

# Catholic colleges: Do less if you want to save your religious mission

*Jonathan Malesic July 19, 2023* Facebook Twitter Email



Trinity

Washington University, in Washington, D.C., preserved its mission and increased enrollment by refocusing on students from historically underserved communities. In photo: Trinity Washington University students Elizabeth Silva and Annissa Young on July 26, 2021. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

Catholic colleges and universities talk a lot about “mission.” The word comes up in hiring decisions, in long-term planning and in debates over religious identity. Missions often connect institutions to their founding religious orders or to actual missionaries posted to what was once a far-flung region. Ideally, a strong sense of mission inspires all who learn and work at a university to attain common goals.

But as a handful of Catholic colleges have [closed](#) this year, the question of mission is becoming an existential one. “The unstated mission of small Catholic colleges is to stay open,” a former professor at one such college

recently told me in an interview. “It’s very hard for them to pay attention to anything else.”

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The more than 200 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States are under pressure. Like all educational institutions, they continue to dig out from the Covid-19 pandemic’s disruption of work and learning. In addition, there are signs that Americans are becoming [skeptical](#) of the value of higher education. Like their institutional peers, Catholic colleges, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, are competing for a [shrinking pool](#) of prospective students.

In such difficult circumstances, anything that might keep an institution going can seem like a smart move. The choice is often between doing more and doing less. University leaders can create new programs, increase workloads and acquire more buildings to house more students. Or they can cut programs and budgets.

Because cuts are painful to anyone who is laid off and can harm the morale of those who remain, many colleges and universities understandably try to solve their financial problems by attempting to do more. But an expansive agenda, even if undertaken in the name of continuing the mission, is counterproductive, in the view of the Harvard researchers Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner. In their book [The Real World of College](#), they coin the term *projectitis* to describe “the rapid increase of centers, staff, and initiatives that are created in efforts to achieve the raft of missions, but which all too often overwhelm and confuse students.”

Projectitis makes any institution’s mission and identity more diffuse, and it simply creates too much for people to do. This pursuit “is ultimately self-defeating, if not suicidal, for the institution,” Ms. Fischman and Mr. Gardner write. “When you seek to be ‘all things to all persons,’ you likely mean nothing that matters to anyone.”

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And universities take a risk when they chase apparent growth areas. For example, over the past two decades, a looming shortage of pharmacists led dozens of U.S. universities to open pharmacy degree programs. Since 2011, though, the number of students applying to [pharmacy school](#) has fallen by 62 percent, and [some programs](#) will likely shut down.

The prudent strategy for financially precarious Catholic colleges, I am afraid, is to do less, both to conserve resources and to avoid the burnout that can come from trying to do the same things with a smaller staff. But that “less” must be guided by a principled understanding of their unique calling, not just what seems financially expedient in the moment.

Here, too, Catholic colleges and universities face a choice. They can try to compete with their public and private peers by becoming more like them, or they can identify what makes them distinctive and seek a niche where they can flourish. Pursuing a niche will not save every troubled Catholic college—the economics for

some may just be too dire—but it may be the only way, given the intense competition among schools, to make a college worth saving.

### **Resist the rush to slash liberal arts**

Several Catholic colleges have followed a flawed script by [eliminating](#) traditional [liberal arts majors](#). Marymount University, in Arlington, Va., drew [headlines](#) when it cut nine undergraduate majors, including art, English, history, mathematics, philosophy, sociology and theology. Bellarmine University, in Louisville, Ky., is cutting several majors, including philosophy and physics, while raising money to support its 2020 move to [NCAA Division I](#) athletics.

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It is not clear that cutting liberal arts majors even helps a university stay afloat. Two years ago, the president of Cabrini University, in Radnor, Pa., said that [cutting virtually all humanities programs](#) would “enable the institution to deliver on its mission in a way that is strategic, market-driven and sustainable.” This past June, the university [announced](#) it would close.

When every small Catholic school has shifted resources from its traditional academic base in the arts and sciences to newer programs in business, engineering, nursing and cybersecurity, they become indistinguishable. Why should any student enroll at *this college*, as opposed to the next one over?

A small college's mission should be narrow, something it alone can do. When cuts are needed, the first things to go should be those that do not align with the central mission. But to do that, a college or university first needs to know what its mission is.

University leaders might think of mission in terms of vocation: a singular, God-given purpose. As William C. Spohn wrote in [an article](#) for **America** 20 years ago, vocation in the Ignatian tradition “is no generic obligation, but rather a call to individuals tailored both to their talents and the community's needs.” It is unique to who you are.

The concept of vocation can certainly be [abused](#). If your work is a calling, some thinking goes, why not do it regardless of limits on your time or employment contract? In religious higher education, “language like *family* and *vocation* [is] used to impose vicious expectations of self-sacrifice,” wrote the University of Portland theology professors Brandy Daniels and David Farina Turnbloom in an article for the Christian magazine [The Other Journal](#). University administrators must not appeal to mission or vocation just to squeeze more work out of people.

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A proper understanding of vocation does not mean always pushing for more. A personal vocation takes into account one's unique circumstances and limitations. Mr. Spohn writes that Ignatius Loyola and his companions could not follow every worthwhile path open to them: Ignatius "could not be a shaggy hermit and also be of service to people in the public arena." The first Jesuits "wanted to be itinerant preachers but found that what their world actually needed was schools and solid learning." To fulfill their calling, they had to let some worthy activities go.

Ms. Fischman and Mr. Gardner recommend that universities sharpen their missions by focusing on high-quality academics and one other thing. That additional focus could be contemplative spirituality, or a preferential option for the poor, or great books, or the arts or athletics. But it should be *one thing* that distinguishes the university from its peers. "Then, once agreed upon," they write, "the school needs to embody the mission—so that even a casual observer knows what College A is about and can see, hear, or feel it in action."

A Catholic college that more clearly identifies its calling in light of its history, its location, and its strengths and weaknesses will surely leave potential sources of funding and student markets untapped. But it may find that, with a clearer sense of purpose, new opportunities emerge.

For example, [Trinity Washington University](#), in Washington, D.C., had long been a Catholic liberal arts college that enrolled elite, mostly white women, but by the 1980s enrollment had dwindled to only 300 students. The future looked bleak. In the 1990s, Trinity began to focus on recruiting women from nearby communities that had been historically underserved by higher education, and by last year [Trinity's enrollment was up to 1,800](#). A strong mission, well-lived and well-marketed, will not just react to prospective students' preferences but shape them.

It may seem that addressing big questions about mission is a luxury pursuit, something to ignore when times are hard. But in fact, the current challenges make such questions all the more essential. If, backed into a corner, a university cannot say why it exists, then maybe it shouldn't.

**[Read next: ["Will Catholic universities survive the upheaval in higher education? The next 10 years will tell."](#)]**





## [Jonathan Malesic](#)

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