

4-1-1997

Who Are Our Students? And Whose Responsibility Are They, Anyway?

Sue D. Weitz

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Weitz, Sue D. (1997) "Who Are Our Students? And Whose Responsibility Are They, Anyway?," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 11, Article 3.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol11/iss1/3>

Who Are Our Students? And Whose Responsibility Are They, Anyway?

SUE WEITZ

The Challenge

*If we educate only our students' minds,
we have not truly educated them.*

—Fr. Bernard Coughlin, S.J.

If I've learned anything in more than twenty-five years working in the world of students, it is the wisdom of remarks such as the one I quote in my epigraph. Fr. Coughlin made this point during his tenure as president of my home institution, Gonzaga University; but the "we" in the quotation, of course, refers to all of us involved in Jesuit higher education. Taking such a view of education to heart means, among other things, that we resist a kind of thinking common throughout higher education. That way of thinking tells us to educate by compartmentalization, to break up the whole student into fragments, putting parts of him or her into the charge of the professor, and reserving other parts for the student life professional, the chaplain, the counselor, or the coach. Educating the whole person means that we say "no" to the kind of thinking that separates intellec-

tual training from other aspects of a student's development, the kind of thinking that is exemplified in another of my "favorite" quotations, from a former president of the American Association of Higher Education:

Whether or not a student drinks all night and sleeps all day is not the business of the collegiate institutions. Universities are not clinics or parents. They are institutions to provide intellectual training and skills.
(cited by Dalton)

Getting the Big Picture

The very structure of institutions of higher learning, unfortunately, tends to militate against our attempts to focus on the whole student. On my own campus, as

Sue Weitz is Vice President for Student Life at Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington. She would like to thank Ronald Slepitz, Vice President of Student Life at Xavier University of Cincinnati, for his assistance with this article.

we engage in an institutional strategic planning process designed to encourage collaborative discussion among all the University's divisions, I sense a pervasive attitude that academic affairs and student affairs are "separate but equal." Such discussions frequently acknowledge the validity of the notion of educating the whole person espoused by St. Ignatius, but they rarely leap (or even attempt to leap) the conceptual chasm that separates those who are responsible for intellectual development from everyone else.

I am not pointing fingers here. Student affairs people can compartmentalize as well as anyone, and I am sure that many faculty members are as concerned as I am with the institutional tendency to define their role in the student's life as limited to classroom contact. My point is that our common inability to bridge our differences results in a fragmented experience for our students. We tell them that their knowledge is part of their larger character development, that they are learning to put their knowledge to work for others; but in practice we too often allow them—even encourage them—to be dis-integrated persons. One kind of person shows up in a Monday morning ethics class, another at a Thursday night party, and yet another at Mass on Sunday. An Ignatian view of education finds this intolerable, and challenges us to reach for the goal of whole person development through a close partnership among all members of this enterprise. Together, we must form a comprehensive picture of our desired impact on students, embrace our students' total educational process, and find collaborative ways to work toward common goals. Otherwise, we may produce students with the technical skills to become excellent engineers, business people, lawyers, or academics; but we run a high risk that they will not be equipped with the sense of moral obligation to themselves or others which distinguishes those who make lasting contributions from those who only partake in the feast.

Jesuit College Students Today

I am convinced that the way out of our present confusion begins with an understanding of who our students are. How do their attitudes, expectations, and beliefs affect their ability to learn? How should these influence how we structure their education? One of the most important facts to know about students entering Jesuit institutions is that, while their *demographic* characteristics have remained relatively stable over many

years, there have been key changes in how they understand and approach learning, and what they expect from their education (Wernig, 1996). These differences present a serious challenge to all members of the Jesuit higher education community. In the five sections that follow, I outline what seem to me to be five key characteristics or tendencies of Jesuit college students *today*.

