



Saving the Bunnies: Mission over Metrics in Catholic Higher Education

*Remarks to Chief Academic Officers at the
Association of Catholic College and Universities Annual Meeting
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**President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University**

Original presentation included a Powerpoint slide deck illustrating various points; key slides embedded below.

Good morning and thanks for allowing me to pinch hit for what I'm sure would have been a far more erudite speaker. I mean... how much can you expect from someone who illustrates her title slide with a cartoon character?



**Saving the Bunnies:
Mission over Metrics
in Catholic Higher Education**

**PRESIDENT PATRICIA MCGUIRE
TRINITY WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC**



Let's start this morning with a simple quiz: which one of these thoughts does not belong in the group:

“The Christian spirit of service to others for the *promotion of social justice* is of particular importance for each Catholic University...Every Catholic University ...will be capable of searching for ways to make university education accessible to all those who are able to benefit

from it, especially the poor or members of minority groups who customarily have been deprived of it.” ([Ex Corde Ecclesiae](#) #34)

“This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity.” (Pope Francis, “[A Big Heart Open to God](#),” *America* magazine Sept. 19, 2013)

“A University is...an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill” (John Henry Cardinal Newman, [The Idea of a University](#))

“... you think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can’t. You just have to drown the bunnies ... put a Glock to their heads.” (Mount St. Mary’s President [Simon Newman](#))

Seriously, he said that?

We have a large and rich body of thought that defines the values of Catholic education, higher education, and our mission as part of the ministry of the Church. We have *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminding us that fidelity to mission is not just about theology but our openness to those who have been on the margins, that we must not just accept but actively promote social justice. We have Pope Francis constantly reminding us of our obligation to be open to all, especially the poor.

We have John Henry Cardinal Newman defining the whole *Idea of the University* as *alma mater* --- surely the sweet mother would hug her bunnies close! But then along comes the president of a Catholic institution, ostensibly one that is considered in certain circles to be among the most “faithfully Catholic” places whatever that may mean, and this president tells his faculty to “drown the bunnies... put a Glock to their heads” --- a metaphor that is so much more than merely unfortunate, a rhetorical window into the soul of someone who completely fails to understand the real mission and purpose of Catholic higher education.

I don’t usually go to evangelical phraseology, but I found myself wondering, “What would Jesus say?” if he spoke to that president. The Gospel command is to “go forth and teach all nations” not just those with strong SAT scores and solid bank accounts.

If Jesus were here today, surely his command would be: Save the bunnies!

Now, I do not want to get into all of the drama and back story intrigue of the case of President Newman at Mount St. Mary’s except to say this: “drowning bunnies” is a metaphor for the triumph of metrics over mission. The entire point of that horrific turn of the phrase was a plan to increase the retention rate and ultimate completion rate at the university in question. Well, isn’t that something we all care about? Let’s not be naïve. The current obsession with retention and completion rates is all about rankings and the scorecard, about competitive advantage with economic elites and more prestigious institutions.

A high completion rate is really an indicator of low risk in the admissions process;¹ a lower completion rate means that the school took a lot more risks in admitting students who are

¹ See my commentary on graduation rates at Patricia McGuire, “[Graduation Rates are Bad Data](#)” in the Washington Post, January 26, 2012.

unlikely to complete degrees on the traditional timetable – and so much research has been done by [Lumina](#) and other organizations on the new pathways for the majority of non-traditional students through college, that’s a topic for another day. But suffice to say that a great many traditional-aged low income students are non-traditional and high-risk for completion on traditional timetables. Many of these students are African American and Latina, students who struggle because of the poverty and injustices that they have suffered grievously. High risk students bring with them not only the reputational risk of lower completion rates according to the IPEDS formula, but also higher costs for financial aid, tutoring and support services, and, quite possibly, threats to credit ratings. Moody’s takes a dim view of student populations with high percentages of low income students of color because these students also bring the most risk to traditional metrics of success such as low discount rates and high net tuition.

