Forum: Mind and Body at Holy Cross

John F. Axelson
Michael L. Beatty
Anthony J. Kuzniewski
Amy R. Wolfson
Timothy R. Austin

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MIND AND BODY AT HOLY CROSS

FORUM

Physically Fit?

1. ROOTS IN JESUIT HISTORY

Timothy R. Austin: In preparation for a pilgrimage this summer to sites in Spain and Italy important to St. Ignatius, I read a good deal of Jesuit history. And I was fascinated to learn that when the Society of Jesus was first getting started, Ignatius prescribed that every house must have somebody who is charged with the physical well being of the group—perhaps because he’d had such poor health himself in the early years. He ordered that every college where Jesuits studied have a farm or house in the countryside where they might go for a day’s recreation during the week. I find it interesting that when you go back to the beginning, you find that Ignatius felt that physical well-being was an essential part of the Society.

2. CLASSROOM AND CAMPUS REALITIES

Axelson: For me, physicality is within an umbrella of overall well-being. And frankly, I don’t think we’re doing a very good job with our students. I see so much self-destructive behavior as them physically and emotionally. In one of my courses, “Mind, Body, Health,” we deal with several issues related to wellness. We talk in concrete terms about the effects of stress on mind and body.

Austin: What class topics provoke the biggest reaction from your students?

Axelson: If there’s one thing that holds the course together it’s the notion of a personal involvement with one’s health, with being proactive. As opposed to the western model of, “I get sick, I go to a doctor, and they prescribe. I think stu-
students come to understand a proac-
tive approach to one’s health places
personal responsibility on the indi-
vidual, on lifestyle choices. They’re
drawn to that notion. And I think it
can be a wake-up call. Because other
students believe that myth of
youth—that nothing is going to hap-
pen to them. That they’re going to
live forever. They often think they’re
invaluable. And I try to let them
know that the habits they develop
now will affect the quality of their
lives when they are in their 50s, 60s
and 70s.

I also ask students in my class how
they define stress. They talk about
how classes stress them out. How
professors stress them out.” And I
point out that they’re regarding stress
passively. I try to challenge them to
think of stress as something that they’re
going to have.

Demands will be placed on you and
you won’t feel totally prepared to
deal with them. And it boils down to
who are the costs to you. And the
students have terribly unrealistic
views of the cost—of don’t get an
“A” in this class, then my life as I
know it is going to be over. In addi-
tion to a toll on their self-esteem,
when under these pressures, stu-
dents eat horribly and they don’t get
enough sleep. Some of the most
important lessons they will have in
the four years they’re here are about
how to respond to these challenges.
I’d prefer they learned to rise to the
challenge of these types of demands
in ways that are less damaging to
their self-esteem and physical health.

Austin: The irony, of course, is that
many of them are indulging in all
definitions of kinds of risky behavior.

Axelson: In their college years, the
way they deal with stress is a very
maladaptive, self-destructive way—
using alcohol and pulling all
nighters. We need to do a much bet-
ter job of helping them change how
they view these demands that are
being placed on them in a healthier
way. Using exercise as a coping
mechanism, as a way of buffering
the physical effects of stress. To
understand that nutrition is some-
thing that’s important to them now.

Austin: We’re constantly working to
help students with wellness pro-
gramming, with all the spiritual and
faith resources offered through the
chaplain’s office. But you seem to be
suggesting that faculty are contribut-
ing to the problem to some degree.
Are there things that we could do
differently?

Axelson: I think that for too many
of our students it’s all about the
grade. We’ve created this with grade
inflation and the expectation that
there is not going to get the job or get
into the graduate school unless I
have an unrealistically high GPA. So
students are picking their courses
based on their expectation of where
their strengths are.

Wolfson: I like to bring the class-
room and the personal together on
these topics. I like to have assign-
ments that are created to help stu-
dents look at their own health as
well as reading about what the
research suggests. In my course
on sleep, the students spend some
time keeping sleep/wake diaries and
using research methodologies to
look at their own sleep/wake
habits—as well as learning the vast
knowledge in the field. And that’s
always an eye-opener for students,
looking at their own behaviors rela-
tive to the research.

Beatty: You’re also trying to connect
the personal with the classroom
experience. This notion of physicali-
y is at the heart of how we teach in
the visual arts and in music and the-
ater. It’s experiential learning where
students are creating something new
by drawing on their inner strengths
and experiences. To make a psycho-
logically charged self-portrait or to
become a character in a play requires
both technical skills and a deep emo-
tional commitment. It’s a different,
yet valid approach to learning.