(1) GREAT EXPECTATIONS / POOR PREPARATION

Getting good high-school grades does not mean our entering students have spent more hours studying during their last year of high school. Quite the contrary, while almost half our entering freshmen in 1995 (48%) reported their average high-school grade-point average as "A," almost 60% routinely have spent fewer than six hours per week in out-of-class study (Wernig, 1996). Their understanding and expectation of what faculty will demand of them in terms of reading, note-taking, critical thinking, cogent argumentation, and eloquent expression of ideas is dramatically out of line with their practical experience in using these skills in high school. The entering freshman, that is, needs as much to learn how to study as to master what he or she is supposed to be studying.

For students to succeed, they must have a more realistic understanding of the university's demands and be given the opportunity to hone their study skills. Without "dumbing down" our courses, we must work together to find ways to provide those opportunities before the rude awakening of a failing grade forces our students to go looking for help. Both faculty and student affairs colleagues can work much more effectively than we have to date to impress upon students a realistic notion of the demands of intellectual life while giving them the wherewithal to respond to those demands.

(2) CAREER MINDEDNESS

Today, over 60% of our students have chosen their particular institution because "graduates get good jobs," compared to only 41% in 1988 (Wernig, 1995). In short, our students are much more concerned about the "return" they will receive from their "investment" than they were in the past. This cost/benefit ratio is a real concern for students at Jesuit institutions of higher education.

Ironically, employers have indicated that while students are being well prepared in their major fields of

ONE KIND OF PERSON
SHOWS UP IN A MONDAY
MORNING ETHICS CLASS,
ANOTHER AT A THURSDAY
NIGHT PARTY, AND YET
ANOTHER AT MASS ON
SUNDAY. AN IGNATIAN
VIEW OF EDUCATION FINDS
THIS INTOLERABLE.

study, many lack the practical competencies needed to be successful in the workplace, what Bruffee (1993) called "the craft of independence." These competencies include skills in communication, group processes, team work, decision making, and understanding workplace culture (Cappelli, 1992; Ewell, 1994; Frisz, 1984 as cited in Kuh et al., 1994). These are the very competencies which may be developed through a core curriculum that is well integrated with practical out-of-class experiences. At the heart of many of our institutions is such a broad core curriculum. The critical question is how well integrated this curriculum is with a student's out-of-class experiences. In a separate article, Kuh (1996) proposes that the most important attribute of success in the workplace of the future will be openness to new ideas and concepts and adaptability in the application of this new knowledge. He argues for a type of learner who is able to "construct" knowledge rather than merely absorb information.

This presents us with a challenge. The career mindedness of our students today may lead them to devalue the "core" courses and experiences necessary to develop the skills they need for the workplace of tomorrow. We must help students understand the importance of these skills and work to provide them with a setting in which they can integrate their experience of the core. Universities are being urged to create "seamless learning environments" where undergraduates' activities and experiences—courses and out-of-class activities both on and off campus—are intentionally arranged to be mutually supporting (Kuh, 1996). The research on the impact of college on a student's development clearly and unequivocally supports the notion that students change as whole, integrated persons as a result of engaging in a broad range of academic and nonacademic activities (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

(3) MONEY WORRIES

Students are continuing to rely on financial aid, in general, and college grant money, in particular, to finance their education. More and more, they choose institutions on the basis of financial assistance packages. The pressures on institutions to increase grant money to attract students is obvious. In a four-year period there has been a 33% rise in the number of students indicating they would receive \$1500 or more in college grant money (43% in 1995 vs. 32% in 1991; see Wernig, 1996). Greater portions of university oper-

ating budgets by necessity are being devoted to financial aid, leaving fewer dollars available for other necessary program enhancements. These trends also mean that students are under greater pressure to get good grades, since their financial aid is based on maintaining a high grade-point average. The stress for students caught in this scissors is enormous. For example, students at my own institution who are doing "B" work often feel they have to drop classes in order to raise their averages to the required 3.2 necessary for financial aid renewal.

