

**THE VINCENTIAN HIGHER  
EDUCATION APOSTOLATE  
IN THE UNITED STATES**



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**BY**

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In an audience held on January 29, 2001, Pope John Paul II observed, “Education is a central element of the Church’s ‘Option for the Poor.’” The Eastern (Philadelphia) and Western (St. Louis) provinces of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States (the Vincentians) believe this wholeheartedly, and have made a significant investment in this apostolate for nearly 200 years. Today, in the United States, a college degree is the single most effective way to lift a person out of poverty.

### **Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in the United States**

Poverty is classified in the U.S. by a government measure known as “the federal poverty index.” In 2014, households of four persons earning less than \$24,418 were described as living “below the federal poverty index.” This index is controversial, for many families earning more than this figure still live in desperate situations. For that reason, the Vincentians of the Eastern Province classify households earning less than \$40,243 to be among the “marginally poor” (i.e., 75% of median household income of \$53,657), and focus their work among this larger group.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these poorer residents are first-generation immigrants and their families, or members of minority groups traditionally denied equal opportunity because of racism or other forms of prejudice and injustice. Both groups have dreams of better futures for themselves and their children.

Traditionally, these populations were able to move out of poverty by two routes: (1) well-paid jobs as skilled or unskilled labor, or (2) by completing a college degree and thereby becoming eligible for better-paying professional jobs. Currently, the first route is disappearing in the United States as the economy shifts its industrial and manufacturing jobs to third-world nations, thereby separating the economy at home increasingly into two unlinked sectors: knowledge-based industries and a lower-paying service economy.

This fundamental and permanent economic shift makes a college education all the more important as a systemic method of escaping poverty. Nearly 30 percent of those without high school degrees are in poverty in the U.S., while only 5 percent of those with bachelor’s degrees or higher are in poverty.<sup>2</sup> Both earnings and employment are tightly tied to educational attainment.

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<sup>1</sup> DeNavas-Walt, Carmen and Bernadette D. Proctor, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-252, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2015. Table 1. Income and Earnings Summary Measures by Selected Characteristics: 2013 and 2014, p.6, and Appendix B, Estimates of Poverty, p.43.

<sup>2</sup> DeNavas-Walt and Proctor. *Ibid.* Table 3. People in Poverty by Selected Characteristics: 2013 and 2014, p.13.

<b>2015 Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment<sup>3</sup></b>		
<b>Education attained</b>	<b>Unemployment rate in 2015 (Percent)</b>	<b>Median weekly earnings</b>
Doctoral degree	1.7	\$1,623
Professional degree	1.5	1,730
Master's degree	2.4	1,341
Bachelor's degree	2.8	1,137
Associate's degree	3.8	798
Some college, no degree	5.0	738
High school diploma	5.4	678
Less than a high school diploma	8.0	493

Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.  
Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

The disparity has only accelerated since the economic recession of 2008. “Of the 7.2 million jobs lost in the recession, 5.6 million were jobs for workers with a high school diploma or less. These workers have recovered only 1 percent of those job losses over the past six years.” Fully 99 percent of the 11.6 million jobs created since the recession require some degree of college education.<sup>4</sup>

This striking differential in earnings and opportunity touches upon the heart of the reason for Vincentian higher education.

### **Access to U.S. Higher Education for the Poor**

As the poor increasingly need higher education as a means to social mobility, they find themselves least able to access it. In 2012, about 82% of high school graduates from families with incomes above \$90,500 enrolled immediately in college, 65% of those from the middle income quintile (\$34,060 to \$55,253) and 52% of those from families with incomes below \$18,300 enrolled. In every quintile, except the lowest, college participation as a percentage of high school graduates grew over the period. Students from the lowest economic quintile lost ground after the recession, with only about half enrolling in postsecondary education.

<sup>3</sup> 2015 United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Projections. [http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_table\\_001.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_001.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *American’s Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots*, 2016, p.1.

<b>Postsecondary Enrollment Rates of Recent High School Graduates by Family Income<sup>5</sup></b>			
Quintile	2002	2007	2012
Highest	78%	80%	82%
4th	65%	69%	71%
3rd	55%	62%	65%
2nd	52%	55%	58%
Lowest	50%	54%	52%

The inequality of access is compounded by the differences in the universities they attend. The majority of Pell Grant recipients enroll in public two-year colleges and for-profit colleges, both of which underserve students from poverty.<sup>6</sup>

