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The IALU Research Agenda: A Resolve to Intervene, Influence, and Transform

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Introduction

"Lasallians in the World Solving Real Problems of the World." "Lasallistas en el Mundo resolviendo problemas reales del Mundo."

Symposium participant packets include the short document by this title. Available in English and Spanish, the article explains the basis for the research agenda of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU). For this talk, I refer liberally to this document, beginning with part of the title: "Lasallians in the World." The International Association of Lasallian Universities has over 50 member institutions – schools, colleges, and universities – scattered in all the continents except Australia and Antarctica.

Whether in Pachuca, Manado, Porto Alegre, Bacolod, Memphis, or Bogota, or in any of the more than 40 other places in the world where they find themselves, our Lasallian researchers are making a difference. The whole point of the IALU Research Agenda is then to raise the bar of our engagement with the world, to move forcefully as one bloc so that Lasallians in the world may solve real problems of the world.

The societal problems we are facing are huge, pervasive, and almost seem permanent, especially in Africa, in Southeast Asia, and in most of Latin America. To make a dent and to make a difference, to be able to influence policies of our governments, we need to move as one huge network of schools with shared resources.

We can use the science and technology that we have in our laboratories for the benefit of society. We can use the humanities, philosophy, theology, and the social sciences to put a human face to our interventions; to make sure that our technological solutions are based squarely on ethical and moral grounds; and to make sure also that in whatever we do, we see and recognize God's hands as we heed His call to let ourselves and our institutions be instruments of peace and social justice in the world.

Research Guided by Faith

Blessed Pope John Paul II phrased the nature of research in Catholic educational contexts very clearly:

Adapted from the author's presentation titled "Lasallians in the World Solving Real World Problems," Second Annual Symposium on Lasallian Research, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota-Twin Cities Campus, Minneapolis, MN, October 27-29, 2013.

A Catholic University, as any University, is immersed in human society; as an extension of its service to the Church, and always within its proper competence, it is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society . . . University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions.²

As a network of Catholic universities in the Lasallian tradition, IALU must encourage and support Lasallian researchers all over the world to strive not only for the creation and growth of knowledge in the academic disciplines, but also for the integration of that knowledge guided by faith, the application of that knowledge in the service of God, the Church, and society, and the orientation of that knowledge towards integral human and Christian development.

Doing Research that Matters

Our respective universities should continue to promote excellence in the different academic disciplines. Excellence in the academic disciplines combined with an academic and research environment that allows the disciplines to grind against each other are potent mechanisms for the promotion of high-impact research that truly benefits society. Only through multi- and interdisciplinary research can we actively engage in research that matters in the world.

Measuring Research Impact

For the societal interventions that we engage ourselves in, we have to define research impact in terms of the *positive societal change* that has resulted from Lasallian research. Has poverty been alleviated? By how much? Is the alleviation of poverty permanent? Has there been true peace and social justice? At what scale? Has the divide been bridged between those who have access to knowledge and those who do not? Are the rivers clean? Is the air healthy? Does government have the right information to design appropriate social interventions? Is private business a partner of government towards the goals of peace and social justice?

Assessing that positive, meaningful, lasting and inclusive societal change has resulted from research interventions is difficult, but doing so remains the true measure of the impact of Lasallian research.

When IALU moves as a bloc, our research agenda has to focus on themes that strike right where it matters, and right where society at large is most vulnerable. Positive, meaningful, lasting and inclusive growth in society should be the main driver, the primary motivation for Lasallian research all over the world, even as the IALU Research Agenda continues to fully recognize, value, and support, “Lasallian research on the life and heritage of St. John Baptiste de La Salle, on modern educational practice and the evangelization of the young.”³

The Emerging Model of Lasallian Research

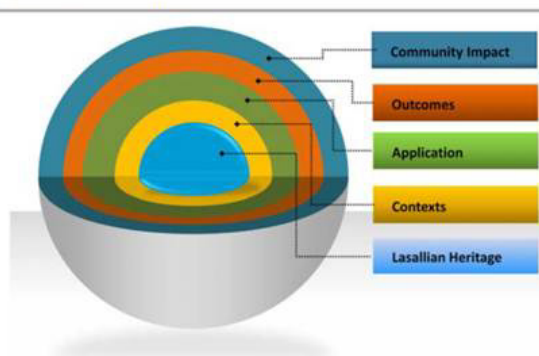
Now, let me try to connect the IALU Research Agenda to the Emerging Model of Lasallian Research, which was the result of the First Symposium on Lasallian Research held in October

2012, and as it was presented by Dr. Susan Hines yesterday evening.

