

# the MISSION COMMITTEE

Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM

Wisdom

Serenity

Faith

Spirit

Harmony

Peace

Believe

Hope

Love

Trust



Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,300 member boards, 1,900 institutions, and 36,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.

Copyright © 2015

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

1133 20th St. N.W., Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036

[www.agb.org](http://www.agb.org)



Breckinridge Capital Advisors is a Boston-based investment advisor specializing in the management of high grade fixed-income portfolios for institutions and private clients. Working through a network of investment consultants and advisors, Breckinridge offers municipal, corporate, government and sustainable bond strategies in customized separate accounts.

Development of this booklet was generously supported by Breckinridge Capital Advisors.

For more information, visit <http://www.breckinridge.com/catholicmission>.

# Introduction to the Mission Committee

**M**ission committees are a relatively recent structure at faith-based colleges and universities to establish an effective manner for the board to preserve and govern the religious purposes of the institution.

Traditionally, the religious purposes were governed by the religious congregation of priests, brothers, or nuns that founded the institution (in the Catholic tradition), or more broadly, by the local bishop (or his or now, her, designees) when the institution was directly under church authority.

The bishop or religious congregation exercised oversight by reserving board leadership positions and/or certain percentages of board slots for their appointees. In addition, certain reserved powers were often codified in the bylaws or charters, requiring approval of the religious congregation or bishop for the appointment and removal of the president, the sale or assumption of significant debt over the property, and any change of mission or institutional purpose. These structures were designed to prevent a board made up of lay men and women from making decisions that would fundamentally remove or alter the religious purposes for which the institution had been founded. More positively, they were intended to ask the governance questions that kept an institution focused on accomplishing its religious mission.

For Catholic institutions, as the memberships of the founding religious congregations declined in recent decades—and those congregations grew less able to exercise oversight—colleges and universities found it useful to establish a new body within the board itself to hold the institution accountable for achieving the institution’s core mission. Increasingly ubiquitous at U.S. Catholic colleges and universities, other faith-based institutions are beginning to adapt them for similar purposes.

These new mission committees have been structured to operate in the same manner as all other board committees, by assigning a subset of trustees to focus closely on these matters on the board's behalf. These committees do not replace the external oversight and accountability roles of the bishop or sponsoring congregation, but rather serve as the board's internal check-and-balance that the mission is being successfully achieved.

## Purpose and Scope of the Committee

Faith-based colleges and universities are founded for various purposes that go beyond the intellectual and social purposes common to all institutions of higher learning. Each institution has its own set of religious and social purposes, but generally they can include:

- The theological education of those students in their midst who share the particular religious tradition of the founders;
- The theological education of students of other faith traditions in those various traditions;
- The religious education of students to know faiths other than their own, and thereby contribute to the world's interfaith understanding;
- Assistance for students to integrate religious commitments as part of the larger maturation process appropriate to their age;
- A more broadly conceived philosophical and ethical education to serve students as a moral touchstone and compass for their lives;
- Formative experiences that encourage students to adopt lifelong commitments to civic engagement and societal service;
- Intellectual activity that contributes to the theological and ethical discourse of the day;
- Provision of an intellectual inter-disciplinary home for the work of scholars and artists who contribute to the world's religious sensibility and needs;
- The education of future leaders for the founding denomination's works in education, health care, social services, and pastoral care;
- Social purposes the faith-based institution may wish to address, such as the education of women, the poor, certain identified immigrants, or overseas at-risk populations, etc.; and
- Making available the assembled pool of faculty expertise and/or student volunteerism to support and strengthen the founding denomination's work or to address larger community and social needs.

All of these are considered part of the religious mission of a faith-based college or university and are within the Mission Committee’s purview.

The Mission Committee’s principal purpose is to create an ongoing conversation with the institution’s senior leadership, ensuring that the mission at a given college or university is well-defined, appropriately resourced and staffed, effectively executed, and regularly assessed and improved.