In 2012, 46% of students from poverty (indicated by Pell-eligibility, federal need-based assistance) attended two-year colleges rather than four-year institutions, while only 25% of non-Pell eligible students did so. That 21 point difference has increased from a 13 point difference just a decade earlier.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to any quality differences in the rigor of education provided, the graduation rates of two-year colleges are notably low. Only 21 percent of students at two-year colleges whose intent was to earn a bachelor’s degree in 2003-04 actually did so within six years. For those from families earning less than \$30,000 annually, the rate is 13%. That compares to a national graduation rate at four-year institutions of 60 percent of those who began in 2008 and graduated within six years. For many, attendance at a two-year college continues to act as a filter, preventing rather than assisting students to graduate.<sup>8</sup>

The same dynamic proves to be true at the quickly expanding sector of for-profit education. Pell recipients are now 3.5 times as likely as non-Pell recipients to attend for-profit institutions in 2012, up from twice-as-likely in 2001. Indeed, more than half of those enrolled in for-profit institutions are from families earning less than \$40,000 annually. Only 32% of students in for-profit

<sup>5</sup> Baum, Sandy, Jennifer Ma, and Kathleen Payea. *Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*. College Board, 2013, p.34.

<sup>6</sup> The Education Trust. “Rankings Aren’t Enough.” <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/rankings-arent-enough/>.

<sup>7</sup> Cahalan, Margaret and Laura Perna. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*, 2015, p.17.

<sup>8</sup> Ma, Jennifer and Sandy Baum. *Trends in Community Colleges: Enrollment, Prices, Student Debt and Completion*. College Board, April 2016, p.19-21. Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates, (Updated May 2016). National Center for Educational Statistics. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_ctr.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp). Brint, Steven and Jerome Karabel. *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. Oxford University Press, 1991.

institutions earn a four-year degree within six years. Here too, the poor are attending in outsize numbers, with less than a third actually achieving their goals of graduation.<sup>9</sup>

On top of this, the affordability of higher education is also disproportionately burdening the poor. Cost increases above inflation and lowered government appropriations have both been passed onto the students in the form of increased tuition costs. The Average Net Price as a percent of average family income for the lowest income quartile has risen from 45% of family income in 1990 to 84% of family income in 2012. For the wealthiest income quartile, the rise has been from 10% to 15% of family income.<sup>10</sup>

All of this compounds to an unsurprising, if startling outcome. In the United States, students from the highest-income families are 8 times more likely than individuals from low-income families to obtain a bachelor's degree by age 24 (77 percent vs. 9 percent). This differential is growing worse, not better. The respective differences in 1970 were 40 percent vs. 6 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Persons who are poor then, are less likely to go to college. Those who do go are less likely to go to a good college, and even then are eight times less likely to graduate. 9% of the marginally poor receive a four-year degree in the United States. The statistics for increasingly important graduate education are even more dismal. Trends show these educational disparities broadening each year. Access of underserved youths and adults to higher education — the best and increasingly primary route out of poverty — is slipping away from them. The very moment when the lowest economic quintile needs a quality college education the most turns out, cruelly, to be the very moment when it is being made harder for them to achieve.

### **Foundation and Evolution of Vincentian Colleges in the United States**

The three Vincentian universities in the United States emerged as responses to the desire of Catholics as a religious minority and as a largely immigrant population in the new republic to gain access to educational opportunity. The Congregation of the Mission, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul in 1625, had traditionally limited its apostolates to the evangelization of the poor in the countryside, the preparation of priests, and the foreign missions. Unlike the Jesuits, the Congregation had no tradition, or experience, in lay or non-seminary education.

A small band of Italian Vincentian priests, brothers and seminarians came to the United States in 1816, to accept Bishop Louis William Dubourg's invitation to evangelize the settlers in the upper Louisiana Territory and to found a seminary there. Felix de Andreis, Joseph Rosati, and the rest of the first band of missionaries somewhat naively assumed they would be able to quickly recreate the traditional apostolates and lifestyles that they were leaving behind in Europe. This assumption proved incorrect from the moment that the group disembarked from the brig "The Ranger" at the

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<sup>9</sup> Cahalan and Perna. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity*, p.16. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *The Condition of Education 2015* (NCES 2015-144). See: Institutional Retention and Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Students, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/Indicator\\_CTR/coe\\_ctr\\_2014\\_05.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/Indicator_CTR/coe_ctr_2014_05.pdf); and Graduation Rate, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14\\_326.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_326.10.asp).

<sup>10</sup> Cahalan and Perna. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity*, p.27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

inner-harbor of Baltimore, Maryland, in July 1816 and began their arduous overland and river journey to the then western frontier of Saint Louis. To their enduring credit the missionaries quickly and enthusiastically adapted to their strange and challenging new surroundings.

The needs of the nascent missionary church in the United States, and indeed the democratic nature of the raw new republic, resulted in the rapid and innovative “Americanization” of Vincentian ministry. In particular, the pioneer Vincentians discovered that the Catholic community in America prized educational opportunity for its sons and daughters and were willing to make great sacrifices to establish a faith-based educational system to meet this need.

