

**ACCU Talk with Sr. Janet Eisner, SND, President, Emmanuel College
January 31, 2011**

Introduction (O'Donnell)

When Michael Galligan-Stierle called to ask me to participate in this session, he said he was looking for a closing presentation with an emphasis on hope, on the “good news,” as our title puts it, of the current state of Catholic higher education. He wanted the conference to hear that good news, he said, from the perspective of two presidents with very different backgrounds and kinds of experience. My immediate response, I must confess, was hesitation on two grounds. First, as an Irish Catholic, such a focus obviously runs directly counter to my inherited sensibilities and outlook. My default position is one best summed up by the poet Josephine Jacobsen. Asked to define what made her outlook and poetry Catholic, she said: being Catholic makes me a “short-term pessimist . . . long-range optimist.” And I must admit that working as an administrator at this level has only exacerbated that predisposition handed down to me by my ancestors. Never more so, in fact, than in the past few weeks! But that’s another story.

When Michael told me who my co-presenter would be, I also expressed doubt that I’d have anything to contribute that Sr. Janet Eisner couldn’t handle better herself. I had never met Sr. Janet, but I of course knew who she was. I knew that she had three decades of presidential experience—and that I had barely three semesters! Why listen to a rookie when you can hear a Hall of Famer?

As soon as we began speaking on a conference call arranged by Michael, however, my doubts melted away. I began to feel as I often do when I meet for the first time a colleague with a deep commitment to Catholic higher education: within minutes, it seemed as if I had known Sr. Janet all my life, and that we had been working together for many years. Though we have been laboring in different parts of the vineyard, we have been colleagues, collaborators and friends in the work for decades. I realized that my story in Catholic higher education is intertwined with hers—that, in fact, my work and outlook—and the sense of hope and possibility that, thank God, I really do have (despite my surname)—is deeply indebted to her—and to many others who have served so long and so well. And so I said, “Sure, I’ll give this a try!”

As we continued to talk in preparation for this session, we found that we shared, for all of our differences in background and career, a profound sense that we are living in an era of tremendous richness in Catholic higher education—that, despite formidable challenges from many quarters, and despite our share of internal strife, the last thirty years of change and development in Catholic Higher Education have been very much for the good; that the project is thriving, and that the future is full of promise. Last year at this closing session, we heard a similar message from Dick Yanikowski, grounded in his broad based research in many areas, including economic indicators, student and faculty spirituality studies, and institutional and programmatic support for Catholic mission. With that kind of “good news” as background, we thought we might take, this morning, a very different, much more personal approach, and present an account of our different paths on a common journey, organized chronologically around a few memorable events, watershed changes, and instructive images—all of which signify for us defining moments in our common history.

Sr. Janet will start, and we will divide our remarks into three sections, roughly covering the three decades since Sr. Janet began her presidency: the 80s, the 90s and the turn of the century up to today.

1. The 1980s –Governance (Eisner)

Brennan and I are hoping that this closing session will be a conversation on the good news of Catholic higher education. In fact throughout this conference we have heard so many examples of “good news” beginning with the opening liturgy and the first plenary session with Bishop Kicanas’ address. Our focus in this session is on Catholic higher education and the promise ahead.

In the 1980s College and University governance was a key issue in Catholic higher education.

Brief context: Until the late 1960s, religious congregations operated most Catholic colleges. They served as presidents, deans and chaired academic departments. Their contributed services helped fund the colleges. In the early 1970s, a number of Catholic colleges both smaller ones and some now prominent colleges, experienced severe financial problems from declining enrollment or from increasing debt. In fact over 20 colleges closed in that decade and some others merged.

There were several reasons that Catholic colleges changed their governance structure. They changed their financial structure separating the funds of the religious community from those of the college, so that their colleges could receive funds from government and from foundation sources. Colleges gave more responsibility and authority to lay boards. This was also post Vatican II, and that spirit as noted in several documents gave Catholic colleges a new understanding of their role in the Church of the modern world and especially of the new role of laity.

