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WESTERN CONVERSATION ON JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

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The idea for Western Conversations was born in Omaha when Creighton University hosted a national meeting on "Collaboration in Mission." On a May weekend in 1988, about sixty men and women drawn from most of the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States gathered to exchange ideas and share values. Unlike most academic exchanges, there were no position papers with formal responses, no advance common readings for discussion, and no outside experts. Instead the proceedings were exuberantly inductive. Participants shared their personal experiences of teaching and working in Jesuit schools. Facilitated with humor and tact by David Thomas, a lay faculty member from Regis University, the conversations were wide-ranging and open-ended. What was particularly striking was the common ground that persons from different schools and diverse backgrounds quickly found; and we left with renewed enthusiasm for Jesuit higher education and our colleagues in the enterprise. Over the next four years, three more national meetings

with somewhat different formats were held at St. Louis University, Loyola in New Orleans, and Gonzaga in Spokane.

Driving these national gatherings was the growing realization that the future of our schools required a more informed partnership between the Jesuits and other members of the academic community—particularly the faculty, who play a crucial, growing role in the governance of these institutions. Today Jesuits comprise about ten percent or less of the teaching staff. Given present demographic trends, this number will decrease in coming years. Moreover, it is increasingly obvious that most lay faculty members arrive at Jesuit schools with little or no understanding of the mission or ethos of these institutions. Consequently, if these schools are to maintain their distinctive character "in the Jesuit tradition" into the twenty-first century, further strategies had to be developed to extend to the academic community the vision and values that have historically embodied Jesuit higher education.

This process began as early as the 1970s in some Jesuit institutions

and by the late 1980s had spread to the great majority of them. In a multitude of ways (conferences, lecture series, library exhibits, internal publications, spiritual and academic retreats, and the establishment of committees and/or offices for mission and identity) each Jesuit college or university has attempted to explain its mission to the faculty, staff, and administrators from diverse religious and academic backgrounds who have joined its ranks in the past quarter century. But the Creighton meeting suggested that the distinctive mission of Jesuit institutions could be more clearly identified and appropriated by Jesuits and non-Jesuits alike when expressed and shared by participants in conversations across institutional boundaries. Local school politics and problems could then yield to common issues of identity and concern.

National gatherings, however, presented multiple problems, the most serious of which was the fact that only two or three people from each institution could attend. A larger number would inhibit the desired degree of active participation along the

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lines of the Creighton model. So in 1993 a small group of faculty from Loyola Marymount, who had attended one or more of the national meetings, met with David Thomas to draw up a proposal for what became *Western Conversations*. With enthusiastic support from Thomas P. O'Malley, S.J., the president at LMU, we proposed that faculty members from western Jesuit institutions hold semiannual meetings over the next three years. The six schools (Gonzaga, LMU, Regis, Santa Clara, Seattle, and the University of San Francisco) are of similar sizes and within the travel time and time zones to make weekend meetings, beginning on Friday afternoons, feasible.

The decision to limit participation to faculty members was based on several reasons. First, other groups in the Jesuit system (e.g. Presidents, Academic Vice Presidents, Financial Affairs Officers, Deans, Student Affairs, Financial Aid, and Admissions Directors) already meet regularly, and have developed networks across the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU). Second, we envisioned meetings similar in style and format

to the Jesuit-lay collaboration meeting held at Creighton. The focus on discussion and participation in both large and small groups necessarily limits the number of attendees; but, more important, it also presumes extensive interaction by people who have similar interests and experiences. Faculty members hold direct responsibility for three critically important areas: the formal teaching and academic guidance of students, the development and approval of the curriculum, and the selection, retention, and promotion of new faculty members. We hoped that these meetings would produce an extensive, frank discussion of faculty members' specific experiences, expectations, and contributions to the identity and mission of Jesuit education in terms of those three areas.

The plan was that each university in turn would host one weekend meeting. A different group of ten to twelve faculty members from each university would attend each weekend. After these six meetings, each school should have about sixty faculty members familiar with and capable of dis-

cussing pressing questions of identity and mission, particularly as they touch issues of faculty governance. Also, it was expected that throughout this period, conversations would continue on each campus, expanding to include new participants after each semester's regional meeting.

