

9-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Staysniak, Chris (2013) "Talking Back: Graduate School and Jesuit Identity," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 44, Article 24.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol44/iss1/24>

TALKING BACK

Graduate School and Jesuit Identity

By Chris Staysniak

One of the central points that drew me to Boston College as I began to pursue graduate studies in American history was its Jesuit identity.

Having been influenced so deeply by my Jesuit high school and undergraduate experiences, I felt it was the best fit for me and the way I wanted to frame my future praxis as a historian. Having now completed my first year of studies, it is clear to me that BC works very hard to negotiate the tension between its obligations as both a Jesuit and a world-class research university. I have witnessed many of the programmatic efforts in this ongoing affair firsthand, working as a graduate assistant in the school's Office of University Mission and Ministry. In this capacity I have

become familiar with the abundance of opportunities to engage with the school's Jesuit foundations available to the BC community. To name a few, these include the Arrupe International Immersion Program, the Intersections Project, and Halftime retreats. The people who run these programs care deeply about the work that they do, and the result is nothing short of impressive. It has been a real joy and an education unto itself to be a small cog in these wheels.

Juxtaposed to my experience in Mission and Ministry have been my graduate studies in history. In the culture of the department, there is what I can best describe as a noteworthy indifference to the school's Jesuit underpinnings. The school's heritage is a non-factor. Now, this culture shock was not a complete surprise, even for a zealous proponent of Jesuit pedagogy like me. I

fully understand that my studies are meant to prepare me to be a historian first, and that my training is shaped by the dictates of the wider historical enterprise. I would be dreaming to think that Pedro Arrupe or Dean Brackley would surface in classroom conversations as frequently as Foner or Foucault! Still, I have found this absence of BC's Jesuit identity within my studies a conundrum worth further examination.

I have spent considerable time this past year—often with more pressing assignments looming!—contemplating this tension between preparation for the demands of the historical profession and the school's Jesuit identity. Is there a way they can constructively support one another? Can drawing

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upon the university's Jesuit ideals also enrich the training received by history graduate students at BC? In my reflections, I have come to two concrete proposals on how this might be achieved.

First, I propose the creation and institutionalization of space within the department for the purpose of reflection. Practically speaking, once or twice a month a room could be reserved for interested graduate students and faculty alike to discuss larger vocational questions over the requisite coffee and baked goods. For example: Why do we study history? What does it mean to be a historian? What are our goals, and where does a degree fit within them? I know that these conversations happen every day within the department, but never in an organized way. These conversations are central to our training, but they are largely a matter of time and circumstances. These greater questions are also

often moved to the back burner as the semester proceeds and the workload intensifies.

It is no secret that the world of higher education is rife with change and worries over developments like the rise of MOOC's, a shrinking professorial job market, and the ever-fermenting popular resentment over the price of a college education. Add to these the worries of the historical field in particular, as well as the day-to-day demands of class and research. Throw in the challenges of living on a graduate student stipend, and that makes for a whole lot to think and potentially worry about! As such, the creation of an intentional space for reflection and discernment would, I feel, be a boon to many a graduate student who might not make the time for introspection otherwise. Even while the reflection questions will most likely not use specifically Ignatian language or talk of Jesuit education, I think carving out such a

time and space within the department would be a practical programmatic improvement as well as a distinctly Jesuit exercise, given the centrality of discernment and reflection to Jesuit spirituality and pedagogy.

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My second proposal stems from an email one Jesuit from my undergraduate years wrote to me upon hearing of my acceptance to BC. Within his congratulations he urged me to find some sort of local service to pursue, writing that, "While they [your studies] are crucially important...they cannot become 100% of your focus, for the rest of the world continues to exist."

I have since learned that the rigors of archival research and ever-expanding reading lists can easily consume one's life as a graduate student, making for an insular existence that often borders on hermetic. This serves to perpetuate the often-levied criticism that higher education is inward-looking, as embodied in the notorious ivory tower caricature. I have managed to make a commitment to work in a soup kitchen, but it would be unrealistic to demand that my cohorts in the department all partake in similar ventures. Instead, I believe that a commitment to local history might serve as a constructive response to some of these aforementioned charges and challenges, while simultaneously tapping into Jesuit values.

For example, resources within the department could be committed to an ongoing oral history project. A relatively small amount of funding could incentivize a few students to reach out to various groups and communities in the Boston area to collect their stories and recollections as they pertain to historical events or developments. From a more strictly history-department point of view, this effort would yield a rich resource for future research (similar to the famed WPA slave narratives), and it would furthermore give graduate students an expanded opportunity to hone their skills in oral history collection. This would also challenge the ivory tower stereotype.

Additionally, such a project would encourage students to authentically engage with the surrounding community and hear the stories and lived experiences of individuals in ways

they might otherwise not have over the course of their studies. By creating new bonds and actively working to preserve the city's history, a commitment to local history would be an experience in service that would not only supplement historical training. This sort of project would also be a unique answer to the call for the promotion of justice and the formation of women and men for others that is so central to a Jesuit education.

As I hope to make these proposals concrete actions, it remains to be seen whether they will gain traction within my history world, and I am very prepared that these efforts may not bear any fruit. Either way, I am thankful for the opportunity to explore this tension between my graduate training and BC's Jesuit identity, as well as for the length of my training, which gives me time to think of other ideas should these not work! ■

Eloquentia Perfecta in the Digital Age

By Patrick L. Gilger, S.J.

For Jesuit basketball supporters, the madness is ending as I write. No longer will we contribute to the estimated loss of four million productive work hours by watching, for example, the Marquette men's basketball team—the last standing Jesuit school in the annual pit of productivity quicksand that is the NCAA tournament—on our work computers. Marquette just had the life crushed from them by the Orangemen of Syracuse. But after reading the last issue of *Conversations*, it's clear that the same cannot also be said of the liveliness of *eloquentia perfecta* in Jesuit universities.

In making a contemporary case for *eloquentia perfecta*, that issue pointed out that much of what was always true of good predigital rhetoric remains true of good digital rhetoric. Two points regarding this continuity are particularly impor-

tant. First, as Paul Lynch gracefully reminded us, rhetoric remains the tool for discerning the “available means of persuasion” in a given situation. While the available means and the problems to be overcome change, the demand that we evaluate our options with care in order to proceed with efficacy remains. Second, the tight bond between the cultivation of rhetorical skill and the cultivation of good character remains a goal of Jesuit rhetorical education. It was John O'Malley who noted that such character formation is shaped by the same perennial questions “of life and death, of virtue and vice.” And Stephen Mailloux noted that in classical rhetoric it is the good person who is able to speak well for the common good. Both of these traits remain the same.

But what has changed? We might hypothesize that if it's not the essence or the ends of rhetoric that have changed, then it must be the means. And this is partially true. Persuasion is certainly

accomplished through different means in the digital age: the constraints of the 6-second Vine video and 140-character Tweets are both new. But neither is fundamentally different from the constraints of, say, the sonnet. It seems to me that what has changed more substantially is not just the means themselves, but the increasingly small number of ways we are willing to allow ourselves to be open to persuasion. In other words, when considering the ideal of *eloquentia perfecta* for Jesuit educators in the digital age, we ought to consider not just how digital technology provides different conduits

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