In addition, more of our students must work to make ends meet. When this work is on-campus in areas that develop skills, contacts, and experiences relevant to their future aspirations, it can complement the student's education. Too often, however, the student resorts to off-campus employment that carries a higher hourly wage but less relevance to his or her education. Off-campus employment takes students away from the very involvements that can teach them the kinds of skills outlined in section (2), above (Astin, 1982; Ehrenberg and Sherman, 1987).

(4) PROBLEM DRINKING

The use of alcohol on college campuses has serious consequences for students individually, and for the environment in which non-drinking or moderately drinking students must live. While students have always socialized and while that socialization has often included drinking, the way students drink has changed.

Students today drink to get drunk. *Binge drinking*—defined as having five or more drinks for men and four or more drinks for women in one sitting—is the leading substance-abuse problem in American college life (Harvard School of Public Health Study, 1995). While this drinking has a variety of serious adverse effects on students who binge—including unplanned sexual activity, damage to property, personal injury, trouble with police, and academic performance problems—it also affected adversely 87% of the non-binge drinkers who lived on campuses. Today's drinking students binge approximately three times a week. Alcohol is involved in more than 40% of all academic problems, and 28% of all drop-outs. Poor grades are also highly correlated with the use of alcohol (Center, 1994).

Such binge drinking inevitably affects the "student culture," the environment in which students study—or learn not to study, or are prevented from studying. This is of especially great concern for us in Jesuit institu-

BINGE DRINKING IS THE LEADING SUBSTANCE-ABUSE PROBLEM IN AMERICAN COLLEGE LIFE.

tions, because studies have shown that our students are at an even higher risk of alcohol abuse and binge drinking than are students at other institutions. Students in private institutions binge drink more than those who attend public colleges and universities. Students in Jesuit universities are more likely to binge drink, drink more drinks per week, and experience negative consequences at a higher frequency than those who attend other four-year institutions. White, nineteen-year-old, Catholic, male students form the category most at risk of abusive drinking (Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 1994; and Wernig, 1990).

Again, this drinking is of concern not just because of the adverse impact alcohol has on those who abuse it, but also because of its effects on the entire campus community and especially on the non-drinker or moderate drinker whose studies suffer, who is subject to harassment or assault, or who feels alienated from the campus culture. Binge drinking is an issue whose impact on our campuses is so pervasive that we cannot relegate it to those responsible for managing the out-of-class environment. The research on binge drinking indicates that colleges create or perpetuate their own drinking cultures through their selection of students, traditions, policies, and other practices (Harvard School of Public Health, 1995). If we are to combat the impact of binge drinking on Jesuit campuses, we must, as a campus community, work together to create a culture that does not reinforce the practice.

(5) MEN AND WOMEN FOR . . . ?

Many students entering Jesuit education today have been fortunate enough to have experienced all the benefits society has to offer. At the same time, today's students have first-hand experience with the "dysfunctional family." They have been touched, either directly or through friends and acquaintances, by domestic violence, legal skirmishes, and economic disasters. They have available to them at least as many models of unhealthy as of healthy relationships with and among adults. They have been affected by child care and working parents, graphic violence in news and entertainment, experimentation with family structures, and increased use of medication such as anti-depressants. Their measuring stick for judging their own families reveals that many families fall short of the ideal. Contemporary scholarship has given them the language to identify the issues without providing the resources to deal with them.

Our students' attitudes on public issues sometimes

differ sharply from the official positions of the Catholic Church. For example, while our students are becoming more wary of casual sex (38% of 1995 freshman agree that "if two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time" compared with 45% in 1991), they tend to adopt attitudes—both conservative and liberal—which differ from Jesuit and Church positions.

While first-year students entering our institutions continue to agree that "to help support others in difficulty" is an important goal (73%), their commitment to "promoting racial understanding" and "influencing social values" in relation to the extent of racial discrimination in the United States has weakened. More than half of entering freshman in 1992 reported that "promoting racial understanding" was an important life goal, compared with only 40.5% of 1995 freshman (Wernig, 1996). This downward trend, while paralleling a national trend, presents a special challenge to Jesuit colleges and universities, where social justice issues and leadership development are considered part of the institution's mission.

