

Joy and Hope on the Margins: The Mission Imperative of Access to Catholic Higher Education

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*Remarks given at Sacred Heart University
Conference on Vatican II and Catholic Higher Education
October 14, 2022*

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” ([Gaudium et Spes](#) #1, December 7 1965)

That opening sentence of *Gaudium et Spes* is a timeless meditation on our work in Catholic education. The words call us to solidarity with the human community, especially the poor and afflicted. Who among us can doubt the ways in which this simple sentence frames our mission and calls us to action?

And yet...and yet. What do we actually hear? How do we understand the call to action echoing from this mid-20th Century document in our work heading into the mid-21st Century?

Does Catholic higher education in 2022 really understand the Vatican II call to solidarity with the poor and afflicted, a call that echoes across the years through Vatican documents including *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and more recently in the encyclicals and statements of Pope Francis?

Are our griefs and anxieties those of real suffering --- or simply frets about the next bowl championship, whether we reach the Final Four, if that big donor is going to favor our university with a major gift to build a new building, whether we can move up a notch in *U.S. News*.

Words written in 1965 seem prophetic for today’s challenges to the human community:

“Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. ...political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes.” ([Gaudium et Spes](#) #4)

The content and structure of *Gaudium et Spes* suggests a curriculum for Catholic Higher Education that is broad and deep --- economics, politics, sociology, science, theology, languages and cultural studies, philosophy and ethics, and so much more. But my reflections this evening focus more on the WHO and HOW of Catholic Higher Education rather than curricular content, which I believe others at this conference have explored at some length. I am no scholar, I am an administrator, which by definition means I am a pragmatist.

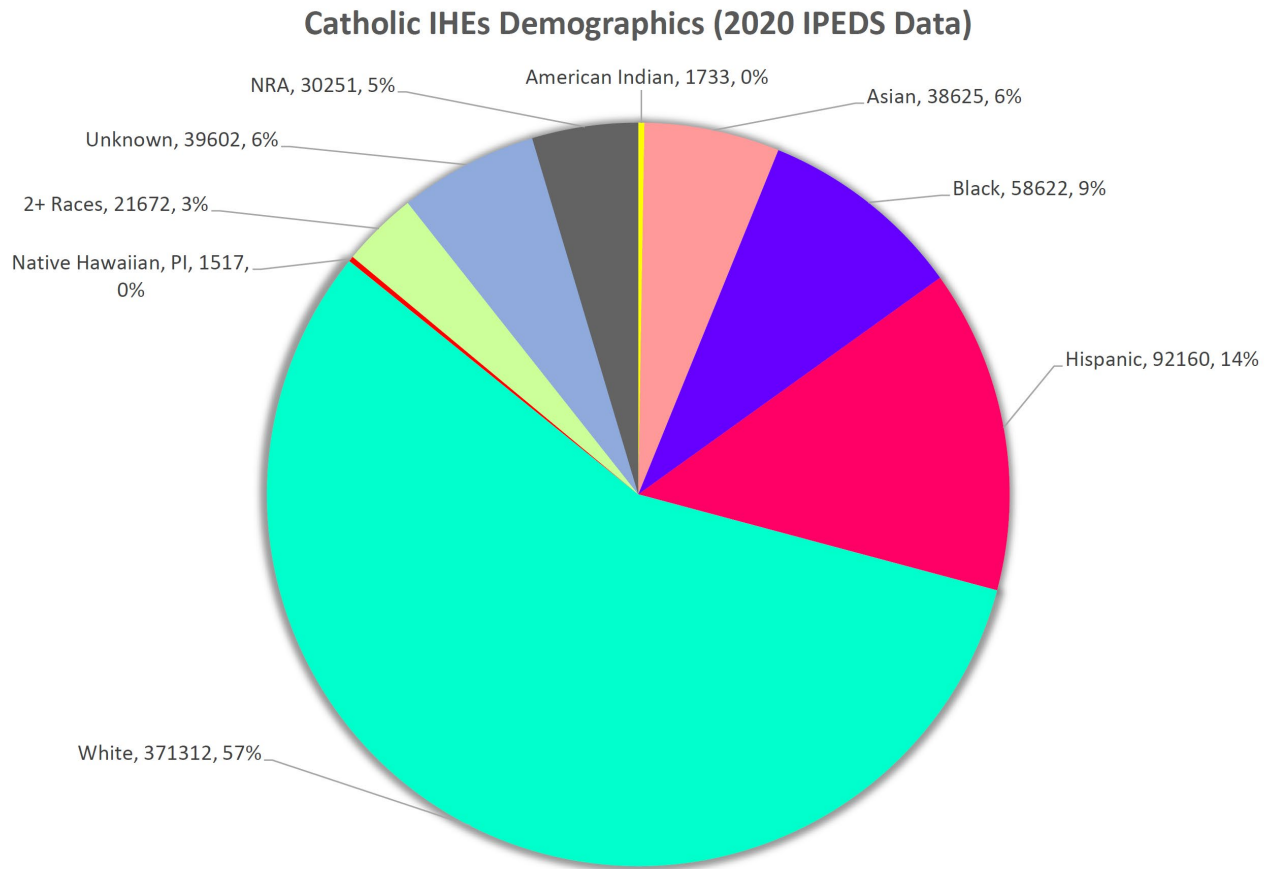
Who is invited into Catholic higher education, and how do we make it possible for all the People of God to participate? The title of my talk tonight: “Joy and Hope on the Margins: the Mission Imperative of Access to Catholic Higher Education” gives away my purpose.

