Professional Education

Where We Come From, What Lies Ahead

By Jeffrey von Arx, S.J.

As with our first entrance into running schools in the sixteenth century, Jesuits in the United States backed into graduate and professional education without much of a plan. Certainly, there was no planning at the national level. For one thing, there was little differentiation between levels of instruction in Jesuit schools until well after many American colleges had developed into universities with clear graduate divisions under the influence of the German model in the later nineteenth century. In the early 1840s, St. Louis University started (short-lived) law and medical “departments” within the university, but it would appear that the credit for having the first distinct professional schools that persisted goes to Georgetown, which established medical and law schools in 1849 and 1870 respectively, and Georgetown opened its medical school in 1892.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a flurry of new professional schools that would become a hallmark of Jesuit education in the twentieth century: especially law schools (Fordham in 1905, Loyola Chicago in 1908, St. Louis reestablished in 1904, Georgetown in 1912, for example); but also schools of education (which were often the entry for women into Jesuit education), business, and three medical schools (St. Louis reestablished in 1906, Fordham opened in 1909, closed in 1911, and Loyola Chicago, 1917). Clearly, Catholics of this era aspired to the professions, and so members of their faith were not always welcome in established professional schools. Jesuit universities were quick to meet the need. By the end of the century, professional schools had truly proliferated at Jesuit universities: Allied Health Professions (10), Architecture (1), Business Administration/Management (26), Communication Journalism, Fine Arts (9), Dentistry (4), Divinity (3), Education (22), Engineering (9), International Affairs (1), Law (14), Medicine (4), Nursing (19), Pharmacy (2).

If Jesuit colleges and universities responded with alacrity to the desire for professional education from the rising Catholic middle class, the same cannot be said about their efforts in graduate education in the arts and sciences. In the first place, it was often the case that few or even none of the Jesuits who were the majority of the faculty at many of our institutions in the first half of the twentieth century had Ph.D.s themselves; completion of the long course in Jesuit studies, it was thought, should fit a man to teach anything! Moreover, there was often a decided lack of sympathy in Jesuit circles for what we would consider the very essence of a research university.

Fr. Gerald McKevitt, S.J. famously quotes a Jesuit administrator at Santa Clara in 1950: “Research cannot be the primary object of a Catholic graduate school, because it is at war with the whole Catholic life of the mind.” In his landmark essay in Thought “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life” (1955), Msgr. John Tracy Ellis noted the failure of Catholics to exercise intellectual leadership and influence and attributed this deficiency to the very proliferation of professional studies in Catholic universities to the detriment of serious intellectual work. Moreover, where they existed, graduate programs were...
underfunded and inadequately staffed with profes-
sors who had the credentials to carry them on. The
result, according to Ellis, was "a perpetuation of
mediocrity and the doing-away from each other of
the strength that is necessary if really superior
achievements are to be obtained."

Clearly, there has been much progress made by
Jesuit universities in establishing credible and pro-
fessional graduate programs in the arts and sciences
that are turning out superbly trained teachers and
scholars. But it is not clear that many of these pro-
gress programs can claim the intellectual leadership and influ-
cence that Msgr. Ellis hoped for from Catholic univer-
sities. Much as it pains me to cite, U.S. News and
World Report rankings, it is clear for Ph.D. programs
at Jesuit universities to break into the top fifty and
there are none in the top twenty-five. Georgetown's
history program is as high as we rank at 19. The
story with our professional schools is predictably dif-
ferent. There, there has been better success, espe-
cially in law (with three schools, Georgetown, BC
and Fordham, ranked in the top 27); an education
school (BC's) at 18; business schools at 22
(Georgetown) and 54 (BC), a medical school
(Georgetown) at 40 and Public Policy Georgetown
again) at 14. So while we are certainly in a position
to build up our hands and while our programs pro-
duce well-trained scholars and professionals (who
often have great influence in these societies), leader-
sip and influence in graduate and professional edu-
cation on the national level (with a few exceptions)
 eludes us.

Given this rapid and high-stakes review of the
history of Jesuit graduate and professional edu-
cation, what can we say about the challenges that face
us in the future? Certainly one of the most important
questions that arises, especially in light of our invest-
ment in professional education at almost every one
of our schools, has to do with the fit between pro-
fessional education and issues of mission and iden-
tity that have become so important a part of our
thinking about undergraduate education. In the case, as by Al
Punzo, implies, that there is lit-
tle that is unique in form about
Jesuit or Catholic graduate and
professional studies since they
developed alongside their coun-
terparts in American higher ed-
ucation. Certainly, we share with all educators the goal of producing practitioners whose competence
is not a matter of religious commitment (when I had
surgery several years ago, I jokingly requested a sur-
gon without too- strong a belief in the afterlife).

Is competent and
ethical practice the
most we can expect?

Well-publicized moral lapses across the profes-
sions in recent years have focused everyone's atten-
tion on ethical practice, and our institutions have
taken naturally to this emphasis, but so, too, has
every other professional school.

But is competent and ethical practice the
most we can expect from the graduates
of our professional schools, and if it is,
why, according to the principle of the
magis, are we engaged in professional
education when state and secular institu-
tions can do it equally well or even better?

There have been, in recent years, a number of
explicit efforts to connect religion and professional
practice in our schools: one thinks immediately of
the Institute for Religion, Law and Lawyer's Work
at Fordham. And clearly, the emphasis on certain areas
of practice is a clear reflection of Jesuit tradition.
Georgetown Law Center's strong clinical programs,
for example, in recent years, I have been suggesting
to our own professional schools at Fairfield that
reflection on the relationship between the profess-
sions and professional life and the notion of the
common good is an appropriate focus for profes-
sional schools at a Jesuit university as well as an
emphasis that is not replicated at secular institutions.

The question of what we should or should not
be doing in terms of graduate education in the arts
and sciences is a complicated one. There is, of
course, the prior question of whether we should be
doing anything at all if we cannot do it better than
others. Does the world really need another Ph.D.
program in English at a Jesuit university? Theology
and to a lesser extent philosophy are obvi-
cous candidates for graduate programs of real excel-
lence: one thinks of Boston College's present status
as the premier center for theological reflection, with
its already distinguished theology department now
that Weston has reaccredited with B.C. in the School
of Theology and Ministry. Other institutions have creat-
ed niche programs that play to their strengths and
offer opportunity for real distinction: Medieval
Studies at Fordham and some of the area studies
programs at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service
cite examples that are familiar to me.

These examples show the need for strategic
thinking in relation to graduate and professional
education and, dare I say, a certain discipline and
asceticism with regard to new programs. I would
suggest that this is one of those areas where it is
worth doing it at all if you cannot do it well.