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THE CORE AND THE HEART

What makes the system work?

By Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.

In 1892, according to an imaginative report in the Jesuit journal *Woodstock Letters*, two young Jesuit scholastics, on a summer vacation walk in the southern Maryland counties, bored into the very heart of what Jesuit education was all about.

Their names were Theologian and Philosopher, representing the stages of their training. T. had taught high school for three years and was now on track for ordination. P., five years into his training, was champing at the bit, raring to teach. They bragged that there were now a total of 7086 students in the 28 schools. "Our system prevails," said the older T., "because it is a perfect system." Prestige had slipped for a while, he said, because they had been forced to hire laymen; but now there were enough Jesuits to carry on without them. Even Protestant schools, he added, were envious of our *Ratio Studiorum*, the 300-year-old instructional rule book basic to the system's perfection.

Bursting with practical advice, T. told P. how to prepare class: Have the students translate Cicero from the Latin in imitation of the various rhetorical styles — as if Newman, Demosthenes or Gladstone were speaking. Add English courses? Heavens, no. English is no substitute for the ancient Classics. "We can't trim our sails to every wind."

This confident Society of Jesus was in for a shock. In 1893 Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, national leader of university reform and a proponent of the elective system, listed 69 schools from which Harvard Law would accept applicants. No Jesuit school was on the list. This was not anti-Catholic bigotry itself, he said. It's just that Jesuit graduates were too narrowly prepared to do the work.

The decades-long controversy that followed demonstrated that the Jesuit seven-year *Ratio* combination of catechism, public piety, dorm surveillance, sacraments, and Classics was seriously out of step with the American four and four-year high school to college system determined by the accrediting agencies. Indeed, as the articles in this issue by Gerald McKevitt, S.J., John O'Malley, S.J., and John Padberg, S.J., point out, in reality, only a small percentage of Jesuit students completed the course. The failure of Jesuit schools to adapt hurt enrollment; gradually, led partly by Loyola Chicago, they stopped teaching philosophy in Latin, dropped or lowered Greek, Latin, and philosophy and religion requirements so their students could get into accredited graduate schools. And they finally paid atten-

tion to a shelved internal study of the American Jesuit universities in the 1930s, known as the McElwane Report, which revealed that our institutions, in scholarship and academic standards, were inferior to their secular counterparts.

