Mission Education as a form of Teaching: examining dynamics in a contemporary context

The decline of religiously-based colleges and universities of diverse faith traditions and institutions led by Catholic religious orders has given birth to new forms of education about the founders of those institutions and their relevance for today’s world. Many educational institutions, founded by religious communities/denominations, now sponsor mission offices with varying titles but with similar goals. Mission integration, mission education, mission centers – these departments seem to have several main functions: 1) education about the founders of the institution. 2) celebration of the “high holy days” and charisms unique to the founding of this institution 3) infusion of the ethos and spirit of the founders into the life of the institution. Finally, a fourth function has emerged in the past couple years as higher education has been forced to examine its own conscience: that is, a critical analysis of racist, sexist and discriminatory hegemony present in academia at large and in the heritage of many religiously based institutions. To foster open and honest dialogue and critique while also recovering a lasting understanding of the good and just intentions of the founders’ ethos, the mission offices target employees of the institutions – faculty, staff, and administrators – as foundational to the future of the mission.

The literature related to religious education of adults, which explores the very intentions of such education, provides very helpful insights and parameters as mission offices chart their futures and justify their purposes to diverse constituencies. By utilizing selected authors, the pages ahead provide an overview of the terrain of mission education and an analysis of some cautionary concerns as these programs have expanded in the higher education context. Mary Hess and Stephen Brookfield call educators to accountability for the null curriculum – the vestiges of racism, sexism and bigotry, for example, that many institutions of higher education are now forced to confront. Paul Lakeland’s scholarship on postmodern sensibilities provides a helpful lens for understanding the complexity of the audiences for mission programs. Gabriel Moran and Kieran Scott offer insight into the teaching languages utilized by such offices and the dangers that arise when these languages are blurred; both raise questions about the moral implications of the use of such languages. Jane Regan’s application of the notion of “learning community” to the parish community can be compared to mission education. Also, parallels can be drawn from narrative education literature, as explicated by Sharan Merriam. Finally, Thomas Groome’s understanding of “shared praxis” sheds light on potential developments for the future direction of mission education.
The Signs of the Times for Mission education

Before addressing the particulars of mission education, the signs of the times in higher education require some focused attention because they elicit considerable pause and concern for promoters of mission who approach their mandates with intellectual and moral integrity. Several scenarios serve to embody this reality. First, in the past year Georgetown University\(^1\) has been forced into soul-searching and accountability as its sinful history of selling slaves (272 slaves from Jesuit plantations in 1838 to generate the equivalent of 3 million dollars in today’s world) has been revealed and has provoked significant media attention. Second, a national campaign against sexual assault has targeted higher education as among the worst culprits in not pursuing and reporting assault allegations.\(^2\) The sex abuse crisis in the church has heightened awareness and concern especially in religiously-based institutions. Finally the conversation about racism in the United States, intensified by the police shootings of unarmed African Americans in cities throughout the nation (such as Ferguson, Missouri; Minneapolis, Mn; Baton Rouge, LA) is very much on the minds of many at college campuses where students are raising issues ranging from: peer to peer or faculty to student micro-aggressions and bigotry; faculty hiring for diversity; diversity issues in the curriculum; university response to police shootings; and ethically responsible institutional spending and investment.

Institutional racism, rampant sexual assault, and ubiquitous forms of bigotry – these trenchant injustices help to frame the contextual landscape from which mission education operates. Context is critical. For mission centers to ignore the impacts of oppressive injustices on their constituents is tantamount to embracing a “null curriculum,” a term of Elliott Eisner, used by Mary Hess and Stephen Brookfield,\(^3\) to challenge educators to face up to the deleterious effects of racism and white privilege. Commenting on the predicament of educating with awareness of inherent unjust structures, Hess and Brookfield query, “How do we deconstruct these destructive systems, while working within systems of power that grant us the authority we rely upon for teaching and the agency we require for that teaching to function well?”\(^4\)

Attending to Mission Education Audiences

Attuned to the signs of the times, how might one describe the diverse constituencies of faculty, staff, and administrators who may be the audiences of mission education events? In his important work, The Liberation of the Laity, Paul Lakeland paints the picture of three distinct typologies of the postmodern era: counter modern,

