

**FROM MISSION TO MEANINGFUL LIVES: STUDENT SUCCESS IN
CHURCH-RELATED HIGHER EDUCATION
15th Annual Lilly Fellows Program Workshop for Senior Administrators**

Mission as Ground, Path and Horizon for Post-Baccalaureate Student Success
Patricia O'Connell Killen, Ph.D., Gonzaga University
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Introduction

The opportunity for genuine conversation is one of the most precious gifts of our vocations as academics and leaders in higher education. I had the privilege of such conversation with Bobby Fong as we engaged each other in preparing our talks for this workshop. While I knew of Bobby and his work, I had not met him previous to Joe Creech bringing us together. I am grateful to you, Joe, for doing that.

Bobby's charge was to present the broader theological framing of the question of mission and meaningful lives for graduates of church-related colleges and universities. Mark Schwehn has shared with us Bobby's vision, organized around the three themes of what it means for students to know the world, to know themselves, and to know God. My charge is to speak to the topic at the more practical, concrete level. Hence the question I have been mulling – what are specific strategies for connecting mission to post-baccalaureate success?

Sitting with this question, I have reflected not only on the “what” of our conference theme – mission as the source of a theologically rich and practically relevant understanding of post-baccalaureate success – but also on the “how” of our conference theme – mission as the organizing principle for, and source of institutional practices that, cumulatively, awaken and cultivate in our students more robust capacities for that success. When it comes to the question of the relationship of mission to post-

baccalaureate success, I want to suggest that a promising way forward emerges when we consider that mission has multiple functions. Mission is the ground, the path, and the horizon for all that we do in our institutions, including how we engage students around their aspirations for life and work after they leave us.

I am proposing that appropriate and effective strategies for working with our students on post-baccalaureate success flow from institutional mission and are grounded in the fundamental theological vision that undergirds mission. We give flesh to that vision through concrete educational and formational activities. As faith-based, faith-informed, and faith-saturated institutions we seek to compose an educational and formational environment for our students that recognizes, honors, and discloses to them as yet unrecognized dimensions of their deepest aspirations; and, that equips them to creatively and fearlessly connect those aspirations to the world of work and life after graduation. When we do this well, we increase the odds that our colleges will animate the choices that each graduate makes about life and career; animate them in a direction that aligns more robustly to the vision of flourishing life contained in our mission statements.

This work has long been part of mission-based higher education. Doing it has become particularly challenging now, as the dominant cultural conversation regarding post-baccalaureate success, in its baldest form, as Bobby noted, reduces the question to whether a student gets a job in his or her field with a desirable entry level salary for that position. If this formulation of the question prevails, we are all in trouble. Let me be clear – finding employment is important. But all of us here believe, indeed have

committed our lives to, the mission of church-related higher education as far more than workforce training.

What is heartbreaking about “success equals job and good entry level salary” is its distorted and diminished view of the human person. It is based on an inadequate anthropology that also is dangerous for its corrosive effect on capacities for communal life, which, theologically, flow from the Trinity. Yet, as people of grace, I believe we do best to see the challenge we face in society’s dominant conceptualization of post-baccalaureate success as an invitation. It is an invitation to return to our mission as a source of strategies that effectively link mission to graduates’ success, and, in the process, both remain bettered aligned with our respective institutional missions and develop language to articulate to the larger world, in terms it can understand, the value proposition for our colleges and universities. What I am proposing is a tack suggested by the late Avery Cardinal Dulles, namely, that when consensus is thin, we return to the originating stories and begin there.¹

Five Strategies for Advancing Mission-Based, Post-Baccalaureate Success

I want to propose five strategies for advancing mission-based, post-baccalaureate success. Each of these has a theological and pragmatic rationale. Each, I believe, can contribute to deepening students’ capacities for critical and creative reflection; to extending their relationships into communities of all kinds; and, to raising the altitude of their imaginations about their futures in mission-inspired ways. With each of them, I believe we need to start from the place of desire. “We search for a self to be. We search

¹ Avery Dulles, “An Ecclesial Model for Theological Reflection: The Council of Jerusalem,” in *Tracing the Spirit: Communities, Social Action, and Theological*

for other selves to love. We search for work to do,” as Frederick Buechner put it in the first volume of his spiritual autobiography.² It is within the nexus of these three desires that we find the touch points to work with our students.

