

Foundations of a Mission & Identity Culture at Xavier University

Allow me to begin my remarks on mission and identity work at Xavier University by telling a quick story. Last academic year, the faculty crafted a new core curriculum and brought it to the Board for approval in May 2014. They had spent a good many months the previous year discussing what the student learning objectives at the heart of this new core ought to be. In April 2013, the faculty who led that effort sat down with me to brief me on their progress. I was astonished to learn that they had chosen to use as inspirations for those student learning outcomes a set of guideposts we had been using at Xavier for some years to capture elements of our Jesuit Catholic tradition: *Magis*, Reflection, Discernment, Solidarity and Kinship, Service Rooted in Justice and Love. I say I was astonished to learn this because the faculty had, on their own, chosen to link the University's core curriculum to its underlying religious values. No one had suggested to them that they do this. In describing this moment later to various individuals, I often referred to it as my "Now, Lord, you can dismiss your servant in peace" moment. That we had gotten to the point where our faculty could, on its own inspiration, make perhaps the most fundamental curricular decision they could make against the background of our Jesuit and Catholic identity told me that we had come to an important place with respect to how Xavier University articulates and enacts its underlying mission and identity. In brief, the purpose of this presentation is to describe a bit how we got there.

Like all Catholic institutions, I'm sure, Xavier University has its own long history of trying to share its foundational charism broadly – with students, faculty, staff, trustees and others. A pivotal moment in that history came in the early 90s when our President at the time asked Fr. Leo Klein to serve as Vice President for what eventually became known as Mission and Ministry, one of the usual models of organizing this work. Leo brought along with him Fr. George Traub and the two of them did remarkable work for many years, effectively laying the groundwork for our contemporary efforts today. I was lucky enough to inherit their work when I took over as President on January 1, 2001.

They say leadership begins at the top, and I have often found that to be true; certainly, people tend to pay attention to things they see the boss attending to. And so a word or two about my own convictions regarding the importance of mission and identity work would be appropriate here. On a very basic level, and although I'm sure it will come as a shock to you, it's difficult to recruit Jesuits to Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Jesuit Community is small and aging, the University lacks the doctoral programs that newly-minted Jesuit Ph.Ds. often seek, and Cincinnati (though pleasant) isn't New York, Boston, Chicago or anywhere you care to name in California. And so after making a number of attempts - unsuccessful attempts - to recruit younger Jesuits to Xavier, I decided instead to embrace the possibility that Xavier's Jesuit character had to be guaranteed by doubling down on mission and identity work with faculty, staff, trustees and students.

To say it this way makes it sound as if I backed into a second-best approach to advancing the culture of mission and identity at Xavier. That is not the case. First, I believe strongly in a Church where laity are at the center and have consequently believed for years that one of the most important tasks of the current generation of consecrated religious professionals like myself is the handing over of the institutions we steward to laity. Moreover, I have seen it happen over and over again that individuals who encounter the Ignatian tradition at the heart of a Jesuit school like Xavier are themselves deepened and enriched by that living encounter. I like to think that these two more high-minded motivations are what really spurred me forward, but must acknowledge as well the practical reality that younger Jesuits seemed usually to go to other institutions elsewhere.

Against the background of all of this, and given the opportunity to renew our commitment to mission and identity work at Xavier after the retirement of Fr. Leo Klein, I launched something we took to calling a Discernment Group in 2007. I borrowed the form of it from a program then gestating among mission and identity officers and others within 12 Jesuit universities in the central and southern US, what we have called the Heartland-Delta Group; this program came to be called the Ignatian Colleagues Program. Specifically, I

mandated that the group spend one year reading deeply about the Jesuit tradition generally and its educational efforts in particular, make an Ignatian retreat and then undertake an immersion project together. Only when they had done this were they to begin working on the topic I wanted them to consider, namely how to re-imagine and then re-launch Xavier's mission work. I pulled together a diverse group from across the institution (and, indeed, beyond it in one case), deliberately interfaith, although including several Jesuits on campus. The recommendations that they made at the end of their two-year journey together form the basis of our current mission and identity work today. The language of the values I cited above, for example – Solidarity and Kinship, Service Rooted in Justice and Love, and the rest of them – come directly from their work. I should also note that they reviewed their recommendations with multiple campus constituencies as they shaped them, which helped generate both widespread campus awareness and buy-in.

