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# Houses of Formation: The Role of Residence Life in Promoting the Ideals of Jesuit Education

David E. Nantais, S.J.

*Residence Life departments are partners with faculty and staff in promoting student leadership formation, raising awareness about social justice issues, and building community on Jesuit university campuses.*

Life on a college campus. For many people, this phrase conjures up images of John Belushi and friends engaged in wild mischief and partying in the 1978 movie *Animal House*. Having lived in residence halls at two Jesuit universities (Detroit Mercy and Loyola Chicago), I can truthfully attest that this portrayal of students is severely over-exaggerated! The students with whom I have lived like to have a good time, and admittedly a few like to have too good a time too often, but weekend parties do not provide an adequate portrayal of residence hall life at Jesuit colleges and universities.

Jesuit higher education should promote leadership development, raise awareness about social justice issues, and build community. The faculty certainly helps with this mission, but there are golden opportunities to teach students these values outside of the classroom as well. Residence Life departments at Jesuit schools do not exist solely to offer student housing and entertainment. These departments have access to a substantial portion of the student population, and they play an integral role in student leadership formation, raising awareness about social justice, and community building. Residence Life can continue to develop new ways to promote these ideals of Jesuit higher education in the future. After laying out two important challenges that Jesuit higher education must embrace in the twenty-first century, I will attempt to illustrate how those responsible for resident students at Jesuit universities can aid in facing these challenges.

In October, 2000 Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, addressed

the "Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education" conference at Santa Clara University. He very adeptly reviewed the triumphs of Jesuit higher Education in the United States over the past quarter century, and he underscored some of the challenges facing Jesuit higher education institutions in the future. One of the challenges is the temptation to reduce Jesuit education to academic and technical competence. Fr. Kolvenbach states, "Today's predominant ideology reduces the human world to a global jungle whose primordial law is the survival of the fittest. Students who subscribe to this view want to be equipped with well-honed professional and technical skills in order to compete in the market and secure one of the relatively scarce fulfilling and lucrative jobs available."<sup>1</sup> Teaching technical skills is an important part of an education, but a Jesuit university must transcend the acquisition of technical knowledge and look toward developing leaders with strong moral character who care about social justice. As Fr. Kolvenbach reminds us, "The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become."<sup>2</sup> Ethical development, spiritual development, leadership development, and psychological development are equally as important when the focus of our mission is on "the whole person."

Developing a "whole person" in the twenty-first century will be a different task than it was during the time of Ignatius, and even different than it was thirty years ago, as Fr. Kolvenbach reminds us in his address. Students at Jesuit universities need an, "educated awareness of society and culture with which to contribute socially, generously, in the real world."<sup>3</sup> The "real world" is one where the disparity between the rich

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and poor is growing. As Jesuit university students graduate and become leaders in their fields, it is crucial that they have an eye for social justice and how human beings are truly connected in a global community.

Another challenge facing U.S. Jesuit higher education in the twenty-first century is the task of welcoming cultural diversity. One need only take a cursory glance at the 2000 census results to realize that the United States is becoming more ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. A diverse student population is important for Jesuit universities, but a school needs to do more than just admit non-Caucasians and expect a peaceful mini-global village to form. Students of all backgrounds require guidance that will help them live, eat, study, and work in proximity to people who are very different than themselves. The undergraduate years, if placed within a multi-cultural setting, are an ideal time to encourage community building by inviting young adults to engage people of diverse ethnicities and religions, and learn from each other. Dialogue such as this can occur in the classroom, but it can also be encouraged as students find themselves side by side in the residence halls, or serving on a student activities committee together.

As we look to the future of Jesuit higher education, forming leaders with concerns for community building and social justice remains a focal priority, but the ways we go about achieving it will look different than in years past. I would like to offer some examples of how Residence Life departments have made significant and creative contributions toward realizing this priority, and offer some suggestions regarding how Residence Life can continue doing so in the future.