Who are we inviting into the intellectual work of the Church in the modern world, and how are we making it possible for them to thrive in our colleges and universities, and to take the lessons of our mission forward into the world they will inhabit, influence, and perhaps even evangelize reaching toward the 22nd Century?

Let me set the context with some quick data snapshots about Catholic higher ed drawn from data in IPEDS from Fall 2020, the last year for which the public data is available. (This data is my own work, and I’m not a researcher or statistician, so if you find errors please let me know and please be understanding.... The idea is a general picture...) [The list I pulled from the [USCCB website](#) had 178 institutions with 655,000 total students --- I did not include seminaries or very small very special-mission institutions. The full list on the USCCB website has 245 institutions.]

My initial question was: how much access does Catholic Higher Education provide to populations of students that might be marginalized by race or poverty or other conditions? These snapshots provide some answers:

[Slide 2: Overall Demographics]



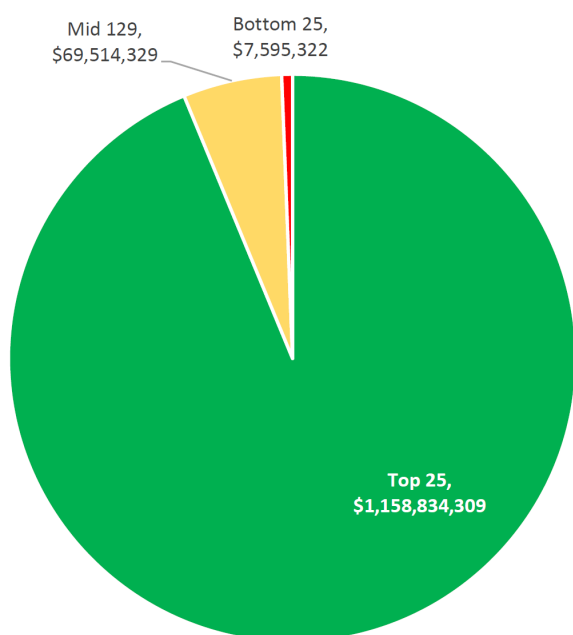
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An initial demographic overview has some positive elements: Catholic HE appears to have a good deal of diversity by student racial demographics. While 57% of our students overall are White, 43% represent populations of color, including 14% Hispanic, 9% Black and 6% Asian, with the balance being others.

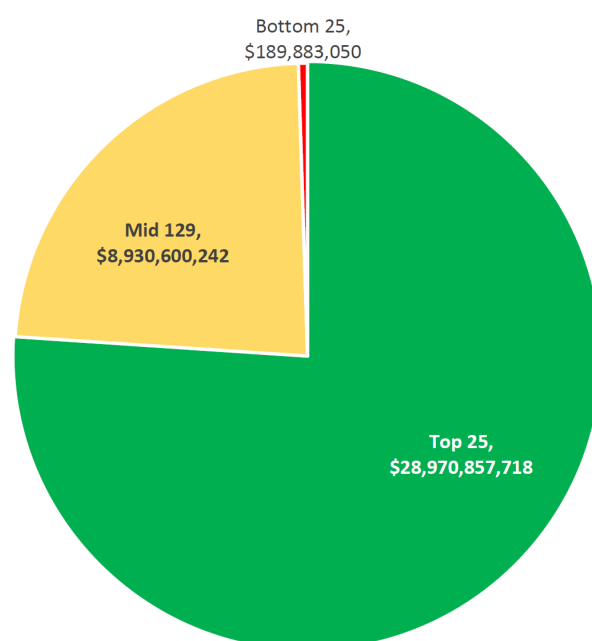
But we know that Catholic higher ed, like all of higher ed, is stratified in a caste system arrayed by wealth and prestige of institutions, and any assessment of how we're doing on access needs to account for that wealth.

[Slide 3 – Average Endowment]

Catholic IHEs: Endowment Averages and Total Endowment Volumes
 Array by Endowment Size: Top 25, Middle 129, Bottom 25 (2020 IPEDS)



