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## Book Review: Realizing the Distinctive University: Vision and Values, Strategy and Culture

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Realizing the Distinctive University: Vision and Values, Strategy and Culture

Mark William Roche

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017

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Just as American higher education benefits from diversity *within* institutions, it also benefits from diversity *among* institutions. Catholic universities, public universities, community colleges, and other types of schools all have distinct missions and constituencies, and accrediting agencies are becoming more cognizant of this fact—often inviting institutions to define their own missions rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all standard. Scholars of higher education management have warned against mission creep and urged universities to find their own distinctive voices rather than emulate the educational models of the Ivy League and land-grant universities that produce the lion's share of their faculty (Alfred, 2006).

In this context, the serious academic study of Catholic university mission has emerged as an important niche subfield. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, many Catholic colleges and universities began a gradual transition away from direct Church control and into the academic mainstream, implementing modern tenure systems, introducing research expectations for faculty, and supplementing all-clerical teaching staffs with large numbers of lay instructors (Gleason, 1995). Several authors (Hendershott, 2009; Morey & Piderit, 2006) have addressed the challenges of understanding Catholic university mission when so much of the traditional Catholic college governance structure has changed so quickly.

Mark Roche has already contributed to this discussion with his excellent 2003 book, *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University* (University of Notre Dame Press). Roche, who served as dean

of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters from 1997-2008, is uniquely positioned to comment on the mission of the modern Catholic research university, both as a scholar and as a practitioner. As one of the first lay people to occupy a position that, a generation ago, would have almost certainly been held by a priest, he is part of a pioneering group of Catholic educators in South Bend, Washington, Chestnut Hill, and elsewhere who helped to transform small religious academies into modern American research universities. Roche's 2003 book was an important defense of the Catholic research university, arguing that Catholic identity does not contradict the values of the academy, but can be the truest fulfillment thereof, freeing scholars to explore important theological and interdisciplinary implications of their work in a way that would be more difficult at secular institutions.

Roche's latest book, *Realizing the Distinctive University*, can be seen as a follow-up and an expansion of that previous publication. While drawing upon many of the same ideas and principles, Roche, this time, is targeting a much broader audience—using his experiences at a Catholic university to illustrate lessons that he hopes will translate to all types of institutions. The main thesis of the book is that universities are at their best when they develop clear and distinctive missions, embracing the traditions, pedagogies, and curricula that set them apart from their peers, rather than replicating the practices of higher-ranked institutions in the quest for prestige.

In the same way that the Gospels teach through parables, Roche illustrates his points primarily through anecdotes and personal experiences. Many stories relate to challenges he faced as he attempted to upend years of tradition at Notre Dame by introducing clearer expectations for faculty, including annual performance reviews and other practices adapted from his previous career as a department chair at Ohio State. These reforms were uncomfortable at an institution still struggling with whether to define itself as a residential undergraduate college or a graduate research university.

It is slightly unfortunate that the book is being marketed to a broad audience, because Catholic university administrators are the group most likely most likely to find value in it. The book is at its best when Roche describes his efforts to promote appreciation for Notre Dame's Catholic identity among his 500 faculty. All too often in the debate over Catholic university mission, faculty are seen as exogenous—like cats who cannot be herded or loose cannons who cannot be controlled. Inevitably, universities with that mindset tend to relegate the stewardship of the institution's Catholic identity to the staff, limiting it to campus ministry offices without exploring its

impact on the messy world of teaching, research, and academic freedom. Roche not only shows that it is possible to incorporate Catholic mission into hiring, tenure decisions, and research, but offers some concrete practices for doing so (e.g., mandatory references to Catholic identity in all faculty job announcements and incentive funding for scholars whose research aligns with the Catholic mission). Many Catholic institutions would do well to use these techniques.

Roche occasionally criticizes Notre Dame's tendency to isolate itself in its own bubble and perhaps pat itself on the back too much, but this book is not entirely immune from that tendency toward institutional self-praise. Although Roche makes an effort to acknowledge his mistakes and present awarts-and-all account of his deanship, positive anecdotes outnumber negative ones, and the book can at times seem too institution-centric, with an abundance of Notre Dame stories interspersed with occasional counter-examples from Ohio State and other universities where Roche has studied or lectured. That, combined with the fact that it is published by Notre Dame Press, gives the book an insular feel, and may leave some audiences with the impression that they are reading an extended recruitment brochure for Notre Dame.

An explicit case study of Notre Dame would have stood on its own merits. With its \$10 billion football-fueled endowment, Notre Dame is America's wealthiest Catholic university and is worthy of study. However, it cannot be called a "typical" Catholic university. Most of the nearly 200 Catholic institutions in this country are urban, with compact campuses and limited financial resources; administrators at such schools will find Roche's discussions of budget and endowment management interesting, but will find little that they can replicate directly on their own campuses. That said, Roche's anecdotes are meant to be illustrative, not prescriptive, and his main point is that all universities should engage in self-reflection to identify and build upon their own unique strengths.

There is one passing reference to Notre Dame's founding religious order, but perhaps because he is targeting a broad audience, Roche does not go into detail about Catholic universities' relationship to the Church. This is unfortunate, because it may imply, to non-specialists, that Roche and his Notre Dame colleagues single-handedly redefined the nature of the Catholic research university, when in fact they built upon decades of dialogue between different institutions, orders, and dioceses. Also, as might be expected from the perspective of a former dean, the management techniques illustrated here are predominantly faculty-centric. There is no mention of campus ministry

and only passing mention of residence life, extra-curricular activities, or other aspects of university management usually under staff purview. Roche takes a hierarchical view of faculty-staff relations, referring to the “academic *core* and support *side*” (p. 232), and bemoaning that, “Even as a professional staff...frees faculty to focus on teaching and research, it runs the risk of moving academic decision making away from the faculty” (p. 230). This attitude borders unhelpfully on condescension, and a more complete view of mission integration would have addressed faculty and staff as partners in a shared enterprise rather than dismissively relegating staff to a secondary role.

At its core, *Realizing the Distinctive University* is most often a personal memoir, recounting one dean’s experience at one particular Catholic university. Readers should approach it with this in mind. But when the dean in question is Mark Roche, and the time period in question is an era when many Catholic colleges transformed themselves into modern research universities, that memoir is interesting indeed.

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