Catholic higher education, of all places, should embrace those risks and welcome those students for whom our schools are quite often the best hope for change in their lives. In welcoming “the other” into the heart of our campuses, we should remember our history and our mission. Most of our institutions were founded because of exclusion --- Catholics were once “the other” excluded from traditional colleges in the 19th and early 20th centuries because of rabid discrimination against Catholics and the ethnic groups of our ancestors. We should remember that history in being open and welcoming for new generations of students who are excluded --- they may not be Catholic, but they are all of God’s children, and they suffer the discrimination born of racism and classism and other forms of prejudice that block human progress in this nation.

*“The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to **warm the hearts** of the faithful...I see the church as a **field hospital** after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to **heal his wounds**. Then we can talk about everything else...”*

Pope Francis, Interview in [America Magazine](#), September 30, 2013



Ex Corde calls Catholic higher education to a very different place, a place deeply rooted in the essence of our social justice imperatives: to protect and cherish human life, to express solidarity with our neighbors, to take the option for the poor. Pope Francis, in his plain-spoken homilies, says it even more clearly: our job as participants in the great work of the Church is not to drive people out but to open our hearts to them, to bind up their wounds in the “field hospital” that is the Church of his vision --- which, in the case of struggling freshmen, might be teaching an 18 year old how to read well, or providing enough financial aid so that a student is not hungry or homeless, or daring to reform the curriculum to make the old canons of knowledge more readily accessible to a very different choir from those to whom we preached in the past. [Cristina Parsons, a Trinity faculty member, coined that wonderful phrase about teaching to a different choir.]



“...we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. ...Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest...As a consequence, masses of people find themselves **excluded and marginalized** ...We have created a **“throw away” culture** which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”.... To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a **globalization of indifference** has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were **someone else’s responsibility** and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 53-54)

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This pope is very clear about his disdain for exclusion. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls us to say “no to an economy of exclusion.” This should apply as much to Catholic higher education as to any other Church ministry. He challenges us to reject the “throw-away culture,” to recognize that actions that exclude others leads to “globalization of indifference” and stunting of lives for whom opportunity is elusive. He warns against letting our prosperity deaden us to the needs of the poor and marginalized --- those who may be the very students in the bottom 25

of the class for whom our colleges should offer the hope of radical change in their lives, not the fear of being cast out for being found wanting in some way, not conforming to group norms.



“We need to avoid a common temptation nowadays: to discard whatever proves troublesome.”

Pope Francis to the U.S. Congress



He said this more succinctly to Congress, in remarks about refugees, but a thought that can easily apply to the bottom 25 freshmen: “We need to avoid a common temptation nowadays: to discard whatever proves troublesome.” To discard what threatens our metrics...

We cannot do the work of the Church if we discard, reject, dismiss those who need us the most -- those in the bottom of the class.

TIME U.S.

LATEST MAGAZINE VIDEOS

U.S. EDUCATION

Catholic Colleges Tell Poor Kids to Go Elsewhere

Dec. 22, 2014

Church-affiliated schools are among the nation's most expensive for low-income students

At Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., officials sometimes bring in low-income applicants and their families for counseling. The point of the sessions is not to encourage the students to attend, but to suggest they consider going somewhere cheaper.

The university needs to spend its financial aid to attract “higher-end students,” says W. Michael Hendricks, vice president for enrollment management

Why Latin American Women Can't Follow the Zika Advice to Avoid Pregnancy
ALL CONTENT

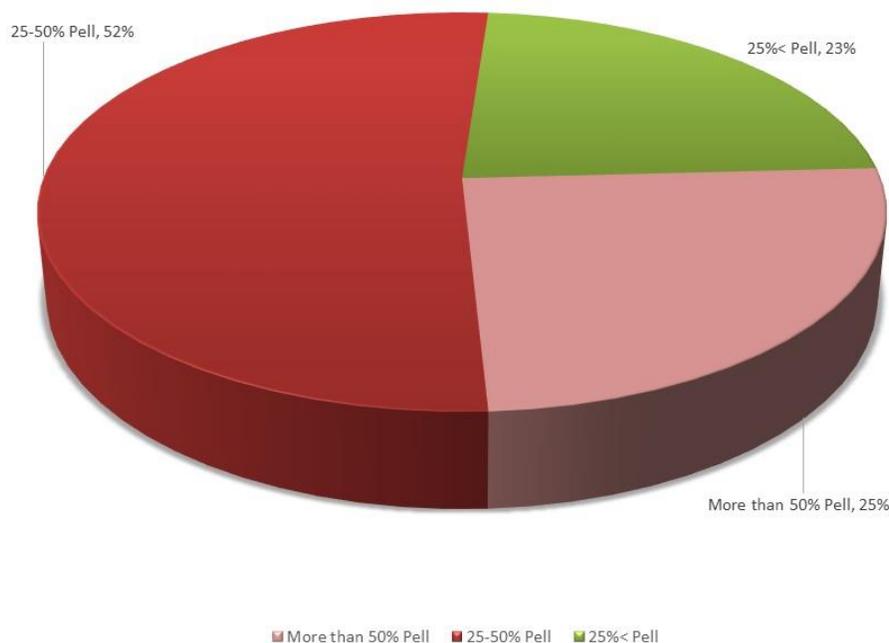
How One Man Tried to Get 14 Liquor Bottles Past Saudi Customs

