



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

**Journal of Catholic Education**

---

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 4

---

12-1-2006

## **Student Affairs Professionals at Catholic Colleges and Universities: Honoring Two Philosophies**

Molly A. Schaller

Kathleen M. Boyle

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

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Schaller, M. A., & Boyle, K. M. (2006). Student Affairs Professionals at Catholic Colleges and Universities: Honoring Two Philosophies. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 10 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1002042013>

This Focus Section Article 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](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [JCE@nd.edu](mailto:JCE@nd.edu).

## FOCUS SECTION

---

# STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS AT CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: HONORING TWO PHILOSOPHIES

MOLLY A. SCHALLER  
*University of Dayton*

KATHLEEN M. BOYLE  
*University of St. Thomas*

*Student affairs professionals are encouraged by their professional organizations to recognize the responsibility they have to their institutions by “supporting its mission, goals and policies” (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2006, p. 6) and by avoiding conflicts of interest between the self and the college or university (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 1990). While some would say that the philosophy that guides student affairs professionals fits quite well with the mission of Catholic institutions (Gallin, 1990), others point out that most student affairs professionals are educated at secular universities and experience little preparation regarding the Catholic intellectual tradition (Estanek, 2001). The purpose of this study was to explore the following questions: Are there student affairs professionals at Catholic colleges and universities who are able to bring together a student affairs philosophy with that of Catholic colleges and universities? If these professionals do exist, what can we learn from their knowledge and approaches that might help other student affairs professionals at Catholic colleges and universities to honor both philosophies? The results suggest that a great deal can be learned from seasoned professionals in Catholic student affairs, which may well assist new professionals in negotiating these two different philosophies.*

Currently over 220 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States enroll more than 700,000 students (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities [ACCU], n.d.). Student affairs work in these 220 institutions cannot be characterized easily because of the diversity of institution type represented in Catholic higher education. While institutional missions are unique to the history and tradition of each college, university, and founding order, each institution shares a certain identity in its relationship to the Catholic Church. Student affairs professionals are encouraged by profession-

al organizations to recognize responsibility to their institutions by “supporting its mission, goals and policies” (ACPA, 2006, p. 6) and by avoiding conflicts of interest between the self and the college or university (NASPA, 1990). However, only a handful of student affairs graduate preparation programs exist in Catholic higher education. Therefore, most student affairs professionals are educated in public universities (Estanek, 2001). Estanek (2002) suggested that this is problematic because of fundamental differences between assumptions of the Catholic Church and the student affairs profession. The purpose of this study was to learn from student affairs professionals in Catholic higher education who have found ways to incorporate a strong Catholic, institutional identity and a solid student affairs approach in their work. Using a grounded theory methodology, we interviewed 7 professionals who others reported met these requirements.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The role of the student affairs professional in American higher education is to promote student development and learning through programs, policies, and relationships with students. While this role has remained relatively consistent as the profession itself has developed over the past half century, the view of this role has changed as the academy has changed. As the academy has become less content-centered and more student-centered (Blimling & Whitt, 1999), an increase in collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs on college campuses has been noted. This approach to educating students is centered on developing good citizens, those who will contribute positively to our world society. In this respect, student affairs practitioners are well-suited to work in Catholic higher education where developing world citizens is also a value. Gallin (1990) suggested Catholic higher education has a climate that supports the development of friendship and community and therefore reinforces the idea that the Catholic setting is one where students can grow as human beings. In addition, Gallin asserted that Catholic institutions are no longer determined to control behavior of young people and instead work to influence personal decision making. In many ways, this is in keeping with the student affairs perspective. However, as Roberts (2002) suggested, student affairs professionals in Catholic institutions face the challenge of accepting students where they are while also moving them to where the institution wants them to be.

