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CASE STUDY



Third Mission and identity in a Catholic university: The Universidad de La Sabana case

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the comprehensive strategies employed by Universidad de La Sabana to align its Third Mission with its Catholic identity after a media and public opinion crisis in 2015. The crisis, triggered by controversial remarks from a university professor during a national debate on same-sex adoption, underscored the necessity for the university to assert its institutional values while navigating the complexities of public scrutiny. In response, the university undertook organizational realignments, including the establishment of new strategic committees, the development of communication training programs, and the enhancement of its Legal Clinic's role. These initiatives were designed not only to mitigate reputational risks but also to reinforce the university's capacity to engage successfully in public discourse. Additionally, the university launched other impactful public initiatives, which further strengthened its legitimacy and influence on broader societal issues. The findings of this study provide a detailed account of these strategies and their outcomes, offering insights for other institutions facing similar challenges. This study contributes to the literature on crisis management in higher education and highlights the critical importance of aligning institutional identity with public engagement, particularly in a polarized societal context.

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1. Introduction

As a Catholic-inspired institution, Universidad de La Sabana ('the University' or 'La Sabana'), a Colombian university founded in 1979, has declared its purpose to form leaders with a Christian vision, capable of transforming society through their knowledge, professional skills, and ethical values (Universidad de La Sabana n.d.). This identity brings with it several commitments for the university and its members, not only to fulfill the traditional missions of teaching and research but also to engage

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in the Third Mission, which involves contributing to solving the problems of the community and serving society, as will be explained in the following section.

In the pages that follow, we will explore how these values have been woven into the University's principles and daily academic practices. This context sets the stage for discussing the media and public opinion crisis the University faced in 2015, and how it responded by defending its institutional identity while simultaneously strengthening its focus on fulfilling its Third Mission. The hypothesis of this study is that the alignment of a Catholic-inspired university's organizational structure, tasks, capabilities, and culture with its religious identity is essential for effectively managing crises and legitimizing its actions in the public sphere. Specifically, the study posits that the university's Third Mission, which integrates community engagement and social responsibility, plays a vital role in reinforcing its Catholic identity, thereby enhancing its legitimacy and influence in broader societal discussions.

To explore and address this hypothesis, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining documentary analysis with direct interviews. The documentary analysis involved a thorough examination of official records, minutes of meetings, and other archival materials from Universidad de La Sabana, providing a detailed account of the university's strategic initiatives and alignment efforts as outlined in the Congruence Model. The Congruence Model, which will be explained in detail later, is a framework that emphasizes the importance of aligning an organization's tasks, structure, culture, and capabilities to achieve coherence and effectiveness. This analysis was complemented by in-depth interviews with key individuals who actively participated in the projects and activities aimed at aligning the university's organizational structure, tasks, capabilities, and culture with its Catholic identity. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the processes and outcomes associated with the university's strategic alignment efforts to fulfill with its Third Mission.

Specifically, we will examine the fundamental role of the University's Legal Clinic and how its activities have facilitated the defense of individuals and their rights in both national and international arenas. Additionally, we will discuss other Third Mission initiatives, such as the Herons Ventilator project, which contributed to public health during the COVID-19 pandemic; the Pazalavoz platform, which promoted peace and reconciliation through digital storytelling; the Educaré project, which focuses on improving educational outcomes for vulnerable populations; the Prohibition of Physical Punishment Initiative, which advocates for children's rights; and the WHO resolution to reduce neural tube defects, which emphasizes the University's commitment to global health issues. These initiatives have been instrumental in strengthening the University's legitimacy and its capacity to engage meaningfully in the public sphere. Finally, the paper will present conclusions and recommendations for maintaining a clear institutional identity while also ensuring the necessary professionalization to mitigate legal and communication risks in response to contemporary challenges.

2. The Third Mission and Catholic-inspired universities

In addition to their two predominant missions—teaching and research—universities have increasingly recognized their responsibility to contribute to society. This

responsibility involves using their knowledge and expertise to foster cultural transmission, promote human well-being, and drive social and economic development both locally and globally (Poff 2023; Vargiu 2015; Alonso, Cuschnir, and Nápoli 2022). This broadening of focus has led to the development of what is now known as the Third Mission of universities.

