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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AT SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

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*The development of a new Catholic leadership degree program at Saint Louis University was directly impacted by the Danforth Foundation, which funded a program for the preparation of public school administrators for the city of St. Louis. The lessons learned through this program over the past five years and the presence of a cooperative preparation program for Catholic school principals with the Archdiocese of St. Louis formed the basis for the development of this new program. This article provides a brief review of the program and explains the use of cohorts for the preparation of Catholic school leaders.*

**D**ue to the decline in religious vocations and the availability of other ministries for members of religious orders, approximately 98% of the teachers and principals in Catholic schools are lay people. As a result, to preserve and advance private and parochial Catholic education at the elementary and secondary levels in the United States, it is necessary to recruit and retain lay teachers who have the potential to become Catholic school leaders. Moreover, these teachers need to be encouraged to enroll in graduate programs that will prepare them for such leadership positions. For these reasons the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education at Saint Louis University began to revise an existing Master of Arts degree program and initiated plans to develop a Doctor of Education degree program in Catholic school leadership. While the master's program focused on the preparation of principals, the doctoral program was designed to prepare central office administrators and heads of private Catholic schools.

## **DIMENSIONS OF THE PROGRAM**

The Catholic School Leadership Program has two major components:

- Acquiring skills necessary to administer an elementary or secondary Catholic school program.
- Developing a spiritual formation program aimed at fostering a sense of mission for the ministry of Catholic education.

The formation component emphasizes the mission of the Christian because of one's baptism and confirmation into the apostolic work of the Church. Further, the formation program focuses on the responsibility of the Catholic educational leader to foster the spiritual growth of staff and students. In contemporary society, this staff and student development must include an appreciation of the importance of promoting social justice through dialogue with the diverse cultures in the United States. The apostolic work of the educational leader is understood in relation to communicating the faith in the hope of transforming the culture and leading others to an appreciation of the Catholic faith. Learning how to accomplish this objective is a part of the formation of Catholic educational leaders.

## **COHORT DELIVERY MODEL**

The newly developed leadership programs will be offered through a cohort delivery model where students enter the program and progress through their coursework as a group. Student cohorts in degree programs at Saint Louis University were initially introduced in 1992 through a Danforth Foundation-funded program to prepare educational leaders for the St. Louis public schools.

The cohort model addresses many of the reforms cited by professional associations relative to the preparation of school leaders. Norton (1995) identified a variety of perceived program needs in educational administration, for example, (a) a concentrated period of study/preparation for students, (b) meaningful student, faculty, and institutional relevance in course and field experiences; and (c) higher program standards. The cohort model appears to address these needs. It brings together a group of students with a common goal of seeking the completion of a degree program. Of particular importance to the Catholic School Leadership Program is the expansion of the common degree goal to include a strong spiritual formation component which models the faith community so critical to the role of Catholic schools. In order to enhance and strengthen this faith bond, members of the cohort are directly involved in planning spiritual formation activities.

The advantages of the cohort model for the delivery of a preparation program can be summarized through an explanation of the following six components:

**Curriculum Alignment and Sequencing.** A cohort offers the advantage of the proper sequencing of courses and field experiences for part-time students. Members of the cohort follow a sequence of courses, allowing prescribed standards to be established.

**Enhanced Interaction with Faculty.** Cohort programs can be designed to ensure that students encounter a variety of full-time and adjunct faculty members throughout their course of study. Interaction with faculty is facilitated by planned activities and clinical experiences.

**Program Identification.** After one semester, the members of the cohort form a strong commitment to their program. As students become more familiar with the program and one another, the group becomes a more cohesive unit.

**Persistence to Program Completion.** By the end of the first semester, 10% to 20% of the students tend to leave the program. This loss is usually the result of unrealistic expectations of the time commitment required to successfully navigate the academic program. With a prescribed course of studies and a defined time limit for completion of the coursework, comprehensive examinations, and dissertation or projects, students who persevere through the first semester of the program usually complete the program. Graduation statistics for students who complete the first semester are 95% at the master's level and 89% at the doctoral level.

**Personal and Professional Support System.** Members of the cohort tend to be extremely supportive of each other personally and professionally. While many students encounter difficulties during a graduate degree program, cohort members are a ready-made support group to help them through these difficult times. This would be particularly true for a Catholic leadership cohort program with a strong spiritual component. Students in cohorts should recognize that the pursuit of the degree is as much a group effort as an individual endeavor.

**Professional Networking.** Since most graduate students in education are part-time students, the cohort offers the dimension of a professional network for practicing school leaders and teachers. During their program, cohort students often call on one another for assistance with their work assignments. After completion of the program, members of the cohort regularly maintain this supportive network throughout their professional careers.

