

April 1998

Responses to Hollenbach: Barriers and Resources

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Recommended Citation

Dougherty, Charles J. (1998) "Responses to Hollenbach: Barriers and Resources," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 13 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol13/iss1/4>



Barriers and Resources

CHARLES J. DOUGHERTY

Before addressing the specifics of what Catholic universities can do to promote dialogue on the common good, I want to register two conceptual reservations about Professor Hollenbach's analysis. First, I believe it to be consistent with what he says but not made as clear as it should be that the educational effort needed on this issue must pervade society. This is not solely a responsibility of Catholic higher education, American higher education, or even formal educational institutions as such. Instead, all of society's educational relationships—families, neighborhoods, churches, workplaces, and the like—have a role in helping Americans focus more clearly on questions related to the common good. This in no way diminishes the special responsibility of Catholic universities, but it places it in a larger framework.

Second, I think Hollenbach's account of Americans' loss of a sense of the common good is overly pessimistic. I believe that Americans have, by and large, an intuitive or visceral sense of the common good. Much of our present confusion is not about the ends or goals of life, but about the appropriate means to attain those ends. Most

Americans, I believe, would accept a characterization of the common good along the following lines: a society in which individuals can lead reasonably long lives with a minimum of pain and with a maximum of love, friendship, satisfying work, creativity, and an overall sense of purpose. If I am right, then much of our discussion about the common good is really a discussion about means, not ends. It is about which careers, relationships, and kinds of lives are most likely to lead to those ends that most of us desire intuitively.

Now I want to try to do justice to the main thrust of Hollenbach's article and its emphasis on the particular role that Catholic higher education can play in stimulating dialogue about the common good, or, in my estimation, about the roads that lead toward or away from the common good. Certain barriers stand in the way of

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Catholic universities' fulfilling this role, but we have some exceptional resources as well. First, the barriers:

1. Many faculty members at Catholic universities are unaware of the Catholic intellectual tradition and, therefore, cannot help to stimulate dialogue around the issue of the common good. This is a familiar fact to those on the inside of American Catholic higher education, but, in my experience, a surprise and source of alarm to Catholic families who send their children to our institutions. What we know (and they do not) is that in the 1960's and 1970's, we focused on hiring the best faculty on a disciplinary basis—the best chemists, the best sociologists—with little attention to faculty members' sympathy with the Catholic character of our institutions. In too many cases we have gotten just what we wished for, namely, outstanding faculties—but faculties unaware of, and in some cases unsympathetic to, the Catholic intellectual tradition.
2. At most Catholic universities, the percentage of students identifying themselves as Catholic when they enter the university has been declining. In part, this is a matter of our own choosing. As we have sought diversity on our campuses, we have reached out to new populations. In my own institution, for example, we have increased the numbers of Muslim and Hindu students substantially over the last several years. At the same time, I suspect that a growing number of students who come to us from Catholic homes and high schools are less willing to identify themselves as Catholic on the way into our institution and are checking the "none of the above" box on our religion surveys. This may be a small act of rebellion or it may represent a worrisome level of disaffection. With larger numbers of non-Catholics and larger numbers of Catholics unwilling to identify themselves as such, our ability to focus and sustain a discussion on the Catholic contribution to our understanding of the common good is increasingly difficult.
3. Another phenomenon well known to insiders in American Catholic education but also surprising to those in the Catholic community outside our universities is the non-directive character of most of our instruction, especially in areas critical for common-good discussions such as the humanities and social sciences. We all know exceptions to this generalization, but the prevailing teaching

style among our faculty is to expose students to various alternatives (say, competing theories of justice), encourage them to think through strengths and weaknesses of each position, and then move on without offering a professional or personal opinion themselves. This "value-free" instruction is another barrier to a substantive discussion of Catholic views on the common good.

4. Finally, there is a reality about contemporary American Catholic universities that, like it or not, must be acknowledged candidly. I cannot cite survey data to sustain this claim, but my guess is that the majority of faculty and students at Catholic universities reject official teaching about the role of women in the Church. Many reject large portions of Church teaching on sexuality as well. The substance of these issues aside, such widespread alienation creates a barrier to campus discussions of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

There are, however, countervailing resources at Catholic universities that make the prospects for a dialogue of the kind Hollenbach seeks possible and, in the right set of circumstances, likely. In my estimation, these are the main resources at hand:

1. While faculty at Catholic universities are more secular and non-directive in teaching than the wider Catholic community expects, they also have deep professional and personal commitments in their intellectual lives and research endeavors. Many faculty have found Catholic universities congenial precisely because of our institutional support for the deep moral commitments that drive their scholarly efforts. Catholic universities reward applied and socially-engaged scholarship. Thus, there is a depth of commitment among our faculty that is a potential starting point for a dialogue on the common good. Faculty may be reluctant to say so publicly, but in their "heart of hearts" many believe their scholarship contributes to the common good.
2. There is a salutary movement within Catholic universities over the last several years to "hire for mission." The movement is too young to characterize fully, but it has brought the Catholic character of our universities more squarely into the faculty hiring process.¹ Potential faculty

¹ On "Hiring for Mission," see *Conversations*, no. 12 (Spring 1997). Ed.

members, for example, are sometimes asked to read key mission documents and to reflect on them as part of the interview process. Some are asked explicitly why they want to be part of a Catholic university, or what they can contribute to fulfilling the mission. These are not easy discussions to conduct or evaluate, nor is this movement without critics. But “hiring for mission” holds out the promise that as faculty at Catholic universities are renewed, willingness to enter a dialogue about the Catholic intellectual tradition and the common good will increase.

3. An especially useful resource that Catholic universities have is an unusually large and articulate core curriculum. Typically, this core curriculum is strong in theology and the humanities, areas where discussion of the common good and roads to it are routine. It would not be impossible in most cases to add material on the common good directly into existing required courses or to fashion new courses around it. A curricular vehicle, therefore, exists at Catholic universities to locate and facilitate dialogue on the common good, something not true of American universities in general.
4. Catholic universities are developing what can aptly be called a “culture of service” on our campuses. Voluntary service opportunities abound and our students are taking advantage of them in droves. Service learning in which educational reflection provides a cognitive context for service activities is a growing phenomenon. Both volunteerism and academic reflection on it are fertile grounds for discussion of justice and of other issues directly related to the common good.
5. The most important phenomena that make Catholic universities ripe for the kind of dialogue Professor Hollenbach proposes are the many concrete ways in which the Catholic university campus has itself become a community, especially for resident students. This is largely the result of efforts by student services personnel, campus ministry, and other support staff who have worked assiduously to build relationships in the residence halls, involvement in student activities, and a sense of caring about the campus as a whole. Students experience a community in which the common good and approaches to it are ongoing concerns in the halls, in the chapels, and in various student organizations and activities.

This is a practicum for the kind of dialogue needed across the nation. Perhaps Catholic universities can do no better than to continue to provide our nation with individuals who have experienced four years of a community that cares for individuals and yet understands itself as an organic social whole.

I trust that Professor Hollenbach is not leaving the entire problem of refocusing on the common good to our educational institutions. I believe the problem is one step removed from an issue of ultimate ends, and therefore more penetrable. Finally, I think that Catholic universities, while facing significant barriers, also have important resources that can make them centers for a national dialogue on the common good and means to attain it.