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Academic Excellence Is Not Enough: The Moral Formation of Our Students

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Few college faculty should be surprised at the conclusions of a recent study, "What We Know about Cheating in College." Responding to a 1993 survey conducted at nine state universities, slightly more than half of the students admitted cheating on exams, double the percentage of a similar inquiry thirty years earlier. Nor does intellectual honesty improve at small, highly selective schools, though institutions with honor systems fared somewhat better.[1] This survey illustrates what we already know: that college students tend to replicate the behavior of a society in which moral and ethical values are up for grabs. As recent history demonstrates, Watergate with its systemic corruption was not an isolated phenomenon, nor have moral deficiencies been the exclusive province of politicians. Accounts of significant ethical lapses in business, religion, education, law, medicine, and family life have been splashed all over the media for the past quarter century.

American higher education must shoulder its share of the blame. Until the 1960s a broad consensus argued that ethics and action were related, that if students were trained in values, certain desirable behaviors would follow. For America's founders, the success of the republican experiment depended upon the public virtue of its citizenry and education had a crucial role to play. Ethical formation began at any early age. Stories in the McGuffey Readers, for example, sought to implant a moral compass in young people. Nineteenth-century institutions of higher education assumed a moral foundation in their students and sought to build on it. In addition to requiring moral philosophy or ethics of all students, they frequently mandated chapel exercises and copied West Point's honor system. Much of this dropped by the way-side, however, after World War II. Recognizing the consequences, over twenty years ago, Alan Pifer, president of

the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, urged institutions of higher education deliberately to foster moral qualities such as honesty, tolerance, humanitarianism, and humility.[2]

Ignatius of Loyola was no stranger to such pedagogy. Academic excellence was not enough, nor was it even his principal goal for students who came to Jesuit schools. In the section of the Jesuit *Constitutions* that dealt with higher education, he wrote, "Very special care should be taken that those who come to the universities of the Society to obtain knowledge should acquire along with it good and Christian moral habits." And he proposed that students, lay as well as Jesuit,

[1]Donald L. McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, "What We Know about Cheating in College," *Change* (January-February 1996): 29-33.
[2]Alan J. Pifer, "A Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame," *The Catholic Mind* 73 (October 1975): 48-54.

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give regular exhortations designed to encourage "moral habits" in their confreres, while teachers should "inspire the students to the love and service of God our Lord, and to a love of the virtues by which they will please Him." Behavior that violated Christian moral values was not to be tolerated. As President Frank Rhodes of Cornell pointed out a few years ago, for Ignatius "moral excellence was the ultimate goal of Jesuit education."[3]

How does a university "in the Jesuit tradition" translate that concern into action at the end of this century? Virtually all Jesuit schools regard themselves as student-centered and proclaim the formation of "men and women for others" as a major goal. Professedly, the education is value laden, rather than value free; and at the core of those values is the recognition of the God-given dignity and worth of each person. This is expressed most obviously in the way in which faculty, students, staff, and administrators treat one another. Newcomers to our institutions quickly recognize this quality and frequently describe the atmosphere in interpersonal terms such as mutual concern, respect, interest, and support. Moral formation goes deeper, however, to work against the privatization of religion and values which has so marked American culture since at least the 1960s.

A Catholic university should reflect the values of a Catholic intellectual and moral tradition, which, frequently enough, is profoundly counter-cultural in American society today. Even when objectives coincide, motivations can be very different. School policies combat racism and sexual harassment, for example, not because a "rights"-based culture frowns on such conduct or deems it politically incorrect, but because such behavior denies central Christian values. Other school policies should follow suit, from the regulations governing dormitories and fraternities to a just salary scale and benefits program established for part-time faculty. Sound policies demonstrate the Catholic character of the institution; and, like wise laws, they have an educative function for the whole academic community.

But by no means do they exhaust the possibilities for moral formation. Indeed, moral values and the formation of conscience are apt subjects for explicit reference and conversation both in and out of the classroom. Nor are they the exclusive province of ethics professors, campus ministers, or the Jesuits and other men and women religious. In their personal lives as well as professional responsibilities, all members of the university community—from the sports coaches to the reference librarians to the resident hall advisers—can model personal integrity. And a multitude of creative possibilities exist both in explicitly academic settings and collaborative efforts between faculty members and student life personnel outside the classroom.

Whether or not in fact any of this happens, however, depends on the people who comprise the academic community. To develop a distinguished faculty, Jesuit schools have increasingly sought to hire individuals for their demonstrated scholarly as well as teaching potential and provide them with the facilities, grant support, and time necessary for research. If Jesuit institutions are also seriously committed to moral formation, then hiring committees and administrators need to consider the moral values and ethical concerns of potential faculty, staff, and administrators; and opportunities for their continued development must be provided after they are on board. Further, if we recognize, as Ignatius did, that students are most influenced by their peers, admissions officers need to seek out students interested in and capable of the kind of values formation that a truly Jesuit institution envisions. Today we deliberately recruit faculty, staff, administrators, and students for diversity. Should we not also recruit specifically for values? If so, then that needs to be reflected in literature such as viewbooks and catalogs as well as in the hiring and admission processes.

In terms of maintaining and enhancing a distinctive Jesuit character into the next century, the commitment to moral formation is of critical importance. We need to think creatively about ways in which to broaden and deepen that effort, particularly in the curriculum and student life. The goal of academic excellence cannot substitute for the effort to prepare women and men of moral purpose and the highest personal standards of conduct. In this respect, Jesuit schools have historically been ahead of the game. They should stay that way.

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[3]Ignatius Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans. and ed. by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis, 1970), pp. 223, 224; Frank Rhodes, "The Meaning and Ministry of Jesuits in Higher Education," *America*, July 29-August 5, 1989, p. 56. Also helpful for the contrast between secular education and Jesuit education is Joseph A. Tetlow, S.J., "The Jesuits' Mission in Higher Education: Perspectives and Contexts," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, November, 1983 and January, 1984.