

THE CHARACTER OF JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., 29th Superior General of the Society of Jesus

Key ideas contained in two addresses delivered June 7 and 8, 1989, at Georgetown University and Georgetown Prep are summarized and edited here by Rev. John J. Callahan, S.J.

Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., the 29th Superior General of the Society of Jesus, on the 200th anniversary celebration of Jesuit education in the United States, described the characteristics of a graduate of a Jesuit Institution:

Our purpose in education, then, is to form men and women “for others.” The Society of Jesus has always sought to imbue students with values that transcend the goals of money, fame, and success. We want graduates who will be leaders concerned about society and the world in which they live. We want graduates who desire to eliminate hunger and conflict in the world and who are sensitive to the need for more equitable distribution of the world’s goods. We want graduates who seek to end sexual and social discrimination and who are eager to share their faith with others.

In short, we want our graduates to be leaders-in-service. That has been the goal of Jesuit education since the sixteenth century. It remains so today.

As a Catholic, Jesuit university, Rockhurst is a member of a higher education family which has its own origins, its own insights, its own way of doing things, its own hopes, and its own ways of expressing them and living them. That charism,

that characteristic way of thought and action, has its origin in the charism of St. Ignatius Loyola who established the first forty Jesuit schools. In his life, his experience, his spirituality, his insights, and his “way of proceeding” we find the origin of and the spirit behind what we do and who we are.

The Ignatian worldview

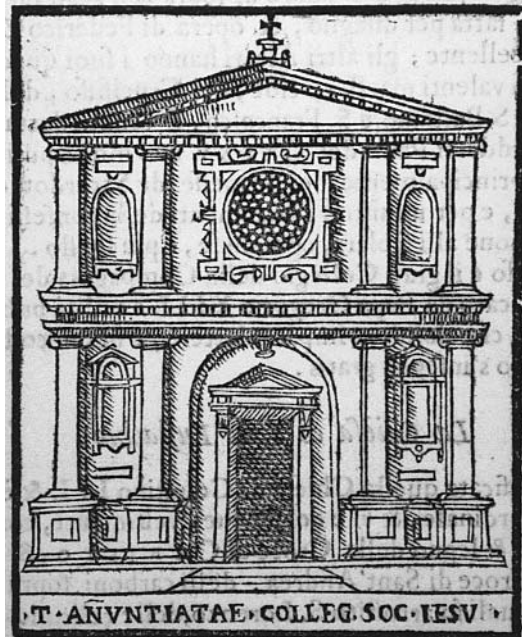
- **is world-affirming:** For Ignatius, to know the world better is to know God better. There can be no contradiction between human knowledge and faith. At most, there can only be a failure in understanding. Ignatius’ sense of the goodness and beauty of all things also leads a person to be a responsible steward of creation.

- **is comprehensive:** There is a call to a genuinely humanistic education—literature, history, arts, science, philosophy and theology—in addition to professional studies. In the Ignatian view, to become more fully human is to become more fully divine.

• **faces up to sin, personal and social, but points to God’s love as more powerful than human weakness and evil**

- **places emphasis on freedom:** Liberated from the constraints of ignorance, prejudice, limited horizons, and distorted values and desires, a person, with God’s help, is free to develop a positive set of values.

- **stresses the essential need for discernment:** A person must know the world, examine attitudes, challenge assumptions, and analyze motives. In this way, one may discern God’s loving desire and



select values which become the basis for principled decision-making.

- **is altruistic:** Adopting the mind and heart of Christ, a person is called to compassion, to concern for others, and to the work of justice.
- **gives ample scope to intellect and affectivity in forming leaders:** Ignatius calls for the development of the whole person, head and heart, intellect and feelings. The purpose, however, is not centered on the development of the self alone. Rather, the purpose is to develop leaders who will work to change society.

Themes of Jesuit Higher Education

In his address at Georgetown, Father Kolvenbach went on to describe four characteristic themes of Jesuit education:

1. Jesuit education is VALUE ORIENTED. The education process must rigorously probe crucial human problems and reflect on the value implications of what is studied. This is to be done in every course (e.g., the uses of technology) on a consistent basis so as to develop the habit of reflecting on values and of assessing values and their consequences not only for oneself but for others.

Jesuit education is value oriented. There is no aspect of education, not even the so-called hard sciences, which is neutral. All teaching imparts values. A value literally means something which has a price, something dear, precious or worthwhile and, therefore, something that one is ready to suffer or sacrifice for, which gives one a reason to live and, if need be, a reason to die.

