In Response: Integration of Mission and Instruction at Fairfield University

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A year after the conference on justice at Santa Clara University, an assessment of justice initiatives underway at Fairfield University shows many successes.

In the year since the Santa Clara Conference, we have had time to reflect on how our institution responds to the challenges so eloquently expressed by Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus. The reflection caused us to revisit some of the previous projects of the university in an effort to determine how those projects fit with the mission of the school and with Fr. Kolvenbach's recommendations. This article is a review of several of the current and proposed projects at Fairfield University's schools.

The School of Nursing through its Health Promotion Center has had a significant impact on the health of children in nearby Bridgeport, CT. For the past few years, teams of our student nurses and their faculty have focused on lead poisoning prevention and cardiovascular risk reduction. Students spend their time in class absorbing the theory and methodology and are able to put some of that into practice in a community project under the supervision of their instructors. They are thus learning not only how to function in their chosen profession, but also actively sharing their gifts with those less fortunate than they are. For many of the residents, this is the only source of preventive care. This service by the Nursing School has received grants from area corporations that assure the continuing presence of our Nursing School in the community.

The psychology department in the College of Arts and Sciences has received funding from the Adrienne Kirby Family for a literacy campaign in Bridgeport. The project involves over 200 Fairfield University students, and 750 low-income students and their parents in preschoolers' readiness and language skills, increasing parental involvement in the children's education, increasing the children's computer skills, and enhancing the university students' pre-professional training experiences and commitment to community service.

As part of the Jesuit charisma emphasizing formation for service, Campus Ministry plays a major role in engaging a significant number of students in service programs in the surrounding communities. There are teams committed to weekly meal preparation at soup kitchens, tutoring programs, service to AIDS affected families, and many other opportunities that link the students' service to a reflective examination of that service in the light of their own privileged experience. They also have teams making yearly trips to disadvantaged areas in Ecuador, Mexico, Haiti, Maine, Appalachia, and Nicaragua. These students invariably return with a new sense of themselves and their responsibility to the poor.

Students and faculty in the Dolan School of Business produced a literacy game designed by a Haitian priest. The game introduces familiar vocabulary, which the students learn to read and write very quickly. The initial cost was partially covered by a grant, and the rest was borrowed from a microfinance organization in Haiti. This effort is now managed as a separate business that is self-sustaining, and spreading literacy training in all parts of the country. The students were able to learn how such a project goes from concept to completion, but also faced the

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enormous problems of illiteracy in developing countries. In January 2001 a new interdisciplinary course was introduced, that included instructors from the College of Arts and Sciences, the Business and Nursing schools. The students in "Justice in the Developing World" had classes with different professors with specific emphasis on Nicaragua. During spring break, the students traveled with two instructors to Leon, Nicaragua to execute their research plan. While there, they also traveled to historic sites and other important landmarks that helped them learn about the people and the country. In June, 2001 after they graduated, three students from that class raised the funds to return to Chacra Seca, a small village devastated by Hurricane Mitch in 1999, to build two houses along with the villagers. The impact of the trip on the students was a life-altering experience for many. That is what we hope a Jesuit education will instill in the students.

Another graduate was so disturbed by the plight of street children in Cap Haitien, Haiti, that he started a shelter and school for them to provide them with security and a place to live, things which most of us take for granted. Many of our students visit and work in that community each year and are invariably touched by the generosity and spirit of the youngsters. Despite the deprivation, the children's spirit is unbowed, and it teaches all of us that God does indeed dwell in each of us, if only we would do more to share our gifts with those around us.

The Dolan School of Business has worked on several projects locally and internationally that involved students and faculty in developing self-sustaining enterprises. Students regularly visit a high school in nearby Bridgeport and mentor some of those students. They learn from each other that despite their racial and economic differences, they share common aspirations and fears. Fairfield University students often invite the inner city students to visit them on campus, something that helps the high school students experience the college environment. Students in computer classes have helped St. Aloysius school in Harlem, New York in upgrading their computers, and installing a network. Our students write a reflection on the experience, and it invariably confirms their joy and humility in sharing and learning how God has blessed each person in a special way.

