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Formal Study in the Humanities?

Get Real

By Stephen F. Gambescia

During the course of my formal studies in the humanities family, friends, and co-workers expressed puzzlement over this choice of major for graduate studies. They would ask: “What are you going to do with it?” I knew implicitly what they meant by “do with it.” How would a degree in the humanities help anyone get a “better” job or help “advance” a career? Get real.

Having read Father Adolfo Nicolás’s remarks (Mexico City – 23 April 2010), I can say that time invested helps with his call for “promoting depth of thought and imagination” and avoids falling prey to a “superficiality” of advanced learning.

Now more than ever people believe that continuing one’s education should have more to do with learning the habits of industry, rather than the “frivolous” habits of the heart. Social commentators for decades, if not centuries, have challenged the *raison d’être* of what an institution of higher education provides for the adult continuing education student. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, written between 1835 and 1840, pointed out the many ways Americans were facile in the practicality of the arts and sciences but quite shallow in a theoretical understanding of the sciences and less reflective and contemplative when it came to the humanities.

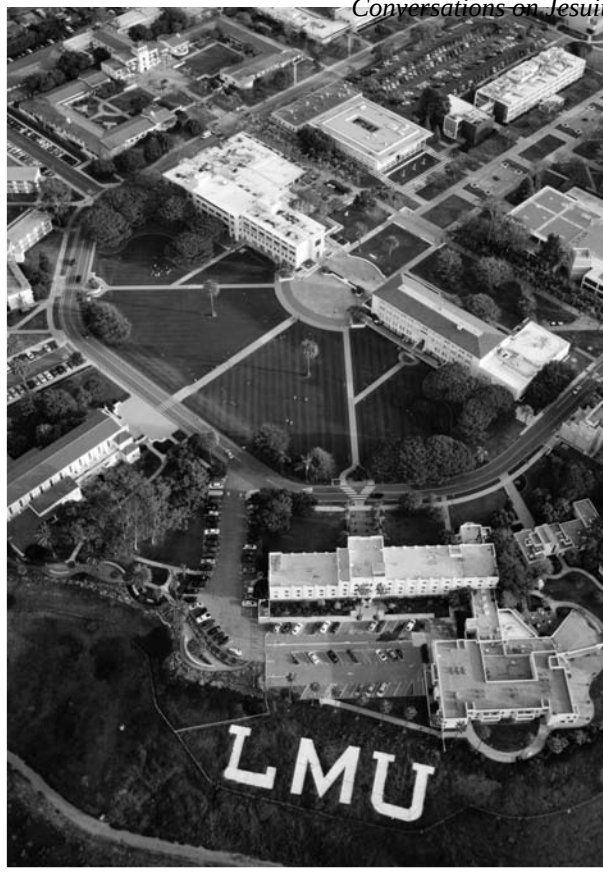
In recent time most are familiar with Alan Bloom’s 1986 work *The Closing of the American Mind* and a subsequent *Giants and Dwarfs* (1990) explaining that the academy has drifted too far from having students engage in subjects that allowed for contemplation of the big questions in life, and instead has introduced a myriad of disciplines and sub-disciplines that simply “prepare” students for jobs and have them conduct ordinary business, rather than directing students onto their *vision quest* toward “human completeness.” Bloom argues that students, especially our best students, should be investigating fundamental questions to become a truly educated person — for example, *What is man?* And students should continue to ask the enduring questions that have been asked since the beginning of human history: *What is my relationship to the world?* The most intimate question for students to consider is *Who am I?*

Father Nicolás reminds us that “depth of thought and imagination are distinguishing marks of the Ignatian tradition.” This imagination must not be confused with fantasy, which is not real, but a strategy to reach deep down the mystery of the human person, use different modes of thinking, and recognize various patterns in our lives. To be “excellent Jesuit universities” these schools must move students beyond being bright, skilled, and competent graduates, to ones that have an “active creative imagination” that helps transform one to a life of service, virtue, and truth understanding. What better way to reach this objective than to undertake formal studies in the humanities?

Formal studies in the humanities helps one explore the expanse of human experience, thought, and practice. It moves one out of a parochial intellectual comfort zones, to go places where normally one would not go. I don’t begrudge those who question the practicality in studying the humanities. Truthfully, I entered with some reticence and marched on with humble reserve. Having completed formal studies in the humanities, there came a surprising “transformative of person.” Prior to this, I felt blessed and could gain support among three pillars: 1) Ignatian Spirit; 2) Intellect; and 3) Industry. However, compared with the three-legged stool, the support is not complete without the seat. Formation in the humanities can be that seat.

Father Nicolás challenged those running the Jesuit academies to “...forge intellectual bridges between Gospel and culture, faith and reason, for the sake of the world and its great questions and problems.” I found the formal studies in the humanities to be that bridge, helping me to crisscross between the three pillars. It helps one see the world not only with the “mind’s eye” but the eyes of the heart and soul. ■

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