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\(^3\) Mary E. Hess and Stephen Brookfield, “How can White Teachers Recognize and Challenge Racism?” Acknowledging Collusion and Learning an Aggressive Humility,” from Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts, edited by Hess and Brookfield (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2008), 165

\(^4\) Hess and Brookfield, 167
radically postmodern, or late modern. The counter modern position revels in a sense of nostalgia for the rituals and certainty of the pre-modern period. Anger is a chief emotion directed towards the change agents of the modern era. From my perspective, this counter modern position focuses on pietistic practices, devotion, and arcane societies to preserve the past. Lakeland suggests that a “pneumatology of nostalgia” envelops the institutional church and prevents it from moving forward into the future. In higher education, there is often considerable suspicion—sometimes healthy but more often neuralgic—of anything that smacks of innovation and change. In place of rigorous academic critique the counter modern perspective is content with hagiography to exalt the legends and heroics of institutional founders.

While the counter modern position seems quite evident among some circles in higher education so too a radically postmodern approach seems more a feature of at least some sectors of student bodies and faculty/staff of Catholic institutions, as my experience has revealed. Such an approach may demonstrate scant knowledge of the religious traditions that informed the heroes of the institution. Many are unaffiliated or disaffected with institutional religion but at the same time could very much be much interested in and inspired by the experiences of their institutional heroes. For example, the discernment process of Edmund Rice (1762-1844), a millionaire of his time and also a widower who had suffered the tragic loss of his wife soon after his daughter was born, to give his fortune to the education of poor, marginalized children of Ireland can be of considerable interest to the altruistic millennials I teach at Iona College; Edmund’s fervent devotion to the Eucharist and to daily reading of the Bible is of less interest to most.

A third perspective, late modern, recognizes the excesses of the second position but does not want to sacrifice the freedoms of free thinking and rationality that the modern era has bestowed. Lakeland describes this approach as a hope-filled realism that understands the “church’s mission in the modern world” as “collaborative and challenging,” but not as “fearful and still less as dismissive.” This middle ground position describes those in higher education who see tremendous value in understanding and celebrating Catholic identity and mission but recognize that this activity must forge new directions and not dwell in nostalgia.

In her work, Towards an Adult Church, Jane Regan captures well this tension between a fixation on the past versus a future orientation. In gleaning insights from organizational management literature, Regan utilizes Thomas Hawkins’ distinction between two types of “cultures” that can characterize any learning community, whether it be in the corporate sector, higher education, or the faith community. Hawkins speaks of a post-figurative culture and a pre-figurative culture. The former posits a continuity between the past and present; learning from the past provides valuable lessons for the present and future. The latter approach, or pre-figurative, favors a sense of discontinuity with the past. New insights, new skills, new knowledge should be the focus of learning.

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6 Lakeland, 237
7 Lakeland, 241
8 Jane Regan, Toward an Adult Church (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 117.
communities intent on meeting the challenges of the future. Given the previous conversation on the signs of the times, institutions need to be post-figurative in order to undo the grip of racism and sexism that has shaped contemporary higher education. At the same time, this post-figurative approach requires at times critical analysis, accountability for past misdeeds, community lament of injustices and a resolve to be pre-figurative. That is, committed to new insights, perspectives, and skills that are attentive to the current times. Both the typologies of Lakeland and the “cultures” of Hawkins seem to call for a middle ground position for mission education: attuned to and honest about institutional memory; appreciative of, yet critical when necessary, of the past; but ultimately grounded in present needs and concerns as an affirmation of an unfolding future.

It is worthwhile to point out, as Gabriel Moran has, that the dilemma between the past and the future is not a new one in the education spheres. In 1929, George Coe raised the question “whether the primary purpose of Christian education is to hand on a religion or to create a new world?” While Coe may have been overstating his point through the image of “creating a new world,” his fundamental position remains: the work of Christian education can not be a thoughtless, mechanical transmission of the past into the present day. The same can be said with mission education.