Endowment Average Per Institution

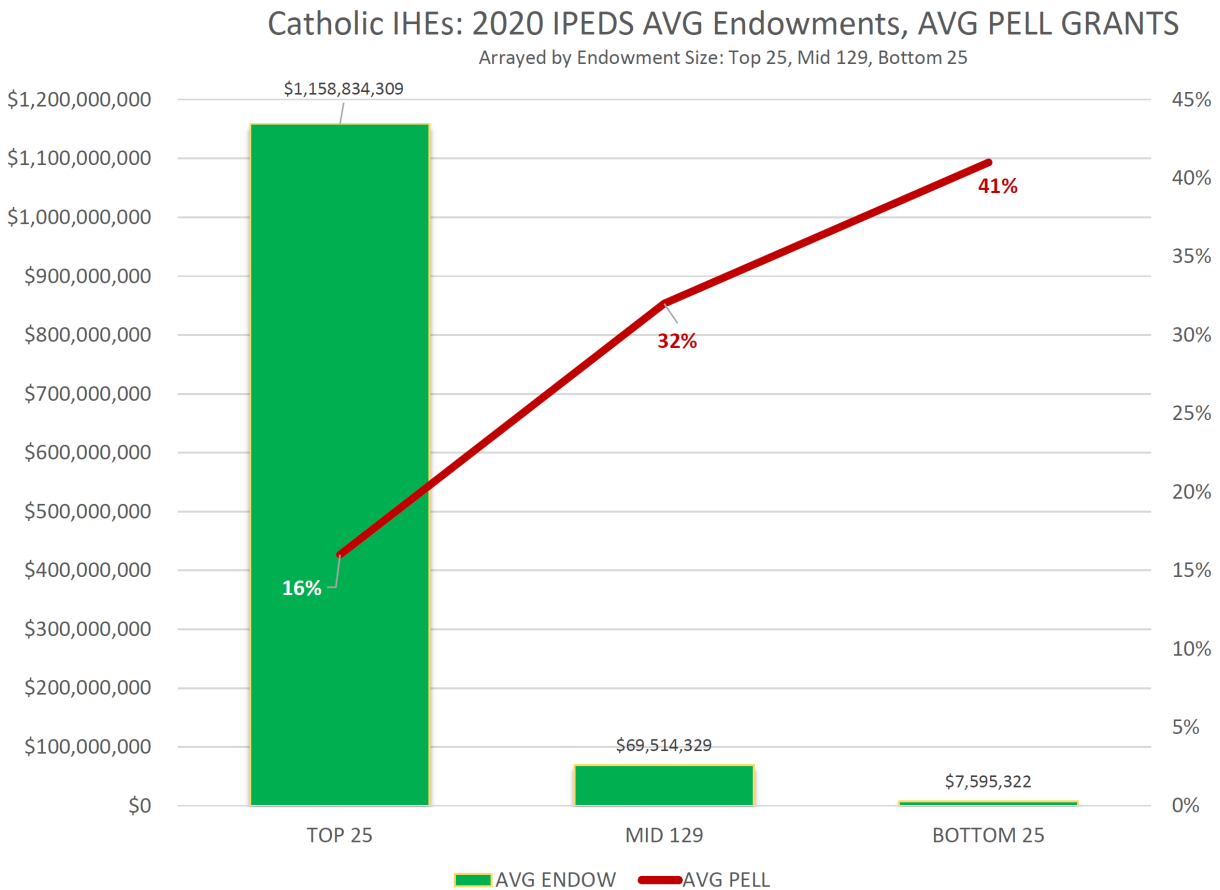


Total Endowment Volume by Cohort

So, in my next slice of data, I took a look at the top 25 institutions by endowment size, the bottom 25, and the middle 129. The top 25 have an average endowment of \$1.1 Billion, with a range from \$232 Million to \$12.3 Billion and total volume of \$28.9 BILLION. The bottom 25 have an average endowment of \$7.5 Million, ranging from \$1 M to \$13M with a total volume of \$189 Million. The middle group of 129 have an average endowment of \$69.5 million ranging in size from \$13.4 M to \$231 M with a total volume of \$8.9 Billion.

Keep the wealth of institutions in mind when we layer over some other data.

[Slide 4 – pell grants]



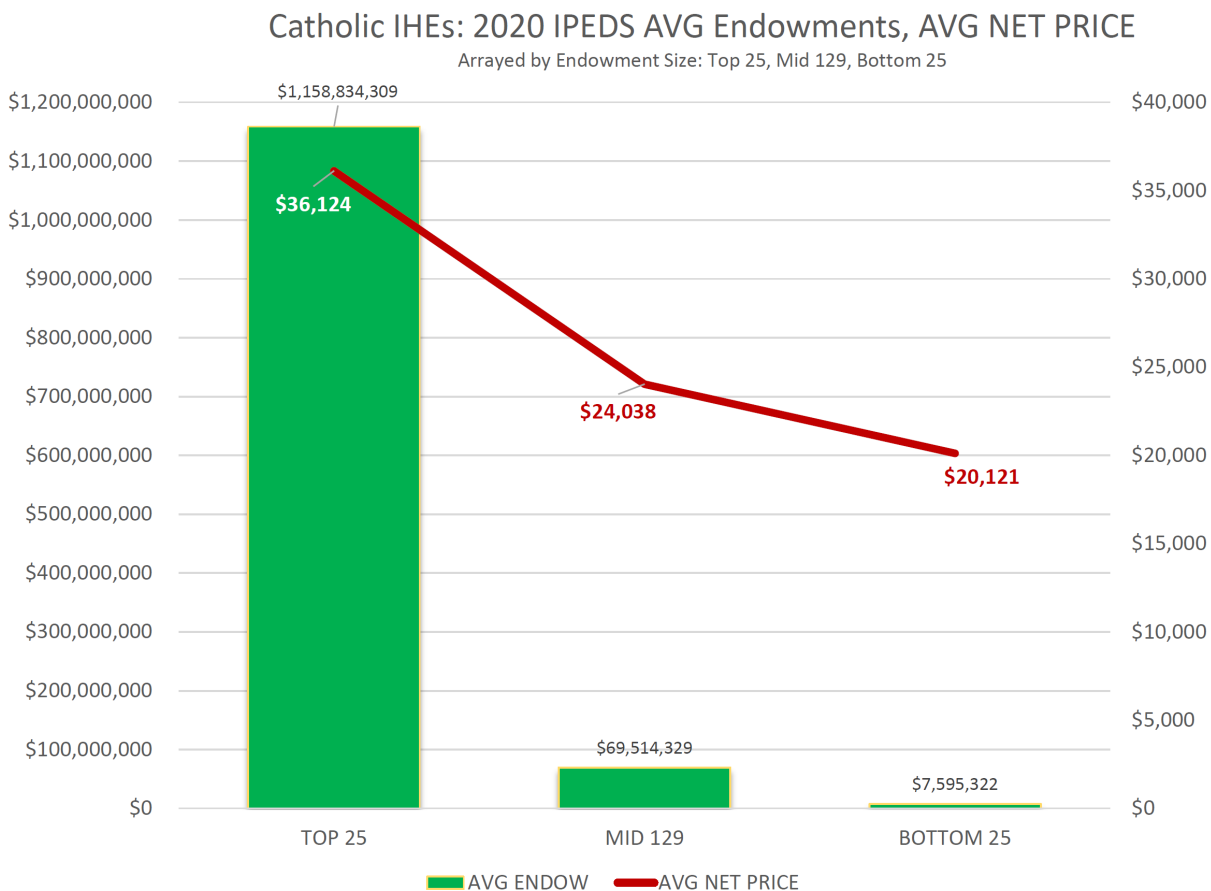
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Next, I wanted to know how the cohorts by wealth performed on the proportionate enrollment of the neediest students, measured by Pell Grant enrollments.

