

A Synodal Process for Revising the Mission of a Contemporary Catholic University

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Abstract

During the 2022–2023 academic year, the University of San Diego engaged in a year-long dialogue on what it means to be a Catholic university in the twenty-first century. Mirroring the synodal process initiated in 2021 by Pope Francis for the global Catholic Church, the university sought to create opportunities for all university constituents to reflect on the mission and values of the institution and to listen to one another articulate their hopes and dreams for the future. In this article, we provide a historical context for the importance of mission and Catholic identity, describe how the process utilized parallels the synodality conversation within the Catholic Church, and reflect on the challenges and opportunities that emerged from engaging numerous stakeholders in this important dialogue.

Historical Context

The importance of identifying the mission of a Catholic university can be traced back to Pope Alexander IV, when he wrote to clarify what he believed to be the mission and purpose of the University of Paris in 1255.¹ From the founding of the first European universities in the thirteenth century, leading Catholic thinkers, including St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and St. John Henry Newman, have offered views on the aims and purposes of Catholic universities.² More

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¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1990), sec. 1, ¶ 1.

² Michael Rizzi, “Defining Catholic Education in Positive Terms,” *Journal of Catholic Education* 22, no. 2 (2019): pages 2-3.

recently, two seminal documents, the Land O'Lakes Statement³ and *Ex corde Ecclesiae*,⁴ have influenced the way Catholic colleges and universities think about the theological, philosophical, and ethical underpinnings of their missions. Informed by wisdom accumulated across hundreds of years, these two statements address the nature of Catholic higher education in the twentieth century.

Today, every accredited institution of higher education in America has a mission that guides what students it serves, its educational focus, and how it contributes to society. The first college in America, Harvard, was founded to train future ministers and other individuals to lead key institutions in the New World.⁵ The privilege to attend Harvard, however, was afforded only to white males from leading colonial families. Over the next three and a half centuries, other models of higher education with distinct missions would emerge, broadening the scope of higher education and expanding its impact. Catholic universities were at the forefront of this development.

The historian Fredrick Rudolph observed that it did not take the Catholic Church long to create colleges to serve distinct populations following the example, among others, of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.⁶ The first of these in the United States—Georgetown—was created for the purpose of promoting “an education that would advance the best of Catholic and republican cultures.”⁷ The founding of Boston College in 1863 was an early example of higher education expanding access to the underserved by focusing on Boston’s predominantly poor, Irish Catholic population. Similarly, St. Catherine University in Minnesota was founded to provide women from lower and middle socioeconomic classes access to higher education. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other Catholic colleges and universities were established to serve particular populations, typically those excluded from traditional institutions. Alverno College in Milwaukee, for instance, was founded in 1887 with the mission to educate females to be teachers in Catholic schools, and Xavier University of Louisiana, America’s first Catholic, Historically

³ Federation of Catholic Universities, “Land O’Lakes Statement: Statement on the Nature of the Contemporary Catholic University,” <https://cushwa.nd.edu/assets/245340/landolakesstatement.pdf>.

⁴ See note 1.

⁵ Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1962), page 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 94.

⁷ Robert Emmett Curran, “Georgetown University: A Brief History,” *Georgetown University Undergraduate Bulletin*, <https://bulletin.georgetown.edu/about/guhistory/>.

Black institution, was founded in 1925 to serve Black and Indigenous students. Each of these institutions were created with a particular educational focus that shaped the student populations they served and the programs they offered, with the ultimate purpose of advancing the public good. While the scope of these schools has expanded, each would argue that their original purpose is still being fulfilled to this day.

Importance of Mission

Many universities are able to trace their history back for centuries, and the most successful ones, according to Geiger, can attribute their success to a select number of factors.⁸ One of those is a clear understanding of their purpose, an understanding which is often linked to the vision and values of its founders. In his renowned work on strategic planning in higher education, Keller emphasized that any college or university that wished to chart a new course in order to adjust to challenges in the environment must first have a clear mission statement and set of values from which to base its decision-making.⁹ According to Harris, et al., “mission refers to the purpose, philosophy, and educational aspirations of a college or university.”¹⁰ The mission should guide the leaders of an institution on a comprehensive range of matters—including the curriculum offered, how resources are utilized, which students to recruit and admit, which faculty and staff to hire—and provide a rationale for any major decisions that are made.