Estanek (2002) pointed out fundamental differences in the approach of student affairs professionals and the Catholic perspective, identifying three basic assumptions that provide for potential conflict for student affairs professionals in the Catholic setting. First, the student affairs profession has a knowledge base grown from an inductive approach, where one’s experience

leads to certain beliefs about the world. The Catholic perspective, in contrast, is deductive, where beliefs are based in a guiding philosophy. Second, individual students and their development and success are primary in the minds of student affairs professionals and community is secondary or optional. The Catholic perspective places primary importance on community, and individual needs are secondary. Third, individual choice is the fundamental social value in student affairs, whereas the Catholic perspective holds the value for the common good. When taken together, the ideas of Estanek (2002) and Roberts (2002) suggest that difficulties may exist in the value system of student affairs professionals working in Catholic higher education. The Church's perspective on sexuality, gender, and hierarchy may be sources of conflict as student affairs professionals attend to individuals and their development (Schaller, 2003).

How do student affairs professionals in Catholic colleges and universities balance demands of their profession with demands of their institution? If a basic tenet of the profession is that one must be able to support the mission of the institution, how does one do this when conflicting perspectives arise? Certainly, sources of conflict for student affairs professionals exist in a number of settings. Additionally, student affairs professionals working in Catholic higher education may find few conflicts in specific settings because of similarities found in Catholic social teaching and the history of student affairs work. However, with fewer vowed religious brothers, sisters, and priests leading student affairs divisions, more and more traditionally educated student affairs professionals are working in Catholic colleges and universities (Schaller, 2003). We know conflicts occur for some student affairs professionals in Catholic higher education (Bickel, 2001; Estanek, 1996; Love, 1998; Roberts, 2002). Are there professionals who work or have worked in student affairs in Catholic higher education who have found a balance in honoring these two philosophies? If so, how have they brought about this balance in their work? These are guiding questions of this study.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study which examines experiences of professionals who work, or have worked, in student affairs at Catholic institutions of higher education. We were interested in understanding how these particular individuals experienced the balance and integration of student affairs philosophy and Catholic teachings and identity. We sought to understand how participants constructed meaning from the phenomena that go together to create their understanding of balancing these two philosophical perspectives—their environment, perceptions, beliefs, and conversations with others—in order to capture some of the meaning in the professionals' experiences and to give

that meaning voice (Reinharz, 1992). We specifically chose interviews as “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19).

Participants were selected using a snowball sampling method. Initial participants were identified from a discussion at a meeting of faculty in college student personnel and higher education administration programs within Catholic universities. Participating faculty members were asked to identify student affairs professionals who did a good job of balancing the student affairs philosophy with the mission of Catholic higher education. Prospective participants were contacted via email and/or telephone. Not all prospective participants responded to the researchers.

Prospective participants who did respond participated in an initial interview to discuss the study and issues of confidentiality. They were asked three questions to determine if they would be able to share insights into the research questions. All prospective participants who participated in initial interviews also participated in the study. The interview protocol explored participants’ background, their entry into their current position, view of student affairs work in Catholic higher education including specific challenges and supports, keys to success, what graduate preparation programs could do to prepare new professionals to work in Catholic higher education, and what student affairs divisions can do to prepare and support professionals new to Catholic higher education. Participants also were asked to provide additional names or contacts for the study. All interviews were conducted over the phone, taped, and transcribed verbatim.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Seven student affairs professionals, 4 female and 3 male, participated in the study. Each had worked in at least one Catholic college or university. All participants also had experience at public universities or private non-Catholic institutions either as students or as professionals. At the time of our interviews, one participant was considering leaving Catholic higher education, one had left Catholic higher education but had a desire to return, and one had recently left higher education altogether. Three participants were the senior student affairs professionals on their campus, and the remaining participant was a high-level housing professional. Each of the participants had over 10 years of experience in student affairs, and most of the participants had over 20 years of experience.

Participants worked in many different types of Catholic colleges and universities, including those governed by a diocese and a variety of religious orders. Participants worked in nearly every region of the country. While each

participant responded openly to the questions asked of them, 3 women asked for additional caution when reporting specific situations or insights. One participant, though quite forthcoming, explained at the end of the interview that she was quite nervous about the discussion. Because of this, we are very careful here to report findings of the study in ways that do not identify participants or institutions where they have worked or currently work. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

## **ANALYSIS**

A thematic analysis was conducted utilizing interview transcripts. We read through the entire transcripts once. In the second reading, a note was made each time a change in meaning was detected. Meanings were then grouped in similar themes. We discussed our individual insights into the study. Original findings became the basis for a presentation at a professional conference. During this presentation, at least one study participant was in attendance.