In describing these strategies I will provide examples from two institutions, Pacific Lutheran University, where I was for two decades, and Gonzaga University, where I serve now. The examples will, I hope, provide a comparative lens to stimulate your reflection in ways that will highlight your own institution’s currently effective strategies and perhaps generate ideas about new possibilities.

One: Provide More Opportunities to Pause and Ponder

I might also have called this first one – claiming the essential human work of growing human beings. All of our institutions, in one way or another, assert a connection between the liberal arts education that we include in our core curricula and the development of mature human beings. An essential characteristic of a mature, liberally educated person is the capacity to slow down the leap from experience or event to judgment or interpretation, so that one can look again at the experience or event, and at the way one has made meaning of it. In that slow motion looking in two directions, less than adequate meaning can be discerned and richer, truer meanings begin to develop. This is the heart of reflection. Slowing down that leap. And reflection is what occurs when we pause and ponder.³ Please note, I am not proposing simply “talking about” a particular topic. I am proposing thoughtful reflection.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 58.

³ Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994).

Some opportunities for reflection need to focus explicitly on students' career and life aspirations. This is a fruitful beginning point for reflection because it is the place where we have the best chance of helping them to surface, reflect on, and potentially revise understandings of success that are inadequate. Inadequate understandings may fall short in terms of the theological anthropology and understanding of creation embedded in our mission statements, or they may be seen as so in light of each student's deepest desires. From such reflection students may also find their aspirations confirmed, revised, or deepened.

The ability to build the bridge from the desire the students know and name to larger meanings is essential to our educational project. The psychologist William Perry taught a course at Harvard for first-year students on how to improve their reading. The students read the course title as "learning to read faster." Knowing that the students understood "improve" as "speed up," Perry designed the course so that some time at the beginning of each session was spent on exercises to increase reading rate. But, from the beginning, and increasingly as the course progressed, he spent more time on exercises designed to help student engage the material: to summarize what they had read, to articulate key points, to ask questions of the text, to anticipate what was coming next, to sketch the structure of the argument. By including both what the students understood their desire to be – to read faster – even as he knew that a strategy of dis-engaged but "fast" reading would not make them successful at Harvard; and, what he knew was the deeper meaning of that desire *as well as* what they actually needed – reading in a more engaged manner – Perry honored, responded to and deepened his students' aspirations in

a way that also built a bridge toward their success at Harvard.⁴ We need to take the same approach in working with our students on their ideas about success.

Some of the reflection for which I am calling occurs serendipitously in interaction between students and their teachers and advisers, some in student-to-student interaction, some in university ministry services, and some in solitary moments. But in a culture hell-bent on frenetic activity and constant connection, we can ill afford to rely on serendipity to assure reflective occasions for our students. And the stakes around the practice of pause are high. Without pause our students cannot learn to extend hospitality to themselves, a capacity fundamental to their ability to extend hospitality to others. I would argue that the practice of pausing and pondering is itself fundamental to students' developing the capacity for empathy, a capacity without which they cannot be persons of conscience.⁵

Such opportunities for reflection need to permeate curricular, co-curricular, residential, and faith-formational activities across our campuses. When faculty and staff practice some shared, fundamental processes for facilitating reflection with students – even a few question prompts – it makes a major difference with students. The opportunities for reflection need to be deliberate and strategically situated at appropriate points along students' developmental journey through the university.

⁴ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 277-282.

⁵ On pause, see Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams, Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, revised edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011); on empathy and conscience, Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 36-38.