The columns are the average endowments, and the red line is the average percentage of Pell grantees in each cohort.

The picture tells the story: the wealthiest institutions enroll the smallest percentage of Pell grantees, just 16%. The poorest institutions enroll the largest proportion of Pell grantees, 41%. The middle group of institutions enroll 32%.

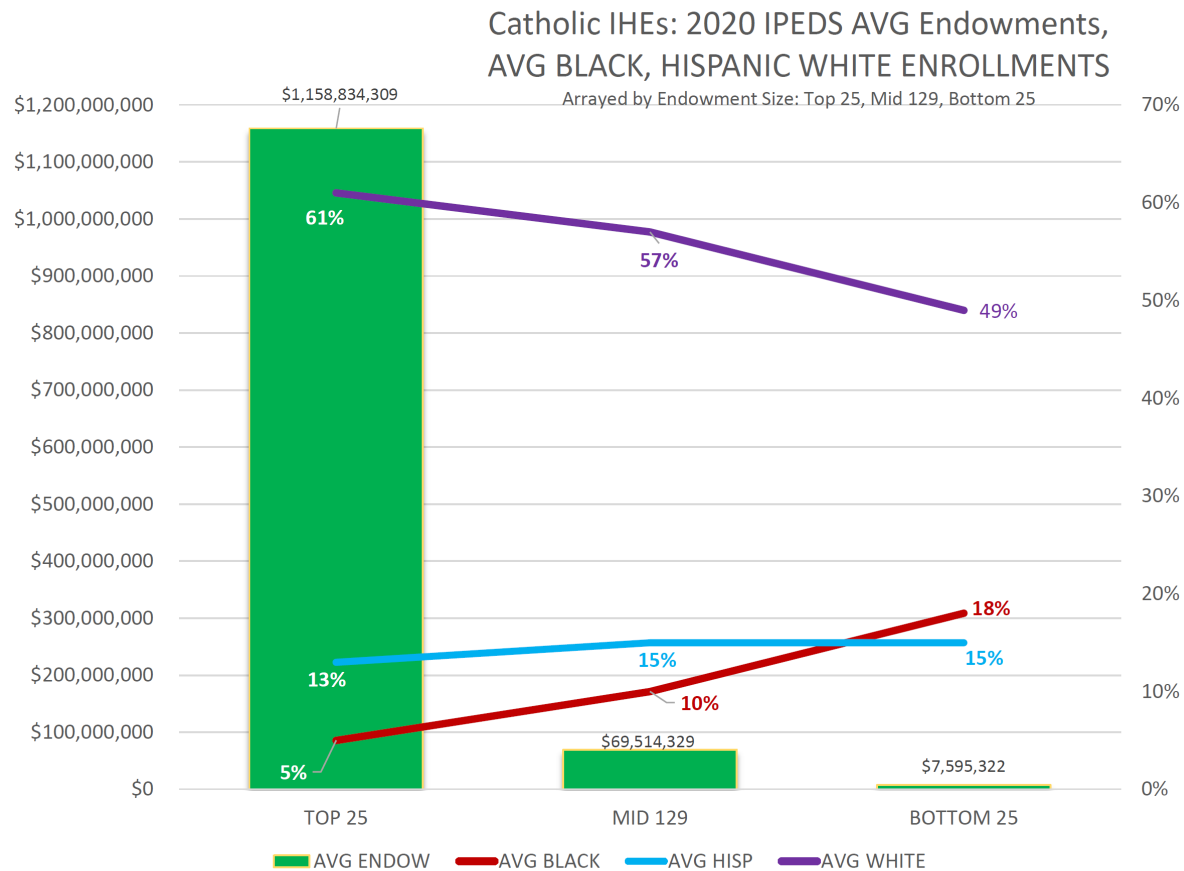
[Slide 5 – net price]



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I wondered if all of that endowment money at least helped to keep the pricetag down. Of course not! This slide shows the average net price of each cohort. The wealthiest institutions have the highest net price at \$36,000, while the most impoverished institutions serving the most impoverished students have the lowest net price at \$20,000, which is, of course, still too high for many of their students.

[Slide 6 enrollment by race]