Data analysis was conducted continuously and simultaneously with data collection. This study used inductive data analysis “from specific raw units of information to subsuming categories of information...in order to define local working hypotheses or questions that can be followed up” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 203). Data analysis was similar to the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). A group of methods generally associated with grounded theory uses this type of analysis. Constant comparative analysis usually consists of combining concrete instances of data into more general categories used for theory building. Our objective was to construct a coherent narrative of student affairs professionals’ experiences at Catholic colleges and universities. The voices within the participants’ shared experiences were brought forth and explored in order to gain greater insight into the ways in which they balance variant philosophies.

## **FINDINGS**

In the process of reading and rereading transcripts, we found ourselves struck by the change that participants reported in their view of student affairs work in Catholic higher education. They clearly identified issues they faced when they were new to the Catholic setting, while also recognizing that their perspectives had changed over the years. Most participants discussed challenges they faced in working with professionals new to Catholic higher education or just new professionals. This may have been a function of differences between study participants and these, mostly, seasoned professionals; but we found these insights easily falling into two categories. We have organ-

ized the findings here into two separate domains: early career issues and later career issues. While we suspect there may well be a full continuum, rather than a bifurcated experience, for professionals in Catholic higher education, results of this study are richest on either end of the continuum. Under each domain, we have identified three areas of insight: why professionals work in a Catholic setting, the impact of the Church on professional life, and the role of institutional mission in their professional lives.

## **EARLY CAREER ISSUES**

Either in reflecting on their own experience or on experiences of professionals new to their Catholic campus, participants illuminated why they and others are attracted to Catholic higher education, how the Church impacted their or early professionals' work, and the relationship they had to mission.

### **Selecting Catholic Higher Education**

Participants in this study described coming to Catholic higher education largely by happenstance. Lora, whose first position in a Catholic setting was as a senior level administrator seemed most intentional in her decision making. For Danny, and others like him, the decision had more to do with convenience or comfort of the Catholic setting. He said, "I ended up at [a Catholic university] in [this city] probably as much because of geographical reasons as philosophical reasons. It was a one-day drive from [home]."

Brad and Rob each had connections that helped them find Catholic higher education. For Brad, it was the connection to his undergraduate institution. When he was in graduate school, he received a call and was essentially offered a job with one term of study yet to complete. His undergraduate institution was a Catholic college and Brad said,

I took it, I think, because I knew the place. I knew the people, I was comfortable in it. In those days, this would be in the late 70s, Catholic identity was not much of a topic of conversation. It was never really on my radar.

Brad found success and promotion at his first institution, leading to numerous promotions and eventually a senior level position. One of Rob's supervisors in his public graduate preparation program suggested that he apply for a position at a Catholic institution. Rob did and although he left to work in a public university for 2 years, he has been at that same institution for many years. Cathy began working at a Catholic college in the late 1960s and described herself as "estranged in a way" from the Church at the time. She applied for her original position, she said, "in spite of the college."

Many of the participants suggested that they find young professionals attracted to Catholic higher education because of the “comfort.” For some new professionals, Catholic colleges and universities provide that connection to their faith that they may or may not have yet explored. For others, participants suggested that professionals come to Catholic higher education without recognition of the mission. Lora described experiences she has had in interviewing prospective staff at her college,

I think sometimes people come and I always find it interesting in interviewing, particularly young professionals, and you say, “how does this resonate with you to work at a Catholic institution?”—“Oh, it doesn’t bother me.” “It’s ok, I’m not afraid of it, it doesn’t bother me.” Well, that’s not really the answer I’m looking for.

Lora’s concern was that often professionals new to Catholic higher education come to the setting with a naïve view of what it means. She explained,

I think a lot of...Catholics who work on Catholic campuses come with a, we have a very almost eighth grade Catholic education, you know? Unless you have gone to a Catholic college or university, to explore the Catholic intellectual tradition a bit more, it’s what we’ve heard in grade school and the pulpit and that’s been it.

