

# The Purpose of Higher Education in the Global 21st Century— Learning from Catholic Universities’ Historically Competitive Advantage Mission

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University is where challenges are made to the status quo. The current focus on producing graduates to maximize return on their education. It is time to challenge the traditional universities’ focus on return maximizing behavior of graduates. They do not have to look further. Catholic Universities have always focused on education with purpose, and the traditional universities were inspired by a competitive advantage mission. We will cite some of these examples as we make our case. The integration of Laudato Si’ into the mission of Catholic institutions provides them with a competitive edge, as they can market themselves as leaders in ethical sustainability and social responsibility. The combination of academic rigor and moral clarity rooted in Catholic social teaching sets them apart from many secular institutions. Additionally, by embracing Pope Francis’ call to care for our common home, Catholic institutions position themselves as models of how faith and sustainability can work together to shape a better world for future generations. They are ready to lead the purpose of higher education in the 21st century. The historical mission of Catholic universities—anchored in holistic education, ethical leadership, community, global perspective, and the integration of faith and reason—offers a compelling and competitive model for higher education in the 21st century. As we reconsider what education should accomplish in a rapidly changing world, these institutions remind us that true learning, transforms not just what we know, but who we become.

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## Motivation

University is where challenges are made to the status quo. The current focus on producing graduates to maximize return on their education. It is time to challenge the traditional universities’ focus on return maximizing behavior of graduates. They do not have to look further. Catholic Universities have always focused on education with purpose and the traditional universities were inspired by a competitive advantage mission. We will cite some of these examples as we make our case.

Universities should not only focus on maximizing returns in a traditional economic sense but also emphasize a mission-driven, purpose-oriented approach to education. The notion of education with purpose is evolving, and many institutions are beginning to prioritize the development of well-rounded individuals who are committed to

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societal well-being, sustainability, and positive social impact.

### **Some Notable Examples**

#### **Here are a Few Notable Efforts and References Toward Securing Education with a Purpose in Traditional Universities**

- Universities worldwide are aligning their curricula with the United Nations' SDGs, which emphasize global challenges like poverty, inequality, climate change, and peace. Many educational institutions are redesigning their programs to equip students with the skills to contribute to these goals. For instance, Stanford University has created interdisciplinary programs to tackle these global challenges.
- University of Edinburgh: The university has aligned much of its academic and research output with the SDGs. This includes a focus on climate change, social justice, and equity.
- Harvard Innovation Labs: Harvard's innovation labs provide students with the resources, mentorship, and funding to create startups with a social impact mission. These startups often focus on solving complex social problems and creating sustainable solutions.
- The University of Cape Town (UCT) offers programs in social entrepreneurship and development that focus on addressing local and global challenges. They work closely with social innovators and empower students to build businesses that benefit society at large.
- The Aspen Institute's Business and Society Program: The Aspen Institute has long advocated for an education that integrates ethics and responsibility. The institute offers resources for universities to incorporate ethics into business curricula, pushing for leaders who prioritize social responsibility alongside financial performance.

#### **Critical Pedagogy, Empowerment and the Higher Education**

- The Responsible Business Education Initiative (RBEI): Several business schools are participating in this initiative, which aims to provide education that integrates values, sustainability, and social impact into traditional business management education. INSEAD and The Wharton School are among those integrating purpose-driven education into their curricula.
- Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Freire's work has been foundational in transforming education from a top-down, rote-learning approach to one that emphasizes empowerment and social justice. His concept of "education for liberation" advocates for an education system that challenges the status quo and encourages students to critically engage with the world. Many progressive institutions use Freire's ideas to push for education that challenges traditional power structures.
- The University of the Streets in New York: This is an example of an alternative education model that focuses on community-driven learning and social change, emphasizing education as a means to address societal inequalities.
- Global Citizenship Education (GCED): The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been a major advocate for GCED, which focuses on educating students to become informed, responsible global citizens. Programs like these encourage students to understand issues from a global perspective and take actions that promote peace and human rights.
- Global Exchange Programs: Universities like Duke University and Yale University offer exchange programs that focus on global development and cross-cultural understanding, encouraging students to

think critically about global challenges and actively engage in solutions.

