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Transforming Catholic Education through Research: The American Educational Research Association Catholic Education Special Interest Group

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Catholic schools in the United States and abroad face numerous financial, cultural, and structural challenges due to contemporary education policies and economic trends. Within this climate, research about Catholic education is often conducted and leveraged in efforts to serve schools' most immediate needs. To be certain, research aimed at finding solutions to pressing problems is important—indeed, essential—to Catholic schools' survival. However, it is also important that research on Catholic education connect to larger questions, issues, and discourses in education—both private and public—in order to contribute important insights and bring otherwise marginalized voices to bear in contemporary educational debates.

As a field of study, Catholic education has its share of successes and seminal works: “Public and Private Schools,” the 1981 report authored by James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore; Andrew Greeley’s 1982 book *Catholic High Schools and Minority Students*, which introduced the notion of a “private school effect” on the academic success of minority and low-income students; Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland’s study detailed in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (1993), which highlighted features of the environment in Catholic schools that are particularly supportive of minority and disadvantaged students; and more recent works such as Thomas Hunt, David O’Brien, and Timothy Walch’s edited volume, *Urban Catholic Education: The Best of Times, the Worst of Times* (2013), which brings together research and commentary from key contemporary scholars of Catholic education to paint a picture of urban Catholic education in the US since 1960. In addition to these important books, numerous articles published in *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* (now the *Journal of Catholic Education*) as well as in other academic journals focused on Catholic or religious education, have advanced the field and disseminated valuable findings to researchers and practitioners alike.

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Research on Catholic education does not, however, reside only in specialized journals and book series. Many scholars working in Catholic schools publish their research alongside findings from other private and public school settings. As research on Catholic education is disseminated more widely, its value and applicability to other educational settings become more apparent. This work of “mainstreaming” Catholic education research—that is, bringing Catholic education research into conversation with research on other educational settings—is essential to growing the field and continuing to produce relevant research for practitioners and academics alike. One key effort in integrating Catholic education research into broader conversations on education is through participation in the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Since 2010, this participation has been concentrated within the Special Interest Group (SIG) on Catholic Education.

Background: AERA and SIGs

Many readers of the *Journal of Catholic Education* are active in the American Educational Research Association (AERA); however, for those who are not familiar, AERA is a professional organization for educational researchers. Currently including more than 25,000 members, AERA brings together faculty, graduate students, and other researchers and educators from diverse educational settings. AERA offers various professional development activities for members, including an Annual Meeting held each spring.

One of the organizational structures within AERA is the Special Interest Group (SIG), a community of researchers interested in a specific educational topic. Oftentimes, SIG membership brings together AERA members from different [divisions](#), increasing the diversity of viewpoints and resources brought to the discussions and activities of the SIG. For areas of study that are specialized yet relevant to researchers with various foci, such as Catholic education, the SIG is a powerful means of facilitating interdisciplinary conversations, fostering collaboration and innovation, and sharing quality research across sectors.

History of the Catholic Education SIG

The Catholic Education SIG at AERA was designed to meet dual needs. First, it provided a venue for sharing research on Catholic education outside of Catholic conferences (such as the National Catholic Educational Associa-

tion [NCEA] national conference). AERA not only provides an additional venue for discussing research about Catholic education, it allows for a shift in focus from research dedicated to immediate, practical needs of schools to more traditional academic research, including larger-scale and longitudinal research. The SIG creates a dedicated space within AERA for sharing this type of research among scholars. Second, the SIG facilitates dialogue about Catholic education among scholars working in related areas—for example, private schooling, religious studies, urban education, or higher education—who are interested in sharing research in Catholic education PK-20.

The purpose of Catholic Education SIG is to “support, promote, and disseminate information, research, and evaluation of Catholic education written from a diverse set of perspectives, including interdisciplinary and international issues” (URL). From its inception in 2010, the SIG has endeavored to fulfill this purpose through participation in the AERA Annual Meeting as well as through ongoing programs such as the SIG Dissertation Awards. Four years in, the SIG has a membership of approximately 100 people and is poised to grow its presence and impact within AERA in coming years.

Growth

The Catholic education SIG was officially recognized as a SIG-in-formation in 2010, at which time it had 75 members committed to the group for a three-year term. By 2013, membership had grown to 128, with additional new members anticipated prior to the Annual Meeting. Three elected officers govern the SIG: a Chair (currently Shane Martin, Ph.D. of Loyola Marymount University); a Program Chair (currently Robert Simmons, III, Ed.D. of Loyola University Maryland); and a Secretary/Treasurer (currently Ursula Aldana, Ph.D. of Loyola Marymount University). An election to choose a new Chair was held in February 2014 and Karie Huchting, Ph.D., of Loyola Marymount University, was inducted as the new Chair at the Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in April 2014.

In addition to growth and evolution in membership and leadership, the SIG has seen expansion in its presence at the Annual Meeting over its four-year existence. Growing from a Business Meeting in its first year, the SIG will sponsor [four content sessions at the 2014 conference](#), touching on various critical, historical, legal, and curricular issues.