The concept of the Third Mission has evolved significantly as higher education institutions adapt to changing societal roles and expectations. Over recent decades, universities have been called upon to engage more directly with their surrounding communities and the wider society, extending their impact beyond traditional academic boundaries. This mission encompasses a wide range of activities aimed at promoting social, economic, and cultural development, thereby solidifying the university's role as a proactive agent of change (Laredo 2007; Loi and Di Guardo 2015).

The origins of the Third Mission can be traced back to various policy shifts and societal demands that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. As governments and societies began to place greater emphasis on the economic and social relevance of academic institutions, universities were increasingly encouraged to engage in activities that would directly benefit society. This included the commercialization of research, community engagement, and the promotion of social innovation. The Third Mission thus became a way for universities to demonstrate their value to society by addressing real-world problems and contributing to economic development (Molas-Gallart and Castro-Martínez 2007; Kitagawa, Sánchez-Barrioluengo, and Uyarra 2016).

In its current form, the Third Mission represents a broad spectrum of activities that universities undertake to engage with external stakeholders, including businesses, government agencies, and local communities. These activities are often driven by the need to generate additional revenue streams, enhance the university's reputation, and fulfill social responsibilities. As a result, the Third Mission has become an integral part of the modern university's identity, reflecting its role as both a knowledge producer and a catalyst for societal change (Laredo 2007; Petersen, Kruss, and van Rheede 2022). By integrating the Third Mission into their core activities, universities enhance their relevance and legitimacy in contemporary society, demonstrating their capacity to respond proactively to current challenges. This approach enriches the academic contributions of universities while solidifying their role as key players in fostering social progress.

The Third Mission of Catholic universities is deeply embedded in their religious identity and mission, reflecting a commitment to serving society that transcends academic endeavors. Unlike secular institutions, where the Third Mission may primarily focus on social responsibility and community engagement as additional objectives, in Catholic universities, this mission is integral to their core identity. It embodies their dedication to promoting the common good, human dignity, and social justice. According to Melé (2022), these institutions are not only committed to academic excellence and knowledge generation but also bear the responsibility of integrating ethical and moral dimensions into their activities, guided by the social doctrine of the Church. This perspective is further reinforced by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II 1990), which emphasizes that Catholic universities must ensure their research, teaching, and public service are imbued with Christian values.

This holistic approach is fundamental for Catholic universities as it allows them to align their educational, research, and outreach efforts with their foundational values. The Third Mission reinforces this integration by demanding that universities do not merely impart knowledge but also act as agents of social change, promoting justice and solidarity through their programs and community activities. For example, Catholic universities are encouraged to foster a sense of global citizenship among their students, preparing them to address contemporary issues with a commitment to social justice. This mission helps Catholic universities legitimize their role in the public sphere, ensuring that their initiatives reflect and strengthen their Christian identity in an increasingly secularized world (John Paul II 1990; Francis 2017; Melé 2022).

Moreover, the Third Mission in Catholic universities is not simply an additional function to their traditional missions of teaching and research; it is a way of living out their faith in the world. This mission involves a complete approach to education, where intellectual and ethical development go hand in hand, preparing students to contribute to society in ways that reflect both academic excellence and moral integrity. The integration of faith and reason, as emphasized by the Catholic Church, is central to this mission, ensuring that all academic endeavors are carried out with a concern for the ethical implications and the social and human impact of knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997).

In conclusion, the Third Mission is essential for Catholic universities as it embodies their commitment to social responsibility rooted in their religious identity. It not only legitimizes their actions in the public domain but also reinforces their mission to serve the common good, guided by the principles of Christian social teaching. This mission allows Catholic universities to play a unique and vital role in society, aligning their academic and community activities with the broader goals of promoting human dignity, justice, and the care for creation (John Paul II 1990; Benedict XVI 2009; Francis 2015).

3. A strong Catholic identity and a media and public opinion crisis in a polarized society

The University of La Sabana's Institutional Educational Project (PEI) is founded on Christian principles, emphasizing the pursuit, discovery, communication, and preservation of truth. This mission integrates reason and faith, fostering open dialogue and multidisciplinary approaches. The University supports academic freedom, access to resources, and moral responsibility, promoting the dignity of individuals and the family as the cornerstone of society. It views work and study as means for personal and social growth, respects nature, and aims for comprehensive development of individuals and community engagement (Universidad de La Sabana n.d.). This distinctive framework sets it apart within Colombia's educational landscape.