A word here about our model of mission work before describing some of the elements that have helped make our mission work successful. Earlier, I mentioned that Fr. Leo Klein had been our Vice President of Mission and Ministry, a model which typically pulls together work aimed at students through campus ministry, peace and justice programs, and so on along with work with the more permanent members of the University community: faculty, staff and trustees. One of the outcomes of the Discernment Group was to lateral off what eventually became the Dorothy Day Center for Faith and Justice to the Division of Student Life so as to allow the staff of the newly constituted Office of Mission and Identity to focus their work on the permanent members of the University community, with the expectation that to influence them would shift university culture significantly and so ultimately shape the experience of students past the point of mere programming.

As I reflect on the very good work of our Office of Mission and Identity today, six factors in particular seem to me to be fundamental to it: patience over time, leadership, programming, place, the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities network and our trustees. Let me say a little bit about each:

Patience Over Time

As I mentioned, our contemporary efforts to more deeply share the Jesuit Catholic ethos of Xavier University with its various critical stakeholders goes back to the early 90s. My experience has been that you know programs are succeeding when their participants come to you and suggest what you might do next. Those things which you then do next lead other people to suggest other ideas, and over time, an enterprise grows that you wouldn't have expected at the beginning. That has certainly been our own experience. Several years ago, someone at another university, envious of what they considered to be my university's successful basketball program, asked me what they should do about theirs. Resolve now, I replied, to begin building the program you would like to have in 25 years. The same can be said for successful mission and identity programs!

Leadership

Xavier is deeply graced to have Dr. Debra Mooney lead our mission and identity efforts. Her official title is Assistant to the President for Mission and Identity, and we refer to her unabashedly as our Chief Mission Officer. Now in her 6th year in this role, Debra brings a special credibility to her role that no Jesuit could. They, after all, are expected to think the way they do. She isn't. Debra originally joined the University as a psychologist in the Health and Counseling Center, found her way to Jesuit identity work and was eventually recruited onto the staff by Fr. George Traub. While we have several Jesuits on the Mission and Identity staff (including Fr. Traub on a part-time basis), Debra blends creativity and passion for the work with an affable and engaging style that has enabled her to form a strong network of contacts across the campus.

One other observation I'd make with respect to leadership. One recommendation of that Discernment Group referenced earlier called for a half-time Director of Faculty Programs – in other words, a faculty member who would spend half their time doing mission and identity work with their faculty colleagues and spearheading programs to do so. This position is a two-year appointment. Both because the faculty is a generally difficult group to do mission and identity work with and because faculty are so central to the life of a University, the

individuals who have held this role over a period of years have powerfully advanced our work with and among the faculty in multiple ways.

Programming

To some degree, this is a simple elaboration of the first topic – patience over time – because the fundamental work of the Mission and Identity staff is the programming it sponsors or makes available. And so, for example, long ago Frs. Leo Klein and George Traub and others shaped something called AFMIX: Assuring the Future of Mission and Identity at Xavier. This 2-year, cohort program is now in its 16th year and has touched over 220 faculty and staff at Xavier University. And it was AFMIX alumni who then began coming to us and suggesting other possibilities. Our Office of Mission and Identity now sponsors annually a formidable list of programs, including:

- Manresa, a 4-part orientation on Jesuit identity for new faculty and staff
- The Reflecting on the Mission Seminar, an additional in-depth orientation for new senior administrators
- The Loyola Seminar, a weekly drop-in lunch-and-learn
- Departmental Colloquia, area-specific mission education and dialogue
- The Ignatian Mentoring Program, peer mentoring for 2nd-year faculty
- Taking Time To Reflect, an opportunity for veteran faculty to think deeply on their work-life experiences
- Facilitators in Ignatian Spirituality, a program to expand facilitation skills in guiding small peer groups
- Educating for Justice, faculty support to integrate service into courses
- The Women's Ignatian Leadership Salon, a seminar to strengthen leadership confidence
- An Ignatian Retreat, a day of prayer and Ignatian reflection during the fall break