- Many universities are increasingly focusing on research that addresses common good in global challenges. For instance:
  - The University of California, Berkeley is renowned for its work in environmental sustainability, where research aligns with both academic advancement and societal benefits.
  - MIT's Media Lab focuses on socially responsible innovation, with a commitment to creating technologies that benefit humanity.
  - The Bard College Globalization and International Affairs Program is designed to prepare students to understand global interdependencies and engage in action-oriented solutions to global issues.
  - The New School in New York offers interdisciplinary programs that focus on social justice, environmental sustainability, and global equity.

These university efforts reflect a shift in higher education toward a broader mission that incorporates societal responsibility, sustainability, and ethics. The drive to “secure education with a purpose” is not only about altering the way universities approach teaching and learning but also about redefining what success means in higher education. Instead of just maximizing economic returns for students, institutions are embracing a vision of education that is transformative, socially responsible, and globally aware.

### **Catholic University's Competitive Advantage Mission**

Catholic universities have long maintained a distinctive competitive advantage rooted in their unique mission to integrate faith, reason, and service to society. These universities often emphasize values such as social justice, ethical leadership, and community service, which align with their religious and educational traditions. Their mission-driven approach allows them to carve out a distinct identity in higher education and offer a holistic education that goes beyond the mere acquisition of technical skills.

Here are some historical examples of Catholic universities whose missions have provided them with a competitive advantage (Benedict XVI, 2006; Pope Paul II, 1990):

The Jesuit order, founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola, has played a pivotal role in the development of Catholic higher education (Jesuit Secondary Education Association, 1987). Jesuit universities emphasize the cultivation of “cura personalis” (care for the whole person) and a commitment to social justice, leadership, and ethical action. These universities have historically been known for their intellectual rigor, commitment to service, and emphasis on moral and ethical responsibility.

Examples:

- Georgetown University (Founded in 1789): As the first Catholic university in the United States, Georgetown has long held a competitive advantage by integrating its commitment to academic excellence with a mission of service to society. Georgetown's location in Washington, D.C., has allowed it to influence political, social, and economic policy, while its Jesuit tradition has provided a moral framework for addressing societal challenges.
- Boston College (Founded in 1863): Boston College emphasizes its commitment to the Jesuit ideals of faith and reason. The university's competitive advantage is found in its integration of rigorous academic training with its focus on social justice, ethics, and the development of ethical leadership. Boston College's role in promoting service and community outreach has positioned it as a leader in areas like social work, theology, and education.

- Catholic universities have historically been leaders in the promotion of social justice, particularly in areas like civil rights, labor rights, and global peace. This commitment to social justice often provides a competitive advantage by attracting students who want to be part of educational environments that value both intellectual rigor and social engagement.
- The University of Notre Dame (Founded in 1842): Notre Dame has long been committed to both academic excellence and the service of society. It played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement, with prominent figures like Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of Notre Dame, actively advocating for racial equality and social justice. The university's strong integration of faith-based moral reasoning into its academic culture gives it a competitive edge in fostering leaders who are prepared to address both ethical and practical challenges in society.
- DePaul University (Founded in 1898): DePaul, located in Chicago, has long been focused on serving underrepresented populations, especially those in urban areas. Its mission emphasizes the service of the marginalized, inspired by the life of St. Vincent de Paul, after whom the university is named. DePaul's strong commitment to urban community engagement and social justice has allowed it to build a unique reputation, particularly in fields like social work, law, and education.
- Catholic universities have also leveraged their global networks and commitment to solidarity and global development as a competitive advantage. These institutions often have a strong sense of global mission, which helps them build partnerships with international organizations and lead programs that address global challenges.
- The Catholic University of Louvain (UCLouvain) (Founded in 1425): Located in Belgium, UCLouvain has played a significant role in the development of Catholic education in Europe. It has a long history of engaging with global issues, including the promotion of peace, human rights, and development. Its strong international focus and commitment to academic excellence provide it with a competitive advantage, particularly in European and global intellectual circles.
- Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (PUC) (Founded in 1888): As one of the leading universities in Latin America, PUC's emphasis on Catholic social teaching and its historical role in the development of the region's educational and intellectual life have given it a unique advantage. It plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural and social development of Chile and the broader Latin American region.
- Many Catholic universities have been at the forefront of integrating ethical and faith-based perspectives into the healthcare profession. Their competitive advantage often lies in their focus on the intersection of healthcare, ethics, and social justice.
- Loyola University Chicago (Founded in 1870): Loyola's commitment to ethical practice in medicine and healthcare has allowed it to create a strong academic reputation, particularly through its Stritch School of Medicine. The university's focus on ethical leadership in healthcare aligns with its Jesuit mission of service and justice.
- Creighton University (Founded in 1878): With its emphasis on ethical decision-making and the integration of Catholic teachings into healthcare education, Creighton has positioned itself as a leader in healthcare and medical education. Its competitive advantage stems from the fusion of rigorous scientific education and ethical reflection, with a focus on caring for the whole person.
- Catholic universities have historically been committed to forming leaders who are prepared to serve the public good. Their focus on developing ethical, community-oriented leaders has often given them

