

Smith, Robert. "Lasallian Summer Seminar for Professors: The Challenges of Lasallian Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 8, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2017).

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## **Lasallian Summer Seminar for Professors: The Challenges of Lasallian Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century**

Robert Smith, FSC<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction and Overview**

Upon the invitation of Brother William Mann, FSC, president of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, seven professor-scholars from Lasallian college/universities within the Lasallian Region of North America (including Bethlehem University) traveled to Winona, Minnesota, to participate in a three day interactive research seminar around the theme: "The Challenges of Lasallian Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century."

The gathering was modeled on and structured similar to the "Spirituality Seminars" the then-called USA-Toronto Region sponsored for approximately two decades. Those seminars initially involved 12-14 Brother-scholars from around the Region and evolved, as did the Institute in general, to include Brothers-and-partners from the Lasallian world as well as from other institutions. Those seminars were intentionally interdisciplinary, with teacher-scholars, most but not all from Lasallian universities and mostly involving college/university teachers, coming together to discuss a previously prepared and distributed paper on a particular topic. The theme had been decided upon the previous year, papers were due to each participant four weeks before the group gathered for a weekend seminar during which each author had fifteen minutes to present his (or, in later years, her) paper and then receive good-natured and often insightful feedback from other participants. Each writer then had eight weeks to submit a final copy that would be published in book form and distributed throughout the USA-Toronto Region.

Working through both the Mission and Chief Academic Officers of each of the RELAN universities, invitation letters were sent which framed the process and structure as well as the expectations on each prospective participant. Also shared were the intended outcomes of the seminar. In the end, the seminar's discussion group ended up numbering eight professors (one from Bethlehem University in Palestine, two from Christian Brothers University (CBU) in Memphis, one from La Salle University in Philadelphia, two from Lewis University in Romeoville, IL, and two from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota). In addition, Dr. Timothy Gossen, vice president for mission and student life at Saint Mary's University served as the convener and coordinator of the group. Brother Robert Smith, FSC, PhD, chief academic officer for Saint Mary's University, served as the facilitator of the discussion sessions.

What follows are the revised final essays of seven of the participants. The reader will immediately be struck, as were the participants, by the breadth and diversity of topics – as well as contexts and approaches – evidenced in the papers. The presentations and discussions were

made all the more rich given the diversity of scholars and their scholarship present for the three days, the respect for the interdisciplinary nature of the interaction, and the camaraderie that is an inevitable outcome of having Lasallians gather to talk about their passion for and commitment to the mission of providing an excellent education to all students, in all their diversity, entrusted to their care.

In addition to giving a full hour's attention to each paper over the two-and-a-half-days together, it needs to be noted, in true Lasallian fashion, that each session began with a prayerful reflection and that meals were shared both on- and off-campus.

Readers will note that at the end of each paper, the author includes several questions for reflection and discussion in the hope that the reader – and perhaps groups of readers – might partake in some measure of ongoing thoughtful engagement with the topic that is explored in the papers.

### **Summary of Discussion**

Following an opening prayer and a round of personal introductions, the group commenced discussion of the first paper. For the purposes of this summary, the universities are presented in alphabetical order.

Dr. Muna Matar introduced her paper saying that she appreciated the theme of the seminar (The Challenges of Lasallian Higher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) and that she quite intentionally incorporated “The Unique [Challenges . . .]” in the title of her paper. Muna's peers did not disagree that her university might be the most unique in all the Lasallian – if not broader – higher education world given the political climate and challenging context the university regularly contends with in light of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Within a mile or so of the campus of Bethlehem University is a checkpoint that students, faculty, and staff who are not living in Bethlehem or its West Bank surrounding area must pass through. Some days that is a simple and relatively easy experience; other days it can delay one's entrance into the West Bank city of Bethlehem by an hour . . . or a day.

Dr. Matar's paper presented current facts about Bethlehem in particular and Palestine in general, the university's past and present, the high levels of unemployment, especially among young people (including university graduates), the specific and multiple challenges that all higher education faces in Palestine, while the demand for its services continues to increase, the often still present disparities between men and women in terms of opportunity, leadership, family roles, and so on, and the challenge all Christians face as a clearly dwindling minority in the land of Jesus' birth and ministry.

This paper brought about a great deal of discussion, empathy, a certain somberness given the challenges “on the ground” in Palestine, as well as a deeper understanding of and tremendous respect for the work that Bethlehem University continues to do now as it approaches its half-century mark.

Dr. Kelly James led the Christian Brothers University two-person delegation in presenting an overview of her paper which provides a more substantive and integrated approach to service-learning in a Lasallian context as it relates to both Lasallian formation and adult identity development. Often with humor, and always with disarming honesty, Kelly shared the experience of some of her students as well as her own experience of being a first generation college graduate having grown up in a family headed by her divorced Mom who often worked two jobs to make ends meet. Her own reality, as well as her interaction with many of her students in Memphis, coupled with her deepening knowledge of the Lasallian tradition in all its richness, moved her to reflect deeply on the kind of service-learning that can both touch hearts as well as teach minds.

