



Cultivating an On-Going Campus Dialogue about Catholic Identity The Experience of Loras College

Loras College is one of the oldest Catholic colleges in the United States, and from its inception its Catholic character has been essential to its mission and identity. Today, however, no Catholic college can take its Catholic identity for granted. Changes in the Church, American culture, and the landscape of higher education over the last several decades have led Loras and many other Catholic institutions to become more intentional in addressing their specific mission and culture.

In 1999 Loras launched a series of three annual symposia under the title “Streams of Living Water.” These featured speakers and activities designed to generate interest in the topic of Catholic identity and to stimulate enthusiasm for a deeper spiritual life on campus.

Building on these symposia, in 2003 Loras began a comprehensive effort to reflect on, sharpen, and deepen its Catholic identity. This effort has been coordinated by a presidential task force that eventually became a permanent Catholic Identity Committee.

Composition of the Catholic Identity Committee

From the beginning, the committee has brought together people from across campus. Members represent a range of academic programs, student/residential life, campus ministry, students, hourly employees, athletics, administration, human resources, and other areas.

The committee has always included some members who are themselves Catholic, as well as some from other faith traditions.

To facilitate smooth coordination and sharing of ideas, the committee includes members active in other areas of Catholic life on campus—The Breitbach Catholic Thinkers and Leaders Program, the Catholic Studies Minor, Campus Ministry, The Fr. Ray Herman Peace and Justice Center, The Archbishop Kucera Center for Catholic Intellectual and Spiritual Life, and other initiatives.

Hospitality and Dialogue

In addition to a broad-based and representative membership, the committee has consistently emphasized hospitality and dialogue in its efforts. It has worked to create a series of diverse settings and events that are open, welcoming, and comfortable. These have helped facilitate the coming together of the campus community to explore the richness of the Catholic tradition—to learn about its history, celebrate its endurance, explore its challenges, and talk about its meanings and implications.

Beginning the Conversation

The process began when members of the committee themselves engaged in open-ended dialogue about the character of the Catholic tradition at Loras and what role the committee should play in addressing it. The process included formal and informal gatherings, as well as a retreat for committee members.

The committee hosted a series of small informal gatherings across campus. These included refreshments and were scheduled in different buildings at different times during the day and

week. There was no set agenda. Instead the campus community was invited to come for fellowship and an open-ended discussion of what it means for Loras to be a Catholic college. At some of these meetings, a PowerPoint slide show ran an automated loop of mission statements from other Catholic colleges and universities—texts that helped prompt ideas, issues, and themes for more detailed discussion.

The committee hosted a series of “Hospitality Dinners.” These featured a high-end plated meal in the campus ballroom. Participants—students, faculty, and staff—were randomly seated at round tables. After a speaker gave a short presentation on a particular aspect of the Catholic tradition, participants discussed the topic over dinner.

The committee sponsored a summer reading group with people from across campus featuring George Dennis O’Brien’s *The Idea of a Catholic University*.

Returning to the ideals behind the “Streams of Living Water” symposia, the committee began an annual Catholic Identity Week with programming, speakers, and discussions centering on Catholicism and the college’s role in the Church.

Creating a Catholic Identity Statement

Reflecting on the themes that emerged from campus dialogue, the committee began to draft a statement of Catholic Identity at the college.

In addition to collecting ideas from across campus, members reviewed statements from other Catholic institutions and more general articles and books on Catholic identity and American higher education.

As it took shape, the statement went through 13 drafts. The committee emphasized that the process needed to be as open, collaborative, and broad-based as possible. It conducted a series of open forums and workshops across campus, met with other committees on campus such as the Diversity Task Force, hosted a discussion of the statement following the Sunday campus liturgy, met with representatives of the Board of Regents, and discussed the process with several off-campus experts in Catholic higher education.

When the final draft was approved by the Loras College Board of Regents, the committee had already been planning for ways to make sure the exploration and celebration of Catholic identity at Loras continued. The idea was that the Catholic Identity Statement should become a “living document,” one that continued to foster reflection and dialogue and that continued to challenge the campus community.

Continuing the Conversation

Following the adoption of the Catholic Identity Statement, the committee sponsored a series of lunch and breakfast events around specific sections. These featured short presentations and discussion about both the promise and the challenges involved in living out the particular element of the statement.

Members of the committee have met with each academic division and the leaders of student groups to discuss specific challenges and opportunities presented by the Catholic Identity Statement

The committee has continued the popular Hospitality Dinners, working with campus groups and using an on-line campus survey to pick a topic each semester. The dinners have featured presentations by students, faculty, and staff. The focus of the dinners is to create opportunities for and models of civil discourse about often difficult topics—the nature of God, human sexuality, ecumenical dialogue, and so on.

The committee sends a birthday card to every college employee on her or his birthday, signed by each member of the committee. The cards were designed by Loras students, the result of a campus-wide contest sponsored by the committee.

Committee members serve two popular meals to the entire student body each year—the Thanksgiving meal and a late-night breakfast during final exams week. The finals week breakfast features humorous touches with T-shirts quoting John 21:12 (“Come and have breakfast.”) and St. Jude prayer cards (patron saint of lost causes).

The committee sponsors a Catholic Identity page each week in the campus newspaper.

Committee members meet with new faculty during their orientation sessions to share and discuss the Catholic identity of the college.

The committee helps plan and host an annual conference of representatives from the country’s diocesan colleges and universities.