

# **The Search for Identity: Emergent Catholicity in the modern business school**

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## **Abstract**

For the Catholic University that is not affiliated with a religious order or congregation, the Catholic identity within the business school may not be well defined. Therefore, the school is not able to answer the basic question of how the mission as Catholic per se is manifest. It leaves open important questions in regard to its curriculum, faculty and student composition, and enrollment management. For example, even with *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* it is difficult to answer: what is a “Catholic” business school, what precisely (other than the number of Catholics on the faculty) differentiates a Catholic business school from any other business school, what is “value” in the education experience, how important is Catholic social teaching, or is Catholic an important positioning factor? Accordingly, we set out to study from a stakeholder perspective the understanding of “Catholic” in the MBA program at a Catholic-affiliated university. Using a survey administered to current and prospective graduate business students and alumni of a single Catholic-affiliated university, we asked about their perceptions of “Catholic” among the features of the business school. With this information we propose to address the following research questions: What composes the Catholic identity or image of an MBA program held by its stakeholder(s) in the absence of an externally-defined charism, and what is the role of this identity in stakeholders' attitudes and decisions? Our results will aid decision makers to better appreciate and implement the Catholic mandate of the mission statement in Catholic business schools.

## **Introduction**

One of the obstacles to fulfilling the Catholic character of business education in a school whose mission includes a dedication to “the recovery of the Christian intellectual tradition” and a desire to “help students acquire a mature understanding of their faith, develop their spiritual lives, and prepare themselves for their calling as men and women of faith in the world” is understanding what it means to be *Catholic*. Besides the basic principles stated in *Ex Corde*, some business schools are aided in their articulation of a Catholic character by the expressed charism of their founding order or congregation, but the business school at a diocesan or other university not affiliated with an order must seek other bases from which to inform itself on how Catholic might be manifest in its curriculum, policies, and other activities. An important source of this information is the primary stakeholder – the student. Accordingly, if the Catholic business school is to better achieve its mission, it needs to better understand what it means to be Catholic from its students' perspective.

With this imperative in mind, we conducted empirical research. The goals for our research included: (a) to help mission-driven Catholic schools to understand a primary stakeholder, (b) to help mission-driven Catholic schools better define and communicate their Catholic character, and (c) to help mission-driven Catholic schools understand how embracing and understanding

their stakeholders' perspective may lead to important outcomes. We addressed these goals by profiling survey responses from students and alumni, positioning Catholic among common features of a business school, and relating Catholic to how respondents regard important outcomes.

## **Literature Review**

Catholic Business Schools (CBS) have not done an adequate job of applying their mission to the overall mission of their university/college<sup>i</sup>. This disconnect can be traced to a number of factors, including the inability or unwillingness to target Catholic in faculty hiring, the lack of development of faculty with regards to the Catholic mission statement, and the absence of any "Catholic research agenda." Charles Clark identified another problem as the rising secular nature of the academy, one which believes that Catholic social teaching will reduce the rigor of the course work, and place an emphasis on knowledge not necessary or desired, particularly among non-Catholics.<sup>ii</sup> Such beliefs become translated into marginalizing or dismissing the Catholic nature of the CBS's, arguing that anything less than a widely agreed upon secular approach would involve more cost than benefit. Other faculty and administrators at CBS's, however, have argued that this need not be the case -- that creating or sustaining a CBS environment connected to the overall mission of a Catholic university, one which embraces its Catholicity, is neither impossible nor disdainful. Carolyn Woo outlined a CBS where nearly 70% of the faculty are Catholic. She explained that there is no reduction in the academic nature of this CBS, but instead, the Catholic emphasis, through research and teaching, has increased quality, and emphasized "excellence and faith are not tradeoffs."<sup>iii</sup>

Our review of the literature revealed that the study of Catholic in business schools has focused on a handful of important topics, but has not adequately addressed the perspective of the student for addressing its mission. One stream of conceptual writing, for example, has focused on the integration of Catholic teaching with business curricula<sup>iv</sup>. A second stream of empirical studies has examined Catholic students versus other students in their honesty and moral development<sup>v</sup>, and asked whether faculty members are different in their familiarity and use of Catholic social teaching<sup>vi</sup>. Absent among these research streams, however, is a thorough study of the student as a motivator of the expression of Catholic in the business school. Although Howard Greene looked at undergraduate students at public versus private colleges<sup>vii</sup>, he did not explicitly ask about the nature of Catholicism, nor could his results necessarily be generalized to MBA students.