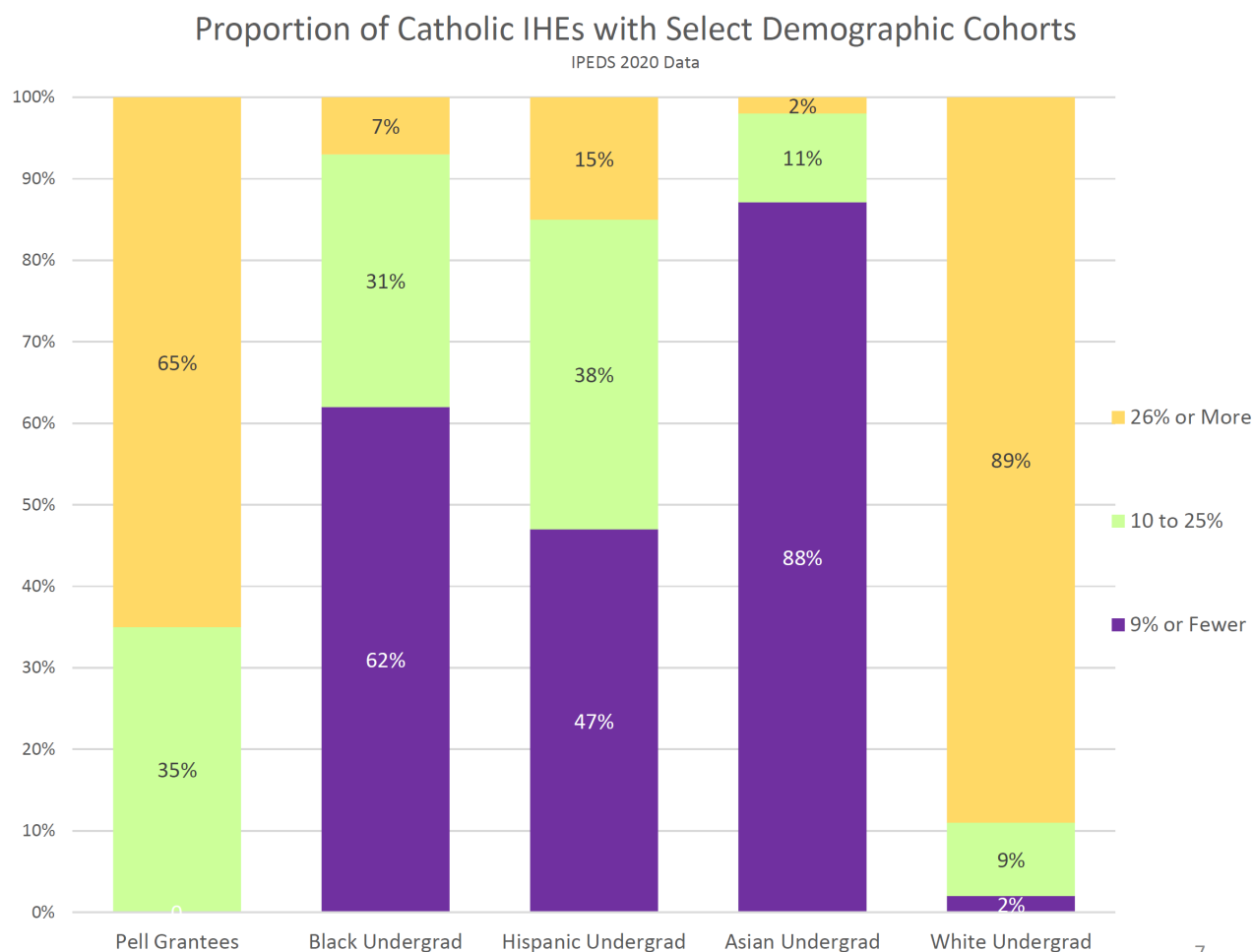


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Next, I wanted to understand how the institutions by endowment size fared on demographic enrollments. This slide tells the story: the wealthiest institutions enroll the most White students proportionately at 61%, and the fewest Black students at just 5%.

The most impoverished institutions are truly Minority Serving Institutions enrolling proportionately 18% Black students and 15% Hispanic. It's notable that the relative proportion of Hispanic students in all categories is relatively low --- we might think that the Hispanic proportion would be larger, but it's not.

[Slide 7 – proportions of cohorts]



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Squeezing the stone to see if I could find some hints of good news, I sliced the data one other way: This slide shows relative proportions of enrollments by student characteristics in the categories indicated.

The good news: (left column) 65% of Catholic colleges and universities have a proportionate enrollment of Pell Grantees that is 26% or more of the undergraduate student population. This tells us that a significant majority of our institutions have some economic diversity and real commitment to helping students on the economic margins.

But the news is less positive for Black students. (second from left column) Fully 62% of Catholic colleges and universities have student populations with fewer than 9% Black students. (Among the 10 wealthiest, the number is 5%)

Somewhat surprisingly, (middle column) we do only marginally better with Hispanic students, and we fall off the chart with Asian students. White students (right column) are more than 26% of the student bodies in 89% of our institutions.

So, what do these data snapshots tell us about the “joy and hope” of Catholic HE in 2022?

Folks, we have a lot of work to do! We seem to have been so caught up in our own culture wars and obsessions with wealth and status and rankings and competition with the big state u or big ivy up the street that we have failed in many ways to be the places of hope and justice we should be, the urgent collective exemplars for the values we should hold out to the world.

Yes, we have some individual examples of institutions doing good work --- I think of the marvelous example of Dominican University in Illinois with its large welcome to Dreamers; and Mt. St. Mary's of Los Angeles with its significant mission to the Latina community; I know that Xavier in New Orleans is a top producer of Black doctors, and Loyola of Chicago is doing amazing work with Aruppe College, and BC just launched Messina College; here at Sacred Heart you have a significant ministry in service, as does Albertus Magnus and Fairfield University and so many others. Well, yes, I could go on, there are many wonderful examples.

And, yet, in the very core of our institutions, the heart of our teaching and intellectual life, who do we welcome into our most central programs for teaching and learning? We can do a lot more.

How do we do this? I was invited here tonight to talk about Trinity's model, the one I know best, but let me offer this disclaimer at the outset: Trinity is surely not the best or only model, you will certainly find flaws, perhaps you would prefer to know something very different. All fair. But in our rather remarkable story at Trinity, I hope you might find some threads of what can be possible with institutional transformation for Catholic colleges and universities to become more accessible institutions.

