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At the Frontier and in the Heart: Jesuit Schools

Today's high school students, tomorrow yours

By Kent Hickey

It's said that the only place without tension is the grave. If that's true, Jesuit secondary schools are alive and well. It's a good tension but, even so, it doesn't always make for easy living.

Our companions in Jesuit universities know this tension well. We share the same ideals and principles that shape who we are and what we do. We also share the understanding that, although our excellence is born from these principles, they do not coexist in perfect harmony. We are, for example, people of the *magis*, but also of *cura personalis*. Therefore, we strive for the more, but also care for the person. This striving and caring often create friction.

Leaders at our schools are charged with the additional responsibility of exercising *cura apostolica*, care for the apostolic work (the school itself), and this layer chafes as well. What is good for the institution is not always good for the individual, and this sometimes leads to hard choices and the tension that comes with them.

We are not Jesuit schools - middle, secondary, or university - if any of these basic principles are missing. So, it follows, we are also not truly Jesuit without the tension that's produced as they rub up against each other. This dynamism fuels our shared "way of proceeding."

There is clearly, however, a greater tension in the air in secondary schools than the normal tension that exists simply because of who we are. Decree 1, a document written in response to Pope Benedict's remarks to the Jesuits at General Congregation 35, describes a dual challenge that points to the source of this extra-ordinary tension. Pope Benedict reminded the Society of Jesus of the essential role it plays at the edges and urged Jesuits to continue to "...reach new social, cultural, and religious frontiers." However, during this time of complex

changes, the Pope also exhorted the Society to "...faithfully help the Church" within its heart.

This image - pushing forward to new frontiers while remaining in the heart of the Church - helps us better understand the heightened tensions that are surfacing at a number of intersecting points. I suggest to our fellow educators in Jesuit higher education that often these tensions are first realized most acutely at the high school level. These tensions are shaping our work and also shaping the students we work with - students who will soon land on your doorsteps.

Preferential option for the poor/an option for the middle class

We are fortunate that the wealthy are attracted to our high schools and universities. Many of our benefactors grew up in middle income, blue collar families who "made it" because of the excellent education they received from Jesuits in the decades after WWII. This education was heavily subsidized by "vow of poverty" labor, a subsidy that no longer exists. Generally 80 percent of a school's expenses come from labor costs, and our tuition rates reflect the rightful commitment to pay just wages and benefits to faculty and staff.

As these costs necessarily rise, so do our tuition rates. We rely upon a solid core of wealthy parents to not only pay these higher rates but also to join other benefactors in contributing to capital and other needs. However, we are also committed to Fr. Pedro Arrupe's call to exercise a preferential option for the poor. This frontier, to reach out to those on the socio-economic margins of society, rightfully requires that we provide financial aid to those in need, and our schools are



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How to Build a Perception of Greatness
But these five suggestions can help.
It's hard to bottle the buzz about a hot college.

MEASURING STICK *First in a series*

The Quality Question

BY DAVID GLENN

Mediocrity happens. At this very moment at an institution of higher education near you, a mildly hungover student is finishing a mildly plagiarized paper on travel-industry marketing, for which he'll receive a B-plus. Across campus, an assistant professor is drafting a tepid scholarly article that will eventually be read by 43 people and cited by one. In yet another building, administrators are holding a five-hour meeting about how to spruce up the campus golf course, which is four more hours than they'll devote this month to improving their stagnant graduation rate.

So far, so familiar.

Continued on Page A8



| Acceptance rate '09 | Average alumni giving rate |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 7% | 18% |
| 5% | 25% |
| 19% | 9% |
| 9% | 15% |
| 14% | 14% |
| 8% | 14% |
| 6% | 17% |
| 3% | 17% |
| 71% | 12% |
| 35% | 12% |
| 82% | 16% |
| 42% | 12% |
| 57% | 22% |
| 53% | 10% |
| 67% | 20% |
| 35% | 21% |
| 3% | 14% |
| 4% | 14% |
| 19% | 22% |
| 72% | 23% |
| 45% | 68% |
| 61% | 23% |
| 64% | 77% |
| 51% | 14% |
| 70% | 11% |
| 18% | 17% |
| 6% | 8% |
| 4% | 21% |
| 58% | 28% |
| 66% | 10% |
| 34% | 6% |
| 7% | 16% |
| 5% | 12% |

Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction

Doctoral Rankings Revamped

New measures of programs push 'objective' criteria

In Flood of Texting and Technology, Schools Fight to Stay Focused

| Score | 2.8 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 80% | 66% |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 20. Canisius College (NY) | 56 | 2.9 | 82% | 66% | |
| 22. Mount St. Mary's Univ. (MD) | 55 | 3.0 | 80% | | |
| 23. Hood College (MD) | 54 | 2.8 | | | |
| 23. Rowan University (NJ)* | 54 | | | | |
| 25. CUNY-Baruch College* | 50 | | | | |
| 25. Nazareth College (NY) | 50 | | | | |
| 25. Ramapo College of NJ | 50 | | | | |
| 25. Wagner College | 50 | | | | |
| 29. A... | 50 | | | | |

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We don't allow cell phones

universally committed to this ideal. (This is especially true at Jesuit Nativity and Christo Rey schools.)

What has become, however, of the middle class in Jesuit schools - the heart of our schools throughout most of the 20th century? Our ever increasing tuition rates and the diminishment of the middle class in the United States over the past decade (especially in regards to solid blue collar jobs) are creating donut schools. The wealthy can afford our tuition and we provide assistance to the poor, but there is an ever widening gap in the center where the middle class used to reside.

Technology/Relationships

Technology isn't just accelerating, it is accelerating exponentially. The rate of advancement pushes us toward ever expanding frontiers of possibility - a mostly positive development for education. This does not mean, for example, that the textbook as we know it may die. That death is a given. The only question is what will replace it. Will it be the multiple function flexibility of the i-pad or will we see more benefit in the limitations of the pure e-reader that is the Kindle? What new product will emerge within the next few years (or months) that will knock both off the shelves?

But these questions are no different than "pencil vs. pen" or "vhs vs. beta" debates. The only difference is

rate of change. We need to approach the frontiers of new technologies pragmatically: adopt smarter tools that work; disregard those that don't; and stay clear of techno-fadism lest we mindlessly bounce from one trendy teaching tool to the next.

Further, our technological exploration must recognize that tools, however smart, don't reside at the heart of Jesuit education. Our heart is relational. The early companions were friends in the Lord and friends with each other. Their meetings were characterized by raucous laughter. Their letters were tear-stained. They were bold enough to pray to the persons of the Trinity in colloquies, conversations between friends. To the early companions their friend, Ignatius, seemed to be all love.

Technology connects, but it can also isolate. That's why we don't allow students to use their cell phones at Seattle Prep. Texting means we don't see eyes, and we want eyes to meet constantly throughout the school day. An insightful Marquette University educator and spiritual director, Frank Majka S.J., once wrote that Jesuit schools are all about tables: We work on projects around library tables; gather for meals at lunchroom tables; pull desks together to form discussion tables in the classroom; eat and drink the body and blood of our Lord around Eucharistic tables. Tables will always be our best technology.

Information/Formation

In 1994 while I was academic dean at Marquette High I attended the first JSEA (Jesuit Secondary Education Association) symposium in New York. We were introduced to the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm (IPP) and were charged with bringing this pedagogy into our schools. Honest reflection leads me to conclude that I bungled this responsibility rather badly, especially in my attempts to emphasize reflection (the third step in the IPP) over content.

The Ignatian educators who developed the IPP were amazingly prescient. Smarter tools and the internet's guiding principle – information wants to be free – will continue to expand what is knowable beyond our capacity to know it. The Ignatian approach, reflection over content, recognized this reality before it even existed. It is becoming increasingly clear, as described in Nicholas Carr's writings, that an emphasis on information (through such practices as constant texting) may even be injurious to young brains. Reflection based pedagogy allows for deeper thought and understanding. Conversely, incessant information exchanging may be creating shallow, twitching brains less capable of pondering and imagination.

Yet, American culture, with its emphasis on standardized testing, merit pay for teachers for content driven results, and inclusion on "best of" lists based upon quantitative rather than qualitative measurements, does not value the role of reflection in education. It's akin to Wall Street's valuation of companies: short term earnings reports take precedence over less sexy building blocks like research and development that yield long term results.