Today, there is also a practical reason for embracing a mission statement: all regional accrediting bodies require that an institution have one. While not the principal reason to develop and draw upon a relevant mission statement, fulfilling the expectations of accreditation agencies is imperative. Standard One in the WASC Senior College and University Commission’s Handbook of Accreditation defines the criteria by which an institution is deemed to have demonstrated a clear mission. It states, “The institution has a clear and explicit sense of its essential values and character, its distinctive elements, its place

⁸ Roger Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pages ix-xii.

⁹ George Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), page 121.

¹⁰ James T. Harris, III, *Academic Leadership and Governance in Higher Education: A Guide for Trustees, Leaders and Aspiring Leaders of Two- and Four-Year Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 2022), page 11.

in the higher education community and society, and its contribution to the public good.”¹¹

It is not enough, however, to have an established mission statement. To thrive, institutions must, from time to time, revisit these statements to ensure that they continue to be relevant while also remaining true to the ideals and principles on which the institution was founded. According to the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP), an effective mission statement can be an institution’s “North Star” and provide a “distinct and constant direction that a college or university can travel towards.”¹² These functions are more important than ever in the midst of sweeping changes in the socio-political context currently being navigated by institutions of higher education, changes dramatically illustrated by, among others, the COVID-19 pandemic and the steep decline in the number of high-school graduates (the so-called “demographic cliff”).¹³

SCUP suggests that one way to ensure that a mission statement is distinctive, relevant, and even inspirational, is to evaluate it on a periodic basis. At the University of San Diego, we initiated such a process during the 2022–2023 academic year by engaging our entire university community in an open dialogue about who we are and what we value. Rather than a traditional method—with a small number of individuals collecting feedback from a select number of key constituents before composing a new document—we employed a synodal process. Inspired by Pope Francis’ call to the world-wide Catholic Church, we developed an analogous process with a similar goal, enlisting as many people as possible in the conversation, providing opportunities for them to listen deeply to one another, and ensuring that each voice was afforded equal weight. While we expected that the process would produce a revised mission statement, we also hoped that the experience of journeying and discerning together would empower us as a community to “plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, [and] awaken a dawn of hope.”¹⁴

¹¹ WASC Senior College and University Commission, “2023 Standard,” <https://www.wscuc.org/handbook2023/#S1>

¹² Nicholas Santilli and Sadie Wutka, “Reviewing and Updating Your Mission Statement,” Society for College and University Planning, <https://www.scup.org/resource/reviewing-and-updating-your-mission-statement/>.

¹³ John Boeckenstedt, “Will Your College Survive the Demographic Cliff?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/will-your-college-survive-the-demographic-cliff>.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People* (October 3, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html.

University of San Diego

The University of San Diego (USD) traces its roots to 1936 and the creation of the Diocese of San Diego. The first bishop of the diocese, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy, had the foresight to envision that the diocese would include a Catholic college. As a small border town, San Diego had suffered badly during the Great Depression, and he believed that for the diocese—and the entire region—to flourish, it would need a Catholic college to prepare the next generation of teachers and leaders for the community. He enlisted the help of Mother Rosalie Clifton Hill of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (RSCJ) to help him create the San Diego College for Women. Providing access to children from poor Catholic families was part of the mission for the college, with each parish in the diocese contributing financially and otherwise to its creation. Over the ensuing decade, a College for Men and a Law School were added. In 1972, the three independently-operated institutions merged to become the University of San Diego. USD's creation led to a unique governance structure; rather than being administered by or directly affiliated with a religious order or a diocese, USD is governed by a lay board of trustees. The inaugural president of USD, Author Hughes, PhD, was the first lay president of a Catholic, doctoral-granting university in the United States.

Today, the university has grown to enroll approximately 9,000 students (5,600 of those being undergraduates) and to include seven academic units: the College of Arts and Sciences along with Schools of Business, Engineering, Law, Leadership and Education, Nursing, and Peace. USD is the youngest private university included in the U.S. News and World Report's list of the top one hundred national universities. Since its inception, the University of San Diego has been committed to values-based, holistic education including a social awareness designed to awaken and amplify students' desire to transform the world. This legacy of community engagement has led to USD being recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as a "Community Engagement Institution," and its dedication to social innovation and entrepreneurship resulted in its designation as one of only forty Ashoka Changemaker campuses in the world.

