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WHAT A HARVARD STUDY CAN TEACH US

Fine Arts and Jesuit Education

By Eileen Wirth

In 2001 as my daughter was entering Creighton, I read a study by Richard Light, a professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and John F. Kennedy School of Government, on effective undergraduate teaching and factors that contribute to academic success. One of the most striking findings was the importance of fine arts experiences in promoting achievement and attachment to the campus community.

That fall I saw the study "Making the Most of College" come to life when my business-major daughter won a role in "Guys and Dolls." Her experience mirrored the study's major findings. She made close friends with a diverse group of students, attached to the Creighton community, found an outlet for her creativity and generally got a terrific start in college.

Later when I became fascinated with Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy, including their strong stress on learning through the senses and imagination, I realized that the Harvard study validates the traditional Jesuit emphasis on educating the whole person and building community. This must mean that Jesuit universities stress the arts. Right?

Not necessarily, said Ted Bohr S.J., who directs our campus art gallery. He said that many Jesuit schools have downplayed the arts as part of their effort to compete in academic terms with secular universities. In doing so, they have given up "more imaginative approaches" to education.

"The arts should be central to the spirituality of Jesuit campuses but too often they are not," he said.

In this essay I will present the major germane findings of the Harvard study, discuss their implica-

tions for Jesuit universities and conclude with a plea for a stronger role for the arts on our campuses.

The Harvard Study

The Harvard study asked students what experiences were most important to them and what teaching styles worked best. To Light's surprise, students ranked participation in the arts as very important.

"First, I assumed that most important and memorable academic learning goes on inside the classroom, while outside activities provide a useful but modest supplement," Light wrote. "The evidence shows that the opposite is true: learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital. When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside of the classroom."

Light found that students "characterize the arts as an important source of both pleasure and learning." Many found "joy and release" in participating in music, dance and theater and they also made connections between their participation in the arts and their work in class. The arts helped them develop insights that they could transfer to their classes.

The study also discovered that arts activities "offer special opportunities to interact with and ideally learn

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Saint Joseph's University graduates gather around the St. Joseph the Worker statue after commencement. The statue was created by Maurice Lowe in 1967, and was a gift of the Evening College class of 1966 in memory of Michale F. Maher, S.J., dean.

from fellow students who come from backgrounds unlike their own." It concludes its discussion of the importance of participating in the arts by saying that "if learning about yourself is an integral part of education, engaging with the arts offers a critical and unique opportunity."

Implications for Jesuit Institutions

I would suggest that this study offers at least three major implications for our schools to consider.

(1) Jesuit institutions that have de-emphasized arts experiences in the name of promoting academic rigor should recognize that this is a false dichotomy.

The Harvard study suggests that far from de-emphasizing the arts to compete academically with secular institutions, Jesuit institutions should re-claim their original eminence in such fields as theater in the name of both Ignatian spirituality and effective education. The arts seem to promote the creative and analytical thinking that are essential for academic rigor.

Both St. Ignatius and Harvard researchers agree that it is imperative to educate the whole person whether it is for secular or spiritual motives. As Jesuit campuses increasingly stress their Ignatian identities and spirituality, creating a rich fine arts environment that emphasizes widespread opportunities to participate should become both a pedagogical and mission priority.

(2) Jesuit campuses should incorporate arts experiences in campus ministry and a wide range of co-curricular activities open to all interested students because of their effectiveness in building community

Campus ministry and student life officials need to become aware of the commu-

nity-building benefits of arts experiences that are easy to incorporate into their existing programs. Furthermore the moderate size of most Jesuit schools facilitates widespread opportunities for students to participate in arts experiences.

At large state schools such as I attended the arts have been professionalized and non-majors have fewer opportunities to get involved than students at Jesuit schools with relatively few fine arts majors. As a result the non-fine arts majors at large schools and those that don't emphasize the arts miss out on the

community-building benefits that my daughter experienced from her involvement in theater.

Students come to Jesuit universities seeking community. They participate in activities such as retreats, service, trips, volunteer work with children and liturgies. Arts activities can easily become integral parts of these and many more co-curriculars.

(3) Jesuit campuses should prioritize fine arts programs that celebrate and promote cultural diversity.

The Harvard study's finding about the positive impact of arts experiences in helping students experience diversity is one of its most significant, especially on Jesuit campuses that value diversity but struggle to attract diverse students.

Arts experiences are ideal vehicles for educating students about diverse cultures and for helping minority students gain both visibility and affirmation of their cultures and themselves. Two highlights of our campus life include a Hawaiian Luau given by our Hawaiian student organization (Creighton's attraction to students from Hawaii is an interesting story itself but not part of this piece) and a Native American pow wow. Middle-American students

would be unlikely to experience either of these cultural events were they not held on campus. The affirming messages of such celebrations might even help Jesuit schools attract more students of various backgrounds.

Conclusion

The Harvard study should empower fine arts proponents on Jesuit campuses to proclaim their important role in the total education of our students and their crucial role in building community. It reminds us that we can celebrate the Ignatian vision of creativity and imagination without sacrificing academic rigor.

We need to remember that the world is "charged with the grandeur of God," as the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said, and one of the best ways to open the minds and hearts of students to this vision is through the arts. Future chemists and accountants need to experience the arts as much as future choir directors. Doing so will not only enrich their undergraduate years but eventually make them better chemists, accountants and people who will carry the Ignatian vision into society. ■



Main Hall and Boettcher Commons at Regis University in Denver where students frequently meet, walk from class to class, play frisbee and relax.