

## **Empowering the Mission Officer, Helping Guarantee the Mission<sup>1</sup>**

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There is perhaps no more strategic decision in advancing the mission and identity of the Lasallian Catholic college or university than that of identifying, empowering and resourcing a capable and committed Mission Officer. Hopefully that person functions in the top tier of the administration, that is, serving on the President's Cabinet or Leadership Council. With a well-qualified and well-positioned Mission Officer, there inevitably will occur much mission-focused planning, the designation of necessary resources, considerable strategic alignment, and timely collaborative initiatives, which when integrated with other areas of strategic decision-making, should ensure steady advancement in making real the Catholic identity and living out the Lasallian charism at each of our institutions of higher education.

For it is ever more certain that our discerning students need the very positive and respectful environment of a Lasallian Catholic college or university, in the light of serious challenges in the church and in our culture. It is ever more apparent that the learning environment, the caring inclusion and the holistic experience that we strive to offer our students is absolutely vital for the further attainment of the mission and reform of the church, the well-being of society, and the ongoing transformation of the world community. As was stated in the recent *Declaration*, "The message of Jesus is the source for Lasallian education: it includes love, forgiveness, truth, mercy, a preference for those who are excluded, the value of life, solidarity and generosity." It is very much to that point that one of your strategic plans is properly entitled: "Students at the Center...For a Better World."<sup>3</sup>

We all know that crucial to the success of the president, to harmonious relationships of the board with the administration, and to the consistent enhancement of the college or university are the competence, collaboration and mission commitment of the president's leadership team. This has long been the case for the Provost, the Chief Financial Officer, the Academic, Student Life, Admissions and Advancement Vice Presidents. During the last decade or longer, it has become very evident that the Vice President for Strategic Planning also plays a vital and necessary role. And gradually the same can rightly be said of the Vice President for Mission and Ministry. Furthermore, the success of that Mission Officer, who presumably is a Vice President, flows from the fact that he or she has direct access to the President on a timely basis, as well as having the President's confidence and trust, and is in a position to help ensure that major decisions are made explicitly in the context of the mission, the vision and the strategic plan. Indeed, for the authenticity of the mission of these six higher education enterprises of ours, it is necessary that

the President, with the whole-hearted and capable collaboration of the Vice President for Mission and many other colleagues, always has the lens of the mission clearly in view in addressing various strategic areas of opportunity and challenge. The mission is pivotal, the mission provides a broader context, and the mission is the very reason for the existence of Lasallian higher education.

The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) has been a strong advocate for the professionalization of the role of the Mission Officers, in addition to adequate professional development opportunities and the budgeting of sufficient funding. In addition, they consistently stress the advantages of a formal network of mission personnel. The same can be said of the ever-stronger spirit of association and collaboration among our six Mission Vice Presidents. Increasingly they are in regular dialogue and are becoming mutually engaged, in the light of similar current or emerging mission needs in each of our universities and colleges. Our institutions appear to be selecting more professional and better-qualified candidates for the role of the Mission Vice President and are ensuring further theological, ministerial, leadership and administrative training. But even as this role is professionalized, it remains at its core a ministry.

Collaboration is vital for mission advancement. First and foremost is close cooperation with the President and his or her cabinet. But it is also significant for developing a mission-infused academic program and curriculum, thus the need for regular interaction with deans, faculty leadership and staff specialists, all working for the success of the students, their balanced education and their career-readiness. There is also the need and desire to be in dialogue at times with the local church and with representatives of the sponsoring religious congregation, for the further integration of their founding charism and stewardship for the institution's Catholic identity. Moreover, the Mission Officer should play an important role in preparing, mentoring and cultivating various other persons throughout the institution in advancing the mission and fostering its underlying spirituality. He or she needs to be especially adept in supporting strong relationships throughout the educational community. This is fundamental, given the broad diversity on campus, the multi-faith make-up of that community, the effort to unify the campus community, and the provision of a welcoming and inclusive spirit. As the *Declaration* insists, "Being Lasallian involves, by definition, belonging to a community, and a commitment to a shared task within that community."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, everyone rightly looks to mission and ministry staff to create and lead various campus programs and events to strengthen the campus culture and its climate for mission, including the assurance of spiritual formation, available accompaniment, and readily accessible pastoral care. Most Mission Officers have an advanced degree in theology, pastoral studies, ministry, higher education leadership or a related field. If his or her background and experience are inadequate, the Mission Officer can participate in relevant courses and workshops to gradually fill in the gaps. In addition, he or she needs to have a functional understanding of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, social justice and ethical priorities, general liturgical norms, applicable canon law

content, Church teachings on contemporary issues, and Catholic higher education principles including “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.”<sup>5</sup>

