

# Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

---

Volume 39

Article 14

---

2-1-2011

## Something Special at Scranton

Ronald H. McKinney, S.J.

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

---

### Recommended Citation

McKinney, S.J., Ronald H. (2011) "Something Special at Scranton," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 39, Article 14.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol39/iss1/14>

# Something Special at Scranton

## Some student testimony

By Ronald H. McKinney, S.J.

**I**sawed the human head in half yesterday, right down the midline of the face. Oddly enough it got me thinking about SJLA.” I often get letters that start like that from alumni who are graduates of the Special Jesuit Liberal Arts Honors Program here at the University of Scranton. I have spent the past 24 years honored to be the Jesuit director of this program. I am passing on this position to a lay colleague next year, not because I am dying or fear assassination, but because others deserve to experience the same privilege I have had. Watching so many freshmen over the years grow into the marvelous alumni they are today is what makes teaching worthwhile.

SJLA is a unique program that tries to package the general education core of our curriculum in a way that privileges philosophy as the central discipline. As a result, most students in this learning community, while taking all the “gen ed” courses others take, still manage to take a few extra courses to get a double major in philosophy as well. They think it worthwhile because our department has the reputation of having professors who know how to engage their students in and outside the classroom. The program is equally attractive for the caliber of other students they meet in the thirteen J-designated courses in philosophy, theology, and literature that they take together over their four years.

At the heart of the program are two important courses.

### *200 words a week*

es. The Trivium is an arduous rhetoric course that teaches them writing, speech, and logic in order for them to master “eloquentia perfecta.” Many graduates who go into business claim they owe their success to Trivium’s

weekly under-200-words essay. They argue that their ability to communicate effectively is what makes them attractive to their superiors. Another science grad student claims she got the only A+ a professor ever gave because SJLA “taught her how to write a well-developed argument.” The other important course is the Jesuit *magis* that helps students reflect on the volunteer service that is also required of them here through the study of Jesuit history and spirituality. Recently a student claimed that reading *The Sparrow* for this course “has been one of the most powerful experiences I’ve had in my educational career.”

In his 25 page paper (4-5 pages were assigned!), he maintains this novel “is not so much about Jesuits exploring outer space, but it is primarily interested about concerns of faith, friendship, pain, providence, suffering, and God.” He says he has learned in this course to be more open “because I’m still growing into who I am and learning about myself, God, and life every day.”

The medical student whose quote began this essay goes on to say that “philosophy, I have found, is not a class, but after SJLA, is a way of life.” He argues that “SJLA has taught me to operate on a different level, one where I am not what I do, but what I do is part of me...Take it from me. I started in the back row; the nihilist, the anti-idealist, the black-sheep of the class...So, think a lot. Be stumped,” he tells current SJLA students, “since confusion here, in class, will allow everything else to make sense...I’m [now] serving the underserved in north Philly and loving every second of it.”

Obviously not every SJLA graduate achieves this gratitude and clarity. Some would argue that we are elitist, only choosing the very best freshmen for admission. True, but we do allow others to join the following two semesters, and the GPA requirement is a negotiable item

*Some call us elitist*

for probation, depending upon the unique circumstances of each student. Motivation and character can mean as much as one's GPA. Indeed, one student argues that "rather than isolating me from the general student body, SJLA...has prompted me to direct my talents back into the university community."

Other critics have argued that we put too much stress on philosophy. Indeed, very bright students do drop out because philosophy is not their cup of tea. Still there are other honors programs here for them to join. However, one alumnus argues that it was the "interdisciplinary nature of the program [that] led me to become an historian. By junior year I recognized how the book we read in Masterworks was connected to the history paper I wrote next week, then related to the issues in philosophy we debated the following week, and how those same ideas played out in the service work we did in the Scranton community." Indeed, there are also those who remain in SJLA, in spite of philosophy (or to spite it!), because they love the community atmosphere: the pizza socials, retreats, late night study groups, and Frisbee matches between classes.

I have been sometimes asked by outsiders whether our SJLA curriculum could successfully be adopted elsewhere. And I try to get them to see that anyone can start an SJLA Program elsewhere, but that it is not the curriculum that will make it work. Indeed, any of our current philosophy requirements could be replaced by any other liberal arts offering that evokes critical thinking.

**W**hat makes SJLA work, though, is its M.O of putting both conservative and liberal students together, with faculty serving as mentors (or referees!), into an experience where they have to question everything they hold dear.

Many go on to become committed leaders in our American culture as doctors, lawyers, business entrepreneurs, and teachers. Others prefer less traditional paths by working in non-profit organizations and doing service work here and abroad. But whether or not they maintain their current faith (most enter as white middle-class Catholics), those who do remain staunch Catholics are less likely to ignore the marginalized in their community; and those who stop practicing their institutional faith have learned to realize the importance of being a spiritual person who is capable of grappling with religious questions. As one student put it: "This program is like one big family pulling together to help each other. It has changed my whole way of thinking and outlook on life as well. It has

made me more aware of the world around me and has given me spiritual guidance as well."

Another acknowledges that "many of us have strong convictions which often conflict. There are those who would characterize us as 'highly motivated and competitive.' Although we are competitive and desire to do well in life, we never held it over each other. SJLA is not cutthroat, but it has demand-

### *Many drop out*

ed excellence from each of us, and it is something to be proud of...We are called to promote justice in an apparently unjust world, and I believe that we have been given the tools to do so in SJLA."

Fifty to sixty students begin as freshmen and a few others join along the way, but it is expected that there will only be about 30-45 who will graduate together in SJLA to preserve its community ethos. SJLA tries to balance the inevitable stress that can develop by promoting in our students a realization that grades are not what it is all about. As one student puts it: "This semester I wanted to drop SJLA. But after talking to an upperclassman in the program, I remembered why I'm in this program—for an education. I'm getting my money's worth!"

I am sure that the goals of its founder in 1975, Fr. Ed Gannon, S.J., have been adapted a bit by me, and that my successor will do the same as regards my aims for SJLA. Yet the unchanging heart of this G.E. program is the collaboration that occurs between members of our faculty. It is only if we model for our students the ideals we hold up to them that we will succeed in producing "women and men for others" that we can be proud of here at this Jesuit University.

Would it bother me if an SJLA graduate suggested that our SJLA professors could better promote the *magis* by leaving Scranton and teaching at some Cristo Rey school for the underprivileged instead? No. On the contrary, I would consider it a great success that they were able to critique the very program that gave them such skills of discernment. In the end, though, perhaps we should attribute it simply to divine grace that one of our graduates can be as eloquent as that student above who sawed into a human head: "In the blizzard of technical science, I find that my time in SJLA has left my mind open, allotting enough space for all the anatomical relations of the human body, since I am always also in constant reflection about the occurrences of my everyday reality." ■

*Ronald H. McKinney, S.J., is in the philosophy department at Scranton University.*