The university has had multiple versions of a mission statement throughout its history. The most recent was approved by the board of trustees in February 2004. That statement served the institution well for many years. It read:

"The University of San Diego is a Roman Catholic institution committed to advancing academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse and inclusive community, and preparing leaders who are dedicated to ethical conduct and compassionate service."

In addition to briefly attesting to the university's Catholic identity, this mission delineated the five core values, which were also articulated and approved in 2004: academic excellence, liberal and professional knowledge, diverse and inclusive community, ethical conduct, and compassionate service.

In 2015, James T. Harris, III, EdD, became the fourth president in the university's history. The board of trustees, aware that the institution's existing strategic plan had run its course, identified the creation of a new strategic plan as a top priority for the new president. The result of that process included the new plan as well as a new vision statement, both of which were adopted by the board in September of 2016. That new vision read:

"The University of San Diego sets the standard for an engaged, contemporary Catholic university where innovative changemakers confront humanity's urgent challenges."

The updated plan and the freshly articulated vision were inspired by the 2015 publication of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's encyclical on care for our common home.¹⁵ In fact, the phrase "Care for Our Common Home" was used to identify one of the six pathways of the 2016 strategic plan. Moreover, numerous colleagues began using the expression "becoming the university of Laudato Si'" to summarize the strategic plan's overall shape and direction. The phrase "confront humanity's urgent challenges" resonated strongly with the campus community, putting words to aspirations that had long animated the work of many faculty and staff as well as the motivations of numerous students. Francis's attention to the interconnected nature of our global society, as well as the ways climate change disproportionately harms the poor, spoke to our university community, especially since San Diego is one of the most biodiverse microclimates in the world. Likewise, his call for "leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all without prejudice toward coming generations,"¹⁶ expressed what many would say is an important element of the charism of USD.

Responding to Francis's call, in the fall of 2021 the university formally committed to embrace the central principles of the encyclical,

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 2015).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. 1, ¶ 53.

becoming one of the earliest Catholic universities in the United States to receive recognition by the Vatican for doing so. In addition, at its September 2021 meeting, the board of trustees unanimously adopted an amended investment policy built on Environmental, Social, and Governance principles, positioning USD as one of the first universities to take this step. Of particular note was the commitment to eliminate entirely investments in fossil fuel companies by no later than 2035.

The strategic plan developed at the start of President Harris's tenure was titled "Envisioning 2024," highlighting its culmination in the year 2024, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the original San Diego College for Women. As the university approached that milestone and began to think about the next strategic plan, the need to review the existing mission statement came into focus.

Revising the Mission

At a leadership retreat in August 2022, President Harris led his senior team in assessing the university's mission statement. After utilizing materials designed by SCUP for this purpose, the team discerned that the time was right to engage the university community in reviewing the statement. In addition to the impending conclusion of the current strategic plan and the resulting need to craft a new one, the team was aware that the existing mission statement was eighteen years old. According to WASC and SCUP, best practice calls for organizations to reconsider their mission statement on a timelier basis. More significantly—and unmistakable in light of the COVID pandemic—the world had changed profoundly since that statement was written and adopted in 2004. The changes that took place in the external environment in the years 2004–2022 were mirrored by shifts in USD's internal context. During that time, the campus benefited from a significant number of major building projects (with more than ten capital projects completed) as well as profoundly consequential academic and other developments, including the design and implementation of a new core curriculum, the establishment of Living Learning Communities for all first-year students, two successful accreditation processes, and a growing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. These data prompted the leadership team to adopt reviewing the mission statement as a key strategic goal for the 2022-2023 academic year. The first step in that process was to consult with the board of trustees at their fall retreat.

Process and Constituents

In preparation for the board meeting—as well as the work with the university community ahead—the leadership team thought carefully about creating a suitable structure to guide the review of the mission statement. After much reflection, we realized that we were hoping to employ a synodal process similar to the one Pope Francis had initiated for the Church. His emphasis on mutual listening, as well as his focus on the themes of communion, participation, and mission, had potent parallels to our work. The essence of synodality—journeying together, listening to one another to understand how God might be speaking to all of us—was exactly the nature of the process we were hoping to implement.

In the Diocese of San Diego, the first phase of the synodal process involved small-group conversations focused on three questions: (1) What are the joys of the faithful in the life of the Church? (2) What are their sorrows in the Church? and (3) What hopes do they have for the Church?¹⁷ Inspired by that approach, we crafted three questions to guide the university community’s consideration of our existing mission statement, asking them to answer the three queries in light of the current mission, vision, and core values:

1. What do you appreciate most about these statements?
2. What, if anything, is missing?
3. What do you hope the new mission statement will express?