To fulfill its mission, the University has encouraged its professors and students to participate in interventions before various public authorities, both national and international, during the discussion of laws, judicial decisions, and, in general, matters that had an impact on public policy. To obtain the authoritative opinions of

the most relevant actors within the national and international context, the Colombian Constitutional Court (CCC or the Court), when analyzing a particular case, often seeks input from universities, research centers, think tanks, and other experts. In 2014, the Court solicited opinions from multiple individuals and organizations on the ongoing case regarding the possibility of same-sex couples adopting minors (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2015).

The Constitutional Court officially requested several faculties to provide academic opinions on the potential impact of same-sex couples adopting children, with the aim of having informed elements for decision-making. In response to this request, three professors from the schools of Medicine, Law, and Psychology of the University submitted their opinions. They all requested the Court to consider the scientific evidence presented that supports the possible negative effects of adoption by same-sex couples. Therefore, they suggested prudence and caution in making a legal decision that affects the welfare and best interests of the minors (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2015).

One of the experts consulted by the court was a Medicine professor from Universidad de La Sabana, who, in addition to presenting a series of statistical considerations to support his opinion that it was not advisable to allow same-sex couples to adopt minors, stated that ‘homosexual and lesbian individuals deserve our respect as people, but it must be noted that their behavior deviates from the norm, which in some way constitutes an illness’ (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2015). Early in 2015, the professor’s opinion was widely highlighted by certain media outlets and taken out of context by others. This led to a media and public opinion crisis for the University, as the institution was perceived as discriminating against the homosexual population. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1973 and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1990 had excluded homosexuality from the classification of mental illnesses.

Following specific actions, such as a press release and several interviews and statements from the Rector, it was clarified that the University respects all individuals, regardless of their condition or sexual orientation. It was also emphasized that the freedom of teaching and opinion is a value to be protected. Additionally, the University affirmed that it would not forsake its Catholic identity in the fulfillment of its substantive functions.

As stated by the Rector

Public debate has its own logic, different from academic discourse, especially when it deals with issues with significant experiential implications. In this sense, we have reaffirmed our commitment to contributing to social dialogue, sharing our values and knowledge, but this commitment to participate requires specialized training and processes in which we will deepen. This is an opportunity to improve and become more of a university, in the service of Colombia and all Latin America (Velásquez 2015).

The crisis served as a wake-up call for the University, highlighting the need to align its processes and structure. This alignment was necessary to ensure that the University could project its academic work and identity effectively, without being exposed to the risks that this episode had revealed.

4. The university's response through structural alignment, communication skills development, and the formation of prepared work teams

In the wake of the 2015 crisis, the University undertook significant measures to refine its existing structure, enhancing its capability to embody and project its institutional identity more effectively. Prior to this period, the University was already engaged in developing a framework conducive to the accurate reflection and external projection of its foundational values. However, the events of 2015 catalyzed an expedited reevaluation and adjustment of this framework, leading to strategic organizational alignments.

At that time, the University was beginning to utilize various models for its institutional transformation. One adopted methodology was the Congruence Model, which entails aligning an organization's structure, tasks, people, and culture to achieve harmony and efficiency (Nadler and Tushman 1980; O'Reilly, Nadler, and Tushman 2016). This model was applied to project the University's institutional identity by clarifying tasks, adjusting organizational structure, developing skills and competencies—especially in communication and strategic litigation—and strengthening institutional culture elements. The basic elements of these alignments are illustrated in Figure 1, created by the author based on the Nadler and Tushman model (Nadler and Tushman 1980; O'Reilly, Nadler, and Tushman 2016).

Regarding the organizational structure, one of the pivotal enhancements was the creation of the Sub-commission on Institutional Culture. This body, operating under the auspices of the General Affairs Commission—a permanent governing body of the University—was tasked with the governance of all matters pertaining to the University's institutional identity. This move aimed to underscore the University's commitment to embedding its core values across all aspects of its operations and ensuring these values were consistently reflected in its external engagements.