Kelly's passion for giving students a voice was clear in her desire to help them to find their purpose and to discover their vocation. Connecting students' voices, purpose, and vocation to the Lasallian Catholic commitment to social justice and equity, Kelly's commitment to service-learning is normative for her classes and she is a constant advocate that service-learning should be encouraged and facilitated across a university's curriculum – and even in a cross- and interdisciplinary way. Her paper includes a section on CBU's "Month of Service" model, in which multiple opportunities for serving within the local Memphis community has helped students get to know each other, build community, feel heard and valued, and connect such service to their classroom activities. CBU also tries to incorporate their local alumni network in their planning for the opportunity for service in a win-win-win kind of situation that benefits students, alums, as well as members of the local community being served.

This paper stimulated considerable discussion about the nature and function of volunteerism, service-learning programs at other Lasallian universities (and secondary schools), the importance of integrating curricular and co-curricular efforts, and the imperative to preach social justice, and to use words when necessary.

Dr. James' CBU colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Sable, offered in his paper a reflection on "students as apprentices in lifelong learning." One interesting aspect of this paper, and the discussion it engendered, was Jeff's grounding of his argument in the Institute documents from the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter which highlight and emphasize the need for "active and committed participation on the part of students to their own formation." The same document also comments that "Lasallian education believes that students are primarily responsible for their own education." Jeff wove this into his definition and understanding of what it means to be an "apprentice" and how that leads to and supports lifelong learning. These images and the approaches to education they bring to mind was fertile ground for the ensuing discussion.

Of course, the challenges of mentoring and guiding students to a point where they consciously – and hopefully conscientiously and consistently – engage ". . . the teacher, other students, and *even the material itself*" was recognized as a challenge with many of our students at all of our institutions. Suggestions and examples of a variety of methods to move students in this direction were offered, affirmed, critiqued, and sometimes humored. The fact that such an approach "forces a second effect" that teachers must also be, or become, lifelong learners and model this in their very lives – inside and outside of their classrooms. Jeff reflected his commitment to the Catholic intellectual tradition in quoting *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* as well as a number of current

Catholic thinkers to support his approach. The final section of his paper, and the final minutes of the group's discussion, focused on how to create and sustain an "apprenticeship culture" on our campuses.

In seeking wisdom from the East (of the United States), the group turned its attention to La Salle University's Dr. Jack Downey's paper and we were not disappointed. Jack's opening paragraph included the suggestion "that a pressing task of Lasallian educators is to convince our students that the world is actually much worse than they already think it is, without thereby plunging them into reflexive denial, abject despair, or nihilistic apathy . . . ." With that as a stepping off point, Jack walked the group through his paper and a stimulating discussion followed.

Among the interjections that were made and reflected on included the role and function of education in general and Lasallian education in particular; notions and behaviors and beliefs about sin and sinfulness – personal, communal, and structural; the privilege (and inherent bias) each of us and a good number of our students enjoy as, among other things, the recipients of a private education; the urgency of the Lasallian and Catholic communities to call out injustice and work proactively and relentlessly for a society of justice and equity; and more. Near the end of his essay, Jack acknowledges that "this reflection has focused on some rather grim propositions." At the same time, no one in the group could disagree that our challenge as Lasallian educators must be more than "simply" providing disciplinary content for our students, a polished resume at the end of four years of study, and job offers upon graduation. As Jack puts it, "these all rank in the 'necessary-but-not-sufficient' category for a vision of the future . . . ." The question was raised as to how Lasallian teachers find a "balance" in educating our students in such a way that they are made aware of the depths of the suffering and despair and injustice in the world without being so overwhelmed as to become either frozen in their sense of helplessness or cynical and merely self-serving since it is beyond anything they can do about it. Therein lies a challenge for the ages.

Having ventured eastward, the group returned to the heartland and Lewis University's Dr. Dennis Cremin's paper addressing our contemporary understanding of De La Salle through shifting historical and theological narrative approaches as well as through the lens of museum studies. Using De La Salle's experience of "burnout or an 'existential crisis' brought on by hard work and unrelenting processional demands," Dennis suggested that the Saint's time of "retreat" (if not escape) at Parmenie, with some guidance from Sister Louise, became an occasion for a changed narrative. Rather than a spiritually, mentally, and physically depleted if not broken man, De La Salle emerged from Parmenie both more human and more saintly, faithful to the vow he had previously taken, ready once again to take up the leadership of the community.