While there are many advantages to the cohort model for the delivery of programs, there are some disadvantages. The following is a brief review of some of the more troublesome areas:

**Weak Students.** While cohort members are strong supporters of each other, at times this support becomes a vehicle for shielding weaker students. It

often is necessary to remind the cohort members that each individual is responsible for meeting the standards of the program.

**Disruptive Cohorts.** At times, cohort members act as a pressure group to seek inappropriate changes in program or individual class requirements. In such cases a concerted effort must be made to maintain program integrity and not allow a cohort to lower faculty expectations.

**Faculty Load.** Since cohort programs lead to program completion at the same time for all students, faculty can be overwhelmed with large numbers of students attempting to complete their degree requirements. This is particularly true for comprehensive examinations, both written and oral, and completion of theses, projects, and dissertations.

**Student Attendance.** In cohort programs, student attendance and tardiness may become a serious problem. The strong sense of fellowship that is so natural to a cohort often results in students relying on others to share notes and materials from missed classes. Part-time students occasionally have to miss class as a result of their jobs. However, some members abuse this privilege and this can become disruptive.

Appropriate governance mechanisms can address the disadvantages of the cohort model. One such method is a first-year review of students. At the conclusion of the first year, each student should be reviewed by the faculty and considered for continuation of the program. A shorter version of this process should also occur at the conclusion of the first semester. Students experiencing academic difficulties or attendance problems can be counseled out of the program during this initial year. It becomes increasingly difficult after the first year to remove students who have made an extensive time and financial commitment to the program.

In order to recognize time commitments and the complexities of individual schedules, the Master of Arts and Doctor of Education degree programs are offered through a non-traditional schedule (weekends, summer semesters, etc.). The Master of Arts program is designed to allow a student to complete the degree requirements in three years; the Doctor of Education program, in four years.

## RECRUITMENT OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERS

Encouraging young people to consider the ministry of education must begin in Catholic high schools. Catholic colleges and universities must further foster this interest through on-campus programs which encourage students to major in teacher education while providing them with theological and spiritual formation programs. The success of this venture also requires the involvement and encouragement of the local parish: the pastor and associate priests, deacons, religious, the parish council, the parish board of education

and in fact, the entire parish community. Finally, the local bishop and diocesan staff must provide leadership to the parishes and to the Catholic schools for this endeavor to be successful. Success of such a program would be realized when a local parish, Catholic school board, or diocesan board of education issues a call to education ministry to prospective teachers and administrators and financial support as an incentive to degree candidates.

## **THE SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY PROGRAM**

The Catholic School Leadership Program at Saint Louis University is distinctive in its emphasis on both theory and practice. The key resides in the selection of faculty to deliver the program of studies. While there are full-time faculty in the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education with appropriate training and experience to teach and administer the program, the department recognizes that richness of the curriculum calls for faculty from the Departments of Philosophy and Theology. Moreover, the Aquinas Institute of Theology is located on the campus of Saint Louis University, and faculty from the Institute will also augment the needs of the program.

The array of full-time faculty available at the University is highly diverse. In addition, as the program evolves, its directors expect that curriculum consultants from across the country will develop specialized courses. Whether a faculty member is full-time or part-time, the directors of the program will insist that every faculty member possess certain qualifications. Specifically, faculty in the Catholic School Leadership Program will know and value Catholic school education; they will have had teaching or administrative experience; and they will consistently model a commitment to Catholic education. In addition, faculty will have a commitment to the goals of Saint Louis University and be dedicated scholars and successful practitioners in their disciplines.

The Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education resides in the College of Public Service. Among the foundational elements of the College is a commitment to be nontraditional and to deliver its curricular offerings in cross-disciplinary ways. Hence, while the core faculty will come from educational leadership and higher education, philosophy, theology, and the Aquinas Institute, the program directors expect that the interdisciplinary courses will be team taught. The courses are required to meld theory and practice so that students are not overwhelmed with theory.

Another goal of the program is for the practical side of the courses to enrich the day-to-day functioning of the students. While the degree program is designed to provide students with a rich background in philosophy and theology, it is also fashioned with a view toward those who will be on the firing line every day in administering and teaching in Catholic schools.

The Catholic School Leadership Program at Saint Louis University is being created to meet the needs of Catholic school systems as well as those who are or will be called to serve as leaders. Therefore, courses are being formulated to respond to the specific requirements of the Catholic school systems and their current and future leadership.

The Master of Arts program of studies consists of 32 graduate course hours. The doctoral degree in Catholic School Leadership requires an additional 38 hours. One may observe that there is rigor associated with the conceptualization underpinning the curriculum design of the program. There are many courses which will benefit the student in the Catholic School Leadership Program. However, faculty developing the program concluded that Master's degree students need to take introductory courses identified as the Foundations of Catholic Leadership. These courses focus on the philosophical and theological dimensions of Catholic leadership.