But before belaboring this correlation between “mission education” and “religious education,” it is important to pause here and define some terms. Mission originates from the Latin, “to be sent.” Thus, mission education carries with it an implied “place” from which one is sent and suggests a “place” to which one is going. In the very definition of the word, “mission education,” one cannot avoid discussing directly a past, present, and a future. Such a trajectory is not suggested in any direct way by “religious education.” Moran defines the sphere of “religious” as dealing with the whole person, the body, the spirit, and the mind. “Religion” has two definitions: one dealing with the “rituals, beliefs, and moral practices of a community;” and, a second, focusing on classroom learning, the critical inquiry into the academic study. Mission education is not a discipline specific endeavor: there can be a mission dimension to varieties of types of institutions. Yet, there is some overlap between mission education and religious education: both suggest a study that engages one in action or praxis. Likewise, critical study of mission and study of religion on the higher education levels demand the academic freedom and investigation appropriate to a classroom. While related, experiential praxis and classroom learning are distinct endeavors. As Kieran Scott says, religious education is “Janus-faced;” so too is mission education. What, then, are the distinct contexts of mission education on the higher education level?

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10Moran, 139

languages of teaching utilized in these contexts? What challenges are inherent in mission education?

Teaching Languages of Mission Education

This paper does not pretend to survey a rich diversity of mission education programs at colleges in the United States. I am focusing here on my home institution, Iona College, where a mission office has been in place for 20 years and in recent years has joined forces with the college’s campus ministry department. Serving as the director of this combine mission and ministry office for three years, I bring an experiential knowledge of its programs to this paper. The adult learning and development literature provides a theoretical vantage point to look again at these programs. In making connections between the scholarship of Scott and Moran to “mission education,” I am first struck by the starting point of Scott as he seeks to “reclaim the richest meaning of the verb, ‘to teach.’” For, in this area of mission education, the question arises: who is the primary teacher? Questions of ownership and expertise come to mind here.

Who “owns” the mission of an institution? It could be answered that everyone from the youngest student to the oldest professor or groundskeeper has some “ownership” of the mission of an institution. A corporate or legal definition might assign this role to the “Board of Trustees.” Concerning expertise about mission, there are elements of mission education that require academic expertise and also elements informed more by experiential knowledge. Academically speaking, historical knowledge of the founder, theological understanding of ecclesiology and documents such as Ex Corde Ecclesiae, background in the Catholic Intellectual tradition – these areas of expertise are appropriate to teachers of history and theology, for example. At the same time, it can be argued that a mission is only effective as to the extent its diverse constituents “live it” in their everyday lives. This perspective expands the role of “teacher” to the entire community that professes that mission.

This insight about the “teachers of the mission” dovetails with Moran’s sense of a “moral dilemma in the idea of teaching.” Issues of authority, equity, and power foster uneasiness when one suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, that one teacher of mission might be more authentic or credentialed than another. It is helpful then to remember that the etymological roots of the verb, “to teach,” means “to show how.” As Scott says, every religious community teaches by “showing how” people live that way of life. “Virtue is learned when adults and children grow up in a virtuous community.” The same could be said about mission. People learn the mission by working day in and out with people who believe in the mission and are exemplars of the mission. Yet still, some elements of the mission are appropriate to the critical analysis that is the purview of the classroom. For this reason it is important to unpack the various ways mission is taught. A discussion of the three languages of teaching – homiletic, therapeutic, and academic – may provide a more concrete delineation of how mission education might happen at a Catholic college.

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12Scott, 148
13Scott, 150
First, the homiletic. The basis of homiletic teaching is acknowledgement that a community shares common beliefs. Homilies inspire people to put those beliefs into action in their everyday lives. They can be emotional and persuasive, personal and demonstrative. Good homilists craft stories in careful ways so that listeners can discover themselves to be characters thick in the plot of the narrative. Homilies about mission can persuade people to embrace the mission. At welcome events for new employees of my college, the Office of Mission and Ministry highlights seasoned employees who can offer “witness stories” of their understanding of the mission of the college. They are often quite moving. First year employees participate in a “Living the Mission” day-long retreat where they hear inspiring stories of the founder of the college’s sponsoring order and they participate in creative exercises to envision the future of the institution. The “homily” then becomes a “shared one” as participants offer personal accounts of their hopes for and beliefs in the institution. In both the welcome events and retreat days, the homiletic language is utilized to tell inspiring stories about the “heroes” of the institution, in the case of Iona College, that is Edmund Rice and St. Columba.