### "Spicing" up Residence Life

The job of a student resident assistant (RA) can be a thankless one at times. Patrolling the halls, breaking up noisy parties, and putting out fires (literally and figuratively!) are some of the tasks facing RAs every day. RAs are also the representatives of Residence Life that students see on a daily basis; so it is not surprising that those students chosen for the job have demonstrated a gift for leadership. The mission of Residence Life regarding RAs is to help them develop this gift by training them to treat residents with care and encourage community building in the halls. While they do have to deal with many problems, RAs have an

enviable position because they often graduate with some of the talents required by effective leaders, such as conflict resolution, good listening skills, and a sense of *cura personalis* (care for the person).

RAs are expected to develop programs for the residents on their floors. A program is an activity designed to bring the floor together for a common purpose, whether that be to socialize or raise awareness



Photo by: Marquette Office of Communications

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about drug and alcohol abuse, or to play volleyball. RA programming at Jesuit universities can easily focus on the basic tenets of Jesuit education Fr. Kolvenbach mentioned at the Santa Clara Justice conference. For example, at Detroit Mercy, Residence Life expects RAs to put S.P.I.C.E.S. in their programs. This means that the activities they plan should be focused on the following themes: Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Cultural, Emotional, and Social. An RA could take his or her floor residents to the city art museum to fulfill the requirement for a Cultural program, and then organize a discussion about the dangers of Ecstasy, the new drug of choice among suburban college-aged people, as an Intellectual program. Once, for a Spiritual program, an RA brought his residents to Mass and then asked me to lead a discussion afterwards about the various parts of the liturgy.

I have noticed that many more programs are focusing on social justice, and the challenges and joys involved with building community in a student population that is culturally and racially diverse. Jesuit university campuses have a decent reputation for being open to people of all backgrounds. As the minority population rises (especially the Hispanic population, which constitutes a large number of Catholic students), the student body at Jesuit universities will begin to change, and students will potentially find themselves sharing a room with someone who looks and acts differently than they do. Students require assistance when approaching the inevitable challenges that arise from these living situations, and Residence Life has a wonderful opportunity to play the lead role in this endeavor. Through careful study of the resident population and a sharp attention to programming, Residence Life departments can teach students about the complexities and beauty of a multi-cultural nation. Not only will students be learning how to cope with differences during their college years, but these lessons will also apply once they have graduated.

Since a good number of Jesuit schools are located in urban centers, many undergraduate students experience inner-city poverty for the first time when they move on campus. Often, the stark dichotomy between a safe and friendly campus and the depressed surrounding community prompts students to ask questions about inequality, homelessness, and crime. Jesuit schools can utilize this time when students are being exposed to some harsh realities as a teaching

opportunity. I have helped RAs organize trips to inner city service centers, where their residents can witness and reflect on how poverty affects human beings. At Detroit Mercy all first year resident students spend a day doing service work as part of their orientation. These initiatives are not possible without the assistance of a mission-driven Residence Life department.

Residence Life departments are also responsible for cultivating student leadership by training and working with RAs. Many students do not realize their full potential as leaders until they find themselves in situations where they need to draw upon their inner resources and work through a conflict with a resident or help a distraught student find professional help. I have personally witnessed a number of RAs make amazing progress toward adulthood by learning from their mistakes and receiving good mentoring from their superiors. As a direct consequence, I know RAs who have shown a depth of concern for their students that is quite amazing and beautiful. These are the class of "men and women for others" that Jesuit education hopes to mold, and Residence Life plays an integral role in their formation.

### T.G.I. Thursday!

Thursday nights are never dull on campus! One questionable practice among many students is to initiate weekend festivities a day early, which unfortunately leads to a lack of student productivity on Friday. In order to better understand how Thursday night campus culture contributes to or detracts from the ideals of justice, community building, and leadership, one needs to know about the culture. Here is a verbal snapshot of residence hall life on a Thursday night (those with weak hearts or stomachs need not read on!)