Our research has demonstrated that individuals serving in leadership positions in Catholic schools enjoy varying degrees of preparation in philosophy and theology. Some have extensive backgrounds, while others have hardly scratched the surface. The axiom, "You cannot give what you do not have," is fundamentally true; and leaders of Catholic schools should be expected to have an understanding of and appreciation for the intellectual and philosophical framework that guides them. Consequently, the faculty from theology, philosophy, and the Aquinas Institute will prepare and deliver these foundation courses. However, a serious dialogue is needed between the faculty of these disciplines and the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education to determine the nature of the content of these courses so the program's "home department" can own the whole of it. Concomitant with the exploration of philosophy and theology is another foundations course, Spirituality of Catholic School Leadership. Students will take this course in order to come to grips with their own spirituality. Predicated on the premise that this leadership program is designed to develop and educate the "whole person," this course in spirituality will enable students to focus on their relationship with God.

Along with requiring foundations courses, the faculty believe that students should be steeped in research and assessment courses. The faculty expects that students will conduct meaningful research and appreciate good research when they encounter it. Scholars should explore various aspects of Catholic school systems, and the faculty wish to collaborate with students to focus on particular issues within the Catholic school communities. If the leadership program focuses its research activities on a select range of interests, the community of scholars at Saint Louis University can make a profound difference in providing solutions to problems within the Catholic school system.

While research activities are important, school leaders must also center

their attention on desired outcomes. Thus, outcomes assessment is a necessary part of the academic program. Research and assessment are practical tools which can jump-start some of the qualitative aspects of a school system, and leaders in Catholic schools must possess a keen understanding of them so that Catholic schools will continue to be competitive. Moreover, it is important that Catholic schools be recognized not only for their value system, but also for the high quality of their educational programs.

In designing courses which will provide the best education for students, the faculty has considered it exceedingly important that Catholic leadership education courses integrate the five basic principal courses for state certification. Consequently, students in the program will be exposed to courses such as Human Relations, Legal Issues, Business and Facilities Management, Governance Issues, Counseling Techniques, and Administrative Practice and Leadership. Other courses deal with instructional supervision, including teacher recruitment, selection, evaluation, staff development, and curriculum development.

The program of studies is designed so that students will participate in an internship experience—an emphasis on the practical once again—and will produce a formal paper which will express their philosophy of education and what Catholic school leadership means to them. The faculty expect students to work in teams, but the students' culminating experience presents an opportunity to work with the faculty mentor as they explore their philosophical orientation, educational philosophy, and philosophy of life. This personal vision statement should serve as a road map for the brand of Catholic leadership one might expect from each individual in the Catholic School Leadership Program. The faculty see this as crucial because the future of the Catholic educational system will be determined in large part by the quality of its leaders. Consequently, as the Catholic School Leadership Program is successful at the Master's level, it will produce graduates who are grounded in philosophy, theology, and spirituality as well as the educational tools required to provide leadership.

For those interested in pursuing the doctoral degree in the Catholic School Leadership Program, Saint Louis University offers a sequence of courses that build upon the Master's degree. These doctoral candidates will take three additional foundations courses drawn from a series of proposed seminars. The doctoral program is intended to deepen the students' appreciation for the Catholic character of our schools as well as their own personal, professional, and spiritual development. Following discussion with a mentor, students may choose from seminars such as Theological Dimensions of Catholic School Leadership, Social Justice in Catholic School Leadership, Selected Issues in Sacred Scripture, and Spiritual Formation Program for Catholic School Administrators.

In addition to the foundations courses, students will pursue an advanced



research course intended to build upon the two research courses taken at the Master's level. The primary purpose of this course is to jump-start the student toward the doctoral project. Doctoral students will be expected to make a significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge and/or practice concerning Catholic schools. The student's doctoral project is meant to be carried out over the entire length of the doctoral program and will eventually culminate in an oral examination.

The professional sequence of courses includes an array of offerings intended to enrich the competence of students who are leaders in Catholic schools. The architects of the doctoral program realize that the leadership role in Catholic schools continues to change. In fact, the demands of cutting-edge leadership call for a more sophisticated approach to the business of education. Consequently, the program of studies will expose students to such courses as Catholic School Leadership in a Pluralistic Society, Ethics and School Law, Staff Development Issues, Financial Development and Management, Human Resources, and Governance Issues, including an understanding of local diocesan, regional, national, and universal Church-related issues. Along with these courses, students will participate in an internship program, preferably in a setting different from their own.

