
Touching Hearts and Teaching Minds: Strengthening Lasallian Higher Education through Mission

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“To touch the hearts of your students is the greatest miracle you can perform.”²

Catholic education is a place, a process, a community and a lifestyle to name a few of its parts. University is where people go to gain knowledge, learn about themselves, accomplish goals, and prepare for careers. While secular institutions of higher education share many of the same goals and concerns Catholic ones do, Catholic colleges and universities have to squeeze religious mission in somewhere, too. They must recruit and admit quality students, support, and retain them to graduate ready for professional life. While faculty stay involved in their disciplines, staff must be current as well to work effectively with students. Achieving these quality standards makes any university a good one, but higher education has a long checklist to get to that designation. Colleges and universities accomplish the important task of preparing students for their careers and vocations, while also guiding them through an intense developmental stage of young adulthood.³ Where the schools of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Lasallian) differ from other higher education institutions is their mission. Lasallian schools are charged with educating the poor and the under-prepared, and these students face unique challenges with their finances and their educational preparation. Because Lasallian colleges and universities actively recruit the poor and the children of immigrants, faculty and staff must facilitate the college experience using the best practices of higher education but also the necessary support services for this population’s needs. These tasks require strategy and planning in addition to every other university goal. As society changes, the students and the institutions do too, necessitating colleges to adapt.⁴ From complying with new Federal Financial Aid regulations to succeeding with the most recent accreditation standards, Christian Brothers and the lay personnel work hard to be the best.

The building doors on the Christian Brothers University (CBU) campus in Memphis, Tennessee say ‘Enter to Learn’ and ‘Leave to Serve’. Students are reminded daily that their lives matter, that they are at CBU to prepare themselves for careers and vocations, and that they can change other people’s lives through their work and service. The Lasallian mission calls for aiding students’ learning goals and career aspirations, but also encouraging and strengthening their spiritual development through the Catholic faith.⁵ From the classroom to the cafeteria, spirituality is a crucial part of learning in religious higher education.⁶ While spirituality and religion are broad terms with many teachings, Catholicism teaches that God calls us to dismantle social injustice and remedy its consequences⁷ and this message appears throughout CBU. To further demonstrate the importance of this responsibility, Pope Francis⁸ writings on the Year of Mercy say, “The church is a field hospital where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded’.” Catholic schools are obligated to join churches in educating youth about the

“wounded” and their care, as well as tending to our students’ challenges. That is the way of life at a Lasallian institute of higher education.

While not all students at Catholic colleges are Catholic, the call to social justice can engage all students. As Appleyard⁹ said when writing about the Catholic mission of higher education, faculty and staff are called to inspire students of all faiths to converse and work together to build and sustain ‘the human good’. By providing opportunities for social justice work while in college, we are preparing students to serve the common good through their careers and throughout their lives. We must consistently mentor students for ‘a life of service’ and ‘a quest for justice and peace’¹⁰ and accomplish this in thorough and consistent ways. The service component of Lasallian higher education strengthens and improves our institutions. By embedding Lasallian values into every aspect of university life, we better our schools¹¹ and by teaching students about social injustice, we prepare our students for a life doing God’s work.¹² By helping them to learn about themselves and the gifts God gives them, we can steer them toward their vocation.¹³

The university stage of life is an interesting time for young people as they transition out of high school. Student maturity levels vary as greatly as their fashion. So while freshmen in college begin a new phase of life, they are all in different places to develop their adult identities.¹⁴ In the classroom, the residence halls, the cafeteria, the chapel, and the community around our college, students encounter new undertakings and different experiences. To be effective in linking service with college, we need to use diverse spaces and multiple opportunities to connect students with the idea and practice of service. To best accomplish the Lasallian command ‘Leave to Serve’, our faculty and staff must work together and incorporate service projects with classes and student life activities to teach students about social injustice and the marginalized. We must also use every opportunity available to facilitate what Chickering¹⁵ calls the sixth vector of student psychological development – purpose. When purpose is learned, the student knows what career path can work best for him or her and what work will fulfill him or her. I believe these two goals of Catholic higher education dovetail and are best accomplished in service learning opportunities offered in course clusters across disciplines.