Priorities and Initiatives

Among the immediate priorities for the SIG are increasing its membership and visibility within AERA. The number of members in a SIG determines, in part, the number of sessions allocated at the Annual Meeting; therefore, it is essential that the SIG's membership reflects the size of the Catholic education research community. Without a healthy membership, opportunities to share research focused on Catholic education at the AERA Annual Meeting could be reduced. In addition to growing the membership within the Catholic Education Special Interest Group, networking and collaborating with other SIGs such as the Associates for Research on Private Education, Leadership for Social Justice, or Religion and Education, is important to increasing the visibility of issues important in educational contexts that include, but are not limited to, Catholic schools.

Alongside efforts to increase visibility and membership, the SIG continues to support research aimed at understanding educational experiences and outcomes for students in urban Catholic schools—in particular, students of color and students from families of lower socioeconomic status. This research contributes to the transformation of Catholic education by documenting and analyzing the everyday practices of teaching and learning in contemporary urban Catholic schools, asking questions about how schools are supporting students most in need, and drawing connections to concepts such as Catholic identity and education for social justice. The SIG's support for such research is evident in the sessions presented at the Annual Meeting, as well as in its efforts to build connections with the *Journal of Catholic Education*. Although the *Journal of Catholic Education* is not published by AERA, the SIG leadership recognizes its status as a key publication outlet for research in Catholic education and respects its commitment to supporting emerging and established authors. The dual commitment to quality and accessibility are important contributions to the field of Catholic education.

Of great importance to the work of the Catholic education SIG is recognizing and supporting the work of emerging scholars in Catholic Education. To this end, the SIG established the Catholic Education Special Interest Group Dissertation Award to encourage early career researchers working in the area of Catholic education. Dissertations submitted for consideration are assessed in multiple categories, including: relevance to important issues/problems within Catholic education, theoretical and methodological rigor,

soundness of analysis and results, and quality of writing. The Award is presented at the AERA Annual Meeting; awardees receive a modest cash prize, plaque, and an invitation to present their research during the SIG business meeting. The Award was presented in 2012 and 2013 and will be presented for the third time in April 2014. The Editors and Governing Board of the *Journal of Catholic Education* are pleased to include in this focus section two articles drawn from dissertations that were recipients of the Catholic Education Special Interest Group Dissertation Award.

Award-winning Dissertations

Dr. Christian Dallavis was the winner of the first Catholic Education Special Interest Group Dissertation Award. Dallavis, a graduate of the University of Michigan with a joint Ph.D. in English and Education, received the award in 2012 for his dissertation, *Extending Theories of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: An Ethnographic Examination of Catholic Schooling in an Immigrant Community in Chicago*.

In his article for this focus section, “Culturally Responsive Caring and Expectations for Academic Achievement in a Catholic School,” Dallavis emphasizes an important intersection between tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and faith-based schooling: the relationship among expectations for academic achievement teachers’ expressions of care for students, and teachers’ religious identities/beliefs. The article presents one strand of inquiry drawn from the dissertation, using data from his ethnographic study of Saints Joachim and Ann Catholic School (J&A), a parish school in Chicago, to investigate the question “To what extent do teachers in this faith-based school hold high expectations for academic achievement for their students?” As he notes in the article, maintaining high expectations for students is a key tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy, a practice linked to valuing the knowledge students bring with them to school and treating students as experts. Using data from interviews, observations, and artifacts, Dallavis’s article describes a discourse of academic achievement present in the J&A community. Further, he posits that teachers’ enactment of the discourse—the ways in which they demonstrate care for students’ achievement—is linked to their religious identities as well as their beliefs about the goals and purposes of Catholic education.

Dr. Ursula Aldana was recognized in 2013 for her dissertation, *College Dreams, Corporate Work Study, Brotherhood and Belonging: How Urban High*

Schools Structure Opportunity for Low Income Latino and African American Male Youth. She received her Ph.D. from the ULCA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

Aldana's article, "Moving Beyond the College-Preparatory High School Model to a College-Going Culture in Urban Catholic High Schools," addresses questions about expectations for student success through an ethnographic study of two Catholic high schools in a large southwestern metropolitan city. The article compares features of the college preparatory programs at the two school sites, analyzing both student experiences and school staff's perceptions of students' college readiness in order to highlight features of a college-going culture that builds upon the previous successes of Catholic schools in serving underrepresented students, focusing attention on African American and Latino males and as first-generation college students. The data presented in the article suggest that while both schools emphasized college preparation, the ways in which they provided resources for students differed. Aldana's analysis reveals that one school was more successful in preparing its students for college due to what she describes as a pervasive *college-going discourse*—language used throughout the school community to emphasize the importance of college and to express the belief that all students can attend college.

The articles in this focus section, penned by two committed and promising scholars in the field of Catholic education, provide readers of the *Journal of Catholic Education* a glimpse into current and pressing issues in Catholic education research. Contemporary scholars and practitioners work within a context for Catholic education that is unique to the current educational landscape, which is impacted by economic, educational, and cultural trends. Through their careful study design, rigorous methods, and commitment to underrepresented students in urban Catholic schools, these excellent articles illuminate a path for other researchers to follow in the pursuit of transforming Catholic education through research.

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