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Focusing on the Student as a Means of Closing the Dichotomy; or, Let's Stay Together for the Sake of the Children

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All colleges and universities in the United States have experienced a move toward greater professionalism in the organization and functioning of their faculties and staffs. With respect to services for students, this move toward professionalism has taken an interesting form. Many of the outside-the-classroom tasks formerly performed by faculty—supervising residence living, enforcing discipline, advising and counseling, special tutoring—are now being handled by staff specialists. There are good reasons for this phenomenon, having to do with the changing nature of students, the growth of students' need for specialized services, the increasing pressure put on faculty to handle heavier teaching loads and to do research, and the like. These valid reasons notwithstanding, the movement I am describing had the effect of seeming to create a distance between the fundamental job of teaching in the classroom, and important ancillary functions that have a direct relationship to successful student learning. The split has grown to a chasm. Faculty are on one side; their job is restricted to the classroom and the laboratory. Student services staff are on the other side. They are responsible for everything else that affects the student’s life on campus. The one is the legitimate academic domain; the other is, well, other—unacademic, illegitimate.

These occurrences are ironic, since they are happening at a time when college students, increasingly, see their lives as dichotomized between their academic work and every other part of their lives on campus. During the week, therefore (and on some campuses it is an increasingly short week), students work in classrooms and labs, offices, and libraries. When the weekend arrives (sometimes as early as Thursday night), students take a well-earned rest. They relax. They forget about the awful demands of their academic existence. Frequently they accomplish this task by getting drunk—consciously, intentionally—to wipe out the memory of all that hard work. It is not simply a matter of binge drinking; it is also a matter of binge studying as well. The life of the student is a progress from one kind of binge to another.

It seems clear to me that the mistaken student tendency to dichotomize college life is enabled by the university’s structural dichotomy between the formal academic curriculum and the co-curricular learning environment. The way we structure our institutions and the tasks of those who work with our students confirms a dangerous binge life style. For Jesuit universities this is a particularly vexing problem, since it contradicts the mission which aims at the education of the whole student. It turns “cura personalis” on its head.

The solution, as I see it (and in this I agree wholeheartedly with Sue Wetz’s arguments, in this issue), is for us to go back to the basic principles of our Jesuit tradition and to focus on the student. We need to remind ourselves that Jesuit schools are not so much about teaching as they are about learning. And we
need to remind ourselves that much more learning during the college years takes place outside the classroom than within. (Pascarella and Terenzini, in their monumental study *How College Affects Students*, have established this point beyond dispute.)

If we do so, then we will surely conclude that our job is to overcome the academic dichotomy, and not to foster it. We will not have to reorganize ourselves, to renounce specialization, to back away from a variety of student services. We will not have to give up research as a valid faculty activity, force faculty to run student residence halls, or fire all those tutors.

The task, rather, is for us to deny the dichotomy in our schools. We need to remind ourselves that everyone on a Jesuit campus helps students to learn, from the student affairs folks, the front line staff in the registrar and treasurer’s office, the computer consultants, through the faculty. We all support one another, because we all help students to learn.

From a pragmatic point of view, this should not be so difficult a thing for us to strive for, and ultimately to achieve. After all, we are all part of the same learning community, and we need one another to make sure that our students take advantage of the learning environment which we have to offer. It’s the same student who appears in my class or laboratory, who lives down my corridor, who needs assistance in my computer lab, who takes part in my orientation program, who needs to be sanctioned by my disciplinary hearing board. Those of us who help students to come to class sober help those of us who want students to pay attention in class. Those of us who hold students to account in class five days a week help those who want students to stay out of the bars.

There is evidence in recent events on many campuses that this bit of optimism is not simply theoretical. I’ll cite two examples. First, within the last ten years most of the Jesuit colleges and universities have moved to more elaborate orientation programs for new students, usually taking place during the summer. Whatever the local history of this practice, whatever the organizational arrangement on any specific campus, these summer orientation programs have been universally successful. Students and parents have found them to be helpful ways for inculcation to the campus; the universities themselves have found that they assist in reducing the problematic “summer melt” (the discrepancy between the number of students who are admitted and the number of actual arrivals on campus). Whatever the local story, they have required on every campus that the academic and student-life folks, the faculty and staff, work together to make the event balanced. Every school has made short-term mistakes in the joint enterprise; but we have all learned to overcome them.

My second example is of more recent vintage, perhaps more of a situation in process. I have observed that very many of the Jesuit universities and colleges are working out some sort of “freshman experience” program to continue the process of helping new students to make the transition to college life. John Gardner from the University of South Carolina has become the guru of the freshman seminar, as it has been called. Though Gardner has attempted to involve both faculty and student-services folks in his approach, the planning of these freshman seminars has frequently been caught up in the academic/student development dichotomy. On the one hand, staff people from student services have wanted to stress the student’s personal adjustment to college; on the other, faculty have preferred to focus on a freshman seminar with “academic substance,” based in one or another of the disciplines. Different schools, in my observation, have chosen different emphases, some with academic credit and some not, some with full-time faculty and some with staff instructors. At Scranton we have tried to involve both groups, and the jury is still out with respect to the final configuration. But the basic idea is so sound that most of us will work the conflict out, in our own way, based on our own cast of characters and our own history. I predict that the stakes are too high for us to let the project languish in our own incarnations of the dichotomy. I predict that this, too, will be a success story.

Humbling though it may seem to each of us, none of us can educate the whole student completely. It takes the whole university community to do that, working together, reinforcing one another, making learning a harmonious whole. Difficult as it may be, we need to stay together for the sake of the children!