Women in Jesuit Higher Education

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ver a decade has passed since I commented on the status of women in Jesuit higher education in Conversations in 1993. At that time, although there were many challenges, women were beginning to establish their presence in universities that had previously been characterized by predominantly male faculty, students and administrators. Our situation today reminds me of a comment I wrote some years earlier. In 1989, I was so surprised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the return to independence of many European nations formerly under Soviet rule that I wrote in my log, “The Cold War is over, and we won!” I didn’t mean that there were no conflicts with or within Europe. I meant that the posture of conflict was over. I think this can be said about the role of women in Catholic higher education today. The cold war is over and we won. Women still don’t have true parity, but the posture of conflict is over. We have achieved critical mass, and there is no going back.

1. The learning environment has noticeably changed. Services and policies that support women have been introduced on most campuses, and women are leaders in the student affairs division in the roles of dean, director or vice president. There are well-publicized policies on sexual harassment. Campus security programs include improved lighting and escort services for women. Title IX requirements have pushed campuses to develop strong competitive athletics and recreational programs for women. Perhaps because the Jesuit universities were built decades ago, it is not surprising that the chapel and buildings still feature very few images of women as models. However, university publications typically feature women as well as men, and there are buildings and endowments named for women. The right of women to be students in the university, and the ability of women to succeed in academic programs is rarely questioned. In fact, women are now the majority in the student body, and therefore define the norm rather than being an exception.

2. The number of women on the faculty has also increased. Women hold endowed chairs and leadership positions. While not equal in number to male faculty in most departments, women faculty have achieved a critical mass. There are so many excellent women scholars and teachers that it would be foolish to suggest that women are not capable of high quality academic work.

Nevertheless, at the higher ranks, women have not yet achieved parity with men, even though 40 years have passed since the Civil Rights Act called for gender equity and made sex discrimination illegal. This is a phenomenon throughout higher education, and is particularly found in prestigious universities. The argument that this is the consequence of an inadequate number of women scholars in the pipeline is becoming old. Women are now the majority of those earning the PhD. Thus the pool of potential women faculty should make the recruitment and appointment of women just as likely as that of men. Although discrimination against women is usually not overt, it still exists widely and is

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revealed by reports of women faculty, anecdotally and, of course, lawsuits. Jesuit universities have not been the targets of media attention, but continuing sensitivity to subtle discrimination is prudent. The recent culmination at Harvard around the decline of tenure offers to women in Arts and Science from 37 percent to 11 percent during the Summers presidency, and President Summers’ recent remarks about women in the sciences illustrates that gender is still a topic of conversation.

Student policies are generally sensitive to the lives of women, but faculty policies usually are not, with little variance possible in the tenure schedule for promotion and responsibility. The demands of child bearing and rearing can interfere with completion of scholarly work, and it is not surprising that many tenure women scholars are not married or do not have children. Where there is a “mummy track” or an option to take an extended maternity leave; women who make this choice may be considered insincere or insufficiently devoted to their academic career. This is still an area of concern for women that needs attention.

3. **University curricula** are more inclusive of the role of women in history, literature, the sciences and other fields than they were a dozen years ago. Most Jesuit institutions feature excellent women’s studies programs, and some have begun to incorporate the research developed in these programs into mainstream courses as well.

4. **Women administrators.** A dozen years ago, women deans and vice presidents were present, but still few in number in Jesuit universities. There are many more women deans, provosts, vice presidents and senior administrators in Jesuit universities today, although the presidency is still likely unattainable. At several Jesuit universities, the Board of Trustees chair is a woman.

5. **Concern for justice** for women is still a valid issue. Although women have strained access to graduate programs in medicine, law, and business, there is still a striking salary differential between the compensation of women and men in the same positions. The role of women in the Church has not seen much improvement, and in some respects it has become worse. Women are still not eligible for ordained ministries, and the directive from the Vatican is that the topic is not to be discussed. When we consider that women are half the human race, this seems an extreme exclusion.

Jesuit colleges and universities have become places where women are welcomed and valued. While Jesuit universities do not differ noticeably from their peer institutions in the numbers of women on campus, the progress achieved is noticeable, and welcome. Given their commitment to social justice and academic excellence, we expect Jesuit institutions to be leaders in promoting the role of women in higher education and in the Church.