Seattle Prep's principal, Dr. Matt Barmore, speaks passionately about the goal of Jesuit education being formation, not information (and at magical moments even transformation). But formation only comes with reflection, and that requires a sacrifice on our part. We could find ourselves in a more isolated frontier of greater wisdom but lower standardized test scores. I hope Jesuit universities would be accepting of students who come from such a place.

Exclusion/Belonging

As wonderful as the teenage years can be, I'm a firm believer that no one goes through high school unscarred. At times all teenagers feel themselves to be on the edges looking in, uncertain of how or where they fit, a feeling that often persists well into college years. This is especially true of homosexual young people. They are subjected to homophobic comments, harassment, and even violence. It's no wonder that the suicide and drug dependency rates for gay teens and young adults are so much higher than their heterosexual peers.

The Catholic Church and its Gospel emphasis on love of neighbor should provide a respite for all our young people, including those of homosexual orientation. Sadly, that's not always the case. For example, Archbishop Dadeus Grings recently drew a facile con-

*One can be both fully gay
and fully Catholic*

nection between homosexuality and pedophilia: "Homosexuals used to be discriminated against. When we begin to say they have rights...pretty soon we'll find the rights of pedophiles." In this country the Catholicity of schools has been questioned due to support of gay students. Children of gay parents have even been barred from Catholic schools.

The increasing tension surrounding this issue suggests that this would be a very good place to respond to



An ornate doorway, Fordham University.

Pope Benedict's call to faithfully help the Church. One way to do so would be to consistently voice the Catholic Church's teachings about homosexuality: Our Church teaches that one's sexuality is intrinsic to the person. It is a matter of nature, not a question of choice. All are made in the image of God; therefore, one can be both fully gay and fully Catholic.

Asserting this truth and acting accordingly may cause anxiety and even anger for those who see such actions as pushing toward a frontier that stretches the Church too far. However, walking in truth and living in love are core Gospel values and these values place us very much within the heart of the Church.

Private/Catholic, Jesuit

This past school year a Seattle Prep graduate, Amanda Knox, was convicted of murdering her British roommate in Perugia, Italy. The case attracted attention world-wide and we were faced with a decision about our response. We decided to help Amanda's family through a fundraiser and to support Amanda with letters and care pack-

ages. We also committed ourselves to prayer, including prayers for the victim of the crime, Meredith Kercher, and her family.

If we were a private school this would have been a very dumb decision on our part. We were lambasted in the local paper and on talk radio, a parent called for my resignation, we received some very hateful and deeply disturbing emails, and some donors stopped giving. It was not good marketing and bad for business. But it was, in the end, very beneficial to our community. It raised awareness through a concrete and difficult experience that we are not a business, nor a marketing firm, nor even a private school. As a Catholic, Jesuit school we discern differently because we seek different ends.

One end is the person herself, and the call to live *cura personalis* is a *sine qua non* for living in mission, even if (especially if) we find ourselves in an isolated frontier, subjected to ridicule and scorn. This care is even more important as our schools live within the aftermath of the sex abuse crisis, something we have yet to really get a handle on. Students who enter high school now know only a Church of this crisis. Our young people have many reasons to opt out and pursue a purely personal spirituality, especially as they move away from whatever spirituality is found at home and into the greater independence of university life. If we are to pull our young people back into the heart of the Church – a heart that has nothing to do with the evil and hypocrisy of the crisis – they need to live in a community that cares deeply for them, one precious young person at a time. As St. Ignatius said, "Love is shown more in deeds than in words."

Conclusion

These are all difficult issues, made more so in a nation of blue vs. red amidst a common need to reduce all discussion to talking points and sound bite simplicities. In his remarks to General Congregation 35, Pope Benedict called for a different approach and cited surprising examples of complexity and conflict to both honor and encourage the Jesuits: Matteo Ricci in China, Robert DeNobli in India, and the Reductions in Latin America. Given that our Pope is known for choosing words carefully, there is clearly a message here that should guide those who strive for excellence in all of our Jesuit schools:

We should not fear moving into frontiers, though we should also be mindful that we never leave our heart, especially the heart of the Church, when doing so. ■

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