
Informed by Community: Lasallian University Adaptations in Twenty-First Century American University Secular Culture

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Introduction

In recent years, Catholic universities have faced new and diverging student needs, which required us to grow, adapt, and evolve. The introduction and growth of technology-enhanced, blended, and online courses changed the way we deliver and co-create learning. Colleges and universities have realized and come to rely on the returning and graduate adult student markets as revenue streams, as these populations constitute the largest financial segments of the higher education market.³ Competition from for-profit higher education institutions and new delivery modalities are transforming how universities market for increased enrollment, work to enhance student retention, and engage learners through technology.⁴

Increased use of adjunct, community, and contracted faculty on our residential and online campuses has altered the curriculum that is designed and taught, as well as the relational dynamics between students, faculty, and administration.⁵ For the purpose of this paper, secularization in American Lasallian Catholic universities is understood as an increased influence of worldly forces and values and a movement away from a traditionally religious-centric emphasis and presence in academics and operations. Ecclesiastical authority, faculty formation, and a clear articulation of the Catholic intellectual tradition are balanced with the demands of research and external governance; this dynamic contributes to what Heft⁶ and Kaslyn⁷ refer to as the American Catholic Universities' adaptations to secular culture.

At Lasallian universities, we have an additional key component of our charism that differentiates us in how we work with the values and forces of secular culture. It is through the building of community we offer tertiary education not fed by ego and ambition but instead through inclusion and hope. Lasallian university communities work with students of many types of twenty-first century poverty: fiscal poverty, academic under-preparedness, survivors of emotional hardship, and a spiritual paucity that can erode the human soul.

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools⁸ argued, "The phenomenon of *secularization* has effectively critiqued every aspect of life, especially displacing the role of religion in the public sphere in favor of science and reason, and elevating the individual over the community." Lasallian schools are not new in adjusting to secularization, Rummery⁹ reminded us that the Institute needed to make deft and significant adjustments in response to the 1904 secularization laws in France. This paper explores how Lasallian institutions have and may continue to rebuff secularization in our colleges and universities through our inclusive and

communal heritage. By adapting to twenty-first century American secular culture, our common Lasallian heritage has a unique opportunity to grow in service.

Lasallian Heritage

One way to consider our present lived heritage is as a part of a community that transcended De La Salle's time and the context of eighteenth century France. To that end, Brother Gerard Rummery¹⁰ outlined key principles of Lasallian heritage for establishing community:

1. The foundation is a response in the spirit of the Gospel to the particular needs of those to be served.
2. Those responsible for the work are associated together in what they see as a common enterprise and are prepared to work together to achieve its ends.
3. The basis of relationships, among those who serve as well as among those being served, is that of being "brothers/sisters to one another and older brothers/sisters to those served."
4. A profound sense of gratuity, material and spiritual, characterizes the policies of the foundation.

Through the aforementioned principles, we can cultivate responses to the unique challenges of higher education today. As Rummery¹¹ pointed out that when working with dynamic external circumstances, ". . . fidelity to the heritage would make it imperative to try to implement the same foundational principles in the new situation."

Brother Gerard¹² echoed the call of the General Chapter of 2000 for a thorough dialogue between brothers and associated partners in animating and operationalizing our communities in today's educational environment. The hope for our Lasallian educational communities has been to deliver a holistic education to our students. From the beginning of the Institute, our charism has been realized and offered to provide students with the skills to live with dignity.¹³ Our most significant legacy, and key to the future, may be, as Rummery¹⁴ stated, that the "the institute shows that part of its original genius has been its ability to maintain its unity of Lasallian principles while adapting itself to situations that have transcended the original categories of race, language, religion, and gender."

Contemporary Lasallian Higher Education Communities

In agreement with the four principle foundations of Lasallian heritage as outlined above, let us consider some possible directions to adapt and develop our Lasallian university communities in concert with twenty-first century American secular culture.

Gospel Spirit and Needs of Those to be Served

As in seventeenth century France, present day Lasallian higher education seeks to increase access to quality education. Informed by the model described in the Gospel of John, as the "good

shepherd,”¹⁵ we hope to see, acknowledge, give voice, and accompany those students who might otherwise be underserved, unnoticed, deterred, or disadvantaged. In the environment of the twenty-first century American college, these students may come from many divergent populations such as, first generation college students, students of color, community college graduates, returning adult students who were previously unsuccessful at college, students apprehensive about attempting college, immigrants from the developing world, students returning for graduate studies while balancing or leaving outside careers, and students with learning disabilities.

In a homily, His Holiness Pope Francis¹⁶ reminded us:

“The Christian includes, he does not close the door to anyone, even if this provokes resistance. He who excludes, because he believes himself to be better, generates conflicts and divisions, and does not consider the fact that ‘we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.’”