It is also both helpful and relevant for the Mission Vice President to develop skills in strategic management, leadership and network development, intercultural competence and communication skills, the ability to influence relevant faculty research, and the capability to successfully navigate and shape a complex institutional culture, always in a welcoming manner, and with the ability to provide a sense of belonging. Equally important is a readiness to dialogue with the chief academic officer, student development leaders, operational administrators, advancement professionals, enrollment managers and other cross-divisional leaders, and always consistently through the lens of mission. Still further, the Vice President for Mission is charged with the continuing professional development of mission and ministerial leaders, especially in the context and reflective of Catholic Social Justice priorities and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Of paramount importance is the collaborative relationship of the mission and ministry staff with the theology department.

Furthermore, the mission officer should be a thought leader on campus related to synodality, assessment of mission effectiveness, best practices in the attainment of success for minority students, religious and cultural diversity, shared governance, ministering to the religiously disaffected, the integration of the historically marginalized, integral ecology, the fostering of mission leadership across the campus, and the promoting of active membership in Mission Officer conferences, forums and associations, most especially Catholic and Lasallian bodies, such as Lasallian Association of Colleges and Universities (LACU), Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) and International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU). In short, the role of Vice President for Mission can be quite taxing, but at the same time it is integral to mission attainment.

### **The Brothers and Lasallian Partners “Together and in Association”**

For more than 150 years in this country, the local Community of De La Salle Christian Brothers could be counted upon to give powerful witness to the purpose and significance of our six Catholic colleges and universities, similar to the reality throughout the Lasallian higher education network globally. But now, in this country and in many others, the Brothers are certainly fewer in number and no longer able to render the same services nor staff the same positions as before. However, we are wonderfully blessed in now being able to collaborate with hundreds and even thousands of dedicated lay Lasallians with whom we partner in making explicit and actual our Lasallian identity within the world of Catholic higher education. These Lasallian Partners now hold the very large majority of positions of influence in our various Lasallian educational institutions. Thanks be to God, increasingly they are carrying forward the Lasallian Mission quite effectively in most settings, including in our colleges and universities. Moreover, through the leadership of the Presidents, and with the full and active collaboration of the Vice Presidents for Mission, adequate resources are being sought for financing the desired

participation of numerous Lasallian Partners in quality initial and ongoing formation programs at the local, Regional and global levels.

Clearly there already are numerous well-regarded formation programs available in this Region to our administrators, faculty, staff, trustees and even student leaders. It is imperative we consistently take advantage of these opportunities, for the need and timing are critical. The Lasallian Association of Colleges and Universities (LACU) should consider if there is an interest in additional formation initiatives that speak most directly to the specific needs of our colleges and universities, and if so, to move forward rapidly in planning and implementing such programs, possibly in collaboration with the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU). There simply are not enough annual openings within the existing Regional formation programs to meet our crucial needs. To that point, currently a Lasallian tertiary institution would be fortunate to be able annually to place 10-15 of its members in present summer formation programs, but that might be only 10-15 out of 600 personnel. Still further, there is so much turnover of college personnel that we cannot wait until colleagues are 5-10 years into their roles before inviting them to participate in their first Lasallian formation experience. It is also for these reasons that each institution should develop one or several new campus summer formation programs, to allow a far larger number of faculty, staff and administrators to participate.

There already exist several quite effective programs that can serve as models for other of our tertiary institutions. Moreover, there is no reason why these current and newly launched local campus programs cannot be made accessible to members of other Lasallian Catholic colleges in the Region, just as they are in the case of several summer formation programs that already exist and which are made readily accessible to personnel from area Lasallian high schools, middle schools, retreat centers and even specialized Regional ministries such as Christian Brothers Services (CBS) and Christian Brothers Investment Services (CBIS) Furthermore, there is an urgent need to engage new and current trustees in yet to be developed formation programs meant especially for the leadership of each of our Boards of Trustees. No doubt creative and concrete plans would emerge if the six Vice Presidents for Mission and some of their staff colleagues were to meet to develop these opportunities, in consultation and collaboration with the presidents and the board chairs. There is some movement of late in that direction, which is quite encouraging.