Speaking from personal experience I note that Emmanuel College had a single governing board since its founding in 1919 with members of the religious congregation comprising the Board. By the 1960s some lay people were added to the Board as well. In the mid 1970s, like many colleges across the country, Emmanuel College introduced a two-tier governing structure, giving the Board of Trustees the responsibility to manage the affairs of the College and reserving several powers to the Corporation, a board of members, which was comprised of members and leadership of two Provinces. Just four years later this new structure was challenged and issues needed to be clarified.

In September of 1978, the president of Emmanuel College resigned along with the board chair and several trustees over the issue of governance: Who ran the college? Who could make decisions? Several weeks later the trustees elected me to serve as acting president of the College. When I left the English department and walked into the president’s office there was a letter waiting for me from the head of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges stating clearly the need to resolve the governance issues. My first phone calls were to Tom Ingram at AGB and to a few presidents of Catholic colleges for help! The College made changes to clarify roles immediately and over time made other revisions as well to

assure an effective governing structure for the College. In fact, many Catholic colleges and universities addressed issues of governance well into the 1980s.

When I was elected president of Emmanuel College in 1979 all five previous presidents of the College, including the founder who had directed the college for 31 years, were still living and available for support and information. There were 35 Sisters of Notre Dame serving on the faculty and administration and that continued for several more years into the mid 80s. New lay faculty who came to Catholic Colleges right up to the early 1980s, found religious still in many significant positions. Faculty who came in those years said that they “absorbed” the Catholic nature of the college from the Sisters. With the increasing number of lay faculty, it became imperative to put in place new structures, such as faculty handbooks, promotion and tenure committees, and opportunities for greater participation in the decision-making.

The good news of the 80s: Religious congregations placed the mission of Catholic higher education foremost and had the courage and conviction to make the difficult and necessary changes to allow lay people to have increasing responsibility in the colleges and on the boards. In other words, the religious congregations let go of control and created new ways to work in partnership with lay people to assure the continuation of the mission.

2. The 1980s from a Faculty Perspective (O'Donnell)

My first direct acquaintance with Catholic Higher education dates from 1987, when I was hired fresh out of graduate school as an assistant professor of English at Loyola College in Maryland. While I attended a diocesan Catholic high school, I had done undergraduate and graduate degrees at large state universities, and I will confess that I arrived at Loyola with little understanding of what might distinguish Catholic higher education from what I had experienced. I had applied to Loyola without much more than a general sense of its identity as Jesuit and Catholic, and, while during the hiring process I was required to write an essay about my contribution to mission, and while the president, Fr. Joseph Sellinger, met with me and spoke engagingly about how important the core curriculum was in a Jesuit school, I accepted the job with only a very vague sense of what I might be getting myself into. I was, in short, part of that influx of faculty into the new, post-Land O' Lakes Catholic university, for whom attachment to my academic discipline and external professional organizations was strong, while any sense of belonging to the College and charged with promoting its distinctive mission was proportionately weak. Yes, I was “that” faculty member!

I remember a moment, though, maybe eighteen months or so into my tenure at Loyola, that crystallizes the atmosphere of the time, and marks for me a stage in my developing sense of Loyola's distinctiveness. I was sitting in a lounge area with four very senior colleagues from humanities departments when they started reminiscing about the old days, when the College was “really Catholic,” with Jesuits in most of the classrooms and administrative positions, and a great majority of students who had been educated in Catholic schools. One of them started to grouse about how all of that was lost, and that there was no difference now between the College and any decent, secular liberal arts College.

I remember almost spitting out my coffee, as I thought “are you out of your minds?” (As a probationary faculty member, I had the good sense to hold back from actually saying that!)

Coming as I had from outside the Catholic world, I could see clearly at every turn all sorts of ways in which the College was in fact distinctive.

The presence in the heart of the campus of a chapel, where Eucharist was celebrated daily and the pervasiveness of Catholic iconography throughout the campus had made a deep impression on me, as did the atmosphere of commitment to service and to what can only be called a pastoral regard for students. All of this had invited me—subtly and noiselessly—to rethink my role as a member of that culture.