Sarah and Vanessa are sprawled out on the floor of their dorm room, eyes fixed onto the television set which sits about two feet from the tips of their noses. Many television networks have blockbuster line-ups on Thursday night, and most of the shows appeal to the traditional college-age crowd. Since these shows attract so many students, it is not unusual for RAs or their residents to host TV watching parties in their rooms or in a residence hall lounge.

In a nearby room, Nicky sits at her computer, typing away frantically. She is not attempting to finish

up a paper due on Friday morning; rather, she is communicating with a friend in a neighboring residence hall with AOL Instant Messenger. The two are making plans to meet up later that evening for a fraternity party. Nicky's friend on the other end of the electronic connection types while listening to music on her stereo. Her five-CD changer contains the latest releases by *Linkin Park*, *Dave Matthews Band*, *Dido*, *Backstreet Boys*, and *Green Day*.

Sean and Steve, surrounded by an array of supermodel and World Wrestling Federation posters, jokingly toss verbal jabs at one another while their Super Nintendo characters thrash each other on a large screen. Their suitemates casually play cards while arguing about who would win in a fight between Wolverine, a character from the X-Men movie, and Freddy Krueger of *Nightmare on Elm Street* fame.

If, after reading this description of residence hall life, you are unable to discern if the students portrayed are at a Catholic Jesuit school or a public university, do not be dismayed. The leisure time interests of Jesuit university students are not going to vary much from those of their public school counterparts. Regardless of what school they attend, middle-class American young adults are wooed by the media and entertainment industry because they have a large amount of disposable income. Traditional age college students purchase large quantities of clothes, CDs, and movies,

and this trend will not likely end in the near future. Faced with this reality, can Jesuit schools do anything to help students reflect on their popular culture infused world?

Tom Beaudoin, author of *Virtual Faith*, an excellent analysis of Generation X spirituality, writes: "all forms of culture -- and human experiences within culture -- have a religious character that may be plumbed, even, in my view, pop culture and the human experiences it describes."<sup>4</sup> While most current students at Jesuit colleges and universities are considered post-Generation X (the "Millennial Generation"), popular culture continues to exert an influence on their ideas. Yet, how often do these students do theological reflection upon the popular culture in which they are immersed? Reflecting on popular culture, especially students' tastes in movies and music, is a worthwhile exercise because it can potentially reveal much about their spirituality. Reflection can also invite students to investigate the darker aspects of their culture or, in Ignatian-speak, the ways their culture leads them away from God.

Helping students engage in reflection on popular culture is an important goal for Residence Life and Student Life offices at Jesuit institutions. People working in these offices are in a privileged position because they can interact with students in a relaxed environment, observe how they spend their leisure

Commuting has positive and negative consequences. Commuting teaches the student to organize his or her time more carefully. Living thirty minutes from campus makes it necessary for me to focus more while I am at school so I will have adequate time to use school services, like the library, before I have to go home to work. I also enjoy the ride to and from school, because it forces me to take time from my busy day to relax. Another benefit is that I can spend more time with my family members and friends. Another benefit is the amount of money saved.

However, commuting makes it more difficult to get involved with activities outside of the classroom. In this way, as a commuter I feel I miss part of the college experience. Commuters also are more affected by traffic, weather, and car trouble. Less time on campus makes it more difficult to do things like group projects.

Overall, I think it is more beneficial to live on or near campus. However, I feel that for me commuting was the right decision. Because I commute I focus more on the academic aspect of college. Though I don't live at school I have still met many new people through my classes. Ultimately, the decision to commute or dorm depends on what is most important to the student. What one student considers a strength, another might consider a weakness.

David Laguardia, John Carroll University senior



time, and invite students to a discussion without seeming threatening or overly critical. Developing a method for theological reflection on pop culture is quite a challenge, but one that I propose is worthwhile. For example, social justice can be highlighted by challenging students to reflect upon who does and does not have access to a popular culture that is primarily marketed to people who hold respectable purchasing power. Jesuit schools have an opportunity at this point in history to challenge their students in new ways, but always keeping in sight the goal of promoting the formation of the "whole person" -- intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical.