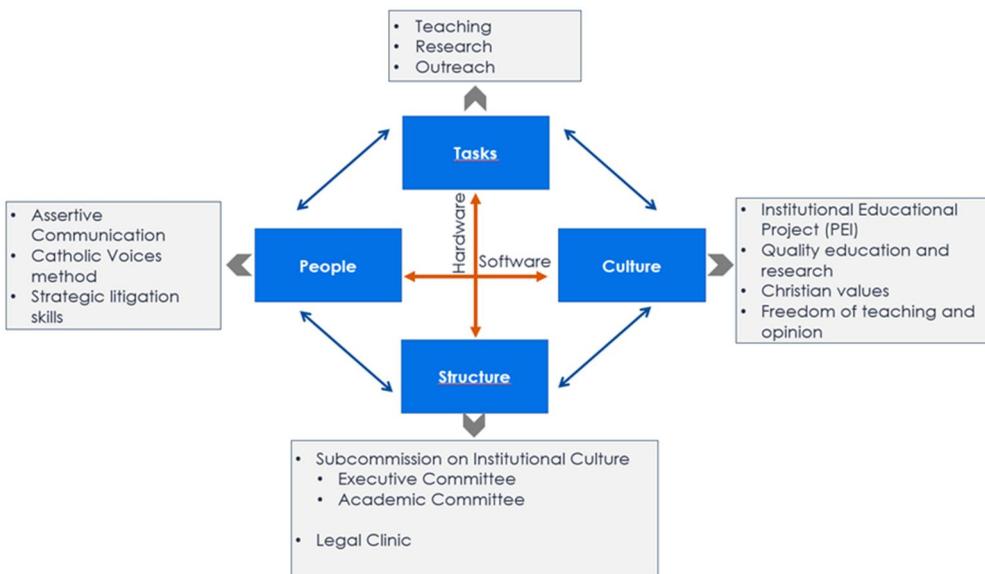


Figure 1. Congruence model for institutional transformation (Figure created by the author based on the Nadler and Tushman model).

Further, the establishment of two new committees under the Sub-commission marked a strategic pivot toward more outwardly projecting the University's identity. The first, an executive committee, was designated the role of coordinating all university units involved in the external projection of its identity. This committee brought together various segments of the University, including the Vice-rectorate of Academic Processes, which presided over the committee, alongside the Social Projection Directorate, the Institutional Communication Directorate, and the School of Law and Political Science. The inclusion of such diverse units under a single committee facilitated a cohesive and unified approach to external identity projection.

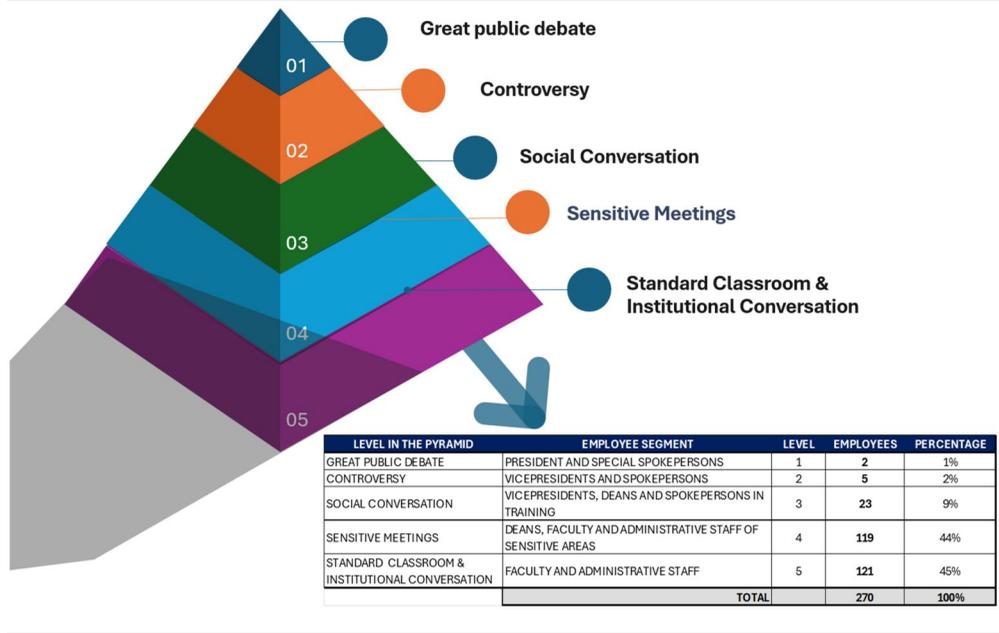
The second committee established was the academic committee, comprising faculty members from a wide array of disciplines such as medicine, law, philosophy, and economics, among others. This committee was charged with the critical task of thoroughly analyzing, studying, and preparing position papers on key issues that aligned with the University's desire to continue projecting its institutional identity. Topics of focus included the defense of life, the promotion of family, university autonomy, and inclusion and diversity.

