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Jesuit Education in India Provides Innovative Opportunities

Justice, Respect, and Collaboration Cross Many Boundaries

By Vincent Sekhar, S.J.

India is a vast multicultural and multilingual setting within which the Society of Jesus sponsors 52 institutions of higher education, including one university, 29 colleges, and multiple professional schools that offer specialized training in engineering, management, and education. This makes India home to the world's largest national collection of Jesuit institutions of higher learning. Typical of the Indian approach, most of these institutions are affiliated colleges within secular, government-regulated universities; but particularly in South India, many hold the legal status of autonomous colleges that allows them to exercise mission-related prerogatives in every aspect of their internal governance. All 52 institutions are linked together through the Secretariat for Jesuits in Higher Education in South Asia (JHEASAA), a network designed to enhance the sharing of resources and best practices and to facilitate cross-institutional planning and international exposure.

Each institution within this network has its own story and can attest to its own particular strengths and challenges. But for the sake of brevity, I will focus on Loyola College in Chennai, an autonomous college established in 1925 and affiliated with the government-sponsored University of Madras, which provides a window into the some of the core themes and interests that shape Indian Jesuit higher education today.

Loyola College is widely regarded as one of the very best institutions of higher education in India, offering

multiple undergraduate and graduate degree programs in the arts and sciences, education, business, and engineering. Yet among its most distinguishing features is that it is home to the Institute of Dialog with Cultures and Religions (IDCR), a vital part of the Jesuit approach to education which permeates the curriculum across Loyola's degree programs.

Headed by theologian Michael Amaladoss, S.J., IDCR provides critical support by training instructors for our "foundation courses," which explore themes of diversity, multiculturalism, tolerance, and peace and encourage the development of mutual understanding across the boundaries of caste, creed, language, and region. IDCR also collaborates with other colleges in the area to educate select student leaders about religious fundamentalism, prejudice, and intolerance, an effort to advance a community of compassionate hearing and spiritual unity which can serve as a resource especially in the face of troubling events such as devastating Uttarakhand floods of 2013 and the tragic Mecca stampede of 2015.

Loyola is also home to an array of immersion and outreach programs which deepen our students' exposure to many of the same issues explored in the foundation courses. Through these initiatives, sponsored by the

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Loyola's Department of Outreach and often undertaken in collaboration with local NGOs, our students visit villages and camps where they are challenged to open the minds and hearts to the reality of the life in the Dalit community and to the connections among issues of poverty, corruption, and injustice in their world. Students regularly attest that these experiences inspire an enriched sense of responsibility toward the poor, the underprivileged, and the deprived – experiences that we hope will prove effective over a long haul.

Beyond these programs, Loyola is the setting for a wide range of initiatives that link it to multiple international universities and colleges and give our education a global stamp. For the past 15 years, a wave of universities from abroad have been recruiting Indian students. But because of the lack of scholarship sources available to Indian students at foreign universities, even the most brilliant students and their families are not equipped to pay the large tuitions bills that come with studying abroad. Consequently, Loyola College, like other Indian Jesuit institutions, has developed relationship, with multiple universities abroad that allow our students more affordable opportunities to benefit from studying in a different cultural and national setting.

Loyola has relationships with universities in Belgium, China, France, Germany, Ghana, Kenya, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, including Boston College and St. Louis University. One example is our relationship with Lille Catholic University in France. After completing two years of study at Loyola, our students can complete an additional two years of study in Lille and earn a bachelor's degree in business administration. Conversely, students from Lille and from other foreign universities join us for a one-semester study abroad program.

Among the most successful approaches to international cooperation is the Loyola-ICAM College of Engineering and Technology (LICET). This is a partnership that involves the Jesuit-sponsored ICAM, a graduate school with multiple campuses in France. Indian students who show an interest and aptitude for graduate studies abroad are eligible for scholarship funds, are provided French language instruction, and are offered a month-long summer exposure program prior to beginning their studies abroad. Our LICET students also live with French host families, affording highly personalized opportunities for cultural exchange.

In addition, Loyola's Institute of Business Administration, among the top-ranked business schools in India, provides international opportunities through relationships with many foreign universities, including the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Italy, the University of Antwerp and the University of Leuven-KU Leuven in Belgium, Katholische Universität Eichstätt-

Ingolstadt in Germany, and, in the United States, with the University of Dayton and the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. Business students from all of these places are likewise welcome to study at our campus, and faculty from some of these universities have also taught at Loyola.

Of special note in terms of our international networks are immersion programs that link Loyola College to Canisius College in Buffalo, New York, and Fu-Jen Catholic University in Taipei, Taiwan. Students and faculty in these programs travel to India for two or three weeks, are instructed about India's religious and cultural diversity, learn about the work of NGOs in the region, and have an immersion experience in a Dalit community.

Also worth noting are our efforts at Loyola, as well as at other Indian Jesuit institutions, to meet the needs of poor students who experience difficulty because of deficits in their earlier education. To help students reach high academic standards, Indian Jesuit institutions have organized remedial courses and introduced streamlining strategies that accommodate different learning capacities. Through this work, we demonstrate that we seek to be accountable to all stakeholders – our students, the Indian public, and our government – for offering an education that meets social needs, fulfills individual aspirations, and multiplies employment opportunities for our graduates.

Generally, Jesuit colleges in India are perceived very positively and are ranked high by the stakeholders and accreditation teams that measure the quality of our education, our character formation and discipline, and our social concern and outreach. Notably, Loyola College has been ranked second in liberal arts education among over 33,000 affiliated colleges in India.

At the same time, our institutions are not without challenges and problems. Finances are a major problem, and our leaders are in constant discussion about how to provide more scholarships, subsidize fees, provide for infrastructural needs and maintenance costs, and meet increasing salary costs. As we look to the future, there is also a need for greater understanding and collaboration between Jesuit colleges and the various universities and the government bodies to which they are accountable. It is also clear that Indian Jesuit institutions as a body must develop collectively a greater flexibility to respond to changing needs in the 21st century.

Like Jesuit universities and colleges throughout the world, Indian Jesuit institutions seek to carry and express the Jesuit character of *magis* or excellence through the vehicle of higher education. They emphasize the option for the poor and the Dalits, justice consciousness, respect for other faiths and cultures, and collaboration across multiple boundaries.

Together, these themes and interests represent the core of Jesuit higher education in India today. ■