I note that in none of these activities is attendance 'mandatory.' Thus, there is a sense of choice and freedom to engage in mission. Ironically, involvement is both greater and deeper. A case-in-point: I remember once being informed by our Chief Mission Officer that at an orientation dinner, a new administrator from the corporate world was fervently suggesting to her that the orientation should not be voluntary but rather mandated "like Toyota." He continued to argue his point despite her informing him that 1) attendance was *not* a problem and 2) faculty may be less inclined to participate if it *were* obligatory. On hearing the later point, he approached a faculty member and asked her "Would you be less likely to have come here if this was mandatory?" Without missing a beat, she responded. "Yes! – I'm too old to be told what to do."

In addition to 'home-grown' programs we are privileged to be part of the Jesuit network of 28 colleges and universities, and so have access to a variety of impactful mission-oriented programs which we do not ourselves have to execute – for example:

- The AJCU Leadership Seminar, a mission-oriented leadership development program held each summer
- The National *Magis* Retreat, a week-long experience of Ignatian spirituality and reflection
- The Ignatian Pilgrimage, a learning immersion on the life of Ignatius Loyola to Spain and Rome
- The Heartland-Delta Faculty Conversations, an annual conference for early-career faculty
- The Heartland-Delta Triennial Conference, a topical gathering of 300-500 staff and faculty within the network

The point of this is that, in my view, mission and identity work needs to have multiple on-ramps to best engage different individuals. The kind of programming that might appeal to one individual will not appeal to another. And so, the more opportunities you can provide or make available, the more chances you have of engaging people. Further, many aspects of the work we do just because we are universities – from diversity and inclusion work to community engagement to sustainability efforts and more – may all be reframed at a Catholic university because they all are ultimately colored and shaped by our underlying religious identity. Considered in this way, all these works ought to be ways in which members of our college and university communities find their way into the beating heart of our deepest identity. The trick is making sure that the individuals who lead this work at your university understand that there should be a difference between how that work is understood at your university and how it is understood at another, non-Catholic one.

Place

Like a lot of places, I suspect, Xavier has been playing its own version of monopoly in recent years, tearing down houses and building, not hotels, but classroom buildings, residence halls and so on. For years, our mission work emanated out of one such house, an arrangement both congenial and cramped. Several years ago, we built a new residence hall complex with a campus dining center in the heart of the campus. I insisted that some of the space on the first floor be given over to the Office Mission and Identity – a decision not entirely popular with some student groups at the time. It is perhaps the most coveted real estate on campus – and with good reason. The staff now has a suite of offices and – almost more importantly – several very attractive conference rooms (one large, one small) that a variety of campus groups find their way to. Consequently, people come into contact with the Mission and Identity staff as they come and go from meetings that may have nothing to do with mission and identity work. It helps nurture the social capital that allows the staff to penetrate the organization deeply, and their central campus location serves as well as a powerful symbol of the place we believe their work occupies in all we do.

The AJCU Network

The 28 colleges and universities which comprise the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities represents an enormous wealth for us to tap in doing our own mission and identity work, as I mentioned a moment ago. I've referenced already the Ignatian Colleagues Program – which began among the Heartland-Delta schools of the AJCU, but which is now overseen by the AJCU itself – as well as other network offerings. The AJCU likewise sponsors what we call “Conferences” – professional associations of almost every imaginable kind from nursing deans to financial administrators, from IT professionals to honors directors to advancement professionals to student life personnel and many more. And I do mean “many more” - somewhere north of 40. Meetings of these various professional groups have themselves begun having mission and identity considerations on their own meeting agendas, and something magic always seems to happen when people on one campus discover that people on other campuses across the county speak the same language they do. It gives it a kind of reality it doesn't have when it is experienced as or thought to be the language of just your campus. Moreover, it also helps to till the soil for area-specific mission and identity work on one's own campus. Of course, AJCU mission officers have their own annual conference. Because they are a relatively small group of individuals in unique roles who tend to have institutional longevity, they are a genuinely close-knit group who supports each other in their common work – sharing best practices, addressing current challenges and preparing for future trends.

