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Forming Thoughtful, Committed Citizens

By Lucas Sharma, S.J.

In a twist of fate, our nation has become a culture fraught with “alternative facts,” political apathy, and chronic lying. Recent political events have shone a light into the depths of our political problems, but in reality, they have been building for years. American philosophers from John Dewey to Hannah Arendt have long decried the loss, eclipse, and collapse of the public sphere. In her recent book, *Undoing the Demos*, political philosopher Wendy Brown argues that today neoliberalism collapses our ability to be a democracy. While we used to go to college to become citizens, now our minds are formed to think only in the categories of efficiency, effectiveness, and privatization. To think in terms of “we the people” becomes illogical; the only logic we can posit is one that privileges personal profits and utility over any sense of community.

The goal of Jesuit colleges and universities – to form women and men for and with others – stands in stark contrast. In his often cited 2000 Santa Clara address, former Jesuit Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach suggested that “the measure of Jesuit universities is not what our students do but who they become and the adult Christian responsibility they will exercise in future towards their neighbor and the world.” What this means is that our students and alumni must be formed as whole persons who can think with more than simple cost-benefit analysis. The continuation of our democracy and today’s world requires persons who are for and with others. Recommitting to Father Kolvenbach’s ideal university and measure of alumni is one way for Jesuit colleges and universities to be a *sanctuary for truth and justice*.

In a time of political uncertainty, our colleges and universities stand as sanctuaries because our essential nature is to prophetically live the Gospel – to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to

captives, to let the oppressed go free. By teaching students to see the world through the lens of the Gospel, they can translate the welcome of Jesus into concrete viable solutions for our own day. In a word, they can be Jesuit-educated *citizens* committed to acting for and with those forgotten in our society.

To be a citizen is to see the world through plurality. It means to step out of our narrow self-interest to ask value questions about the nation’s priorities. Hannah Arendt sought to retrieve politics from questions of efficiency and instrumental reasoning towards deeper meaning. In our schools, this attitude means asking questions like *who ought we to be, what does it mean to be a political community, and are our current values ones we’d like to organize our community around?* And, if we are persons of faith, we might add, *how does our particular religious tradition inform the way we answer these questions?* For all of our graduates, to be a Jesuit-educated citizen is to ask these questions so as to reorder society into one that welcomes the strangers – those who are already with us and those whose journeys will bring them to us.

Examining our colleges and universities today, we have a lot to be proud of: we are already forming citizens in our core curriculum and majors courses, in our co-curricular activities and community engagement. Many of our schools complete over 100,000 hours of service each year and send alumni to programs like Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Other schools have diverse campus ministries that seek to build campuses committed to fostering faith for persons from multiple faith traditions. But perhaps becoming a sanctuary today means more explicitly taking on citizenship formation. This involves acknowledging that, due to their socialization, our undergraduates cannot help but view the world through its individualistic logic.

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– Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.

In addition, they are worried about the ever increasing cost of higher education. Consequently, they ask questions like *why do I need to take philosophy class? What does sociology have to do with my major? Why am I in this science class?* Hearing from parents, the media, and even former President Obama that STEM education and jobs are the way of the future, it should not surprise us that many of our students want only to take classes they perceive will directly help them get ahead in life.

The Jesuit Catholic university exists to engage students in the very purpose and ultimate meaning of their lives. Our explicit goal is to foster women and men for others who are virtuous people – courageous, generous, humble, and deeply loving. As Jesuit educators, we can strengthen our commitment to our students and our world by making it clear to them that we are person-forming institutions rather than mere technical-training programs. Knowing economic curves is an important technical skill, but being a truly good business person means asking the social consequences of decisions made through economic logic: how will the decisions made in the board room affect the poor and the vulnerable? The nurse needs to know how to insert an IV, but being a good nurse means seeing into the soul of the patient whose is likely suffering in more than just a physical way. And the philosopher must know how to communicate the ethics of Aristotle and Plato, but the good philosopher sees how philosophical questions might be causing deep questioning and uncertainty in the student and people in the nation.

Thus, in our classrooms and our student services, we can reinforce how our school stands to create citizens who can engage deeply with the values of

truth and justice. We can assign papers, create on-campus activities, and hold up models of religious conviction, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Mahatma Gandhi.

There is one significant challenge: we must ask ourselves how to communicate these values without sounding paternalistic. Should we sound like a nagging parent – “I know you don’t want to take science for non-majors, but this will be good for your formation as a person,” – students likely will tune us out. We must think creatively about how to foster citizenship without collapsing the drive within our students.

In doing so, we will form students who are thoughtful citizens able to connect deep questions in whatever professions they continue towards. They likely will differ in how they approach the questions above. We’d expect that they’d even have a difference of opinion, ideas, and voices in the ways they engage their local and national communities. If they achieve this, we have accomplished the goal suggested by Father Kolvenbach: we will have formed graduates able to take the sanctuary for truth and justice into the world, tasked with the goal of fighting a culture of lies and apathy with the words and actions of the Gospel. They will be able to speak boldly and courageously, suggesting that other values are possible and another more welcoming, inclusive, and loving community can be built.

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