Finding One’s Purpose

I am a sociologist in a behavioral sciences department at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee. As a First Generation scholar, I identify with many of our students. I grew up in Memphis and went to both public and Catholic schools. Our students often lack the means of transportation and they worry about the next tuition payment or the next book to buy. I graduated Memphis Catholic High School in 1983 owing \$74 for tuition. The principal forgave the balance and I graduated with my class. Luckily, we lived close to the school and I could walk there every day. Memphis’ bus system had limited routes then as it does now, and one CBU student I know takes four buses to get home if someone does not take her to one of the bus stops or to her home ten miles away. Since her last class three days of the week was with me, I often took her to her third bus stop two miles away from campus. Her family has four children, two adults and one car. As Lasallian professors and administrators, we have all met students like ‘Taleisha’ and we work to help our students in the classroom, on campus, and off campus. As I walked to my car with ‘Taleisha’ on those days, I lived my purpose of helping people graduate

college like my professors helped me. My fear is college will get too hard on ‘Taleisha’ and her family’s resources will be needed elsewhere necessitating her dropping out of CBU.

As Saint John Baptist de la Salle helped students learn and thrive in France so many years ago, so do we today.¹⁶ The challenge lies in doing this Lasallian work while sustaining our institutions. Catholic colleges and universities must plan according to their needs and the resources available¹⁷ and this requires people to work together across the departments.¹⁸ By offering students the Catholic way to make the world a better place and by providing a good community where faculty and staff can work, Lasallian institutions strengthen their place in higher education.¹⁹ Catholic universities are not corporations focusing on profit and growth for growth’s sake, but a community of scholars and colleagues.²⁰ Of course, money is always an issue for any college or university. A Catholic college cannot be everything to everybody and the Lasallian institution of higher education guides its growth and change through the core values shaping its mission.²¹ We are called to respect people, contribute to our community, and support each other in our work of quality education.²² The Catholic Church embraces the teaching of Deuteronomy 27:19, which says good is obtained by seeking justice for those without resources, ‘the orphans, widows, and strangers’.²³ By fully incorporating Lasallian mission into the many parts of our Catholic higher education institutions, as we are able, we build bonds between faculty, staff, students, Brothers, and the community.

Educating the children of the poor and the artisans was revolutionary in seventeenth century France and remains challenging today. The economics of maintaining and advancing higher education institutions requires strategic planning. By diversifying and increasing service learning opportunities, Lasallian institutions of higher education will attract students and contribute to their betterment as global citizens, but this has to be done while recruiting and retaining students. We need to tie service more closely with academics and embed service in all possible ways to be effective. Learning the origins of justice issues while actively working on solving them embodies the call for ‘active teaching methodologies’ as discussed at the 2015 III La Salle Forum.²⁴ Poverty, literacy, food insecurity, homelessness, violence, and racism are just a few social problems in the news and that our students encounter in their communities, often in their own lives. Service in the Lasallian tradition helps teach students their strengths, challenges, and purpose. Helping them understand how to use that information can guide them to their vocation. Purpose is more than finding a job. Students want to be fulfilled by their work and by knowing their efforts matter to others.²⁵

Finding One’s Vocation

I grew up the youngest child of three with a divorced mom who worked low-paying office jobs. My father stopped paying child-support soon after the end of their marriage when I was seven year old, so we never had enough money. I did not know how other families lived, so I assumed eating a turkey TV dinner was how people celebrated Thanksgiving. As I grew older, I learned our circumstances were not true for everyone. I could not go swimming in the apartment complex pool because my mother worked two jobs, and she did not trust my siblings to watch me closely enough while swimming. My friend from school had a pool in her backyard and her stay-at-home mom swam with her. Seeing these two different realities taught me that something was not working right, but I did not understand what it could be.

Poverty laid the groundwork for my vocation, helping people and teaching them. I was a kid who needed help and who loved to learn. My third grade teacher offered a prize for whoever read the most books every month and I won several times because books took me to different places. The school library offered what my home did not, lots of books. I am speaking from a position of wanting to teach students the macro contributions to poverty and social inequality having experienced it and having wondered why my mom, sister, and I had to share a room when my classmates got to sleep alone. Many of my students have been taught that the playing field is level and difficult circumstances are brought on by bad choices and bad luck. My mother was not the reason we had to move in the middle of the night because she could not pay our rent, though I did not know this at the age of ten. It took some years of college education paid for by a Pell Grant at the local state university to understand that macro socio-historical factors deserved the blame. Jobs dominated by women are typically low-paying²⁶ and this was beyond my mother's control. She could not afford to send me to Christian Brothers College where my high school friends were going, and I did not know that I could receive scholarships because my ACT score met the requisite number. No one told me. Although I love my high school guidance counselor, somehow I got lost. I was a poor, under-prepared high school student and I lacked the cultural capital to know about scholarships at the more expensive schools.