Through engaging in reflection and discussion of these questions, a clear consensus emerged during the board meeting. While the trustees appreciated a great deal about the existing statements, they also recognized several areas for improvement. Primary among these was the mission’s lack of distinctiveness; without the words “The University of San Diego,” the mission could apply to virtually any Catholic university. Moreover, almost no one could recite the mission from memory. Thus, two desires for a new statement became clear—for it to be more distinct and for it to be more concise, and therefore more memorable. An additional issue with the existing mission statement was the reference to “liberal knowledge.” The phrase was ambiguous, and several people

¹⁷ Diocese of San Diego, *Synthesis: The Synodal Process for the Diocese of San Diego*, June 2022, https://sdcatholic.org/wp-content/uploads/synod/2022-reports/Synod_Process_Report_A_Eng.pdf.

suggested that “liberal arts” would be preferable, particularly at a time when the word liberal is often understood in terms of partisan politics. The board charged President Harris and his leadership team with facilitating an inclusive, comprehensive process to review the mission statement—with a new version approved by the board at its meeting in May 2023. With the board’s endorsement, President Harris asked the Vice President for Mission Integration, Dr. Michael Lovette-Colyer, to lead the campus-wide effort to review and reconsider the university’s mission.

Emulating the synodal way, the leadership team made it a priority to include every constituent group associated with the university and to give equal consideration to the perspective of everyone, regardless of their position or seniority. These cohorts included students, faculty, administrators, staff, alumni, parents, local community members, and benefactors. We spent the fall semester engaged in divergent thinking, listening to as many people from these groups as possible to hear their responses to our three questions. Meeting with ten groups as well as sending a campus-wide email generated more than 430 discrete pieces of feedback. Primed by the listening sessions and the extensive data collected, we were ready to shift to convergent thinking, striving to make sense of the feedback and identify major themes.

In order to move forward, we convened a small writing group to review the insights gathered during the fall and begin drafting new statements. This writing group was comprised of five faculty and staff members who were well known across campus for their dedication to the university and their robust ability to describe the ways in which their roles align with and advance the existing mission. They were also selected for their ability to think and write creatively and collaboratively. Rather than being a representative group—which would have necessitated a large number of people—the writing team was intentionally kept small so that it could work nimbly to create new documents that we would then take back to the whole community for additional discernment and refinement in the spring.

The writing group met on four occasions in late December and early January and, by mid-January, was almost finished with its first draft of a new mission statement. At that time, we were learning about Chat GPT and other artificial intelligence models. One of our colleagues asked Chat GPT to produce a mission statement for a university; almost instantaneously, the chatbot produced a pithy statement that was eerily similar to what the writing group had spent hours crafting. While initially disconcerting, this proved enormously helpful. Since large

language models produce text by predicting and selecting the most commonly used words, we realized that in striving to be concise, we were—unintentionally—creating another non-specific mission statement, one that could apply to any university, Catholic or otherwise, rather than one which reflected the elements that make USD special.

This important insight motivated us to pause and clarify the most distinctive characteristics of our university. While there are many, the following seemed most salient: our contemporary Catholic identity, foundation in the liberal arts, location near an international border, commitment to our common home, the centrality of high-impact educational practices (i.e., Living Learning Communities, undergraduate research, study abroad, community-based learning, internships), emphasis on ethical conduct and compassionate service, status as a doctoral-granting institution, and concern for justice and peace. Some of these qualities, such as our location, are almost totally unique to USD; others are not exclusive (such as our grounding in the liberal arts and incorporation of high-impact practices); collectively, however, this list encapsulates what is distinctive about USD. With these qualities at the forefront of its thinking, the writing group produced the following as the first draft of a revised mission statement:

“We are a contemporary Catholic university, grounded in the liberal arts, advancing academic distinction, intellectual exploration, and inclusive excellence. Anchored on an international border, we care for our common home through responsible participation, ethical conduct, and compassionate service. Together, we foster peace, work for justice, and lead with love.”