an edge in fields like law, politics, and public policy.

- Seton Hall University (Founded in 1856): Located in New Jersey, Seton Hall has been a significant institution for students interested in law and public policy. The university emphasizes Catholic social teaching and ethics, which has been a competitive advantage in forming students who work toward justice and equity in public service.
- Saint Louis University (Founded in 1818): As one of the oldest Catholic universities in the United States, Saint Louis University has emphasized leadership in public service, particularly through its School of Law and School of Social Work. Its competitive edge comes from its commitment to educating leaders who blend legal expertise with ethical, social justice principles rooted in Catholic tradition.

### **Pope Francis' Laudato Si'**

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015), is a pivotal document that calls for an urgent response to environmental degradation, climate change, and social inequalities, all framed within the context of Catholic teachings on care for creation, justice, and the common good. The *Laudato Si'* Action Plan, initiated by the Vatican, aims to implement the principles of *Laudato Si'* across the global Catholic community, including universities, institutions, and other sectors of society. The plan offers a competitive advantage for Catholic institutions by integrating sustainability, social justice, and ethical leadership into their missions, offering both moral clarity and practical pathways to address the environmental crisis.

Here are current and past examples of how Catholic universities and institutions have leveraged *Laudato Si'* in their mission, contributing to a competitive advantage:

#### **The Competitive Advantage of Integrating Laudato Si' into Mission**

The *Laudato Si'* Action Plan gives Catholic institutions the competitive advantage of aligning their operations, education, and outreach with a globally recognized moral framework. This provides a unique selling point for universities and organizations that want to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability, ethical leadership, and social responsibility. By following *Laudato Si'* principles, these institutions distinguish themselves in a crowded higher education landscape by offering an education that actively contributes to the common good and global environmental goals.

#### **Current and Past Examples**

##### **Current Example.**

Saint Xavier University's focus on Human Dignity and Common Good in Experiential Learning Projects:

##### **1. Cougar Student Managed Hedge Fund and Triple Bottomline**

Two hands on experiential learning courses that impart valuable practical skills and CME certification upon successful completion of the courses towards leadership placements in the investment industry. As Finance students they naturally maximize risk adjusted return, the traditional profit bottom line. We have a Student Managed Hedge Fund that recommends Exchange Traded Funds (ETF) to buy or sell. However, we tell them that we live our mission, and our fund should be inspired by our mission. So, they diligently choose only those ETFs which cater to human dignity and common good. The way we ensure that is to select Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) compliant ETFs. These ETFs make sure inequities in ESG areas are addressed and redressed by these companies. The Cougar Student Managed Hedge Fund (CSMHF) is an innovative application

of ESG investments, and the Financial Times of London in 2020 named it as one of the best examples of impact investments integrated in finance curriculum in the United States achieving triple bottom line of planet, people and profit. (<https://www.ft.com/content/44d2227a-4852-43ef-b123-94ef138ab843>)