In the form of concentric spheres, this model helps us understand better just what is Lasallian research. From our *Lasallian Heritage* at its core, we move outward to include research *Context*, then *Application*, then *Outcomes*, and then *Community Impact*. Subliminally, the sphere reminds us of the Earth. The sphere is the world – with all its current societal issues.

Note that the five elements that run from the core to the crust are all nouns. To connect the IALU Research Agenda to this Emerging Model of Lasallian Research, I will enrich the nouns with three verbs.

An Emerging Model of Lasallian Research



Instead of just giving you the three verbs, I will do it like the “Pic and Text” game that I used to play with my wife and children. The first verb has six letters that are jumbled up. A collection of four pictures depict the verb that we are looking for . . . we have the picture of a kitten with her nose pressed against her own image in a mirror, a large glossy public architectural art piece, August Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*, and a pensive monkey in a pose just like *The Thinker*.

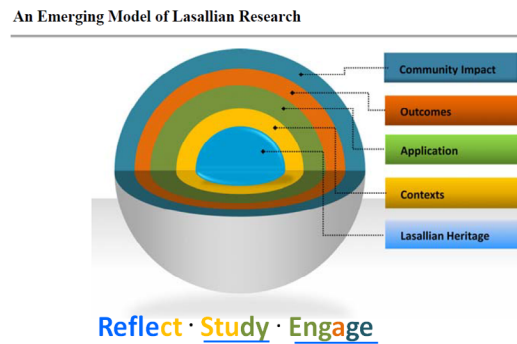
The verb we seek encompasses the many introspective scholarly works that Lasallian researchers have done so well in the past – contemplating the connections between the life story of our Founder, and of the schools that he founded, as well as of the individual stories of the early Brothers, and how they connect to the work and the struggles of the modern Brothers, the conduct of Lasallian schools today, and the contextualization of the Lasallian mission in the seventeenth century in comparison to the realities of contemporary youth and societies. The verb is **REFLECT**, presented in light blue because it is mostly about our *Lasallian Heritage*, and also a bit of yellow, since the reflection is mostly done within a specific *Context*.

The second verb I offer to enrich the nouns of our research model has five scrambled letters, and describes something our students do most of the time – with books in the past, now with iPads, and Google, and Wikipedia. Two pictures bring this verb to mind. The first picture is of two children enduring the Marshmallow Test, a study of whether the ability of a child to delay gratification was somehow correlated to success later in life. The other picture is a head-and-shoulders view of a scientist, protected by white lab coat, latex gloves, and eye shields during serious study of some bacteria under a microscope. The word we seek is not always a verb – it can also be used as a noun referring to a special room in a house.

When used as a verb, this word mostly encompasses the many calibrated reviews, analyses, and assessments of diverse situations, subjects, and phenomena. How much learning is happening when high school physics students use iPads, compared to the traditional lecture and laboratory approach to teaching science? What kinds of symbols, phrases, and images do college students in Mexico associate with the word “Lasallista?” What is the carbon footprint of Lasallian high schools in the Philippines, compared to similarly sized high schools in Brazil and Argentina?

The second verb is of course **STUDY**. I chose to color it mostly in yellow because it is mostly about a specific *Context*, and include green because we value the *Application* of new knowledge to similar circumstances. The verb is underlined in light blue, because studies are often accompanied by a reflection which points back to our *Lasallian Heritage*.

The third verb may be somewhat harder to decipher. Although it is often associated with the image of a lady’s fanciful ring, it also is often used in tandem with the word “community”, and can be brought to mind into,” as an image of fight, or involved in Habitat for Humanity. This verb is the root of an inspiring professor, absorbing conversation.



by the phrase “to get locked individuals locked in a some noble cause such as or Medecins Sans Frontiers. a word we use to describe or an eloquent speech, or an

Our third enriching verb is colored green, encompasses *Application*, *Outcomes* and *Community Impact*. It took me a while to settle for this modern, *a la mode*, and glamorous verb. I think it is too widely used and too glamorous. I wished for some word that was more apt.

verb is **ENGAGE**. This orange, and dark blue, as it encompasses *Application*, *Outcomes* and *Community Impact*. It took me a while to settle for this modern, *a la mode*, and glamorous verb. I think it is too widely used and too glamorous. I wished for some word that was more apt.

