

## A Jesuit University: Jesuits, Lay Colleagues, and the Future

### Exploring the Jesuit and Catholic dimensions of the university's mission

---

Most Catholic universities in the U.S. were founded in the 19th century by members of male and female religious congregations (Jesuits, Franciscans, Benedictines, Augustinians, etc.) and these congregations provided large numbers of faculty and all the top administrators of their institutions until quite recently. Since the mid-sixties this situation has been rapidly changing. Rare is the Catholic college or university today where more than one or two members of the founding congregation hold positions of authority. These institutions are now staffed, led, and governed almost exclusively by lay men and women.



This situation raises fascinating questions about how the mission of a Catholic university will be understood and transmitted when the influential voices no longer come from a relatively small core of individuals formed in the spirituality and traditions of a religious congregation but come instead from a large number of men and women of varying experiences who claim a stake in the identity of the institution.

A good place to start considering some of the issues is an essay by a faculty member with long experience of studying and working in Jesuit education, "From Omaha to Philadelphia and Beyond: Jesuit-Lay Cooperation in 21st Century Higher Education" by Brennan O'Donnell (in *Jesuit Education 21: Conference Proceedings on the Future of Jesuit Higher Education*, ed. Martin R. Tripole; Saint Joseph's University Press, 2000).

The 34th Congregation of the Jesuits produced a landmark document, "[Cooperation with the Laity in Mission](#)". This document notes that ministry in the Church is increasingly becoming ministry led by lay people and makes the startling proposal that Jesuits should consider their own primary work to be the support of lay colleagues in their ministry.

The 35th General Congregation (2008) addressed this topic again in a document, "[Collaboration at the Heart of Mission](#)".

Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles has written a pastoral letter about lay ministry in the church that offers an interesting glimpse of the larger ecclesial context in which these university developments are occurring: "Pastoral Letter on Lay Ministry" (in *Origins*, 4 May 2000).

Jesuit colleges and universities in the U.S. have recently created the [Ignatian Colleagues Program](#) to address some of these issues. It invites lay men and women who hold senior administrative positions in Jesuit institutions to learn about and appropriate the foundational principles of Jesuit education and Ignatian spirituality. The eighteen-month program includes the Spiritual Exercises, on-line courses, an international service and immersion program, and regular meetings with a local campus coordinator.