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Teaching That Transforms

JESUIT EDUCATION TODAY

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Teaching That Transforms

THE DISTINCTIVE HEART OF
JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

BY KEVIN P. QUINN

HUMAN FLOURISHING.
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What is different about Jesuit higher education? Two questions will help focus this consideration. How does the idea that reality is suffused with the presence of God, or the idea that the way to become more like God is to be as fully human as we can, find expression in Jesuit higher education? And does Jesuit higher education aspire to provide for its students something more than superior academic training?

Well-done education at a Jesuit university transforms a student and prepares him or her for work that promotes the common good, while allowing that student to discern his or her vocation in life and, in the long run, to flourish as a human being. This is the transforming power of education on a Jesuit campus rightly understood: personal transformation that

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leads to societal transformation through the ongoing dialectic of personal freedom and social responsibility.

Contemporary Jesuit leadership remains vigilant regarding what is an appropriate starting point for this discussion. The 34th General Congregation stated: “As we look to the future, we need consciously to be on guard that both the noun ‘university’ and the adjective ‘Jesuit’ always remain fully honored” (Decree 17, No. 5). And the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities says further: “Catholic and Jesuit, descriptors that define us as an institution, are not simply two characteristics among many. Rather, they signify our defining character, what makes us uniquely who we are.” This is a risky undertaking for us as Catholic and Jesuit educators. While the values and “way of proceeding” of secular education sometimes overlap with ours, many times they do not. That is why it is so important for us to understand and celebrate the principles and convictions that motivate our work, precisely as the work of a university that is Catholic and Jesuit.

The contemporary university *qua* university is characterized, the A.J.C.U. adds, by “peer reviewed research, research-grounded teaching and teaching as mentoring, and service, all within a climate of academic freedom.” What universities claim to be teaching their students—specifically, to think critically, reason analytically, solve problems and communicate clearly—is necessary but not sufficient for Jesuit universities. For a Jesuit university should ask more of its students by educating and forming them to become men and women of faith and of service to their communities. This is the “value added” of Jesuit higher education.

This self-defining claim poses a significant challenge for us because it does not matter to our external accreditors or to our secular colleagues. By definition, Jesuit institutions of higher learning exist to educate young people in a way that prepares them to be valuable contributors to the common good through the work they will do in the course of their careers. But that, for Jesuit educators, is not enough. We seek to form—and that powerful transitive verb cannot be overemphasized in our context—men and women of a particular kind: individuals of faith who understand that their faith compels them to work for justice and in the service of others, regardless of their chosen profession. Even more pointedly, our tradition recognizes that the work our alumni undertake and the careers that will unfold for them take on their proper importance and meaning only in the context of the deeper, primary commitments of their lives: the commitments they owe to their families and their communities.

In 1989, reflecting on 200 years of Jesuit and Catholic education at Georgetown, Timothy Healy, S.J., then the university’s president, spoke eloquently of the work of all Jesuit universities when he reminded all involved with the life of Georgetown:

Undergraduate teaching, with its dream of making citizens for the City of Man and the City of God, has always been first in Georgetown’s time and heart. For two centuries on this good ground the faculty has labored to help young men, and for the last 30 years young women, to achieve themselves as citizens, husbands and wives, parents and as friends. “Liberal education” has always had those aims and only those.... [W]e have never bowed to either of two heresies—that the bachelor’s degree is for making a living rather than for life itself, or that one can debase the arts and sciences to make them “value free.” Neither fallacy has ever clouded the renaissance Jesuit vision that everything human, as well as the nature in which mankind sits, is filled with the laboring presence of God and thus worth the struggle to enjoy, understand and celebrate.

Such convictions flow from the spiritual vision passed on in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the touchstone of all Jesuit spirituality and the work of any Jesuit school. The underpinnings of education in Jesuit schools can be found in the worldview transmitted by three meditations found in the exercises. Although written almost 500 years ago, they evoke powerful, foundational convictions that can—and, I would submit, must—animate any academic program at a Jesuit university. These meditations are those on the Incarnation, on the Call of the King and on the Two Standards.

