When I first began the job as superintendent fourteen months ago, I came with a tradition of spirited independence and flexibility. Planning and leadership had almost instant impact in the private Catholic high school. It took a while to wrap arms around a system that turned like an oceanliner and is a truly "loosely coupled system" with the weight of canon law. That said, the Cardinal, the stakeholders across the Archdiocese, the new Board, and the colleges and universities have all been supportive of new models which seek to deepen our faith and excellence.

I am grateful for the opportunity these days afford to explore how universities in particular can speak to the heritage and promise of Catholic Schools. Universities face many demands, but I do believe their focus can assist on both a "micro" and a "macro" level. Individual schools benefit from the elan, the panache, the "swish" factor of being affiliated with a university: programs, visiting professors, board engagement, math/science programs, writers workshops, professional or curriculum development all have an impact - especially if the schools can "market" the relationship. Universities can use the schools as labs in more than education and for mutual benefit. Please do not undersell this: sometimes all a really good school needs is this extra spotlight a college can give it - enrollment and financial support follow.

On the macro level, universities can assist with the underlying causes of the crisis facing our elementary and secondary schools. The statistics in Chicago prove out the academic excellence and social justice of our schools: if a young person attends a Catholic grade school, they have a 98% chance of graduating from (any) high school; for the general population, it is less than 40%. CARA studies have documented the impact of Catholic education on sacramental life and participation in the Church. We are, however, out of resources....and fundamental support.

The Catholic population - and the clergy themselves - often find the schools irrelevant. They are perceived as a drain - or as buildings to rent out to prop up struggling parishes. Foreign pastors are impatient with us being "sheep" about state funding for schools; parents in the "bungalow belt" who have never asked for help now look for scholarships that don't exist; the Latino population, without the Catholic School tradition, is largely ignored. Universities have the depth to look at these issues. What could happen if schools of architecture and finance were engaged with our ageing buildings? Or schools of public policy and law assisting in the effort to see that the "money follows the child"? Can we learn the sophisticated world of advancement in time? Will we learn from the new UND study on Hispanics and our schools in time to renew our Church?

What is needed most of all from our universities is, even as they are helping us to form our educational leaders in the schools of education and finance and to strengthen our academic excellence, is the leadership of higher education's voice in advocacy backed by research. Universities get national attention: our Catholic universities can be the means of reshaping the national consciousness and will so that our schools can garner the resources to again transform American society.
Pax,
SP