So while Catholic institutions may be convenient or comfortable as places of work, few participants made purposeful decisions about working in a Catholic institution as new or young professionals. In addition, they met many candidates and early Catholic student affairs professionals who had similar perspectives.

### **Impact of the Catholic Church on Early Professionals**

All but one participant discussed difficulties that they have or have had with Church teachings. Danny found controversies when he worked at a Catholic institution, but he did not seem to feel those personally. On the other hand, Mary was deeply troubled by the disconnect she felt between her values and Church values. This continuum, between having few conflicts with the Church and its teachings to having a deep disconnect may be a reality that exists on many Catholic campuses. We were particularly struck by changes that had occurred in the viewpoints of the other 5 participants. All described a balancing act between their connection to Church values, the Catholic college or university, and difficulties they have with some doctrines. Cathy said, “What I first noticed when I came here was the women’s role in the Church. I thought the Church’s position is hard.” Those reactions to Church culture or to hot button issues did not remain a major focus for participants, except for Mary.



Although Danny was currently working at a public university, he reflected on his experience on a Catholic campus, recalling little open discussion about how to handle some difficult topics or situations. He said,

Sometimes we did or didn't do things out of fear or misunderstanding. I don't think all of those things are written down in a policy manual that says here are the 10 things that you will not do when you get here.

Mary said she felt particularly effective on her campus because she was prepared to handle the politics that came with working on a Catholic campus. Her ability to handle conflict, to know who to talk to when sensitive issues arose, was an important skill that she used often in her work.

In some respect, new professionals were shielded from more significant issues facing student affairs professionals on Catholic campuses. They did not have a relationship or contact with bishops or feel responsible to negotiate a relationship with the Church. Instead, they entered the field with some sense of sensitive topics and then found ways to work within guidelines, whether spoken or assumed, within their institution.

### **Connection to Mission**

Student affairs professionals in this study did not seem to find the mission of the institution of particular importance in their early career. Perhaps this is because we were asking these professionals to reflect upon their entire experience and for many of them, that first experience was a distant memory. However, reflection upon the mission and values of the institution came up as they discussed issues they face with new professionals on their campuses. Vicky acknowledged that work in Catholic student affairs is not for everyone. She said,

Anything we can do to have new professionals reflect on their own values system. Because I think, no matter where it is that we work, your own professional [values] need to match the institutional values or the context of the institution.

Cathy suggested that as a new professional she wondered, "Can I support the mission of the institution?" Brad recommended that this issue be attended to by asking prospective employees to write about the mission and how it would affect their work prior to their hiring. Brad and others found that when they interviewed prospective employees, young professionals did not always know that the institution was Catholic and often had not thought through how the nature of the institution would impact their work life.

## Summary

While we were not examining the experience of early career issues in Catholic student affairs, study participants illuminated a number of important points. For those who have been working in Catholic higher education for more than a decade, the experience has seemed to change. Mission and Catholic intellectual tradition are now topics of conversation. Hiring new professionals who understand and can support the mission is of great importance to these senior level administrators. In addition, while they may have some personal disagreements with the Church, for the most part they have stayed in Catholic higher education because they have found ways to deal with those issues.

## LATER CAREER ISSUES

Each senior level administrator involved in this study shared a number of views and beliefs about working in Catholic higher education. Three participants who were not deans of students or vice presidents had three differing views. Rob, who worked in housing, was committed to Catholic higher education. He had recently found his ideal job at a state school near his parents, but he could not get himself to apply for the position because he did not want to leave his current institution. He said, "I believe in the institution and the mission." Danny was not working in Catholic higher education and his public experience in student affairs caused him to yearn for the Catholic setting. He particularly missed the sharing of a faith community. He said, "It is such an important part of who I am and frankly, because of the [Catholic college] experience, I think it is because it is so ingrained in the way that I approach my professional life." Although Mary thought that she was successful in the Catholic setting, she was considering leaving.

## Selecting Catholic Higher Education

Brad, Rob, Vicky, and Lora each went through career changes and in the process actively sought work in the Catholic setting. Vicky described working in student affairs in Catholic higher education as her vocation. She explained,

I don't think that the work any student affairs professional does anywhere is simply work. I just don't see that. So, my sister and brother colleagues at other private and public institutions, there definitely is a deeper meaning aspect to what it is that we do, but there is just something in my heart and my spirit that said to me that my gift to give back, not only to education and for our students, but specifically to give back in Catholic higher education.