Syrian Peace Talks Are At a Stalemate and They Haven't Even Started

So, what are we doing in Catholic higher education? The story about drowning bunnies is not the only problem. Last year, there was an astonishing story in TIME about the net price of Catholic higher ed --- here's the headline: ["Catholic Colleges Tell Poor Kids to Go Elsewhere"](#) - --- 10 of the 30 most expensive universities in the country (on net price) are Catholic, including #1 and #2. Is that really the story we want told about our mission?

Catholic Colleges and Universities with Pell Eligible students

Data Source: 2014 IPEDS



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Now, to be fair, that story was somewhat misleading, and I actually [wrote a response op-ed](#) that included data illustrating the fact that many Catholic colleges and universities actually enroll a substantial proportion of low income students --- my research showed that 77% of our institutions have student bodies that are 25% or more Pell eligible, and 25% of us have more than 50% Pell students. Some of us have more than 80% Pell students.

Dozens of Catholic colleges and universities are excellent examples of places that put mission ahead of metrics, and we are alive and well to tell the tales of institutional transformation. We know quite well that there's no metric for how many teenage mothers earned a B in statistics and grew to love math; or how engaged a once-withdrawn young woman became when she had a chance to read her own poetry at the spoken word program; or how a once-incarcerated older man got his act together and even got a job after completing an associate's degree in one of our adult studies programs. We are the field hospitals of Catholic higher education.

How do some of us manage to put mission before metrics when it comes to serving some of the most challenged students anywhere? I want to share these things we've done at Trinity:

First, a quick snapshot of the Trinity story:

Founded in 1897 as the women's college answer to the then-new Catholic University, Trinity grew and flourished for the first 70 years as a very small, very elite liberal arts college for women. But then after coeducation swept the men's schools, like all women's colleges Trinity's enrollment fell sharply, and the next several decades were a time of severe enrollment and economic depression. The economics were compounded by the fact that, like so many of our schools, the financial foundation was built on the free labor of women, which also disappeared about the same time as our students disappeared in the early 1970's, so as the tide swept out we were left with rising costs and falling revenues.

Trinity --- like New Rochelle, Ursuline, Mt. St. Mary's in Los Angeles and so many others --- turned to adult and continuing education as part of the transformation strategy. In the 1990's, with more and more adult women from the city enrolled in our Weekend College program, the clamor to welcome more and more of their daughters to Trinity increased --- the idea of "legacy" reinvented for an entirely new world. But Trinity, in particular was reluctant to go to that dance. When I became president in 1989, I asked the admissions director how many students from the DC Public Schools were enrolled at Trinity, and her answer shocked me: "None," she said, "they can't do the work here."