Therapeutic teaching language can be a medium for mission education. Praising, thanking, welcoming, mourning, healing, calming – these are all examples of this form of language. Mission offices welcome and orient new employees; they also help the community to mourn the loss of colleagues who have died. Through memorial services, opportunities are afforded to students and faculty to reflect on the impacts of the deceased member of the community. The same office organizes a celebration dinner for employees who have served 20, 30, 40 years at the college. At these events, the service of these employees is often likened to the core values of the institutions. And, during an annual “Heritage Week,” employees who have made a significant impact on others are praised through tributes given at a ceremonial event. Each of these programs are examples of therapeutic language used for the purpose of promoting the spirit of the college’s mission.

Academic language is the medium of the faculty who communicate the mission through lectures sponsored by two sub-committees of the mission office: the Catholic Intellectual Tradition committee, the Week of the Peacemaker and the Catholic Social Teaching Committee. These are academic events that provide opportune times to engage in analysis, self-examination and critique of racist and sexist perspectives in the academy. A discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement, “Black in America: Race, Protest, and Democracy,” will serve as this year’s keynote address to a series examining the notion of faithful citizenship in an election year. A presentation on Edmund Rights International, a Geneva-based NGO, bringing forward the human rights vision of the college’s sponsoring order, will provide faculty and students avenues of social justice analysis and engagement. Outside scholars have addressed topics such as service-learning or the legacy of Vatican II. An astronomer on campus presented on the interplay of scientific knowledge and theological speculation. Each year faculty of diverse disciplines attend a weeklong symposium of Collegium, focused on introducing the breadth of the Catholic Intellectual tradition; their insights, often with parallels to their

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14 Scott, 152
15 Scott, 153
own disciples, are presented at an annual luncheon discussion. A summer symposium on
the Catholic Social Teaching offered faculty and administrators a thorough overview of
the main tenets of the tradition.

Understanding teaching languages, then, is an important dimension to the future
promotion of mission education. This topic also relates to another valuable distinction
Scott makes about teaching languages. One of the challenges of mission education is an
over-emphasis on the past. It has already been discussed how the counter modern
typology, as articulated by Lakeland, focuses on nostalgia. This orientation can
effectively create distance between the “present” priority of mission and the past “birth”
of the mission. Too much attention to the “birth” of the mission can sacrifice the
opportunity for a palpable and creative promotion of a newly understood mission in the
present time, responsive to the challenges of today. In the pages ahead, I wish to explore
how the Catholic institution’s orientation toward mission can give proper respect to the
past but capture the energy and potency of the present “praxis of experience.” But first,
let me return to Scott’s distinction between “teaching” and “teaching about.”16 Just as a
counter modern preoccupation can forge a distance between the present and the past, so
too a similar sense of separation is suggested when one “teaches about” mission. As
Scott indicates, there is a break between subjectivity and objectivity when the priority of
the topic is framed with the preposition, “about.” He calls this an “artificial notion of
objectivity.”17

Too much “teaching about mission” can deceive one into thinking that the
mission is a “thing” to understand from the past, instead of a common commitment
created in relation to the present “signs of the times.” “Teaching about mission”
establishes the mission as a noun, “teaching mission” gives this word the action of a verb.
Also it can be argued that a culture of “teaching about” can do more to breed fear and
(what happened to the good old days? The world is falling apart) than to give birth to
hope. This latter emotion, if based in honesty and reality, can certainly be more healthy
for institutions than the former.

A “Present” Approach to Mission

Guided by the scholarship of Moran and Scott on “teaching languages” and
cautioned by the postmodern sensibilities described by Lakeland, it is productive to turn
to the scholarship of Regan, Merriam, and Groome to help frame a “present orientation”
to mission education. Regan’s use of Peter Senge’s organization theory is instructive
here. Senge points out that if organizations are to become “learning communities,” they
must abandon the notion that one ever “arrives at” this state.18 To become a “learning
community” is a continuous effort that can not be understood as “completed.” Inherent
to this process of becoming a “learning community” is the very word, “community,”
which is distinct from the word, “organization.” From my own experience with mission
education on the college level, it is often the case that the word, “community,” is uttered

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16Scott, 163
17 Scott, 165
18Regan, 119
freely without too much attention to the meanings it connotes. Community evokes a shared system of symbols, common memories, and a context where friendships are values. The word, “organization,” has much more of a functional dimension in which people are easily replaced. Communities prioritize relationships and celebrate diversity; organizations favor results.