Values, then, bring to life the dimension of meaning. Values provide motives. They identify a person, give one a face, a name and character. Without values, one floats, like driftwood in swirling waters. Values are central to one's life and define the quality of that life, marking its breadth and depth.

Values are anchored in the "head." I see reasons why something is valuable and I am intellectually convinced of its worth.

Values are also anchored in the "heart." The language of the heart tells me that something is worthwhile. I am able to perceive something as of value. I am also affected by its worthiness.

Values are also anchored in the "hand." When the mind and the heart are involved, the whole person is involved. Values lead to actual decisions and real actions—and necessarily so.

Each academic discipline, when honest with itself, is well aware that the values transmitted depend on assumptions about the ideal human person and the ideal human society which are used as a starting point.

It is here especially that the Jesuit mission of the promotion of justice can become tangible and transparent in our educational works. For this mission must guide and inspire the lawyer and the politician, the manager and the technician, the sociologist and the artist, the scientist and the author, the philosopher and the theologian.

Our institutions make their essential contribution to society by embodying in our educational process a rigorous, probing study of crucial human problems and concerns. It is for this reason that Jesuit colleges and universities must strive for high academic quality. We are speaking of something far removed from the facile and superficial world of slogans and ideology, of purely emotional and self-centered responses, and of instant and simplistic solutions.

We have learned to our regret that mere appropriation of knowledge does not inevitably humanize. One would hope that we have learned that there is no value-free education. But the values imbedded in many areas of life today are presented subtly, often by assumption. We need to discover ways that will enable students to form the habit of reflecting on values.

Habits are not formed only by chance occasional happenings. Rather, habits develop only by consistent, planned practice. The goal of forming habits of critical reflection needs to be worked on by teachers in all subjects in ways appropriate to the maturity of students at different levels. This habitual reflection should be applied to the human

sciences students learn, the technology being developed, and the whole spectrum of social and political programs suggested by both prophets and politicians.

A value-oriented educational goal like ours—forming men and women for others—will not be realized unless it is infused within our educational programs at every level. The goal is to challenge our students to reflect upon the value implications of what they study, to assess values and their consequences for human beings.

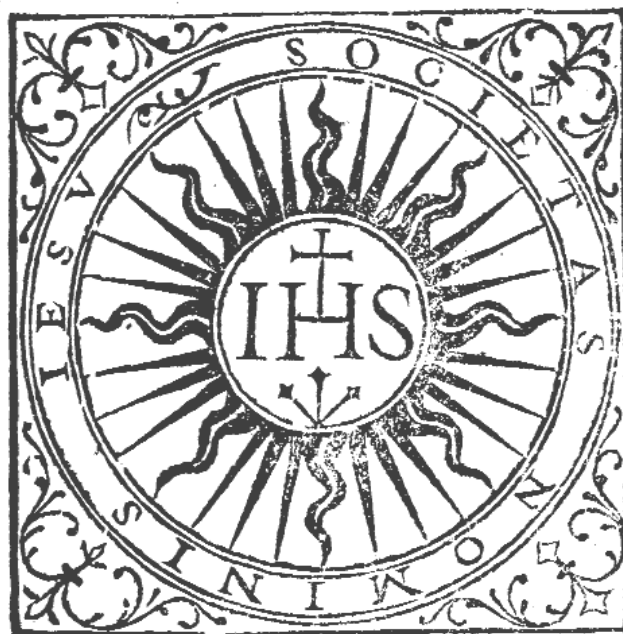
2. Jesuit education is committed to the PROMOTION OF JUSTICE. This includes efforts to make Jesuit education available as much as possible to everyone—the rich, middle class and poor—and to educate from a perspective of justice. Students should be challenged not to make a significant decision (theoretical or practical) without first thinking of how the results would impact those in society with little or no control or influence.

The service of faith through the promotion of justice remains the Society's major apostolic focus. That is why it is urgent that this mission be operative in our lives and in our institutions. Words have meaning; if a college or university describes itself as "Jesuit" or "in the Jesuit tradition," the thrust and practice of the institution should correspond to the description.