Dennis borrowed from the fields of narrative psychology and narrative therapy, arguing that one remakes or recreates oneself with each new telling of one's story, subtly or not so subtly changing parts of the story to make it more engaging, more "truthful" of one's current reality, and more reflective of the person (or institution, or Institute) we want to be and become, all as part of the "creative process of self-creation." When there were 17,000 vowed De La Salle Christian Brothers in the world, the schools were, decidedly, Brothers' schools. When there were one-third that number of Brothers, the schools began to be referred to as Lasallian schools. Different reality; different narrative. Or is it? Several in the group wondered if the reality

changes the narrative, or the narrative changes the reality – a debate that was cut short, not by lack of energy, but by lack of time.

This paper also took the prize for whetting the travel appetites of all who read it, with its rich descriptions of Reims, Parmenie, and Rome and each locations' particular contributions to museums that endeavor to capture the many and varied aspects of De La Salle's life – creating, and recreating, that narrative.

Fittingly enough, papers from two Saint Mary's University faculty members round out this collection. Dr. Matthew Nowakowski, a professor in Saint Mary's doctor of business administration (DBA) program, introduced his paper by saying it was prompted and encouraged by a conversation he had with Brother Gerard Rummery, one of the preeminent living Lasallian scholars today. The context of Matt's paper is the secular culture in which all higher education in the United States finds itself, Catholic higher education not exempted. After defining "secularization," the paper acknowledges the challenges that face higher education in the United States as including recruiting, retaining, and graduating students; balancing budgets; creating alternative revenue streams; adapting (or not) alternative delivery modalities; responding to the challenges of for-profit schools; acknowledging non-traditional means of recognizing certificates, competency-based credentials, and so on.

In general and in an admittedly broad brush stroke, this secular culture values individual success over community cooperation, disciplinary competency over broadly educated (liberal arts) graduates, successful employment upon graduation over against a commitment to social justice and equity, and religious neutrality over respectful engagement with religious diversity. The Lasallian response to these challenges, Matt suggests, offers tertiary education "not fed by ego and ambition but instead through inclusion and hope." An approach to education that emphasizes community, dignity, practicality, ethics, and a sense of gratuity. An education which, at least in general, welcomes all into a community of persons who cares for them, recognizes them as persons created in God's image and likeness, and recognizes – and even celebrates – that many of them come to us and our institutions with a wealth of experience and learning that we can recognize, affirm, and accept.

Much of Matt's paper and the discussion it generated centered on the various ways our higher education institutions – represented at this Seminar and in 60-some Lasallian universities around the world – are concrete instantiations of the response to a secular university culture as inheritors of the charisma, wisdom, and missions of John Baptist de La Salle. Among other things, discussion got quite specific and particular about how we establish "criteria" for accepting the students we do, the broad range of support we try to offer them, our often generous acceptance of transfer credits, and our welcoming of a vast array of diverse students of all ages, cultures, socio-economic strata, religious backgrounds, and ethnicities and races. The group ended on the most positive note in thinking that Brother Gerard would likely have been pleased with our discussion.

Finally, a second teacher-scholar from the host institution, Dr. Elizabeth Seebach's paper presented a cutting-edge technologically-enhanced tool for engaging, advising, and showcasing a student's learning and success through e-Folios. Solidly built on the three-century-rich Lasallian heritage of practical, applied, relevant education and pedagogy that is rooted in relationship –

between and among teachers as well as between teachers and students – Beth suggests that meeting students where they are at today means to be knowledgeable about and competent in their means of communication and engagement.

Beth reported on an academic advising structure that is e-based and developmentally scaffolded that is being used in her university's undergraduate psychology department in order to more fully, comprehensively, and creatively engage departmental undergraduate majors. The paper, and the energetic discussion it provoked, teased out many and varied additional technologically enhanced and supported ways to engage students more systematically, regularly, and creatively. e-Folios, like other technologically supported learning systems, are not the only answer to engaging students, and they cannot address all the challenges of today's students' often multi-dimensional challenges, but they can “encourage communication and deeper understanding when they serve as part of the exploration process in a community context.”

Perhaps a couple of Beth's final sentences, slightly edited and freely adapted to be inclusive of each of these papers and all of the ideas presented in the papers delivered and the robust discussions that took place during three days in July 2016 in Winona, Minnesota can serve as a concluding message: “Our Lasallian approach – practical, in community, together and by association, meeting students where they are – is ideal for . . . the student's academic journey . . . available for a deep learning, integrative approach to fostering collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, content, and confidence; . . . powerful tool[s] readily adapted in our Lasallian pedagogy. [Such] engagement . . . in a Lasallian context may be exactly what our twenty-first century learners need in order to continue our work, together and by association.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Endnotes**

1. Brother Robert Smith, FSC, PhD, is the chief academic officer and vice president for academic affairs for the schools of graduate and professional programs. He earned his PhD from Marquette University.

2. The author notes, “Finally, a word of gratitude to Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and its president, Brother William Mann, FSC, and his initiation of and support in covering all expenses for this project, to Saint Mary's University for hosting the group, and to each person and her or his respective Lasallian university for their commitment to and engagement with this endeavor.”