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Punching in on the Educational Clock

Intellectual Life at Loyola Baltimore

By Daniel Corrigan

The life of the mind at Loyola College. I've thought around and through the idea, and can't find a single failsafe barometer to measure the "intellectual climate" here. During this semester, U. S. Poet Laureate Kay Ryan spoke, we chewed on a lively film and lecture series on the quality and consumption of food, and the usual procession of gallery shows and minor lecturers appeared. But these are only superficial signs of academic health; the question, put plainly, is how engaged students are by the ideas available to them.

Our newly renovated library deserves a nod. Libraries are containers for books, and books are the most tangible containers for our culture's ideas. After years of sporadic improvements, the major renovation of the Loyola-Notre Dame Library reached its completion in September of 2008. Library attendance soared as students took advantage of the new spaces for study, up-to-date computer labs, and prettier carpets. Ironically, the library's budget dwindled five percent shortly thereafter. Library management cut back operating hours, to the dismay of those longing for books and quiet in the late hours. Loyola students need their study spaces, as do students everywhere.

I'm in search of a finer point, though. Students need libraries and study halls to maintain their GPAs—a very practical consideration—so perhaps library use isn't an entirely adequate gauge, either.

What of the anecdotal evidence? Loyola's young writing department has seen great success, partly through the literary efforts of its own students. In an

economic downturn where print publications are folding every day, Loyola maintains three quality, student-run literary magazines.

On the other hand, a more disturbing example comes to mind. A friend related that she sits on Loyola's honor council, a peer-review system for those accused of misconduct. When one student appeared before them under the charge of plagiarism, he justified his offense by protesting "You couldn't catch me in a grave with a book." Not necessarily a dominant perspective at Loyola, but I would be hard-pressed to say he's the only student to articulate that particular view. Many would rather catch up on primetime soaps like *Grey's Anatomy* than see a production of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* a few hundred yards away in Loyola's McManus Theatre.

The honest answer is that yes, a healthy intellectual climate drives the weather at Loyola, but it's akin to a child's understanding of rainforest ecosystems. It is wonderful, fragile, and easily corrupted by the slash-and-burn tactics of many faculty and students alike.

An undergraduate education has become nearly mandatory as a means to that coveted 60k-and-up starting salary. Unfortunately that's not a value that jives comfortably with classical Jesuit liberal arts educations, and so the first often trumps the second. In due course, more quickly digestible forms replace real intellectual examinations. The liberal arts tradition is easily diced into chunks of conventional knowledge: Nietzsche said "God is dead." Thomas Aquinas wrote *Summa Theologica*. Rome fell to the barbarians. These are all innocuous factoids, but they threaten to overwhelm the daily



discourse of ideas as they come to supplant real discussion and thought, as they sometimes do here. The complexities and challenges of Nietzsche, Aquinas, and Roman history are there for students who choose to engage them—and many do—but too many are more concerned with punching in on the education clock and punching out with a degree.

Loyola is not alone in the predicament. The discourse of ideas is present, but needs amplification. Many universities appear to succumb to the easy role of becoming vast trade schools, providing practical knowledge and skills with no sense of the wealth underlying them.

Some days I worry about my future alma mater. Loyola is in a period of rapid strategic expansion, changing its name to "University"—a move that some still find tempered too much by business sensibilities. These developments could either refine or squelch the intellectual integrity of the college. A larger part of the campus must come to realize that Loyola is an environment that encourages depth, breadth, service, and diversity. Much hinges on the faculty and administration's commitment to ideas over material prosperity. And so much hinges on how well they impart those ideas to their students. ■

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