[slide 8 - Trinity historic slide]



The first thing that's notable about Trinity is that it was born in opposition and controversy to be an access institution for women who were denied admission to then-new Catholic University in 1897. Truth be told, like Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the secular women's

colleges and other special mission colleges, *all* Catholic colleges and universities were born as access institutions --- Catholics were reviled, oppressed, sometimes violently so, and ethnic Catholics suffered grave discrimination well into the mid-20th Century. Catholic colleges offered a gateway into higher education that was welcoming and safe – at least for upperclass Catholic men back in the day --- and that, by the way, created a place to safeguard the faith.

But women were largely excluded, as they were from most of secular higher education. So, women had to make their own way, and the religious women who founded Trinity 125 years ago were a persistent bunch, unafraid of the opposition that arose accusing them of heresy (“Americanism”) in starting a college for women. The Sisters of Notre Dame kept moving forward, eventually securing the Pope’s approval and Trinity emerged. In an oblique answer to the critics, Cardinal Gibbons (who quietly supported the SNDs throughout the endeavor) wrote to Trinity Founder Sr. Julia McGroarty, SND, thanking Trinity for “...relieving the university [Catholic University] of the embarrassment of refusing women admission.”

[slide 9 - Trinity stars slide]



For the first 75 or so years of Trinity’s life, it was a very traditional liberal arts college with an immensely strict culture, some found it even cold and humorless to outsiders, but intellectually superior --- “The Catholic Wellesley” according to some alumnae of prior generations. Powerhouse women emerged from under the Red Roof (named for the roof on our Main Hall) --- women who were firsts in medicine, business, law and diplomacy and Congress. You may have heard of some of our graduates from that Trinity era --- Connecticut’s own Barbara Bailey Kennelly ‘58, Trinity’s first woman in Congress, first woman to serve on the House Intelligence Committee, a real trailblazer. One of the Trinity Women who followed in her footsteps was Nancy Pelosi ‘62, the first and still only woman to serve as Speaker of the House – twice! Kathleen Gilligan Sebelius ‘70 was a governor (Kansas, a red state!) AND Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Obama Administration; Maggie Williams ‘77 was the highest

ranking African American in the Clinton White House when she was chief of staff to first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. The list goes on.

[slide 10 - Sweeping forces of change slide]



Sweeping Forces of Change

- Vatican II
 - Catholics more accepted outside of Catholic schools
 - Declining vocations, end of Contributed Services
 - Laicization of Boards
- Sputnik, Space Race, NSF
 - Men's universities grew, especially science and technology, women's colleges largely left out
- Coeducation
- Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements
- NCAA and big time college sports
- Title IX

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But by the middle of the 1970's, something else was going on that threatened the very life of Trinity and so many similar institutions. Starting in the 1960's, the men's colleges discovered that women were actually superior students, and coeducation spread rapidly across the nation. Along with that, Title IX in 1972 ensured that women would get equal opportunities at the formerly all-male schools, making them far more attractive for women.

As if that were not enough, for the Catholic women's colleges, an even more devastating phenomenon arose as a result of Vatican II --- the changes in religious life especially for religious women meant that many left the convent, thus draining away the free labor of women (aka "contributed services") that had built and sustained these places for nearly a century. The story of the Catholic women's colleges is stark: there were about 170 such institutions in 1970, and today there are about 9 who continue to claim that identity; a number went coed, many closed. Reinventing these very small, old-line colleges into modern universities has been a great challenge, and along the way, we also tackled issues of access, diversity, equity and inclusion in ways that are very different from larger, wealthier, more prestigious institutions.

In 1989, I was the sixth person in 8 years to sit in Trinity's President's office. I was 36, an alumna of Trinity, Trinity trustee, a public interest lawyer who wound up fund raising for Georgetown Law School --- but I had no executive experience. How did someone like me wind up in a place like this?

Trinity had hemorrhaged students through the 1980's, such that by 1989 there were only 300 full-time traditional women. What the Board didn't know -- what I didn't know -- was that adult education and teacher education were sustaining the place. Why didn't we know that? Because like too many alum leaders and trustees of Catholic colleges, we assumed that the "real college" was the full-time undergraduate liberal arts college and that anything else was ancillary, perhaps temporary, not really mission-centered.

The Board asked me to try on the presidency since they had run out of other ideas, and I had a big mouth about what should be happening. Fine, they said. "Fix it or close it!" was the command of the SND who was board chair when she handed me the keys to the president's office.

In the very first week I asked the Admissions Director how many students we had from the DC Public Schools, and she answered quickly and directly, "Oh, none!" I asked her why, and she replied matter of factly, "Oh, THEY can't do the work here!"

So, there it was: the elitism, the institutional racism, the back turned on our own backyard that had taken Trinity to the brink of closure.

With the board we had strategic planning sessions in which alumnae trustees demanded that I work to "restore" the "golden era" of Trinity, which of course was impossible. I asked them about their vision for the college: if we wanted 1000 full-time residential Catholic students, then we had no choice but to "go coed" and pray. But at that, one of the Sisters of Notre Dame stood up and gave the galvanizing speech that changed the course of our history: "Why are we trying so hard to reclaim a population that is gone?" she fairly cried out, "when there are thousands of women at our doorstep?" She went on, "The Sisters of Notre Dame founded Trinity to provide access to a great higher education for women who did not have such access, and they are still out there --- they may not look like us, but they are our mission!" The mission of access; the mission of justice.