As the spring 2023 semester began, we scheduled meetings with all of the stakeholder groups we met with in the fall to listen to their feedback on this draft and refine it accordingly. Not surprisingly, almost every group we met with thought the new statement was too long. Paradoxically, many groups told us it needed to be shorter and then asked us to include a word, phrase, or concept that was significant to them, making the statement longer. After wrestling with this dynamic for several weeks, in March we realized that no one statement could include everything that needed to be conveyed about the university. Thus, we began drafting not only a new mission statement but also a new vision statement as well as a revised list of core values. Pivoting to creating all three texts opened a pathway to adopt concise mission and vision statements without sacrificing essential aspects of our university identity and aspirations.

Throughout the spring, President Harris and Vice President Lovette-Colyer met with thirteen different groups of stakeholders,

engaging more than 525 individuals. At each of these sessions, we began by sharing the various drafts of the mission statement so that participants could see how it was developing based on the community's insights. This highlighted aspects that were consistently included from the beginning as well as those that had changed throughout the year, drawing attention to both areas of convergence and divergence. We then focused on small-group conversations, asking people to talk with the others assigned to their tables, sharing their reactions and reflections to the latest version of the statement. After listening to one another, we invited each table to submit feedback electronically so that the writing team could consider it carefully; we also asked each table to share with the full group the key insights that surfaced during their conversation. After listening to the summaries of discussion at the other tables, all of the participants were offered another opportunity to submit feedback electronically as well as to speak directly with President Harris and/or Vice President Lovette-Colyer to voice their perspective.

Several cohorts—including the board of trustees and the president's cabinet (which includes the university faculty senate executive committee)—reviewed the developing documents on multiple occasions. A significant number of individuals participated in the conversations in more than one context. For example, faculty, deans, and administrators engaged in the process as members of the president's cabinet, during board of trustees' meetings, at the two university-wide forums dedicated to the project, and in sessions with their academic unit or division. This overlap created a rich interaction of people and ideas with ample opportunities to ask questions of and listen to one another.

The inclusion of the word "love" in the new documents provides an illustration of the collaborative, non-hierarchical nature of the process. The suggestion to incorporate love was made by a mid-level staff member in the athletic department, a person who likely would not have been invited to participate in a traditional university-wide initiative. When others heard her suggestion, many strongly resonated with the merit and importance of including the word. Others had questions, even resistance, to incorporating a word they thought overused, overly vague, and out of place in an institutional setting. Ongoing conversations throughout the spring provided opportunities to discern together whether and how to include love, as well as other words proposed, in the new formulation of the university community's mission, vision, and values.

As a result of this deliberate process, by mid-April we had new vision, mission, and value statements ready to take to the board meeting in early May. Before doing so, we consulted with our bishop, Cardinal

Robert W. McElroy, who, in addition to making one content suggestion, affirmed that the new statements expressed a strong Catholic vision of higher education.

Outcome

In preparation for the presentation to the board, we convened a meeting with the current, past, and incoming board chairs to solicit their support for the new statement. These three trustee leaders became strong advocates for the newly elaborated mission, vision, and values, and on May 6, the full board of trustees unanimously approved the revised statements. Our mission is expressed in these terms:

“We are a contemporary Catholic university, grounded in the liberal arts and anchored along an international border, advancing academic excellence to create a more inclusive, sustainable, and hopeful world.”

And our vision is:

“Strengthened by the Catholic intellectual tradition, we confront humanity’s challenges by fostering peace, working for justice, and leading with love.”

Our updated list of six core values consists of academic excellence, Catholic identity, human dignity, care for our common home, ethical conduct and compassionate service, and inspired and meaningful lives. For the description of each of these values, please visit the university’s web site.¹⁸

Key Insights

While the result of this ten-month process was positive, the process was equally as fruitful. The new statements are immensely valuable in helping prospective and new students, faculty, and staff understand the history, distinguishing aspects, and charism of our university. Likewise, they have already begun to serve as a firm foundation for the next strategic-planning process. While these are significant contributions, engaging the campus community in an inclusive, thoughtful conversation about who we are, why we exist, and what values guide us was even more valuable. It provided a needed opportunity to discern together how

¹⁸ University of San Diego, “Mission, Vision and Values,” <https://www.sandiego.edu/about/mission-vision-values.php>.

we can best express our deepest identity and highest aspirations at this singular moment in history.

