

Regional Challenges Jesuit Higher Education Faces in North America

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Introduction

These are challenging times in higher education. These are also times of extraordinary opportunity to re-imagine the mission and purpose of the university. I offer these reflections from the perspective of North America, seeking to capture the forces that frame the work of our colleges and universities, the challenges that define this moment, and the opportunities that are present. These reflections assume three different ways of looking at our work. First, there is the work of *administration*: are we providing the context that will ensure a confidence, a stability, a sense of security that the conditions will be sustained that support teaching and learning, scholarship and research? Our faculty, staff, and students look to us to ensure that we can competently manage the affairs of complex institutions. Second, there is the work of *inspiration*: are we able to interpret for our colleagues the meaning of our Catholic and Jesuit heritage and make it alive in ever new ways, in ever changing circumstances? In the face of a declining number of Jesuits, can we sustain a spirit that will continue to deepen as we move into an uncertain future? Third, there is the work of providing *direction*: can we provide a context that engages our colleagues in imagining the future of our colleges and universities? How do we see ourselves as *generative* – as fostering leadership for a new generation of Catholic and Jesuit higher education?

Our colleges and universities respond to the challenges and opportunities of this moment, not merely by orienting resources and attention to areas where the university is uniquely capable of response, but by framing this response *creatively*, engaging the resources of our Catholic and

Jesuit identity. The Ignatian *magis* signifies not simply amplitude but depth, a deeper richness of insight of how to provide administration, inspiration, and direction for our academic communities – an adaptation in ways that we have not, perhaps, thought of before. The challenge before us is a profoundly spiritual experience of institutional conversion.

Three Forces

There are three large forces that converge to influence the direction of higher education at this moment – globalization, postmodernism, and de-secularization. I believe these three forces impact all of our institutions, but I think there is a particular salience in North America.

Globalization offers the opportunity to connect in places and contexts that would have been unimaginable just a generation ago. Due to advances in both information and transportation technologies, our colleges and universities have the capacity to be interconnected in truly extraordinary new ways. Globalization introduces connectedness in how economies function, in how individuals interact, in the availability of information at lightning speed, and in the awareness, instantaneously, of events of significance.

Postmodernism has led to both the destabilizing of the categories and concepts through which we interpret the world and establish meaning and the acknowledgment of this contingent world view as being reality. Specifically, it gives rise to a relativism about our deepest values.

De-secularization refers to the re-emergence of religion in both public and intellectual life. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 brought an end to the Thirty Years War in Europe, through the Enlightenment and into the Modern era, religion was pushed to the periphery of public and intellectual discourse. Today, religion is re-emerging as a necessary element of such discourse. Religious belief can be used to foment violence. Our religious traditions are also the repositories of our most deeply held values and can be a source for justice and peace. Capturing

what is at stake in this emerging de-secularization is a condition that frames the current context for our colleges and universities.

These influences in North American colleges and universities generate effects that pose seemingly intractable problems. But if we conceive of these influences as giving rise to *tension*, we are poised to embrace creative responses that make solutions possible. As Jesuit institutions, we have a depth and breadth of resources from which to draw. We are the heirs to an extraordinary tradition of education. The resources of our tradition are relevant and adaptive to the challenges of our times.

The tensions arising from these three influences give rise to both challenges and opportunities.

Challenges

First, the influence of these three forces, particularly globalization, will require that our young people secure ever stronger educations. To ensure our graduates can participate in knowledge-based economies will require that we adapt our curricula and our pedagogy. Pressure will come from two competing demands: the need for ever greater specialization while sustaining the breadth of learning that comes through a liberal education. This is a creative tension that will characterize our work in the coming years. Our students come from throughout the world. They return, post-college and university, to a “globalized world,” needing the knowledge and strength to compete against “the best.” From a pedagogical view, we need to look at the necessity of developing “skills” and the imperative of creating the foundation of wisdom that comes from introducing a liberal approach to learning.

Second, this global competitiveness, in all aspects of university life, puts enormous pressure for finances for our schools, for families, and for individual students. No college or

university will be spared the impact of rising expenses and diminishing revenues. In the United States, many of our future students will have either immigrated from Latin America or be first-generation residents or citizens, and may require economic support for tuition and expenses – meaning that increased need for resources coincides with their diminishing availability. Making matters more parlous, for most of the past generation, the “price index” for higher education has outpaced the consumer price index by one to two percent. This rate of growth in revenue is not likely to be sustained in the coming years.

Third, there is a pervasive relativism in our society about values. The Holy Father has devoted considerable intellectual attention to this problem of relativism. In his Homily, *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, addressed to the College of Cardinals on April 18, 2005:

Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,” seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s ego and desires.