When students arrive at CBU, they probably do not know that women make less money than men across occupations, and that this situation reduces the quality of life for female-headed households. Living in one of those homes is not enough to understand the social problems either. I often ask sociology 101 students about the correlation between wages and gender and they say, with very few exceptions, that one's race probably predicts wages better. It does not, gender does. Teaching about social justice issues should include the differentiation of macro and micro factors and the difference between societal responsibility and individual responsibility. Having that knowledge makes our students better prepared to work towards social justice. They can care for the "wounded" without understanding injustice, but they will not succeed at reducing inequality and oppression if they do not understand what causes those issues. As Seider²⁷ points out in his book *Shelter*, the Harvard students working in a homeless shelter gained so much insight into why people are homeless by talking to their clients. Contact and conversation did more teaching than a book could. Post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, down-sizing, and lack of accessible mental health services have more to do with homelessness than bad morals and defective characters,²⁸ but an undergraduate might not know that if he or she doesn't take a sociology or political science course that includes that information. If a student has a calling to work on that social issue, he or she will have a greater impact with that knowledge and experience. The student may be more likely to realize that calling at the shelter, too.

The Benefits of Service Learning

CBU students do a lot of service. Student groups partner with community agencies throughout the year, sometimes for many years. While teachers are using the classroom to teach concepts and skills, they also partner with service agencies so students can directly experience the application of their coursework. I am advocating for a more thorough approach to this practice by pairing the science class with the social science class with a graded component of hours served and written reflection. For instance, nursing students at CBU travel twice a year to Haiti

with a West Tennessee Haiti Partnerships, servicing the medical needs of Haitian people. Students work with around 60 children a day and I suggest providing the context for why U.S. organizations provide aid to Haiti's citizens would help the students more clearly understand humanitarian relief. We can teach them about the political issues that complicate Haiti's social problems in case a student has the gift of leadership and the call to liaise with local organizers. The political science professor brings knowledge and experience to help make that happen. This unique set of circumstances, coursework and service, closes the Lasallian loop of service from admission through formation and education ending in graduation and launching.

Accounting students at CBU help low-income Memphians prepare their taxes. One of our business professors, Jennifer Weske, facilitates this project. She could co-teach with an economics professor or have a sociology professor guest lecture so students could learn about stratification and social inequality and possibly earn a general education credit at the same time. A psychology professor could participate by offering fundamentals of counseling so psychology majors could participate and the service learning experience would teach students about the mental health problems of the poor. For the most part, these courses are taught regularly in the professor's course load and would not require extra funds or overloads, just planning and coordination.

Christian Brothers University students make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the cafeteria every Wednesday alongside campus ministry personnel to support Saint Mary's Catholic Church and its food ministry to the homeless. A few days of helping, someone in need is not enough time for a student to learn his or her personal strengths and limits. They stand together in Alfonso Cafeteria and chat as they assemble the food and I wonder if they think about the people who eat those sandwiches. To better facilitate the college student's need for purpose and vocation, students have to do more than make sandwiches. They need to go to Saint Mary's church, talk to the people eating there, take a class in moral philosophy, do an internship at a non-profit that serves the poor, and organize student groups to volunteer at a shelter. A student may follow Father Boyle's path and build a bakery to serve ex-gang members²⁹ or the student may choose to major in business and work in human resources at a company and help newly released prisoners with re-entry by hiring them for jobs. We need to participate regularly in distributing those sandwiches, of course, but Lasallian students can have a greater impact on 'the human good' with a comprehensive experience that includes self-reflection and personal development. Students need to know their work will matter³⁰ and our job is teach them that God has prepared them for this work. A comprehensive service learning experience can accomplish this goal.

Month of Service Approach

The Month of Service model provides multiple service opportunities in one month of the year making it an ideal program for freshmen, transfer students, and upper classmen to meet and bond through helping our community. Dr. Tracie Burke, the director of September of service at CBU, works with a student advisory board and they arrange the projects at each agency or location over the year. September offers seven to ten choices for volunteering per week. The website describes each event and location, and a participating student leader organizes the group, arranges travel to the site, and shares the service experience with them. On most trips, faculty and staff members volunteer along with the students. When I volunteered in September 2016, our

university president, Dr. Smarelli, was cleaning packs of spicy rice from the debris of packages broken in transit with all of us at MIFA, the main agency serving food insecurity in Memphis. I learned how kind our students are and that volunteering is necessary and satisfying albeit wearying.