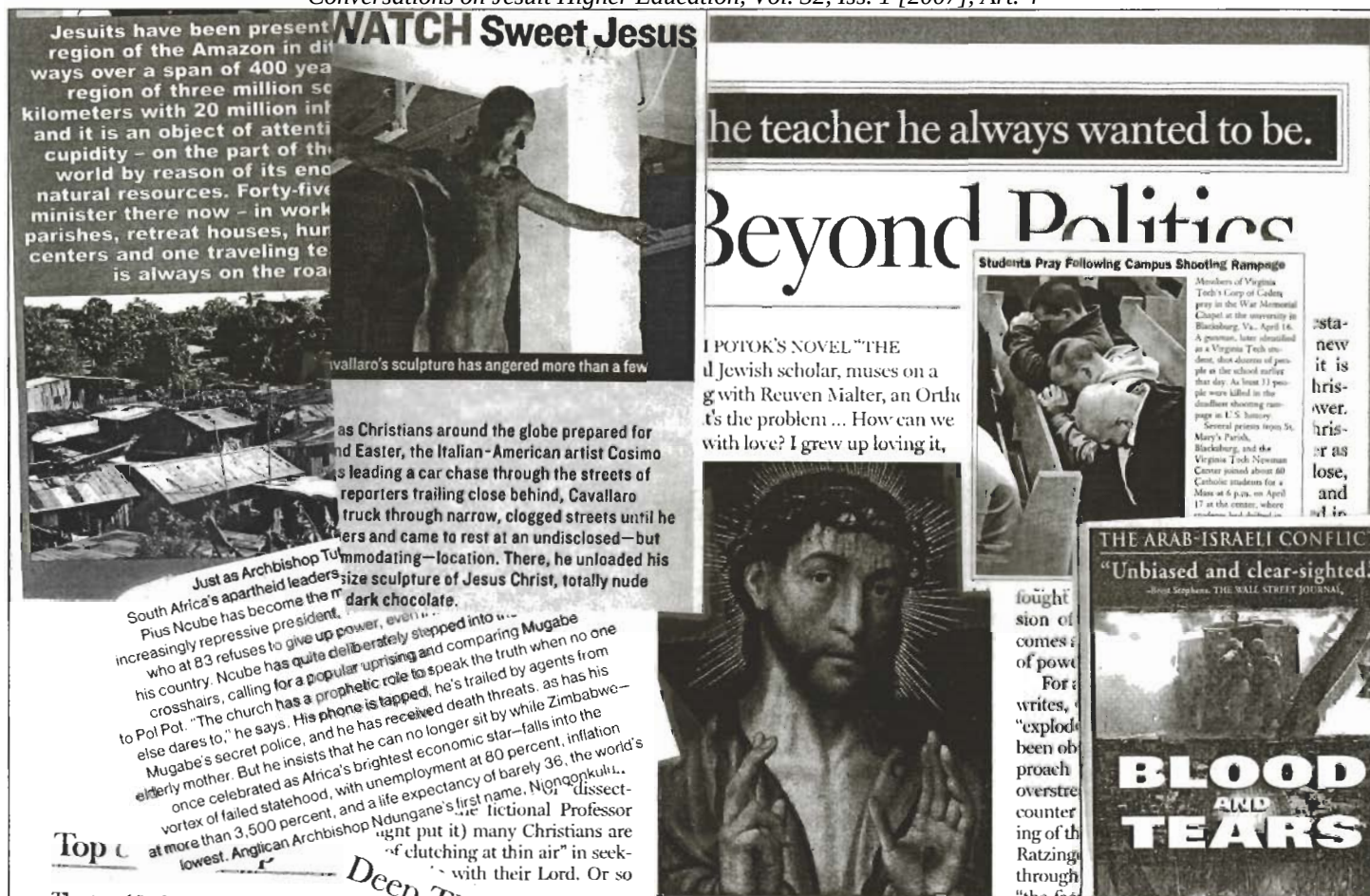
In the 1950s, sometimes called the Golden Age of American higher education, we began to compete with non-Catholic schools by sending Jesuits for PhDs at Ivy League universities. And the 1967 Land O'Lakes manifesto declared that Catholic universities would both match the standards of secular universities and maintain their Catholic character. But it was far from clear that the Catholic character was successfully embodied in the philosophy and theology departments. New reforming presidents, at Boston College and Holy Cross, for example, quickly determined that the theology courses were among those most poorly taught, and some Jesuit veterans were sent into quick retirement.

The Embattled Core

While the major teaches the specialized skills which may prepare one for a profession or simply deepen the intellectual experience by its focus, the core curriculum has always expressed the values of what is called general education, those things which a community, secular or religious, believes all its members should know if the culture, embodied in the school, is to thrive.

But since the 1950s, enriched by federal funds and by the swarm of mature students financed by the G.I. Bill of Rights, what once described themselves as liberal arts colleges, to match their "product" to an ever-expanding "market," have multiplied departments and majors, especially in "commercial" courses, the sciences and social sciences. They have swelled into "universities" by tacking on evening, weekend, business, engineering, medical, law, and nursing schools and

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schools of education. Suddenly, in the 1980s, an upwardly mobile businessman could acquire an "executive MBA" on Saturday mornings; when he can't attend class he can watch a video of the meeting or report in online.

But every new program chipped away at the core. In some schools the overwhelming majority of business and accounting majors set a new ethos: job-oriented students saw the core courses not as the heart of their education but as a "useless," annoying distractions that would never help them get a job. Embattled English professors were reduced to suggesting either that reading Wordsworth was "good in itself," a humanizing experience, or even that literary sophistication made the ornery student more marketable as a business executive.

What's Required?

A sampling of the core chapter rhetoric in contemporary catalogues indicates similar goals: the nine knowledge areas "foster life-long learning and promote the values of faith, leadership, excellence..." (Marquette); "... create a learning community characterized by a commitment to address the funda-

mental problems of society..." (Santa Clara); "...develop the whole human person..." (John Carroll); function in a "pluralistic culture, and an ecumenical age," (Loyola New Orleans).

