

Higher Standards in Higher Education

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Five years ago last October, the superior general of the Jesuits, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, delivered a historic address at Santa Clara University in California, urging that the promotion of justice should have a central place in Jesuit higher education. Father Kolvenbach was not simply innovating. Ten years earlier Pope John Paul II had written in his apostolic letter *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* that “the Christian spirit of service to others in promoting social justice is especially important for each Catholic university and should be shared by professors and fomented among students” (No. 34). The document called for research on “the promotion of justice for all...a more equitable distribution of world resources and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at the national and international level” (No. 32).

While promoting justice may not be the chief work of higher education, according to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* it is indispensable for Catholic colleges and universities. This emphasis, which responds to greater social awareness in the church and wider society, has far-reaching implications. The promotion of justice is one of those factors that distinguishes Catholic colleges and universities, calling them beyond the models, both liberal and conservative, commonly held up for imitation. Our schools cannot measure their educational excellence by the same yardstick as Harvard or Stanford. Neither can they afford to turn in on themselves as confessional enclaves.

Far from distorting the mission of the university, the promotion of justice should enhance it. But how? Let me suggest seven “higher standards” for Catholic higher education.

First, the university community should strive to *understand the real world*. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., the rector of the Jesuit university in El Salvador who was murdered in 1989, used to insist that reality is the primary object of study. That is less obvious than it sounds. Many students graduate from college with little understanding of homelessness, abortion or their own country’s military adventures. Last year during the U.S. electoral campaign, polls revealed a striking level of ignorance on vital political issues.

By all means, let us lose ourselves in great works of art. They teach us about life and shape us to live better. But let us resist the kind of obsession with narrow sub-specialties that distracts us from the wider reality.

A second standard is related to this: *focus on the big questions*. Wisdom, not mere information, is the goal of education. Again, let us study obscure insects and obscure authors and master the periodic table of the elements. But let that study be part of a quest to understand what life means, how life and well-being are threatened and how they can flourish. Let the most important questions structure learning— questions about the drama of life and death, about injustice and liberation, good and evil, grace and sin. In the language of faith, the Cross is the center of reality— Jesus’ cross and all the other crosses. At the foot of the cross, reality comes into focus. Lacking that perspective, wisdom turns to folly.

Third, our universities need to *free us from bias*. We know how debates in the classroom and the lounge about free trade and the war in Iraq can drone on and achieve little, because they are based on unexamined assumptions. Moreover, teachers frequently offer answers to questions students are not asking, because the problems lie beyond their experience. Sophistry and propaganda compound the problem. How are teachers to help students unmask deception today, when war is waged on false pretenses and Fox News claims to be impartial? Does impartiality mean giving equal time to the Swift-boat veterans? What does impartiality mean in practice?

Seeking truth includes uncovering hidden interests inside us and outside us. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, most modern thinkers prescribe reason and conscious awareness as the means to overcome

bias. Yet although reality is reasonable, it is naïve to suppose that reason alone will take us to it. Discovering truth requires reason integrally considered—that is, rooted in experience and practice and nourished by contemplation, affectivity and imagination. Only such an “enriched reason” that engages the whole person—intellect, will and emotions—produces wisdom.

Above all, the pure-reason paradigm overlooks the need for moral conversion. Cognitive liberation requires personal change. In the end, prejudice is embedded in my identity, so that to question my world is to question *me*. Naturally, I resist.

We need wholesome crises to help expand our horizons. Frequently, such experiences occur when students engage in activities, like service learning, that draw them into close contact with poverty and suffering. There they are mugged by reality. The humanity of the people they encounter, some of them victims of injustice, crashes through students’ defenses, provoking a salutary disorientation, much like the experience of falling in love. When the anonymous masses take on three dimensions for students, their horizons open. Their world is reconfigured. Some things move from the margin to the center and others from the center to the edge.

Today, this kind of experience is a necessary part of education for the middle-class “tribe,” to which most of the population of Catholic colleges and universities belongs. At Santa Clara, the Jesuit general argued that service among poor people should be a normal part of students’ academic programs. This can happen close to home. At the same time, I am deeply impressed with the educational impact of semester-abroad programs for U.S. students, like the Casa de la Solidaridad in El Salvador. While semester-abroad programs abound in Europe for U.S. students, we need to open more such programs in poor countries.

