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The Vincentian Higher Education Apostolate in the United States

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In an audience held on 29 January 2001, Pope John Paul II observed that “education is a central element of the Church’s ‘Option for the Poor.’” The Eastern (Philadelphia) and Midwestern (St. Louis) Provinces of the United States believe this wholeheartedly and have made a significant investment in this apostolate for almost 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 States¹

Poverty is classified in the U.S. by a government measure known as “the federal poverty index.” In 1999, households of four persons earning less than \$17,029 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 \$31,878 to be among the “marginally poor,” (i.e., 75% of median household income) and focus their work among this larger group.

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 our 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. The dawn of the Information Age has also introduced new forms of poverty that have created the oft-discussed “digital divide.”

¹Money Income in the United States, 1999, U.S. Department of Commerce, Table B-2; Poverty Thresholds, 1999, U.S. Census Bureau; Poverty in the United States, 1999, U.S. Census Bureau.

This fundamental and permanent economic shift makes a college education all the more important as a systemic method of escaping poverty. In 1999, men having college degrees earned 63% more on the average than those having only high school degrees. Women with college degrees earned 84% more.

**1999 Average Earnings by Educational Attainment,
25-34 year olds**

	High School Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Men	\$29,162	\$47,515
Women	\$17,373	\$31,916

This striking differential in earnings, as a reflection of an unjust differential in opportunity, gets at the heart of the reason for Vincentian higher education.

Access to U.S. Higher Education for the Poor²

In the United States, 83% of high school graduates from wealthy families (earning more than \$75,000) go to college, whereas only 53% of those from less affluent families (earning less than \$25,000) attempt college. At four-year colleges, the gap is worse. The poor attend four-year colleges at only half the rate of their higher-income peers. Out of financial necessity, many disadvantaged students attend public, two-year community colleges. These two-year colleges do not generally offer the quality of education, or the eventual earning power, of four-year colleges.

Largely because of unequal educational opportunities at the primary and secondary levels, even those disadvantaged youths who do begin a higher education are seven times less likely to graduate than their wealthier peers. Only 6% of those from the lowest economic quartile complete a four-year degree, compared to 41% from the highest income quartile. Of those from “marginally poor households,” (\$30,000 or less), only 14% receive a private education. The rest attend larger, less-expensive public institutions. And even the public institutions are becoming less affordable. Government scholarship aid given to support needy students in college covered 84% of the cost of attending public colleges in 1975-76. It now covers only 39% of the cost in the 1999-2000 academic year.

²“Access Denied: Restoring the Nation’s Commitment to Equal Educational Opportunity,” U.S. Department of Education, as excerpted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 2, 2001.

Persons who are poor then, are half as likely to go to college as those who are wealthy. Those who do go are seven times less likely to graduate, seven times less likely to receive a private education, and are increasingly unable even to afford a public education. Less than six 6 percent 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. The access of underserved youths and adults to higher education — the best and increasingly primary route out of poverty — is slipping away from them.

Foundation and Evolution of Vincentian Colleges in the U.S.

The Vincentian universities of the United States were not founded as such to raise the poor out of poverty. Rather, a small band of Italian Vincentian priests, brothers and seminarians came to the United States in 1816 to accept Bishop Louis DuBourg's invitation to evangelize the settlers in the upper-Louisiana Territories and to found a seminary there. Felix de Andreis, Joseph Rosati and the first band of missionaries naively assumed that they would be able to recreate the traditional apostolates and lifestyles that they were leaving behind in Europe. This assumption proved incorrect from the moment that the group landed at the inner harbor of Baltimore in October 1816. The needs of the nascent Church in the United States, and indeed the democratic nature of the raw new republic itself, resulted in the rapid "Americanization" of Vincentian ministry. They discovered in America that other religious congregations had opened college preparatory programs to serve both local lay students and clerical prospects. This model suited the missionaries' purpose, for a college could serve as a base for rural missionary outreach and the lay students' tuition supported the cost of seminary education.³

The intention of the first missionaries to found a seminary in Bishop Louis DuBourg's new Diocese of Louisiana was realized in October 1818 with the foundation of St. Mary's of the Barrens College in Perryville, Missouri. Because of the absence of any other opportunities for lay students to be educated, St. Mary's and later St. Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri (1838) had alternating and at times simultaneous existences as seminaries and lay colleges for the rest of the 19th century before emerging exclusively as seminaries.

In 1856, John Lynch, C.M., at the invitation of his confrere, Bishop John Timon, established Our Lady of the Angels Seminary in Buffalo, New York. Soon this institution moved to neighboring Niagara Falls, New York, where a parallel lay college opened. This college evolved into Niagara University.

³Power, Edward J., *A History of Catholic Higher Education in the United States*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1958) 36; Gleason, Philip, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 4.

At the request of John Loughlin, the first Bishop of Brooklyn, New York, the College of Saint John the Baptist opened its doors in September of 1870. This urban institution evolved into the present-day St. John's University in Jamaica, New York. 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."⁴ Almost simultaneously, across the vast expanse of the country, another early urban Vincentian lay college, St. Vincent's, began its existence in Los Angeles, California.

The year 1888 saw the division of the United States Province into two 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 province founded St. Vincent's College in Chicago, Illinois in 1898 and Holy Trinity College in Dallas, Texas in 1907. This, together with its many seminary and other apostolic commitments represented a disastrous over-extension of finances and personnel. These and other factors led to the traumatic 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 St. Vincent's College in Chicago, which in 1907 became DePaul University. In 1911, DePaul became the first Catholic college or university in the United States to become co-educational.

