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Liberating Students
From Paris Hilton, Howard Stern, and Jim Beam

By Richard G. Malloy, S.J.

Challenging and Transforming College Culture: A self-described, disgruntled conservative Catholic challenges me: "Father, why do all these Catholic kids go to Catholic colleges and lose their faith?" My response is to challenge the questioner's underlying premise. Frankly, the majority of Catholic eighteen year olds do not come to college with a deep and vibrant faith. They come to college more with the hope of "meeting and mating" than with the desire to develop discipleship with Jesus. The faithful practice of Catholicism is not a central component of their lives. Students desire more to "facebook.com" than to meet God and others face to face (cf., 1 Cor 13:12). Students do not realize that the way to understand themselves, others and our world is intimately connected to the ways we love, and that the ways we live and love are rooted in the manners in which we imagine our relationship to God, i.e., faith. Why don't they know the power and freedom of faith, and what can we do about it?

We need to examine what blinds and oppresses college students to the liberating action of God in their lives, and develop strategies that will help them work toward their own, and our, liberation. Liberation theologia's method examines what oppresses and impoverishes people, and then calls us to bring the liberating power of the Gospel into dialogue with the situation. College students today, although usually economically fairly well off, often lack the spiritual resources and cultural capital necessary to live satisfying and enriching faith lives. A vibrant, living practice of faith in the loving, challenging God of Jesus Christ, can free students from oppressive cultural currents. Students free from slavery to the idols of Budweiser and Jim Beam are ready for the intellectually joyous adventure college can be, and for many, is. Students free for the adventure of becoming their deepest, truest selves, and not Paris Hilton and Howard Stern "wannabees," will relate to themselves, others and God in ways that make for a world of peace and justice for all.

For a sizable minority, faith is a constitutive dimension of the fabric of their lives, and rare is the college student who will opine that spirituality (but not necessarily religion) is unimportant. Yet most college students pay tuition because they think a college degree will open the door to a high paying job, not put them on the path to salvation. If told they won't get to heaven, most students will respond, "Whatever." If told they will never get a decent paying job, students will tremble. In order to develop in students' lives the practices of Catholicism, we must do what God has always done for people: name and address that which is oppressing them and work toward liberation.

Let's prophetically oppose the idols, the false gods demanding student sacrifice and death. Let's offer the practice of a full and flexible Catholic faith that will help college students establish an adult relationship with the Lord of love and life. We can ignite in young adult hearts and minds transformative energies now lying dormant on the beer soaked floors of Animal House and Old School modes of being. But web sites like "collegehumor.com" and "drinkoniversity.com" graphically display the destructive cultural dynamics coursing through collegians' daily lives. Books like Ariel Levy's study of raunch culture (Female Chauvinist Pigs: Is Raunch Culture the New Women's Liberation? 2005) and Pamela Paul's investigation of pornography's pervasive influence (Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, 2005) reveal what we are up against.

As teachers and administrators in Jesuit, Catholic...
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institutions of higher education, we are called to challenge and change the ways in which students unthinkingly respond to the cultural currents within which too many of our students swim, and in which too many drown. Fostering the liberation of our students will provide them with the character building, soul satisfying practices and expertise in relational dynamics they now lack. Such practices they will desperately need to build happy, healthy, holy and free lives in the future. What may appear to be a young adult’s loss of “faith” may be a shedding of childhood conditioning and practices. During college years, they are invited to open their minds and hearts to a God who may not be the God of one’s Parents or the idols of one’s culture.

“It’s so hard to be me,” Teresa, a stunningly beautiful high school senior, bemoans the fact that she has to wear certain name brand clothes and apply makeup so perfectly each day. Asked why she feels the need to live in such a manner, she replies, “People expect it of me.” She is looking forward to the chance to start anew at college. There she imagines she will be free from all those expectations that have oppressed her in high school. College administration and faculty should rush in and seize the opportunity to create campus experiences that will help students like Teresa confront culturally oppressive practices (e.g., ‘Plunk N’ Ho’ parties, the 21st birthday ‘hour of power’; ‘friends with benefits’; lower back ‘traump stamp’ tattoos, oral sex on demand).

Students like Teresa deeply desire to free themselves and form communities in the light of Jesus’ call to serve and love others. They just aren’t being shown how. Corrupt seniors can show “fresh meat flesh,” i.e., females, to the leg parties the first nights of the semester, but we can’t get first year students to attend freshmen retreats. They think they want beer, when what they deeply desire is what we all want: God.

Consciously Constructing College Culture: Ignatian spirituality is rooted in the practice of discerning desires. God’s grace in our lives functions to transform our desires, leading us to want and choose what God wants and chooses. In discovering our deepest truest desires, we most immediately and passionately find God. What do we desire for and from our students? What do we want our college students to look and sound like? What kind of campus culture must we construct in order to see our desires realized? Actually, the top twenty percent of today’s students are better than they have ever been: smarter, more intellectually curious, harder working, more likely to engage in significant service, more aware of and open to religious formation. But the bottom forty percent really make me worry about who will be running my nursing home!