Axelson: One of the things I try to
convey to students is how exercise
and physical well being affect the
entire person. We know quite a bit
about the relationship between exer-
cise and depression and stress reduc-
tion. And I see a lot of students who
report that they use exercise as a
way of buffering against stress. But,
for some, it can just become another
source of stress—in that they feel
pressure to fit in their run or their
workout. Women in particular are
susceptible to this more because of
body image issues and such. So, in
my Body Health class, the word we
keep coming back to is “moderation.”

3. BODY IMAGE

Beatty: We certainly engage in
questions of body image in the dif-
erent kinds of projects we assign
across the visual arts classes. It’s fas-
cinating to see students raise the
issue of body image and how it
relates to identity in their work. It’s
interesting how, sometimes, it can be
coupled with humor. I think it’s actu-
ally something that students are very
articulate about because it has been
driven into them—this whole idea of
body image and how you shouldn’t
fall prey to the media version of
what you’ve supposed to look like.
So they’re very savvy, but, at the
same time, they all buy into it.
They’re really conflicted. We had a
student last year who made these
incredible sculptures—life-size self-
portraits made out of food, one using
marshmallows, crab crackers, and
chocolate icing. She was an athlete
here. Plays field hockey. And she
explained how her “body type” is
not quite right for the sport.

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then she said, “Well, you know, that’s just part of who I am. And I’m going to make a sculpture that reflects that.”

The work is hysterically funny, but once the humor disarms you, then you see, oh, this is really about something a little bit more serious.

This idea of self-portraiture or using a surrogate for yourself comes up in a lot of the work that students make. Another student athlete, she’s on the crew team, had taken one of her uniforms and sewn a football dress onto it. The finished haute couture gown suggested a contrast between idealized feminine beauty versus the expectation of herself as an athlete.

Austen: In a life drawing class, how do the students react when a model comes in whose appearance doesn’t match what they’ve been expecting?

Beatty: Well, often they expect an idealized version of the human body, when, in fact, the models could be the age of the students’ parents, for example. I think that’s always an eye-opener for them. And it’s an important kind of engagement—looking at anatomy, understanding anatomy. How do you translate what you’re seeing onto the page? It’s a fairly unique experience, in that it’s one of the few times you look at a naked person and there’s no sexual connotation attached to it.

Kuzniowski: We’re conditioned by the great museums to think of idealized human figures, the Venus de Milo or the David. It’s interesting that you give them people who look like us.

Austen: We all hear that these students have gone through their 15 to 19 years of being indoctrinated to what body image should be. And, therefore, they’re unable to have a realistic sense of the fact that there are different styles and so forth.

Wolfson: I come across the issue when I teach abnormal psychology. We discuss body image, disordered eating, and eating disorders. What I tend to find, first of all, is an assumption on the male students’ part that this is only a female issue. I have used some guided discussions to try to break down this issue and related questions.

Axelson: Years ago, when one of my students was an undergraduate, I once saw him in the Campus Center at a review session. Another professor came by and said, “How nice that they’re helping out the football players.
with their chemistry." The football player had to explain that he was tutoring the other students. We're all suscept-
ible to these kinds of body-type prejudices.

Wolfson: And one of the things that I think is impor-
tant for us to keep in mind is just how young our stu-
dents are. They are older adolescents in transition to
adolescence. Emerging adults. There is ongoing brain mat-
uration, particularly in areas of cognitive and emotional
development. They're taking in information about body
image or about eating disorders, for example, as devel-
oping adults.

Beatty: I think that's one thing that the visual arts offer
students. To take some of the concepts that come out of
their more academically oriented classes and reinterpret
them through a personal vision. I often find that a stu-
dent who is a chemistry major can incorporate ideas
from their discipline to create an interesting work of art
in my class.

4. IS THERE A PHYSICAL DIMENSION TO FAITH?

Kuzniarczyk: I suppose that sports is a kind of ideal-
ized form of warfare or combat that lends itself to a kind
of religiosity. I don't think there is a necessary connec-
tion, but I think a lot of sincere religiosity in our athletes.
A lot of it, in my experience, depends on the direction
that the coach gives to it and on the availability of differ-
ent people willing to serve in the chaplain's capacity. But
when I first became involved with the football team
here, 13 years ago, it was to say a team Mass on the day
of games. The players were required to attend. Then we
had a change of coaches and he and I agreed that prayer
should be voluntary—which was also the thought of
Ignatius of Loyola. You invited people to pray but you
never compelled them.