Fourth, the new technologies, particularly social networking technologies that sustain a new kind of communication and interconnection among young people, provide a new way of making meaning. These technologies re-imagine the ways our young people create, define, and strengthen their own personal identities and their relationships with others. They are “connected” in ways that would have been unimaginable even just a decade ago. But this greater facility in connecting with others, near and far, does not equate to depth or integrity. This availability of communication networks and the greater sophistication of our students using these new networks can generate a new human loneliness, can slip into superficial contacts and translate these as wisdom or understanding, and can encourage an intellectual and cultural arrogance.

Fifth, specific to our colleges and universities are the changing demographics, specifically the aging of our Jesuit communities, which have been at work now for many years. Traditional structures for leadership will be difficult to maintain and the presence of Jesuits on our campuses will be declining in the coming years.

Sixth, in North America there are cultural challenges that have an impact on how people relate within and emerge from our schools. Nearly a third of our students will cope with the clinical signs of depression during late adolescence and early adulthood, only exacerbated by a pervasive abuse of alcohol in youth culture. Crucial developmental questions that face young people regarding their sexuality are present during their years on our campuses and there is an urgent need to provide supportive communities for our students as they engage these questions.

Finally, there are also questions that touch raw, human – and truly global – concerns: fears about the future of peoples trapped by violence that marks so much of the world, a fear that prompts xenophobia, prejudice, national, racial, ethnic antagonisms. Nearly half the world lives on less than two dollars a day. There are structures and systems that contribute to the marginalization of women in every society. These questions pervade the lives of our communities.

Opportunities

To help us respond to these new challenges, we possess great resources that are unique to Catholic and Jesuit colleges and universities. The resources of our tradition are both relevant and adaptive to the tensions of our times.

First, we have a history of balancing an important creative tension between two aspects of what takes place in our schools. As John O'Malley, S.J. has shared in Four Cultures of the West, our approach to education, with a focus on the humanities, entails a commitment to the

“formation of upright character” and to civic engagement and responsibility. The early Jesuit schools of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries called for an immersion in the arts and letters, “ordered to the common good and the betterment of society.” One of the early creative tensions that Jesuit colleges and universities engaged was the integration of this unique culture emerging from the Jesuit schools with the culture of the academy. Again, as Father O’Malley has shared, in the “Academy,” there is a “certain style of learning and discovery,” a style that is the “analytical, questing and questioning, restless and relentless style in which we in academe are today immersed. It is a style of learning that is never satisfied, that is critical of received wisdom, that is insatiably eager to ask the further question and that is ever ready to propose yet another perspective....” This is the style of learning present in colleges and universities throughout the world.ⁱ

By engaging this tension, we can ensure that resources of our tradition are present in the life on institutions committed to the work of the Academy. Part of this tradition includes a coherent moral framework that integrates the implications of an Ignatian humanism with the body of knowledge captured in the Papal encyclicals articulating Catholic social thought. We need to provide the norms and applications of a renewed Ignatian humanism that emphasizes the genuine interior freedom of our students and faculty and participates in the development of Catholic social thought, most recently extended in the new social encyclical of Pope Benedict, *Caritas in Veritate*.

Second, in addition to a history of balancing this extraordinary creative tension and providing a coherent moral framework in a world increasingly beset by relativism, the Spirituality of St. Ignatius reminds us of our ultimate purpose and provides an incomparable resource for integration and coordination across our institutions. Through the pioneering work of

an extraordinary group of Jesuits following the Second Vatican Council, the resources of the Spirituality are now available to members of all of our communities in ways that are unprecedented. This past generation has witnessed a transformation in the opportunities for our students and faculty to experience the spirituality of St. Ignatius. Through the 19th Annotation, and through a range of retreat programs, there has never been a time when the resources of the Spirituality were more available to our community. It is important to recognize that this availability of new resources to communicate and deepen the Ignatian experience requires that we find ways to provide second- and third-level opportunities for spiritual maturation for our students, faculty, and staff. The establishment of a secure, growing Ignatian culture on our campuses in the face of diminishing Jesuit numerical presence is a presenting issue for our communities.

Third, in a time of greater fragmentation of knowledge, we are heirs to a coherent tradition through which we can make sense of our world. In this tradition, we sustain a commitment to finding the unity in all of our diversity. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his most recent book God, philosophy, universities, identifies the capacity to engage in “theistic” philosophy as a distinctive dimension of a Catholic university. A theistic philosophy assumes an order of things, an underlying unity, a “universe.” A Catholic philosophy will restore a conception of the “universe as created and sustained by God, as embodying his purposes.”ⁱⁱ A university shaped by such an underlying conviction will provide a home for the multiplicity of approaches to understanding our world – the disciplines – but also seek to explore the relationships between these different disciplines, always striving to identify the underlying unity. It is the task of the Catholic university to integrate the disciplines and consider the “bearing of each on the others, and of asking how each contributes to the overall understanding of the nature and order of

things....^{»iii}

Fourth, we participate in what is a truly global system of higher learning. Is there another group of schools that could gather like we will in Mexico City in April, bound by a common history and purpose? We do not have to face the challenges defining this moment in isolation.