For a variety of understandable reasons, the task of revising a university's mission statement is one that is frequently delayed, even avoided. In addition to the magnitude of the work, it often appears analogous to opening a Pandora's box; once initiated, it is difficult to imagine how to bring the process to a satisfactory, much less edifying, conclusion. Our experience at the University of San Diego, however, indicates unequivocally that the work is worth the effort. It is a uniquely effective way of engaging the campus community in a conversation about our Catholic identity and fosters the integration of the mission into every aspect of campus life. In addition to this observation, several other key insights emerged from our process. These include the tension between distinctiveness and conciseness; the task of articulating Catholic identity, using the wisdom of the Catholic tradition to ground and explain key university goals such as diversity, equity, and inclusion; the importance of the liberal arts; and board of trustee engagement.

Distinctiveness and Conciseness

As previously indicated, two of the initial desires for a revised USD mission statement were that it be more concise and that it reflect the distinctive aspects of our university. We did not realize, when these two desires first surfaced at the board of trustees retreat in the fall, the extent to which they are in tension. Describing what makes a university unique requires more words than a generic expression. To be sure, a succinct statement about inspiring students to transform the world is relatively easy to remember, but its generalizability tends toward cliché. While brevity is important, substance and depth are more so. Now that we have new and distinctive mission and vision statements, we can draw on them to create marketing and other communications strategies appropriate for specific audiences.

One of the ways we sought to express the distinctiveness of USD was by incorporating the phrase "leading with love." As mentioned above, love may strike some as unusual or even inappropriate for a university vision statement, but we are convinced of its aptness. Love is, of course, the core of the Christian message, revealed most fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and powerfully attested to by scripture.¹⁹

¹⁹ Jn 15: 9–17 and 1 Jn 4: 7–17.

Moreover, incorporating the word “love” eloquently expresses the truth that we are dedicated to the education of the heart as much as of the mind, while also paying tribute to the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, one of the founding institutions of the university. Finally, “leading with love” expresses our desire to form servant leaders, graduates prepared to live meaningful and inspired lives in service to their communities.

A second distinguishing element of our revised mission is its explicit embrace of our location. Located less than twenty miles from the US/Mexico border, USD has a long history of cross-border initiatives, working with community partners on both sides of the international boundary to understand and contribute to the many issues related to migration. For more than thirty years, USD students have visited and developed relationships with our neighbors to the south, learning about the reality of their lives, the joys they experience, and the challenges they face. In 2019, the university opened the Tijuana Hub, a permanent shared-office space in Mexico which regularly hosts groups of USD faculty and students. Drawing on the concept of anchor institutions,²⁰ the phrase “anchored along an international border” indicates that this work is enduring; we will continue to be deeply invested in it. The university’s physical placement was also addressed in the core value of “Care for Our Common Home.” There we include a land acknowledgment, specifying that USD is located on Kumeyaay land, striving to pay tribute to the Kumeyaay nation, and communicating our dedication to building reciprocal relationships with our Indigenous and all other community partners. Weaving the land acknowledgment into the core values was intended to go beyond what some view as the performative nature of such gestures to more fully and firmly foster the solidarity they signify.

Catholic Identity

A particularly important facet of the distinctiveness of any Catholic college or university is its Catholic identity. Among others, Buckley has drawn attention to the imperative for the mission statements of Catholic institutions of higher education to include clear references to

²⁰ Michael Harris and Karri Holley, “Universities as Anchor Institutions: Economic and Social Potential for Urban Development” in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, ed. M. B. Paulsen (Springer International Publishing: Switzerland, 2016), pages 393–439.

our Catholicity.²¹ Meeting this need in an invitational, inclusive manner in our current, pluralistic environment is no easy task. A vague statement focused on holistic education, values, ethics and/or service may seem preferable, provoking no friction in the marketplace. Such general expressions, however, fail to communicate the richness and added value of Catholic higher education. Sufficient articulations of that richness and value require that we claim the distinctive nature of our animating faith commitments, in a way that is sensitive to and in dialogue with the many who do not share those commitments.

The mission statement approved in 2004 described USD as “Roman Catholic,” a rare designation among the approximately 220 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. Instead of “Roman Catholic,” most of our peer institutions describe themselves simply as Catholic—with possible additional reference being made to the religious order they are affiliated with (i.e., Jesuit, Mercy, etc.). Prior to the 2004 mission statement, earlier versions referred to USD as “Catholic,” with some adding the descriptor “Welcoming.” Motivated in part by the 1990 publication of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the 2004 reference to “Roman Catholic” reflected a desire to emphasize our fundamental relationship to and alignment with the institutional Catholic Church. While that concern continues to be critically important, the qualifier of “Roman” instigated many questions. Some theologians and others well versed in Catholicism noticed that it points to the various rites within the Catholic Church and can thereby lead to confusion for those unfamiliar with the Church’s diversity. As San Diego is home to a large population of Chaldean Catholics, the phrase “Roman Catholic” can be especially confounding. A final consideration with the word Roman is the way that it privileged our connection to one of our founding institutions—the Diocese of San Diego—at the expense of the other, the RSCJ sisters.