Beyond that, I was coming to understand that I was working in company with colleagues (including the four who were in the room) for whom teaching and research clearly was a vocation, and not merely an outgrowth of professional ambition. But, most important, I had continued to think about Fr. Sellinger's emphasis on the core in that initial hiring interview. I remembered especially how strongly and passionately he had urged me to think about issues of disciplinary integration. (In truth, the whole notion that a president would take such an interest in such things was itself amazing!)

I remembered that he asked me to consider my own courses, especially in the core, not simply as belonging to me, or to my discipline, but as belonging to the College and, finally, to the student. "Imagine the curriculum," he urged me, "from the student's perspective, and ask what part your course plays in the whole of the student's experience of the core." To this day, I cherish that simple suggestion, and repeat it myself when I interview finalists for each faculty position. Trying to follow that advice back in 1987- 1988, I immediately found myself (of course) in need of continuing education (what was the core?), which led me to engage colleagues in all of the disciplines, and required me, therefore, to confront a discipline that had before then formed no formal part of the "circuit of knowledge" of my secular education. Yes, I had to talk with Theologians! It would be years before I would fully grasp the wisdom of what Fr. Sellinger had encouraged me to do. In a word, he urged me to do myself what the core asked our students to do—that is, to follow the path so brilliantly described in Newman's *The Idea of a University*, constantly seeking to connect each discipline with a whole that includes Theological knowledge. And, fortunately, Loyola had in those years—and still does—a remarkable department of Theology, full of wonderful conversation partners who were themselves true Newmanites in their energetic and humble engagement with disciplines outside their own.

At the opening liturgy, Bishop Kicanas spoke eloquently about the powerful witness of "exemplars" in our journey. For me, Jim Buckley, then chair of the Theology department and later dean of arts and sciences, is one of those exemplars. And I could name many more from those years.

In addition, I was fortunate that the College had by the late 80s put in place ample opportunities for interdisciplinary conversation, thanks in large part to an NEH funded Center for the Humanities, which supported common text programs, team teaching initiatives, and a wonderful faculty reading group.

It is because of these early experiences as a faculty member that I continue, more than twenty years later, to advocate—and to have great hope for--approaches to "hiring for mission" that do not create too narrow a gate for a candidate to pass through, but instead

focus on providing an institutional culture of invitation to the Catholic intellectual tradition and its integral approach, firmly tied to multi-faceted systems of support. (This is, by the way, the approach that my colleague John Wilcox explores in his soon to be published book, *Retaining for Mission*.)

As John Haughey argues in his excellent recent book, *Where Is Knowing Going*, it is the rare teacher-scholar (and the very rare good teacher-scholar) who is not a person of profound hope and who does not on some level see his or her own work as participating in a larger project with a horizon defined by that hope. Haughey argues that good scholars bring with them scholarly virtues that we must recognize, honor and build upon. We must engage them, that is, where they actually work by making exploration of the specifically Catholic, theologically informed self-understanding of our institutions compelling to them as educators, and not merely as pre-qualifications for employment or onerous add-ons to their “real work.” My experience, as an “outsider” to Catholic higher education who has benefited so richly from many years of collegial dialogue, suggests to me that Haughey has it right, at least for as long as there are strong voices presenting that theologically-grounded self understanding and the institutional support to foster the conversation.

3. The 1990s - *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (Eisner)

Ex Corde Ecclesiae dominated much of the work of Catholic college presidents in the 1990s. We met regularly here in Washington as members of ACCU; we worked with each other, and with our Bishops. The initial response to the document was one of fear and concern, felt keenly by faculty in theology departments. There followed a decade of discussion before the American Bishops approved the application of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. This decade of the 90s marked the beginning of meetings in our own regions; the presidents of all New England Catholic Colleges met to exchange experiences; to hear updates from the presidents working with the Bishops.

