

# From Principle to Action? Developing Research Tools to Assess Catholic Social Teaching Efforts in Higher Education

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# Session Plan, as Described

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## Session Description

This session will focus on the building of research instruments that can operationalize Catholic Social Teaching principles. After a brief presentation (of relevant research and theory), the majority of the session will be a dialogue among all present to envision what may be useful, and means to create relevant measures.

## Abstract

Catholic Social Teaching is not the best-kept secret anymore at Catholic colleges and universities. New initiatives to foster learning about CST principles, and commensurate actions on the part of students and faculty, show promise. What is still unknown, however, is the effectiveness of such efforts. How well do our graduates understand the principles? Do they see applicability to social challenges they encounter, and endeavor to apply the principles? What long-term impacts do programs designed to teach the Catholic tradition have? Such are the questions we will explore in this session. Our goal is to create instruments (qualitative and quantitative) that may authentically assess understanding of and orientation toward CST principles. This session—mostly a dialogue—is a step in that direction and a call for collaboration. Following a brief review of relevant theory and research, we will discuss means to build relevant measures. Please join us.

# Today

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**Dialogue** — maybe *how to* next conference

A focus on the Catholic social teaching  
**principles**

**And how we may know if students are  
learning, incorporating the principles**

## Research @ the Center

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Notre Dame Study of Moral Purpose

Student learning through engaged courses: misc

Impact of diversity experiences on student development

Study of spirituality, religious commitment, and pro-social behavior in higher education

See: <http://socialconcerns.nd.edu/faculty/research/research.shtml>



## Why Research on CST?

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Catholic Social Teaching is no longer the best-kept secret at Catholic colleges and universities.

New programs and initiatives to foster ...

Yet little is known about the effectiveness of such, or about how individuals learn and incorporate such complex principles



## We've begun to ask:

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How well do our graduates understand the principles?

Do they see applicability to social challenges they encounter, and endeavor to apply the principles?

What long-term impacts do programs designed to teach the Catholic social tradition have?

## Research to match the goal

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In this work, most of us want to encourage the **transformation of world views/moral maps** through the integration of rich Catholic Social Teaching **principles**

Thus we need research that is sophisticated enough to assess how such complex development may take place, and how we will know if we've been successful.

This is no small challenge . . .

Which may explain why there is so little research to date

## Literature Review

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Not a great deal specific to learning of CST

Can integrate efforts from related fields (e.g., moral development research)

Need to add what makes CST principles **distinctive**: faith elements, counter-cultural assumptions, ...



## Many Principles, One Person

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**Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

**The Common Good—Call to Family, Community, & Participation**

**Rights and Responsibilities**

**Preferential Option for the Poor & Vulnerable**

**Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers**

**Caring for Creation**

**Solidarity**

**Subsidiarity**

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml>



## A place to start: Orienting principles

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**Common good**

**Option for the poor**

**Rights and responsibilities** (correlated)

**Subsidiarity**

**Life and dignity of the human person**

## General Methods/Mean

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**Case studies**

- application of principles is ascertained via response
- also helpful pedagogically

**Surveys or related objective methods**

- Applicability across contexts and time periods
- Sample from relevant field: Defining Issues Test

**Interviews or open-ended items**

- Coding systems can be developed for reliability and validity

## Pilot Assessment

### Perceived Gains with respect to CST Principles

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Analysis built into Center-wide assessment (2009)

Pre-post survey of over 300 participants in Center courses

Open-ended query: "Please describe what, if anything, you have learned in this Seminar about the Catholic Social Teaching Principle of:"

- **The common good**
- **Preferential option for the poor**

## Data

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### **Response rates:**

30.8% for common good

26.0% for preferential option for the poor

### **Non-response bias analyses**

Examined potential differences between respondents and non-respondents

Few systematic differences

Though SSLP and ISSLP students were somewhat less likely to respond

# Coding and Analyses

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Two coders rated all data Thanks Derek Novacek and Beth Mullen

Each coder created preliminary themes separately

Discussed findings and agreed upon 13 themes for each outcome

Coded all responses individually with these themes

Discussed and agreed upon final coding for all responses

# The Common Good

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## **Consistent Themes →**

### **Interdependency/Interconnectedness**

“I learned about the interconnectedness of people half a world away from us. I’m now more aware of how U.S. foreign policy, especially international economic policy, affects so many people’s lives.”



# The Common Good

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## **Work together**

“This concept of the common good is something very difficult to aspire to as it requires a great portion of the community to devote themselves to. Without the cooperation of everyone, it is very difficult to accomplish this.”

## **Equality**

“The resources God gave us are here for the good of all mankind, not just a fortunate few.”



# Preferential Option for the Poor

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## **Awareness of need for involvement/advocacy**

“We are to be the voices of the poor, who are unable to stand up for themselves. We are their advocates, who must speak against the injustices against them...to take what we have seen and make a change.”



# Preferential Option for the Poor

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## **Preferential Option is a good thing**

“As I understood it, the preferential option for the poor shouldn’t be looked at as a win-lose situation. Treating the poor and vulnerable isn’t done to the detriment of the rest of society...there are also economic reasons for doing so, i.e. that societal development as a whole benefits from our efforts for the ‘least of these’.”

# Preferential Option for the Poor

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## **Institutional/Governmental/Structural**

“ The poor and vulnerable...have struggles that cannot always be overcome by sheer willpower and determination; there are social, political, and economic obstacles keeping them in the circle of poverty.”

## What we concluded from pilot assessment:

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Students are learning (though limitations of self-report)

Responses can be coded reliably

Key themes emerge

Many questions remain:

- Will learning last?
- Do students apply principles in life context?

## Sample Next Steps

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- Collect cases/scenarios and test
- Examine items from existing research, and pilot new items/instruments
- Consult those with CST expertise to assess validity
- Test/retest across groups for reliability/validity
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## Discussion/Dialogue

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- What do you what to know about the learning and integration of CST principles?
- What types of measures might be valuable?
- What resources might be relevant as we proceed?
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## Thank You

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Collaboration is welcome

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## Related Work →

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## Religiosity, Spirituality, and Prosocial Orientation

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Religious Commitment



Spirituality  
(broadly conceived)

- Prosocial Development
- • Moral/social responsibility
- Intention and behavior

## Religiosity, Spirituality, and Prosocial Orientation

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- Relationships among all three constructs (Brandenberger & Bowman, in press, *Spirituality in Higher Education* book, New York: Routledge)
- Religious engagement and the impact of religious affiliation (Bowman & Small, in press, *Spirituality in Higher Education* book, New York: Routledge)
- Religious engagement and other college experiences predicting prosocial orientation (Bowman & Brandenberger, in preparation, *Journal of Moral Education*)