The Institute agrees with the need for Lasallian colleges and universities to be open to the vulnerable and underserved and that our “. . . commitment is strengthened with the presence of Lasallian institutions of higher education and their specific contribution in teaching, research, and service to society.”¹⁷

How best to advocate for the educational success of these important groups of students? As a first step, Lasallian institutions need to develop communication and marketing channels to connect with underserved, or unnoticed students and their families concerning the opportunities in Lasallian higher education. Underserved groups may not understand the intricacies of selecting a college¹⁸ and may not be aware of many college opportunities. Even more concerning are the reports and lawsuits filed against for-profit colleges that follow predatory and dishonest marketing and recruitment practices to enroll students in unaccredited, high cost programs.¹⁹

Lasallian institutions can also support these students through efficient and effective philanthropic efforts, raising funds to reduce the financial burden on these families. Underserved populations may not perceive a Lasallian Catholic college education as financially possible, and thus, may choose other higher education options or not attend college at all. These philanthropic efforts are key for our universities as they struggle with a new reality of increasing institutional tuition discounts and competition for tuition dollars.²⁰

Finally, in embracing our heritage to build community with underserved students in our time, it is important to be informed and to construct our curriculum through a pedagogy that embraces and supports English as a Second Language (ESL) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). However, it is critical that our institutions take a proactive and realistic approach in creating strategies and programs to prepare our learning communities to support ESL and CRT with sufficient and sustainable resources.

To first generation college students, the context and environment of college may seem like an alien landscape, stark and unreachable. Students struggling with English or coming from other underserved or academically underprepared populations may feel trapped and unable to succeed

in college. While the debate concerning the value and direction of American university education rages on, we still must consider that in Lasallian terms, the holistic development and transformation of the student is at the core of our mission. Greater in depth and breadth than “education for employment,” as Lasallians we are dedicated to the vocation of teaching and providing access to education for those who seek it, regardless of station in life. As American theorist Mike Rose²¹ states, for the underprepared student seeking an education, “It’s not just a few bucks more a week that’s at stake, literacy, here, is intimately connected with respect, with a sense that they are not beaten, the mastery of print revealing the deepest impulse to survive.”

Associated for a Common Enterprise

An important aspect of any Lasallian institution is a dedication to excellence in teaching and learning. The early De La Salle Christian Brothers met to share best teaching practices and, of course, to update the *Conduct of Schools*.²² We have the opportunity across Lasallian higher education to continue this important tradition that enriches our communities, mission, and thinking.

Pragmatically, best practices in teaching could be shared between faculty, particularly as related to working with underprepared students, protected populations, and first generation college students. As supported by Heft²³ faculty may benefit from formation discussions on infusing the Catholic Intellectual Tradition into specific content area disciplines. Recently, there have been international gatherings of Lasallian faculty to share best practices and discuss a shared research agenda. Efforts to congregate Lasallian business faculty in Manila, Philippines, and education faculty in Cuernavaca, Mexico are encouraging steps.

Another area of shared collaboration is through the joint Lasallian research agenda as coordinated through the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU)²⁴.

Continued conversations at key Lasallian research seminars and meetings can move the three themes of Lasallian research forward, which were defined by IALU²⁵ as:

1. Food, Nutrition and Health (e.g. biochemistry of food products, science and engineering of potable water, cancer risks and cure from food, economic impact).
2. Sustainability and the Environment (e.g. dealing with climate change, eco-design of houses and urban centers, industrial ecology, air and water quality monitoring in mega-cities).
3. Education and Learning Innovations (e.g. access to education among the poor, impact of the use of tablets for learning math and science, coping mechanisms among children with learning disabilities, predicting the academic emotions of young learners based on physiological signals).

A groundswell of student, faculty, and institutional commitment is necessary to operationalize the Lasallian research agenda. Students must be encouraged to research, write, and present. Faculty can model this commitment, but only if supported with time, facilities, and funds.

Working groups of faculty and students across Lasallian universities should be encouraged to meet and discuss joint research projects is a key step.

Sharing intellectual capital, collaboration in grant writing, and thought leadership in scholarship will advance research and ultimately the publication of findings from Lasallian universities. Lasallian faculty must be bold in advancing this agenda by encouraging bachelor, master, and doctoral students to contribute to this research. During his address to the summer IALU leadership program in Rome, Brother Thomas Johnson²⁶ offered these words, “Once seen as something for very few people, now we see universities, not as elitist institutions, but educational resources opening up paths of advancement, intellectual nourishment and spiritual development for the entire community for adult learners.” In today’s secular higher education culture, Brother Tom accurately and prophetically described our shared common enterprise.

Brother and Sister to One Another

The Brothers of the Christian Schools have been progressive in the inclusion of other members of the laity, specifically associated university partners, in formation programs. The Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, IALU, the Brother John Johnston Institute of Contemporary Lasallian Studies, and university-specific mission retreats are just a few examples of exceptional formation opportunities available to all persons working within the institute. Rummery²⁷ reminds us, “the Brother’s role in all this is the particular gift he brings from the Lasallian heritage, but it is one that can help to guide the new Lasallian ‘community’ formed with others around a shared vision to a new place, always open to the future.”

