Just Employment and Investment Policies: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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Have our Jesuit campuses fully lived out their ideals when it comes to the rights of campus workers and the investment of university endowments?

A three-year campaign for a living wage for contract workers at Georgetown peaked in 2005, when students went on a nine-day hunger strike. At Loyola New Orleans, a campaign by students and dining services workers crescendoed after a well-loved employee was fired for her union-organizing activity.

For administrators, responding to situations like these has been fraught with challenges around neutrality in labor disputes and financial constraints. Given this, it would be easy to dismiss protesting students as radical or naïve. But then, too, we would have to dismiss the challenging call of the late Jesuit superior general Fr. Pedro Arrupe to practice the works of justice:

• First, a basic attitude of respect for all people that forbids us ever to use them as instruments for our own profit.
• Second, a firm resolve never to profit from or allow ourselves to be suborned by positions of power deriving from privilege, for to do so even passively is equivalent to active oppression. To be drugged by the comforts of privilege is to contribute to injustice as silent beneficiaries of its fruits.
• Third, an attitude not simply of refusal but of counterattack against injustice; a decision to work with others toward the dismantling of unjust social structures so that the weak, the oppressed, the marginalized of this world may be set free.

Jesuit values and business operations need not be at odds. What makes the above cases remarkable is the response of the respective administrations. At Georgetown, the administration worked quickly with various stakeholders to develop and implement a just employment policy, which sets guidelines on issues like wages, benefits, and organizing rights for contract employers. At Loyola, a task force created by the president spent a year to research and create a similar policy. Both schools have advisory committees that now ensure that the policies are followed.

Similar issues exist around our endowments. Currently, students at hundreds of colleges and universities—several of our Jesuit schools among them—are calling for divestment of endowments from fossil fuels. Others, following the Move Our Money campaign, are calling on our schools to invest in their local communities.

Again, several of our schools have developed constructive ways forward. Loyola Chicago has an active shareholder advocacy committee, which engages the companies LUC is invested in on human rights and environmental issues. And Fordham recently made a
We are all aware that St. Ignatius wished Jesuits not to charge for their ministries, including the ministry of education, so that students would be admitted to our colleges regardless of their ability to pay. He expected us to beg for the support of our works! This proved to be impractical in the long run, but the contributed services of Jesuits, who constituted the majority of faculty in our schools for most of Jesuit history, meant that fees were low, even when they were charged. Here in the United States, our colleges were founded in the interest of a mostly urban, immigrant population who could not afford the fees that most private institutions charged, and even these modest fees were often waived for students who could not pay them in an informal economy of financial aid administered by the Jesuits.

As our institutions changed, and especially as we hired more lay faculty and staff who had to be paid a living wage, tuitions rose and financial aid became more formalized. Today, a few of our institutions are in the fortunate position to honor a commitment not only to need-blind admission but also to meeting fully the demonstrated financial need of all the students they admit. They do this typically with the help of large endowments. But I do not mean to minimize the struggle it is even for these institutions to meet this commitment, especially in the current economic climate.

For the rest of us, who cannot meet full financial need, we have traditionally tried to make as much need-based financial aid available as we could. There have been some exceptions to this practice, most notably athletic grants-in-aid, which are awarded irrespective of need (although, of course, many athletes have need), and merit scholarship programs to attract the very best students (presidential scholars, etc.). But a commitment to awarding most financial aid on the basis of need has