The students see social injustice in many places including our environment. Cleaning up a polluted lake in the Memphis area appears in the list every year and often has the most participants, so the environmentally leaning student can participate all four years of his or her college career. Along the way, he or she can take biology with a service-learning component at an agency that needs support and can benefit from an on-going relationship with our students. During September, students partner with many Memphis agencies during the month to support their programs. They mentor children at a Jubilee school or stock the shelves at a Habitat for Humanity ReSale store. Our students can meet people experiencing struggles or learn how social service agencies combat the social problems they address. A senior can have four years of September of service experience, and the opportunities could teach him or her so much more when paired with academics, self-exploration and reflection, Lasallian formation, and community dialogue. Environmental science may not be his or her path. Working with the animals at the Humane Society could attract his or her attention, and with planning, guidance, and cooperation, CBU faculty and staff could support this purpose and vocation.

The Active Alumni Approach

An alum, John Wigley, offers his tax expertise to help people at CBU prepare their own taxes including students. He also mentors a fraternity and he can be seen at most Alumni events. When the softball team was raising money at a local pizza place, John Wigley was there with Brother Ryan Anderson, our campus minister. Advertised on our website and in our weekly newsletter, current students see graduates of CBU active in our school, giving back, and living their vocation, a vocation fostered at a Lasallian institute of higher education. John majored in accounting at CBU and he gives back in many different ways including sharing his sense of humor and trivia judging skills. Christian Brothers University students also work with an alumna who founded a Memphis non-profit organization. A Lasallian alumna, inspired by her undergraduate experience, Chanda Murphy, organizes Cheer for Kids, a local cheerleading competition that donates its proceeds to the Make a Wish Mid-South organization. Our students are learning how to create a charity event to raise money for a social justice cause because of Chanda's purpose, vocation, and drive. Since Chanda is a psychology professor specializing in industrial organizational psychology, she could pair her service experience with courses in organizational training or work motivation and co-teach with a sports management professor. Dr. Mary Campbell, our internship coordinator in behavioral sciences, can build on this beginning by connecting the students to agencies that use recreational therapy with youth like JIFF in Memphis, a Christian agency that helps juvenile delinquents focus on personal growth and success while avoiding recidivism. Students will know at the end of this Lasallian experience whether they are prepared to do this work and how to do this work. Mentoring youth is a valuable tool in dismantling social injustice, but it is not for everyone. A mentor needs patience, insight, and good communication skills. Juvenile offenders are uniquely troubled as there are many reasons children become delinquents.³¹

Roberts³² studied faculty working in service learning for over ten years and in her research participants expressed that connecting students to the community was what kept them doing those projects. Seeing students grow as they help others is a rewarding part of teaching at a Catholic college.³³ The students will struggle, according to Smith, with the depth of social injustice, but they can learn their place on the path to remedying it. Participating in this process rewards faculty and staff, too. Seeing a student discover his or her purpose and vocation is rewarding work and closes the Lasallian loop for our vocations. I did my first service-learning experience in 1986 at the Alliance for the Blind and Visually Impaired. While I knew nothing about blindness, I was an undergraduate Social Work student who wanted to help somebody somehow. I mostly filed and answered phones, but I learned so much about the social work profession that the experience was invaluable and meaningful. Hearing the clients explain their needs to the agency's caseworkers helped me understand the gift of being temporarily able-bodied, as some of the clients call those of us without current disabilities. The time I spent writing about my experiences and processing them with my professor helped me find my purpose and my vocation.

Conclusion

We must empower and teach students that God has given them gifts to do His work as they mature during the college years and develop into adults. Saint John Baptist de la Salle reminds us that we 'received talents and graces from God' to do His work.³⁴ Lasallian teachers actively teach this message and inspire students to discern their skills, strengths, and limits to better the world and live their own vocations. Sitting with a homeless man while he eats his soup and sandwich will teach a college student if that conversation invigorates or depletes his or her energy and both lessons are useful. Christian Brothers University's mission statement is "Educating Minds, Touching Hearts, and Remembering the presence of God."³⁵ Touching the hearts of young people and teaching their minds, modeling an inclusive community, and demonstrating respect for others is our job. The greatest gift we can give our students is to deconstruct the social historical forces that cause social injustice and empower them to find their own path to dismantling it.