Formation experiences need to expand and evolve as our Lasallian faculties teach more online and blended courses. In addition, as contracted, community, and adjunct faculty grow in numbers within our schools; we need to think proactively about how to provide exceptional formation and development experiences, so they become enmeshed in our learning communities. Hines²⁸ described the importance that De La Salle placed on growing community, by showing “devotion to his teacher’s employment and formation.” Additionally, faculty development programs working in concert with Lasallian formation opportunities may help develop and support Lasallian research collaboration both within and between Lasallian universities.

Given that 98% of those working with the Institute are partners, Rummery²⁹ reflected that the “contribution made by the Brothers is therefore much more qualitative than quantitative.” Wiggins et al.³⁰ reported that De La Salle Christian Brothers comprise 1.5% or 45 of 2965 full and part-time college faculty within the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN). Certainly, formation programs and activities are one avenue to experience these qualitative activities. Other venues (e.g., Brothers and associates teaming to co-present coursework or guest lectures, creating online mission offices, or mentorship programs) may offer additional quality experiences.

Specialized programs, such as Lasallian Honors studies, Great Books, Lasallian Book Clubs, and Contemporary Issues programs that integrate an interdisciplinary curriculum are a potential “quality” venue for Brothers to work as mentors and teachers to students and partners. These programs are often a crucible of deep discussions, debate, critical analysis, and transformational

moments. In those moments, presence, connection, accompaniment, teacher and student, “older brother/sister to those served.”

Profound Sense of Gratitude

Some in the academy and in the public sector have opened the debate, if not possibility, of a tuition-free college education in America.³¹ While an intriguing idea, most if not all of our tertiary schools have a degree of dependence on tuition dollars for working capital. Realistically, an operational retreat to gratuitous schools is not financially viable for our institutions. Rummery³² reminded us that in the stubborn adherence to the orthodoxy of gratuity, the evolution of the Institute was at risk. Brother Gerard³³ remembers, “The blanket refusal of the Brothers to revise the principle of gratuity from the absolute sense of its foundation in a very different society led to their being forced to withdraw from many village and small town schools where parents were being asked to contribute to the support of the school.”

Our opportunity today is to realize a new twenty-first century “sense” of gratuity that will inform and enliven our higher education institutions. This new sense of gratuity should focus on the removal of barriers potential students face accessing higher education, such as:

- admissions policies and procedures that efficiently help students matriculate into our colleges;
- alternative training and programs for ESL learners to help them attain the English proficiency needed for successful college studies;
- standardized, compassionate, and reliable transfer credit policies that respect the life knowledge gained by returning adult students, especially veterans, the underserved, and the poor;
- understandable and mobile device-friendly applications for reducing what some students describe as a daunting amount of application paperwork; and
- content specific faculty advisors who can meet with students, in-person or online, to describe content, career growth, and the Lasallian tradition of the school that may also help establish a feeling of community with prospective students.

We must also consider the student’s spiritual growth in the guise of building community. Providing opportunities for students at all university levels to “give back” through Lasallian service programs is an important component. Returning adult learners at the bachelor, master, and doctoral levels lead busy lives; however, service opportunities can be woven into the curriculum in creative ways to enrich our programs and student learning.

Finally, all our college and university students should be encouraged, when appropriate, to conduct research that is aligned with our Lasallian research agenda. Senior projects, capstone projects, master’s theses, and doctoral dissertations in support of the three key research threads will help bolster our research efforts with new ideas and perspectives.

Conclusion

The development of strong Lasallian communities helps us retain our cultural identity. Inspired by the gospel spirit, associated for a common enterprise as brothers and sisters with gratuitous and generous hearts, we aspire to provide exceptional and transformative higher education experiences. A relationship between faculty, staff, and students that promotes holistic growth remains the cornerstone of Lasallian education. John Baptist de La Salle described a double contemplation of salvation in God and education as a means to transform into wholeness with salvation.³⁴ It is our heritage to build communities that inspire a transformation in thinking, and a transformation from the misery of exclusion to a life of hope.

Questions for Consideration

In consultation with Brother Gerard³⁵, we offer the following questions for further research and discussion:

1. We may refer to the “brothers to one another/older brothers (sisters) to the young” as the *anthropological corner stone* of the Lasallian enterprise. Another way of expressing this would be to see that in choosing this sense of ‘brotherhood/sisterhood’ the first Brothers gave themselves both an *identity* and a *mission*.
2. A question that you might like to consider is how this cornerstone finds form of concrete actions among associated partner Lasallians . . . You do not live together in a community, so what do you *share* as a community, academics and staff members? What would you be willing to develop together as a community?
3. The discussion on gratuity is very important. Besides financial support, encouragement, second chances etc. think how willing are the members ready to *spend time* beyond the call of duty with students who otherwise would fail or fall through the cracks.
4. In a rapidly changing society, how do you ensure that the four basic concepts of community do not become a straitjacket? How does the Lasallian community *evolve? Change?* And even for good reasons, *mutate?*

Endnotes

1. This essay was inspired through conversation and reflection with Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, Lasallian scholar, who suggested associated Lasallian partners could enrich Lasallian literature through their lives lived as well as their views on historical and contemporary topics facing the institute. I am an associated Lasallian partner who has spent the last 9 years working as both an administrator and now full-time doctoral faculty member in business and education.

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