And so we went out into our city and started welcoming the women of Washington in much larger numbers, not only in adult and graduate studies but into our full-time undergraduate program. Typical of the white flight syndrome in Catholic urban schools, as we admitted more Black students our demographics changed quickly. Racial tensions grew. The faculty muttered, "Who let these students in here?" Alumnae became angry. An alumna fairly shouted at me in the middle of one meeting, "We don't mind all this diversity, *but are THEY CATHOLIC?*"

A Middle States reviewer wrote that Trinity's choice to remain faithful to our founding mission as a women's college was far more radical than if we had gone coed --- far from reinforcing tradition, our choice changed everything.

We went through a decade of turmoil, conflict, fits and starts, doubt and setbacks. And then, we celebrated our Centennial and started construction on the first new building on our campus in 40 years --- a sports center. We never had indoor sports facilities before, and some people wondered why that was our first project --- but soon, it became clear that the new facility not only helped enrollment, it also built a very positive relationship with our community in northeast DC --- we designed the facility to be open and welcoming to our neighbors.

At the groundbreaking ceremony, our main benefactor, an older gentleman who trended very conservative, took one look at all of the neighborhood children we had invited to the event and he leaned over to me and whispered: “You know this idea you have of welcoming the community into Trinity? It’s a good thing!” I knew we were on the right track.

Going into the first decades of the 21st Century, Trinity at long last began to find peace within herself and pride in what we called the “paradigm shift.” We began to grow again, and we became far more confident in our ability to transform curricula and pedagogy to serve our students more effectively.

A Middle States team in 2006 wrote, “The team recognizes the impressive congruence of Trinity in 2006 with the original vision of Trinity’s founders in 1897. ..The team admires and commends the University’s rejection of the notion that paradigm shift means abandonment of historic mission. ..Rather, we discover in the work and vitality of Trinity of 2006, a most obvious continuity with Trinity’s 110 year old mission expressed with a renewed relevance and vigor....” (2006 Middle States Team Report for Trinity, p. 5)

[slide 11 - Trinity students today slide]



Trinity today, in 2022, is the only Predominantly Black Institution among the Catholic colleges, surpassed in proportion of Black students only by Xavier of New Orleans which is an HBCU. We are also an Hispanic Serving Institution – in fact, we are something of a “unicorn” being still primarily a women’s college, a Catholic university, a PBI and HSI all under the same roof.

[slide 12 - with Trinity data]

Among 178 Catholic Colleges and Universities, Trinity is: #3 in Pell Percentage, #5 in total number of Black undergraduate students, #2 in percentage of Black undergrads, and #10 in lowest net price...



Just a few quick data snapshots show that, among today’s Catholic institutions of higher ed:

- Trinity is 3rd in Pell Percentage
- 5th in total number of Black students
- 2nd in Percentage of Black Students
- 10th in Net Price

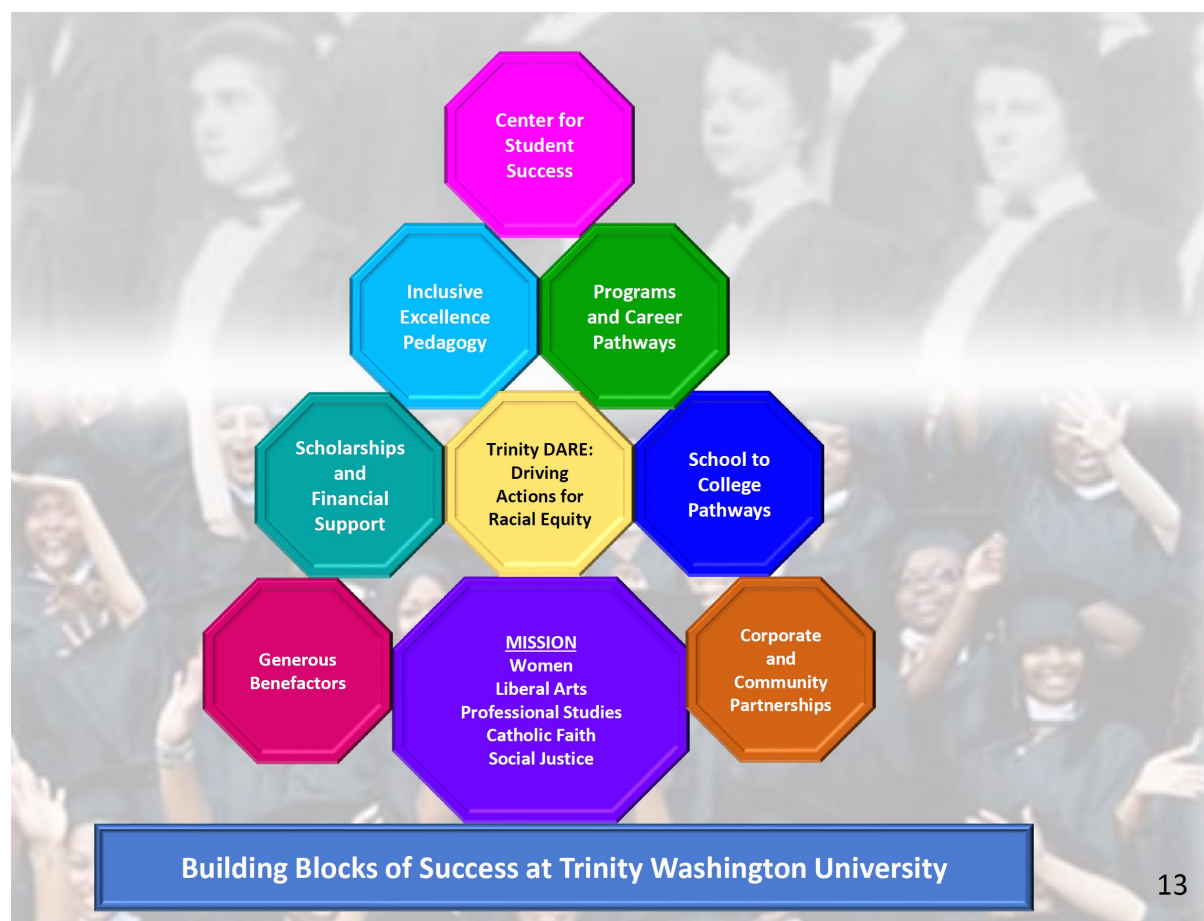
Such dramatic change comes with costs and opportunities. Some costs are emotional: some members of our extended family will never forgive us for these changes. We have to move on from those emotional restraints.