Accordingly, we designed our study to address this deficiency in the literature. We based our study on three propositions: (1) Catholic is multidimensional – there are multiple dimensions upon which stakeholders define Catholic and regard a program as being Catholic, (2) Catholic exists in a mix of features – it is one of many features of an MBA program and functions as part of a multidimensional system of features in the stakeholders' perceptions about the program, and (3) Catholic matters – how a stakeholder perceives "Catholic" and evaluates a program according to that perception among the many program features is important and salient in his/her attitude formation or decision making.

## Research Methodology

Three distinct samples of MBA program stakeholders, prospective students (n = 38), current students (n=252) and alumni (n=54) were surveyed as part of a comprehensive awareness and image research project at a small, urban, Catholic-affiliated university in the Southwest serving approximately 1,600 graduate management students . The sample of current MBA students included 98 women and 151 men, typically identified as domestic (88.1%) and part-time (72%). These students were frequently employed full-time (83.7%). Prospective MBA student respondents included 14 women and 24 men, most often employed full-time (84.2%) and graduates of large state universities (31.6%) or regional colleges or universities (26.3%). MBA program alumni respondents included 19 women and 35 men, identified primarily as Catholic (37%) or Protestant (35.2%). These respondents also tended to be employed full-time (74.1%) and over half (57.5%) had graduated within the last 20 years.

Survey instruments for each group were developed which had many similar questions in terms of how various characteristics of MBA programs (including “Catholic affiliation and values”) were perceived in terms of relative importance and as an indicator of quality. Each characteristic was paired with a 4-point scale ranging from “Very Important” (1) to “Not Important” (4) and “Low Quality” (1) to “Very High Quality” (4). Open-ended questions on the issues were also used to “flesh out” the quantitative responses. In addition, each group was asked questions specific to their perception of the nature and attractiveness of a Catholic affiliation to MBA programs.

Quota sampling from lists provided by the university were used to collect data from respondents using two basic methods: web based survey research and telephone interviewing. A random sample of currently enrolled MBA students received an email invitation to take part in a web based survey of their attitudes and opinions toward their university and degree program and this effort yielded approximately 250 usable responses. Prospective (inquiring) MBA students and MBA alumni were randomly selected from lists provided by the university and were interviewed by telephone. Quotas of 50 completed calls from each of these two groups were achieved for the alumni although not for the prospective student samples.

## Results

We applied descriptive and factor analytic techniques to the empirical data and content-analytic methodology to the qualitative responses to address our three research propositions.

### (1) Catholic is multidimensional

*Supporting the first research proposition, current MBA students and prospective MBA students were heterogeneous in their choice of dimensions with which they defined Catholic and its influence on graduate management education.*

Current MBA students were asked the open-ended question “**What, if anything, does the <institution’s> Catholic heritage contribute to your graduate education?**” Content analysis of verbatim responses suggested five basic themes, as follows:

Theme	Number	Percent
“Nothing” or no answer	113	44.8
Small class size, friendly people, nurturing and respectful environment,	57	22.7

Catholic “feel”, etc.		
Ethics and integrity	46	18.3
Consistent with prior beliefs/college attended as undergraduate	22	8.7
Influences on teaching/open dialogue	14	5.5

Prospective MBA students were presented with the question “**What do you think a Catholic college or university contributes to a student’s education that other colleges and universities do not contribute?**” They were presented with the following choices. Multiple answers were permitted.

Item	Number	Percent
Ethics, morals	13	26.5
Don’t know	9	18.4
Catholic values	8	16.3
Nothing	6	12.2
Spiritual growth	4	8.2
Rules and regulations	4	8.2
Other	3	6.1
Development of the whole person	2	4.1

For both groups, current and prospective MBA students, while there was a range of responses, “ethics” was a fairly typical response to the question of the impact of Catholic on education.

### *(2) Catholic exists in a mix of features*

*Partially supporting the second research proposition that Catholic is one of many features of an MBA program and functions as part of a multidimensional system of features in the stakeholders' perceptions about the program.*

A set of 28 items on the Current and Prospective surveys asked about the importance of various characteristics of a graduate management program to their choice of program. Each item was presented as a statement, to which the respondent was asked to indicate his or her evaluation of importance on a four-point scale ranging from “not important to me” to “very important.”

Looking specifically at the item “Catholic affiliation and values”, 95.3 percent of the current students and 79.7 percent of the prospective students indicated it was “somewhat important,” “important” or “very important.”