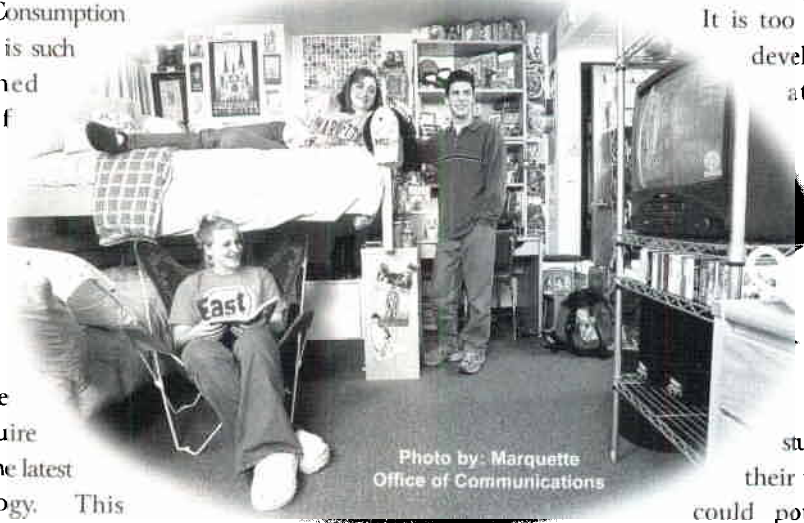
Another aspect of campus social culture that we should invite students to reflect upon is the use of alcohol. It should not be a surprise to anyone that a lot of students at Jesuit colleges and universities drink. Consumption of alcohol at parties is such a deeply ingrained characteristic of college culture that it is rare to find a student who has not experimented at least once with alcohol. In addition, many students are easily able to acquire "fake IDs," thanks to the latest computer technology. This enables them to frequent bars around campus, which are all too eager to accept the under-age business. This does not mean that all college students require detox treatment, but drinking is a serious concern at Jesuit schools, especially because of the many problems associated with over-consumption of alcohol.

Binge drinking, which is consuming large amounts of alcohol over a very short period of time, is a major factor in many problems that occur on a college campus. Undergraduate students are inexperienced and do not realize how alcohol affects them. This lack of knowledge contributes to students becoming perpetrators or victims of the many dangers of binge drinking. Some students become violent when they are drunk and are more prone to fight or vandalize

property. Some may become "fearless" and attempt dangerous stunts. Others pass out quickly, which, especially for young women, can make them vulnerable to sexual abuse. As a residence hall chaplain at a Jesuit school, I spent more than a few long nights in a hospital emergency room with students suffering from alcohol poisoning.

Jesuit schools have an obligation to deal with these problems. Initiating draconian regulations on student social activities is not the answer, but neither is adopting a laissez-faire, "kids will be kids" attitude. Educating students about the consequences of too much alcohol use is critical. Residence Life should encourage awareness programming by RAs. I have seen some excellent programs for students who have been disciplined for alcohol-related offenses, but Jesuit schools need to work on more preventive measures.

It is too easy for students to develop a non-reflective attitude regarding alcohol because it is so much a part of campus culture. It is this lack of awareness that leads to the problems I mentioned earlier. The drinking habits students develop during their undergraduate years could potentially last long after graduation. Of equal concern are the physical injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, and psychological damage that can result from drinking too much. Given the concern Jesuit schools place on developing the "whole person," we owe it to our students to help them adopt a more reflective attitude regarding alcohol use.



