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## For Openers: Puzzling Questions

Editorial Board

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# Puzzling Questions

Attempts to define what is distinctive about Jesuit education sooner or later will make the claim that Jesuit education is “student centered.”

What does that mean? Who are these students who stand at the center of our concern? What are the implications of our expressed commitment to them? How well are we fulfilling our promise to educate them as “whole persons”? Is there really anything distinctively Jesuit about these claims or about how Jesuit colleges and universities go about fulfilling their promises?

This issue of *Conversations* attempts to explore these and related questions. It began as a modest attempt to help bridge the gap—some would say chasm—between the viewpoints of faculty and student-affairs professionals. We invited Sue Weitz of Gonzaga University to answer the question “who are our students?” from the perspective of her twenty-five years of experience in student affairs. It didn’t take us long to learn what we probably ought to have known from the beginning: we had asked an enormously challenging question, one that opens into many of the most important issues facing higher education today. Do the structures of our institutions, including the current division of labor between faculty and student-affairs professionals, allow us to respond in the best way possible to the changing needs of a new generation of students? Or are we sending students mixed signals, encouraging them

to compartmentalize their intellectual, social, personal, and religious lives in ways that are inimical to the goal of educating the whole person? Is it time for a wholesale reassessment of that time-honored division of labor?

As such questions obviously impinge upon faculty prerogatives, we wanted to give equal time to a faculty voice. We invited Michael Leiserson, professor of political science at Gonzaga and a long-time colleague and friend of Sue Weitz, to write a companion article. Our idea was that the personal and professional relationship between the writers might help make the two articles genuinely conversant with one another, avoiding the kind of glib and often invidious dichotomizing that tends to mar these debates. We think that you will find our hopes fulfilled in the result.

The shorter responses that follow the main conversation attempt to engage and develop a few of the many questions raised by Weitz and Leiserson, or to point out additional complexities in the debate. We are aware, of course, that a number of important topics that one would ideally want to consider in this context remain unexplored. Some—diversity and multiculturalism, for example—are important enough in their own right to deserve separate treatment. Others, no doubt, we ought to have considered. We look forward to your telling us so, by letter, e-mail, phone, or fax.

