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Harry R. Dammer

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# OBSTACLES TO EXCELLENCE

By Harry R. Dammer

**T**his issue of *Conversations* contains many examples of excellence at our 28 Jesuit institutions. However, we are called to do better and more. So with appreciation for what we have accomplished, here are some challenges that face us. These ideas are not novel, nor are they necessarily special to Catholic or Jesuit universities. But our purpose here is simply to jumpstart a “conversation” about the pursuit of excellence.

## ***Five obstacles to excellence.***

### **1. The explosion in the use of technology**

Technology is not inherently bad. Those of us in the trenches, however, are aware of the difficulty of getting students to focus and/or even read a challenging text. Why? Research reflects lower reading and math scores for those that have more technology and math books around the house while growing up. Students cannot concentrate and cannot focus on one thing for longer than fifteen minutes.

The inability to concentrate leads directly to their inability to think deeply and later express themselves clearly in written or oral forms (*eloquentia perfecta*). Further, can students under the influence of electronic stimulation ever truly focus on context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation or deal with the key issues of life — ‘who am I, and for whom shall I serve?’ Superior General Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., has referred to this expanding problem of technology as the “globalization of superficiality.” He argues with authority that new technologies, along with the influences of moral relativism and consumerism, are shaping the interior worlds of young people in ways that limit their ability to respond to their own “intellectual, moral and spiritual healing.”

#### **Possible solutions:**

- Include context, experience, reflection and self-evaluation components in all classes
- Prohibit cell phones or computer use in class. And less *power point* would help too!
- Bring back quiet hours to library and dorms

### **2. The costs of a Jesuit Education**

Tuition at Jesuit schools ranges from about \$25,000 to almost \$50,000 per year. The average cost of private higher education in the United States is around \$50,000 per year and the cost of college overall has risen by 250 to 300 percent since 1980.

Financial issues have created a bifurcated system. Those in the top tier Jesuit schools have excellent students who are smart enough to get at least a partial scholarship or have parents rich enough to afford tuition. Because alums from these institutions are also wealthy (and many have Division I athletics), endowments that provide additional financial aid have a better chance to increase. Many of our tuition-driven institutions however are forced to give full scholarships to the good students or accept marginal or poorly prepared students to fill the freshman class because they are full pays. Those same schools also continue, as they should, to increase diversity which most often calls for considerable tuition assistance. The problem with all this is the middle class—those who paid to fill our schools during the mid to late 20th century—are now attending State U. The impact of these financial realities may soon lead to closing some of our less resourced Jesuit colleges and universities.

#### **Possible solutions:**

- Reduce the size of administration and staff
- Reduce the cost of organized sports
- Develop locked-in tuition plans
- Increase the teaching load of faculty who do not publish.

### **3. The issue of rigor**

Veteran teachers agree that years ago we required more of students. We have heard about the “anti-intellectual culture” that is pervasive today. This argument is supported with “Students just care about partying and not about their work,” or, ‘They care only about the grades and not about learning or having a real thirst for knowledge.’ We must challenge our students to do more. As Fr. Superior General Kolvenbach who said in 1989 “the pursuit of each student’s intellectual development to the full measure of God-given talents rightly remains a prominent goal of Jesuit education.”

One way to increase rigor is to reduce grade

inflation. Any perusal of grade distribution data or a comparison of GPAs for past and current students will support this position. We should also review course syllabi to determine whether students are asked to read more, take more exams, or write more than in the past. Are courses more likely to have 'take-home' exams, true and false questions, group projects, or other "soft" pedagogic strategies? Rather, are students required to take comprehensive exams with essay requirements, write papers that require correct grammar, and take daily or weekly quizzes to "encourage" reading the text material?

#### **Possible Solutions:**

- Grading guidelines to corral grade inflation
- University-wide attendance policies
- Better supervision of adjunct faculty
- Post-tenure review for full-time faculty

#### **4. Diversity as a challenge to mission**

At the risk of sounding un-PC, I think it is important to mention a major challenge to mission that has developed quickly over the last twenty-five or so years—diversity. No one would argue that diversity is a bad thing. But emphasis on diversity creates challenges from three sources: students, faculty, and ideas. Our current students differ more than in religion and skin color. They are also more likely to be from single parent families, foreign countries, have learning disabilities or psychological disorders, and are less likely to have attended Catholic secondary schools.

Our faculties are even more diverse than our students. At my medium-size university I have colleagues who have attended universities in twenty-one countries and I have met those who are who are Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Wiccan, atheist, and agnostic. Ideas that are brought forth in the classroom, the laboratory and at public lectures are also much different from those only twenty-five years ago. The science of stem cell research, the sociology of post-modernism, and the discussion about GLBTQ issues, cause consternation for presidents and bishops across the country.

In some ways our schools are less Catholic and less Jesuit than they used to be. The impact is visible in the short term and problematic for the long term survival of our institutions. Students with poor academic backgrounds are challenged by the rigors of philosophy and theology as well as other liberal arts courses. What percentage of students and faculty are Catholic or attend campus-held Masses? Students who have serious psychological issues may find it difficult to handle the stress of rigorous study. Comparatively few of our courses address any aspect of Catholic social teaching. Because of the emphasis on research (and tenure!) current faculty are more likely to think only of their own discipline and not be interested in the linkages to the Catholic intellectual tradition or any other faith traditions. Philosopher

Alasdair MacIntyre says it well: "only the faculty can secure the Catholic identity of a college and determine what kind of identity it is and what form of academic expression should be."

The good news is that since the issuance of *Ex corde ecclesiae* ("From the Heart of the Church") some twenty years ago by Pope John Paul II, many of our Jesuit institutions have responded with training of staff, seminars on the Catholic intellectual tradition, and hiring for mission.

#### **5. Obstinance to change**

Recent books by Mark C. Taylor (*Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming our Colleges and Universities*) and the team of Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus (*Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids and What We Can Do About It*) stress the need for thinking more creatively, about the way we do our business of education. All four of the "obstacles" discussed here feed directly into this point. The will be addressed only if we are willing to "think outside the box" about how Jesuit and Catholic education is administered. Some possible paradigm shifts follow:

- AJCU schools can pool technological and faculty resources and offer more blended and on-line degree alternatives.
- Consolidate Catholic universities. For example, if Jesuit college (A) has a weak sociology program but a local non-Jesuit Catholic college (B) has a strong social work program and they are only one mile down the road, they could offer one joint degree program
- Should some of our financially challenged institutions become Catholic junior colleges that would better serve the mission to inner-city students?
- Do we really need tenure or would we **all** best be served by five or seven year renewable contracts?

For sure there are many reasons why each of these ideas is impractical or politically uncomfortable. But they all are ideas that will be part of the "conversations" within Jesuit circles in this century—if we like it or not. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., Fr. Superior General of the Society of Jesus, in a recent address suggested that we "place ourselves in the spiritual space of St. Ignatius... as if we were the first companions" and then ask the question "What kind of universities, with what emphases and what directions, would we run, if we were re-founding the Society of Jesus in today's world?" These are the "conversations" we are called to have. ■

*Harry R. Dammer is chair of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Scranton.*