Our students are disenchanted with the political process and do not believe they have much influence in changing society. Declining percentages of first-year students report frequently discussing politics (22% in 1995, down from 31% in 1991), and keeping up to date with politics (42% in 1995, 54% in 1991). Even more striking, while 85% of the entering students in 1995 believed racial discrimination is a problem in the United States, only two in five, as noted above, felt they needed to take personal responsibility for doing something about it. Obviously, our ability to promote a concern for social justice is challenged by such attitudes among our students (Wernig, 1996).

On the other hand, our first-year students continue to report widespread participation in volunteer activities. Eighty-five percent (compared with 79% in 1991) performed volunteer work during their last year of high school, and 65% (compared with 60% in 1991) tutored other students in high school. Are these rates due primarily to the increasing tendency of high schools to require volunteer work, or are they impressive evidence of the "concern for others" Jesuit institutions promise to develop? If we believe the former to be true, how can we work to transform our students' understanding of what they do when they sign up to help? If the latter, how can we help them to develop the gift that they bring us?

Preparing students to assume greater leadership

roles in society has recently been recognized as a key challenge facing higher education. The Wingspread Group (1993), responding to society's waning confidence in higher education's ability to make a difference in the lives of students and society, challenges all of us:

A disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs of higher education and what it is receiving. Nowhere is this mismatch more dangerous than in the quality of undergraduate preparation What does our society NEED from higher education? It needs stronger, more vital forms of community. It needs an informed and involved citizenry. It needs graduates able to assume leadership roles in American life Above all it needs a commitment to the idea that all Americans have an opportunity to develop their talents to the fullest. Higher education is not meeting these imperatives.

These imperatives are the very promise of Ignatian education, properly delivered.

Issues Facing Our Institutions

It is important to understand how this portrait of our students, in the context of the financial, educational, and socio-economic climate of higher education today, presents practical problems for our commitment to an Ignatian vision of education. In the words of Fr. Andrew J. Thon, S.J., "The goal of Jesuit education is not merely to gather information, acquire knowledge, gain academic competence, or develop the mind":

The graduate of a Jesuit school must also be someone who has also matured physically, psychologically, socially, aesthetically, ethically, sexually, and spiritually; someone who has developed compassion and heartfelt values. (Thon 15)

Many issues and challenges surface for our institutions when we combine this vision with who our students are, in the context of today's higher education climate. Sooner or later, our Ignatian commitment and our students' needs always lead to competing demands for increasingly limited resources, as budget committees, financial administrators, academic leaders, and student-affairs personnel confront, balance, and resolve issues such as the following:

1. Many of the new challenges of contemporary col-

lege students—AIDS, alcohol-related violence, overcoming the tensions caused by various kinds of diversity—require that institutions offer new services to address these needs. Such services cost money. Meeting these new needs may conflict with institutional constraints and raises the challenge of how to order our priorities.

2. The push towards technology with its increased reliance on computers, connection to educational networks and the internet, distance learning, and new modes of multimedia presentation, places added demands on the resources necessary to fund adequate teaching and learning. At the same time, faculty and staff are challenged to stay current on these emerging technologies and their applications.

3. The desired increase in diversity of the student body presents institutional challenges in programming, financial aid, and educational styles.

4. Our time as faculty and student affairs professionals is focused on the outstanding students and the problem students, ironically marginalizing the majority of our typical students. We are challenged to deliver the best of Ignatian education to the broadest reaches of our student body.

5. Our students are increasingly anxious to define their post-graduation career options and to see their academic preparation as relevant to these options. This presents a challenge to faculty, advisors, and career counselors, and requires a level of institutional coordination that we have hardly begun to achieve.

Issues such as these present us with a challenge of forming a different kind of community, what I like to call an Ignatian community of learners.