Beginning with the 2016 vision statement, USD adopted the expression “Contemporary Catholic.” This language, reflecting the vision and echoing the terminology of the Land O’Lakes Statement, was selected to highlight the manner in which we seek to address contemporary issues by drawing on the wisdom of the Catholic spiritual, moral, and intellectual traditions. In addition, we are a contemporary Catholic institution in that we became a university (through the merger of the College of Women, College of Men, and School of Law) in 1972, subsequent to the Second Vatican Council. Thus, many aspects of our

²¹ Michael J. Buckley, SJ, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), pages 6-9.

institution reflect a post-conciliar reality; for example, each of the four presidents of the university have been lay people. Much of our academic community's focus has also consistently reflected changes in the Church shaped by the Council. Vatican II's call for the Church to move from a stance of defensiveness to engagement with the modern world, for example, has been reflected in USD's desire to be a university fully engaged with humanity's urgent challenges.²² Similarly, our long-standing commitment to ecumenical and interfaith cooperation reflect changes initiated by Vatican II.

Since its adoption, the phrase "Contemporary Catholic"—like "Roman Catholic" before it—has generated questions. Rather than a problem, we see this as an opportunity. What does it mean to be a contemporary Catholic institution, to be Catholic at this moment in time? The freshness of the expression has fostered thoughtful conversation and provided new ways to engage people in dialogue, including those who were disengaged because they felt excluded and those who felt they had already exhausted the significance of that conversation. As one of the few Catholic institutions founded as a university after Vatican II, we believe this is a critical distinguishing aspect of USD's identity. We therefore decided to include "Contemporary Catholic" in the new mission statement as well as to add a core value elucidating what we mean by it.

Wisdom from the Catholic Tradition

As is the case at most Catholic colleges and universities, USD engages in practices that are, in many respects, similar to those prevalent on other university campuses. While many institutions have commitments to high-impact practices, USD provides opportunities for all students to participate in them, including first-year experiences, service-learning, study abroad, undergraduate research, internships, and capstone projects. While we share with many others an awareness of the educational benefit of real-world engagement, especially the public good of partnering with under-resourced communities, our reason for prioritizing these projects is different. For us, the teaching and example of Jesus found in the Gospel serve as the most fundamental rationale for such efforts.²³ Similarly, we have a keen appreciation for the value of the Catholic Social Teaching principal of solidarity, which most deeply

²² Thomas R. Rausch, SJ, *This is our Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), page 126.

²³ Mt 25:31–46.

animates our desire for students to experience themselves as a part of and responsible to our interconnected world.

One example—an especially timely one—is our work to foster diversity, equity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging, particularly for students, faculty, and staff from under-represented backgrounds. Like many institutions, USD reflected intensely on what the racial reckoning spurred by the killing of George Floyd meant for our community. While a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion has been a campus priority for many years, it took on new urgency in 2020. In response, the university developed a five-year institutional initiative entitled the Horizon Project. It is designed to coalesce and align our people, policies, and practices to accomplish a set of goals by 2026. It was clear during our discussions about the new mission statement that maintaining and expanding our commitment to this work was important to all university stakeholders.

In recent months, the polarized nature of public discourse related to diversity, equity, and inclusion has become evident. Some have accused universities of promoting division through theories they deem radical and criticized higher education institutions for adopting priorities they view as politically motivated. Of course, our long established—always imperfect—commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion does not emanate from a political ideology or partisan motivation. Instead, it is grounded in the core Judeo-Christian belief in human dignity, the conviction that each person is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore deserves and demands to be treated with utmost respect. By labeling the core value that addresses these themes as “Human Dignity,” we sought to explicitly tie our diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to virtues and values at the very heart of the Catholic tradition. Similarly, the newly expressed core value of “Ethical Conduct and Compassionate Service” articulates the truth that a distinguishing characteristic of a Catholic university is to engage the imminent social issues of our time in order to enhance the common good. Certainly, the language in our newly articulated core values will not miraculously alleviate the societal conflict related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Nevertheless, we are convinced of the need to draw on Catholic beliefs, virtues, and vocabulary as much as possible when explicating what we do on our campuses and, more importantly, why.

