



9-1-2008

Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis, by Melanie Morey & John J. Piderit, S.J.

Robert Adrien Martel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Martel, R. A. (2008). Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis, by Melanie Morey & John J. Piderit, S.J.. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 12 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1201072013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in Journal of Catholic Education by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of Journal of Catholic Education, please email JCE@nd.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis

Melanie Morey & John J. Piderit, S.J.
 Oxford University Press, 2006
 \$35.00, 450 pages

Reviewed by Robert Adrien Martel

A crisis is looming within Catholic higher education. As Catholic colleges and universities analyze their position and set a course for the future, they are faced with a structural reality that threatens their ability to continue as institutions with vibrant religious cultures. (p. 3)

With this dire assessment, drawn from a national study focusing on 124 senior administrators from 33 Catholic colleges and universities, Melanie Morey and John Piderit begin their in-depth and carefully researched book, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis*. A timely and solidly researched investigation into the pressures and issues facing Catholic colleges and universities, *Catholic Higher Education* reveals the uncertainty administrators struggle with to preserve and bolster Catholic culture and identity while wishing to keep their institutions relevant and competitive in a market composed largely of nonsectarian options. Though Catholic institutions of higher learning have faced this crisis for the last 40 years, the authors isolate a limited but vital set of issues at the core of the current state of crisis, including what constitutes Catholic identity and how is an appropriate balance between the secular and religious missions achieved? While claims of an identity/authenticity crisis in all levels of institutional Catholic education are by no means new, it is precisely the persistent and adaptive character of this crisis that renders it such a daunting force for each generation of educational administrators. *Catholic Higher Education* not only highlights the contemporary relevancy of this crisis, it offers strategies that take into account the current structure of the market of higher education, doing so with Catholic religious culture at the forefront of consideration.

Though there are a number of methodological assumptions that Morey and Piderit admittedly bring to their study, both authors demonstrate sympathetic awareness of the pressing questions of identity and cultural relevancy that face Catholic institutions of higher learning. The first phase of the study involved an open-ended questionnaire distributed to all presidents of Catholic

colleges and universities in the United States, asking respondents to give an account of their understanding of the current and future enterprise of Catholic higher education. The results, separated into factual, statistical, and interpretive categories, revealed a lack of direction and conceptualization on standards of religious education and a lack of awareness of what Catholic culture and identity entail. Recognizing the shortcomings of the study's first phase, namely in failing to produce responses of sufficient depth and clarity, the researchers initiated the interview-based second phase, designed to elicit more detailed responses from senior administrators in 33 institutional sites probing the same themes first posed in the open-ended questionnaire.

When combined, both phases of the study uncovered the depth of understanding and the degree of expectation administrators have for notions of Catholic identity and Catholic culture, contributing to a primary assumption that informs the investigative direction of the book: Many senior administrators lack knowledge of Catholic culture in other Catholic institutions and are, therefore, unable to contextualize the weaknesses or strengths of their own institution's Catholic identity in the broader culture of Catholic higher education. Even the other major themes that arose repeatedly in the study—social justice and role of faculty—were intimately tied to the question of authentic Catholic culture. For instance, administrators identify the intersection of faculty and students as the pivotal relationship upon which Catholic identity, character, and mission are nurtured and propagated, but find faculty remain dubious of their role and contribution to their institution's Catholic character, and this, administrators argue, contributes to the student body's unawareness of the richness of Catholic intellectual tradition and religious mission. Yet, one strong feature of Morey and Piderit's study is the sympathetic and objective balance with which they approach their data, revealing the assumptions that administrators themselves possess and how the uncertainty of their own role and contribution impacts the strengths and weaknesses of their institution's religious cultural identity.

The thoroughness that Morey and Piderit bring to their study is evident in the structure of *Catholic Higher Education*. Organized into three distinct parts, the book's first portion offers the analytical framework necessary for interpreting the prominent themes emerging from both phases of the study, providing a comprehensive look at what constitutes Catholic culture (chapter 2), while identifying four Catholic models of culture that explore what it means to be "truly Catholic" (chapter 3). Part II evaluates the perspectives of administrators on a number of recurring themes from Catholic intellectual tradition (chapter 5) to the issues of campus social life (chapter 6). Chapters 7 and 8 are an attempt to determine the institution's overall "Catholic impact"

upon students by examining not only the presence of campus ministry, but also the administration's efforts to promote a comprehensive idea of Catholic education. Chapters 9 to 11 inform the book's third part, assessing the impact of adapting institutional culture, and providing a range of practical ways to assist students, faculty, and others in positions of leadership to grow in knowledge and commitment in both personal and institutional Catholicism.

Should schools find their institutional identity falls within the functional boundary points of Catholic cultural intensity—as set out by Morey and Piderit—the authors offer suggestions for improving Catholic cultural identity. Granted, the authors themselves establish a baseline definition of Catholic culture, creating a normative, though potentially unrealistic, concept of what too little or too much Catholic culture is suitable for the market. Readers could argue that the authors' definition of Catholic culture forces the data collected from both phases of the study to conform to this definition, validating the methodological assumptions behind the study. Yet, many administrators were unable to offer a definition of Catholic culture upon which their institutional expectations and goals could be based. This pervasive failure to conceptualize Catholic cultural identity demonstrates how unlikely administrators are to save Catholic higher education institutions without the efforts and participation of faculty, students, parents, and the wider Catholic community. *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* is a detailed and thoughtful study of a growing crisis that Catholic colleges and universities have difficulty defining, let alone engaging.

Robert Adrien Martel is a doctoral candidate, researching the issue of publicly funded faith-based schools at the University of Waterloo, Canada.

Studying Educational and Social Policy: Theoretical Concepts and Research Methods

Ronald H. Heck
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004
\$39.95, 381 pages

Reviewed by Betsy Ferrer

“Policy analysis is an important, but problematic, window on the educational world because it may illuminate or obscure what it views” (p. 318). Schools