As we discussed the commitment of each of our colleges to the Catholic educational mission, we began to find common ground among ourselves. In our meetings with our own Bishops we experienced a new sense of understanding and respect for the mission of Catholic higher education.

Catholic colleges began to take with greater urgency the need to celebrate our Catholic identity. We went back to our roots as Catholic colleges and articulated more clearly our purposes. John Tracy Ellis, who had criticized Catholic colleges in the 50s for their failure to make a distinctive contribution to American intellectual life, described the task before American Catholic colleges in the late 80s as:

It remains, however, a prime requisite (for Catholic colleges and universities) to prosper and to fulfill their dual responsibility to maintain the highest standards and at the same time preserve their distinctly Catholic character and tradition. Failure to sustain the former renders them suspect in the eyes of their American secular counterparts, a suspicion they can ill afford; failure to sustain the latter calls in question their fidelity to the truths that nurtured their origins and that have given warrant for their espousal as valid representatives of the church's commitment to the world of learning.

He captured the challenge colleges faced in the Ex Corde Ecclesiae decade. Catholic colleges and universities reviewed and re-emphasized the understanding of American Catholic education as articulated by Cardinal John Henry Newman in, *The Idea of a University*. For generations of students, this text had been part of the curriculum, required reading. When I asked our library for a hardback copy of *The Idea of a University* I received a copy with copy #35 at the bottom, recalling previous decades of use. Then and now I and others recognize this work and discuss it regularly with faculty and students, citing pivotal quotes, such as the following, which speak unequivocally to the centrality of the search for truth in Catholic colleges and universities:

(A Catholic University is) A place in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge.

In this decade we spoke intentionally of our founding Charism, in my case of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. We inaugurated Founders' Day, now Founders' Week, to tell the story of the college founding and that of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Students began to understand better not only the founding vision and mission of the College but also that of the founding religious community, "Making known God's goodness-educating for life." Now 19 years later this is a tradition rich with speakers, students, faculty and graduates telling of how they carry on the mission.

Colleges initiated programs in mission and Catholic identity. They held campus discussion on topics: "What makes us a Catholic College? And who says so?" By the end of the 90s, Catholic colleges were citing shared essential aspects of Catholic higher education, with different nuance and expression, but comprising the characteristics and key elements such as: the dialogue of faith and reason; theology and philosophy central to curriculum; strong sense of community; commitment to justice and peace; service to others; vibrant campus ministry and public affirmation of identity and celebration of legacy.

The good news of the 1990s: Ex Corde Ecclesiae did encourage Catholic colleges and universities to renew and re-focus their Catholic identity and celebrate their founding Charism and vision.

4. The Intellectual Ferment of the 1990s (O'Donnell)

As a lay faculty member making the transition from "probationary" to tenured, the early to mid 1990s were exhilarating. Looking back, I now understand how fortunate I was to be in the midst of some powerful currents in Catholic higher education. By the end of the 1980s, the growing self-awareness of religious communities that survival of their institutions depended on passing on the work to lay colleagues sparked intense discussion and rich opportunities for lay faculty to get involved. In the Jesuit world, there was a national conference in Omaha in 1988 that for the first time brought Jesuits and lay colleagues together as equal partners in higher education. The 1989 Assembly at Georgetown, marking the 200th anniversary of Jesuit education in the United States, was a powerhouse of a

conference, and keynote addresses by Fr. Kolvenbach, Cornell President Frank Rhodes and others began circulating back on the campuses. Such activity gave those of us who were just beginning to feel ourselves to be “permanent” members of the institution a powerful sense of being part of something historically important that was much, much larger than our own schools individually.

From my perspective (as a non-theologian lay faculty member with no administrative responsibilities—ah! blissful days!) discussions prompted directly by Ex Corde simply added another layer of complexity and challenge: how to preserve and hand down Catholic identity was important to the institution and its immediate community, of course; Assembly 89 focused us on the importance of Catholic education to the broader world of American higher education—and American civic life—by preserving a crucial dimension of institutional diversity; and now Ex Corde was prompting intense examination of the relationship of the university and the church. It felt, in short, as if we were in the midst of something very, very important indeed.