Meanwhile our accompanying list describing the philosophy and theology requirements in 23 of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities which sent information is an illuminating guide to how the system's "heart" is more or less united, while each member asserts its own character in both major and minor curricular decisions. A close majority (14) require a combined 4 or 5 courses. But there's a remarkable leap between Holy Cross's 2 and Gonzaga's 7. Eleven require an ethics course in either discipline. St. Louis differs in that while the A & S College asks a total of 6 courses, teachers and engineers take only one theology. In a separate survey I made two years ago, only three Jesuit schools allow core courses to be taken pass/fail. This means, in practice, that students in those schools can approach philosophy and theology having determined to do no more than 60 percent of the work.

How does Holy Cross, with its 2 courses, the one remaining Jesuit institution that is purely a liberal arts college, rationalize its not asking more? Between 1968 and 1971 — an era when elite schools

like Brown University, having lost confidence in the traditional canons, responding to more professionalized faculty who didn't want to teach intro courses and students determined to pursue only what interested them, dropped all requirements — the Cross reduced its core from 15 core courses out of 40 to a curriculum based on 32 4-credit courses made up entirely of the major and electives.

For example, Pennsylvania Senator Robert Casey, who writes in this issue of *Conversations* and who graduated in 1981, had no philosophy or theology requirements, but took several because he was interested. The following year it replaced the open electives with a distribution requirement, one or two courses from seven broad areas, two of which are religion and philosophy. The current dean, Timothy Austin, has obtained a foundation grant to assess the curriculum effectiveness.

As far as I know, based on almost 40 years at 5 Jesuit colleges and universities, no school has published a thorough study on how effectively the core courses actually form the values and behavior of the students over four years. I suggest, however, that a study of our schools would show that the core itself is only one of the several ways that Jesuit institutions make their mark on the student soul. Ironically, today's strategy echoes the 19th century, where the community lifestyle, the rhythm of social and religious interaction, in spite of its occasional narrowness and oppression, molded the character. The Jesuit scholastic would reign over the study hall with his stick, then tuck up his black habit under his belt and scoot back and forth on the soccer field with his boys.

Today those scholastics are rare; but the residence life staff, the campus ministry staff of young laymen and women, the psychological and career counselors, and even the coaches and trainers are expected to buy into the Jesuit *mystique* of *cura personalis*. If a significant number of students every year have not worked in a soup kitchen or AIDS hospice, spend a few weeks building huts in Honduras or Mexico, spent a semester in a foreign country, been at least introduced to Liberation Theology through a mass commemorating the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, visited the sick and dying, or demonstrated against the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga., it's not really a "Jesuit" school.

That's good, but not enough.

It means the administration and departments must take hiring for mission more seriously. Don't ask an applicant merely whether he or she is "comfortable" with the mission statement. Ask if he or she

will join a cooperative effort to promote specific goals. The faculty must buy into the idea that all core courses should in some way promote faith and justice. I can imagine some objecting that this interferes with their "academic freedom." But a commitment to the poor and oppressed, for example, is not an obscure Catholic dogma, it's a basic American — and human — priority, embraced by most Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and atheists on our faculties. If it's not a value to the applicant, hire someone else.

ack to the core. As in the first decades of the 20th century, the challenge remains to make the core — which for the most part still represents a Balkanized view of the intellectual life, a disconnected series of visits to little academic fiefdoms where each department dispenses its own basic information to students who would rather be somewhere else — a challenging, integrated, intellectual experience.

We shy away from ideas that Jesuit scholars should leap at, like Columbia University's two-semester course on Western Civilization required of all students. Everyone who graduates from Columbia has read Homer, Plato, Sophocles, Aristotle, Aeschylus and Euripides, Virgil, the Bible, Augustine, Machiavelli, Dante, Hume, Kant, Shakespeare, Hegel, Conrad, Woolf, and many more. How many Jesuit grads have? How many faculty? How many have read Dostoevsky? Or even one whole Gospel? To accomplish this we would have to knock down some departmental walls and start learning from one another.

It's time for some more long summer walks and rethinking our "perfect system." ■