**“WHY ARE WE TRYING SO HARD TO “RECLAIM” A
POPULATION THAT HAS MOVED ON? THE SNDS
FOUNDED TRINITY TO OFFER ACCESS TO HIGHER
EDUCATION FOR WOMEN WHO FACE BARRIERS.
THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF WOMEN AT OUR
DOORSTEP WHO STILL FACE HUGE BARRIERS, WHO
NEED A TRINITY EDUCATION SO VERY MUCH”**

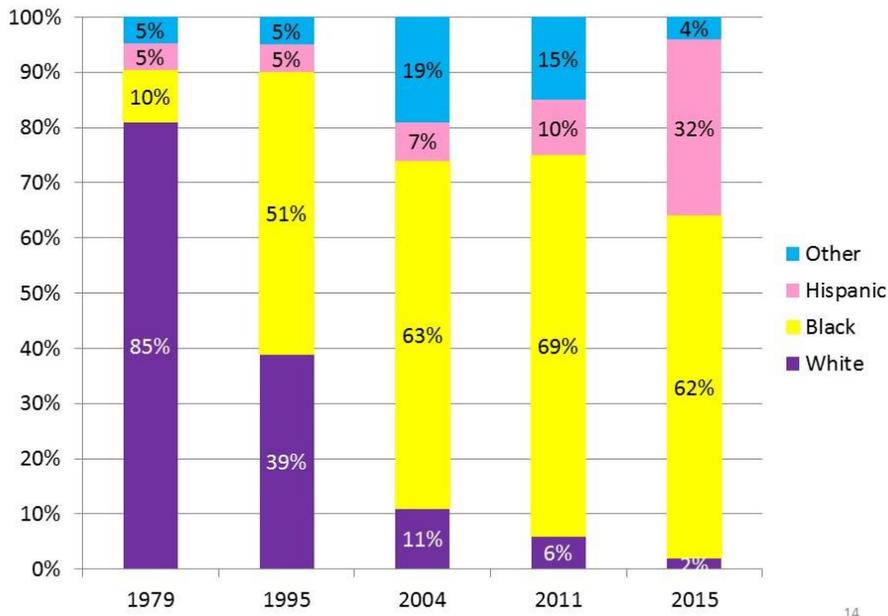
**--- A SISTER OF NOTRE DAME
DURING STRATEGIC PLANNING DISCUSSIONS
CIRCA 1992**



We had to change our attitude, not just as a matter of survival – but let's be clear, the instinct for survival can certainly clarify vision --- but also as a matter of mission. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, our founding congregation, helped to get our heads turned in the right direction. We engaged strategic planning and endless discussions, and finally, in one board meeting, an SND stood up and proclaimed, exasperated, "Why are we trying so hard to reclaim the past? Those women are gone! But there are thousands of women at our doorstep and they deserve this education! The SNDS founded Trinity to make a great higher education accessible to women --- we should be welcoming the women for whom this education will be transformative!"

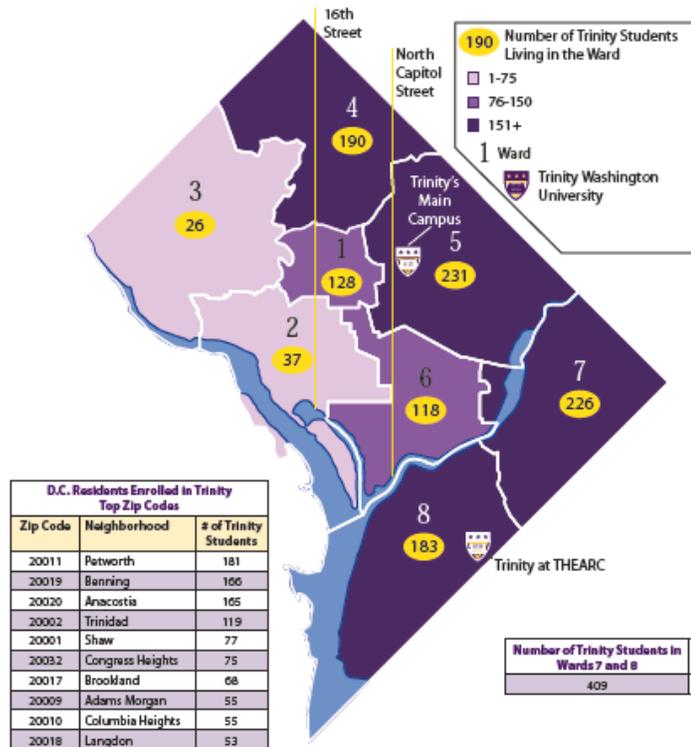
She was so right, and we did just that --- but not without controversy, of course!

