**Do Catholic Universities Still Have a Value Proposition?**

Yes, they definitely do, says Scott Kelley, who details why.

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February 26, 2019

My brother and I have chosen very different paths in our professional lives. Tom is a brand executive at Nike, and I am a mission integration professional at DePaul University. Over the years, however, I have realized that our jobs are not that different.

I recently asked Tom for his perspective on branding as it relates to what we do as mission-integration professionals. “A brand is based on authenticity and integrity,” he said, “a relationship between what I stand for and what you want … That’s the job of a brand: to connect those things.”

I had never thought about the mission of a university as a relationship between what we stand for and what our students want.

The Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan [said](https://utorontopress.com/ca/method-in-theology-6) a theologian “mediates between a cultural matrix and the role of religion within it.” My job as a mission-integration professional is to mediate between the cultural matrix that our students inhabit and the role of a Catholic university within it.

What, in fact, do Catholic universities offer in relation to what students want?

The findings of a recent [survey](https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/02/11/survey-asks-how-prospective-students-and-their-parents-view-catholic) of prospective students from EAB Enrollment Services suggest there may not be much of a positive brand identity, especially when the top three characteristics most associated with Roman Catholic colleges are “conservative,” “traditional” and “expensive.”

But the bad news is not just limited to Catholic universities. There are ominous signs that universities face a [supply and demand crisis](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/01/27/higher-education-is-headed-for-a-supply-and-demand-crisis/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9ad494642d88), challenging their core value proposition. With fewer high school graduates and an increasing public distrust of higher education, landing a job has become the main motivation for earning a college degree. A recent [Edvance Foundation blog post](http://edvancefoundation.org/blog/higher-education-bond-rating-warnings/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) posited that universities must help students envision their contributions to society.

Students imagine such contributions to society when they discover a problem they want to solve. Catholic universities must do the same and name the problems they solve.

Marketers say the bigger you frame the problem and your value in addressing it, the more loyal your customers will be. Automakers are not in the car-manufacturing business; they are in the freedom of movement business. Cars may become obsolete, but the urge to be someplace else is always upon us, as John Steinbeck observed in *Travels With Charley*.

Catholic universities equip students to address big problems like poverty, hunger and injustice. But how can we articulate that mission in a way that is broadly appealing?

Here’s a pitch for Catholic universities: we are in the business of *integral human development*, a concept from [Catholic social teaching](https://capp-usa.org/contemporary_issues/22) that pursues the development of the *whole* person -- from a spiritual, social, cultural and economic perspective -- as well as the development of *all* people.

In his [World Day of Peace Message](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html) in 2014, Pope Francis declared, “The necessary realism proper to politics and economy cannot be reduced to mere technical know-how bereft of ideals and unconcerned with the transcendent dimension of man.” A year later in *[Laudato Si’](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*[, On Care for Our Common Home](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), he used the term “[integral ecology](https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/integral-ecology-everything-connected)” to describe the connections between environmental, economic, social and cultural systems. Education is vital: “Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffective unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.” That’s what Catholic universities stand for.

**The Value Proposition Today**

If [*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html) provides the institutional framework of a Catholic university, then *Laudato Si’*provides the vision for why Catholic universities belong in the American higher education marketplace at all.

Catholic universities do much more than prepare students for jobs or careers. They enable students to flourish in the many vocations they will have throughout their lifetimes. Popes have long espoused that work is the key to the social question; we transform ourselves, our communities and our common home largely through the world of work. And the fact is that our students want more than jobs and careers. They want meaningful work.

Theologians use the term “salvific” to describe things of enduring value. Mediating between today’s cultural matrix and the role of Catholic education within it demands a “salvific sensibility” that should remain the highest aim. How then might Catholic universities better share a salvific sensibility in a period of declining religiosity?

Historical mindedness establishes what marketing professionals refer to as [brand provenance](https://www.fastcompany.com/3009750/where-do-you-come-from-tips-for-creating-a-powerful-provenance-for-your-brand), which comes from the French *provenir*, meaning to originate. Historical legacy signals authenticity, and this can help Catholic universities better understand their “original” value in a crowded marketplace.

The term “catholicity” is a literal translation of *kata* and *holos*, two Greek words that when combined form the word “*katholikos*,”meaning “toward wholeness.” Pope Francis uses integral ecology in the way Catholic theologians have used the adjective “catholic”: as a means to present a holistic vision of reality. For almost 1,000 years, the Catholic university has integrated wisdom from all sources and all parts.

Not long after the great intellectual awakening of the 11th century, cathedral schools quietly morphed into universities in places like Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Salamanca and Toulouse. Scholars and teachers organized themselves into guilds, much like their merchant counterparts, to protect their mutual interests as seekers of wisdom.

At the University of Paris, [Thomas Aquinas](https://www.iep.utm.edu/aquinas/) critically examined the natural philosophy of Aristotle and integrated the interpretations of Jewish and Muslim philosophers to construct a synthesis of the whole: the [*Summa Theologica*](http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/). Today we call this systems thinking.

When Pope Leo XIII positioned Aquinas as a model for the Catholic intellectual enterprise in his 1879 encyclical *[Aeterni Patris](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*[: On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), he highlighted a specific tradition of scholastic inquiry and dialogical encounter. While today’s questions are not those of a 13th-century theologian, and theology is no longer the queen of the sciences, the rigor, logic, openness and intellectual breadth of Aquinas is a model for the Catholic university.

Before the modern research university took shape in 19th-century Germany and deified the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, the academy had always served some greater good, some larger vision. Is it time to recover a salvific sensibility that has been lost? Is it time to offer a broader idea of what education is about?

**The Way Forward**

We know Generation Z is different. Today’s students have little tolerance for anything that isn’t authentic. They need to believe that the institutions they engage with are a pathway to serve something bigger than themselves. Students want to develop their sense of the whole that is more inclusive and more compassionate.

At the same time, corporations are redesigning the workplace to offer things like the corporate Peace Corps and flex-time work. Why? Because young adults refuse to accept their parents’ view of work. They will not accept the death of a salesman as their fate. Today’s cultural matrix includes phrases like “the purpose economy” and job titles like “chief purpose officer” because graduates want to live a life of purpose and integrity.

This leads us to the most important value proposition of Catholic universities: to educate students to shape the future we want. Catholic universities belong in today’s higher educational matrix because they imagine the development of the whole person and of all people. They do much more than educate for jobs or careers. It should follow that those students who feel it is their duty to save our world will become the most loyal customers of all.