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Put the Catholic Jesuit Identity Up Front

Hiring for Mission and Academic Excellence, can we have it all?

By Robert Niehoff, S.J.

For over 20 years, faculty and administrators have addressed the issue of hiring for mission in the context of a Catholic Jesuit University. For years, much of the energy in these conversations focused on defining the scope and meaning of our institutional mission, and yet the definition of mission was not really very clear. In discussing hiring for mission, far too often mission was seen to encompass only the religious mission and identity of the institution. Within a Jesuit University our mission clearly includes our Catholic and Jesuit identity but is not limited to that. Every institution is grounded in its history and traditions which help define its mission. For instance, for many of us, our institutional founding and early mission focused on educating the children of Catholic immigrants and later educating first generation college students became more of a focus. Since the 1970s our institutions have focused on academic excellence as seen in research agendas and graduate programs. The discussion of hiring for mission then at times began to be a tug of war between excellence and 'mission' defined in religious terms. The problem is that excellence is clearly demanded by all aspects of our missions.

It is not my goal to discuss the definition or development of our institutional missions. It is, however, crucial that each institution develop a more robust operational definition of mission in order to foster more meaningful "hiring for mission" discussions. While the hiring process for administrative and leadership positions in our institutions significantly influence our missions, much of our historical discussion focused on faculty hiring. Both faculty and administrative hiring experiences

provide the basis for my comments here. In this brief reflection, I intend to explore the intricacies of the search process, which I believe might help make our hiring for mission discussions more useful.

An important point - and one thing often forgotten in this discussion - is that all hires are choices between the ideal and the possible. Every search committee, at its best, attempts to determine the candidates who will most effectively advance the university's goals. Some of the clearest examples of unrealistic position descriptions I have seen are the unrealistic presidential position descriptions that many institutions produce. We all know that no one can perform all of the demanding functions excellently, as the position descriptions require, even on his or her best days.

The posted position description is the first stage of the hiring process and this is the point at which many prospective candidates begin to self-select regarding their willingness to engage the institutional mission. In the position description the institution (through an individual, a department, or a committee) describes itself and the specific contribution of an *ideal selected candidate*. In every case, possible candidates evaluate themselves against the criteria in the job description and their knowledge, real and imagined, of the institution and its people. The self-selection process continues through the on-campus interview right up to agreeing to take the position, and as some of us have unhappily experienced, even after the individual arrives and begins the role still ambiva-

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lent about the institution. While candidate self-selection is significant, and often not in the power of the institution to control, the quality of the institution's ability to articulate its mission both in the position description and operationally, e.g. in the campus visit, in the orientation to the campus and to the role, is key to successful recruitment.

It is crucial that the position description address the significance of the Catholic and Jesuit character of the university and the commitment to excellence.

The way the institution addresses this question will reflect its commitment (or lack thereof) to these values. Where these characteristics fall within the various criteria in the position description is also significant. Job descriptions typically begin with required training (degrees), experience (teaching or administrative), skills and background. After the position requirements we often see the desired training, experience and skills enumerated. How the institution describes its commitment to academic excellence, social justice, service and service learning, commitment to the disadvantaged locally and globally, and its commitment to its Catholic and Jesuit character will matter to many candidates and I argue should come up front.

Balancing the ideal and the possible

These suggestions have at time elicited negative responses. Some might see them as efforts to impose litmus tests on candidates. In the most extreme examples and for some, in an attempt to reduce this discussion to the absurd, you will hear the question asked — does this mean that you will only hire Catholics? I sometimes will respond for effect— that I would not even hire a Jesuit, Catholic or not, for reason of their support for the mission alone! And there are countless examples of non-Catholics who support the mission and identity of our institutions very effectively.

It is this challenge of balancing the ideal and the possible which vexes many of us. The reality that no candidate is perfect forces institutions to do their best to attempt to judge “a fit” between the institutional needs and the prospective candidates. Among those judgments is an evaluation of the candidate's fit with the institutional mission. There is no short cut to resolving this forced choice. It is not enough for the candidate to suggest that they *‘do not have a problem’* with our mission (which includes our Catholic and Jesuit tradition and values as these have helped determined who and what our communities are today). What corporation, non-profit, or educational institution would hire anyone — janitor, electrician, faculty member, or administrator — who does “not have a problem” with the mission and goals of

the organization and think they hired the best? I believe that a comprehensive commitment to our mission—in teaching, learning and service is demanded in every institutional hire. (I recommend Susan Resneck Pierce's “Presidents and Mission” in *Inside Higher Education*, August 21, 2011.)

So every hire we make is a hire for mission. Every hiring decision adds to the institution's collective values and energy to achieve our mission goals however we might articulate them. I know of no institution that would hire a candidate because of his or her ability to articulate their commitment to our mission, especially



Robert I. Niehoff, S.J., president of John Carroll University, stopping to talk to students on the quad.

our Catholic and Jesuit mission, absent the academic and professional skills and ability we require for that role. This is true be they a Catholic or Jesuit or of no religious affiliation at all. I would argue the “hiring for mission” discussion might actually help our campuses to articulate how the Catholic Intellectual traditions can contribute to a more robust curriculum and certainly to a more meaningful campus conversation regarding our values. Faculty and administrators who bring or can be educated to appreciate our intellectual tradition(s), not just that of their disciplines, can contribute to our campus community and our students' experiences. As I suggest to our new faculty hires at their orientation, every person we bring into the community makes our conversation more robust because he or she brings his or her own experience and reality to what we believe and how we live on our campus. ■