The Meditations

In the meditation on the Incarnation, Ignatius asks the retreatant to use the powers of imagination to envision the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—involved in a conversation as they look down upon the entire “expanse and circuit of the Earth.” They behold it all at once, the good, the bad and the ugly, and they agree that the project of creation, as embodied in the human race, is not going well. Something is wrong and needs fixing. The fruit of their discussion is a divine decision and resolution: “Let us work the redemption of the human race.” And the angel Gabriel is sent to Mary in the backwater village of Nazareth.

This meditation and the understanding of the nature of God it conveys are at the very heart of Jesuit spirituality and Jesuit education. The foundational understanding is this: God has chosen to “roll up his sleeves” and “go to work” in creation. God labors in creation. Our laboring, therefore, is one profound manifestation of how we are made in the image and likeness of God. This insight has—or should have—profound implications for the work of education in Jesuit schools.

Ignatius does not stop there. After inviting us to consider the truth that God labors in creation, he then summons all men and women to join in that divine labor. In the medita-

tion on the Call of the King, Ignatius asks the retreatant first to consider a good and upright earthly king who issues a call to his subjects, asking them to “join with him” in a noble task “conquering all enemies of mankind, which include disease, ignorance, poverty and oppression.” Ignatius asks the retreatant to consider that any reasonable person of good will would join in such an endeavor. He then takes a step further, asking the retreatant to reflect on the call of the Eternal King, Jesus Christ, to join with him in the aforementioned work of redeeming the human race. This call is issued to every human being.

The Ignatian imagination sees God as actively involved in the ongoing work of creation and sees human beings as recipients of an unending divine invitation to join in that work here and now. Fittingly, academic programs at Jesuit institutions are natural and potentially very powerful tools for bringing about human flourishing both for the individuals who are educated and formed in them and for the broader community in which they will work. Ignatius reminds us, however, that Jesuit schools—precisely because of the good they can bring about for so many—will be opposed by what Ignatius repeatedly called “the enemy of human nature.”

In the meditation on the Two Standards, Ignatius places both the activity of God in the world and the call to action God issues to all human beings within the broader context of a cosmic struggle between good and evil in the world. For

Ignatius, evil was very real and very active in the world, especially in the realm of human decision-making; moreover, it was crafty and relentless in its desire to frustrate the hopes and the laboring of God among human beings. In this powerful meditation, Ignatius asks the retreatant to imagine a scene in which both Christ and Satan invite all human beings to “choose sides” in the great cosmic struggle between good and evil. Ignatius insists that “Christ calls and wants all beneath his standard, and Lucifer, on the other hand, wants all under his.” Human beings must choose.

These three meditations, quaint as they may appear to contemporary readers and foreign as they surely are to secular academics, can be for us today powerful reminders of why Jesuit schools exist and how Jesuit educators should understand the work we do. In particular, these meditations can inform how we structure our academic programs.

Jesuit Education Today

But what is distinctive about Jesuit higher education today? The Society of Jesus is 475 years old and continues to educate young men and women by applying insights born of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and by reflecting on experiences of countless Jesuits and Jesuit schools across the globe and through the centuries. Contemporary commentary on Ignatian spirituality identifies several important themes, as articulated by the Jesuits at Georgetown in 2010:

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the experience of a divine and forgiving love that in turn enables us to recognize our complicity with sin; a personal calling that frees us to embrace our truest passions in following Christ and in service of others; the redemptive possibility of self-giving love that invites us to attend to the cries of those who suffer; [and] the experience of enduring goodness that gives hope for a world in which the Spirit always labors.

These themes in turn shape the Ignatian worldview and inform as organizing principles much of Jesuit education, as the A.J.C.U. states, by “encouraging students to see the hand of

for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.”

This is the contemporary standard for engaged learning in a Jesuit university. This standard applies to all students. To apply these Jesuit “marching orders,” students are encouraged to enter worlds beyond campus, to gain an education that no classroom alone can offer, to learn with and from people in marginalized communities and so to become global citizens for a new century.

