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# MIND AND BODY AT HOLY CROSS

## FORUM

### *Physically Fit?*

**A discussion about the place of physical development and well-being in the Jesuit commitment to educating the whole person—body, mind and spirit.**

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professor of psychology

This conversation took place at the College of the Holy Cross on June 14, 2007, and was moderated by Timothy R. Austin, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the College.

#### 1. ROOTS IN JESUIT HISTORY

**Timothy R. Austin:** In preparation for a pilgrimage this summer to sites in Spain and Italy important to St. Ignatius, I read a good deal of Jesuit history. And I was fascinated to learn that when the Society of Jesus was first getting started, Ignatius prescribed that every house must have somebody who is charged with the physical well being of the group—perhaps because he'd had such poor health himself in the early years. He ordered that every college where Jesuits studied have a farm or house in the countryside where they might go for a day's recreation during the week. I find it interesting that when you go back to the beginning, you find that Ignatius felt that physical well-being was an essential part of the Society.

#### 2. CLASSROOM AND CAMPUS REALITIES

**Axelsson:** For me, physicality is within an umbrella of overall wellness. And frankly, I don't think we're doing a very good job with our students. I see so much self-destructive behavior in them physically and emotionally. In one of my courses, "Mind, Body, Health," we deal with several issues related to wellness. We talk in concrete terms about the effects of stress on mind and body.

**Austin:** What class topics provoke the biggest reaction from your students?

**Axelsson:** If there's one thing that holds the course together it's the notion of a personal involvement with one's health, with being proactive. As opposed to the western model of: *I get sick, I go to a doctor, and they prescribe.* I think stu-

dents come to understand a proactive approach to one's health places personal responsibility on the individual, on lifestyle choices. They're drawn to that notion. And I think it can be a wake-up call. Because often students believe that myth of youth—that nothing is going to happen to them. That they're going to live forever. They often think they're invulnerable. And I try to let them know that the habits they develop now will affect the quality of their lives when they are in their 50s, 60s and 70s.

I also ask students in my class how they define stress. They talk about how classes "stress them out." How professors "stress them out." And I point out that they're regarding stress passively. I try to challenge them to think of stress as something that they're *always* going to have. Demands will be placed on you and you won't feel totally prepared to deal with them. And it boils down to what are the costs to you. And the students have terribly unrealistic views of the cost—if I don't get an "A" in this class, then my life as I know it is going to be over. In addition to a toll on their self-esteem, when under these pressures, students eat horribly and they don't get enough sleep. Some of the most important lessons they will have in the four years they're here are about how to respond to these challenges. I'd prefer they learned to rise to the challenge of these types of demands in ways that are less damaging to their self-esteem and physical health.

**Austin:** The irony, of course, is that many of them are indulging in all kinds of risky behaviors.

**Axelson:** In their college years, the way they deal with stress is a very maladaptive, self-destructive way—relying on alcohol and pulling all-nighters. We need to do a much better job of helping them change how

they view these demands that are being placed on them in a healthier way. Using exercise as a coping mechanism, as a way of buffering the physical effects of stress. To understand that nutrition is something that's important to them now.

**Austin:** We're constantly working to help students with wellness programming, with all the spiritual and faith resources offered through the chaplains' office. But you seem to be suggesting that faculty are contributing to the problem to some degree. Are there things that we could do differently?

**Axelson:** I think that for too many of our students it's all about the grade. We've created this with grade inflation and the expectation that "I'm not going to get the job or get into the graduate school unless I have an unrealistically high GPA." So students are picking their courses based on their expectation of where their strengths are.

**Wolfson:** I like to bring the classroom and the personal together on these topics. I like to have assignments that are created to help students look at their own health as well as reading about what the research suggests. In my course on sleep, the students spend some time keeping sleep/wake diaries and using research methodologies to look at their own sleep/wake habits—as well as learning the vast knowledge in the field. And that's always an eye-opener for students, looking at their own behaviors relative to the research.

**Beatty:** I'm also trying to connect the personal with the classroom experience. This notion of physicality is at the heart of how we teach in the visual arts and in music and theater. It's experiential learning where students are creating something new by drawing on their inner strengths

and experiences. To make a psychologically charged self portrait or to become a character in a play requires both technical skills and a deep emotional commitment. It's a different, yet valid approach to learning.

