will Catholic universities take the secularization path that major Protestant universities took at the turn of the last century? His conclusion after reviewing the challenges and the changing landscape is expressed this way:

“If Catholic universities and colleges have solid leadership, recruit boards of trustees that understand Catholic education at a university level, and strengthen the Catholic intellectual tradition through careful faculty hiring and formation, I believe that they will not lose their Catholic identity and will thrive and offer to the world a truly distinctive education.”

Solid leadership at the presidential level, well-formed and knowledgeable boards, faculty dedicated to the Catholic intellectual tradition are his three answers. However, if the book has a serious omission, it is a failure to grapple with the economic and demographic realities and pressures of our time. Access and affordability do not get the attention they deserve. They certainly occupy our attention. So, we need to add the issue of financial viability for the promotion of access and affordability to his list. This four-fold formula implies a great deal, and if you agree that these are THE critical criteria for maintenance of our mission, then this is what we need to explore in the short time we have together. Hopefully, our program will give some time and attention to these.

We might ask ourselves if we are living in a similarly liminal moment? No one would argue that, over these 50 years, higher education has grown more complicated, more expensive, and more secular. The pressures to move away from our signature liberal education model is intense. Recruiting faculty with explicit interest in the Catholic intellectual heritage is more difficult. Diversity, equity and inclusion—DEI—is also a necessary preoccupation, perhaps, even at times, competing with our need to hire Catholics.

Today, the value proposition for a higher education degree seems to be reduced in the public’s mind to the starting salary upon graduation. Our legislatures see a college degree as a personal commodity and no longer as an investment in the country’s economic and cultural future. This shifting of the cost of an education onto the consumer has forced students to pay the lion’s share of their education through borrowing and has pushed us to compete with tuition discounts and tuition hikes
that are simply unsustainable. As many have noted, the middle class—our bread and butter—are now forced to rethink the importance and affordability of a college diploma.

Another feature of our changing landscape are the students themselves. They come to us with more demands and more needs. I am sure you and your boards have discussed with student affairs staff and faculty that our students are presenting with more physical and emotional problems, and not only an academic deficit caused by two years of greatly diminished academic and social opportunities. Their ability to adjust to college life and the classroom has been impacted not only by isolation, but also by the climate of division and contention that surrounds them. UCLA’s annual survey of 150,000 nationwide first-year students found them to be more depressed and anxious than any time in the last 50 years. Their physical and emotional health has declined significantly since 1985 when they began reporting the results of their survey of new and graduating student attitudes. Covid has taken its toll.

In the classroom, faculty report a reluctance on the part of students to share ideas and opinions in political and social matters, a fear of being judged or labeled, resulting in a heightened self-consciousness. All of this means faculty must work to make the classroom a “safe place” for the exchange of ideas. Faculty often feel ill-equipped to deal with these new pressures. We hear each day how challenging the teaching environment has become. This is not, by any means, the whole picture. Fortunately, we see young people who are committed and energetic, eager to make an impact on the world, and quite conscious of the world’s need for their contributions. But, we notice a change and teaching has become more difficult as our political and social divides enter the classroom and shape our work in the co-curricular area.

We Jesuit universities have what we believe they need: an academic community that supports them, an education that gives them agency, and a moral compass that helps them navigate the options they will need to discern as they move through life. The Society of Jesus has identified four “preferences” that are designed to inspire us, to give us a roadmap for our time. These preferences, which you have heard of, call us to walk with them toward a hope-filled future, to give them not only a well-rounded education, but also the tools of discernment and the spiritual guidance and support they will need to make carefully informed decisions. These “preferences” challenge us to make the plight of those who are marginalized and excluded a core feature of their educational experiences with us—the implication being that the future they wish to construct cannot be exclusive to themselves and their social class—and to support in them a critical and passionate care for the planet they will inherit. Our educational priorities should be in line, then, with their deepest desires and concerns.

What I have hoped to explain is that Jesuit higher education has been capable of making radical adjustments, that after a careful reading of the times, our forebearers took risks that have proven to be consequential and wise. Without their bold moves we would not see today the solid state of our institutions, the respect they have in the academic world, their value to the Church, and their value to families across the ethnic, racial and socio-economic spectrum, nor the diversity of our faculty staff and students. And, I have tried to say we have an opportunity to face the challenges of this new post-Covid era because we have a pedagogical formula—a way of educating that addresses all aspects of our humanity—that is especially needed in this moment.
In conclusion, the challenge for us and for this brief time we have together is to listen to one another, to share our concerns and suggestions, to discern what might be some next steps for this organization. Will we be able to take bold actions to address the changing circumstances, resetting our institution on a solid financial footing and giving the faculty and staff the resources they need to form students into the men and women they are called to be, and that enables them to do the scholarly work that keeps them motivated to open minds and hearts. It may not be one big bold move that we need to make, but rather a number of strategic moves that lead to even stronger institutions that are even more deeply committed to the mission of Jesuit education.

We have our work cut out for us.

I leave you with two sheets….one demonstrates the turn-over in leadership over the past few years. The second is a chronology of Jesuit higher education institutions in the US…. I believe it demonstrates a few things quite vividly: a) the broad diversity of institutions that we founded, b) the obvious risk-taking that was involved with each project—things did not always work out as the entrepreneurial Jesuits had imagined, and finally, the impetus behind these establishments was quite simply to go were the people were going and where they were needed.