

## The Importance of JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

AJCU Communications Group

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I want to talk about the importance of our mission to the world today. I would like to suggest that we would know that our universities were truly Jesuit by our end-product—if I can use that phrase—namely the kind of graduates we need to form and why the world needs them. How we do this, of course, is more challenging and more your prerogative to spell out in terms of its specifics—in other words, in creating curricula, student affairs programs, faculty and staff relations with students, campus ministries, and other endeavors. Let me name six student outcomes and why they are important today.

First, Jesuit universities must **continue their commitment to form leaders for a Church of the future**. Our Church has been battered by the clergy sexual abuse scandal and equally by divisions within its ranks. Our Jesuit universities have a tradition of educating leaders for the Church in various ways that will be all the more important in the decades to come. The Jesuit commitment to the faith-that-does-justice is all the more important if we are to be the poor Church of the poor which Pope Francis is calling for—a Church in the streets that shares “the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of people across the world, especially the least among us.” [Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*.]

Second, we need to produce **students and graduates with dreams** today because we are a nation that has become increasingly cynical – about political leaders, about government, about public service, about the common good, and – beneath it all – about our own ability to create a better world, nation, city, or neighborhood. Graduates who understand their co-creative responsibility for the world and have heard the call of Christ

the King in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius are those who can dream dreams of children with quality education, cities with safe streets, rich and poor and black and white with equal justice, the sick and the elderly with respect and care, a healthy environment, and a world at peace.

Third, we need to develop **students and graduates committed to service** today because we are a nation that has far too much selfishness and self-interest – from the halls of Congress to Wall Street to Main Street. Sure, we have a wonderful history of volunteerism in this nation. But there are far too many Americans who have withdrawn into lifestyle enclaves where walls, air conditioning, stereos, computers, televisions, and the internet block out the sounds of human longing and human suffering from women, men, and children everywhere. The emphasis of our Jesuit universities on community service and service-learning can nurture lifelong habits of service to transform our communities.

Fourth, as the poisonous political atmosphere, prison hyper-incarceration, and the black-lives-matter movement remind us, race remains a dividing bar in our society. So, Jesuit education that views all people as children of one God and sisters and brothers to Christ Jesus can form **students and graduates committed to celebrate diversity and effect racial justice**. This is critically important because, as our tragic news last week made so clear, our cities have become polarized, our institutions divided, and our perceptions of even the justice system shaped more by racial identity than any other factor. Thus, our ability to create a common future and common opportunities is severely

compromised for all of us. Despite our wonderful and almost unique achievement of being a multi-ethnic and multi-racial nation, racism remains at the heart of this nation's social problems; and leadership is needed on all sides to respond positively and creatively.

Unfortunately, while some have died and many have suffered to end legal segregation in this nation, we have yet to conquer the prejudice and inequality which were its companions. That agony still lies before us; and the generation who are our students—if imbued with a Jesuit spirituality of being with-and-for-others—can make great strides in undoing hundreds of years of America's original sin and greatest tragedy, fulfilling the promise of equality and opportunity which gave birth to this nation and which we celebrated last week.

Moreover, most of our Jesuit universities were born in the quest to educate and uplift earlier generations of immigrants and refugees. Now, as our nation expands in terms of legal and undocumented immigration, that tradition can be brought to bear in how we respond to the immediate needs of migrants and immigrants and how our research and teaching address the worldwide social and structural injustices which have driven millions of people from their nations to our communities.

Fifth, we need **students and graduates with inquiring minds**. So much of our political, social, and economic life is driven by myth. We speak of equality, when the disparity between rich and poor is at an all-time high and is getting worse; and many policy makers promote tax and spending priorities which will worsen that disparity. Many politicians pretend that we can fight wars in the Middle East and still give great tax breaks

and refunds, mostly to the wealthy, without inhibiting our ability to meet our nation's infrastructure and social needs, including services and protection to the elderly, housing for the poor, health care for the uninsured, and protection of the environment. The critical thinking which is a hallmark of Jesuit education can shape graduates who are capable of moving us beyond today's stale political choices to a new tomorrow which will hold generations, nations, and classes together in common cause, not pit them against one another, and not destroy our common environmental heritage.

Lastly, we need to continue to create **students and graduates imbued with hope**. Too many people have despaired of the present and the future. As you well know, we have schools that do not educate; and too many students, parents, and teachers can foresee no alternative. We have abandoned the classic goal of rehabilitation in our prisons; and we have determined instead to house more and more of our population, including younger and younger boys and girls and even the mentally impaired, in more and more prisons, achieving the dubious honor of being the world's leader in incarceration. We have lost hope of providing the medical, family, and other supports to our frail elderly; and we increasingly are wooed by those who promise the easy fix of assisted death as the least costly and most "humane" end of an increasingly secularized human existence.

Those graduates who have learned from Ignatius and Jesuit education of the goodness of creation and the powerful forces for good within the human heart, even in the face of evil, they will be people of HOPE and RESILIENCE in the deeply spiritual sense

described by Vaclav Havel, the Czech poet and later president, in a speech in 1986 at Liberty Hall in Philadelphia:

***Either** we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart ...*

***Hope**, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.*

***Hope** is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out ... It is this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.*

In conclusion, our graduates, if properly taught and formed, have great gifts to offer us; and our society has much to learn from them in the years to come – if we help them to remain open to learning, caring about their community, committed to solidarity, protective of our common home, and passionate about the common good – in other words, if they become the people-for-and-with-others which is the goal of all Jesuit education and formation.