Trustees

It is safe to say that Xavier's Trustees consider the health of Xavier's Jesuit Catholic identity to be part of their fiduciary responsibility. Our Chief Mission Officer, Dr. Debra Mooney, staffs the Jesuit Identity Committee of our Board of Trustees, a committee initially formed by Fr. Leo Klein back in 1990. The work of this committee is two-fold. On the one hand, it reviews the sorts of things that any Trustee committee reviews pursuant to its particular charge. Its meetings help inform it about our mission and identity efforts and acquaint it with data that helps us gauge the efficacy of our work. But the second purpose of the committee is at least as important. All our University Trustees serve a two-year tour of duty on this committee, during which they are introduced through a deliberate curriculum to such things as the history of the Society of Jesus, the history of Xavier University, foundational documents such as *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, contemporary statements about Jesuit education from recent Superiors General of the Society of Jesus, and so on. I remarked above that one sign of a successful program is when participants come to you and suggest what you might do next. Several years ago, some of our Trustees did just that when they asked that our Office of Mission and Identity shape opportunities for each committee to reflect upon how it undertakes its particular work in light of our underlying University mission and values; we are now about halfway through offering our Board committees that opportunity. On top of that, inspired through this experience, Trustees initiated the process of revising all committee charters to

include more clear references to the University's Jesuit Catholic mission in the context of the committee's specific responsibilities.

I began with one story and would like to conclude with another. Perhaps another 'fundamental factor' for embedding mission is to keep the mission overtly a priority, something easier said than done during challenging economic times. Several years ago, we had a wave of 12 new senior (many Cabinet-) level administrators. They participated in a year-long program to deeply understand our Jesuit Catholic identity. The year was to conclude with an Ignatian pilgrimage following in the footsteps of St Ignatius Loyola in Spain and Rome. With recent budget and position cuts, I heard directly and indirectly that many were having second thoughts about the capstone immersion. I wrote them a letter stating my thoughts:

"...I want first to thank you for your strong commitment to doing what is best for the University. The tough budget situation we are in raises twin issues of the highest and best use of university resources and the "optics" of how we use those resources, and both are serious issues. It is a measure of who you are as leaders here that you are concerned, in the midst of the people and offices you serve, for the responsible stewardship of scarce University funds and for how all of this "looks," and I salute you for that. But I have concluded that I want to ask you to lay aside your objections and participate as we originally planned. I have a number of reasons for doing so—and those reasons are, so to speak, 10% practical and 90% principle"

I will excerpt, here, the 90%:

"You know that activities that promote our Jesuit Catholic spirit are dear to my heart, not only because it is through such activities that we will keep alive this fundamental spirit which makes us distinct in the world of American higher education, but also because I believe that, the stronger that spirit here, the more vibrant and alive all our people will be. Numerous Jesuit documents in recent years, at all levels, call us to do whatever we can to drink in more deeply this fundamental spirit and make it our own. Our emerging strategic plan is premised on just this deeper engagement with our identity. I hope you therefore see my desire to send you on this pilgrimage as an activity, and a crucial one, in support of the strategic plan. For the formation of articulate, Ignatian leadership on campus is one of the most important ways that we will do Mission and Identity work, today and in the future.

"It is worthwhile as well to step back, I think, and ask questions about the relationship of the budget to what we do here. We have had to make difficult choices this year and have additional difficult—indeed, more difficult—choices to make in the future. Our budget will need to hew more and more closely to what those most important strategic goals are that we must accomplish. But as I said above, this goal is, to my mind, just such a crucial strategic goal. If budgets are values made real, then we need to make sure that our budgets as we cast them in the future capture those things that are the most important for us. And there is nothing more central to us than our Jesuit Catholic identity. It is not one more feature among many features of who we are and what we do; it is the bedrock of those things, drawing everything else together and integrating it."

It is a pleasure to be with so many colleagues here today who share this basic conviction: that our underlying missions and identities as Catholic universities of many kinds not only make us who we are, but enable as well our many co-laborers and colleagues to better become who they are.