It should be operative in a variety of ways. The recruitment of students must include special efforts to make a Jesuit education possible for the disadvantaged. But let it be noted, and let there be no misunderstanding: The "option for the poor" is not an exclusive option; it is not a classist option. We are not called upon to educate only the poor and the disadvantaged. The option is far more comprehensive and demanding, for it calls

upon us to educate all—rich, middle class and poor—from a perspective of justice.

Ignatius wanted Jesuit schools to be open to all. We educate all social classes so that people from every stratum of society may learn and grow in the special love and concern for the poor. Concern for social problems should never be absent. We should challenge all of our students to use concern for the poor as a criterion, so that they make no significant decision without first thinking of how it would impact the least in society.



3. Jesuit education is INTERDISCIPLINARY. The responses to the crucial questions of our times require not only empirical data and technological knowhow. They require consideration of sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives if the solutions proposed are to demonstrate moral responsibility and sensitivity. Jesuit education attempts to integrate religious, humanitarian, and technological values.

Jesuit education is interdisciplinary. A qualitative integration of inquiry which can lead to an appreciation of more comprehensive truth is the goal. How far this is from the view that portrays the university as merely an administrative umbrella for unconnected fields of research.

It is a pity that an interdisciplinary approach, the only significant way to heal the fracture of knowledge, is still considered a luxury reserved to occasional staff seminars or a few doctoral programs. Of course, an interdisciplinary approach is not without problems: It runs the risk of simply overloading students, of teaching them relativism, of inadmissible violation of the methodology of individual disciplines.

But a love of the whole truth, a love of the integral human situation can help us to overcome even these potential problems. What single academic

discipline can pretend to offer comprehensive solutions to real questions like those concerning genetic research, corporate takeovers, definitions concerning the start and end of human life, homelessness and city planning, poverty, illiteracy, developments in medical and military technology, human rights, the environment and artificial intelligence?

These require empirical data and technological know-how. But they also cry out for consideration in terms of their impact on men and women from a holistic point of view. They demand, in addition, sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives if the solutions proposed are to demonstrate moral responsibility and sensitivity.

Continually developing capacities to control human choices present us with moral questions of the highest order. These questions are not solved in an unidisciplinary manner, for they embrace human, and not simply technical, values. Are we preparing our students to know that just because some technological advance is possible for us, we are not thereby justified in its development and use?

Do we challenge the leaders of tomorrow to reflect critically on the assumptions and consequences of “progress?” Do we challenge them to ponder both the wonderful possibilities and the limits of science? Do we help them to see that often significant civil financial decisions are not merely political manifestos but also moral statements?

This concern for a more holistic inquiry should be true of any college or university. But it ought to be the case that in a Jesuit educational institution teaching and research are not even conceivable without the integration of different forms of knowledge with human values and with theology.

Our universities, of course, must do this precisely as universities, following our heritage and tradition. This heritage and tradition promotes a culture that emphasizes the values of human dignity and the good life in its fullest sense. This heritage is made real today by fostering academic freedom, by demanding excellence of schools and students, and by treating religious experience and questions as central to human culture and life.

Concrete means to achieve such an integrated program might be sought in the substance and methodologies employed in the core curriculum or in significant capstone courses for senior students on social, cultural, and ethical responsibilities—and in that contemplative capacity for God and the world which lies at the very center of human existence.

4. Jesuit education is *INTERNATIONAL*. Not only is Jesuit education international in scope, located on every populated continent, but also international in viewpoint. This means education for the “global village.” Curricula which include major world cultures, diversity in the cultural background of our students, international exchanges, and incorporation of a global dimension into educational programs are part of the fiber of a Jesuit college or university.

Our mission is global. Our interdependence on this planet is becoming more evident every day in realities across a broad spectrum from economics to ecology. In response to this rapidly shrinking world, we seek education for responsible citizenship in the global village.

Will we really help to form men and women for others in the world community of the twenty-first century if we do not adapt to the changing international culture? This is a corporate responsibility, with all of us participating in some way according to resources and interests, and with a genuine desire to help all others.

In the recent past education has sometimes focused exclusively on self-actualization of the individual. Today it must be the world community that forms the context for growth and learning. Curricula must be broadened to include major world cultures. Especially encouraged is diversity of cultural backgrounds in our student bodies and more international exchanges of both teachers and students.

Efforts at internationalization are signs of the impulse to incorporate a global dimension into our educational programs—not as occasional special events, but as part of the fiber of what it means to be Jesuit colleges or universities. I ask you to intensify these efforts.