And we were. The next decade saw an explosion of creativity in response to the challenge of what Melanie Morey and John Piderit call “inheritability” of the Catholic identity of the schools. The great scholarship of people like Phillip Gleason and George Marsden, Alice Gallen, Dave O’Brien and many others circulated on campuses across the country as publishing outlets were created in many places by many orders and associations. If you had used our campus in those years as a site for statistical sampling of book sales, titles such as James Burtchaell’s *Dying of the Light* and Michael Buckley’s *The Catholic University as Promise and Project* would have been best sellers.

During these years, I was most fortunate to serve as editor of one of these publications, *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, through which I had the privilege of working closely with a Hall of Fame of powerful thinkers and writers on these issues, including Monika Hellwig, John Padberg, Michael Himes, Alice Gallen, Joe Appleyard, Mark Schwehn, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Alice Hayes, William Byron, Howard Gray, and many others. My crystallizing moment during these years comes from a meeting of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education, a group that was established out of the Assembly 89 conference and served as the editorial board for the magazine. At the end of each meeting, John Padberg, the chair, would go around the table to ask each of us for our impressions. This particular meeting was the first for a new member, someone who was a very senior—and very well known—figure in Catholic theological and Catholic higher education circles. When John asked him for his first impressions, this old hand in Catholic higher education said, “I can’t tell you how much it restores my faith to sit here and listen to people who care so deeply about this stuff.” All around the country, people who thought that they were the only ones for whom “this stuff” was important were finding networks of new colleagues.

Inter-institutional programs were cropping up everywhere—programs that allowed faculty and student affairs professionals the kinds of opportunities that ACCU, for example, gives high-level administrators. And creative programming began to flow from the exchange of ideas.

These were also the years of intense activity galvanized by the killings in El Salvador and the resulting soul searching in our institutions about the connection (or lack of connection)

between education that speaks of justice and education that transforms students into people who work for justice. Service learning programs with a focus on Catholic social thought tradition were being established everywhere, along with centers and institutes to support that work. The Bannon Center at Santa Clara, for example, and the Ryan Center at St. Thomas date from this time.

Indeed, the 90s saw the creation of a number of programs that have and continue to make an enormous contribution to the vitality of our collective project. None of these is more important, in my estimation, than Collegium. That program, the brainchild of Tom Landy and now in its 18th year, has something on the order of 1500 alumni from 65 colleges and universities, each of whom has been exposed to some of the best current thinking and writing on the Catholic intellectual tradition, each of whom now has an inter-institutional network of colleagues, and all of whom have been invited to think of themselves as the future of that project, whatever their starting point upon entry to their particular school. At each of the three schools where I've been, Collegium alumni are stepping into leadership roles—they are becoming department chairs, deans and program directors; they are also becoming, as faculty mentors, the people creating the culture of welcome on which so much depends. Collegium is making a difference.

The early 90s also mark the birth date of the Lilly Fellows Program and its National Network, a consortium of about 80 church related schools, protestant and Catholic, that sponsors conferences on Christian scholarship, faculty development programs, network exchanges, and fellowships for graduate and post graduate students with desire to teach in church-related schools. The strong focus of this program on vocation has been a tremendous boon and is contributing not only to faculty development programs but also to the growth of the many, many innovations in integrated learning that we're seeing on our campuses—learning communities and living-learning programs that encourage students to think of their life's goals not exclusively in terms of career but in terms of response to God's call. At Loyola, we read Lilly Director Mark Schwehn's *Exiles from Eden*, with its call for faculty members to integrate their lives and work through a sense of vocation, as part of our piloting of first-year living-and-learning programs that had as their core the student's vocation. (Whole persons to whole persons).

As I look back on that decade, I'm astounded at the activity and at the lasting impact of so many important centers, institutes and programs designed to support and sustain our mission through inter-institutional collaboration. And I can't imagine doing the work we have before us today if it weren't for the vision and hard work of that decade, work that was initiated and sustained by many people in this room today.

