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Forum: Frontier Universities: Be Edgy, Be Gutsy

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of dollars in grant monies through the Department of Defense, etc., are there to be serious discussions of this complicity with the waging of war on our campuses?

Is there an accounting for the weapons that our research helps to develop? Are the costs of war in terms of human life and environmental degradation to be shown to our students on days when the military recruits on our campuses? Will we have anything creative and innovative to offer the world for the making of peace? Will our students be able to think and write about the recent nonviolent uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, for example, with a solid sense of the principles of nonviolence, other examples of nonviolent political move-

ments, etc.? Will we promote peace studies as a major course of study on our campuses?

Father General asks that we become a “voice for the voiceless.” We would do well on Jesuit campuses, therefore, to maintain our programs of service but also to build our social justice programs so that they are proportionate to community service programs. In addition, Jesuit schools would do well to launch a major effort in the study and practices of peacemaking and nonviolence. ■

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FRONTIER UNIVERSITIES: BE EDGY, BE GUTSY

Matthew Carnes, S.J.

Jesuits universities, like Jesuits themselves, are “sent to the frontiers.” They are at their best when they reach out beyond their walls, beyond existing models of success and achievement. They make a unique contribution when they live on the edge, pushing the envelope. How do Jesuit universities live on the frontiers today? I offer two proposals for our shared discernment.

1. Schools that no one else should (or could) open

Part VII, Chapter 2, of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus describes the criteria by which Jesuit missions are to be chosen. Ignatius stresses that “[w]hen other considerations are equal, that part of the vineyard ought to be chosen which has greater need, because of the lack of other workers” and the need of those whom it will serve (622).

Today, a “greater need” cries out across the divide of those who have access to information, technology, and education, and those who do not. Indeed, there are whole populations who live “on the frontiers,” for whom college is not even envisioned as a possibility. The Jesuit

spirit sees this need as a challenge we want to embrace – precisely because no one else is doing so.

Make no mistake about it: this will be hard work. Those who are excluded often cannot afford to pay \$50,000 tuition, do not have legal citizenship, or are not prepared academically for a

traditional four-year college. Our work with them may force us out of our comfort zone of bucolic green campuses, and into the world of understaffed, shoestring-budget junior colleges in the inner city. These efforts will lose money on some – maybe most – students, and require the constant work of fundraising just to break even. But the value-added through a Jesuit education for these students will be unparalleled.

If our universities are to make a difference in the world, they will do it – at least in part – by serving people who would otherwise go unserved. This cannot be reduced to a small program or set of scholarships in the university, but must be a focal point of each school's mission. I wonder if every school ought not to have at least one “frontier” loss-making venture, designed specifically to serve the excluded.

2. The universities that live frontier values and create frontier leaders

Ignatius continues in Chapter VII, “Consideration should also be given to where the greater fruit will proba-

bly be reaped.” He particularly looks to universities as places “attended by numerous persons who by being aided themselves can become laborers for the help of others.”

Jesuit universities can have a transformative, multiplier effect if they live “frontier values” and create “frontier leaders.” Today, many of our students and colleagues find questions of faith to be on the edge of their experience. They arrive without having heard the Gospel in an articulate, persuasive, and inviting form, and they have never known the experience of an intelligent, nurturing religious community. Our classes and activities, retreats and student life programs, ought to be edgy – pushing ourselves and our students to engage the difficult questions of belief and unbelief, meaning and purpose, justice and dignity. We must find ways to deeply engage contemporary culture and student experiences in ways that make faith and the Church relevant, and that cross disciplinary boundaries in the academy.

The task is to make this edginess an integral part of

students’ experience, and not simply an opt-in opportunity for a lucky – or already convinced – few. I wonder if this might involve refocusing the curriculum on the distinctly Jesuit task of “formation,” ensuring that every student gets a thorough grounding in the best of our Catholic tradition of faith-filled service to the world. If we do this well, our graduates will be leavened beyond the university, laboring “for the help of others” in ways that multiply our efforts.

In short, our schools today confront a higher education market that excludes many, and a generation and a culture that have never heard the Gospel in its richness. Our response must be edgy and gutsy, embracing this work on the frontiers with the “holy boldness” (General Congregation 34) that is at the heart of our Ignatian identity. ■

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