### **The Contributions of Brothers Today**

Even in the light of the diminished number of De La Salle Christian Brothers on college campuses, especially as teachers and administrators, the local Brothers' community can still play a limited but valuable role in the advancement of Catholic higher education in the Lasallian tradition. These services can include becoming members of various Boards of Trustees in the Region, assisting in the provision of campus Lasallian formation, being members of university Mission Councils, offering workshops on Lasallian pedagogy, facilitating opportunities for collaboration with the international network of Lasallian Catholic colleges and universities,

accompanying students and faculty/staff mentors on service and education trips (including at sites on the periphery), and many similar contributions. In addition, it is very important to regularly open our residences to campus guests to share fraternal hospitality, to host certain student gatherings, and with the co-sponsorship of the Vice President for Mission, to offer short, structured Lasallian formation and renewal opportunities. A friendly welcome by the Brothers to their residence is always much appreciated, as is the presence of an appropriate number of Brothers (in proportion to the number of us living on each campus) at various formal and informal gatherings throughout the academic year. For instance, there is one of our college communities which last year responded to various university requests to provide a fraternal presence to the campus community 41 times, with considerable impact, as well as the praise and appreciation each time of tens and even hundreds of members of that campus community. Giving witness can still occur and be experienced as a genuine blessing, even as the Brothers age and of necessity step back from full-time ministry positions. However, the spirit of Association can still endure and be advanced. Again, it is the Declaration which states, “Association is a vocational journey which invites us to form communities in which we share faith and respond to the needs of today.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, there are some quasi-retired Brothers who could still render a valuable service in accompanying various groups in understanding and implementing the Lasallian Mission. This could include the mission and ministry team, the campus vocation council, the athletic department, residential life, and academic affairs. Furthermore, as noted, they and other highly experienced Lasallians should be called upon to serve on Boards of Trustees of colleges and universities apart from their own, as well as to render the same services for District middle-schools and high schools, including on the boards for San Miguel and Cristo Rey schools, and for retreat centers. All of this is presently occurring on a limited basis, but for it to continue and to remain impactful, adequate planning, structure and sufficient preparation will be required. Brothers can also assist in collaboratively offering orientation and formation events for Boards of Trustees, for newly hired administrators, for faculty and staff, and for student leaders, along with hiring for mission training.

One common feature on all of our campuses that is consistently supported and advocated by the Brothers and many other Lasallians is the appealing and welcoming nature of our college chapels. Well-situated on campus and consistently upgraded and staffed, provide a welcoming environment, maintain a spiritual tone, reach out to various faith traditions by way of the ministry team, and offer pastoral service to whomever seeks it. In addition, our colleges and universities, with the appreciative support of the Brothers and Lasallian Partners alike, have provided beautiful campuses with spiritually uplifting natural environments and inspiring religious and other art pieces. All of these point to the revelation of our compassionate and ever-faithful God. Some are quite extraordinary, such as the iconic sculpture of St. De La Salle here at Saint Mary’s, the glorious windows in Manhattan’s Chapel of De La Salle and His Brothers, and the intriguing “Encounter” sculpture at the center of the Lewis campus. Of course, most or all of

our campuses have crucifixes and other religious art in every classroom, and similar religious pieces elsewhere. Each piece of religious art in its own way reveals God's holy presence, the Lord in whom we "live and move and have our very being."

In this manner the university environment is itself a daily reminder of the magnificence and mystery of creation, the significance of loving and caring relationships, and our shared responsibility for the respectful care of "our common home." To the extent that these dimensions of a Lasallian tertiary experience are integral to our spirituality, they help us, our colleagues and our students to bring greater meaning to one's existence and become more fully human. Each new day, we are graced with the presence of our incarnational God and his wonderful human creatures. Hopefully in each of our learning centers, we are developing further mission understanding rooted in our Lasallian spirituality, lived out in our community, and in our passion for the mission, as each of us pursues our own vocational journey. In this manner, we Lasallians, Brothers and lay Partners alike, can provide a distinctive kind of education and offer our students our commitment to their accompaniment, as we support each other as brothers and sisters, and as older brothers and sisters to our students whom we place at the center of Lasallian education in service to community, faith and the pursuit of justice.