5. The 2000s - Collaboration with the Wider Church (Eisner)

Now as we begin the second decade of the 21st century, we are experiencing a time filled with promise for the future. In the 2000s, we are experiencing even greater collaboration with the wider church community, in both the global and local church. For some colleges this has meant working with other colleges to support the Archdiocese's Catholic elementary and secondary schools, particularly by providing programs and assistance for the on-going development of teachers and principals. It has also meant assisting the schools with marketing analysis and tools to increase enrollment and providing resources for parishes.

Bishop Kicanas listed a number of these contributions yesterday. It also means being willing to say, “yes” to invitations to serve on Archdiocesan search committees, planning committees and parish reconfiguration teams. It means building relationships of trust between laity and clergy, often noiselessly and without fanfare, in order to effect change and further the mission of the Church, particularly its educational mission.

In this decade and going forward I believe that Catholic colleges and universities are making a singular gift to the church. Not only are we continuing to educate the future leaders of our society and our Church, but also we are providing a place for informed and open debate on central issues to the Church in an environment, which welcomes diversity of opinion. This is a real gift to the Church today.

Most of all in this decade we are engaging the Millennial students. They are so responsive to ever growing programs for alternative spring breaks all over this country, and other immersion programs in third world areas. Students return saying that their lives are transformed, that they received so much more than they gave, and that their experience of the gospel is renewed. From our campuses these students give generously of their time in hours of service throughout the year. When they graduate many more are giving years of service and others finding ways to continue what they experienced at Catholic colleges and universities.

When Pope Benedict met with Catholic college presidents in April of 2008 at the Catholic University of America he noted that Catholic colleges and universities are a “place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth. In this relationship we are drawn by the very power of the gospel to lead a new life characterized by all that is beautiful, good and true.” The good news of this decade is that this description is at the heart of all our endeavors for students of this century. For us it is all about our Students.

6. 2000 and forward (O’Donnell)

As I think about the past seven to ten years, I am most heartened by what I see as a coalescence of internal and external forces around the issue of institutional distinctiveness and identity. The 1990s were years of tremendous sharpening of our internal focus, as we became much more self-conscious about our mission and the means we had in place (or needed to put in place) to strengthen and sustain it. At the same time, I think that we have seen in higher education as a whole a growing acknowledgment that it is a good thing to have institutional distinctiveness—that diversity does not mean that everyone has to diversify in exactly the same way!

And I think that, as the traditional liberal arts, and especially the humanities, have come under assault for having lost their “soul” (as former Harvard dean Harry Lewis puts it in a 2006 book), Catholic Colleges are gaining new levels of respect for our efforts to teach students, in the spirit of Newman’s *The Idea of a University*, to have a comprehensive view of the humanities, grounded in a search for meaning, to be smart about faith, and to be humble about the limits of disciplinary knowledge.

I've spent a great deal of time over the past seven years, first as dean and now as president, interviewing candidates for faculty positions, and I have been heartened by the openness of prospective faculty to serious conversations about Mission, as well as by the quality of those conversations. This experience puts me in firm agreement with James Heft, who writes in a recent *Commonweal* article that the rise of what he calls "soft postmodernism" is to be welcomed by the Catholic university.

As Heft explains: this emerging, "softer" postmodern approach, in its recognition that "a purely objective and totally accurate expression of reality is impossible . . . that all concepts have a history, and that all truths need to be put in their historical and cultural context" leaves ample room for the Catholic tradition, while also helping us "avoid both the pretensions of absolutism and a paralyzing relativism" ("*Distinctively Catholic*," *Commonweal*, March 26, 2010). The great majority of candidates with whom I speak require no convincing either that religion is important or that the university is on solid intellectual footing in upholding and expecting its members to respect a particular tradition of inquiry. What we do to encourage them to engage in that tradition is another story—and an area in which we all know we need a great deal of work.