**Axelson:** One of the things I try to convey to students is how exercise and physical well being affect the entire person. We know quite a bit about the relationship between exercise and depression and stress reduction. And I see a lot of students who report that they use exercise as a way of buffering against stress. But, for some, it can just become another source of stress—in that they feel pressure to fit in their run or their workout. Women in particular are susceptible to this more because of body image issues and such. So, in my Body Health class, the word we keep coming back to is "moderation."

### 3. BODY IMAGE

**Beatty:** We certainly engage in questions of body image in the different kinds of projects we assign across the visual arts classes. It's fascinating to see students raise the issue of body image and how it relates to identity in their work. It's interesting how, sometimes, it can be coupled with humor. I think it's actually something that students are very articulate about because it has been driven into them—this whole idea of body image and how you shouldn't fall prey to the media version of what you're supposed to look like. So they're very savvy, but, at the same time, they all buy into it. They're really conflicted. We had a student last year who made these incredible sculptures—life-size self-portraits made out of food, one using marshmallows, graham crackers and chocolate icing. She's an athlete here. Plays field hockey. And she explained how her "body type" is not quite right for the sport. **And**

then she said, "Well, you know, that's just part of who I am. And I'm going to make a sculpture that reflects that." The work is hysterically funny, but once the humor disarms you, then you see, oh, this is really about something a little bit more serious.

This idea of self-portraiture or using a surrogate for yourself comes up in a lot of the work that students make. Another student athlete, she's on the crew team, had taken one of her uniforms and sewn a formal dress onto it. The finished haute couture gown suggested a contrast between idealized feminine beauty versus the expectation of herself as an athlete.

**Austin:** In a life drawing class, how do the students react when a model comes in whose appearance doesn't match what they've been expecting?

**Beatty.** Well, often they expect an idealized version of the human body, when, in fact, the models could be the age of the students' parents, for example. I think that's always an eye-opener for them. And it's an important kind of engagement—looking at anatomy, understanding anatomy. How do you translate what you're seeing onto the page? It's a fairly unique experience, in that it's one of the few times you look at a naked person and there's no sexual connotation attached to it.

