

## Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 40 *Re-creating Jesuit Higher Education: The General's Challenge*

Article 12

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9-1-2011

# Jesuit Commons: What It Is and How You Can Help

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### Recommended Citation

Lowney, Chris (2011) "Jesuit Commons: What It Is and How You Can Help," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 12.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/12>

# JESUIT COMMONS: WHAT IT IS AND HOW YOU CAN HELP

By **Chris Lowney**

**T**he global Jesuit network is vast. But too often, the “network” exists only on paper, barely scratching the surface of its collaborative potential. That, in part, is the rationale behind the Jesuit Commons, a recently launched effort to catalyze collaborations across the global Jesuit network to benefit the world’s poorest communities.

Consider a few facts: Jesuits and their lay colleagues staff more than 200 higher education institutions and nearly a 1000 secondary schools that together count millions of students and alumni; more than a million more of Latin America’s most impoverished students are educated annually in the *Fe y Alegria* network; the Jesuit Refugee Service is accompanying displaced persons in dozens of countries. A plethora of social service agencies, parishes, and spiritual centers touch others in more than 100 countries. Taken together, this may be the world’s most extensive and expert network of educational, social services, and spiritual organizations.

How to unlock our network’s untapped potential to benefit the world’s poorest communities? The Jesuit Commons is attempting to do so, beginning with two first-of-a-kind initiatives, one to use emerging social media technologies to link the Jesuit world, and the other to use online educational technologies to bring higher education to refugees. Though these two initiatives are quite different in scope and nature, common working values animate both. Leverage emerging technologies. Welcome all talent throughout the Jesuit network. Ignore institutional boundaries, Collaborate across continents. Experiment. Be humble and open to learn.

[www.JesuitCommons.org](http://www.JesuitCommons.org), one of the initiatives, is a

platform for students, faculties, and all others touched by the Jesuit mission to learn about what is happening in the network, develop groups for common research or advocacy projects, donate expertise or funding to Jesuit-sponsored grass roots projects in developing world settings, and make connections with others in the network. Dozens of projects and networks have already been launched by individuals from multiple countries who have discovered the *Commons* website during its “public pilot” phase. Visitors, for example, can join networks around issues such as global ecology, education, literacy or advocacy. Or, visitors can make secure online donations to support a range of projects and schools run by the Jesuits across the developing world, ranging from a primary school in a Caracas slum to job training for impoverished women in rural India.

Kyle Outlaw, an experienced professional who designs web and mobile internet strategies for large corporations, has volunteered to lead the evolution of [www.JesuitCommons.org](http://www.JesuitCommons.org), motivated by Jesuit spirituality and his interest in exploring how social media can be of benefit to the very poor. He has introduced a “permanent beta” mindset to the project: that is, we will continually improve the site as technologies evolve and as the Jesuit network around the world communicates its needs and interests.

But to make that vision work, the Commons projects needs to broaden the community of experts willing to invest time and expertise in this quixotic venture. We

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*Chris Lowney is the author of several books, including Heroic Leadership (Loyola Press), applying the principles of Saint Ignatius to practical issues, including business.*

# BY YOUR STUDENTS YOU'LL BE TAUGHT

By Mary McFarland

*“My life had been so good in Rwanda, before the wind started blowing me out of my mind and make me homeless... We never get used to being homeless, and uneducated--- we need a respectable life and improved kind of education so as when we will go back to our countries we will make a change...*

*(Rwandan refugee applying to Diploma Program)*

Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM) serves those who hunger for education but life has placed them in the rugged environment of the margin.

Addressing Fr. Nicolás's call is a pilot project, in partnership with US Jesuit Universities and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), offering Community Service Learning Tracks (CSLT) and a 45 credit diploma in Liberal Studies program, on-line, for refugees in Kakuma Camp, northern Kenya, in Dzaleka Camp, Malawi, and in Syria with urban Iraqi refugees. Faculty from several Jesuit universities have volunteered to develop curriculum, teach, or coordinate CSLT offerings. Faculty, staff, and a university regent serve on the inter-university Ricci Technology group. Faculty from four universities serve on the inter-university curriculum committee. Over 40 faculty and staff from numerous Jesuit universities helped score essays written by the refugees as part of the admission process. Multiple Jesuit universities making a difference!