In relation to the component of people and capabilities in the Congruence Model, both the 2015 crisis and the University's response to it were intertwined with communication challenges, highlighting the necessity of enhancing the communication skills of faculty members and administrators. In response to these challenges, with the help of an international external adviser, the University initiated an Assertive Communication Training Program between 2015 and 2016, aimed at different segments of the academic community. The first part of this program consisted of a series of practical training sessions leveraging the facilities of the Faculty of Communication's radio and television studios, under the guidance of seasoned journalists and media professionals. As recommended by the external consultant, these sessions were meant to equip participants with the skills necessary to effectively engage with the media and public discourse in the new cultural context (Cannata 2014).

Later, between 2017 and 2018, the University focused on training the same segment in the Catholic Voices method, known for its effectiveness in navigating controversial issues in challenging international contexts for the Catholic Church (Catholic Voices n.d.). With this method, which had proven successful during events such as Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the United Kingdom in 2010 and the early major international appearances of Pope Francis, the University aimed to prepare its representatives with the skills to articulate their viewpoints in a manner that was both respectful and compelling.

In addition to practical training, the University disseminated and facilitated the study of the book *'Cómo defender la fe sin levantar la voz'* (Ivereigh & de la Cierva 2016), the Spanish version of *'How to Defend the Faith Without Raising Your Voice: Civil Responses to Catholic Hot Button Issues'* (Ivereigh 2012), which served as a basis for various training sessions with faculty and administrators. This text was instrumental in providing a framework for engaging in public discourse in a manner that was both effective and aligned with the University's Catholic identity. To reinforce the understanding and application of the Catholic Voices method, in 2019, a select group of faculty members and spokespersons participated in a specialized course offered by Universidad Austral (Argentina) and Catholic Voices.

Table 1. Assertive communication training hours by segment. Source: Universidad de La Sabana (2023) (Own elaboration).



In short, this Assertive Communication Training Program delivered 1,816 hours of training to 270 employees, with an average of seven hours per employee, with different levels of intensity and training, depending on the employee’s position, as detailed in Table 1 (Universidad de La Sabana, 2023).

Last, recognizing that many of the arenas in which the University aimed to project its identity were legal in nature, the structure was adjusted, and the capabilities were strengthened to enhance the role of the University’s Legal Clinic, as will be discussed below in further detail.

5. The legal clinic as a promoter of the university’s Third Mission and institutional identity

Legal clinics serve as bridges between theoretical knowledge and practical legal experience. These clinics operate on the principle of learning by doing, where law students engage directly with cases, providing pro bono legal services to the community’s most vulnerable members. The inception of legal clinics is rooted in a commitment to social justice, aiming to democratize access to legal aid while fostering a new generation of lawyers equipped with the empathy, skills, and ethical grounding necessary for the profession. The strategic litigation undertaken by these clinics often targets systemic legal and social issues, aiming not only to assist individual clients but also to bring about broader societal change (Bloch and Noone 2011).

The Public Interest and Human Rights Legal Clinic at the Universidad de La Sabana (‘the Legal Clinic’) embodies these traditional roles while furthermore

intertwining them with the University's Catholic identity. Established as a key component of the University's Law program, the Clinic serves two primary functions: providing essential legal services to those in need and acting as an educational platform for students. Through its work, the Clinic emphasizes the principles of dignity, justice, and service to the community, thus projecting the University's institutional identity into the broader legal and social landscape. It operates under a model that not only seeks to educate its students about the law but also to instill a profound sense of moral responsibility toward the protection of the vulnerable and the promotion of the common good (Clínica Jurídica n.d.).

Although the Clinic was established in 2012, like other structures of the University, it was adjusted in 2017 to transition from a research incubator to a social outreach modality for the Law program and the entire university. This structure aimed to professionalize the Clinic's work and increase its impact on public and legal matters. In addition to participating in assertive communication training, the connection with the 'Argumentation and Rhetoric' course in the Law program's curriculum was strengthened. Furthermore, considering the events of 2015, the Clinic adjusted the formats for presenting opinions to the Constitutional Court and other authorities and established an internal peer review space to ensure these opinions met the required standards and formalities. Regarding the working group, besides several professors, the active participation of students with good academic performance and a clear commitment to the Clinic's objectives was encouraged.