Creating a Community of Learners

Pursuing the goal of Ignatian education means we must be prepared to embrace change. In my view, we must broaden our notion of the learning environment beyond the classroom to incorporate more completely new pedagogical approaches. Such approaches include collaborative and cooperative learning, service learning and experiential learning, problem- and project-based learning, and case-method teaching. These incorporate, as well, a host of new instructional technologies (Hutchings, 1996). Pursuing these new approaches would involve a recognition that Ignatian education of the whole person is defined in terms of what students

actually learn. Students are at the center of our collective enterprise. And focusing on students requires that we form new partnerships.

But experience shows that when faculty and administrators, especially student-affairs administrators, try to move toward building partnerships, tensions emerge. To understand what gives rise to these tensions, it may help to examine the similarities and differences between faculty and student-affairs professionals. Each group has a distinctive style, and makes a distinctive contribution. Elizabeth Blake, vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Minnesota at Morris, argues that our differences may be traced to the fact that academic affairs and student affairs tend to attract different kinds of people. She cites different styles of interacting with the world, differing views of what constitutes formal learning, and different emphases on community and individuality. Yet while she maintains that the cultures of the faculty and student affairs are different, she believes each may benefit from greater understanding of the other (Blake, 1996).

K. Patricia Cross uses the analogy of various lenses focused upon student learning, arguing that to address student learning on our campuses more effectively, we need to bring our vision of learning into clearer focus. Student-affairs practitioners, she argues, focus either on the needs of individual students (using their “counselor lens”) or on the broader campus community (looking through an “administrative lens”). She believes that a greater emphasis on activities and experiences that promote student learning might produce a salutary integration of these views. In the case of the faculty, she argues, their lenses are focused clearly on student learning within their disciplines, but to the exclusion of the total learning experience, in which the student integrates coursework, study, personal experiences, relationships, and the practical aspects of living (Cross, 1996). An Ignatian view of education calls us to this higher goal of mutual understanding and collaboration to promote student learning.

Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, stated in June of 1989 at the assembly at Georgetown University, “Without attention to the other dimension of the student’s development, our education runs the risk of remaining cerebral, not fully human in its quest for God’s love and guidance.” Faculty and student affairs professionals need to work together to attain the type of environment where student learning can flourish.

One way this might occur is through a greater

AN IGNATIAN VIEW OF
EDUCATION CALLS US
TO THIS HIGHER GOAL
OF MUTUAL
UNDERSTANDING AND
COLLABORATION TO
PROMOTE STUDENT
LEARNING.

emphasis on personal connections and opportunities for interaction among students, faculty, and student affairs staff. Such connections should occur within an educational context and should be focused on discussing life experiences and learning, preferably in small group or one-to-one settings. For the student, such contact offers the opportunity for greater involvement, reflection on his or her own learning and learning in general, and the possibility of creating greater connections between his or her life experiences and studies. For faculty and staff members, such interactions lead to their own critical reflection on what factors foster learning. It promotes what Cross (1996) terms "profession-*al inquiry*," targeted on student learning experiences.

Richard Light (1992), a faculty member at Harvard, has argued for the establishment of learning communities as a tool for promoting more comprehensive student learning. In these communities, courses are linked to common themes. Students take classes together in sequences as self-contained cohorts. They live together, promoting a group identity, cohesion, and purpose. The goal is the creation of a seamless learning environment. Service-learning programs have also been successful in linking the classroom to broader life issues.

Through it all, the challenge to student affairs professionals is to accept their responsibility for being integral to the institution in educating students. Student affairs people must shift their focus from administrative and activities functions to creating learning communities. They also must become more responsible for assessing the effectiveness of learning outside the classroom (Cross, 1996).

For faculty, the challenge is to find opportunities to extend the learning environment beyond the classroom, working in partnership with the student affairs staff skilled in this domain. Such work is likely to be most productive when it is focused on enhancing student learning and geared toward creating an integrated, Ignatian vision of learning. Such collaborative efforts are unlikely to be effective unless institutional reward structures favor such efforts.