Three other verbs came close: *intervene*, *influence*, and *transform*. All three qualify what we Lasallians may mean by the word *engage*.

ENGAGE seems to unify these three *Application* of research. *Influence* is *Outcomes* of interventions based on represent significant *Community* underlined in light blue, because our use to design the expected *Outcomes* always reflects back to the core beliefs



verbs. *Intervene* is green, representing orange, depicting meaningful research. *Transform* is dark blue to *Impact*. The verb *engage* is also motivation for intervening, the lens we and assess the *Community Impact*, and principles from *Lasallian Heritage*.

IALU Chooses to Engage – to Intervene, to Influence, to Transform

Now back to the IALU Research Agenda. From a deeply Lasallian perspective, and as an expression of solidarity with the world and the societies we serve, IALU has decided, has resolved, to engage! That is, to intervene, to influence, and to transform.

When the context has become too scary, the picture really bleak and gloomy, when the worlds of women and children have become harsh and inhuman, when poor children are unhealthy and malnourished, when imported medicines even for ordinary infections and coughs are too expensive for the poor, when our environment has reached a precarious state –with all these realities staring us in the face, Lasallian researchers have to intervene, influence, and transform.

The problems of the world are many, and IALU cannot do everything that needs doing to save the world from all its problems. However, the things we can do, separately in our little corners,

can be magnified a thousand-fold if we work together. With full cognizance of the fact that Lasallian researchers in the world can achieve significantly more by working “together and by association,” IALU selected only a few research themes that directly address societal issues and needs to be actively pursued by collective effort.

These themes certainly do not preclude the pursuit of other lines of research according to the individual missions and visions of IALU member institutions. For now, the period 2013 to 2018, we have two highly multi- and interdisciplinary themes.

1. Food, Nutrition and Health

IALU has access to sophisticated bio-chemistry laboratories and sufficiently equipped medical schools to do clinical trials on exotic compounds that our scientists are able to isolate from indigenous food products. Are there functional foods in the forests of South America or in Kalimantan, Indonesia, that can be used to cure cancers or Type 2 Diabetes?

Spirulina is a blue-green algae that grows in clean water and is easily cultivated. It has been shown to have many times more nutrients than spinach. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration is looking at spirulina as a possible food source for missions in space. Is there a scientifically proven safe and hygienic way to cultivate spirulina in ordinary clay jars, so that a harvest can provide the daily nutrient requirements for a family of eight?

In the Philippines, a Conditional Cash Transfer program provides identified poor families with monthly subsidies for as long as they keep their children in school and avail themselves of vaccinations and other public health interventions. There is also a nutrition program implemented by the Ministry of Education in the public schools. Do we know, after many years of implementation, whether poor children are staying longer in school before dropping out, and whether they are less malnourished than before these programs began? Do we have baseline data about the malnutrition levels in the different regions of our respective countries, and at the different socio-economic strata in society?

2. Sustainability and the Environment

Instead of physically treating large tracts of former mining sites using magnets and complicated engineering processes, can certain so-called phyto-remediating trees, shrubs, and fungi be used to remove nickel, copper, mercury, and arsenic from the soil so the land can be used again to grow plants for food?

Can mass housing for the poor be designed and built to withstand strong typhoons and earthquakes, and that would not corrode in proximity to the sea?

Is there a way to protect corals from bleaching assuming the average sea temperature rises by 2 to 3 degrees centigrade?

Is there a systematic and efficient way to remove toxic substances and pathogens from storm water drains before excess water is channeled to reservoirs?

Is there a technically and economically feasible way to replace two-stroke tricycles with electric bicycles as a mode of public transport that does not pollute the air, yet is accessible to poor drivers?