### Peace and Social Justice Floor- a Model for Jesuit Residence Life

The residence hall floor I live on now at the University of Detroit Mercy is, I believe, a wonderful model for how Jesuit universities can encourage community building, reflection on social justice issues, and developing "men and women for others" as leaders



Photo by: Creighton University

To receive a college degree is an outstanding accomplishment for any young adult, but for someone who struggled to overcome a learning disability, it is an accomplishment with added gratification. Such is the case of Cynthia VanWie, a Canisius College student in the graduating class of 2001.

"In high school, I overcame the learning disability and no longer needed the special services," explains Cindy. "But I still struggled through college. I had to put a lot more effort into school, spend a lot more time studying for tests. I had to get all my work proofread. I really pushed myself."

Academically, Cindy made the dean's list for six straight semesters and graduated with a 3.2 grade point average. Her accomplishments earned her the Mussarra-Docouet Scholarship, awarded to a junior with a minimum 3.0 grade point average. She is also a two-time recipient of the Lester-Suess Scholarship, presented to outstanding junior and senior students.

Despite the several hours she spent studying, Cindy always found time to fulfill the Jesuit commitment to service. She chaired the Camp Good Days Dance Marathon, which raised thousands of dollars for the non-profit organization that helps terminally ill children. She served as a Eucharistic

Minister at the college's Christ the King Chapel. It was her community service work back home in Bridgeport, New York that earned Cindy a four-year Co-Curricular Leadership Scholarship for college.

Her Canisius education, coupled with a determination to overcome a learning disability, is now what drives this elementary and special education major to work with children who have special needs. "I understand what it is like to go through that, to struggle through school," Cindy says. "And it's just so rewarding to be able to help these kids understand and see them benefit."

of the future. I will provide a brief history of how the Peace and Social Justice floor originated, and comment on how it has developed over the past decade.

In 1992, a group of students attending the University of Detroit Mercy packed into a van and drove twelve hours to spend their Spring Break living in an intentional community, doing service, and reflecting on that service and its impact on each of them. Upon their return, the group did not want the experience to end; so they approached Residence Life with a proposal: set aside one floor of a residence hall for twenty to twenty-five students who want to continue, in the spirit of Alternative Spring Break, to work with the poor, reflect on the experience, and live in community. Almost ten years later, the Peace and Social Justice floor continues to promote the mission of that original handful of students whose hearts were set on fire by their experience of God in the midst of poverty.

In the fall of 2000 I moved onto the Peace and Justice floor (PJF) as the University Ministry representative (and resident Jesuit<sup>5</sup>). The PJF is co-sponsored by the offices of Residence Life and University Ministry, working together to promote the floor and mentor the students who make it their home. As someone with an "insider's view," I can offer a description of how the PJF works, what the challenges are to managing a floor such as this, and how the PJF helps to promote the ideals of Jesuit education.

The three foundational tenets of the PJF are Service, Reflection, and Community. Students who wish to live on the floor must complete a special application form, write a short essay about how they have already made the ideals of the floor part of their



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life, and interview with University Ministry and Residence Life. Each student commits to fifteen hours of service per semester -- five of those hours must be done with a group of four or more members of the floor. In addition to retreats at the beginning and end of each semester, reflection opportunities are offered once or twice a month. For the academic year 2000 - 2001, some of the reflection topics included: Spirituality and Social Justice, Guided Meditation, and Spirituality and the Environment. There are also monthly floor meals to encourage socializing and community building.

A salient point to add is that the students take

responsibility for leadership on the floor, although Residence Life and Campus Ministry certainly provide support and encouragement. Each of the students on the P/JF belongs to one of three teams, each of which is responsible for organizing floor events -- meals, reflections, and service opportunities. The service team investigates group service opportunities in the metro-Detroit area, informs the students on the floor, and coordinates transportation. The floor meal team plans menus, purchases food, and elicits volunteers to help prepare the monthly meals. The reflection team provides regular opportunities for students to think about their service work and talk with their floor mates about how they have been affected by it. Of course, as the semester progresses and the workloads increase, floor activities tend to descend on a student's priority list. It is important that Residence Life and University Ministry serve as a catalyst for floor activities when student enthusiasm wanes.