This educational strategy calls for personal transformation that would lead to transforming society. The ideal of a personal transformation requires a rigorous education to prepare students to become ethical and compassionate leaders who will infuse society with faith and justice, informed by knowledge. For personal transformation to be effective, academic, moral and spiritual, experience must be integrated with and enhanced by learning outside the classroom. But it must be experiential learning in which immersion and reflection on experience are intertwined and focused on the needs and concerns that many in our world face. It must also be learning that is framed in the context of asking the “bigger questions” of human experience, such as, “What does this experience say to me about God, about the purpose and meaning of human life and about how the hopes and labors of God in the world can be frustrated?”

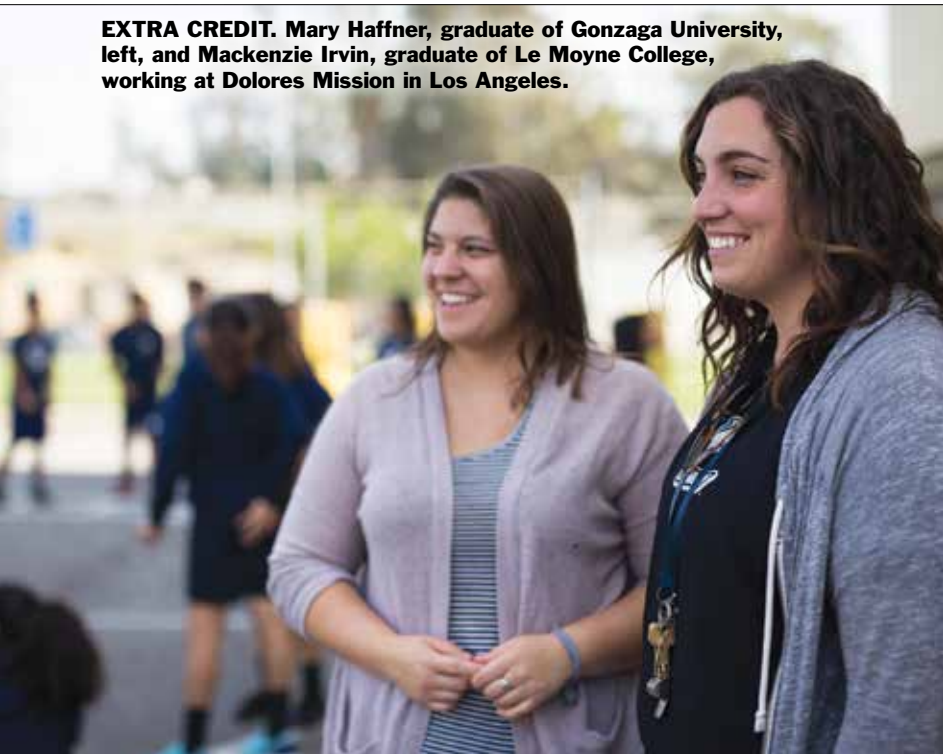
Learning With

There is a catch here, a shift in educational philosophy. The aim is not just serving others and learning about people but learning with and from people who are often excluded from participation in economic, social and political

life. And further, there is a call to integrate academic inquiry, creative imagination and reflection on experience in order to inspire the fashioning of a more just and humane society. Or as Mark Ravizza, S.J., put it so well during a conference on the University of Scranton campus: integrating accompaniment, spirituality, academic excellence and community will lead university students to a depth of thought and imagination that is a distinguishing mark of the Ignatian tradition. Through these experiences faculty members, students, community partners and indigenous peoples become dynamic partners in an ambitious and often difficult educational process.

To deliver a transformative education in the Jesuit tradition requires the integration of academic, moral and spiritual learning—the union of mind, heart and soul. We also know that any university that claims—as Jesuit institutions surely do—to educate and form the whole person cannot pretend

EXTRA CREDIT. Mary Haffner, graduate of Gonzaga University, left, and Mackenzie Irvin, graduate of Le Moyne College, working at Dolores Mission in Los Angeles.