Now with our current coach, we have a game-day Mass,
which is a fairly large percentage of players attend. I also
read the team in a prayer in the locker room before the
game. And in that situation, I tend to use a variation of
St. Augustine's idea that the glory of God is man fully
alive. And if we use all of our gifts—including our ath-
lletic gifts—we'll, we give glory to God.

Axelson: While coaching the Chicago Bulls, NBA
coach Phil Jackson wrote a book called Sacred Hoops in
which he described teaching his players to meditate—to
be mindful of what is happening at each moment of
time. I think our athletes experience this when they're
on the field. They're in the moment. How did you make
that move as an athlete? They don't think about it,
they're totally in the moment. And I think it's possible to have those experiences in the academic life. I think the physical world and the mental world come together for these people.

Kuzniakowski: I sense that it's harder than ever before for our students to bring those worlds together. I don't know what it feels like to be a college age student right now and to be part of a culture that is so pluralized. They have their cell phones, their i-pods, their Facebook. There's constant engagement all the time, and I wonder when they have time to be in contact with themselves. The question emerged for me again last fall. A freshman came in to tell me that he had been in the library and had been so absorbed in a book that he got through most of it in two hours. He was just drawn in—and he had never had an experience like that before. As I look back, I think we had those moments regularly in my generation as we were growing up. I just don't think it's as common anymore so that they can give themselves fully as they're doing at the moment.

5. SCHEDULING AND THE LIMITS OF TIME

Austin: It has occurred to me that the way we organize the day on campus is actually counterproductive for our students. It's comfortable for us, as adults, to start at 8:30 a.m. and end at 5:00 p.m. But, actually, this doesn't help our students study. And if we're here to help them to be all that they can be, we really want to start at what, 11:00 a.m.?

Wolfson: I don't know about 11:00, but certainly 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. Other schools have done this. Duke University has made significant changes to its class schedule for students. They made a unilateral decision about it a few years ago. I believe they don't start any classes earlier than 9:00 a.m.

Kuzniakowski: But that's not training them for the workforce. It's not mimicking what they'll have to do once they graduate.

Wolfson: You're right, but as I suggested earlier, college students are not adults physically or psychologically or emotionally. Sleep/wake schedules change with development. Research suggests that as students mature over the course of the college years, their sleep schedules become more consistent and less delayed.

Austin: In terms of scheduling, we do have some options. It seems to me that it's hard putting students in a situation where you know they will not perform well. Why would we do that? We wouldn't put them into a situation where there was a lot of noise outside and they couldn't hear every fourth word that the instructor said. We think that that was absurd. So it's strange to go on perpetuating this when we know that there's a solution or a way to get around it. Though of course, we have constraints on the number of classrooms and the number class hours and the fact that instructors want to get back to their families at the end of the day.

Wolfson: Regarding scheduling, Professor Royce Singleton and I wrote a paper where we discuss this issue. The first-year students here at Holy Cross are more likely to be put in those 8:00 a.m. classes. And they are the very group that we should not be putting in those classes. The majority of college first-year students do less well in early morning classes and that can be documented.

Kuzniakowski: One problem for our students is simply the limits of time. They might have a lot of time required for sport and a lot of time required for academics. Either that means they can't take a course that they want to take, or that they won't do well in their sport. Or that they compromise on both sides. Another issue for the athletes is the problem of travel schedules. Particularly for big league sports like basketball. But we're also in an impossible situation. If they get home a 3:00 in the morning having played a game that evening and they're supposed to be in class at 8:00 a.m. and they fall asleep, you can't blame them. This is a place where I think that, for the good of our students, the dialogue has to be not just promoted but even, perhaps, forced a little.

Axelson: There is some interesting data that suggests that varsity athletes in college aren't doing as well academically, on average. But then, 10 years down the road, in all kinds of measures—economic, quality of life—they are doing better. There's something about that experience for a lot of students that is highly beneficial. Does that mean that it's a good thing for all our student athletes? Absolutely not. We need to continue to work hard on gender equity issues and at managing how participation in athletics fits with our student athletes' academic schedules.