Trinity Enrollment By Race 1979 to 2015



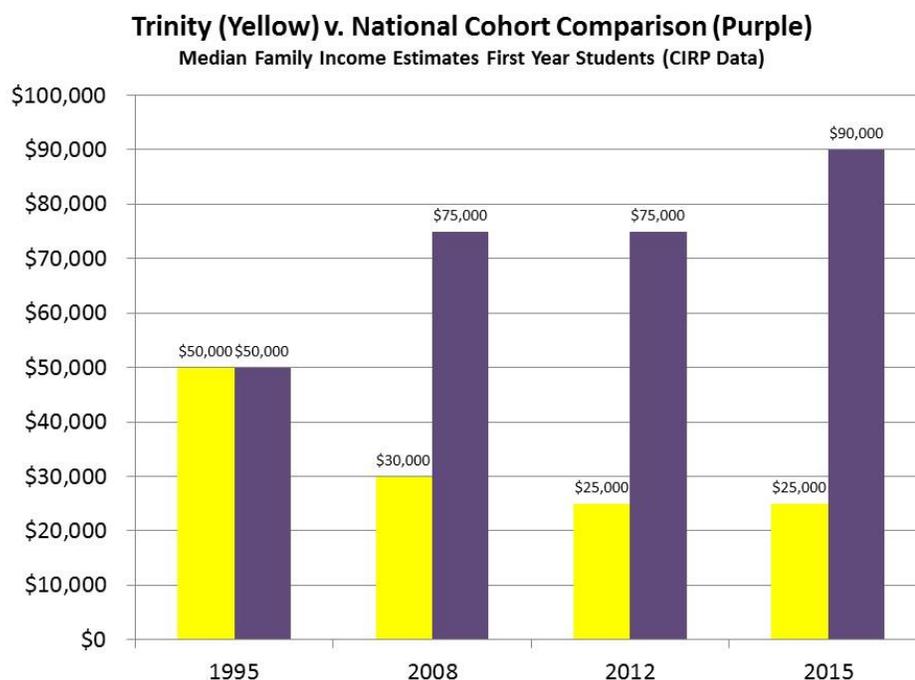
As Trinity welcomed more and more students from the city, we became a predominantly Black institution, and now we have a growing population of Latina students because of our Dreamers scholarship program.

D.C. Residents Enrolled in Trinity Washington University, by Ward



We became the largest private university serving the needs of the poorest DC residents on the eastern half of the city.

We went through a very rough period with our alums for whom the idea of a majority black student body was a hard concept --- and not just race, but social class and religion. “We don’t mind all this diversity,” said one to me in a meeting, “But are they Catholic?”



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Our students are deeply impoverished. We had to get over the idea that our mission was defined by student characteristics of race or class or religion or bank accounts --- we had to re-learn the true meaning of a Catholic mission to be open to all God’s children, to welcome students at the places where they are and help them move to new places of greater intellectual power and economic security. We had to figure out how to support a student body that’s more than 80% Pell eligible, so many young women on their own with babies, so many students for whom academic success has always been elusive, so much ambition but so little preparation for the rigors of college.

The work proved to be very hard --- harder than we expected, harder than anything we had done previously. Along the way, our faculty had to transform themselves.... I am very proud of the work our faculty have done to change curricula and pedagogy, to focus on student success. We just completed our Middle States self-study and the work in assessment is breath-taking.

Given time today, I cannot describe everything we are doing, but since you are provosts let me highlight three areas where our sense of mission as a Catholic institution must really shine through --- and note that none of these have anything to do with Theology and wars with bishops, our sense of Catholic mission pervades every single thing we do, not compartmentalized into one place in the curriculum but a sense of justice, charity and hope pervades all.