One additional skill the program is designed to provide for the student is an exposure to the field of fundraising. Virtually every not-for-profit depends on philanthropy in order to flourish, if not survive. While this is not a role many educational leaders relish, it has become a basic part of the responsibility of the modern leader. Thus, the program will explore fundraising goals, objectives, and strategies and provide fundraising case studies and actual practice in order to instill a sense of confidence that fundraising, too, will become part of the individual's expertise.

As the program matures, it will undoubtedly undergo modification. Additionally, individual student experiences will undoubtedly cause the faculty to rethink various points of emphasis currently on the drawing board. We would like to receive input from readers of this article so that we may incorporate the best thinking available concerning education for Catholic school leaders.

## **CURRICULUM AND PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS**

Both the master's and doctoral programs are divided into five parts: spiritual foundations courses, research courses, administrative leadership courses, curriculum and instruction courses, and culminating experiences. While credit is given for the courses in spiritual formation, formation activities go beyond the classroom setting and are continued through liturgical celebrations, small group discussion, and individual counseling. An overview of the curriculum and degree requirements follows.

## **MASTERS OF ARTS DEGREE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP—32 GRADUATE HOURS**

Foundations of Catholic School Leadership Courses—5 hours

The Spirituality of Catholic School Leadership (2 hrs.)

The Theological Dimensions of Catholic School Leadership (3 hrs.)

Research Courses—6 hours

General Research Methods (3 hrs.)

Program Assessment and Evaluation (3 hrs.)

Catholic School Leadership Courses—15 hours

Catholic School Administrative Practice and Leadership (Includes Identifying Community and Government Resources) (3 hrs.)

Human Relations and Counseling Techniques (Includes Conflict Management) (2 hrs.)

Business and Facilities Management (3 hrs.)

Staff and Student Legal Issues (Includes Selected Canon Law Issues) (3 hrs.)

Governance Issues (Includes the role of the Pastor, Parish Staff, Board of Education and Parish Council) (2 hrs.)

Catholic School Principal Internship (2 hrs.)

Catholic School Curriculum and Instruction Courses—6 hours

Instructional Supervision (Includes Teacher Recruitment, Selection, Evaluation, and Staff Development) (3 hrs.)

Curriculum Development (Includes Technology) (3 hrs.)

Culminating Experience—Each student is to write a scholarly paper setting forth his or her philosophy of Catholic school leadership and to pass a one-hour oral examination conducted by three faculty members. The ideas and concepts contained in the scholarly paper become the focus of the oral examination.

## **DOCTOR OF EDUCATION DEGREE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP—38 GRADUATE COURSE HOURS BEYOND THE M.A.**

Foundations of Catholic School Leadership Courses—9 hours

Spiritual Formation Leadership Seminar for Catholic School Administrators (3 hrs.)

Seminar on the Theological Dimensions of Catholic School Leadership (Includes Selected Issues in Scripture, Systematic Theology, Liturgy, and Ecclesiology) (3 hrs.)

Seminar on Social Justice in Catholic School Leadership (Includes Building the Christian Community, Moral Development, Pluralism, Needs of Special Students) (3 hrs.)

**Research Courses—9 hours**

**Prerequisites—6 hours**

**Seminar—Research Topics in Catholic Educational Leadership (3 hrs.)** This is the first course which will be taken by the student after which he or she will begin researching and writing a research project on Catholic school leadership. The research project will be carried out over the entire length of the doctoral program and will culminate in an oral examination.

**Catholic School Leadership Seminars—20 hours**

Catholic School Leadership in a Pluralistic Society (3 hrs.)

Human Resource Issues and Administration (3 hrs.)

Staff Development Issues (3 hrs.)

Survey of School Law (Includes Selected Canon Law Issues) (3 hrs.)

Financial Development and Management (3 hrs.)

Governance Issues (Includes Local, Diocesan, National, and Universal Church Councils & Boards) (3 hrs.)

Internship in Central Office Leadership (2 hrs.)

**Culminating Experience—**Each student is expected to pass a six-hour written comprehensive examination and a two-hour oral examination conducted by five faculty members. The focus of the oral examination is the student's research project.

## **CONCLUSION**

The need for well-prepared leaders for Catholic schools is documented in every diocese in the United States. The challenges include a continual decline of religious vocations, changing demographics and diversity issues in many states, declining enrollments, and increased tuition costs. Preparation programs must reflect these new challenges with a strong academic preparation program which includes and emphasizes the spiritual formation of faculty and administrators. Delivery of the program through a cohort model provides an opportunity for prospective and current educational leaders to develop a network of colleagues to augment their professional growth well beyond their preparation program.

## **REFERENCE**

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