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Forum: Framing a Global Education

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Introduction to the Forum

Certainly the most challenging words in Fr. General Nicolás's talk came in the final paragraph. He invites his audience — which now includes the readers of *Conversations* — not to think of ourselves as presidents or CEOs of large institutions, but as “co-founders of a new religious group, discerning God's call to you as an apostolic body in the Church.”

His question is, “What kind of universities, with what emphasis and what directions, would we run, if we were re-founding the Society of Jesus in today's world?”

To some degree most essays in the whole magazine touch on this question. But we specifically invited seven writers to address this directly. Some responses are familiar, some will surprise. We invite your responses for publication in our next issue.

RASsj

Forum

FRAMING A GLOBAL EDUCATION

Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte

In my office hangs a photograph, taken in a Houston, Texas, junk shop, featuring a saddle in front of a wall of old, wooden frames in myriad sizes. I find this image symbolic of the aims of education: education puts you in the saddle of life by equipping you with the frameworks necessary to process, organize, and understand the world.

In his speech in Mexico City last April, Father Nicolás emphasized the importance of frameworks by referencing the life of Matteo Ricci, whose broad-based training in classical authors, the creative arts, science and mathematics, and theology offered the frameworks—the “integrated” and “harmonious” structure—for bringing faith and culture together. Nicolás's use of a Jesuit genius and Renaissance man to exemplify the goals of Jesuit education is fitting because, in many ways, this globalized world in which we live and learn demands a new type of Renaissance learning from all of us: multi-disciplinary, geographically expansive, and inter-culturally aware. Father Nicolás asks whether our Jesuit formation offers the tools, openness, and integrative mind-set necessary for both the development of individual gifts and the integration of faith and reason. Do the frameworks that we currently offer put students in the saddle of this globalized world?

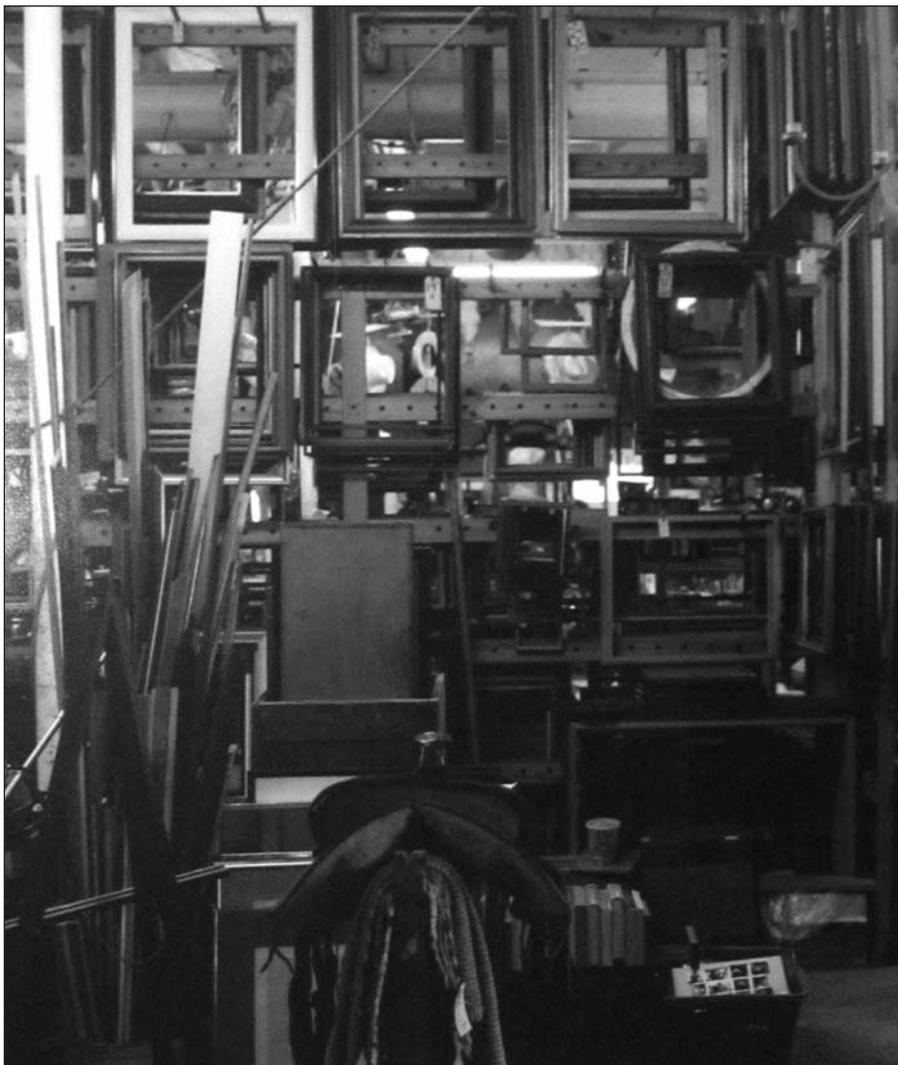
In answering this question, we must think beyond the key frameworks that we have long utilized: skill sets (critical reading, writing, and thinking; quantitative reasoning) and interdisciplinarity (the methodology of liberal arts education). Critical skills and interdisciplinary inquiry are essential to forming students who possess the analytical ability to engage the complex issues of our day. But they are limited by the current shape of the university: discipline and department and their concomitant skills. We have to offer students other frameworks—relational frameworks—that

help them integrate knowledge in the context of the global and social relationships in which they live and act.

Think globally

One needed framework is geographical. We tend to offer students knowledge within discrete geographical parameters (American literature survey or the politics of the Middle-East). However, in a globalized world, students need to understand geographical scale—the concurrent geographical layers in which all issues and actions take place: local, regional, national, international, global. The classic environmentalist slogan, “Think Globally, Act Locally,” needs to be re-tooled for a global generation: “Think locally, regionally, nationally, internationally, and globally. Act accordingly.” In a Disaster/Response class I am currently teaching, I can see students’ views of events and the world change as they compare coverage of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill from local newspapers, the *New York Times*, and the BBC or, alternatively, when they read a single article with careful attention to the viewpoints of Alabama fishermen, EPA representatives, and the BP CEO. Being able to translate the impacts of issues and actions across levels of geographical scale is a key part of active, ethical citizenship in a globalized world.

Another needed framework is knowledge of social sectors. We live in a world made up of categories of stakeholders: government, business, non-profits, faith-based organizations, academia, and the media. With a major in political science or business or communications, we might graduate individuals with expertise in one of these areas, but to be globally literate, we have to understand the roles of these sectors and the tensions—and synergies—among them. We need to make this framework visible to students. Even in a literature course, I might identify how artistic production is implicated across sectors: governmental (ex. National Endowment for the Arts), business (corporate sponsorship of arts), non-profits (McArthur genius grants, Nobel prize), acade-



mia (writers in residence), media (arts sections of newspapers). Students would gain a clearer sense of how the world works—and how they might enter into it—by foregrounding this framework.

In responding to Father Nicolás’s call to re-imagine Jesuit higher education in today’s world, I would urge us to consider the frameworks that students need to understand a globalized world. The world has become too complicated for us to provide only a set of skills or disciplinary approaches and expect students to connect the dots. We have to offer them relational frameworks that help them organize, understand, and engage the world around them if we hope to put them back in the saddle again. ■

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