Lasallian schools need to plan service learning strategically to maximize the lifelong benefits for students. By comprehensively incorporating service throughout all parts of college life, students see the deep commitment Lasallian schools make to help fight social inequality. By designing projects to enhance a student's knowledge of the contributing factors to those problems and the suffering they are trying to alleviate, students will be better prepared to succeed. Roberts³⁶ advocates using ethnographic research techniques that require students to reflect on what they are learning during service work. By writing about the people and the work, these reflections can be the way teachers and project leaders dialogue with students about poverty, literacy, incarceration, or food insecurity. Both Roberts³⁷ and Seider³⁸ show how service can be linked to the Gospel and to vocation. Cleaning out McKellar Lake could be the 'push' that 'pulls' a student toward environmental science or engineering as majors and careers. Dialogue with faculty, staff, and campus ministry are necessary to contextualize these lessons and this conversation should be taking place in every part of a Lasallian institution of higher education. My paper advocates for two student outcomes: facilitate a student's personal growth about spirituality and vocation and empower them to effectively live that vocation.

Some of our students will make great communication directors for Lasallian schools, while others will better help the “orphans, widows, and strangers” by working as a counselor at a homeless shelter or volunteering to teach nutrition and recipes to people facing food insecurity. The career preparation, internship opportunities, scholarly work, and identity development we do as Lasallians touches their hearts and teaches their minds about their gifts and possible uses for those gifts. If we can educate a college student, help him or her grow as a person, support their needs as students and people of faith, while fostering their gifts from God into a vocation that helps the ‘common good’, we have done our job. The greatest gift we can give our students is to deconstruct the socio-historical forces that create and perpetuate poverty and social inequality and teach them that people are not solely responsible for their struggles. We can inspire students to serve, but also to lead and to participate in social justice throughout their lives using their gifts.

A student asked me to let her sister into my sociology 101 class for the fall semester of 2016 because the course was already full. As a Lasallian educator always ready to help, I thought about the class size and the room to see if one more student would fit. I asked ‘Jennifer’ why her sister needed the class and she shared that her sister had not registered for her first semester of college because their parents wanted to send the younger sibling to a local community college to save money. ‘Jennifer’ kept advocating to her parents that the younger child would do much better at CBU because of our school’s size and community. Her parents eventually capitulated, and now ‘Jennifer’s’ sister needed classes. She went on to explain that her experience at CBU had been so positive, she wanted her sister to have the same experience. CBU would encourage and support her sister like she had been encouraged and supported. The director of the honors program, the aforementioned Tracie Burke, had inspired and encouraged ‘Jennifer’ to participate in leadership roles and her psychology professor, Dr. Rod Vogl, was always willing to talk to her during his office hours and helped her process her experiences and feelings. ‘Jennifer’ said her sister needs that, too. Lasallian institutions of higher education must communicate to potential and current students what being Lasallian means and provide a comprehensive approach to help them be Lasallian.

Questions for Consideration

1. Are there specific service-learning programs or practices at your institution you would recommend sharing with other institutions?
2. Is service-learning a collaborative / cross departmental process at your institution or is it organized in one department?
3. How do we encourage faculty and staff members to engage in creating a more collaborative / cross departmental service-learning program that is curricular and co-curricular?
4. Does your institution have a service-learning component in their general education requirement? What would this look like? How does this support the Lasallian mission?

Endnotes

1. Kelly James is an assistant professor of sociology at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee. She earned a PhD degree at Louisiana State University.
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5. <https://www.cbu.edu/mission>.
6. Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
7. Appleyard and Rodden.
8. Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*. Translated by Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016)
9. Appleyard, page 48.
10. <https://www.cbu.edu/mission>.
11. Paul Schweigl, “The Lasallian Tradition and Its Broad Possibilities,” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 6, no. 3 (December 2015).
12. Mary-Antoinette Smith, “Balancing Act” *US Catholic* (February: pp. 26-31).
13. *Meditations* #13.1 and #205.1 and Smith.
14. Chickering, 1969 and 2006.
15. Chickering, 1969.
16. Schweigl.

17. Appleyard.
18. Sue Hines and Rebecca Hopkins, "Overview of the 2015 III La Salle Forum: Active Methodologies in Higher Education." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (June 2016).
19. Schweigl.
20. Smith.
21. Hines and Hopkins.
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23. Pope Francis.
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27. Scott Seider, *Shelter: Where Harvard Meets the Homeless*, Cambridge: Continuum Books (2010).
28. Conley.
29. Gregory Boyle, *The Tattooed Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
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31. Conley.
32. Kathleen Glanister Roberts, "Service Ethnography, and the 'Leap of Faith': A Spiritan Catholic Perspective on Service Learning. (*Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* Volume 12(1) September 2008, pp. 96 – 116).
33. Smith.
34. *Meditations* #13.1 and #205.1.
35. <http://www.cbu.edu/mission>

36. Roberts.

37. Roberts.

38. Seider.