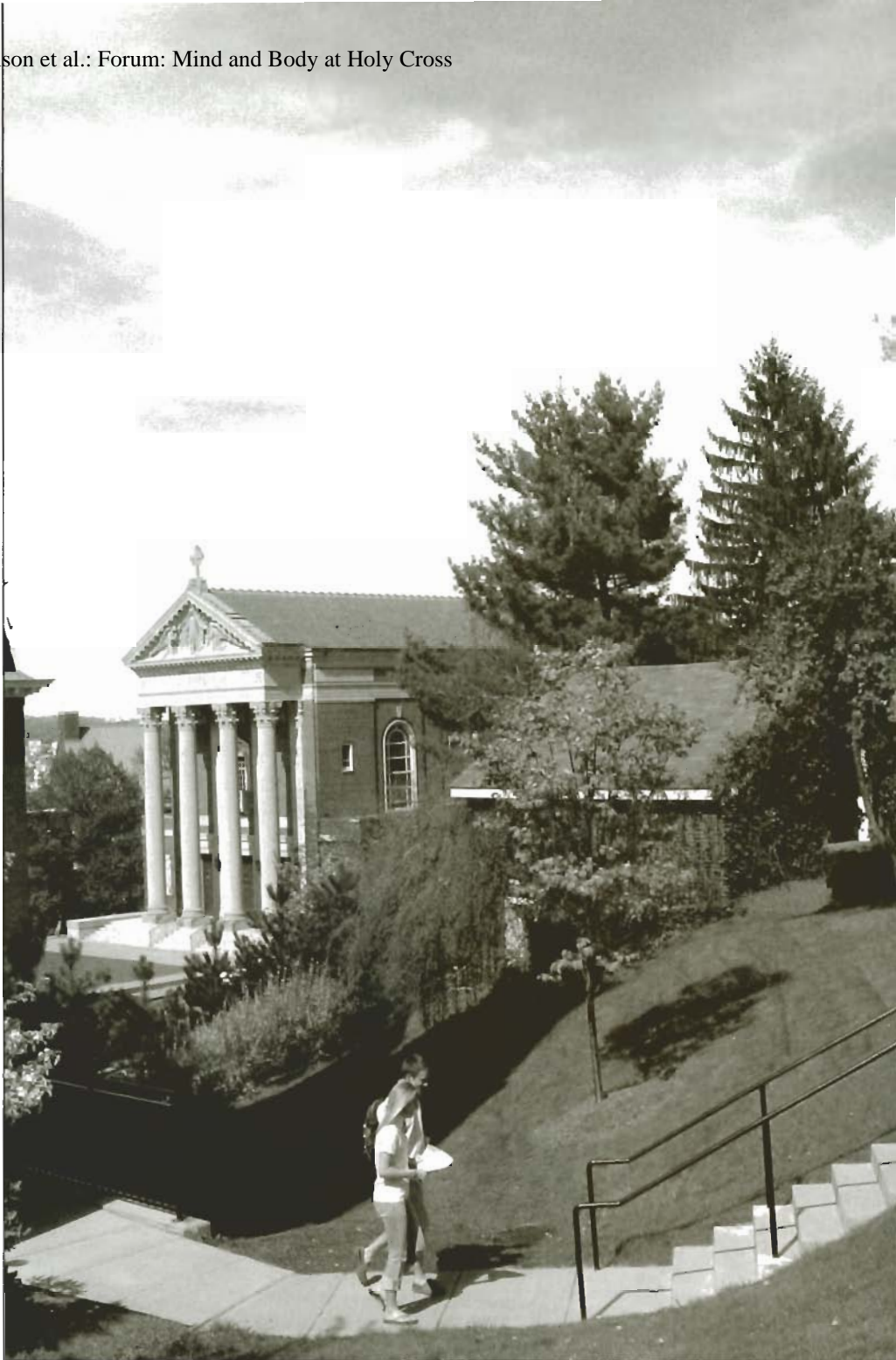
**Kuzniewski:** We're conditioned by the great museums to think of idealized human figures, the Venus de Milo or the David. It's interesting that you give them people who look like us.

**Austin:** We all hear that these students have gone through their 18 or 19 years of being indoctrinated in what body image should be. And, therefore, they're unable to have a realistic sense of the fact that there are different styles and so forth.

**Wolfson:** I come across the issue when I teach abnormal psychology. We discuss body image, disordered eating, and eating disorders. What I tend to find, first of all,

is an assumption on the male students' part that this is only a female issue. I have used some guided discussions to try to break down this issue and related questions.

**Axelson:** Years ago, when one of my students was an undergraduate, I once saw him in the Campus Center at a review session. Another professor came by and said, "How nice that they're helping out the football players



College of the Holy Cross, the chapel in the background.



Fellowship and community lie at the heart of Saint Peter's College. The 'Peacock Flock' help freshmen move into their residence halls in the fall of 2007.

with their chemistry." The football player had to explain that *he* was tutoring the other students. We're all susceptible to these kinds of body-type prejudices.

**Wolfson:** And one of the things that I think is important for us to keep in mind is just how young our students are. They are older adolescents in transition to adulthood. Emerging adults. There is ongoing brain maturation, particularly in areas of cognitive and emotional development. They're taking in information about body image or about eating disorders, for example, as developing adults.

**Beatty:** I think that's one thing that the visual arts offer students. To take some of the concepts that come out of their more academically oriented classes and reinterpret them through a personal vision. I often find that a student who is a chemistry major can incorporate ideas from their discipline to create an interesting work of art in my class.

#### 4. IS THERE A PHYSICAL DIMENSION TO FAITH?

**Kuzniewski:** I suppose that sports is a kind of idealized form of warfare or combat that lends itself to a kind

of religiosity. I don't think there is a necessary connection, but I find a lot of sincere religiosity in our athletes. A lot of it, in my experience, depends on the direction that the coach gives to it and on the availability of different people willing to serve in the chaplain's capacity. But when I first became involved with the football team here, 13 years ago, it was to say a team Mass on the day of games. The players were required to attend. Then we had a change of coaches and he and I agreed that prayer should be voluntary—which was also the thought of Ignatius of Loyola. You invited people to pray but you never compelled them.