As part of the structural adjustments of the Clinic, work lines were created to allow for specialization and focus of the members' activities according to their profiles and experience. Specifically, the Legal Clinic declares works in four different lines as follows: Person and Family;¹ Freedoms and Pluralism;² Peace and Transitional Justice;³ and Current Environmental Issues.⁴ The Clinic's strategic litigation efforts are designed not merely to achieve favorable outcomes in individual cases but to influence legal precedents, policy formulation, and public opinion, consistent with the University's mission (Clínica Jurídica n.d.).

In the Person and Family line, the Legal Clinic's efforts to defend human life are extensive, focusing particularly on cases related to the protection of the unborn and their mothers. Although this is a controversial issue, the Clinic's experience and the robust scientific and legal arguments it has developed over the years have given it a significant role in the legal and media debates on this topic. In most countries, the debate over the protection of the unborn and the decriminalization of abortion has reached the highest judicial instances. In Colombia, these debates have taken place before the constitutional jurisdiction, whose ultimate instance is the Constitutional Court. The Clinic has developed legal strategies to address several lawsuits presented before this court and to explore legal alternatives to protect all rights involved in these situations (Clínica Jurídica n.d.).

Within the strategic litigation on life-related debates, the structural adjustments and communication skills training built in the previous years were necessary. These enhancements not only fortified the Clinic's legal strategies but also improved its ability to articulate complex legal and ethical arguments effectively, ensuring a more influential presence in both judicial and public arenas.

Finally, the Clinic's work has transcended Colombia's borders, with significant participation in international forums such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and various United Nations offices, addressing issues related to the protection of life, peacebuilding, and the guarantee of rights and freedoms.⁵

6. Strengthening the legitimacy to intervene in the public sphere through other Third Mission initiatives

According to Cannata's advice, it is essential to engage with the local community's social issues to effectively convey Christian values to society. Beyond the actions previously mentioned, institutions should align their priorities with the community's needs and concerns. This means focusing on broad social challenges like poverty alleviation, education, protection of vulnerable populations, environmental sustainability, and addressing violence such as bullying and corporal punishment. Such an approach reflects the institution's Christian identity and commitment to common social issues, moving beyond a narrow focus on controversial topics (Cannata 2014).

In projecting the Christian identity of the University, efforts were made to avoid limiting the defense of these values to issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and marriage, as this can present an incomplete picture of La Sabana's commitment in this area. Such a narrow focus might hinder the building of dialogue with other stakeholders who are also concerned with protecting the vulnerable and constructing a just, peaceful, and supportive society, as stated in the University's educational mission. Consequently, to align its strategy with fulfilling its Third Mission and considering its institutional identity, the University of La Sabana has been promoting and highlighting research, teaching, and outreach projects in various areas. The following paragraphs will briefly outline five of the most significant initiatives from the past five years.

6.1. The Herons Ventilator project

The Herons Ventilator project, developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed to address the urgent need for medical ventilators amid the global health crisis. This joint project between the faculties of engineering and medicine, coordinated by the central administration of the University, involved the local production of ventilators using low-cost components for use in hospitals and medical centers across the country (Giraldo-Cadavid et al. 2024). A notable aspect of the project was that one of the primary manufacturers of the University-designed ventilators was the Colombian Military Industry, which repurposed its facilities typically used for producing weapons and ammunition. As of the writing of this paper, the Herons ventilators have been credited with saving at least 48 lives. The project's impact was significant, attracting national and international media attention (The Scientist 2020; AP News 2020) and highlighting the University's innovative response to a critical healthcare challenge. The Herons Ventilator not only demonstrated the University's ability to contribute to technological solutions but also its commitment to safeguarding human health and welfare during unprecedented times.⁶

6.2. The prohibition of corporal punishment

The School of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences played a significant role in advocating for the prohibition of corporal punishment in Colombia, contributing to the related legislation (Congreso de Colombia 2021). This effort aligns with the University's commitment to protecting children's rights and promoting a culture of nonviolence. The University supported the law's implementation through research (Trujillo et al. 2020), educational programs, and public outreach, aiming to ensure the effective enforcement of this legal protection for children (Universidad de La Sabana 2021).