Sample size permitted the application of factor analysis to the responses of the Current MBA student group which was used to identify possible themes in the student importance evaluations. The extraction method used was principle components analysis along with varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization to achieve a better fit of the data. Results of the analysis suggested an eight factor solution with an Eigenvalue of approximately 1 accounting for 62 percent of the variance.



Table 1 provides both mean importance ratings for each item as well as factor loadings, tentatively interpreted as labeled above each factor column. For the purposes of this study in general and our second research proposition in particular, “Catholic affiliation and values” was rated least important of the 28 characteristics of an MBA program presented to the respondents and it loaded alone in the factor analysis, apparently lacking covariance with any of the other items. In other words, it was important, but in relative terms not very important and it was one of many dimensions making up the construct explored, although seemingly unrelated to any of the other dimensions.

### (3) *Catholic matters*

*Supporting the third research proposition as demonstrated by the salience of Catholic to stakeholders’ decision making.*

Current students were asked the open-ended question “**Why did you choose <institution>?**”

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Flexibility, convenient location, etc.	125	49.9
Recommended by others / reputation of the program	43	17.1
Programs I liked	39	15.4
“Nothing” or no response	28	11.0
Catholic	15	5.9
Cost	2	0.7

Prospective students were asked “**How attractive is the <institution’s> Catholic affiliation?**”

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Not attractive	2	5.3
Neutral	23	60.5
Attractive	9	23.7
Very attractive	3	7.9
Did not know it was Catholic	1	2.6

For both of these samples, “Catholic” was present in the decision making of a small percentage of the respondents.

## **Summary**

What are the implications of our findings for our research goals?

### 1. *Help mission-driven Catholic schools understand a primary stakeholder*

For prospective and current graduate management education students, Catholic affiliation is neutral and/or a positive value added to the product.

### 2. *Help mission-driven Catholic schools better define and communicate their Catholic character*

Aside from what external realities may or may not exist, the term “Catholic” implies for the prospective student ethics, integrity, and respect.

### *3. Help mission-driven Catholic schools understand how embracing and understanding their stakeholders' perspectives may lead to important outcomes*

Rather than dismissing or marginalizing the Catholic character of CBS's, it can be promoted with success. In addition to other factors such as class size, convenience, number of credit hours for the degree, the term "Catholic" can be considered beneficial for identity and marketing of a business education program.

## **Discussion**

Two questions frame our discussion and each has research and managerial applications: 1) How do our findings address the basic question of how the mission as Catholic per se is manifest? 2) How can our findings aid decision makers (in the setting of our study and elsewhere) to better appreciate and implement the Catholic mandate of the mission statement in Catholic business schools?

At the heart of each of these questions is the basic issue of mission or mission statement. Morphew and Hartley (2006) conducted a systematic and comprehensive exploration into the value and utility of mission statements in higher education.<sup>viii</sup> Their basic questions were what constitutes mission statements in higher education and how (if) they are used. They found evidence that mission statements were used to signal and symbolize (not to provide direction or vision, but rather as icons to signal key external constituencies that the organization shares these groups values and goals) as well as to communicate with stakeholders that "we understand what you want and we're going to deliver it to you." (p. 469).

First, as discussed earlier, the institution at which this study was conducted has a mission that includes a dedication to "the recovery of the Christian intellectual tradition" and a desire to "help students acquire a mature understanding of their faith, develop their spiritual lives, and prepare themselves for their calling as men and women of faith in the world." The first statement appears to reflect an appeal to those who share common values and goals. The second could alternatively be interpreted as providing direction for strategic planning and helping the organization focus its offerings or as (similar to the first statement) simply signaling shared values and goals.

The issue that this research surfaces for the present study is that in terms of how the mission of Catholic per se is manifest there are at least two options. It is either manifest to signal and symbolize or it can be manifest to provide direction and vision. If the former, then it is probably in the institution's best interests to approach Catholic as broadly and inclusively as possible. As our research suggests, the meaning of Catholic is highly individual. And, in fact, it has been noted that being associated with a specific charism can be somewhat limiting in terms of appeal to shared values and goals.<sup>ix</sup> If the latter, then our focus shifts to the second question as to how decision makers can use Catholic in their strategic planning and operations.

