

Catholic identity of Catholic campuses is focus of expanded center

ARLINGTON, Va. - A newly expanded component of the Cardinal Newman Society will research issues related to Catholic identity of Catholic campuses around the United States, and it plans to publish and distribute its findings to all Catholic colleges and universities across the country.

The society's Center for the Advancement of Catholic Higher Education will be overseen by a new director, David House, former president of St. Joseph's College of Maine.

It was formerly known as the Center for the Study of Catholic Higher Education. The name change and House's appointment to head it were announced March 16.

House said the change from "study" to "advancement" reflects a less neutral mission.

"You can study something but then what do you do with it? I wanted to be more proactive," he told the Arlington Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Diocese of Arlington.

According to its mission statement, the Cardinal Newman Society's purpose is "to help renew and strengthen Catholic identity in Catholic higher education."

The organization, based in Manassas and founded in 1993 by Patrick J. Reilly, is funded by individuals, businesses and foundations. It publishes "The Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College."

House said he is interested in discovering a "quantifiable" way to determine Catholic identity.

"What does it mean when we talk about a place with a strong Catholic identity?" he

said. "How is that manifest? What is it that they do? What benchmarks do we look at?"

How institutions use the center's research is up to them, he said.

"It comes as no surprise for anyone to say that there are Catholic colleges and universities whose Catholicity, by any measure, is pretty much in question," he said. "Everyone is going to get our material and it's up to them to do something with it if they wish."

"When I talk about research, I'm not talking about studies that sit on the shelf and gather dust," House added. "This is really a practical value. This is going to impact how we do business."

Richard A. Yanikoski, president of the Washington-based Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, said it was too early to know what type of relationship his organization will have with the Cardinal Newman Society's expanded center.

The mission of ACCU, founded in 1899, is also focused on Catholic identity. On its Web site, it says that through conferences, seminars, research and consultation, it fosters "a vibrant Catholic identity at member institutions and supports cooperation among them for the greater good of society and the church."

It describes itself as the "collective voice of Catholic higher education in the United States."

Yanikoski told the Arlington Catholic Herald that he hopes the society's center "will be a quality operation, that it will attempt to do things which are constructive, not merely shining a light on things that they find are unsatisfactory."

"If they continue to maintain their point of view that they are at one end of a spectrum criticizing almost everyone else, it's hard to create partnerships," he said.

"I hope that this will be a good venture for them, and that over time they'll produce some quality research that will be useful to higher education and will, in an evenhanded way, help shine a light on that in Catholic higher education which is working well and needs to be acknowledged, and that which is a work in progress

and still needs attention,” Yanikoski added.

The Center for the Advancement of Catholic Higher Education has enlisted four theologians to study specific areas.

One is Father Richard Duffield, provost of the Birmingham, England, community founded in the 19th century by Cardinal John Henry Newman, who will be beatified in September. Father Duffield, who is postulator of his sainthood cause, will research how the cardinal’s thought and legacy pertain to higher education.

The others and their areas of research are: Anne Hendershott, author and professor of urban affairs at the King’s College in New York, student sexuality and relationships on campus; Kimberly Shankman, dean of Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan., core curricula at Catholic colleges and universities; and Father D. Paul Sullins, sociology professor and fellow of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, the impact of an institution’s Catholic identity on student recruitment and enrollment.

House said he is particularly interested in the center offering support for college and university leaders.

“If you’re a president of an institution and you’re trying to turn it around and make it more Catholic, that can be very difficult” in what he said is sometimes “a semi-hostile environment.”

“Collaboration and solidarity is really important to me,” he said, to “take people out of isolation” and enable them to “pick up the phone and call colleagues” who could help.

House added that “the search for truth is what we’re all about.”