The Ignatian educational vision challenges us to review our institutions. But this challenge comes at a time when our institutions are caught in a "higher education trap." This trap consists of the imperatives imposed by our three perennial challenges: the challenge (most recently in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*) to be Catholic; the challenge from secular universities and accrediting bodies to meet academic standards; and the

challenge from the marketplace to make ends meet. This "trap" is sometimes expressed as, "We'll be doing well merely to meet the last two challenges adequately, while still maintaining a Jesuit presence and a religious studies requirement. Surely this is enough!" It is not enough. If we stick with the same way of doing things, we cannot meet the enormous challenges that our students pose for us. We will fail both them and ourselves if we send them out as highly skilled students who may be good engineers or lawyers, but who have little sense of moral obligation to themselves and to others, and who have no sense of their lives as lived for the greater glory of God.

Works Cited

- Astin, A. W. *What Matters in College: Four Control Years Revisited*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- Astin, A.W. *Minorities in American Higher Education: Recent Trends, Current Prospects, and Recommendations*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1982.
- Binge Drinking on American College Campuses: *A New Look at an Old Problem*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard School of Public Health, Department of Health and Social Behavior, 1995.
- Blake, Elizabeth S. "The Yin and Yang of Student Learning in College." *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience* (September/October 1996): 4-9.
- Bruffee, K. A. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Cappelli, P. "College, Students, and the Workplace: Assessing Performance to Improve the Fit." *Change* 24 (1992): 55-61.
- Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. *Rethinking Rites of Passage: Substance Abuse on America's Campuses*. A Report by the Commission on Substance Abuse at Colleges and Universities. New York: Columbia University, June 1994.
- Cross, Patricia. "New Lenses on Learning." *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience* (March/April 1996): 4-9.
- Dalton, J. "Region V & VI Presentation." Conference of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Salt Lake City, Utah, March 1995.
- Ewell, P.T. "Restoring Our Links with Society: The Neglected Art of Collective Responsibility." *Metropolitan University* 5 (1994): 79-87.
- Ehrenberg, R. and D. Sherman. "Employment While in College, Academic Achievement, Postcollege Outcomes: A Summary of Results." *Journal of Human Resources* 22 (1987): 1-23.
- Frisz, R.H. "The Perceived Influence of a Peer Advisement Program on a Group of Its Former Peer Advisors." *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 62 (1984): 616-619.
- Hutchings, P. "Building A New Culture of Teaching and Learning." *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience* (November/December 1996): 4-8.
- Kuh, G.D. "Guiding Principles for Creating Seamless Learning Environments for Undergraduates." *Journal of College Student Development* (1996): 37, 135-148.
- Kuh, G.D. "Some Things We Should Forget." *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience* (September/October 1996): 10-15.
- Office for Substance Abuse Prevention. *Alcohol Practices, Policies, and Potentials of American Colleges and Universities*. Rockville, Maryland: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1991.
- Pascarella, E.T. and P.T. Terenzini. *How College Affects Students*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- Thon, Andrew J., S.J. *The Ignatian Perspective: The Role of Student Affairs in Jesuit Higher Education*. Marquette University, May 1990.
- Wernig, Stephanie R. "Entering Freshman at Jesuit Colleges and Universities: An Executive Summary." *Summary of Cooperative Institutional Research Program*. Los Angeles, California: University of California, Fall 1988-1995.
- Wernig, Stephanie R. "Freshmen at Jesuit Institutions." Unpublished Summary Report. Creighton University, 1996.
- Wernig, Stephanie R. "Alcohol and Drug Survey." Unpublished Report. Creighton University, 1990.
- Wingspread Group in Higher Education. *An American Imperative-Higher Expectations for Higher Education*. Racine, Wisconsin: Johnson Foundation, 1994.