A Jesuit currently teaching a refugee group on-line posed to his colleagues “is anyone else having trouble teaching with their jaw dropped open?” Faculty are awe-struck by the potential of the students, their commitment to learning, and by the insights the faculty themselves are gaining.

invite talent from throughout the Jesuit university network to help lead the site forward. The project could use faculty, staff, and students who are willing to volunteer a limited amount of time; all talent is welcome, though we could especially use those with skills in editorial, graphic design, website administration, those who might help market the site to various constituencies around the world, and those who can help with translation, especially with Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Interested members of the Jesuit network can contact me, Chris Lowney, the volunteer president of Jesuit Commons, at [chris-lowney@verizon.net](mailto:chris-lowney@verizon.net)

## ***Teaching Refugees***

The other key initiative of Jesuit Commons, Higher Education at the Margins, is using online education technologies to deliver accredited university courses to refugees who have had no previous access to tertiary education. Dozens of refugee students at camps in Malawi and Kenya have already begun coursework. They log onto computers powered by solar cells or generators, download course materials, and interact with Jesuit university faculty sitting halfway around the world.

The effort is a groundbreaking multi-lateral partnership. The Jesuit Refugee Service, which works alongside refugees in fifty countries, is providing on the ground coordination and expertise. Regis University in Denver is serving as the credentialing institution and administrative lead. And faculty from more than ten Jesuit universities have already stepped forward to grade application essays, teach courses, or provide other support.

Long term, the program aspires not only to expand to other locations but, more generally, to develop scalable, innovative models of delivering Jesuit-inspired higher education in the world's lowest-resource settings. Dr. Mary McFarland, for-



Seattle University students at the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi discuss the water management program with refugees while participating in community service projects. Photos courtesy of Janet Quillian.

mer dean of the School of Professional Studies at Gonzaga University, left her position to lead the implementation of the refugee education effort, “What’s so exciting about it,” she says, “is that we are giving our universities and the refugee students a chance to work together to build an entirely new and dynamic global network of Jesuit higher education for those at the margins.” Not only is the effort offering academic coursework, it is also pairing those on the ground at refugee camps with experts across the Jesuit university network to develop learning or training strategies relevant to the camp environment, for example, in counseling for trauma survivors, in English as a second language studies, in special needs, maternal-child health, and so on.

But, like [www.jesuitcommons.org](http://www.jesuitcommons.org), higher education at the margins will only maintain its momentum and

thrive with the investments of time and talent from across the university network. The program welcomes faculty members willing to teach an online course now and then; faculty from all disciplines are welcome, but especially valuable in the short run will be those with expertise in liberal arts, in healthcare or business, in English as a foreign language, with expertise in course design, or who have taught before in the online environment. On an institutional level, the program seeks at least one other university

### **Need: Experts willing to invest time and expertise**

to join Regis University in credentialing the academic diploma. Interested colleagues are invited to email Mary McFarland, [mcfarlandm@gonzaga.edu](mailto:mcfarlandm@gonzaga.edu)

The Commons has been conceived as a largely voluntary effort, a wager that there would be sufficient goodwill and interest around the Jesuit network to drive





Seattle University students at the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi. Photos courtesy of Janet Quillian.

two ambitious projects that call for high levels of expertise and problem-solving skills. So far, that wager has paid off. Talented colleagues have been stepping forward. And, being an infrastructure-poor start-up has other advantages: no bureaucracy. The Commons has been able to experiment, make decisions, and move forward nimbly. Within six months of the day, pilot funding was secured, for example, computer labs were erected in two refugee camps, solar panels purchased and installed, electricity and bandwidth secured, the first couple of courses plotted, and enrollment protocols developed, some 300 student applications reviewed, and, most gratifyingly, course work was begun.

**T**o guide its efforts, the Jesuit Commons has assembled a board of directors from five continents, including university presidents, the head of the Jesuit Refugee Service, and other senior Jesuits. Fr. Charles Currie, S.J., President of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) and a founding board member of the Jesuit Commons, puts it this way: “The Commons project reflects one of the founding ideals of Jesuit education – educating those who have traditionally had no access to an education. It’s great to be part of such a life-changing endeavor.”

When Jesuits and colleagues around the world met in Spring of 2010 at the Mexico City conference, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., powerfully endorsed the Jesuit Commons as an innovative way to address the disparities between rich and poor, and create a sense of solidarity with those struggling on the margins: “Globalization has created new inequalities between those who enjoy the power given to them by knowledge, and those who are excluded from its benefits because they have no access to that knowledge,” said Fr. Nicolás, “Thus, we need to ask: Who needs the knowledge we can share, and how can we share it more effectively with those for whom that knowledge can truly make a difference, especially the poor and excluded? In this connection, the work-in-progress of the *Jesuit Commons* is extremely important, and it will require a more serious support and commitment from our universities if it is to succeed in its ambitious dream of promoting greater equality in access to knowledge for the sake of the development of persons and communities.”

The readership of *Conversations* represents an extraordinary array of talent, and the Commons initiative welcomes all those who want to help rise to the challenge enunciated by Fr. Nicolás. ■