The floor residents also have a number of "unwritten rules" that one quickly learns upon arrival! Doors are often kept open, and it is not unusual for students to walk into each other's rooms to "hang-out" and talk. Racial, cultural, and even religious diversity is highly encouraged by the students. Current residents are the best recruiters for the P/JF, and they have made concerted efforts to encourage a healthy mix of people on the floor. Over the past two years, African, Indian, African-American, Taiwanese, and Hispanic students have not only lived on the floor, but have also shared with their floor mates their unique cultural perspectives. This mingling of cultures often prompts North American students to ask probing questions about the vast array of assumptions they have embraced as citizens of the United States. For example, many non-U.S. cultures place a much greater emphasis on community and family. The autonomy so cherished in North America is not viewed as a virtue in some African and Latin American countries. When confronted with these alternative cultural philosophies, U.S. students may be prompted to examine their own cultural assumptions about individualism.

Jesuit higher education in the United States has an opportunity in the twenty-first century to explore new ways of promoting justice, leadership, and community building. Residence Life departments have partnered with faculty and staff to encourage these ideals in the residence halls, and their involvement in



the future is critical. Fashions, slang vocabulary, and musical tastes may change, but students will always confront drugs and alcohol, confusion about relationships, and spiritual questions. A shared concern for forming "whole persons" should encourage those who work with resident students to continue developing new ways of inviting students to reflect on their lives and their world.

As a graduate student in Boston, I learned that finding affordable housing is difficult. It is primarily for this reason that I applied to be an on-campus Resident Assistant. Now that I have been an RA for one academic year, I see that the rewards are much greater than free room and board and living right in the middle of campus. Through my RA position in a senior dorm, I have met a number of outstanding undergrads whom I never would have met had I remained cloistered in my grad student world. Not only have I been able to spend time with them socially and have learned of their experiences during their four years at Boston College, but some of these students have even come to me for advice on graduate school and careers. One of my residents also asked me to direct a spiritual retreat for undergrads -- a retreat which had as much of an impact on me as it did on the retreatants. In short, I have learned just as much from my residents as they have learned from me.

What do I like least? I am very fortunate to be the RA on a floor full of students who are involved in volunteer projects, are socially active, and are studious. Other students in the building, however, are not. At times, dealing with drunken residents becomes nothing more than a baby-sitting job. I was once verbally and physically threatened by a drunk student at an out-of-control dorm party on a Thursday night. Times like these make me question why I am an RA at all. Eating freshly-baked cookies with a group of residents the very next day and listening to them tell me all about their plans after graduation reminded me why.

Angelique Ruhi, Boston College graduate student in theology

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kolvenbach, S.J., Peter-Hans. "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 33/1 January, 2001: 13-29.

<sup>2</sup> Kolvenbach, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Kolvenbach, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith*. Jossey-Bass. 1998. p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> I believe that it is important for Jesuits to live in the residence halls at Jesuit institutions. (I was very pleased to read about Loyola University Chicago president Fr. Michael Garanzini's recent decision to move into a residence hall -- see "Dorms Give Leaders Room With View" *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 2001.) Interactions with students are vastly different than in the classroom. Students appreciate the accessibility to men who have taken on a lifestyle radically different than most people they know. As they grow more comfortable with the presence of a Jesuit in the residence hall, students will often visit for casual conversation, or when they are dealing with a life crisis. Especially at this time in our culture when sex, power, and autonomy are so highly prized, the model of religious life lived in a healthy way is very important for our students to witness. Let me add that some Jesuit schools have lay residence hall chaplains who do excellent work and who deserve far more accolades than they usually receive. The work of these colleagues is also vital to the mission of a Jesuit institution. However, if a Jesuit feels invited by the Spirit to live in a residence hall, I hope he would receive encouragement, given the potential positive impact on the institution.