According to Senge, learning communities are grown through attention to five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Regan applies these five disciplines to the faith community context and suggests that they serve as critical priorities for building a “learning community.” In focusing on personal mastery, one seeks not only to be proficient in one’s job but cognizant of how one’s work is rooted in one’s sense of self and integrity. In attending to one’s operative mental models, one must be open to new learning perspectives that might provide vitality to the organization; as diversity education offerings multiply in higher education, faculty and staff are facing this challenge very acutely. The third discipline, shared vision, relies on a community vision fostered by “sustained conversation.” Such on-going conversation requires continual overtures to the voices that are marginalized. Hess and Brookfield challenge learning communities to accept their own “collusion in racism.” Fostering such honest and vulnerable dialogue requires courage and vulnerability. Team learning, a fourth discipline, is rooted in productive dialogue, as distinguished from idle chit-chat. And finally, systems thinking, involves a grasp of the large picture of inter-locking connections which envelop any organization.

Underlying each of these five disciplines, Regan submits that healthy, learning communities truly must value “sustained critical conversation,” a concept originating from the hermeneutical work of Hans Gadamer. This idea returns us to the goal of identifying a “present orientation” to mission education. If mission education is to avoid the tendency to re-create past into the present, it needs to serve as a catalyst for viable and on-going conversations that are freely motivated. Both Gadamer and Mezirow have well-developed theories on how such conversation can lead to serious questioning of one’s fundamental premises and, for Mezirow, lasting and transformative learning is a result. For Mezirow, sustained conversation discloses three levels of reflection: the content of what is said; the process of how it came to be perceived; and the original premise that shaped one’s perception. Is such sustained conversation possible for mission education in higher education?

Possible, but in reality, obstacles persist. Those accustomed to intellectual discourse are trained to be skeptical. Oftentimes, there can be high level of defensiveness of one’s own ideas. One cannot underestimate the political dimensions that infiltrate academic communities. With tenure and funding issues often pending, there are power dynamics related to many of the gatherings of faculty and administrators. The type of sustained conversation, suggested by Regan, requires a commitment to listening. There is considerable risk taking involved in conversing on a truly honest level, especially if there is any level of mistrust in the atmosphere. One must open oneself up to the

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19 Regan, 120
20 Regan, 124
possibility of not being understood. Or, if understood, one’s listener could disagree in some fundamental ways. What if the listener has a valid point? Genuine conversation means that one might be willing to change one’s opinion. Given these challenges, how might mission education stoke the fires of sustained conversation?

I can not pretend to have any definitive answers to the contextual challenges of sustained conversation in the higher education setting. I am, however, persuaded that mission education needs to cultivate and support the present praxis of people’s creative and intellectual resources. The counter modern dwelling in the past needs to be replaced by an intentional philosophy of mission education that respects the past but focuses on the life-giving energy of the present. Also, as Regan has shown, a milieu of genuine listening, respect, and willingness to change one’s opinion must exist in mission education settings. These qualities presuppose a community of learning, that truly values its members, not just an institution or organization of learning that has its self-interest as paramount. The mission office needs to carve its identity independent of the institutional advancement office which has as its end goal the promotion of the brand and the generation of revenue to support the institution. As important as this function is, a mission office needs to be inclusive of the voices from the margins that may not be reflected in the brand.

Let me turn to two scholarly approaches to education that might contribute to this orientation: narrative/transformative education and a shared/praxis model.

To illustrate the potential of a narrative/transformative approach let me give an example. At Iona College, faculty and administrators participate in events organized by the global Edmund Rice network. The intention of this organization is to appeal not just to vowed religious but to any employee of an organization affiliated with the Christian Brothers. An Associate Professor of Mass Communications at Iona, Dr. Jack Breslin, was a 2007 participant in a four-week immersion experience in Nairobi, Kenya. Organized for a group of 38 educators from around the world there was a curriculum which emphasized a mixture of classroom learning, shared reflection, and hands-on experience at schools and social outreach in the slums of Nairobi. Academic presentations included topics such as social analysis, Kenyan historical and political issues, assimilation of tribal practices in Catholic liturgical life. This cross-cultural immersion involved visits to shanty towns lacking any type of sanitation or police presence. The reflection groups provided a forum for participants to de-brief and to integrate insights from the various components of this educational experience.