Brad said that when he prepared to leave his first institution and do a national job search, he reflected on what was important to him. He said, "I think I

really solidified my thinking about working in Catholic higher education.”

Rob left his institution for 2 years to work in a public setting and then returned to the Catholic setting. He was at a conference and someone from the Catholic college said to him, “you need to come home.” This was the way that Rob saw his institution, as a home.

Lora worked for more than 2 decades in public higher education and actively sought a Catholic college when she began to look for a senior level position. She described feeling a connection to the college on the second day of her interview for her position. She said,

I was surprised personally that after being an undergraduate 4 years at an institution and then spending another [20] years there, plus two more degrees that in a matter of 2 days that I could go to a place and feel that level of connection. It was a very powerful moment.

While participants were not all certain about the role of Catholic education in their lives as early professionals, in these senior level positions, they found an important connection and deep commitment.

### **Impact of the Church on Later Professionals**

Clearly controversy and difficulties did not go away for participants in this study as they remained, returned, or started in Catholic student affairs. In fact, several participants described beginning their senior level positions and finding controversy immediately. Most controversies had to do with issues of sexuality, often the recognition of student organizations in support of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students or in other student activities, such as “The Vagina Monologues.” Pressure from outside constituencies was ever present. However, each senior level administrator described developing a new understanding of his or her role and of the Church. Brad said,

When it comes to issues of sexuality, I’m very comfortable in discussing those issues with students. I’m comfortable in—not that I need to defend it—but to explain the Church’s policy and the Church’s beliefs in those areas.

Brad explained where he gained his insights,

Probably for me the epiphany, if I can say that, was getting involved in ISACC [the Institute for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges]. Because as a student affairs professional in a Catholic institution I had never, up until that time, had that kind of education about the Church and related it to student affairs work. If I had not gone through that, we may be having a different conversation today.

Lora described how important the mission is to her in her work. She said,

Being at a Catholic institution you have an additional lens you can put on issues and it gives you the opportunity, in a very liberating kind of way, to really examine challenges that students are facing, problems we have, conflicts that are here, much more holistically than we can at the public because you can bring in the whole social justice, spirituality piece and decision making.

While controversies around sexual orientation, sexual behavior, role of women in the Church, and other issues were challenging for many of those we interviewed, they also talked eloquently about how their work in the Catholic setting was richer. Rob said, "I think that in Catholic higher education you have an opportunity there in that spiritual sense to approach a student in a manner that you might not be able to do at a state school."

Cathy pointed out that "Catholic social teaching is so rich." And while it is tempting to become marred in controversial issues, she suggested that Catholic social teaching is a basis for the work of student affairs professionals. Vicky described how faith tradition has impacted her daily work,

To me, my work is something more. When I think about the care that we give to each individual student and to me a huge value is the sanctity of each human being. I'm not saying that could happen at another institution, but at a Catholic institution you're asked to make it happen.

Brad also discussed the importance of the dignity of the individual,

I think that probably the dignity of the individual that the Church teaches about all the time in handling anything is my main focus when I'm dealing with [personnel or policy decisions]...I think keeping uppermost in my mind that the person that I'm working with is a manifestation from God and deserves the dignity that I give him or her.

And while others might consider these issues, Brad suggested that many public institutions are more concerned about procedures and following guidelines rather than the dignity of the human person.

Brad also indicated that real challenges occurred in Catholic student affairs because not all institutions are clear about who they are. He explained,

I think that's one of the greater challenges in Catholic higher education is to define absolutely what it means to be Catholic for the institution, to be comfortable with it and also to be ready and willing and able to defend what that means to that institution.

Mary felt a more direct and personal challenge. She described one of her greatest concerns as the need to support each student in his or her development while also supporting the institution. So, if a student wants to talk about his or her sexual orientation, Mary recognized a number of issues she needed to think about. She said,

How can I truly help students from a developmental perspective while balancing what I think might be some real institution needs, which as an employee here I feel are important to respect, and that, I think, is really challenging. I think it is incredibly challenging.