The Dolan Business School is also actively involved in several projects in Leon, Nicaragua. In partnership with the local state university, the Chamber of Commerce and the Mayor's office, a demographic database is being designed and developed. Students in Leon and Fairfield will soon work together in developing the database with the guidance of their professors, who have met and started the planning process.

The strategic planning team in Leon communicates via email with a professor at Fairfield to keep both groups informed of the developments. Similarly a Geographic Information System (GIS) is being used in Leon to map the details of the area, and a professor in the College of Arts and Sciences has worked with experts in Leon to further that effort. His expertise in both GIS and census design has been invaluable to the team in Leon.

The Fairfield faculty continues to encourage the development of small businesses in Leon that will reduce the current reliance on foreign aid. All these activities have resulted in research projects and have already produced several journal articles for the faculty. That experience frequently filters into classroom discussion and engages the students with the realities of the developing world, and causes them to consider their own response to the situation. The projects in Haiti and Nicaragua have in common a design that fosters local development and management. This design encourages sustainable development, which is essential to the long-term viability of an undertaking.

In Fondwa, Haiti, the villagers determined that it would be beneficial for them to have a bakery rather than travel several hours to the capital to buy bread. Accordingly, in 1999 students in the Business School researched the region, and developed a business plan for the proposed bakery. Two years later the bakery has weathered many challenges and continues to operate at a profit despite considerable obstacles. Most of the vendors are women, and they are able to spend more time with their families and have a higher profit margin.
since they no longer have to incur the cost of travel to Port-au-Prince twice weekly.

In an area that has neither electricity nor running water, the students were diligent in developing a business plan that was viable in the prevailing conditions. The Jesuit Conference on Social and International Ministries recognized this project as a "model project" in April, 2001.

Some professors have been assisting in the assessment and management of microfinance institutions (MFI) in Haiti and Nicaragua. The MFIs are formed to serve the poor by making small loans to merchant groups. Many individuals and charitable organizations in the U.S. and Europe provide the funds to the MFIs, and expect a formal report on the disbursement of those funds. Through our Center for Microfinance Advice and Consulting we have helped lenders to evaluate the receiving institution's financial status, and we have helped borrowers to improve their business practices. We have been asked to conduct classes in microfinance practice for small business groups in Nicaragua. We are discussing this possibility with UCA, the Jesuit University in Managua. They have created "Nitlapan" a research organization within the university to study MFIs and best practices. Once again, these activities engage the students and faculty in the essence of being men and women for others.

It is true that while we go about our daily academic lives, we do not always stop to consider how we fulfill our mission. It is useful, therefore, to reflect on the many ways in which each Jesuit institution touches the lives of its community. The instances listed in this article are duplicated in Jesuit institutions, both high school and higher education, all over the world. It is one way for us to foster the development of the people God has asked us to serve, and to provide the world with young women and men who understand their responsibility to share their gifts freely with those around them.
In her quiet, unassuming way, Lauren Scholle represents the ideals of the Jesuit teachings found at John Carroll University (JCU). The sophomore soccer player finds time for sports, academics, community service, and her own spiritual enrichment. While she admits that being a student athlete is a juggling act, she also believes that it has given her time management skills that will last a lifetime. A student in the Boler School of Business at JCU, Scholle says her experience at the University has taken her beyond the classroom and soccer field. "I've gained a feeling of fulfillment you get when you are part of something bigger than yourself."

During the summer of 2001, Scholle and eighteen other JCU students ventured to Tijuana, Mexico for a cultural immersion and service trip led by the University’s Dean of Students, Patrick Rombalski. There they helped build a soccer field for an elementary school, moved cement blocks to construct a church community center, and visited children in an orphanage. "What amazed me was the sense of community among the people and the joy I saw in them despite their poverty," Scholle said. "Children in the orphanage came up and hugged us right away."

The welcome Scholle found in Tijuana will last long beyond her years at JCU and the gift of her service to others is something she plans to continue giving.