In many ways, the IALU Research Agenda – aimed to forcefully and strategically engage and intervene – gives some sense of urgency to a few lines of research from a long list of truly relevant and exciting reflections and studies that our Lasallian schools and universities have begun to contemplate and have in some cases worked on for many, many years.

The IALU Research Leaders' Workshop

For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the program of the IALU Research Leader's Workshop, two parallel break-out sessions will be held during the symposium: one on Food, Nutrition and Health, and the other on Sustainability and the Environment. About a dozen IALU member schools will present their current work in the above two areas. While what we already have started in our universities is impressive, we see two major challenges.

The first challenge is how to get additional funds from donor agencies so that our interventions can be set on a larger stage, and on a larger scale. It is a chicken and egg situation – donor agencies will not fund small projects unless our Lasallian researchers can show a good track record of mounting large societal interventions via research. On the other hand, it is difficult to scale up our research projects unless we receive funds from these donor agencies.

At Session Three of today's symposium activities, participants will explore the issue of receiving funding from external sources. Presentations on some of the gleaming examples of externally funded projects in Manila and in Beauvais, France, will be followed by a discussion of the kinds of projects supported by various grant-making agencies to increase our understanding of the most important ingredients in packaging research proposals to increase our chances of receiving research grants.

The second challenge is increasing collaboration among Lasallian researchers throughout the world. During the post-symposium workshop, we will look specifically at research collaboration among IALU member schools. What drivers and enablers promote and encourage collaboration? What challenges and disincentives hinder collaboration?

Moving Forward

The IALU Research Leaders' Workshop will conclude with revisiting the IALU Action Plan for Research. The goal is to “contribute to positive, meaningful, lasting and inclusive growth in society.” In 2012, IALU published three objectives: 1) to facilitate collaboration; 2) to promote a system of sharing and exchange of resources; and 3) to ensure that we are always aware of the true needs of society.

IALU has further developed its research agenda by adding a list of metrics and targets, and identifies several programs and projects that would help meet the targets by 2015. The targets are rather ambitious, but remain reasonably feasible. The final Lasallian Research Leaders' Workshop session will focus on several key questions about the future: What bright projects can we put together for funding by UNESCO or by the IDRC of Canada? Who will lead these projects? Who will write the proposals? Is there a need for an endowment fund? Can we explore avenues for faculty exchanges and perhaps scholarships for Ph.D. students and post-docs?

I am reminded, again from *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, that Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote as early as 1990 about pooling resources and seeking external funds:

In its attempts to resolve these complex issues that touch on so many different dimensions of human life and of society, a Catholic University will insist on cooperation among the different academic disciplines, each offering its distinct contribution in the search for solutions; moreover, since the economic and personal resources of a single Institution are limited, cooperation in *common research projects* among Catholic Universities, as well as with other private and governmental institutions, is imperative.⁴

Bridging Faith and Scholarship in the Service of Society

We are at that juncture where we are offered a chance to use “our collective will and our formidable intellectual force to secure social transformation.”⁵ Responding to a “call to action” within the context of the world we live in now, may we continue to live a tradition of *active faith* - a Lasallian tradition of *Faith, Service and Communion*.

Let's engage! It's about time.

Notes

1. Dr. Arnulfo Azcarraga is a Professor of Computer Science at De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines and served as Vice Chancellor for Research until May of 2013. Prior to his current appointment, he served in other administrative posts at De La Salle University, including Associate Vice Chancellor for External Relations, Executive Vice President, Dean of the Graduate School, and Vice Dean of the College of Computer Studies. He currently serves as an at-large board member of the International Association of Lasallian Universities. Dr. Azcarraga earned his doctorate in Computer Science from the Grenoble Institute of Technology in France; his master's degree in Computer Science from the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok; and a bachelor's degree in Applied Mathematics from the University of the Philippines.

2. Blessed John Paul II. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae (On Catholic Universities)*, August 15, 1990. Par 32.

3. International Association of Lasallian Universities. "Lasallians in the World Solving Real Problems of the World: Research Agenda of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU)." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2013).

4. Blessed John Paul II. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae (On Catholic Universities)*, August 15, 1990. Par 35.

5. International Association of Lasallian Universities. "Lasallians in the World Solving Real Problems of the World: Research Agenda of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU)." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2013).