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Shaping my Practice through Jesuit Ideals

Jon B. Merchant

When I began my first professional job search in the spring of 2002, I knew exactly what type of institution I was looking for—a private, religiously affiliated school, located in an urban environment in the Midwest. My experience in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program allowed me to define my practice as a student affairs professional and encouraged me to seek an institution where my values and practice would align. After a diligent search, I accepted a position at Marquette University as a residence hall director.

Working at an institution with a clear mission driven by the ideals of St. Ignatius Loyola gives my practice great excitement. Further, I am able to draw significant parallels between the student affairs profession and the ideals of Jesuit philosophy, specifically the four themes of *magis* (excellence), unity of mind and heart, *cura personalis* (care for the person), and men and women for others (existing as a person who serves and lives for others in our world). In the following reflection, I would like to share how these ideals shape my practice and how they influenced my HESA graduate program experience.

Magis can be defined as striving for excellence in all that one does. My HESA career constantly challenged me to seek excellence as a professional, as a scholar, and most importantly, as a human being. The HESA faculty, my practica and assistantship supervisors, and my student colleagues challenged my heart and mind to achieve excellence. Through this community, I knew mediocrity would never be acceptable because we were all invested in each other's success, working with the students' interests in mind. Much like my tenure as a HESA student, as a professional, I continue to strive for excellence in all that I do. I truly believe my role as a residence hall director is one of role model and educator to my students. Consequently, I seek to serve them with integrity.

Another tenet of Jesuit philosophy that shaped my HESA experience is unity of mind and heart. My HESA career challenged me to recognize that compassion is an important part of who I am as an individual. I also must utilize that compassion as an educator. The HESA program allowed me to discover the true importance of listening to my story and reflecting on my experiences. In my opinion, the essence of student affairs is to intertwine one's mind and heart to truly appreciate life experiences.

Cura personalis and the idea of men and women for others are the two Jesuit ideals that most frequently impact my practice. My conception of these ideals was challenged and underwent the most growth during my time at The University of Vermont. As a practitioner, I seek to care for each student with whom I interact as an individual, and acknowledge that each student I encounter is someone who is personally known, called, and loved by his or her god. Further, I believe it is my responsibility to ensure that each student I encounter feels a sense of belonging to the greater community and that she or he is cared for mind and body, heart and soul.

As a man for others, it is my responsibility to use my gifts and talents to serve the community needs and advocate for those whose voices are not heard. Throughout my HESA experience, I was constantly challenged to be a man for others and demonstrate characteristics of being a safe person. I know my time in Vermont opened my eyes to privilege and encouraged me to speak out about injustices in our society. I continue to strive to keep diversity and social justice at the forefront of conversations among colleagues and the students with whom I work. I know it is essential that I speak about oppression and utilize my privilege to influence others to make a difference.

Working in the student affairs profession is not always easy, but knowing that my practice is rooted in Jesuit philosophy provides me with great incentive and encouragement to face each day. I am extremely grateful for my two years in Vermont and for the opportunity I was given to shape my practice through critical thinking,

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practical application, and intentional reflection. My experience working at a Jesuit institution of higher learning enables me to practice what I believe and has given me the opportunity to put theory into practice on a daily basis. My hope is that we in the student affairs profession always strive for excellence in what we do, unite our hearts and minds to truly serve the students and colleagues with whom we work, and care for the whole person while working for justice and equality in our world.