

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 42 *After 50 Years: The Living Spirit of Vatican II*

Article 32

September 2012

Talking Back: Jesuit Community Colleges? "Think Outside the Box" ... In Support for Fr. General Nichols

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Recommended Citation

Dammer, Harry R. (2012) "Talking Back: Jesuit Community Colleges? "Think Outside the Box"... In Support for Fr. General Nichols," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 42, Article 32.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/32>

TALKING BACK

Jesuit Community Colleges?

“Think Outside the Box”... In support of Fr. General Nicolás.

By Harry R. Dammer

In the Fall 2011 issue of *Conversations* we highlighted the remarks of Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., Fr. Superior General of the Society of Jesus, who in his Mexico City address the previous April called for an invitation to re-create the Society of Jesus. More specifically he asked “What kind of universities, with what emphases and what directions, would we run, if we were re-founding the Society of Jesus in today’s world?”

There is considerable evidence to support the position that change is inevitable and a revisioning is necessary.

The challenges at our 28 Jesuit colleges and universities are enormous. The dwindling number of Jesuits, rising medical costs, increases in student tuition, endowment losses, and the need to discount tuition to attract quality students are just a few of the major hurdles keeping administrators awake

at night. Adding to the complexity, the “Catholic culture” that was present in the United States for the last sixty years or so, at least in the northeast U.S., is clearly disappearing. The National Catholic Education Association has stated that 1,267 Catholic schools have closed since 2000. Based on what we have learned over 450 years, and the current situation that exists, what can Catholic and Jesuit education do to adjust and remain viable into the latter half of the 21st Century? Here is one idea to begin a “conversation.”

Have we considered the development of a unique or hybrid form of Catholic and Jesuit higher education? One “out of the box” idea should be considered— Jesuit Junior Colleges (JJC). These institutions, similar to one of the three integrated programs run by the Jesuits at St. John’s College in Belize City, would be located in urban areas, providing a liberal arts A.S. degree that

would be transferable to most of the remaining Jesuit colleges and universities. Increasing future student success, mostly for a diverse student population, and within a Catholic and Jesuit context would be the goal. Students would take classes but also participate in corporate-work study programs much like those in the current Jesuit Cristo Rey secondary school network.

Students at these JJC’s would be required to take a core curriculum, including introductory courses in theology, Christian ethics and/or world religions, but also skill building in basic competencies like English, writing, and public speaking (*eloquentia perfecta*).

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Tuition would be need-based and supplemented by the corporate work study program. Faculty could be staffed by the graduates of other Jesuit education departments with tuition relief from loans, Jesuit Volunteers, and Jesuits that would love to teach but are not motivated

by the “publish or perish” lifestyle. Each would be trained in Jesuit pedagogy with a coordinated curriculum and assessment measures. And there would be no sports, no dorms, and no twelve-salad options for lunch. In the end, these institutions would surely be called to “live the mission”

even beyond the dreams of St. Ignatius and his companions during the formative years of Jesuit education in Paris during the mid-1500’s.

These JJC’s would be located in areas where there are a growing number of Catholics. Atlanta, Miami, Dallas, Phoenix, and San Diego might be good places to start. Nine of our 28 institutions are now located within a five hour drive of New York City. One could claim that one third of our resources are concentrated in areas more likely to grow in Hinduism or Islam than Catholicism. An even more controversial idea would be to consider converting some of our current institutions to JJC’s. Of course, the ideas presented here would require hard choices and considerable risk. But we must continue to ask whether we will be able to sustain our current institutions as they are configured into the late 21st century. And more important, and as reminded by Fr. General Nicolás, we are called to not only think about our current institutions but the future of the church. ■



The University of Scranton’s first interdisciplinary service learning travel course to Los Angeles took place in January of 2012. The trip was part of the “Special Topics: Gangs & Urban Health in LA” course taught by Harry Dammer, Ph.D., professor and chair of the Sociology/Criminal Justice Department, and Catherine Lovecchio, Ph.D., assistant professor of nursing.

(Above left) The group worked at the St. Francis Center in Los Angeles, and (below left) with Rev. Gregory Boyle, S.J., the founder of Homeboy Industries.