At Pacific Lutheran University we made this type of reflection a centerpiece of our PTEV program, “Wild Hope.” We offered training workshops on facilitating reflection to faculty and to student development staff. The student development staff, especially those in student activities, discovered as a side benefit of practicing reflection that it not only helped them to prioritize their own work better, it also allowed them to move far more rapidly and effectively from transactional to genuinely formational interactions with students. We set up six-week and nine-month reflection groups for student returning from study abroad in order to help them process their experiences, relate them to their educational and career aspirations, and to facilitate their re-entry into the campus. We incorporated far more reflection into service learning courses. We inserted carefully structured reflective activities into the first-year experience. We sponsored yearlong faculty seminars on vocation, intellectual life, and mission. And, after its first run at PLU’s annual Alumni Homecoming Weekend, a “meant to live” event at which invited alums participated on a panel sharing reflection on mission in their lives since graduation with current students and other guests, became a standing room only event.

At my current institution, Gonzaga, University Ministry recently implemented retreats for juniors and seniors focused on work/career choices. In a collaborative project between academics and student development, we are implementing the first of a four-year “ZagExperience” program that, we believe, will increase both opportunities to learn information about and opportunities for reflection on education, life, and work. And, this fall, I was able to assign a senior faculty member who is skilled as a teacher and spiritual director to be a “Senior Faculty Adviser for Life/Career/Faith Reflection.” The

assignment is my direct response to a student government survey on advising that identified a lack of opportunity to reflect on the relationship among education, life, career and faith. This senior faculty member facilitates reflection with students in one-on-one and group formats, collaborating with Career Services, Academic Advising, and the Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

“We had the experience but we missed the meaning,” wrote T.S. Eliot, and his line might well be the motto of our time.⁶ If we are true to our institutional missions, this should not be the motto of our graduates. Our alums should be distinguished by their habits of reflection, habits Sharon Daloz Parks has described eloquently as contemplative, connected thinking.⁷

I think we need to consider, however, whether those of us who lead and work at church-related institutions have become a bit complacent about the invitation to reflection that, I would argue, is at the heart of any theological vision. It is easy to share the theological answers too quickly; before we have heard the questions the students are bringing to us and acquiring a discriminating feel for the idiom in which they express them.

It is no small irony that today movements in higher education, some of them avowedly secular, seek to develop what long have been dimensions of a Christian approach to life and learning. One of the fastest growing is the contemplative pedagogy

⁶ T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages,” No. 3 of *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harper, Brace and Company, 1943).

⁷ Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 188-192.

movement.⁸ Developed out of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Society, this movement incorporates reflective and contemplative practices into courses in order to enhance students' capacity to negotiate the inner distress that accompanies confronting difficult, seemingly intractable challenges. Without that ability, students cannot engage those challenges and questions as whole human beings, and so are far less likely to be able to generate imaginative and appropriate solutions. Another educational movement emphasizes the importance of students learning metacognition – taking possession of their own learning process – asking not just “what have I learned,” but “how have I learned this” and “what difference does it make.” I believe we should aim for our institutions to be rife with reflective opportunities. And, we need to help more of our faculty and staff improve their abilities to facilitate reflection. Our institutions will do their work more effectively when faculty discern connections between newer approaches to teaching and learning, the reflective practices we are asking them to incorporate into their work with students, and the theological vision that undergirds the entire project of our institutions.

Two: Foster Networks of Conversation and Connection

This second strategy also could be called “Leveraging the Communion of Saints.” At my institution, and I suspect at yours, there is a sense of the value of community and a desire to continue experiencing community that runs deep in students and alums. Whether they put it into words or not, they experience something of the

⁸ See Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

wholeness of the theological vision that inspires our institutions in how they have been, and are treated while with us.

What I doubt we have done sufficiently is to reflect theologically on the meaning of that desire and to connect it explicitly to the deep theological conviction in our mission statement that whatever counts as salvation or the kingdom of God, it is at a fundamental level communal. In his *The Sacred Journey* the theologian and writer Frederick Buechner, in his meditation on the meaning of the communion of saints tells us we should remember: “all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, the despots and tosspots and crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we love without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have, or ever hope to have, of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own.”⁹

Fostering networks expands that community. Three examples.

