

Spiritan Horizons

Volume 8 | Issue 8

Article 18

Fall 2013

"The Mission of Duquesne University: A Retiring Faculty Member's Perspective"

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Recommended Citation

Somers, D. (2013). "The Mission of Duquesne University: A Retiring Faculty Member's Perspective". *Spiritan Horizons*, 8 (8). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol8/iss8/18>

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Dr. David Somers

David Somers is a physical therapist and neuroscientist. He was Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of Physical Therapy and the Anna Rangos Rizakus Endowed Chair for Health Science and Ethics at Duquesne University where he served for 20 years. Dr. Somers taught neuroscience and research to students of physical therapy and physician assistant studies and investigated the treatment of chronic neuropathic pain. While at Duquesne, he helped to start the Hazelwood Partnership, an ad hoc working group of community and University stakeholders who seek to equip the residents of Hazelwood to become the community they desire to be. Dr. Somers is presently the Director of Education and Operations at the Center of Life, a nonprofit community empowerment organization within the Hazelwood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

*Duquesne serves God
by serving students.*

THE MISSION OF DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY: A RETIRING FACULTY MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE

Encounters of our Mission

The mission of Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit is only a few sentences long, but the concepts it contains commit those who serve to a unique Spiritan call. Tucked between introductory statements describing our Catholic identity, the founding order, the expected partnership between religious and laity, and the means by which the mission will be accomplished are six words that tell the world what we do; *Duquesne serves God by serving students.*

I was asked to reflect on the meaning of serving the mission as a faculty member for the past 20 years. One way to do this is to view our mission from the experiences and actions of others. Visitors to our campus see the mission without being part of its expression. Their comments reveal attributes of what it means to serve the mission of Duquesne. The mission can also be viewed through faculty and staff working to see it fulfilled. Observing the actions and decisions of these people opens a much broader window into the meaning of serving God by serving students. Finally, the mission can be viewed from the perspective of one who was transformed by it. These personal reflections reveal the intimate interaction between the mission and an individual's spiritual growth.

Today I would like to reflect on the meaning of serving the mission of Duquesne through these three levels of experiences and observations. It is my hope that in so doing we will be inspired to continue our service to the mission and to teach every person who joins our family the importance of these six simple words.

The Mission as experienced by Visitors

Potential faculty members, administrators and accrediting agencies visit our University every year. These visitors are often moved to express their positive impressions and sometimes offer recommendations. Two visitors stand out in my mind because their comments reveal much about our simply stated mission.

For the past 20 years it was my pleasure to speak with some extraordinarily qualified people who wished to join our faculty. During one of these interviews, the candidate was asked why he was interested in working at Duquesne University. Without hesitation the candidate replied he was attracted by the mission. Having spent a good bit of the day with us, the candidate was

further impressed by the uniformity of awareness of the mission from all campus constituencies he encountered. He indicated he had never seen such a thorough commitment to a university's mission before in higher education. This impression is not unique among our visitors and reveals one attribute of what it means to serve the mission of Duquesne. *When the people of the University are serving the mission, we want to convey our passion to anyone who will listen.*

As part of the normal interview process, the candidate was queried about opportunities that exist at Duquesne. He responded that there was room for continued growth in research, an idea supported by those with whom he was interviewing. One recommendation he offered to increase extramural support for research was to provide financial remuneration for faculty who submit grants. This idea had worked well at institutions where the candidate had worked, and he very reasonably believed it might work well at Duquesne. I ask that you hold this recommendation in your mind for a moment for it will be considered again.

Another set of visitors to the campus was the Middle States site assessment team who evaluated the University early in my tenure. The team found strengths and weaknesses, and among the strengths was an observation akin to that made by the visiting faculty candidate. The Middle States team commented that there was something special at Duquesne University that seemed to infect everyone here. The team went on to say that they believed this specialness, although not well documented, was an essential quality of Duquesne. Our guests had defined a second essential attribute of what it means to serve the mission. *When the people of the University are serving the mission, it will create a perceptibly unique atmosphere that contributes greatly to our character.*

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The Middle States site team delivered recommendations for improvement after their visit. One recommendation was for the University to codify and document the source and behaviors that were producing our character. They believed this was necessary so that our special something would not be lost in the future. Again, please hold this recommendation in your mind as I will refer to it again.

