

September 2011

Sustainability and Catholic Higher Education: A Toolkit for Mission Integration

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Recommended Citation

DiLeo, Daniel R. (2011) "Sustainability and Catholic Higher Education: A Toolkit for Mission Integration," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 41 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol41/iss1/29>

SPECIAL REPORT: RESOURCES

Sustainability and Catholic Higher Education: A Toolkit for Mission Integration

New resource seeks to help Catholic colleges and universities more fully ground sustainability work in Catholic mission

By Daniel R. DiLeo

All across the country, Catholic colleges and universities have taken positive steps to become more ecologically sustainable. While encouraging, there is a recognition that more needs to be done to ensure that these efforts are explicitly and consistently grounded in Catholic mission. Towards that end, the Association for Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has collaborated with seven other national Catholic organizations to publish *Sustainability and Catholic Higher: A Toolkit for Mission Integration* (available for free download at <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/resources>). The publication of this resource recognizes that there are important reasons to firmly ground sustainability work in Catholic mission, and is especially timely given the Society of Jesus' recent *Special Report on Ecology*.

The Toolkit and its sponsors recognize that it is essential for schools to ground sustainability work in Catholic mission because “cultivat[ing] and car[ing] for” God’s good gift of Creation is a core

dimension the Christian vocation (Genesis 2:15). As such, grounding sustainability work in Catholic mission is critical if schools are to attain a holistic and *integrated* realization of mission. This can be especially challenging if sustainability is seen merely as an optional “add-on” to Catholic mission rather than woven into its very fabric.

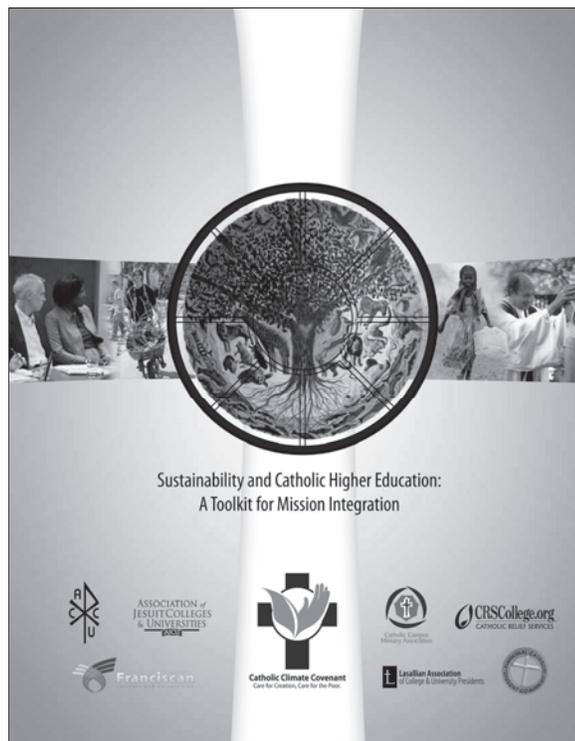
Mission-based sustainability is important because the Catholic tradition offers unique contributions to the larger sustainability conversation. For example, linking sustainability to Catholic mission enables the articulation that environmental issues are inexorably connected to Catholic commitments to protect and defend human life and dignity, especially of the poor and vulnerable. If, however, sustainability work is *not* grounded in Catholic mission, these invaluable contributions to the ecological conversation can quickly become lost.

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Finally, grounding sustainability work in Catholic mission is critical for Catholic schools because doing so can prevent these efforts from becoming politicized. For example, rooting sustainability in faith enables the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to assert in “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good,” At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God’s creation and the one human family.”

In order to help Catholic colleges and universities more firmly ground sustainability work in Catholic mission, AJCU has collaborated with the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities, the Lasallian Association of College and University Presidents, Catholic Relief Services College, the Catholic Campus Ministry Association, the National Catholic Student Coalition and the USCCB-endorsed Catholic Coalition on Climate Change to publish “Sustainability and Catholic Higher: A Toolkit for Mission Integration.” The Toolkit is organized around the five components of the Catholic Climate Covenant: The St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor, and offers practical suggestions by which schools can holistically:

- PRAY and reflect on the duty to care for God’s Creation and protect the poor and vulnerable;



- LEARN about and educate others on the causes and moral dimensions of environmental degradation and climate change;
- ASSESS how we — as individuals and institutions — contribute to environmental degradation and climate change;
- ACT to change our choices and behaviors to reduce the ways we contribute to environmental degradation and climate change;
- ADVOCATE for Catholic principles and priorities in environmental and climate change discussions and decisions, especially as they impact those who are poor and vulnerable.

Each section of the Toolkit examines a different dimension of the Pledge by: identifying who on campus can most effectively take action; offering suggestions for how each element might be implemented on campus; suggesting ways in which the institution might take the Pledge “beyond the campus” into the community. The Toolkit also

offers an Assessment Tool which enables schools to discern the extent to which their sustainability work is already grounded in Catholic mission.

The sponsoring organizations hope that all Catholic colleges and universities will not only implement the

Toolkit, but also join the 25+ national Catholic organizations which have become Catholic Climate Covenant Partners by formally endorsed the Pledge. Doing so offers schools the unique opportunity to publicly affirm their commitment to mission-based sustainability, and stand in solidarity with other Catholic organizations that recognize caring for creation as a core dimension of Catholic life.

In September, the Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat at the General Curia of the Society of Jesus (Rome) published “Healing a Broken World” which considers the realities of environmental degradation and climate change in light of the Jesuit mission and charism. The document’s recommendations particularly encourage Jesuit institutions of higher education to “[r]oot university teaching, research, and service activities in social and environmental justice issues,” and the co-sponsors of the Toolkit encourage Jesuit colleges and universities to use both this resource and Catholic Climate Covenant Partnership as ways to more fully respond to this call of the Society and the Church. ■