The American Church and the Vincentians also remained committed to establishing the seminaries necessary to train native clergy to serve the rapidly growing numbers of Catholics. Because of very limited resources, the first college preparatory institutions typically served both lay students (not all of whom were Catholic) and clerical prospects. This model suited the missionaries’ purposes, for a college could also serve as a base for missionary outreach and the lay students’ tuition helped support the cost of seminary education. However, the mixing of lay and clerical students being educated for very different purposes usually proved to be problematic.

The intention of the first Vincentian missionaries to found a seminary in Bishop Dubourg’s new diocese of Louisiana was realized in October 1818 with the foundation of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens College in Perryville, Missouri, some ninety miles south of Saint Louis. This institution was the first college in the United States chartered west of the Mississippi River.

Saint Mary’s of the Barrens (1818-1985), and later St. Vincent’s College in nearby Cape Girardeau, Missouri (1838-1979), had alternating and at times simultaneous existences as seminaries and lay colleges for the rest of the nineteenth century before emerging exclusively as seminaries to prepare candidates for the Congregation of the Mission from high school through graduate theological studies and ordination.

In 1856, at the invitation of their confrere Bishop John Timon, C.M., of Buffalo, New York, the Vincentians turned their attention eastward and established Our Lady of the Angels seminary in Buffalo. Soon this institution moved to neighboring Niagara Falls where a parallel lay college opened. This college evolved into present day Niagara University.

At the request of John Loughlin, the first bishop of Brooklyn, New York, the College of Saint John the Baptist opened its doors there in September 1870. The bishop had requested the establishment of a Catholic college for his diocese “where the youth of the city might find the advantages of a solid education and where their minds might receive the moral training necessary to maintain the credit of Catholicity.” This urban institution evolved into the present day St. John’s University in Jamaica, New York.

Just a few years earlier in 1865, across the vast expanse of the United States, another early urban Vincentian lay college, St. Vincent’s, began its existence in the frontier town of Los Angeles, California. From its beginnings St. Vincent’s served only lay students. These students were also all male, of course.

The year 1888, saw the division of the United States province of the Congregation of the Mission into two separate provinces: East and West. The Western Province, headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, became heavily involved in both seminary and lay higher education. In addition to the college in Los Angeles the new province founded St. Vincent's College in Chicago, Illinois, in 1898, and Holy Trinity College in Dallas, Texas, in 1907. The new Eastern Province, for its part also established a strong commitment to lay and clerical education.

Unfortunately for the Western Province, this ambitious higher educational expansion was part of a disastrous over-extension of finances and personnel. These and other factors led to the controversial closings of St. Vincent's College in Los Angeles in 1911, and the renamed University of Dallas in 1927. This left the province with only the struggling, debt-laden, St. Vincent's College in Chicago which in 1907 had become DePaul University. It became one of the first Catholic colleges or universities in the United States to by charter eschew any religious test for faculty or students. In 1911, DePaul also became one of the first Catholic colleges or universities in the United States to become co-educational, despite the opposition of the archbishop of Chicago.

Both provinces, but in particular the Western Province, provided long and distinguished service in seminary education across the United States. However, with the changes in the Church, a sharp decline in the number of candidates for the priesthood, and the severe decline in the number of Vincentians, this seminary apostolate largely has disappeared in the United States over the last fifty years.

Thus, from 1927 to the present, the Vincentian higher education apostolate in the United States has been represented by Niagara University, St. John's University, and DePaul University. For the first half of the twentieth century each of these institutions sought to provide young, largely Catholic men and then women (usually first generation college students with modest family means at best) with the opportunity to receive a higher education that had become the key to accessing the proverbial "American Dream."

Fully participating in the evolution of American higher education, each of these institutions grew in stages from colleges with seminary or high school programs existing side-by-side to become accredited, multi-faceted, modern American Catholic universities with undergraduate, graduate, doctoral and professional programs. This mainstreaming was largely made possible by the influx of federal and state aid to higher education after World War II beginning with the G.I. Bill. From the 1960s this growth and mainstreaming also opened the institutions to the influx of very diverse students, faculty and staff.

### **Reshaping the Mission of the Vincentian Universities**

The upheaval of the 1960s also impacted the Roman Catholic Church through the renewal and changes resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council asked the Church's religious orders and congregations to go back to their founding charisms and re-interpret their mission and ministries in the light of what it famously referred to as "the signs of the times."