Liberal Arts

The challenges confronting colleges and universities today are well known. These include shifting societal expectations for higher education,

questions about its value, decreasing public support, increasing concerns about return on investment, and the previously mentioned “demographic cliff”—the large decline in high-school graduates expected by 2026. In addition to these challenges, the ascendancy of artificial intelligence has highlighted the need to address an existential question: “What does it mean to be human?” Amid this difficult environment, it can be tempting to pursue a transactional approach rather than a relational, transformational one. At a time of resource concerns and constraints, all universities are under increasing pressure to deliver value. Those offering a holistic, liberal arts education, are especially required to explain to prospective students, their families, and society at large, how and why an education that emphasizes breath as well as depth matters.

It is our conviction that the advent of artificial intelligence makes liberal arts education more critical than ever. While computer models will be able to do ever more sophisticated analyses, moving toward higher levels of analyses that approach “thinking,” it is imperative that we understand, appreciate, and cultivate the qualities that make us human. Likewise, the ethical issues generated by these models are quickly evolving and multiplying. Society needs empathetic, contemplative leaders to guide the creation and implementation of artificial intelligence tools as well as exercise prudential judgment in the creation of limits for them.

Board Engagement

As the final authority to approve revisions to the mission statement rests with the board, it was imperative that the trustees be fully engaged in the review process. From the beginning, we were purposeful about getting their endorsement for the work as well as identifying a timeline for its completion. We consulted them at every step of the way, incorporating updates and discussions at each of the four board meetings during the academic year. In addition, we asked the executive committee to respond to drafts of the mission at two of their meetings, and we consulted with various board members—individually and in small groups—to make sure we understood what was most important to them. The successful completion of the process required that the trustees had ample and repeated opportunities to shape the new mission statement prior to the May meeting at which the motion to approve it was made. While we wanted the board to have the opportunity to influence the new statement, like every other constituent group, we also did not want the full board to attempt to word-smith the final draft—a task that would almost surely be frustrating and frustrated. Striking the

appropriate balance of board engagement requires careful consideration and a substantial amount of time and energy. It is, however, imperative. We believe we were able to achieve a revised mission statement that the trustees—as well as our other constituents—are enthusiastic about and feel a strong sense of investment in because they were so deeply involved in its creation.

Conclusion

In the prologue of *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, Pope Francis invites us “to dream big, to rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of.”²⁴ The process of revising USD’s mission statement allowed us to engage in the kind of dreaming Francis imagined and which he has modeled. As a community, we were able to rethink our priorities and re-articulate who we are, what we value, and what we are striving to accomplish. The new statements are an enormous contribution. The synodal process of creating them, however, during which we were able to listen to one another describe our hopes and dreams for the future of USD, was the most powerful and positive part of the journey.

Of course, the creation of new mission, vision, and value statements is not the end of the story. The ultimate measure of such documents is the extent to which they help shape the culture of the institution while guiding it into the future. To foster this level of impact, we are systematically communicating the new statements to prospective and new community members. Among other efforts, the new elaboration of our mission, vision, and values has been incorporated into orientation processes for students, faculty, and employees; the Admissions Office has begun revising the printed materials, web pages, and other collateral used to describe USD; and the Department of Human Resources is in the process of updating job descriptions so that they reflect the newly stated mission, vision, and values.

In addition to potential and new members of the USD community, the revised mission, vision, and value statements are being utilized for the annual planning efforts of various departments, offices, and academic units—each of which have been asked to consider the ways in which their work aligns with the concepts expressed in the new documents.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), page 6.

More broadly, the new documents are the foundation for the university's strategic-planning process. In light of the success of the mission-statement revision, the strategic-planning efforts are following a similar, synodal process. Finally, a variety of efforts are underway in which current USD students, faculty, and staff are asked to reflect on the new statements in order to identify how they can contribute to their realization. While there are numerous impacts of the revised mission statement, this may be the most significant—encouraging USD community members to embody the ideas it expresses in diverse, creative ways. The synodal process, in which the revised mission, vision, and value statements emerged from the collective experience and shared wisdom of the community, is essential to empowering this dynamic.