Each year GAMP (Gonzaga Alumni Mentoring Program) teams with Career Services and Student Development to put on a Seattle, a Portland, and a San Francisco Trek. These are major undertakings with nearly 200 undergraduates and a bevy of faculty and staff traveling to these cities to meet with alums who are potential contacts, mentors and/or employers in the area. Alums introduce students to their companies. The alums, some of them regents and trustees, love the treks. And, helping with a trek is one of the first ways that a very new graduate with a job wants to give back to the university.

The treks are a concrete example of an activity focused directly on post-baccalaureate success. The students see clearly that a trek can help with career goals. But

⁹ Buecher, *Sacred Journey*, 74.

the alums value them equally, if not more than the students. Why? The alums are provided the opportunity to exercise hospitality, to welcome and assist students. They want to mentor them. In preparing for treks, the alums have the opportunity to reflect on their own lives post-graduation and on the connection of their post-graduation experience to their time at Gonzaga. The alums share their struggles, achievements, insights, and perspectives.

The networks across age cohorts and time in career that the treks build matter, not just for smoothing transition from student to worker, or from position to position within or across professions or industries. The networks matter because they sustain, exhibit, and express a community of shared experience – an experience shaped by the mission of Gonzaga University. While I think there is much we could do to unpack the theological meaning of that experience, the vitality of it indicates health in an important dimension of institutional mission.

A second important network for strengthening the connection between mission and post-baccalaureate success is global. At Gonzaga our global students network is comprised of international students who are studying on our campus and domestic students who have studied abroad. We identify these students as global – they even receive special cords for commencement. International alumni also are becoming part of this network. Though less mature than the GAMP treks, the global network has comparable potential to directly benefit our students as they pursue life after Gonzaga. The global network also has significant potential to deepen and mature students' understanding of community and responsibility on a global scale.

A third significant network is that of students, agencies, and community partners who come together through our service programs and service-learning courses. As with the global network, the strengthening of an on-going network of conversation and connection built around the challenges and achievements of our students and Spokane area residents with whom they partner in confronting poverty, abuse, environmental degradation and more, deepens and matures students' experience of community, challenges simplistic ideas about society, and has the promise of raising the horizons of their imaginations when considering the future. This network, like the global network, increases the odds that students will be grasped by big questions, and graduate with the capacities for empathy and moral reflection that render them capable of recognizing and feeling obligated by the needs of those in the human family who do not have the resources and opportunities they have had.

You have these networks and more at your home institutions. But the networks, if left discrete and disconnected in our thinking and in the thinking of our students, do not fully express or move students toward fulfillment of our mission. We need to animate them, to practice pointing toward the explicit connections among students' studies and their experience in these networks, and point to the connections between that and our mission.

There is much more that we could, and I think should, be doing with these networks – treks, global experience, community engagement, -- in terms of providing opportunity for explicitly theological reflection that involves students, alums, and community partners. These networks are potent moments for the type of shared reflection on the use of our gifts in a world rife with poverty and injustice for which the

former Father General of the Society of Jesus, Peter Hans Klovenbach called in his 2000 address at Santa Clara University when he challenged leaders of Jesuit institutions this way: “The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become . . . and the adult Christian responsibility they will exercise in [the] future toward their neighbor and their world” (Santa Clara Address, 2000: 60, 61 at www.gonzaga.edu/about/mission/docs/SantaClaraAddressPeterHansKolvenbachSJ.pdf).

We need to develop theologically informed, pastorally and pedagogically artful opportunities for reflection in the networks.

Three: Seed Curricular and Co-Curricular Programs that Stretch Students, Cross Boundaries, Awaken Relish for Challenge and Teach Artful Risk Taking

Each of our institutions has a set of curricular and co-curricular programs through which we seek to provide a quality education to our students. Do we, however, have enough that cross boundaries of disciplines and of town and gown? That encourage our students to imagine more grandly? To step out and take risks? The missions of all our institutions, I believe, give us the permission, even the mandate, to engage the issues of our time and to imagine the future without fear; and, in fact, to do so with a good bit of relish for challenge. And yet, I notice at church-related institutions, including my own, that we are in a time when some faculty and staff are more oriented toward preserving what has been than toward asking where faith and institutional mission are calling us into the future. This affects the array and tenor of our curricular and co-curricular programs. At least at my institution, I have been reflecting on whether the academic programs are

appropriately stretching students, crossing boundaries, initiating students into the pleasure of working on real challenges, and mentoring risk taking robustly enough.