#### **Past Examples.**

- Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.): Georgetown, a prominent Jesuit university, has long integrated sustainability and justice into its academic and operational ethos. Following *Laudato Si'*, Georgetown made notable strides in addressing climate change, environmental sustainability, and social justice. The university's Sustainability Vision 2020 plan, which includes carbon neutrality goals, aligns with the ethos of *Laudato Si'*. Georgetown's "One Health" approach to sustainability—recognizing the interconnectedness of human health, animal health, and environmental health—is an example of how the university integrates *Laudato Si'* values into its mission.
- Boston College (Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts): Boston College is another Jesuit institution where the commitment to sustainability is rooted in its mission. The university's Environmental Sustainability Task Force and campus-wide initiatives are designed to promote eco-friendly practices in alignment with *Laudato Si'*. Additionally, BC offers interdisciplinary programs that focus on environmental justice, a key theme in *Laudato Si'*. Through academic offerings, service learning, and outreach, Boston College is positioning itself as a leader in ethical environmental stewardship, particularly through programs such as the Environmental Studies Program and its Institute for the Liberal Arts.
- University of Notre Dame (South Bend, Indiana): Notre Dame has embraced *Laudato Si'* as a framework for its sustainability efforts. In 2018, the university announced its commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, in alignment with *Laudato Si'* principles. This commitment includes sustainable campus development, investing in renewable energy, and promoting ecological sustainability. Notre Dame's dedication to environmental ethics and sustainability education has earned it recognition as a leader in integrating Catholic social teaching with practical environmental solutions.
- Saint Louis University (SLU) (Saint Louis, Missouri): SLU is another example of a Catholic university actively integrating *Laudato Si'* principles. The university committed to carbon neutrality by 2050 and has made substantial progress in improving energy efficiency, reducing waste, and developing sustainable campus infrastructure. Through the Office of Sustainability, SLU has offered programs that empower students to take leadership roles in sustainability initiatives, preparing them to act as stewards of the environment in their future careers. SLU also offers degree programs with an environmental focus that aligns with the *Laudato Si'* message.
- Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome): The Pontifical Gregorian University is a significant example of a Vatican institution that has actively integrated *Laudato Si'* into its teaching and outreach efforts. As part of its commitment to Pope Francis' environmental encyclical, the Gregorian University has focused on eco-theology, offering courses and workshops that explore the intersection of faith, ecology, and justice. The university has also adopted sustainable practices on campus, including energy-saving measures and waste reduction, positioning itself as an academic institution that leads by example in the Vatican's call for global environmental stewardship.
- Vatican's Own Sustainability Programs: Following the publication of *Laudato Si'*, the Vatican has launched its own sustainability efforts, including the creation of the *Laudato Si'* Platform to support Catholic organizations worldwide in aligning their missions with the teachings of the document. The

Vatican's initiatives include efforts to reduce waste, increase energy efficiency in Vatican buildings, and promote renewable energy sources.

- Many Catholic high schools, such as Xavier High School in New York City, have also embraced *Laudato Si'* in their educational missions, incorporating sustainability into their curricula and operational practices. These institutions prepare younger students to become responsible environmental stewards, contributing to a rising generation of leaders who are grounded in faith-based social and environmental ethics.

### **The Role of *Laudato Si'* in Building Leadership for Social Impact**

Catholic universities are increasingly using *Laudato Si'* to prepare students to become leaders who are committed to environmental justice and social equity. By focusing on holistic education that includes ethical leadership, sustainability, and a global perspective, these institutions are attracting students who want to be part of meaningful change in the world.

The integration of *Laudato Si'* into the mission of Catholic institutions provides them with a competitive edge, as they can market themselves as leaders in ethical sustainability and social responsibility. The combination of academic rigor and moral clarity rooted in Catholic social teaching sets them apart from many secular institutions. Additionally, by embracing Pope Francis' call to care for our common home, Catholic institutions position themselves as models of how faith and sustainability can work together to shape a better world for future generations.

### **Conclusion**

Catholic universities have historically used their missions, grounded in religious values and social justice, as a competitive advantage in education. Their commitment to holistic education, service to society, and the development of ethical leaders who are conscious of their responsibility to the world around them has allowed these institutions to build distinctive reputations in both academia and the broader community. By continuing to focus on their Catholic identity, faith-based values, and societal mission, these universities are well-positioned to thrive in an increasingly globalized and socially conscious world.

The integration of ***Laudato Si'*** into the mission of Catholic institutions provides them with a competitive edge, as they can market themselves as leaders in **ethical sustainability** and **social responsibility**. The combination of **academic rigor** and **moral clarity** rooted in Catholic social teaching sets them apart from many secular institutions. Additionally, by embracing Pope Francis' call to care for our common home, Catholic institutions position themselves as models of how faith and sustainability can work together to shape a better world for future generations. And are ready to lead the purpose of higher education in the 21st century.

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