From 1927 to the present, the Vincentian higher educational apostolate in the United States has been represented by Niagara University, St. John's University and DePaul University. For the first half of the century each of these institutions sought to provide young, largely Catholic men and then women, often first generation college students, with the opportunity to receive a higher education that became the acknowledged key to accessing the proverbial "American dream." Following the predominant American higher educational model each of these institutions grew in stages from colleges to multi-faceted universities with undergraduate, graduate, doctoral and professional programs.

Reshaping the Mission of the Vincentian Universities

As American Catholic higher education became more mainstream in the second half of the 20th century, so did Vincentian higher education. In addition, as a result of the great revisioning occasioned by the Second Vatican Council, the international Congregation, especially in its General Assemblies of 1968 and 1974, 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 confreres wondered, or even doubted,

⁴Quoted by Stafford Poole, C.M. in "The Educational Apostolate: Colleges, Universities, and Secondary Schools," *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States*, John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed., (New York: New City Press, 1988) 315.

how the university apostolate could be justified in light of the 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." Within the last 20 years, however, all three of the U.S. Vincentian universities have reshaped the mission of these institutions putting higher education at the service of the poor.

These universities are now charged to become fully "Vincentian" universities by:

- § Educating the poor and their children, thereby breaking the vicious cycle of poverty within family units;
- § Educating first-generation college students, thereby enabling new immigrant groups and traditionally marginalized populations to enter the mainstream in the United States;
- § Presenting the Roman Catholic tradition as an interpretive framework and spiritual support for students= professional and personal lives, while respecting and being enriched by the great religious diversity represented in the university communities;
- § Instilling in all students an affective and effective love for those in need;
- § Researching poverty in society and looking for creative ways to moderate this social evil;⁵
- § Offering the universities= considerable resources (e.g., knowledgeable experts, volunteers, meeting space, financial support, contacts) to other local, national and international agencies and community groups with complementary goals.

While there is much work that remains to be done, these institutions have much of which to be proud. DePaul University and St. John's University are the two largest Catholic universities in the United States, enrolling nearly 21,000 and 18,621 students respectively. Niagara is smaller, with approximately 3200 students. All three educate a significant population of poor and minority students. 1594 students (approximately 18%) of DePaul undergraduate students are from households earning less than \$30,000. 20% of Niagara's students are from households earning under \$30,000. 41% of St. John's students are from households earning less than \$20,000. All three colleges enroll and far exceed

⁵Fathers and Brothers of the Mission, search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill the causes of poverty and encourage short- and long-term solutions; acceptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church. @ [Address of John Paul II to the delegates of the General Assembly of 1986. *Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, August 2, 1986, p. 12].

the national average of students from poverty receiving a four-year, private college education. All three provide significant amounts of institutional financial and other aid to help these students pay for their education.

All three institutions encourage their faculty to do research and teach on issues concerning domestic and global poverty and justice. All three institutions encourage the faculty to design “service learning” classes that involve students with a variety of populations suffering the effects of poverty. All three institutions encourage students to volunteer their time and service to the poor. At Niagara, 80% of the students perform volunteer service. At St. John’s nearly 15% volunteer, and another 685 undertake service-learning. The scale of student involvement at DePaul is comparable.

All three attempt to create vibrant institutional cultures in which all members of the university community come to know Vincent de Paul and the Vincentian tradition. While many of the students, faculty and staff are not Catholic, all are encouraged to work together on behalf of the universities’ missions. All sponsor campus-based Vincent de Paul Society councils. During vacation breaks, each sponsors educational and service trips to poverty stricken areas, so that students from more privileged backgrounds can learn firsthand about the harsh realities of poverty.

The personnel commitment of the Eastern and Midwestern Provinces to these institutions is significant. There are 23 CMs and 3 DCs working at St. John’s; 15 CMs and one DC at Niagara; and 14 CMs and one DC at DePaul. But, if we understand the *Congregatio Missionis* as a “gathering of people for the sake of the Mission,” each of the universities are filled with thousands of Vincentian faculty, staff, students, administrators, and trustees who have made the Vincentian higher education mission their own.

Over time, these colleges have graduated hundreds of thousands of alumni, each of whom was educated in Vincentian values. Our alumni work in every sector of the United States, and make strong contributions to the nation’s life.

The Vincentian universities in the United States walk a delicate balance between selectivity and accessibility, between offering an excellent liberal arts education and keeping costs low enough for poor people to attend. These strategic choices bring with them daily tensions and balances, but the Vincentian universities have chosen to live with those tensions in the name of providing an excellent education that is available to those who need it most.

Part of a Whole

Universities do not fully realize the Vincentian mission. Few of the world=s peoples have any real opportunity to receive a higher education. Even in the United States, little more than half of the population receives a college degree. The universities represent just a small part of the Vincentian Family’s mission to evangelize, feed, clothe, house, train, heal, organize, and enfranchise the world=s poor. Those who work in the U.S. Vincentian universities, however, do educate the poor. By doing so, they assist thousands of our brothers and sisters each year to permanently leave poverty behind them. They work together with numerous lay colleagues to study the causes of poverty and advocate for justice. They daily labor to instill a love and respect for people who are poor by all who work or study at the university.

In the past 20 years all three of the United States Vincentian universities have made marked progress in demonstrating how large institutions of higher education can be vibrantly academic, American, Catholic and Vincentian. While continuing to provide educational opportunity to the poor, to the underserved and to very diverse student bodies, our universities have made education for charity, justice, service, and advocacy hallmarks of their institutional identities and the focus of considerable institutional efforts. There is still more work to be done, however, to fully incarnate the Vincentian charism in these institutions, foreseeing the day when, because of the rapid diminishment in the number of confreres in the U.S. provinces, this apostolate will be handed over to lay Vincentian leadership gathered together “for the sake of the mission.”