6.3. The EDUCARÉ project

The EDUCARÉ project (Education, Rural Areas, and Reconciliation), led by the School of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences at the University of La Sabana, aims to strengthen education within the framework of peacebuilding in Colombia. This initiative, conducted in partnership with the community of Centro Poblado Héctor Ramírez in Caquetá, focuses on closing the educational gap between rural and urban areas through a participatory community approach (Reinoso-Chávez et al. 2023). Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, the project engages with local communities to address their educational needs, promote cultural and traditional values, and foster social cohesion. EDUCARÉ also supports the consolidation of the peace agreement by working on issues such as poverty reduction, educational access, and the protection of vulnerable populations (Universidad de La Sabana 2024).

6.4. The Pazalavoz project

In an effort to highlight the role of victims and promote transitional justice, students from the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of La Sabana, in coordination with the Peace and Transitional Justice Line of the Public Interest and Human Rights Legal Clinic, launched 'Pazalavoz: the path of participation,' a transformative digital platform. 'Pazalavoz' aims to empower victims of Colombia's prolonged armed conflict and directly involve social leaders, students, and professionals in training. Funded by the University of La Sabana, this initiative provides victims with tools enshrined in Colombia's Integral System for Peace. The platform features educational videos, manuals, and a unique web form that offers real-time personalized responses, guiding victims to appropriate mechanisms within the system (Pazalavoz 2023).

The project faced challenges in legal design, requiring not only rigorous legal research but also the creation of accessible, inclusive, and interactive digital tools for victims and their representatives. The initiative has received support from social leaders and state entities such as the Ombudsman's Office and the Unit for Victims. Additionally, it has been submitted for the Youth Carnegie Peace Prize. The platform's primary goals include extending its reach to regional territories to empower local leaders and expanding its educational role to schools and universities. 'Pazalavoz' contributes significantly to reducing inequality and empowering victims to pursue justice and reparation, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and peaceful society in Colombia (Universidad de La Sabana 2023).

6.5. The WHO resolution to reduce neural tube defects

In May 2023, the WHO approved a resolution (WHA76.19) to protect infants from congenital disorders, promoted and inspired by research in which a Colombian pediatric neurosurgeon and professor at La Sabana played a key role (El Espectador 2023; Semana 2023; Infobae 2023). The research highlighted the strategic fortification of food with folic acid as an effective measure to reduce neural tube defects, anemia, and cardiac malformations in newborns. The study advocated for the widespread fortification of food products with folic acid as a preventive health measure to decrease infant mortality rates and improve newborn health (Gomez et al. 2024). The WHO's approval of this strategy represents significant progress in applying scientific research to public health policy, aiming to prevent congenital anomalies through a straightforward nutritional intervention (WHO 2023).

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The case of Universidad de La Sabana provides insights into how higher education institutions can integrate their Third Mission in alignment with their core identity. The University's response to the 2015 media and public opinion crisis underscores the importance of strategic organizational adjustments and the development of effective communication skills.

Key recommendations for institutions seeking to enhance their societal engagement include:

1. **Developing the Third Mission in a Catholic identity context:** For universities with a Catholic identity, it is important to ensure that the Third Mission reflects their foundational values. This involves integrating the principles of faith, reason, and service into all aspects of societal engagement, thereby reinforcing the university's commitment to social justice and the common good.
2. **Establishing an adequate structure for the Third Mission:** Institutions need to have a robust organizational framework that supports the effective implementation of the Third Mission. This structure should facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, provide necessary resources, and ensure that initiatives align with the university's core identity.
3. **Aligning tasks and structures with assertive communication:** Effective communication is essential for projecting the university's mission and values. Training faculty and administrators in assertive communication and public engagement helps maintain a coherent public image and ensures that the university's efforts are accurately and positively represented.
4. **The role of a legal clinic in a university context:** A legal clinic can play a vital role in a university's Third Mission by bridging theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Legal clinics offer services to vulnerable populations, promoting social justice and providing students with hands-on learning opportunities that align with the university's ethical and educational goals.
5. **Strengthening university legitimacy through Third Mission Initiatives:** Beyond specific projects, universities should engage in a range of Third Mission initiatives that reinforce their institutional identity and benefit the community.

This approach helps build the university's legitimacy and fosters strong, mutually beneficial relationships with external stakeholders.