Treating each person, including students, with dignity sometimes felt as if it was in conflict with what institutions might want from professionals we interviewed. And yet, as Lora said, processes have been developed to be open and discuss the difficult topics that face students. When faced with a controversial discussion of sexual orientation on campus, Lora said,

I'm going to educate myself and I believe that it is important to have open dialogue because if we are talking about the ability to develop critical thinking skills, critical analysis, students have to face all issues and be able to hear and participate in, and develop their own opinions, their own views within a framework that gives them a context that is complete, not just one side. And so, in "by complete" it is being clear about what the Church has said regarding support for homosexual individuals.

### **Connection to Mission**

Perhaps the most significant change from early career to later career issues was the role of mission in these professionals' lives. As early career professionals, they often were not fully cognizant of the mission of the Catholic institution. And if they were, it was often very personally connected to them. They found the mission as a support in their own faith life and community. Senior level student affairs professionals began to see themselves as leaders for the mission. Lora, for example, called herself "an active facilitator of the mission." They felt and articulated a clear role in maintaining and promoting a mission-centered approach in their work at their institution. One important aspect of this leadership was in the selection and training of new staff. Lora explained,

Primarily, I think it is my responsibility to talk about the Catholic mission and the institution and I want to make sure that is a discussion that is had with the most senior member of the division.

Another approach was shared by Brad,

I kept the Catholic identity in front of everybody and I was not afraid to discuss it...So again, the orientations I made sure...even when we hired graduate assistants that I spent an hour and a half with them on the Catholic mission of the institution. I also spent time in orientation with the RAs. It was a topic of discussion I spent with everyone that we hired when I interviewed them individually. So, I think that people knew up front when I arrived that that was one of my main areas and that I was going to place emphasis on that.

Rob suggested that leadership must be in place to articulate a clear connection between student affairs work and the Catholic identity of the institution. This connection needs to be shared with all new staff, including those who are non-Catholic. Rob said,

I think that the schools that do this and do it well, who've been working especially with new professionals and people new to their campuses, folks who are coming from a non-Catholic background onto a Catholic campus is to be open about it and to talk about it. Spend time during training, if it's not built in, it's not in the normal course of conversation, people won't get it and when people do get it—it will be too late because it's something that you have to work at first because you're afraid of it, you don't understand it when you first get there. I think that people expect it to be really different, you know it's not like we walk around holding hands singing Kumbaya.

Cathy, Vicky, Lora, and Brad each talked about approaches they took to lead for mission. Cathy's approach involved both faculty and student affairs professionals in the exploration of Catholic identity and student affairs work. They engaged in discussions about case studies that involved sensitive topics. Her goal was to structure "difficult conversations." In doing so, she wanted to ensure structures were in place to discuss difficult topics when they arose naturally.

Lora said as a leader, she needed to educate herself, explore issues, and structure those same experiences for staff and students. She indicated that she was not willing to ignore or assume clear answers to the difficult questions in students' lives; she said,

It was finding those ways to indeed open the dialogue, you recognize and indeed educate yourself to what does the Church teach about the sanctity of each individual....So working toward a dialogue was probably one of the things that I was confronted with very early.

According to Lora, her job was to provide leadership so that her staff could be actively involved in also supporting the mission. She wanted her staff to

understand Catholic intellectual tradition in addition to owning and valuing the charism of the institution. When staff conducted their work, they would also think about how their work fit with the institution.

Each study participant indicated he or she found tremendous support from religious brothers, sisters, and priests on their campuses. They recognized the decline of vowed religious on their campuses, but found these relationships instrumental in their work. Vicky said sisters, brothers, and priests were critical to her success at all three Catholic institutions at which she worked.

At every institution I've ever worked at, I've had the gift of having colleagues who are members of the religious order or Catholics very well espoused of Catholic social teaching or in the hierarchy...who I could have open frank conversations with. So, if in fact, you come into personal conflict, or personal questions, I have always been able to in a confidential, trusting relationship on every campus I've worked at been able to talk with someone before I (a) had to make a decision or (b) had to go public on something.