We have two programs at Gonzaga that are explicitly oriented this way, especially toward learning to take risks. The first is our Hogan Entrepreneurial Leadership Program. This program, which includes extensive involvement by alums and benefactors, mentors a set of students to develop the skills to be successful entrepreneurs. In the Hogan program students from across disciplines come together to create and even launch entrepreneurial ventures. Many of them are interested in social entrepreneurship – doing good while earning a living.

The second example is Gonzaga’s Comprehensive Leadership Program. Not unlike Hogan, it supports students to develop the understanding, skills, and imagination to move into the future with the capacity and confidence to take some risks. Some of the institutions represented here have opportunities like these available to all students. My own institution is making progress in that direction.

Another program that is successful at initiating students into the pleasure of engaging real challenges is student/faculty research, sometimes conducted with or on behalf of industry partners. (I could have included this activity as another type of network as well.) CUR (Council on Undergraduate Research) and other organizations are promoting student research, which also has been identified as a “high impact practice.”¹⁰ At our institutions the meaning of “high impact” should be expanded significantly to help students develop the connection between the life of the mind they are living out through their research and our respective institutional missions.

¹⁰ George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2008).

Graduates of both Hogan and CLP do extremely well post-graduation. Students who do research at Gonzaga also are doing very well in being placed in either industry or graduate programs. We need to spend more time finding out why and considering how to infuse dimensions of the answer into other academic programs. And, we need to tell our students and parents how and why these programs are excellent preparation for post-baccalaureate success.

Four: Prize Artful Pedagogy

In July, Fr. William Ryan, S.J., a mentor when I was an undergraduate died. What stands out most to me now about Bill is that he treated his students as if we were capable of thought, whether he believed it or not. I opened my comments at his funeral with these words: “Powerful teachers and mentors are gifts. They come into our lives through no accomplishment or merit on our part. With wisdom and insight, they build a bridge from our deepest aspirations – aspirations we may not even be able to put into words – to the questions and conversations of their fields, the world of expertise. Through art, skill, and capaciousness of heart, teachers awaken, inspire, and challenge.”¹¹

It is in the area of pedagogy – primarily pedagogy in the classroom but also in ancillary programs – where our institutions have the best long-term chance to influence our students’ post-baccalaureate success. Virtually all church-related institutions have a liberal arts core. Virtually all see as central their mission of helping students to develop particular habits of thought: to think clearly and carefully, accounting for multiple dimensions of a problem or issue; to probe with questions that are incisive and that can

¹¹ Patricia O’Connell Killen, “Ryan Eulogy,” July 31, 2014.

extend a line of thought; to construct cogent critique saturated with the best practices of scholarly charity; to make connections across courses, fields, dimensions of their lives, and from their lives to larger challenges and opportunities of our time; to imagine alternatives; to innovate; to take account of moral factors in a situation; to speak and write and interact ethically. If the AAC&U LEAP publications are to be believed, employers want to hire students with the capacities for thought that we say we cultivate.

There is even more, however, that I think we need to encourage our faculty, with student development staff, to be cultivating in our students today. For post-baccalaureate success we will do well to help students develop a malleable and eschew a fixed view of talent.¹² We can ill afford more debacles like Enron. We want to help students develop resilience – that capacity to hold steady and to remain oriented to a larger purpose or vision, even when the going is rough. We want them, to the extent possible, to live free of fear. And, for the time they are with us, we want to support them to learn to endure frustration, negotiate conflict, and get to the other side of disillusionment with a capacity to hope – all part of becoming adults.¹³

This is no small order that I am laying out. It is, however, I believe, what our missions call us to by way of our pedagogy. At church-related institutions, more than any other, faculty should be focused on, supported around, and rewarded for the quality of their pedagogy, broadly, richly, fully understood. To make this possible entails sustained effort to provide opportunities for faculty to become familiar with institutional mission and its sources within a particular tradition's theological vision. It entails

¹² Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).