Engaging suffering people and injustice frequently brings to the surface in students the crucial question, What am I doing with my life? This suggests a fourth standard. As formative of the whole person, Catholic education should *help students discover their vocation in life—above all, their vocation to love and serve.*

Students are assaulted by different worldviews and versions of the good life as never before. They wrestle with what is really true and right. For some the world seems to fall apart once a semester. Their search is intense, because more is at stake than ideas. Confronted by contradictory role models—a Mother Teresa on one hand, a Britney Spears on the other—they are searching for an identity and a mission. But while contemporary society might offer them jobs, the only vocation it seems to propose is getting and spending. Besides helping students with their careers, we need to help them discover their vocations. That might be to raise children, discover galaxies, drive a truck—or a combination of these. But whatever it is concretely, faith and reason point to a deeper human calling that we all share—namely, to spend ourselves in love.

Twenty-five years ago, a few months before she was killed in El Salvador, Ita Ford, a Maryknoll sister, wrote to her young niece, Jennifer, back in Brooklyn, “I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for—maybe even worth dying for—something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can’t tell you what it might be. That’s for you to find, to choose, to love.” Ita invited Jennifer to discover her deepest calling, to find herself by losing herself. Higher education should awaken the dramatist or the chemist in us, but also that deepest vocation which is the call of Christ.

According to Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become...and the adult Christian responsibility they will exercise in future towards their neighbor and their world.” This holds for all Catholic universities.

Economic diversity is a fifth standard for our schools. Last May Amherst College awarded an honorary degree to Nelson Mandela. He used the occasion to appeal to the U.S. academic world: “In this world under threat, colleges and universities remain our best hope,” Mandela said. “Your central mission, the pursuit of truth, must lead the way.... We depend on you to point us toward solutions to our problems.”

Mandela then addressed the issue of who gets into college. “The challenges of ensuring full access, according to ability rather than wealth or privilege, have not been met,” he said. “Until they are, we will forfeit some of the talent and genius that the world sorely needs. All institutions of higher education have the obligation to open the door more widely.”

The diversity that people celebrate on campus these days must include economic diversity. This is easier said than done, as costs and tuition rise sharply each year and financial aid plummets. Administrators strive to provide facilities that will attract more affluent students, who can pay full freight and compensate for scholarship students who cannot. These facilities sometimes include first-rate food service, pools, fitness centers and other amenities. Yet all of this can foster an upscale consumer culture on campus that risks undermining the promotion of justice and compounds the alienation of lower-income and minority students.

How can we cut this Gordian knot? Here are three suggestions: promote a culture of simplicity on campus; maximize scholarships based on need, rather than athletic or scholastic ability; include \$50 million for scholarships in the next capital campaign.

A sixth higher standard is *truth in advertising*. Catholic universities should welcome people of other communions and faiths, and of no faith, as first-class citizens. At the same time, our schools must be places where the Catholic tradition is studied, critically debated and handed on. Now that we take pluralism for granted, we can no longer treat our traditions, or faith, as we once did. We should fear for the future if students are graduating with first-class training in, say, economics and only a first-Communion or a Newsweek understanding of the faith. Even more, keeping faith requires orthopraxis, including conspicuous respect for the rights of workers and all vulnerable members of the learning community.

Lastly, our universities should *speak to the wider world*. At the Central American University (UCA) in El Salvador, we speak of *proyección social*, “social projection”; in this term we include all those means by which the university communicates, or projects, social criticism and constructive proposals beyond the campus into the wider society. In practice, our *proyección social* at the UCA involves media appearances, publications, the work of the Human Rights Institute, the pastoral center, the university radio and similar instruments.

Orthopraxis is costly. In 1989 six Jesuits and two women were murdered at the UCA because of the university’s *proyección social*. Even so, nine months after the killings at the UCA, John Paul II’s *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* called for *proyección social*. The document states that Catholic universities must “demonstrate the courage to express uncomfortable truths, truths that may clash with public opinion but that are also necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society” (No. 32). Our Catholic colleges and universities in the United States already practice this when they take public stands on abortion and related issues.

This standard also raises important questions. Who speaks for the university? How is it possible to take into account its different stakeholders and constituencies? How can accountability and the right to dissent be ensured? And there are other issues. Should the university call for an end to the death penalty? Should it speak out against torture at Abu Ghraib, the violation of rights at Guantánamo and the destruction of Fallujah, criticize inequitable tax policy and the lack of health care for the poor, point out how Hurricane Katrina revealed serious neglect of the common good, defend the rights of gay and lesbian persons? Perhaps universities can help the Catholic Church recover its voice and moral authority in the aftermath of the sexual abuse scandals.

A new emphasis on promoting justice builds on the rich heritage of Catholic higher education. It refocuses tired debates of liberal versus conservative, confessional versus secularist. It may provoke misunderstanding, persecution and financial troubles—at the UCA we have known 18 bombings and martyrdom. But it will also produce a stronger sense of identity and mission, along with more lasting and universal good.