Finding this safe place helped Vicky understand how to negotiate nuances of each university.

Vicky and others suggested that this is important, because while Catholic universities hold a great deal in common, differences occur from one university to the next. Danny indicated some universities are "predominately Catholic" and there are other institutions where "that is not an emphasis on what they are trying to do with their students." Many participants talked about the role of the charism of the institution in guiding their work. Vicky indicated other important characteristics are important to acknowledge,

I think that we're all rooted in the same tradition, but sometimes I think the way the institution interprets the actual demonstration of that value is very different. To me, the things that have influenced [me] most have been the location of the institution, the founding religious order, and the president of the institution.

Mission and charism were connected to each participant's institutional involvement.

### **Summary**

Later career student affairs professionals made active choices to work in a Catholic setting. In choosing to work at Catholic institutions, they understood the complexities of student affairs work in a Catholic setting and yet celebrated ways in which Catholic social teaching, ethos of care, sense of

community, and support for values and religious exploration play a role in their work. They did not shy away from difficulties that exist in their work; instead, they worked to provide leadership for the mission of the institution while also opening opportunities for dialogue. Participants believed it best to hold open conversations, rather than to allow assumptions about what is acceptable within the institution to go unspoken. They understood each institution was different and that they needed to be well connected to the founding order or the vowed religious on their campuses. According to our participants, it was their responsibility to coordinate their work and the work of staff in ways that support Church teaching and promote the charism of the institution.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study presented challenges and opportunities for learning. The challenge of this study was twofold. First, we needed to find professionals who had a reputation for supporting both student affairs philosophy and the Catholic mission of their institutions. We assume many more such professionals are employed across the country who are not yet easily identifiable because they have yet to develop a reputation. Therefore, we did not speak to any entry level professionals. Second, we cannot tell why it is that some professionals did not respond to our request to participate in this study. We suspect many of the professionals asked to participate are busy and could not easily find time to respond to our request. In addition, we suspect that these individuals may have a great deal of insight to provide to this study.

Including more participants may have allowed us to analyze the responses by institution type, size, or founding order. We did begin to see some differences between male and female professionals' responses that we would like to explore further by including more participants in our study. Specifically, the only participants who expressed concern over discussing their views were women. In addition, several women held remaining frustrations with the Church that they discussed in length; while men did not seem to hold as many concerns or to hold them as fervently.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS**

Four important considerations for student affairs professionals working in Catholic student affairs arose from this study: (a) professionals seeking opportunities at Catholic institutions should educate themselves about Catholic teaching; (b) Catholic institutions need to weave mission into hiring, orientation, and induction sessions for new student affairs professionals;



(c) dialoguing about difficult topics is critical; and (d) it is important to create partnerships with the vowed religious men and women of the institution.

### **Seek to Understand Catholic Teaching and Interpretation**

It is incumbent upon student affairs professionals to become familiar with the institutional history and tradition of their college or university regardless of affiliation. In the case of Catholic institutions, this includes Church teaching and the various ways that teaching is interpreted. Brad shared the importance of his experience with the Institute for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges. This role is now being filled through the annual conference of the Association for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities (ASACCU). Numerous resources in print and electronically support this exploration.

Senior level participants in this study suggested student affairs divisions provide leadership for this exposure and structure dialogue for all student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals in this study were all educated in traditional graduate preparation programs for student affairs work. None of them were educated in any traditional way regarding Catholic intellectual tradition, religious traditions, or Church teaching. While many of them were raised Catholic and some attended Catholic schools, participants had to seek out and acquire additional education about the Church and acceptable practices on their own campuses. In essence, this meant that these professionals had to become experts in two areas: student affairs and Catholic teaching.

### **Discuss Mission in Hiring, Orientation, and Induction**

Professionals became determined to share the mission of their institution with all levels of staff and in many different ways throughout the academic year. Participants celebrated the Catholic mission of their institutions and therefore found comfort in discussing the mission. We suspect that some student affairs professionals became educated in Catholic teaching and did not remain in the setting or left the setting out of frustration before they came to understand Church teaching. Our participants found themselves supported in their work as they came to a deeper understanding of the Church and were therefore able to actively support the mission. Throughout the study, open dialogue about the role of mission in student affairs work was presented by participants as an important component in hiring, orientation, and induction of new staff.