¹³ Patricia O'Connell Killen, *Finding Our Voices: Women, Wisdom and Faith* (New York: Crossroads, 1997), 114-116.

aligning standards for evaluation with our mission. It entails an articulation of how artful teaching, significant intellectual engagement in one's field, advising, and academic citizenship, carried out at a pace appropriate for the institution, do cohere and feed vital sustainable lives. The fear that such lives are not possible is debilitating to faculty. It feeds a mentality of scarcity, a sense that any investment in the institution fundamentally exhausts. I deal with that debility and you do as well. The corrosive effect on our institutions is costly in terms of mission fulfillment as pain and fear make faculty and staff hesitant to invest.¹⁴ A first step in responding to and correcting faculty fear is a willingness to structure the faculty employment, review, tenure, promotion, and reward processes with what we say we value.

At Gonzaga our mission statement now begins: "Gonzaga University is an exemplary learning community that educates students for lives of leadership and service for the common good. In keeping with its Catholic, Jesuit, and humanistic heritage and identity, Gonzaga models and expects excellence in academic and professional pursuits and intentionally develops the whole person -- intellectually, spiritually, physically, and emotionally."¹⁵ The opening sentences imply an anthropology or view of the human person, an understanding of the community of creation, and an inherent connection among the true, the good, and the beautiful. As well, it implies an understanding of human existence, in proper Ignatian fashion, as an on-going process of creation.

What our universities offer, (perhaps better than other institutions can), once our students leave us, is the opportunity to connect the life of the mind to everything else that

¹⁴ A brief discussion is found in Susan Robison's workbook, *The Peak Performing Professor: A Practical Guide to Productivity and Happiness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 1-20.

¹⁵ www.gonzaga.edu/about/mission/missionstatement.asp

they love and care about, and to the world around them. This is why we need to powerfully describe for our students and ourselves, recognize gladly in our midst, and undertake an on-going discipline of improving pedagogy. Doing so requires an act of faithful trust in the truth of our mission and in our own knowledge about what works well in higher education. It also requires an openness to learning more about how students learn and how we can compose richer learning environments for them, environments that increase the odds of their “getting it” and decrease the odds of failure. (And yes, this includes a willingness to engage the question of educational technology with an open mind.) We need a pedagogy that puts students at the center, and by so doing suggests the ways to build the bridge for our students into the expertise of our fields. This requires a community of reflective, artful teachers who take the time to converse with each other, across disciplines, about the moves they make in the classroom or lab or studio or community-based learning setting, and through that conversation to implement incremental changes that will make them even more artful teachers.

In all their teaching, artful faculty cultivate the apt gap between what students already know and what we would like them to know, between how they think and the greater connections they could be making in their thinking, between the questions they are asking and more incisive questions, between what they are learning and their own narratives of dream, desire, purpose, and calling. As Harvard educational psychologist Robert Kegan put it in his *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, these faculty colleagues know how to be the “right companions for our students’ journeys.”

We need most, if not all of our faculty colleagues to be the right companions for

our students. The single most powerful engine to empower faculties in this way is to encourage and support faculty learning communities that explore concrete teaching practice. Such learning communities, when well facilitated, animate discussion among faculty about their teaching and student learning throughout the entire faculty.

Five: Get Our Story Straight and Stick With It

We become what we are addressed, both that which we address ourselves as being, and that which others address us as being. I think this is true for organizations as well – for we are telling each other stories about ourselves as individuals and as an institution all the time. So, what is the narrative we are telling ourselves about mission and post-baccalaureate success? There are, I think, dimensions to a faithful narrative that will be present regardless of how your mission statement is written. The narrative includes something about what it means to be a person and how a person continues to be created through her “desires, impulses, dreams, projects, relationships, and circumstances of life,” to borrow again from the Ignatian tradition, and in that process connects deeply and powerfully to the world, experiencing fully the wonder and suffering that go with being alive.¹⁶ The narrative includes something about the possibility and joy of living with a greater range of freedom and imagination because Christ has set us free. The narrative includes something about the value of the educational experience our institutions provide. It needs to make quite explicit the connections between that education and what the world needs now – whether one intends to be in high finance, social service, or the arts. Here the narrative needs to be quite specific – this is what

