

CHARACTERISTICS OF FRANCISCAN HIGHER EDUCATION

From the earliest moments of the movement, Franciscans have seen education as a vital way of embodying and sharing the good news of God's action in our world. The following characteristics identify ways in which Franciscan education seeks to form persons and build a better world. While some institutions may emphasize one or other characteristics, all seek to incorporate these values.

The Franciscan Tradition has a distinctive approach to reality. As an educational institution, this approach defines and shapes such aspects as policies, procedures, practices, curriculum, programs, speakers, celebrations, prayer opportunities, service projects, course offerings, professional preparation, resolution of conflicts, and orientations.

The Franciscan Tradition holds a **sacramental** view of the world and of the human person as a reflection of God's overflowing goodness. Thus, a Franciscan education:

- celebrates diversity as an expression of God's generous love **incarnate** both in Jesus Christ and the human family;ⁱ
- emphasizes responsibility for **creation** honoring the dignity of every creature as a particular gift of God with special care for the suffering and marginalized;ⁱⁱ and
- provides opportunities to contemplate and communicate the reality of God's abundant **goodness and beauty**.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Franciscan Tradition emphasizes building **relationships**. Thus, a Franciscan education:

- works from a stance of *minoritas*, accountability, transparency and simplicity;^{iv}
- promotes **peacemaking** seeking to heal divisions through a sense of familial communion;^v and
- engages the world with the attitude of **justice** to "repair God's house" through a culture of social responsibility.^{vi}

The Franciscan Tradition, balancing both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, is grounded in **Gospel** values. Thus a Franciscan education:

- supports every person on his or her lifelong journey of **conversion**;^{vii}
- contributes an **intellectual tradition** that reflects an acknowledgement of faith and an ethical and moral response to God's love;^{viii} and
- models a response to the personal call to **leadership through service**.^{ix}

ⁱ Expressed in the Canticle of the Creatures, all creation is in the Incarnate Word.

Francis speaks of every creature, from heavenly bodies to earthly elements, as sister or brother to him. Scripture notes (Col 1:16, Jn 1:3) everything was made through the Word; all was created for the Word; all was created in the Word. In Christ that Word took on flesh, i.e. the creative divine Word took on the form of physical matter, embodied, "incarnate." Francis considers every good thing a gift received from a generous God who chose to become human in Jesus because of generous love. **Diversity** is a gift to be respected.

ⁱⁱ Francis was named the Patron of Ecology on November 29, 1979.

The bishops of the United States published a document in 1992 entitled *Renewing the Earth*. In it the bishops praised St. Francis while reminding their readers: "Safeguarding creation requires us to live responsibly in it, rather

than managing creation as though we are outside it.” We should see ourselves, they added, as stewards within creation, not as separated from it. (Adm 5) Francis was ahead of his time. He saw himself, like today’s environmentalists, as part of the ecosystem, not as a master over and above it. **Sustainability practices** would be seen far deeper than recycling or a passing fad but a fundamental aspect of Catholic Social Teachings. In 2015, Pope Francis published the encyclical *Laudato Si (On Care for our Common Home)*. In the encyclical Pope Francis stated that “St. Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically” (10).

ⁱⁱⁱ From the Catholic perspective and thus true for the Franciscan lens, all reality is good. God’s light, life and love shine through the fabric of God’s creation. Catholic tradition teaches that God is encountered not only in sacred writings and houses of worship, not only in quiet prayer and the inner recesses of one’s conscience, but in active engagement with the world where God dwells among us and communicates with us. Our responsibility is to acknowledge and receive by providing times and places for an encounter with the sacred. “Let us refer all good to the Lord, God Almighty and Most High,” acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him, “from Whom all good comes, for everything” (ER 17). **Prayer, ritual, beauty** are integrated throughout.

^{iv} Franciscanism understands humanity as essentially relational (reflecting the Trinity). Structures serve to allow every voice to contribute and to participate where the process, so to speak, is as important as the product.

Minority/humility Poverty/simplicity are core values found throughout the sources manifest in **equality and mutuality**.

Accountability: “I have done what is mine to do, may Christ teach you yours.” (LMj 14:3)

Transparency: “This is what you are before God, nothing more.” **Integrity** is modeled on a “patch on the inside and outside” (2C130).

^v The Catholic tradition maintains that life, both human and divine, is profoundly communal. A Trinitarian view of reality teaches that God is not an isolated individual, but a trinity of persons, a communion of love. A Trinitarian view teaches that men and women, made in the divine image, are by their very nature communal creatures who only become fully alive when they love and are loved, and when they enjoy all the rights, privileges, duties and responsibilities of membership in the human community. **Inclusion**, welcome, seeking the common good would be significant goals to be taught and lived.

^{vi} Francis’s original call was to “repair my house.”

In the sources we read Francis did “not to try to build a new one, but he repaired an old one, restored an ancient one...with Christ Jesus as the foundation.” (1C18). This understanding connects to St. Bonaventure’s definition of **justice** as follows: “justice makes beautiful that which had been deformed” [The Six Days of Creation 1:34] so this is more than social work.

^{vii} The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition is part of the larger Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition (CFIT) was established in 2001 for the English-speaking world with respect to the nature and unique contributions of the FIT to the pastoral mission of the Church in the contemporary world. <http://www.franciscantradition.org/> Scholarly research should be grounded in **passing on and contributing** to the truth not only as an intellectual exercise but one that is experienced.

^{viii} FIT is more than a journey of the head engaging the heart to respond to God’s love.

Knowledge is not so that we may have more but be more and in an ethical way. See *The Franciscan Moral Vision: Response to God's Love* Edited by Thomas A. Nairn, OFM – September 27, 2013. Campus ministry and career services might contribute to **vocational discernment as well as career paths**.

^{ix} Service is a recognized aspect manifest from service learning to shared governance. Engagement in the world, “The world is our cloister.” (ScEx 63) must include in the experience an encounter with the other and reflection on it. The call is to follow in the footprints of Jesus in the Gospel. **Leadership** is taught, modeled and seen as a role of service.

In light of these characteristics, Franciscan colleges and universities promote the practice of education that is

sacramental by

- fostering learning as a gift to be shared not a resource to be managed;
- empowering the individual student to utilize her or his gifts and learning abilities;
- encouraging students to engage in serious scholarship, critical thinking and dialogue with their teachers and peers;

relational by

- taking a stance of service to students as a guiding principle;
- promoting communities of learning;
- inviting students into a pursuit of responsible citizenship;

Gospel-oriented by

- asking students to approach their life and career choice as a vocation and a process of ongoing formation;
- helping students to pursue their studies and social activities within an ethical framework;
- measuring the impact of an education by the degree to which it serves the larger communities in which students live and work.