Some costs are reputational: early on we decided that we really could not care about *US News* rankings and other rankings that use traditional elitist measures of quality --- money, selectivity, and so forth. Those benchmarks are meaningless for our work at Trinity.

The opportunities are great. Perhaps the biggest opportunity for Trinity was the communal clarification and embrace of our mission in social justice. From hiring to teaching to student service and all dimensions of our operations, we emphasize mission as our primary motivation for our work. We help all staff to understand their role in promoting mission, no matter their specific job description. Our faculty and staff come from many faith traditions, and all appreciate the open expressions of faith, respect for our Catholic identity, and commitment to social justice as the animating force guiding our work.

The opportunities are also quite tangible. Our success in educating the women of the city of Washington led to significant philanthropic investments in scholarships and support for those students. One philanthropist created a program that subsidizes most of our DC students. Another supports more than 100 of our Dreamers. Yet another supports more than 150 Nursing students.

[slide 13 - building block slide]



How did we build this new model of a Catholic college devoted to access and justice for a broadly diverse student body? We had solid strategic planning, with budgets always tied to goals. We had discipline in building academic programs that met the needs of our community --- Nursing and healthcare became a very large emphasis.

[MISSION] Our planning always started with mission, and from there we considered how to overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities essential for long-term durability of this model.

[STUDENT SUCCESS] We learned, for example, that welcoming a large population of students who are first generation, who have many social and personal challenges as well as preparatory issues required us to develop a new model for academic advising and support that integrates personnel across the institution,. We now call it the Center for Student Success.

[INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE PEDAGOGY] But we knew that a great advising and support system was not enough, we also had to help the faculty to develop new forms of pedagogy, some of which required complete curricular overhaul --- with a \$1 million grant from the Howard

Hughes Medical Institute, our STEM faculty created our Inclusive Excellence program that has transformed science at Trinity and now includes all other disciplines.

[PROGRAMS AND CAREER PATHWAYS] But student support and inclusive excellence were not enough. We had to have the programs that ensure that our students, coming to Trinity from the economic margins, could leave Trinity with degrees and credentials that would propel them into positions of greater economic security.

There is a real tension in American higher education between those who disdain the notion of a career-focused curriculum, and those who say we should be all about jobs. At Trinity, we disagree with both sides of that argument --- of course we believe in and practice the beauty and durability of liberal learning every day, but we also know that it's manifestly unfair and unjust to our students who take on serious debt if we do not prepare them for the world of work. We have to do both, and employers want both.

[HIGH SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS] We also came to the conclusion that we needed to help our local high schools do a better job of preparing students for the pathway into and through college, particularly when it comes to scientific, technological and healthcare pathways. So we have embraced models of dual enrollment and early college with the DC Public Schools -- we have 200 high school students on campus this fall, and that number will probably grow in the future.

[SIGNIFICANT SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORT] To do all of this, we had to generate considerable support for students through scholarships and a financial aid program that is robust.

[GREAT BENEFACTORS] We have many generous benefactors as well as some grants that help to support our initiatives... great fundraising is essential to ensuring success in our quest to enlarge access for marginalized students.

[CORPORATE AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS] Fund raising alone is not enough, we also realized that we had to do our work in partnership with many organizations, both public and private. These partners are gateways to internships and career pathways for our students.

[TRINITY DARE] And, finally, we had to articulate a philosophy of racial justice that created a clear and compelling rationale for our work, supporting mission and challenging those corporate and community partners to join us in this work. We call that initiative Trinity DARE: Driving Actions for Racial Equity. Through this program we specifically challenge our corporate partners to open career pathways for our students --- to make sure that Black and Hispanic women have seats at every table in town when it comes to hiring and employment in well-paying managerial and executive positions of influence, not just low level worker slots.

Finally, the question that arises from time to time --- less so today, but still a weaponized question at times --- is simply this: that's all well and good, but are you *still Catholic*? I always start my reply with that great line from Cardinal Hickey: we do what we do not because THEY are Catholic but because WE are Catholic.



We take seriously the exhortation in [*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*](#) Paragraph #34, which is a direct echo of *Gaudium et Spes*:

34. 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."

Or, to paraphrase the more recent words of Pope Francis, we need more “field hospitals” in Catholic higher education, institutions that have the power to heal the poor and marginalized of our communities through the power of a great value-centered education.

Let us be bearers of the joys and hopes that can truly heal and change lives for the better. Let Catholic higher education live its claim to social justice by opening our doors wider, by sharing our privileged resources of intellectual talent and significant material wealth with those who can move from the margins to the mainstream through the power of our educational programs. Catholic higher education should be leading the access movement in all of American higher education --- a broad commitment to access, backed-up by greater investments in marginalized students, would truly signal our commitment to fulfilling the promise of Vatican II.

Thanks for listening!