*The Mission Committee is meant as an internal accountability structure.*

To this end, the committee’s work will—at least in substance—overlap the external accountability that is expected by the local bishop and/or leadership of the sponsoring religious congregation. Not dissimilar to external accrediting bodies, bishops and religious congregations hold an institution accountable for the standards set by the church itself for its religious institutions of higher learning. The Mission Committee work does not replace this external oversight in any way. Generally, however, bishops and the leadership bodies of religious congregations are infrequent visitors and concerned for widespread enterprises, limiting the time they can attend to any one institution.

The Mission Committee is meant as an internal accountability structure to encourage senior administrators to pay due attention to matters of religious mission, even as they struggle to meet the other day-to-day demands of running a college or university.

Boards of trustees at Catholic institutions are, in fact, required to be attentive to these issues by the 1990 Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae (From the Heart of the Church)*, Saint John Paul II’s statement regarding Catholic colleges and universities, and its 2001 U.S. application document (guidelines for implementation). United Methodist-related colleges are evaluated and reviewed by the University Senate of the United Methodist Church for, among other criteria, “clearly defined church relationships.” The Mission Committee is a structure by which the board can attend to such external expectations.

## **Committee Responsibilities**

As a committee of the board, the Mission Committee will have the specific authority that the board delegates to it generally described in either a board resolution or in the charter contained in the institution’s bylaws. The committee is typically delegated the authority to:

- Review the institution’s strategic plan and its annual reports for the appropriate inclusion and progress of mission-related goals;
- Request and review data-based evidence for the achievement of annual mission-related goals;

- Propose budgetary and capital investments to the larger board as needed to achieve mission-related goals;
- Educate its members to effectively fulfill their oversight role;
- Evaluate whether the institution is in compliance with the expectations of the sponsoring religious denomination; and
- Evaluate whether the president’s overall working relationship with the sponsoring religious denomination’s leadership is productive.

## The Chief Mission Officer

Chief mission officers are a relatively recent addition to the senior leadership teams of faith-based institutions, present at 80 percent of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities, and beginning to be hired at other faith-based institutions.

*The Mission Committee often serves as a useful “first assignment” for new trustees, exposing them to the larger purposes of the institution.*

The university president is ultimately responsible to the board that the institution’s mission is achieved and remains vibrant over time. In the same manner as the vice presidents for academic affairs, financial affairs, or student affairs, however, the chief mission officer (CMO) is the administrator who is day-to-day charged with directing these efforts and, as such, is the individual with whom the committee most immediately interacts.

CMOs are generally part of a president’s cabinet and appointed at the vice presidential level, but their exact titles vary broadly. The CMO most often reports to the president, but may also report to the provost or executive vice president. Regardless, these individuals are charged with seeing that the institution’s religious mission and identity are operating effectively throughout the institution.

Toward that end, CMOs typically involve themselves in key components of university activities that are housed under other vice presidents. For example, CMOs may be charged with conducting or overseeing a component of the hiring and orienting of all new employees, acquainting them with the institution’s history and mission. They may oversee or work closely with campus ministry and the human resources department. They may fund lecture series, publications, public art, historical research, study tours, summer seminars on integrating course content and the sponsoring denomination’s intellectual tradition, and the assemblage of library and other learning tools by which the college or university community can learn the institution’s mission. At times, they may be involved closely in the hiring process, as individuals are assessed for institutional fit or educated about the institution at which they are applying to work. They may help set enrollment, learning, and strategic goals and serve on key committees, from accreditation to faculty development and search committees.

CMOs typically serve the board of trustees as liaison and staff to the Mission Committee. They support the committee's work, working closely with the chair to set the agenda, prepare materials to inform the committee's discussions, coordinate the participation of other university administrators with whom the committee may need to speak in order to understand the matters at hand, educate the board on the institution's mission and the ways in which that mission is executed, and serve as a sounding board with whom the chair and others can talk offline as they think through the committee's oversight responsibilities. The CMO also presents an annual evaluation of the achievement of mission goals, in whatever form the board committee sees fit, and sees that such formalities as minutes, resolutions, and the like are managed on the committee's behalf.

## Committee Composition

The Mission Committee, as with other board committees, is best populated with at least a few board members who are knowledgeable on the matters that will be brought before it. Otherwise, the committee will be unable to responsibly carry out its role of oversight.

