

## **Service-Learning and Justice: Setting Higher Standards for Higher Education**

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The fundamental proposition underlying Jesuit education is that faith, knowledge and service are not three separate and independent aspects of education, accidentally or arbitrarily juxtaposed alongside each other, but rather that they form a triad in which each term is dynamically related to the others, and any one term is incomplete without the other two. This integral philosophy of education is what makes Loyola, together with the other Jesuit colleges and universities, truly distinctive.

Twenty-five years ago, the Society of Jesus required that the promotion of justice become a central feature and a distinctive characteristic of every institution carrying the name “Jesuit.” In fact, it was strongly suggested that the Order withdraw from those institutions that remained impervious to the cries for greater justice being heard all over the world. Nevertheless, the task remained to determine the specific contribution to justice that could rightly be expected from centers of higher education. In other words, how could justice be woven thoughtfully into the teaching and research that takes place at a university?

Perhaps not surprisingly, the promotion of justice quickly became associated with – and sometimes even reduced to –the service component. A rather impressive number of social service initiatives gradually emerged on campuses, making it possible for students—and also for faculty and staff—to become connected to the material and spiritual needs of the larger community. While this development was largely very positive, it remained less clear or less explicit how justice should be woven coherently into the curriculum and also into the different research activities of the university.

Over time, faculty have experimented with a variety of methodologies for weaving justice coherently into the learning process at the university. Nearly all of the departments at Loyola display some courses that deal explicitly with justice-related issues. But certainly one of the most creative and effective ways of creating hearts, minds and imaginations for justice is the pedagogy referred to as “service-learning.” There are several reasons why this seems to be so.

Justice is not a purely rational matter, but has to do with the way we situate ourselves before the face of the other whose humanity we share. Service-learning provides the privileged opportunity to listen to the stories of those who have been hurt or excluded and, then, to incorporate those stories and their questions into the rest of the learning process that occurs in the classroom and in the library. The purpose of the initial contact with the community is not so much effective doing but careful listening. Victims, it is true, may not always be 100% accurate in everything they relate, but they do inevitably help us to formulate the

right questions. These questions should normally lead to a more focused research and a properly critical analysis. Consequently, whenever correctly implemented, service-learning does not jeopardize or threaten academic excellence; on the contrary, it actually adds rigor to the academic agenda by incorporating into the learning process the wisdom of the larger community.

In some ways, colleges and universities have nearly always been involved in their communities. But, more and more, the relationship between university and neighborhood is being framed in the reciprocal terms of a partnership. Service-learning becomes an important instantiation of this relationship. Through service-learning, the student discovers that, while the campus is a tremendous reservoir of knowledge and expertise, so too is the neighborhood organization. The university is one center of expertise, but not *the* center of expertise. When these two kinds of institutional agency join forces for a purpose, real formation—and transformation—can take place. A learning partnership of this kind, based on collaboration not outreach, revitalizes the neighborhood but the university as well.

In addition to service-learning courses, the university could make a very appropriate contribution to justice by means of social research. Many of the challenges facing the world today—the globalization of the economy, the ever-more glaring disparity between the rich and the poor, the problem of drugs and violence in our cities, the need for better health-care delivery systems, etc.—will not disappear with a little more volunteerism, but require for their solution careful and committed study. Not only ought students devote their term papers to study specific aspects of these issues, but ideally the university itself might become more distinctive for a kind of social research that truly matters. In this regard, it has been suggested that perhaps our universities are not so much called to be R1 but rather J1 universities: communities of reason that search for just, viable and sustainable alternatives to social problems affecting the world today.

Whether it is by means of service-learning or by some other proven pedagogy, the goal is that, by the time of graduation, students might demonstrate: an authentic sensitivity towards social suffering in the world, an informed understanding of the causes and conditions that perpetuate that suffering, and a sustained commitment to improve those conditions in such a way that increases justice in the world. The long-term objective, of course, is that the service of justice becomes woven in to the core of one's personal, family and professional life. After all, the purpose of Jesuit education is not simply to get credentialed, but rather to discover or recover a deep sense of vocation.

By itself, no one service-learning course will achieve this desired outcome. The only way to achieve such a high standard is for there to be a consistent continuity between the thing pursued (i.e., a just society) and the people doing the pursuing. In other words, we must be just at Loyola not only in our theories

but in our practices. We must foster justice in all of our dealings and conversations with each other. This notion of “relational justice” emanates from the ancient Biblical tradition in which justice is defined as fidelity to the claims of our relationships.

It is less crucial that we all have exactly the same conceptual definition of justice. As a matter of fact, if we look around campus, we can quickly see that there are somewhat different “paradigms of justice” in circulation. Some embrace what might be called a liberal paradigm of justice that focuses on individual human rights and on the need for legislative reforms. Others articulate a socialist paradigm of justice that emphasizes the need for a radical transformation of the underlying structures of our society insofar as these engender poverty and exclusion. Still others prefer a more immediate pragmatic approach, one that identifies justice with individual initiatives undertaken on behalf of those in need. There should be room at the university for different models or understandings of justice just as there ought to be real dialogue among the proponents of each paradigm.

Ultimately, what joins us together is a common faith; a faith born of the deep awareness that life—my life, your life, our lives—is, finally, a gift.

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