The Mission as lived by the Faculty

For the past five years I served as chair of the Physical Therapy Department in the John G. Rangos Sr. School of Health Sciences. It was my blessing to work with 11 other people who uniformly embraced the mission of Duquesne in their everyday lives. By observing the decisions they made, a far greater understanding of our mission is possible.

Several years ago Dr. Regis Turocy, a retired Duquesne Physical Therapy faculty member, began to offer *pro bono* services at the Catholic Charities free clinic in downtown Pittsburgh. A licensed physical therapist, Dr. Turocy was instrumental in adding physical therapy services to the host of offerings available at the clinic. While providing these services, he also pursued education to become a deacon in the Episcopal Church. As his ordination drew near, he returned to the Physical Therapy department to inquire of our willingness to take over his *pro bono* services. I offered this possibility to our faculty, and Drs. Kenneth Havrilla and Gregory Marchetti volunteered. In my naïveté as a new chair, I promised I would pursue funding for their work because it would require them to perform a portion of their academic responsibilities on their own time. They both thanked me and began to deliver care, inviting our undergraduate students to join them. In this way, students who had not yet matriculated to professional education could learn from their future professors about delivering physical therapy to a needy population.

Eventually, it became clear that I had no authority or budget to offer these faculty members additional pay. I went to each of them to confess that I could not fulfill my naïve promise. In independent meetings, and without hesitation, both responded that the money was irrelevant. Neither was moved to provide the services because they would be paid. Instead, their motivation was to help those in need and to demonstrate to underclassmen the values of Duquesne University and their personal commitment to the poor.

In the actions of these professors is another expression of the mission that our visiting faculty member could not discern. His recommendation to encourage additional grant submissions through financial remuneration did not recognize what true commitment to our mission means. Having not worked on campus surrounded by an entire population of people living the mission, he could not possibly know that our faculty does not work for pay alone. Drs. Havrilla and Marchetti reveal another attribute of our mission. *When the mission is being served, work becomes a calling rather than a means to a paycheck.*

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Dr. Leesa Dibartola is also a faculty member in the Department of Physical Therapy who without question holds the most thankless job within our department. Dr. DiBartola is the Director of Clinical Education. Our students receive education from clinical partners for five separate periods of time. These experiences are arranged, contracted, and managed by Dr. DiBartola, and the staff who support her. Deeply committed to the education of our students, Dr. DiBartola shepherds them to a clinical facility that will best serve their educational needs. The

vicissitudes of her job include calls from parents unhappy with the placement of their son or daughter, frequent emotional episodes with her students who cannot see the wisdom she has employed to place them, communication from clinical departments who for various reasons must back out of their agreements (sometimes days before the experience is to begin), and the burden of managing a comprehensive course sequence that is dispersed over one and one half years.

In addition to these responsibilities, Dr. DiBartola teaches the courses in our curriculum on professional interactions with patients. Students historically find these courses distasteful, as Dr. DiBartola carries out practical mock experiences that challenge their pre-held convictions about how to interact with patients in desperate conditions. Complaining from students during this coursework is routine.

With a few exceptions, Dr. DiBartola receives positive feedback about the job she does two times a year. The first occurs during her annual evaluation with me when I recognize her dedication to the quality education of our students. The second comes when our students return for graduation. It is during this time that gratitude pours from these soon to be physical therapists as they recognize the value of her efforts. It takes exposure to patient populations for the students to realize how wise were Dr. DiBartola's clinical experience placements and how sound her pedagogy. She leaves this exit interview temporarily buoyed only to re-enter the storm four weeks later as the fall semester begins.