Toward that end, certain competencies are desirable among the committee members:

- Expertise on corporate culture and how it is fostered or changed within the life of an organization;
- Knowledge of the intellectual faith tradition and how that is transmitted in an institution of higher learning through a variety of disciplines;
- Knowledge of the particular sponsoring religious congregation's history, spirituality, and goals;
- A facility with (or at least understanding of) church politics, and perhaps relationships with key church leaders; and
- A personal love of and commitment to the institution's social mission and/or expertise in the same.

That said, it is not necessary that all committee members be knowledgeable about mission, *per se*. In fact, the Mission Committee often serves as a useful "first assignment" for new trustees, exposing them to the larger purposes of the institution before they assume memberships on the more specialized committees such as investment, audit, or compensation.

Nor is it necessary, or even desirable, that a preponderance of committee members be clergy or members of the sponsoring religious congregation. Lay committee members frequently ask probing questions that lead to reassessment of effort precisely because, not knowing the status quo, they do not take the status quo for granted. So long as some of the members are experienced and competent on these topics, an intelligent curiosity coupled with a love for the institution's special nature and purpose is sufficient for others who are less experienced.

## Tips for Effective Mission Committees

- **Request and approve clear, measurable goals for mission from the administration.** These should be both yearly goals and longer-term, strategic goals. Align future meeting agenda topics with these goals.
- **Invite university administrators who are responsible for various aspects of the mission to attend committee meetings.** The director of campus ministry or the head of enrollment management, for example, can provide the committee with more direct information, and the committee can provide much appreciated gratitude for their work.
- **Schedule a committee education component for most meetings.** While some individual committee members may be familiar with young adult faith formation, the state of theological education, the purposes and operations of university ministry, or the intricacies of church governance and politics, most will not typically be expert in these matters. Providing concise information that informs wise governance is an art in itself, but necessary if the committee is to effectively serve its purpose.
- **Invite outside experts to attend committee meetings to inform particular conversations.** Experts, such as the heads of national theological associations, professional associations of student affairs or campus ministry, lawyers specializing in church law, or researchers specializing in faith-based higher education can inform the board's knowledge, and deliberations can affirm and supplement the administration's proposed actions on given matters.
- **Conduct periodic discussions with select faculty, staff, and students.** This will help to ascertain their perceptions and experiences of the institution's religious identity and its interactions with the institution's intellectual and cultural identity.
- **Adopt a best practices mentality.** Request that the administration collect and report on best practices across higher education. Such information is often available from groups like the the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America (LECNA), or the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (IAMSCU).
- **Request outcome data wherever reasonable and possible.** When discussing such matters as whether students leave the institution committed to certain values, ask the question, "How do we know...?"

- **Expect the president to attend whenever possible.** The religious mission cuts across many of the institution’s functional areas, and the broadest and most fully informed view of mission activity and accomplishment generally rests with the president. The president is also ultimately responsible that the institution accomplish its mission and is well-served by being in the room as the board committee sets and holds the institution accountable for the accomplishment of these goals.

*Faith-based colleges and universities are founded for purposes that go beyond the common intellectual and social purposes.*

- **Begin with prayer.** Since the institution has faith-based goals grounded in advancing the common good, asking for divine guidance to carry out that mission is appropriate and an excellent model for the “keepers of the mission.”

## Pitfalls and Lessons

- Much like any board committee meeting, the Mission Committee meeting should not be overwhelmed by presentations that fill the time but prevent the board from discussing key matters and asking important questions.
- Similarly, members of the Mission Committee should discourage reports and presentations that focus exclusively on the extent of mission-based activity, rather than outcomes.
- As with other board committees, the Mission Committee should balance its accountability role with an appropriate deference to the priorities of the president, seeking ways to support him or her in securing resources for the accomplishment of the institution’s mission goals.
- Expect that differences of understanding will emerge from time to time between the institution and the denomination and/or church leadership around issues related to mission. Provide the president with a confidential place to discuss how best to manage these differences.
- While it is tempting to populate mission committees with clergy and other religious professionals because of their expertise, mission committees should balance their membership with lay board members, as well. A lay point of view is most valuable since the mission goals are primarily designed to support young adults who will be lay professionals themselves one day. For Catholic institutions, preparing lay trustees to lead the governance of the mission is also necessary as the number of clergy and religious available to serve in a board capacity is quickly diminishing nationwide.