In short this “Karibu” (or “Welcome” in Swahili) experience, as it was called, was truly life-changing for Breslin. As a result, he has given at least two presentations on the college campus and has published reflection pieces in newsletters and in one academic journal. At the present time, Breslin is collaborating with the Mission and Ministry office to sponsor a re-turn trip with a delegation of Iona College alumni. In one of his articles, he describes how as he worked with children at an Edmund Rice school in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, he came to a new insight about the liberating charism of education for justice, so critical to the life of Edmund, but of which he never expected himself to be a
promoter. Sharan Merriam might characterize Breslin’s insight as narrative/transformational learning, as described by Mezirow or “re-storying,” as Randall says.\(^{21}\) In one of his articles, Breslin gladly welcomed a new appellation for himself, that is, “a son of Edmund.” Such an acknowledgment indicates a perspective change or a “re-storying” of his identity. As his listeners were very captivated by his story, Breslin captures well Merriam’s point when she says that “narratives of transformative learning are compelling because of their affective, somatic, and spiritual dimensions.”\(^{22}\)

Clearly, this type of mission education captures both Breslin’s present praxis of experience and the heritage story of Edmund Rice, as a hero figure in the life of the college. This conclusion leads us to Groome’s shared/praxis model. While these final sentences can not do justice to Groome’s comprehensive approach to Christian religious education, several cursory points can suggest a general direction for mission education. First, Groome posits that one’s present action in the world must be understood in a holistic sense of time.\(^ {23}\) In one’s present praxis of experience, one connects with the consequences of the past and projects forward a direction for the future. Breslin’s current and on-going scholarship as a professor now carries with it a redefined sense of the significance of Edmund Rice, a person who has made an indelible impression on him and on the institution to which he belongs. Secondly, Groome emphasizes a “shared” approach to education, echoing Gadamer’s emphasis on “sustained conversation.” While Groome would not diminish at all the scholarly role of the teacher as a solo researcher, he emphasizes here that the communal dynamic of teaching and learning captures a central element of the Christian tradition. In Breslin’s case, his insights were honed and refined through the give and take of a reflection process, in a community of dedicated teachers and scholars who participated in the immersion and back here at his home institution. This context seems appropriate for mission education at a Catholic institution. Thirdly, Groome’s approach is based in a “hermeneutics of dialectic.” In other words, no part of the tradition, or mission story, is accepted “carte blanche” without questioning, rejecting, refining, re-envisioning. This same hermeneutic is applied to the present “signs of the times.” In Groome’s words, “as educators make Christian Story/Vision accessible in a pedagogy, they bring hermeneutics of retrieval, suspicion, and creativity to their interpretation and explanation of it.”\(^ {24}\) Such an approach avoids an uncritical acceptance of the past and a naïve interpretation of present experience.

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\(^{22}\)Merriam, 215.


\(^{24}\)Groome, 145
Conclusion

The mission of the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers is “to do and to teach.” At Iona, the Brothers have founded an institution of higher education primarily committed to being a “teaching college.” There is ample opportunity for discovery of what this word “teaching” means for the present day. A shared/praxis approach to mission education can unlock the vibrancy of this vocation while reaping the creative insight of the Edmund Rice story. A narrative/transformational pedagogy can be a compelling method that will assist this shared/praxis model. Mission education events can serve as catalysts for the “sustained conversation” about the vocation of teaching in the context of a college community – as a dedicated learning community - committed to service, justice and the intellectual life. Self-honest and institutional critique serve to hone and to shape a present focus to mission that is responsive to the “signs of the times.” Mission events will best serve constituents if they respect the distinct “teaching languages” appropriate to the diverse types of venues offered. Such events have the best chance of flourishing if they maintain a present orientation while treating the past with a hermeneutic of critique and analysis, not praise and adulation.

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