

A battle over identity of school roils faculty at Catholic University

Earlier this summer, an informal body called the Faculty Assembly took an unofficial vote of no confidence in its president and provost.

by [Jack Jenkins](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue

About a year after John Garvey was named president of the Catholic University of America, Stephen McKenna, chair of the media studies department, was trying to fill a faculty position. After a lengthy search, he and others narrowed it down to three candidates—only to learn the new president had rejected all three.

According to McKenna, Garvey canceled the search in February 2012 because none of the three finalists openly identified as Catholic. McKenna said that when he visited Garvey's office to discuss the matter, he was lectured on "how to pre-target a desired Catholic candidate, and run a search designed to land that person."

"This was both new and alarming," McKenna wrote recently in an email. "The policy had always been, 'all other things being equal, hire the Catholic.' Clearly now we were to follow that policy with a wink."

Formally established by Pope Leo XIII in the late 1880s, the university was founded by the American Catholic bishops as a beacon of the faith in the world of U.S. academia.

Since Garvey's arrival, critics argue that CUA has taken a conservative turn that has made its education mission more difficult and pushed the university into a spiral of declining enrollment and straitened resources.

The university's leaders don't deny their vision for the school includes a staunch Catholic identity, nor do they apologize for pursuing Catholic professors. At a forum convened by the conservative Cardinal Newman Society, where CUA was lifted up as one of 20 schools that "will truly lead this nation back to God," Garvey noted Pope John Paul II's call for Catholic university faculties to be majority-Catholic. (The faculty

is currently 59 percent Catholic, according to the Cardinal Newman Society.)

Andrew Abela, named provost in 2015 after serving as dean of the business school, said, “There are over 200 Catholic universities, the vast majority of whom do not take their Catholic identity as seriously as we do.”

In recent months, the school has drawn attention for disputes with its faculty over a proposal known as Academic Renewal, which consolidates some programs and reduces the number of professors. The administration maintains the changes are necessary to tackle the school’s \$3.5 million deficit, but they have sparked frustration among faculty.

In June, an informal body called the Faculty Assembly took an unofficial vote of no confidence in Garvey and Abela. The official Academic Senate, which is made up of a smaller group of faculty, recently sent the current version of the proposal to the board, which approved it.

Some observers, though, say the feud is part of a wider confrontation over Garvey and Abela’s supposed desire to transform the school into a conservative bastion. The debates over hiring, they say, go beyond ensuring the university’s Catholic identity to questions about what it means to be a faithful Catholic.

“Increasingly, hires are inspected by the provost department to see not only whether the person who is proposed to be hired is Catholic, but whether that person is a conservative Catholic,” said a faculty member who, like many current and former employees expressing similar sentiments, did not want to be identified for fear of retaliation.

In a recent editorial about Academic Renewal in the Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, Julia Young, a CUA graduate and faculty member, described a “culture of fear” in which even senior tenured faculty worry about being fired or “accused of insufficient support for the university’s mission.”

Abela said he has asked job candidates to pen statements about their Catholic identity up front to “save people who don’t think they’ll be interested in the kind of university we are from even bothering to apply.” But he acknowledged that his “pointed questions” also served to protect the school’s profile.

At elite Catholic schools, “how Catholic?” has been a topic at least since the 1960s, when, after Vatican II, they began to compete with mainstream institutions. It’s safe to say that all of them are committed to a Catholic environment in their hiring. As Richard Conklin, a former vice president at the University of Notre Dame, once observed, “the disagreement comes in deciding how big a thumb on the scale Catholicism should be.”

Notre Dame officials confirmed that they do not require applicants to make a statement about Catholic identity or to talk about what Abela called the “hot button issues” of faith, even in “free-ranging discussions,” as the provost described his approach to job interviews.

Abela rejected any suggestion that CUA gives conservative Catholics preference in its hiring.

“Absolutely, vehemently, no,” he said. “The claims that we are moving right or somehow moving more conservative are just an attempt to make a caricature of what we’re doing.”

However, Garvey and Abela have provided their critics with fodder by raising funds from politically conservative sources. In 2013, the university announced a new School of Business and Economics would be started with a \$1 million grant from the Charles Koch Foundation, known for funding conservative political candidates. Over the next three years, the foundation would pledge an additional \$11.75 million.

In 2016, CUA’s business school was renamed for Tim and Steph Busch after receiving a \$15 million donation—the largest in school history—from the Busch Family Foundation. Tim Busch is cofounder of the Napa Institute, a group whose views the *National Catholic Reporter* described as “a mix of conservative theology and libertarian economics.”

Dozens of Catholic priests, theologians, and CUA faculty decried the donations. One letter to CUA leadership argued, “You send a confusing message to Catholic students and other faithful Catholics that the Koch brothers’ antigovernment, Tea Party ideology has the blessing of a university sanctioned by Catholic bishops.”

Abela said donors understand they have no control over hiring or the content of teaching. “We, in general, recognize that libertarianism and the Catholic faith are inconsistent, because the libertarian position has a view of the human person that is

atomistic, that is completely at odds with Christianity,” he added.

Joseph Capizzi, professor of moral theology and ethics at CUA, said he is not concerned that donors expect agreement.

“They know that we are a Catholic institution, committed to the fullness of church teaching on social and political matters,” he said.

Capizzi sees Garvey’s approach to Catholic identity as balancing “being a great, cutting-edge research institution and being one informed by the Catholic intellectual tradition.” He said he “cannot think of a time [when Abela] pushed us not to hire someone we advanced to him.”

Other faculty members remain concerned.

“While Catholic social teaching is still present on campus, there’s a growing emphasis on libertarian economic policies,” Young said. “It feels like the tent has gotten smaller.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A battle over identity of school roils faculty at Catholic University.”