- Committees should be careful not to defer too much to the clergy and religious on their committee, but should ask questions and seek compelling answers as they would in any board setting.
- A frequent error of mission committees is to focus primarily on campus ministry, while leaving the curricular and research matters related to the religious mission to the Academic Affairs Committee. And yet, academic affairs committees almost never address these topics. Mission committees are generally best situated to raise these questions, and then seek the Academic Affairs Committee's involvement when needed.
- Mission committees also frequently focus their attentions on mission outcomes for the full-time, resident undergraduates. Part-time, commuter, graduate, and distance-learning students should also receive appropriate attention and focus from the committee.
- Colleges and universities often find themselves caught in the crosshairs of larger church or political fights whose origins are outside the institution, but which can find particular manifestations internally. Mission committees should studiously avoid getting caught in such battles themselves, but also help the institution to extricate itself from such delicate matters when appropriate.

## Conclusion

George W. Marsden's excellent 1994 study of American Protestant higher education, *The Soul of the University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, chronicles the loss of religious character in institutions that do not intentionally find socially relevant ways to implement their purposes. Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia universities, among others, all began with the purposes of preparing individuals for ministry and preparing other students to intelligently incorporate faith convictions into the arc of a well-lived life.

Today, numerous faith-based institutions are seeking structural ways to ensure, over time, that the religious and social purposes for which they were founded will serve the present generation well and survive for future generations. Mission committees of the board are relatively new structures for this purpose, and doubtlessly will develop in sophistication and effectiveness over time. Their larger purpose is to serve as an accountability structure, similar to the financial and academic committees, by which successive administrations will set appropriate goals, fund those goals, and measure their accomplishment.

## Sample Mission Committee Charter from DePaul University

The Mission Committee shall review and assess the university's fidelity to its mission and values as well as its Catholic, Vincentian and urban identity. This oversight will extend over a broad spectrum of the university's curricular, co-curricular, research, service, diversity, and university ministry activities. Special attention will be paid to efforts that measurably enhance the understanding and support of the university's identity and mission by all of its internal and external constituencies. The Committee shall also be guided in its work by the principles laid out in the apostolic constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and the norms governing its application of Catholic higher education in the United States.

### References and Resources

**George M. Marsden**, *The Soul of the University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

**Saint John Paul II**, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae (From the Heart of the Church)*. Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities. Cardinal Newman Society, 1990.

### About The Author

Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM, is president of DePaul University, the nation's largest Catholic university and the largest private university in the Midwest, and chairman of Ascension, the nation's largest Catholic and nonprofit health system.

A Detroit native, he studied at Harvard University and received his doctorate in administration, planning, and social policy in 1997 after writing a dissertation on the early history of financial aid in the United States. He earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Niagara University in 1985, studied for the priesthood at Mary Immaculate Seminary in Northampton, Pa., and was ordained in 1989.

Fr. Holtschneider was an administrator with St. John's University in Queens, N.Y., from 1996 to 1999, first as assistant dean of Notre Dame College and later as associate dean of the university's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Concurrently, he served as an assistant professor of higher education in St. John's Graduate School of Education. He served as executive vice president at his alma mater, Niagara University, in Niagara Falls, N.Y., from 2000 to 2004, where he directed the university's strategic planning efforts and daily operations.

Fr. Holtschneider led two national studies examining trends in governance and leadership in American Catholic colleges and universities. He is the author of one book and numerous articles on U.S. higher education and Catholic higher education, as well as a frequent consultant and speaker on these topics.

He is a professor of education at DePaul and a faculty member in the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Management Development Program where, during the fall 2014 semester, he served as Visiting Scholar and President-in-Residence. He also is a faculty member at Boston College's Institute for Administrators in Catholic Higher Education.

**AGB** ASSOCIATION OF  
GOVERNING BOARDS  
OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

1133 20th St. NW • Suite 300 • Washington, D.C. 20036  
[www.agb.org](http://www.agb.org)