As announced in the introduction, this study has explored the alignment of a Catholic-inspired university's organizational structure, tasks, capabilities, and culture with its religious identity, particularly in the context of managing a public opinion crisis. While the findings offer valuable insights, they also open up several avenues for future research. One area that warrants further exploration is the long-term impact of such alignment on the university's engagement with diverse societal groups, especially in increasingly pluralistic and secular contexts. Future studies could examine how this alignment influences the university's ability to navigate subsequent crises, particularly in areas where religious values may conflict with broader societal trends. Additionally, further research could explore the effectiveness of similar alignment strategies in other faith-based institutions, offering a comparative perspective that could enrich the understanding of how different religious identities shape institutional responses to public challenges.

Moreover, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research primarily focused on a single case study, which, while providing depth, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the scope by including multiple Catholic universities or even institutions from other religious backgrounds to assess the broader applicability of the Congruence Model in aligning institutional identity with public engagement. Additionally, while this study provided a detailed account of strategic responses during the crisis, it did not extensively examine the perspectives of external stakeholders, such as the broader public or media. Finally, future studies could incorporate these viewpoints to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the university's impact on public perception and its long-term reputation management.

Notes

1. The Person and Family line specializes in the construction and implementation of litigation strategies that aim to resolve problems related to the protection of life, the rights of children, motherhood and fatherhood, family, and adoption. It addresses issues related to the human person, the beginning and end of life, their dignity, and their family development as the essential nucleus of society.
2. The line on Freedoms and Pluralism focuses on the defense of individual freedoms, diversity, and pluralism within society. Its objective is to promote a positive view of plurality from a democratic perspective, where there is absolute respect for freedom of thought, expression, conscience, and religion, thereby seeking to combat discrimination. To achieve this, it addresses issues such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, prevention of discrimination against certain groups, and finally, academic freedom in conjunction with university autonomy.
3. The Peace and Transitional Justice line undertakes specialized work aimed at strengthening institutions and materializing the objectives underlying the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition and the reintegration route, from a perspective that recognizes the dignity of victims and ex-combatants. Additionally, it seeks to contribute from academia and law—in convergence with other disciplines—to the process of building and consolidating peace in Colombia.

4. The line on Current Environmental Issues focuses on studying, analyzing, and addressing problems and cases related to the protection of the environment and natural resources at the national level and particularly in the University's area of influence (Sabana Centro area). Its objective is to propose solutions, treatments, and discussions for modern environmental problems, raising awareness about environmental protection, and designing and developing various strategic litigation plans for effective environmental protection.
5. Some of the internationally relevant matters attended by the Legal Clinic included representation in the Case of Mirna Citlalli Amaya de Luna and Her Voters v. The United Mexican States (freedom of conscience and religion); amicus curiae in the Case of Manuela v. El Salvador (jurisdiction on abortion regulations); advisory in the Case of Beatriz v. El Salvador (legal status of unborn children and alleged abortion rights); opinion on the Protection of Paternity and Maternity in Armed Conflicts (family protection in armed conflicts); amicus curiae before the Constitutional Court of Ecuador on Abortion (decriminalization of abortion in sexual violence cases); amicus curiae before the Constitutional Court of Ecuador on Gender Identity (importance of reliable public records and children's health risks); amicus curiae on the Right to Care (defending caregivers' rights); inputs to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture (separate prison facilities based on biological sex); input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women on Prostitution (prostitution and women's rights); input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women on Women's Rights in Sports (protection of women's rights in sports); and input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief on Hate Speech (protection of religious freedom in Mexico).
6. The dozens of references in the media and news are listed on the following page: <https://www.unisabana.edu.co/aportesventilador/apariciones-en-los-medios/>.

Disclosure statement

The author is Vice President for Faculty and Research at Universidad de La Sabana.

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Juan F. Córdoba-Marentes is a lawyer with an LL.M and PhD, with postgraduate courses in intellectual property, technology law, and management skills. He has worked as a consultant for law firms in Colombia and Australia and has held research fellowships in the United States, Germany, and Spain. He has served as an arbitrator in various arbitration centers in Colombia and has been President of the Colombian Center for Copyright Law and a speaker in several countries. He is an author and editor of books and scientific articles in his areas of expertise. He has been a professor, researcher, and Dean of the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Universidad de La Sabana, as well as an ad-hoc Justice of the Colombian Constitutional Court. He is currently the Vice-President for Faculty and Research at Universidad de La Sabana.

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