### **Dialogue About Difficult Topics**

Danny's story about his early work in Catholic student affairs suggests professionals may base their approaches to sensitive issues from a position of fear or ignorance. Formal and informal conversations regarding Church

teaching, the charism of the institution, and difficult topics may be uncomfortable and protracted. Dialogue may also be fruitful in producing student affairs approaches that are congruent with mission and therefore allowing espoused values to also become enacted values (Kuh & Hall, 1993). Often, student affairs professionals need to seek assistance from other institutional leaders when making decisions about Church teaching, the charism of the institution, and difficult topics.

### **Seek Partners with Vowed Religious on Campus**

Vicky said that she sought a “soft place to land” when it came to difficult issues she faced in her work. By seeking relationships outside of the student affairs division and with those who understood the nature of the institution, she and others found it easier to understand the implications of their decisions on the institution. In this process of seeking partners, our participants found that the interpretation of Church teaching involved a great deal more uncertainty than they anticipated. This suggests that professionals must have a deepening understanding of the Church and be willing to remain in the process of understanding.

## **CONCLUSION**

For much of the history of student affairs, professionals have seen themselves as most closely aligned with each other and with students. In recent years, there has been a movement toward a closer alignment with the academic mission of higher education. This study suggests student affairs professionals in Catholic higher education must also become more closely aligned with the mission of their institution. They must open dialogue and build relationships on campus to discuss openly challenges facing students and campus life. Student affairs professionals must then become educated so as to articulate their professional identity in the Catholic setting while maintaining their identity as student affairs educators.

## **REFERENCES**

- American College Personnel Association. (2006). *Statement of ethical principles and standards*. Retrieved May 6, 2006, from <http://www.myacpa.org/au/documents/EthicsStatement.pdf>
- Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). *Membership statistics*. Retrieved May 3, 2006, from <http://www.accunet.org/display.asp?Category=6>
- Bickel, C. M. (2001). Residence life professionals on Catholic campuses: A qualitative study of how they assist students with issues of sexual behavior and identity (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 2001). *Dissertations Abstracts International*, 62, 931.
- Blimling, G. S., & Whitt, E. J. (1999). *Good practice in student affairs: Principles to foster student learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Estanek, S. M. (1996). A study of student affairs practice at Catholic colleges and universities. *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, 16, 63-72.

- Estanek, S. M. (2001). Student development and the Catholic university: Philosophical reflections. *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, 22, 37-52.
- Estanek, S. M. (2002). Student development and the Catholic university: Philosophical reflections. In S. M. Estanek (Ed.), *Understanding student affairs at Catholic colleges and universities* (pp. 17-33). Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward.
- Gallin, A. (1990). Introduction. *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, 10(2), 3-4.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Kuh, G. D., & Hall, J. E. (1993). Using cultural perspectives in student affairs. In G. D. Kuh (Ed.), *Cultural perspectives in student affairs work* (pp. 1-20). Lanham, MD: American College Personnel Association.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Love, P. (1998). Cultural barriers facing lesbian, gay, and bisexual students at a Catholic college. *Journal of Higher Education*, 69, 298-323.
- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (1990). *NASPA standards of professional practice*. Retrieved May 3, 2006, from <http://www.naspa.org/programs/standards.cfm>
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, G. (2002). Developing policies to address controversial issues: University of St. Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota. In S. M. Estanek (Ed.), *Understanding student affairs at Catholic colleges and universities* (pp. 139-150). Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward.
- Schaller, M. A. (2003). Research on student affairs at Catholic colleges and universities. In T. C. Hunt, E. A. Joseph, R. J. Nuzzi, & J. O. Geiger (Eds.), *Handbook of research on Catholic higher education* (pp. 243-261). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

*Molly A. Schaller is an assistant professor and coordinator of the College Student Personnel Program at the University of Dayton. Kathleen M. Boyle is an assistant professor and director of the Leadership in Student Affairs Program at the University of St. Thomas. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Molly A. Schaller, Department of Counselor Education and Human Services, University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469-0530.*