But I do think that the conditions for recruiting for mission now are better than they were 20 years ago, when dismissiveness of religion on "hard postmodern" terms was the norm. And I think we have a tremendous opportunity here, if we can find our way to reigniting the kind of enthusiasm for this project that we saw in the 90s!

Finally, I put my hope most firmly in our students. They may seem, year by year, to be less and less knowledgeable about their faith—or about any number of things! They may appear to value little beyond what's most immediate and stimulating. They may affect the kind of hard and angry demeanor that we saw Fr. Murray model for us at our opening liturgy! And, yes, their increasing tendency to disassociate from "organized religion" is a matter of grave concern to all of us, inside and outside the academy. At the same time, they are extraordinarily responsive, I find, to opportunities to explore the big questions. The experts tell us that the Millennials, while they are increasingly suspicious of institutions, including religious institutions, are also increasingly interested in matters of spirituality and meaning. At Manhattan College, our philosophy major is among the fastest growing of all of our programs, and the biggest stars currently on campus are the members of our Ethics Team, which recently won a trip to the National competition! For many of our students, of course, the point of entry into the mission is service, to which they flock with impressive energy and enthusiasm. I think this energy gives us a tremendous opportunity to engage them in the question of the theological and ethical underpinnings of Christian service, and I have great hope for the many programs I see around the country that link meaningful service with a search for meaning.

Another source for hope, I think, is the spread of learning communities, or integrated learning programs, across our campuses. Many of these do an impressive job linking key distinguishing characteristics or spiritual practices of their founding religious orders to structural elements of the program—and many emphasize vocational discernment. I think that these programs have enormous potential to engage our students where they are, and to provide for them a distinctive educational experience authentically grounded in the traditions of Catholic higher education and of the charisms of the founding orders of our schools.

Recruiting faculty who have the interest and the skill—and the time—to staff these programs will be crucial. Just as crucial is promoting a culture of mutual respect and partnership between academics and student life, for it is on the genuine partnership of the two, I believe, that the real promise of these programs depends. It will be the rare faculty member who can be both a real contributor to the academic excellence of the College and the sort of person who cherishes living in a student residence.

If we are going to provide the kind of 24/7 presence of educators in the community that was the norm when the “living endowment” lived on campus, we will increasingly have to depend on highly qualified and dedicated student affairs professionals who have a genuinely collegial relationship with the faculty who teach in these learning communities. In my experience, when you build these programs, students come. For all of their exterior cool and their semblance of detachment, they are, when you get to know them, passionately interested in pursuing the question of how to live a good life, how to contribute to their community, how to find meaning in a life that matters. It is a privilege, a blessing and a joy to come to work each day with the task of providing them with the wherewithal to pursue that quest.

Concluding Remarks (Eisner)

Some years ago, Fr. Bryan Hehir described the American church as being at the center and the edge of American society. He noted that we are at the center because so many Catholics make up the Fortune 500 and hold prominent positions of influence in the public arena; at the edge because of the Church’s many programs, which serve the new immigrants. It seems to me that American Catholic higher education may also be at the center and the edge today. Some of our institutions are educating the second and third generation of legacy students, some from affluent homes and inviting them to recognize the needs of so much of the world. All Catholic institutions have a strong commitment to educating the new and diverse populations in our country.

Going forward in this decade, I believe we will see more collaboration among Catholic colleges and universities, as we address the question, “How can we complement each other’s realization of mission?” As president of a Catholic college, I like to encourage our Catholic doctoral granting universities to keep on offering strong graduate programs; when we are able to appoint young faculty from your programs we find that they understand better our Catholic educational mission.

We want to keep our laser sharp focus on mission in this decade and invite our students, graduates, trustees, clergy and many others to help make this mission real. When we come together we are at our best and the mission flourishes. It is a joy and a privilege to serve as leaders in Catholic higher education for it is such a compelling mission. It is a gift to serve with others who believe deeply in the transformative power of Catholic education. May we look forward with confidence to this new decade in the 21st century, continuing to make the good news real, knowing that our loving God is with us.