God in all things, to discern the ‘magis,’ or the better course of action, [and] to ‘engage the world through a careful analysis of context, in dialogue with experience evaluated through reflection, for the sake of action, and with openness, always, to evaluation’ (GC 35).”

Jesuit education has engaged mind, heart and hands since the first Jesuit school opened in 1548. In 2000, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., then superior general of the Jesuit order, called for a new Jesuit educational standard. “Tomorrow’s ‘whole person,’” he said, “cannot be whole without an educated awareness of society and culture with which to contribute socially, generously, in the real world.” For that reason, he explained, students “must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage in it constructively.” They should learn, he said, to “perceive, think, judge, choose, and act

that the religious life of that person is somehow an optional or accidental dimension that can be relegated to the sidelines or attended to as an afterthought. Rather, the experience of a Jesuit education can and should provide all students with the tools and opportunities to develop the habits of mind and heart that will enable them to encounter the living God. Only in this most important of all encounters will students discover the truth about themselves as well as the meaning and implications of the call that comes with being a person.


In the words of the Georgetown Jesuits reflecting on undergraduate education there: “The journey of selfhood should also ideally include the cultivation of a freedom to choose our truest selves.” Promoting this project of self-discovery and discerning one’s deepest vocation is consistent with, for example, the University of Scranton’s statement to “provide a superior, transformational learning experience, preparing students who...will ‘set the world on fire.’” The task of providing these tools and opportunities is not the job of any single office or division of the university. Nor is the target audience only students studying philosophy and theology. Rather, this task is the focus of the entire university community and is arguably the *raison d’être* for any Jesuit university.

So today’s Jesuit universities in the United States are about student formation, regardless of the student’s college or discipline. Jesuit schools have long had, as the Georgetown Jesuits stated, “a keen interest in formative concerns and in the ways in which such concerns intersect academic work.” Robust collaboration between academic and student affairs and the continued vitality of general education on Jesuit campuses highlight this concern for formation among undergraduates. Jesuit educators aim to invite all students into a broader formational experience that will enable them to grow into persons of a certain kind, blessed with gifts of heart, mind and soul. It is this human formation that provides the context within which Jesuit higher education takes on its proper perspective, its deeper purpose and its true meaning.

Much of what I have discussed here is, to be frank, aspirational and liable to be interpreted as the stuff of promotional materials. To an extent, that is true. However, the aspirational, the articulation of the goal toward which we are working, giving voice to the very reasons why our schools exist—all of this does matter. It can give shape to what we do and the way we do it. If we do not provide a theoretical framework—or a

worldview born of intellect and imagination—for what we do in our academic programs, others will provide them for us. If we do not know who we are as Jesuit universities, others will happily tell us who to be.

I am thinking here not of coercive governmental intrusion but of controlling narrative and value systems that accreditation agencies, professional associations and even our secular colleagues offer as substitutes for the thicker, deeper narrative that is our inheritance as Jesuit schools. We must maintain strong and professionally savvy relationships with all these outside entities, but we must likewise always be careful to safeguard, promote and deepen the distinctive reasons for and faith-fueled convictions behind why we do what we do. We must, in other words, continually articulate aloud and in public, for ourselves and our many constituencies, the spiritual vision that animates everything we do, including our professional education programs.

Jesuit universities are in a privileged position to provide an education that speaks to the deepest desires of our students and at the same time aims to address the most profound needs of our world. Inherited from generations of Jesuit educators and two millennia of Christianity, this is our legacy to preserve and enhance. It is hard for me to imagine more important or rewarding work. In sum, the 21st-century Jesuit university attempts to educate its students by joining excellent academic training with personal and moral formation rooted in the Catholic tradition. When this is done well, those students, now alumni of Jesuit universities, will work hard transforming society, thereby contributing to the labor of God in attempting, as David Fleming, S.J., said, to “work the redemption of the human race.” 



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