The support of all six Jesuit presidents made possible our first meeting at Loyola Marymount early in the spring of 1994 with David Thomas from Regis as moderator. Partial funding for this initial weekend was provided by the Lilly Fellows Program at Valparaiso University. This project, which includes a large network of Christian colleges and universities, supports a national conversation among church-related schools on issues related to identity and mission. The Lilly Fellows Program also supports regional conferences for schools that have a number of common interests. The LMU meeting was one of these regional conferences, and Dr. Arlin Meyer of Valparaiso attended as a Lilly Fellows representative.

After the usual welcomes and introductions, the weekend began with a

keynote speaker, Michael Himes, a priest of the Brooklyn diocese and associate professor of theology at Boston College. Delivered with extraordinary energy, his superb address on the theological foundation for Catholic education helped the sixty-one faculty members shake off travel fatigue and Friday afternoon torpor.¹ After social hour and dinner, we reassembled to introduce ourselves to one another in a large group meeting. The next day and a half were spent in small and large group conversations. David Thomas framed the questions to focus our discussions and subsequent exchanges were meaty and vigorous. On Saturday evening, John Padberg, S.J., from the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St. Louis, delivered a witty, informative after-dinner talk on the history of American Jesuit schools. Our final small-group discussions on Sunday morning were divided by schools, and we concluded with lunch.

Buoyed by the overwhelmingly positive reactions from participants, Western Conversations continued in the fall of 1994 at Gonzaga, then at USF and Seattle in 1995,

and at Santa Clara and Regis in 1996. Although local arrangements and formats varied a bit from school to school, the plan of faculty sharing in small and large groups their lived experience at Jesuit schools remained the same.

At the outset, we had hoped for the following outcomes:

1) ongoing structured conversations within each university on issues involving identity and mission;

2) a heightened sense of inter-collegiate community among the six western Jesuit institutions;

3) a shared and deepened faculty awareness and understanding of the Jesuit educational tradition and its application to contemporary higher education;

4) a commitment to take the necessary steps to make that tradition effective in areas of teaching, counseling of students, curriculum development, and faculty hiring;

5) an interest in continuing or renewing these western Jesuit conversations in the future.

The first round of Western Conversations concluded at Regis in October, 1996 with a general sense that these objectives had been large-

ly met. On each of our campuses about fifty to sixty faculty participants are now involved in formal and informal campus conversations. They form a critical mass which makes its presence felt in a variety of ways.

What should the next step be on the inter-school level? The participants favored a second round with the same format but a more precise focus. With the support of the schools' presidents, Phase II will begin in October 1997 at Loyola Marymount. The theme will be "educating the whole person" and the weekend will seek, first, to inform new faculty of the mission of the University—a type of consciousness raising in the manner of Phase I. Second, it will encourage a discussion on the practical implications of the mission, and in particular an exploration of the "culture" of each institution in light of the education of the whole person. Despite the diversities of our campuses, the shared goal of forming "whole persons" (both faculty and students) will guide the conversation.

¹ See *Conversations*, No. 8 (Fall 1995), for Himes's address.

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Western Conversations has already had a powerful effect in our six Western Jesuit schools. As a grass-roots process which promotes faculty reflection and discussion on serious issues of mission and identity, it has brought new energy and enthusiasm along with some very good “creative tension” to our institutions. As the next round proceeds, the conversations should broaden to involve more faculty and deepen the process of integrating words and values with actions.

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**Jesuit Colleges and Universities
in the United States**

*Boston College
Canisius College
College of the Holy Cross
Creighton University
Fairfield University
Fordham University
Georgetown University
Gonzaga University
John Carroll University
Le Moyne College
Loyola College in Maryland
Loyola Marymount University
Loyola University Chicago
Loyola University, New Orleans
Marquette University
Regis University
Rockhurst College
Saint Joseph's University
Saint Louis University
Saint Peter's College
Santa Clara University
Seattle University
Spring Hill College
University of Detroit Mercy
University of San Francisco
University of Scranton
Wheeling Jesuit University
Xavier University*