One is left to wonder why someone would perform such a relentlessly thankless job year after year. Indeed, the turnover rate of faculty members in this position at other institutions is high. If you ask, she will tell you that the reason she does the job is because she views the students in the same way she would her children. She serves them with the same love a mother would show her child, deeply caring about their success and maturation. Dr. DiBartola reveals yet another attribute of what it means to serve the mission of Duquesne. *When the mission is being served, faculty members love and support the students they teach.*

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Dr. Rick Clemente has taught anatomy in our department for the entire 22 years of our school's existence. He is an outstanding classroom teacher, but his true talent exists within the cadaver dissection laboratory. There he interacts directly with individual students on a daily basis. Our students come to Dr. Clemente from the undergraduate years with no professional training. In addition to teaching anatomy, part of his responsibility is to begin the process of transforming young adults into caring professionals.

His pedagogical process reflects the responsibility he accepts to produce mature professionals. His first lecture begins with photographs of patients he took with permission. Every student is informed that the people just displayed are someone's father, mother, son or daughter. From now on, his students are told, there is no information you are permitted to forget, no understanding you may ignore, no effort you may withhold from your work because at the end of this education is somebody's greatest love.

As the class moves into the dissection laboratory, Dr. Clemente begins the process of individually educating students in anatomy and professional responsibility. He is often questioned early on. "What nerve is this?" a student may ask. Dr. Clemente will not answer that question. Instead, he poses one of his own: "What do you think it is?" Not surprisingly, the student often responds that he/she has no idea. Dr. Clemente will then begin the process of teaching the student what it means to have someone's life in his/her hands through a relentless barrage of questions: "What part of the body do we have here? What is the name of the structure adjacent to the nerve you have identified? What is the name of the structure to the left of it? What is the name of the structure to the right of it?" On and on it goes until the vast ignorance of the student is comprehensively revealed. He then dispenses a piece of advice: "Before you ask me what something is, make sure you understand why you don't know the answer." The prevailing message delivered to each student through countless similar interactions is that your education and future patients are your responsibility. Invest in them because I will hold you accountable.

In our increasingly secular country, one might anticipate that students would rebel against such aggressive, morally-undergirded teaching. They do not. Dr. Clemente has four times been elected by students as the University's teacher of the year, the most recent occurring last year. I believe the reason he is so revered is because he fully endorses Duquesne University's mission and believes unquestionably that he serves God by serving students. He likewise believes that his students must serve God by serving their patients.

For 22 years every student he has taught has sensed this purity of motivation and concern, and they rise to his call in large number. As graduates, these therapists flock back to our department whenever Dr. Clemente offers a continuing education course. His actions reveal a fifth attribute of serving the mission of Duquesne University. *When the mission is well served, students will be motivated to do their absolute best and be grateful to those who inspire them.*

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These are but four faculty members within a department of 12 who fully endorse the mission of Duquesne University and live that mission tirelessly. Every day these faculty members make decisions to support and sustain our mission. It is at this decision point where the recommendation of our visitors from Middle States is revealing. The site team called for us to codify the special something they sensed. Although the request was well motivated, it is impossible to fulfill. The mission-generated specialness cannot be codified on paper because it is written on hearts. Serving God by serving students is a lived commitment, not a typed goal. The words only come alive to create an air of specialness on our campus because of the innumerable decisions made by a campus community unified in purpose.

The Mission as experienced by a Person

Twenty years ago I began my career at Duquesne. I had not before worked at a Catholic University and felt attracted to the Christian faith only because of my upbringing and wife. I carried little of this marginal faith into my work at Duquesne. Although I was certainly humane and friendly with students, they were objects to be educated and little else.

Because the people who serve the mission of Duquesne wanted to convey their passion for it, I became the object of their attention. I was invited to attend the Christian Academic Fellowship (CAFÉ). This group of faculty and staff met weekly to consider living out their Christian faith within the mission of Duquesne University. I was warmly invited into deep discussions about the struggle to serve a faith-based mission in a secular academic world. Through our discussions I was introduced to the Christian faith as a call upon your life rather than an obligation for Sunday. Those in attendance rejected the idea that faith and work should be separate and found such a notion completely inconsistent with the mission of Duquesne. Their presence in my life and willingness to convey the passion of working at Duquesne changed my perspective about teaching at a Catholic University.