Teaches desires and students’ desires differ dramatically. A kid wants to sit in the back row, hat on, bleary eyed, sipping Starbucks. I want a young adult sitting in the front row, hat off, bright eyed and prepared for class, enthusiastic about engaging the course material.

While we want students to do significant amounts of service, many of our undergrads want to hit the bars five, six, even seven nights a week.

What I want is a school full of students like SJU’s orientation leaders, the ‘Redshirts.’ These upperclassmen and women return to school several weekends
during the summer, selflessly, happily working sixteen hour days introducing incoming freshmen to the spirit of Hawk Hill. The first year students begin to learn the meaning of our motto "The Hawk Will Never Die" as they see those upperclassmen and women at 2:00 AM on a Sunday morning, 300 strong and sober, leading some 200 freshmen, singing American Pie, Breakfast at Tiffany’s, Plastic Jesus, (that 70’s classic played and led by the husky Jesuits) and a whole bunch of songs I never heard of by groups like Guinness, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Barenaked Ladies. The kids were armored when they found out I had no idea that the last group was composed of three guys.

The "Redshirts" haven't lost their faith while at SJU; they have found or developed their faith. They have come to believe that service and for others is more enriching and more fun than endless games of beer pong. They are at 8:00 PM Mass on Sunday nights and in class on Monday mornings and on Project Appalachia over Spring Break. These students get everything out of a Jesuit education one can get because they generously give and share so much of the grace and goodness of their hearts. "Redshirts" who betray the values of their office are excoriated by their peers. Students want students in whom they can believe, in whom they can place their trust.

Addressing Oppressions: Why are many students so unlike the "Redshirts"? Students fail to receive all that a Jesuit education has to offer because they choose to succumb to cultural currents opposing them. They unconsciously accept that college ought to be a drinking experience, rooted in the pursuit of sexual and other pleasures, while putting the questions of life’s purpose and meaning on hold for four years. Watching freshmen pour out of the dorm in which I live on a Tuesday or Friday or Sunday night, I realize they are interested in anything but Jesuit education. The guys are slovenly and unkempt, baseball caps on backward, while the young women are tube topped, short skirted and high heeled, all perfumed and "boobsiefy" ("boobiey" meaning "too short, too tight, too much"). These "novice adults" wander the surrounding neighborhoods searching for alcohol. At 3:00 AM one night, I observe a young woman drunkenly stumble back into the dorm. As she stumbles loosely about, she proceeds to vomit.

Suggesting that radical rules be enforced that address and abolish such behaviors is met with, "Well, young people have to learn to be responsible. That entails their making mistakes." Still, conditions that facilitate students' chances of living up to expectations that college be an alcohol soaked bacchanal have to be radically transformed. Students spending much more on booze than they do on books is insane. Worse, students are losing more than their money while worshiping at the dark altars of Blind Light. Each year 1,400 deaths and 70,000 sexual assaults and date rapes result from campus drinking across the nation (Time Magazine 4/22/02).

Eradicate the drinking culture: Challenge and discipline students who want college to be primarily a drunken binge: The three martini lunch is a relic of the past in business circles, and anyone "wasted" or "retarded" (student lingo for "intoxication") at the office Christmas party will not be getting a promotion. Clear any alcohol, haze coloring students' thinking by enacting strong institutional responses to unacceptable behaviors. Hire a few "alcohol cops." Send them to the off-campus bars and apartments, and sanction and fine students engaged in the destructive partying. Suspend students who insist on drinking irresponsibly until they are ready to assume the responsibility of being adult learners. Don’t let students stay in college if they will not act like...
adults. Really, demanding that students live in ways that make peace rather than war with campus neighbors is simple justice. We rattle on about being "men and women for and with others" and service learning. Service starts with stopping sophomores urinating on people's front yards.

Ignite Intellectual Curiosity and Invite the Uninterested to Leave: The saddest students are the ones who just aren't interested. Professors aren't boring; students are bored. Tell the boozed and bored, and those Bright College bears author Annie Matthews calls the "aggressively apathetic," to get interested, or leave. Put us out of their misery. Here's a radical solution: allow professors to drop students from class. Ryan Maher, S.J., once noted that high school kids at St. Joe's Prep in Philadelphia gave zpt attention to coaches. Why? If they didn't, the coach would throw them off the team. Why must a teacher of theology or Western civilization put up with recalcitrant looters who simply don't want to learn the material? Kick out sullen, back row seated malcontents, who can poison a whole class with their sour, negative attitude. Don't wait until the end of the semester to flank them. Bounce the bozos and throw the knuckleheads out of the course in the first weeks of the semester so that others will feel free to participate and energetically engage the material without being labeled "nerds" by the hung over cohort.