Previous research by Abreu (2006) has provided evidence of the importance of understanding the position (or image) of a religious organization as perceived by its key stakeholders and using that information to create offerings and communications that respond to their needs and wants.<sup>x</sup> Miller (2002) has applied strategic management theory to religious organizations.<sup>xi</sup> Simply stated, the process of image development and positioning begins with first assessing the perceptions of the marketplace, including past and current customers. In the setting in which our research was conducted, minimal prior efforts were applied to promoting the Catholic nature of

the university or—more specifically—the MBA program which was our focus. The evidence (and outcomes) of this were clearly reflected in the larger external image and awareness study of which this research was a part that indicated that very few external constituents, particularly business leaders and employers were aware that the university was Catholic-affiliated.

In the absence of conscious, systematic efforts to build a program reflective of Catholic values or to communicate the Catholic affiliation of the university the responses that we received from alumni, current and prospective students to the nature and value of Catholic to their education were self-generated. Our results show that among the more common responses received were references to ethics, which while stressed in the program are not specifically identified with any particular belief system.

Once understanding current image among stakeholders, the next step is to assess whether the current position is optimal and, if not, to develop strategies for moving perceptions and market image in a preferred direction to a new position.

Our findings strongly suggest that even in the almost complete absence of support for the identification of Catholic affiliation or efforts to incorporate Catholic values and goals into programming, there are current and prospective students, as well as alumni, for whom Catholic is important in selecting and evaluating an MBA program. Our findings also suggest that Catholic is a feature of an MBA program that sits outside of the typical evoked feature set of cost, time to complete degree, prestige, etc. In other words, it is probably at best a moderating variable in terms of decision making on the part of those seeking an MBA program. Once the decision maker has been satisfied that the program does indeed meet the minimal requirements for other features, the inclusion of Catholic as an additional feature may make it more attractive. Of course, the opposite is also possible, and a small number of qualitative responses on the survey were rather more negative in terms of perception of Catholic.

To sum up, decision makers in our situation—and perhaps others in similar situations—have two basic issues to address:

1. Is the inclusion of Catholic in the mission or mission statement for the purpose of signaling key stakeholders or for the purpose of providing vision and direction to strategic and operational planning and programming?
2. If the latter, what is the current image of the manifestation of the Catholic nature of the program and what is the benefit or risk to changing that image to, for example, emphasize the Catholic nature of the program?

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<sup>i</sup> Naughton, M., Bausch, T., Fontana, J. and Pierucci, E., (2007), Business Education at Catholic Universities: An Exploration of the Mission-Driven Business School, Working Paper.

<sup>ii</sup> Clark, C. (2007), Challenges Bring CST to a Catholic Business School, Working Paper.

<sup>iii</sup> Woo, C. (2005), Get Real: Making the Mission Statement Operational. *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, Fall. p. 26.

<sup>iv</sup> For example: Clark, C. (2004), Bring Realism to Management Education. *Review of Business*, 6-14. Epstein, E. (1998). Catholic Social Teaching and Education in Business and Economics: A non-Catholic's perspective. *Review of Business*, 19(4), 23-27. Garvey, G. (2004). Business as a Vocation: Implications for Catholic legal education. *Review of Business*, 37-44. Naughton, M. & Bausch, T. (1996). The Integrity of a Catholic Management Education. *California Management Review*, 38(4), 118-140.

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<sup>v</sup> Brown, B & Choong, P (2003). A Comparison of Academic Dishonesty among Business Students in a Public and Private Catholic University. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 12(1), 27-48. Koeplin, J. (1999). *A Comparison of Cognitive Moral Development of Accounting Students at a Catholic University with Secular University Accounting Students*. Dissertation, University of North Texas.

<sup>vi</sup> Kidwell, R. & Kidwell, L. (2006). Ethical Beliefs in the Catholic Business School: The impact of Catholic social thought on classroom reality. *Journal of Markets & Morality*, 9(2), 293-315.

<sup>vii</sup> Greene, H. (1998). *The Select*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>viii</sup> Morphew, C. and Hartley, M (2006), Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across Institutional Type. *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 77, No. 3.

<sup>ix</sup> Ferrari, J and Velcoff, J. (2006), Measuring Staff Perceptions of University Identity and Activities: The Mission and Values Inventory, *Christian Higher Education*, 5: 243-261.

<sup>x</sup> Abrue, M. (2006), The brand positioning and image of a religious organization: an empirical analysis. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, May 2006, 11, 2.

<sup>xi</sup> Miller, K. (2002), Competitive Strategies of Religious Organizations. *Strategic Management Journal*, May 2002, 23, 5.