### **Orientation and Formation of Trustees**

In particular, it is important that there be a robust orientation and also an accompaniment program for trustees. Sufficient time must be set aside initially for the orientation of trustees in order to offer newly selected trustees an understanding of the character and history of their university or college, a comprehension and experience of the Lasallian Mission, the history of the Brothers at their institution but also Regionally and globally, including a session on the Founder, the early Brothers and their innovative responses to the urgent educational needs of their era. Newly chosen trustees also need to understand the culture and the most significant challenges and opportunities currently facing their institution, as well as the structures of the Board itself, its role in governance, and the ability to differentiate between the managerial responsibilities of the administration and the teaching and mentoring roles of the faculty, in contrast to the policy and oversight responsibilities of the trustees. Moreover, boards of trustees are increasingly scheduling not only a full day of initial orientation, but also an adequate amount of time at each and every Board meeting for some further mission content and reflection, in addition to several hours of mission formation at the annual board retreat. Simply offering a prayer at the start of each meeting must be seen for what it is, that is, sincere and symbolic, but without much substance or real depth.

### **Association for Mission**

We have been speaking of the fundamental significance of the mission in attracting and retaining excellent candidates as faculty, staff, administrators and trustees at our Lasallian Catholic colleges and universities. Teachers are especially pivotal in providing the quality of educational

experience which we promise to each student entrusted to our care. Again, we turn to the *Declaration*: “If there is anything that has distinguished Lasallian education from its origin, it is the dignity accorded to the teachers, the importance assigned to their role in the educational process and the recognition of their ability to influence character development in children and young people.”<sup>7</sup>

Mission identification and allegiance provide energy, staying power, the inner spirit and the motivation for service. Given the many challenges (enrollment, finances, infrastructure problems, endowment drawdowns, demographics and other) faced to some degree at all of our tertiary institutions, we require a strong spirit of association for the mission to persevere and prevail. In turn, that requires dedicated and competent advocates for the mission who can lead the way toward further mission achievement, especially within the community and on the board. Chief among these is the leadership relationship of the President and the Vice President for Mission and Identity. Moreover, impressive, realistic and attainable strategic plans are now in place in each of these six institutions. To varying degrees, we have chosen the right administrative leadership, developed well-functioning boards, hired faculty capable of transforming the curriculum for greater career readiness coupled with liberal arts goals and qualifications, and worked together to ensure successful promotion of our Lasallian Catholic mission, especially as our Mission Vice Presidents walk side by side with the Presidents in mission integration and implementation. Moreover, these mission leaders are increasingly collaborating across institutional boundaries and barriers. This is all for the good and quite hopeful.

However, it could prove even more advantageous and sustainable if some or all of the six colleges and universities were to develop new and unprecedented levels of collaboration, resource sharing and innovative visioning to better ensure the viability and vitality of each of these six very special institutions with their hundreds of years of living the Lasallian legacy, especially in educational service to the poor and needy. What form this might take is subject to the extent that we can be innovative, truly open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and honest in sharing with each other an assessment of our institutional strengths and needs. Above all, we want the continuation of our vibrant and very relevant mission and all the educational opportunities that occur as a consequence of mission fidelity, which constitute a very appealing dimension of the Catholic Church. Perhaps there are credible models in this country and abroad of new forms of affiliation, collaboration and even possible federation. What is most significant is that our Lasallian legacy and mission are sustained, even if in new and renewed forms and structures. Young adults, other university students, the Church, the Institute and our struggling society and culture can and will benefit immensely if we can sustain our mission and exercise our imagination and practical judgment to emerge far stronger and more impactful through new constructs of collaboration and reimagined structures, by means of services and systems for the effective provision of excellence in Lasallian Catholic higher education, and in other vibrant learning communities throughout this nation and beyond, all as “One La Salle,” committed to a

values-centered formation of human beings of all ages and backgrounds. Indeed, this collective work is of great purpose and accomplishment, even when it is struggling and difficult to sustain, and certainly is worth all our dedicated and demanding efforts. For it remains very true that this work is truly God’s work now entrusted to us, the God who continues to empower and inspire us “together and in association,” to sustain, extend and renew our system of very worthwhile Lasallian Catholic universities and colleges. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> These remarks were delivered in California on June 15, 2023, at the meeting of the Lasallian Brother Superior and General Council with leaders of Lasallian colleges and universities in the USA on June 15, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Brother James Gaffney, president emeritus of Lewis University, holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Education from Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, a Master of Arts from Manhattan College and a Doctorate of Ministry in Pastoral Theology from the University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, IL. He has received many honors for his leadership, including the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Medal from the Vatican for his service to the Catholic Church and the Hesburgh Award from the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities for his exceptional contributions to Catholic higher education.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020), p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae* [On Catholic Universities], August 15, 1990, Holy See.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* (Rome, Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020), p. 108.