¹⁶ This comes from the “Contemplation to Learn to Love Like God,” at the end of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*.

student-learning outcomes are about. The narrative needs to place our institutions and what we are about more squarely in the larger work of our time. This includes that we educate against the horizon of God's desire for the world to flourish and not founder. Depending on our institutional cultures, traditions, and potential students, we may employ explicitly theological language generously or sparingly. Finally, however, somewhere along a student's time with us, they need to hear the mission from us.

Yes, we need to tell, to narrate. Equally if not more so, we need to show more than we tell. Show how each part of the experience students have with us fits together with the other parts. Show how the institutional commitments, decisions, choices, and covenants that we have with each other – faculty, staff administrators – allow us to be a place where students develop a deeper sense of what it means to be a “successful” person. Tell and show in such a way that students are grasped by the shared project of the kingdom of God in which we participate through our educational mission.

It is no small thing to narrate this story now, with all the challenges that we face in the landscape of higher education today. But doing so, I believe, will orient our institutions more clearly, and contribute to our helping students understand the connection between what they think they want and what they actually want; between what they imagine they will get from us, and what we are asking of them; between what they aspire to and what we will offer them in response to their deepest aspirations, aspirations they are only coming to comprehend when they arrive at our doors.

Conclusion

“If real success is to attend the effort to bring a person to a definite position,” Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his journal in 1854, “one must first of all take pains to find where [that person] is and begin there. . . . In order to help another effectively I must understand what [that person] understands. If I do not know that, my greater understanding will be of no help Instruction begins when you put yourself in [another’s] place so that you may understand what [they] understand and in the way [they] understand it”¹⁷

Kierkegaard’s words are, I believe, apt for thinking both theologically and strategically about how we define student success in terms of our missions and how we compose our institutions as learning and mentoring environments so that our graduates have better odds of realizing that fuller, faith-informed vision of success in life and work. He reminds us that no small part of our project, given our call to leadership in our institutions at this time in history, is to wrestle with making explicit and intelligible to ourselves, to our faculty, staff and benefactors, to our students and their parents, and to the larger society, the deep connection between our institutional missions and post-baccalaureate success. As Bobby Fong articulated so eloquently in his paper for this conference, our graduates should be different – in how they embrace and know the world; in how they know themselves; and in how they know God. That difference should bear fruit in the maturing of their own aspirations for the future, in their understanding of the world they are entering, and in their embrace of the journey of love and loss, suffering and wonder, creativity and diminishment, community and solitude that are the lot of every human being. The vision of what we want our graduates to become is worthy.

¹⁷ I have altered the language to make it inclusive. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959).

How we compose our institutions to invite the growth and transformation through education and formation that flow toward that difference is the art and skill of leading in alignment with mission. The stakes are high in the choices we make about personnel, programs, structure and culture at our institutions. To lead in alignment with mission compels us to challenge and inspire faculty and staff to grow and change. Sometimes we must challenge them to change in ways and at a pace not always welcome, in ways not always understood, and variously a source of satisfaction, discomfort, exhilaration, anger, excitement, and sometimes fear.

For our graduates to be successful in ways that align with our best vision of our institutions and their possibilities, we must, I think, be willing to speak the theology that grounds our mission. We must do our work as administrators and leaders with the habits and practices of deliberation and decision-making that are congruent with that theology. In the day-in and day-out of our work, in word and in action, we are called to communicate five basic truths: 1) because of what God has worked in Jesus, in loving unto death there is safety; 2) that safety frees us to care enough about our educational project to be willing to learn and grow across the career span, and to care enough about our students to challenge them to become their best selves; 3) that what we do is participation in meaningful work that is part of the on-going process of creation; 4) that this educational work we embrace can nourish and not simply exhaust; and, 5) that when we narrate our own stories, we are called into joy.

Thank you.