The Congregation of the Mission responded to this great challenge and opportunity. At its General Assemblies of 1968 and 1974 the community grappled with the key questions of Vincentian apostolic identity and mission within the contemporary Church and the post-modern world. During this difficult process of questioning, many Vincentians wondered, or even doubted, how the university apostolate as it then existed in the United States could be justified in light of the community's new constitutions of 1981, and their call for the Congregation to judge all that it did in light of following "Jesus Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor."

In 1990, Pope John Paul II issued the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, reflecting on the nature and role of a Catholic University. Then, in 2001, after years of study, controversy and dialogue, the norms for applying this document to Catholic higher education in the United States went into effect. This renewal has had a tremendous positive impact on the more than two hundred Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S., and of course on the three Vincentian universities.

Within the last thirty years, therefore, all three of the U.S. Vincentian universities have reshaped their missions and outreach so that they stand out clearly and distinctively as Vincentian and Catholic institutions which:

- Educate the poor and their children, thereby breaking the vicious cycle of poverty within family units.
- Educate diverse first-generation college students, thereby enabling new immigrant groups and under-represented and under-prepared educational populations to enter the mainstream.
- Present the Roman Catholic tradition as an interpretive framework and spiritual support for students' professional and personal lives, while welcoming, respecting, supporting and being enriched by the great diversity of people and faiths represented in the pluralistic university communities.
- Present the Roman Catholic intellectual tradition as one of the interpretive frameworks for the institutions' academic enterprise.
- Instill in all students an affective and effective love for those in need.
- Research poverty in society; and look for creative ways to moderate this social evil through advocacy for social justice and systemic change.
- Offering the universities' considerable resources as institutions of higher education (e.g., knowledgeable experts, volunteers, meeting space, financial support, management advice, contacts) to local, national and international agencies and community groups (especially Vincentian and diocesan/archdiocesan groups) with complementary goals.

While there is much work that remains to be done, these institutions have a great deal to be proud of as Catholic and Vincentian universities. DePaul University and St. John's University are the two largest Catholic universities in the United States, enrolling 23,500 and 20,000 respectively.

Niagara is smaller, with approximately 3300 students. All three educate a significant population of poor and minority students. All three colleges enroll and far exceed the national average of students from poverty receiving a four-year, private college education. All three provide significant amounts of institutional financial aid to help these students pay for their education. All three are vitally concerned with the completion rates of their students, especially those who are most at risk.

In addition, all three universities attempt to create vibrant institutional cultures in which all members of the university community come to know and appreciate Vincent de Paul and the Vincentian tradition, and through this tradition come into positive contact with the Roman Catholicism which underpins Vincentian mission, identity, and institutional values. While many of the faculty and staff are not Catholic, all are invited and encouraged to work together on behalf of the universities' missions, and for the sake of the thousands of very diverse students entrusted to their care. In the end, it must also be noted that while these institutions share many common values and commitments they are by no means carbon copies of each other.

The personnel commitment of the Eastern and Western provinces to these institutions is rapidly diminishing but remains significant. Today, there are ten Vincentians and two Daughters of Charity working at St. John's; fifteen Vincentians and one Daughter of Charity working at DePaul; and nine Vincentians and one Daughter of Charity working at Niagara. However, it has become apparent over the last decade that the rapid aging and personnel diminishment of the Vincentian community shows no sign of abating. Therefore, each institution must continue to prepare for the challenge of remaining vibrant Vincentian and Catholic universities in the absence of a member of the Congregation of the Mission as president, and in the all but complete absence of any members of the Congregation of the Mission regularly on campus, or perhaps even in university governance. This is a trend throughout Catholic higher education in the United States.

Nevertheless, if we understand the *Congregatio Missionis* as a "gathering of like-minded people for the sake of the Mission," each of the universities presently are filled with countless "Vincentian" faculty, staff, students, administrators and trustees who already have made the Vincentian higher education mission their own, and who with proper support and encouragement will be well-prepared to take over the ultimate mission and identity responsibilities for their cherished institutions.

Each year these universities graduate thousands of students who join the ranks of hundreds of thousands of alumni. Our alumni work throughout the United States and throughout the world. Their impact as graduates of Vincentian institutions is as real as it is incalculable.

The Vincentian universities in the United States walk an increasingly delicate and difficult balance between selectivity and accessibility, between offering an excellent education and keeping costs low enough for poor and middle class people to attend. Many of the forces impacting affordability, accessibility and attainment in higher education in the United States work directly against the Vincentian mission. These strategic choices bring with them daily tensions and balancing acts, and require difficult decisions carefully thought out. However, guided by their mission and values the Vincentian universities have chosen to live creatively and hopefully with these tensions in the name of providing an excellent education to those who need it most. They understand the

irreplaceable role that higher education can play in studying and creating systemic change which can break the vicious cycles of exclusion, marginalization, and poverty in our society, our Church, and our world.