Finally, as our world grows more interconnected, the potential for polarization has never been greater. A crucial question we face is whether our religious traditions can enter into authentic dialogue and be sources of understanding and reconciliation. As Charles Taylor has explored in his recent work A Secular Age, we may be entering a new moment in the life of the Academy, where religious discourse can have a legitimate and authentic role.^{iv}

By embracing the challenges and interpreting them through the resources of our tradition, we can engage the tension and seek creative solutions that will ensure our institutions make distinctive contributions in these challenging times.

Faith and Justice

A significant question for Jesuit colleges and universities since Father Arrupe so prophetically expressed the urgency is the reconciliation of the creative tension between the intellectual apostolate and a commitment to social justice. Coming to terms with the demands of this commitment to social justice and harmonizing this commitment with that of the intellectual apostolate has been one of the most challenging questions for a Jesuit college or university community. Our conception of human flourishing entails an understanding that our own wellbeing requires an ever deepening commitment to those who are suffering, including the poor.

One issue that will call us to deepen our commitment to reconciling this tension is immigration. In the United States, the question of reform of current policies and the response to

the needs of the more than twelve million people coping with an uncertain status regarding their future citizenship will be a defining question in these next few years. Estimates for the need for English language instruction alone call for more than one billion hours. Our colleges and universities can play a crucial role in responding to this emerging challenge in North America.

Future Collaboration

The tradition and the history that we share is far greater than the cultural differences and geographical distances that separate us. It is imperative that we link together the talents and resources that are present in our schools. There are themes that have emerged in the past four General Congregations that call for a continuing engagement by the members of our communities. These themes include inculturation, inter-religious dialogue, the integrality of faith and justice, and lay collaboration. The 35th GC provides helpful new ways of interpreting the significance of these themes. There is a deep resonance of the themes that emerged in the 35th GC with those of the 32nd, 33rd, and 34th General Congregations.

But now is the time to deepen our understanding of the demands these themes place upon us as we move forward in this new century. How do we understand the nature of these themes and our responsibility to the development of these themes? Do we gather in Mexico City to celebrate our achievements and to exchange ideas and experiences or are we called to initiate a renewed role for religiously founded reflection, scholarship, and application?

For example, is there a new kind of scholarship in which we can engage that looks to learn from the experiences of those who shaped our understanding of inculturation – Matteo Ricci, Jose de Acosta, Roberto de Nobili. In an age of globalization, the urgency for deepening our understanding of how best to engage with those of another culture could not be greater. Together, working with colleagues across our institutions, could we re-imagine an approach to

inculturation for this new global age?

There are a set of themes that have emerged through the last four General Congregations. These themes are in need of engagement and development. Developing working groups of colleagues from throughout the “global network” of Jesuit institutions, each working on a particular theme, could provide an opportunity for continued work beyond the conference.

Framing Questions for our Future

The influences that characterize this moment: globalization, postmodernism, and de-secularization, and the challenges and opportunities that emerge, require that we live with some very important questions. The following set of questions emerges from the reflections I have offered:

Can we respond to the needs our students will face in a knowledge-based economy with the tension of balancing specialization and liberal learning?

Can we meet the needs of a new population for access to higher education within the framework of an increasingly fragile economic model?

Can we provide a coherent moral framework in response to the challenge of relativism?

Can we support and connect with our young people as they use new social networking technologies to establish the conditions for meaning in their lives?

Can we sustain the Jesuit character and identity of our colleges and universities given the changing face of leadership?

Can a unique dimension of our history and tradition – the integration of our commitment to moral formation and intellectual formation – provide important intellectual and moral resources as we engage the most critical questions of our time?

Can the Spirituality of St. Ignatius serve as a common foundation that can strengthen our capacity for cooperation and collaboration among our institutions?

Can the capacity to seek a unity of knowledge – which comes through a commitment to explore theistic philosophy – provide a foundation for further intellectual collaboration among our institutions?

Can we harness the forces of globalization, especially new information and communication technologies, for greater coordination and collaboration among our institutions?

Do we have a special role to play in what may be a moment of de-secularization of the West?

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Endnotes

ⁱ John W. O'Malley. Four Cultures of the West. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 11.

ⁱⁱ Alasdair MacIntyre. God, philosophy, universities: a selective history of the Catholic philosophical tradition. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009, p. 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 16.

^{iv} Charles Taylor. A Secular Age. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.