A sophomore in my Anthropology of Love course flunked the first test. I asked him what he was doing. He informed me that he didn't like the books in the course. One book was on cross cultural sexual practices. He couldn't claim that was boring! He told me he was an English major and he'd rather be reading novels. I said if that's how he felt, he should drop the course. "No," he replied, "I'm gonna stay and get my three credits." I said "No, you are going to drop the course." Since I could not drop him from the course, I wrote him a letter informing him that he had failed the course. I had not taught him anything in five weeks, nor had he learned anything. He had done virtually no work for the first third of the semester. Therefore, in good conscience, I could not certify that he had earned, or would be able to earn, three credits for the course. He could withdraw now, or take the F. He squawked to deans and chairperson, but then, a few weeks later, slept through the second test and wanted to drop the course after the deadline for doing so had passed. He still got the W.

Grant teachers the power to remove the lazy, idle, classroom space occupiers (I refuse to call them students), and undergraduates will get the message that they must be active learners. No more sleeping in class and getting a C from adjunct professors terrified of re-convying poor student evaluations. If teachers drop too many kids, give administrators the power to overrule the decision. But, I guarantee, placing more power and responsibility back in teachers' hands will transform the classroom atmosphere.

Once students realize they must be active learners, a profound liberation can occur. They will be unable to keep up if they insist on partying four, five, six nights a week. They will start actually doing the assigned reading. They will be awake and alive in class. Soon, students will experience the utter joy of learning. Recently, I studied Brian Greene's The Elegant Universe and The Fabric of the Cosmos. There is a fascination and joy in learning about string theory's conjectures on the possibility of multiple universes and time travel. I tell students, "Truly become life long learners and you will never be bored again. There is nothing as soul satisfying as really learning." Every teacher has sat up all night, reading until five in the morning, unable to put the book down. It's a disgrace if students get through four years of Jesuit education and never feel that thrill of being entered by a book.

We sit on the crest of the wave of the latest increase in knowledge in the history of the human family. Our students are given four years to tackle the endlessly energizing task of mastering a bit of that vast array of human wisdom. Four years to master critical thinking. Develop excellent communicative skills. Gain a more than passing familiarity with perennial theological and philosophical issues. Explore history. Understand the scientific method and science's effects on human existence. Such learning is crucial, for the continuation of civilization rests on our being able to live as intelligent and ethically responsible persons. Life long learners are better able to love and live. That we be learners and lovers is what God desires for us all, and requires of those whose parents are spending over $40,000 a year so their son or daughter can attend a University.

Explore ultimate meanings: Once students are warned away from the bars and boozed, and turned on to learning, we can help them seriously engage in the development and deepening of their faith lives. We need to structure the turning off of 24/7 computers, iPods, the omnipresent cell phones, and

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Kick out students who can poison a whole class with their sour, negative attitude.
all the other flickering lights and noise. Challenge students to stop, be still and alone for a while. Encourage them to notice their souls. How concrete-ly and specifically to do that is the subject of a future article showing how silence, solitude and salvation’s exploration can be integrated into the college experience. For now, let’s realize that college is not job training. A university exists to challenge students to think, learn and grow; to allow faculty to teach stu-
dents, and also explore and expand the boundaries of their academic discipline; to serve the community by graduating young adults who are intellectually equipped to meet the challenges of constructing and continuing the complex civilization on which our lives depend. We need to be asking serious question about ultimate mat-
ters. What is a human person and how ought men and women live? What are the social, economic and political dynamics that affect our world, and how have we, and how will we, channel these forces in the future? Who is God and how does God relate to us? What are we to do with the incredible opportu-
nities of this 21st century? How will we fashion our fragile world and make of it an ecologically sustain-
able world of peace and justice for all?”

The wisdom of our Catholic faith, especially Catholic social teaching, has much to contribute to such discussions. Out of respect for, and fear of offending, non-Catholics in the student body or on the faculty, we sometimes hesitate to articulate the faith freely and forcefully. But we can teach a vibrant and challenging Catholicism. The Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Protestant members of our Jesuit univer-
sity communities are not offended by a full, fair and flexible exposition of our faith. They are intrigued and energized by being invited to participate in the mission of Jesuit higher education. In so doing, they share with the community the strengths of their tra-
ditions. Liberation emerges from our being a com-
munity of communities, responsible to, and respect-
ful of, one another. In union with others, and as dis-
ciples of Jesus, we can help free oppressed students by lovingly cooperating with the mysterious ways grace glides in their hearts and lives. Teach students to pay less at the bars and pay more attention to grace, and they will be free to discover faith and hope and love. ■

Students at Saint Louis University discuss a project with their professor.