Our faculty and administrative team focus on strategies for student success in several major areas of institutional life:

Curriculum and Pedagogy [slide 17]

Of course, central to all that we do, making sure the curricula are strong, accessible and delivered with innovative pedagogy aligned with student needs is essential:

- *First Year Program:* with the support of a Mellon Grant, complete overhaul consistent with national research to engage students directly with content and to embed critical skills development (critical reading, collegiate writing, quantitative analysis and oral presentation skills) in liberal arts courses; revamp Math sequence to get students into Math courses relevant to their career pathways at a much earlier point in time
- *Undergraduate Research:* expanding undergraduate research opportunities beyond the sciences to social sciences, arts and humanities as evidence of research engagement fosters greater student self-confidence and success in many disciplines
- *Smart Use of Assessment Results:* faculty and deans review assessment results of courses and programs continuously to make changes and improve student outcomes; for example, assessment of the Business and Professional Ethics course across four semesters led to significant changes in pedagogy with improved outcomes for both critical reading and ethical reasoning; assessment of the general education capstone courses over several semesters led to a complete overhaul of academic planning and pedagogy for integrative writing;
- *Appreciative Advising:* professional advisors work with every first year student going well beyond course selection to analyze student strengths, interests, risks and specific needs, developing plans for both academic and co-curricular support

Faculty Development [slide 18]

Trinity faculty are extremely proud of their work with our students, and the faculty are intensely devoted to developing pedagogies and practices that foster success for all students. Some of the key initiatives in faculty development include:

- With the support of a Mellon Grant, faculty are redesigning first year courses to meet the new goals for student engagement in liberal arts content at the earliest possible moment, with an emphasis on Writing in the Disciplines, critical reading skills development, quantitative analysis and oral presentation;
- The Mellon Grant also supports faculty development to strengthen the ability of the faculty to teach critical reading and reasoning skills, as well as to introduce undergraduate research opportunities in the arts and humanities – so many opportunities exist for this in Washington, and because of great success with undergraduate research in the sciences, the other faculty wanted to get in on this pedagogy!
- Broad faculty participation in on-campus faculty development programs such as a two-day seminar by Dee Fink on “Designing Courses for Significant Learning Outcomes” and many workshops on assessment and pedagogy

- Faculty incentives focus on effective teaching and creative pedagogy, including support for travel and conference participation, and assessment of faculty work including rank and tenure portfolios
- Adjunct faculty also have access to the faculty development programs in addition to specific workshops designed for adjuncts

Student Support Services [slide 19]

- Academic Support Services: centrally located team of learning specialists and tutors available to work with students on a broad range of academic support issues
- CARE Team and Student Support Services: the Student Affairs personnel are co-located with academic affairs and advisors, and the teams work closely on student cases to ensure wrap-around services across a broad range of issues, e.g., health, hunger, homelessness, family challenges, parenting, domestic violence
- Enrollment Services including Financial Aid: this team also works closely with academic and student affairs to provide support and direct assistance to students with financial challenges (most of them!)

Outcomes [slide 20]

A recent survey of Trinity graduates across the last ten years points to these results: *of those who have answered...*

- 95% are currently employed with a median salary range of \$60,000-\$69,000
- 70% have pursued some graduate studies since graduation; 60% have completed graduate degrees and 36% are still enrolled for a total persistence/completion rate of 96% for graduate degrees; the graduate schools they have attended include universities such as Georgetown, the London School of Economics, American University, Howard University, the University of Pennsylvania, UMUC, Bowie, Towson, Phoenix and Trinity
- Within one year of graduation, 78% reported that they were immediately employed and 32% were in graduate school
- 85% of respondents say that they are employed in the same or related field as their major, or in a different field by choice;
- The most important knowledge and skills the respondents said they received from their Trinity education include excellence in written and oral communication, critical thinking and a deep sense of ethics.



“How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. ...”

Pope Francis I, Interview in [America Magazine](#), September 30, 2013



In closing, let me come back to Francis. In his interview in *America Magazine* he said,

“How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. ... The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost.” (Pope Francis, *America Magazine*, September 13, 2013)

Yes, he was speaking of priests and bishops in that interview with *America*, but he may as well have been speaking to all of us, the administrators and faculty, the real shepherds of the great flock in Catholic higher education. At the end of the day, nobody will remember the particular metrics on this year’s scorecard or whether we moved up or down in next year’s *U.S. News* rankings. What we will know and remember, what others will know and remember about us, what our students will know and experience throughout our lives, is this simple fact: whether we truly lived up to the moral imperatives of our mission in social justice for the sake of the human lives we are graced to encounter, to teach and, quite possibly, transform at least a little bit each day.

Thanks for listening!