Now with our current coach, we have a game-day Mass, which a fairly large percentage of players attend. I also lead the team in a prayer in the locker room before the game. And in that situation, I tend to use a variation of St. Augustine's idea that the glory of God is man fully alive. And if we use all of our gifts—including our athletic gifts—well, we give glory to God.

**Axelson:** While coaching the Chicago Bulls, NBA coach Phil Jackson wrote a book called *Sacred Hoops* in which he described teaching his players to meditate—to be mindful of what is happening at each moment of time. I think our athletes experience this when they're on the field. They're in the moment. How did you make that move as an athlete? They don't think about it,

they're totally in the moment. And I think it's possible to have those experiences in the academic life. I think the physical world and the mental world can come together for these people.

**Kuzniewski:** I sense that it's harder than ever before for our students to bring those worlds together. I don't know what it feels like to be a college age student right now and to be part of a culture that is so plugged-in. They have their cell phones, their i-Pods, their Facebook. There's constant engagement all the time and I wonder when they have time to be in contact with themselves. The question emerged for me again last fall. A freshman came in to tell me that he had been in the library and had been so absorbed in a book that he got through most of it in two hours. He was just drawn in—and he had never had an experience like that before. As I look back, I think we had those moments regularly in my generation as we were growing up. I just don't know if today's students have a chance to be at rest and at peace so that they can give themselves fully to what they're doing at the moment.

## 5. SCHEDULING AND THE LIMITS OF TIME

**Austin:** It has occurred to me that the way we organize the day on campus is actually counterproductive for our students. It's comfortable for us, as adults, to start at 8:30 a.m. and end at 5:00 p.m. But, actually, this doesn't help our students study. And if we're here to help them to "be all that they can be," we really want to start at what, 11:00 a.m.?

**Wolfson:** I don't know about 11:00, but certainly 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. Other schools have done this. Duke University has made significant changes to its class schedule for students. They made a unilateral decision about it a few years ago. I believe they don't start any classes earlier than 9:00 a.m.

**Kuzniewski:** But that's not training them for the workforce. It's not mimicking what they'll have to do once they graduate.

**Wolfson:** You're right, but as I suggested earlier, college students are *not* adults physically or psychologically or emotionally. Sleep/wake schedules change with development. Research suggests that as students mature over the course of the college years, their sleep schedules become more consistent and less delayed.

**Austin:** In terms of scheduling, we do have some options. It seems to me that it's hard putting students in a situation where you know they will not perform well. Why would we do that? We wouldn't put them into a room where we knew there was a lot of noise outside and they couldn't hear every fourth word that the instructor said. We'd think that that was absurd. So it's strange to go on perpetuating this when we know that there's a solution or a way to get around it. Though of course, we have constraints on the number of classrooms and the number class hours and the fact that instructors want to get back to their families at the end of the day.

**Wolfson:** Regarding scheduling, Professor Royce Singleton and I wrote a paper where we discuss this issue. The first-year students here at Holy Cross are more likely to be put in those 8:00 a.m. classes. And they are the very group that we should *not* be putting in those classes. The majority of college first year students do less well in early morning classes and that can be documented.

**Kuzniewski:** One problem for our students is simply the limits of time. They might have a lot of time required for sport and a lot of time required for academics. Either that means they can't take a course that they want to take, or that they won't do well in their sport. Or that they compromise on both sides.

Another issue for the athletes is the problem of travel schedules. Particularly for big league sports like basketball. It puts our athletes in an impossible situation. If they get home at 3:00 in the morning having played a game that evening and they're supposed to be in class at 8:00 a.m. and they fall asleep, you can't blame them. This is a place where I think that, for the good of our students, the dialog has to be not just promoted but even, perhaps, forced a little.

**Axelson:** There is some interesting data that suggests that varsity athletes in college aren't doing as well academically, on average. But then, 10 years down the road, in all kinds of measures—income, quality of life—they are doing better. There's something about that experience for a lot of students that is highly beneficial. Does that mean that it's a good thing for all our student athletes? Absolutely not. We need to continue to work hard on gender equity issues and at managing how participation in athletics fits with our student athlete's academic schedules. ■