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Spiritans Fathers attended this group over the years and introduced me to the idea that the goal of work was not just to be excellent, but to serve. Their personal histories, stories of the Spiritan Order, and commitment to God were appealing to me. I began to attend educational sessions offered by the Spiritans. I read their literature and concluded that work indeed was not about a paycheck but about being called.

In response to this call, I started a spiritually-centered book club for students in my class. Believing my first attempt at this to

be a failure, I discontinued it the next year only to be confronted by a father during freshman orientation. His daughter was about to begin Duquesne and he wondered if I was going to conduct the book study that his son had attended two years ago. When I indicated not, I was informed that my outreach to students impacted his son and he desired his daughter to experience it as well. I started the study again the following year, and became convinced that my job was about much more than teaching neuroscience and getting paid. It was about touching lives and being touched by them.

In 2009 I became the Endowed Chair of Health Sciences and Ethics in the School of Health Sciences. I dedicated these resources to building collaboration between Duquesne and the residents of Hazelwood, a community just east of us devastated by the closure of the steel mills and its local schools. The goal for this collaboration was to provide education that might help the students of Hazelwood have an opportunity to enter colleges like Duquesne. To improve my efforts and learn about the community, I joined the Board of Directors of the Center of Life (COL), a nonprofit organization in Hazelwood. COL's mission is "to provide families and youth with the life-skills, education, training and resources necessary to be strong and to make their communities strong." COL and Duquesne are now in an established partnership that mutually benefits the community and the University.

When I came to Duquesne, teaching well and performing research were my goals as a faculty member. At the end of this semester, I will leave Duquesne to work for COL as a full-time staff member. I believe my decision to leave the University represents the final attribute of the mission; *people who serve God by serving students are transformed through the commitment and respond to the Spirit's call wherever it may lead.* This is no surprise to the members of our founding order who dedicate their lives responding to this call. It is not surprising that the University they built produces the same effect on those who elect to embrace its mission.

Our visitors were right. There is something special about the University, and those of us who live here want to talk about it. Through our actions and decisions, the Spirit becomes a palpable presence on our campus that even those who have only a passing knowledge of Duquesne can sense. The Spirit brings our faculty to work every day with a much higher calling than to earn a paycheck and with love in their hearts for the students they teach. Those students are affected by this environment and strive to reach their highest potential in service to others. They leave us with hearts of gratitude for those who educated them. Indeed, *to serve God by serving students is a profoundly powerful mission.*

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The Future of the Mission

The Middle States recommendation for the University to codify and document the source of our “specialness” is perspicacious. The concern undergirding this recommendation is that we could easily lose what makes us unique. Still, no amount of documentation could prevent this. Although the words serving God by serving students are written on paper or websites, those words are given life and transform only through the individual decisions of people. Indeed, our mission does not live on paper any more than the Spirit lives in the Bible.

Duquesne offered two early retirement packages in the last three years and is now experiencing an unprecedented turnover of faculty and staff. If new faculty and staff members are not touched the way I was by those who remain, the concern of Middle States will be realized. Therefore, I leave you today with a charge. Educate those who will repopulate the bluff. Invite these people to groups on campus where the mission is the topic. Introduce them to the Spiritans and invite them to Spiritan educational sessions. To do anything less than this is a misprision that will presage an inevitable unraveling of what makes us uniquely Duquesne. The Spiritans among us can only do so much. They need your help to protect the character and specialness of this University.

I know the faces sitting here today. I have been touched by you and personally transformed by your own expression of our mission. Do not relent. You are all that stands between the ongoing, lived expression of serving God by serving students and having those words become nothing more than ink on paper. I have great confidence in your commitment and ask God to bless you in your task. It is been a pleasure serving with you at Duquesne.

Dr. David Somers

First presented at the Libermann Luncheon series, Duquesne University, March 19, 2013