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## From the Editor: Excellence. Where is it? On Doing Things Well

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## From the Editor

# Excellence. Where is it? *On Doing Things Well*

Excellence, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. But in the intellectual life — and especially in the education profession — we must use words as precisely as we can. Inevitably, as Michael McFarland, S.J. suggests in his essay, the words “to excel” have the ting of an athletic competition in their resonance.

It reminds me of a story during the First World War. The troops on the ship on the way to France decided to entertain themselves by staging a boxing match between the army and the navy, and my father was chosen to fight for the army. All assembled on the deck, the bell rang and the boxers came out of their corners and started sparring around. The fighters got into a clinch and the sailor said, “No need to overdo this. Let’s just put on a show for them and take it easy.”

“No,” said my father. Let each man do his best.” And he knocked the sailor out of the ring.

Yet, excellence is not synonymous with winning. Watch the marathon runners who stumble across the finish line two hours after the winners have crossed. Some are handicapped, elderly, very young, blind or lame. They have excelled in stamina, determination, character. The runners have a saying, “To compete is to win.”

The various magazine rankings — *U. S. News and World Report* and *Washington Monthly* — are useful, but not the last word. Jesuit schools, for the most part, do well. *The London Times Higher Education World* survey includes Boston College (161) and Georgetown University (164) among the top 200 universities in the world. *U.S. News* lists Georgetown, Boston College, Fordham, Marquette, St. Louis, and Loyola Chicago among the top 191 national universities and 19 Jesuit schools among the best regional universities, most in the first 10-20 in their regions. Xavier is singled out for its first year experience, Loyola New Orleans for its service learning, Georgetown and St. Louis for study abroad, and Saint Peter’s for diversity.

*Washington Monthly*, using different criteria, lists eight Jesuit schools among its top 50 master’s universities, and seven in the first 90 among 258 national universities. Holy Cross, our only strictly liberal arts college, is 15 out of 252. *First Things* magazine offers 100-word sketches evaluating 103 colleges and universities, including seven Jesuit institutions, on how well they conform to the editors’ conservative flavor of Catholicism. Charts list no Jesuit schools among the 12 “most Catholic” and four among the “least Catholic.” Their conclusions can be enjoyed even when they cannot be believed.

In the Jesuit educational tradition, therefore, the high school, college, or university is not really “Jesuit” if anything less than one’s best becomes acceptable. There is a correlation between how well students perform and how much they are challenged to attempt. Even a college with fewer resources — low endowment, students less prepared by their high schools, space shortage, etc. — can pursue *eloquentia perfecta*, which translates as: demanding lists of required classic readings, daily written assignments, tough sanctions on plagiarism, frequent exams or quizzes, and insisting that every student learn how to stand up in front of an audience and speak intelligently for ten minutes without saying “kinda,” “like” or “y’know.” The classic image of the Jesuit-trained young man or woman for a long while has been the one who could analyze and argue rationally. That is a goal to which every institution can aspire, regardless of the size of the football stadium.

Excellence has many faces. In this issue we try to answer the question: Excellence, where is it? To some degree we have focused on standard sign posts — honors programs, Alpha Sigma Nu, etc — but we have reached out. We wrote directly to the presidents of all 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and invited them to send short descriptions and pictures of one person or activity which illustrates excellence on their campus. They responded with a rich list of scholars, an athletic coach, teaching methods, a book fair, student research, and service projects. They demonstrate that the ideal Jesuit student is not just a walking brain but a complex person who travels, works, runs, competes, prays, and serves.

We have opened our discussion with general articles on the history of excellence as a Jesuit concept, suggested norms by which it may be achieved, the high school generation approaching our gates, a challenge for excellence in professional education, a student’s report on an excellent service experience, and a warning that we may still have a way to go. Examples follow.

Finally, our Talking Back section exemplifies how the main goal of this publication may be achieved, with three essays following up on the previous “Core Wars” theme and one adding more insights to our Donna Freitas interview on the hook-up culture on our campuses. And now we welcome your responses. I’m sure we may have left someone or something out. ■

RASsj.