

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 11

Article 8

4-1-1997

Engaging Our Students

Kathleen Orange

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

Recommended Citation

Orange, Kathleen (1997) "Engaging Our Students," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 11, Article 8.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol11/iss1/8>

Engaging Our Students

KATHLEEN ORANGE
SPRING HILL COLLEGE

Because our students' attitudes and preparation are often startlingly different from those of ten or so years ago, teaching is more difficult. The appreciation of mutual effort, which is the basis upon which true friendship between student and teacher is founded, is becoming more and more rare. It is hard to believe in one's own work when so few students really seem able to learn what we have to teach or are willing to undertake the discipline needed to learn. The faculty try to maintain a sense of balance by telling stories of student behavior that is beyond the boundary, that trespasses respect and at times even reality. Students are often so unaware of norms that it is hard to communicate with them about the problems with their work. In short, fewer and fewer students present themselves as persons who can engage what we are about, and we know that expecting Student Life to "fix" this is fatuous, something to say when we don't know what to say.

Five years ago, Spring Hill College began to offer students from the local metropolitan area one-quarter tuition scholarships in return for a commitment to community service. Students thus recruited come from a broad cross-section of academic ability and motivation. Our programs emphasize direct service to individuals: tutoring at-risk public school students, visiting the elderly, teaching English as a second language, for example. In a surprising contrast to their behavior in the classroom, students engaged in service work manifest a responsible, self-directed attitude. They plan projects for the elder care group, insist on the right materials for their English classes, consult with middle-school teachers about the work and behavior of the middle-school students they tutor. This sample of ordinary students, the same group that does not seem to take responsibility in the classroom, manifests alert intelligence in a different setting.

Seeing our students so engaged in service situations has given me an intuition about who they are and what they are capable of that is different from that of my colleagues. The students I see in the classroom are the same students who approach, say, Jamal's learning and behavior problems so resourcefully. Despite their classroom demeanor, then, I assume they are capable of mastering a text, learning how Congress works, engaging this material. I challenge them, fuss at them, quiz them every day, decide what the key things are and repeat them many times. I allow extended discussions of their favorite political and moral questions, knowing they are trying to get somewhere with the stock positions they repeat.

Perhaps because our students are underprepared, busy, working earlier, and involved with social life, the college classroom is no longer where they show the best of themselves; and education does not seem to engage the development of their life project in the passionate way it did when we baby boomers were in college. We have an enormous job to win and keep their attention, to appreciate the triggers to their initiative, and to remember that the human person needs knowledge as much as air and water. My privileged glimpse of the heart our students bring to their service gives me tools and faith for teaching, a happy sense of possibility.