Vincentian Values: Coherence and Solidarity in the University

Vincentian Mission: Opportunity and Responsibility-XIX in the Series
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In this series, Vincentian Research Fellows from across the University share their experiences in actualizing the Mission through their research, teaching and service. Below Professor Tomes reflects on what he has learned from his participation in the interdisciplinary community of Vincentian Fellows.

I am grateful for the support, encouragement and, most of all, the knowledge and inspiration I have received as a Vincentian Fellow. The Fellows Program has given me numerous and unique opportunities to intellectually engage students and colleagues and to orient my teaching, research, and writing to the perspective of Catholic Social Thought. I have also come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of both my own Catholic Faith and the continuing importance and relevance of the Church’s mission in today’s suffering, problem-filled world. These two emphases have offered grounding and coherence and solidarity. Moreover, I have learned from my colleagues that a multi-disciplinary approach is extremely effective as it engages faculty and students in constructive analyses of current world issues.

As a historian, I have repeatedly addressed two themes in my research and writing over the course of my academic career: 1.) The devastating human cost of war, and 2.) The importance of vibrant democratic political institutions in fostering the full development of the human person. Having organized, attended, or participated in dozens of programs offered on campus through the Vincentian Center, I have come to appreciate and experience a genuine passion for Vincentian Core Values. I have been repeatedly moved by the strength of convictions guiding my colleagues, and the depth of interest in humanitarian issues displayed by our students. We have been blessed by an extraordinary roster of guest speakers, who, in presenting riveting first-hand accounts, have challenged our intellects and moved our hearts on a wide range of subjects, from genocide in Africa to ecocide in the oil-rich Nigerian Delta; from human trafficking, kidnapping, and sexual slavery to global warming and its devastating impact in creating staggering shortages of food and water. One of the major accomplishments of the Fellows Program has been to keep our attention focused on how Church Teaching not only raises consciousness but compels a response to social problems and human needs.

Individuals who seek an intellectual appreciation of and a commitment to the pursuit and understanding of truth (the mission of each professor) inevitably face many obstacles. We live in a society dominated by sensationalized, highly
technical, and profit-driven mass media. Precious little encouragement is found in today’s mass popular culture, based on the values of consumerism, hedonism, unchecked individualism, and bland subjectivism. Thus, I am particularly indebted to the Center and to the other Fellows for providing a much broader alternative perspective - one which has time and time again nourished and reassured me that the values and traditions I as a Catholic Scholar cherish are in fact alive and well. I have experienced support in the struggle to keep the faith and to live it fully in a transforming way so as to credibly challenge students to grasp the ethical dimensions of social structures, political systems and experience. The Vincentian Center and the Fellows have delivered a relentless challenge to elevate awareness of Vincentian values and social justice. They have also accomplished a formidable task in building a true, creative, and vibrant intellectual community deeply devoted to participating in this great challenge across the academic disciplines.

Scientific Inquiry and Beyond

Maura C. Flannery (College of Professional Studies, flannerm@stjohns.edu)

I recently attended a conference sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities on “Engaging Science, Advancing Learning: General Education, Majors, and the New Global Century.” I went because I teach Scientific Inquiry, the University’s core science course, and I did discover a great deal that I can use in my teaching. In addition, I learned about a number of themes that have broad application across the curriculum.

I began with a workshop on “Designing and Implementing Rich Science Learning Outcomes for All.” I chose this because it’s title included three words that are important to me, and no, science wasn’t one of them. The first is “implementing.” It is hard work to design changes to our courses, but it is even more difficult to put them into practice—to stick with the work, get past the obstacles, and slog through the problems involved. Any tricks I could discover would be worth my time, and I did pick up some useful ideas, including getting faculty to work together on design and implementation. It’s a lot easier when you have a colleague to complain to, to discuss ideas with, and to hammer out difficulties. At the end of the conference, I attended another session dealing with curriculum design which served as a nice reinforcement of what I had learned the first day. The major concepts I came away with is that there is no substitute for group work and for hard thinking about what we are doing in the classroom.

The other words in the title that lured me in were “learning outcomes.” Barry Stein of Tennessee Technological University emphasized the idea that deciding on outcomes should precede designing activities. It’s essential to know what you want students to learn because that will make it much easier to figure out what they have to do in order to achieve that learning. Again, this is hardly news, but it is a point that I don’t think can be stated too often. It seems second nature for most faculty to think first about content, assuming that content is equivalent to what students learn. At this point, there is enough evidence from cognitive research to make even the least skeptical of us realize that this equation is suspect at best.

To show us how to align outcomes with learning activities, Stein had us work in groups on an outcome important to us and then figure out a good way for students to achieve this outcome. I’m interested in focusing more on quantitative literacy in my course, so I sketched out a graphing activity based on a case study

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Dr. Raymond F. Bulman (Theology & Religious Studies, bulmanr@stjohns.edu) was re-elected for the 15 consecutive year as Chair of the Columbia University Seminar on Studies in Religion; presented a paper, “Hans Küng and Aggiornamento: A Retrospect,” at the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature (March 2008); published articles on “Aggiornamento” and “Hans Küng” for the New Catholic Encyclopedia (Summer 2008); gave a paper entitled “Theology and Freedom of Inquiry: The Case of Hans Küng” at a Seminar on Studies in Religion at Columbia University (October 2008).

Dr. Zhe-Sheng Chen (Pharmaceutical Sciences, chenz@stjohns.edu) with Dr. Charles Ashby (Pharmaceutical Sciences, ashbyc@stjohns.edu) published an article, “Lapatinib (Tykerb, GW572016) Reverses Multidrug Resistance in Cancer Cells by Inhibiting the Activity of ATP-Binding Cassette Subfamily B Member 1 and G Member 2,” in Cancer Research (October 2008); invited a visiting scholar Dr. Yehong Kuang from Central South University Xianya Medical School (China) to work at his laboratory.

Dr. Christopher D. Denny (Theology & Religious Studies, dennyc@stjohns.edu) published an essay, “Discarded Woman, Cherished Icon: The Peaceful Silence of Browning's Duchess,” in Making Peace in Our Time (Weston, MA: Peace Press, 2008); and was elected to the board of directors of the American Academy of Religion (March 2008).

Dr. Maura C. Flannery (Computer Science, Mathematics and Science, flannerm@stjohns.edu) published an article, "For the Love of Nature: Biophilia and Contemporary Jewelry," in Metalsmith (June 2008); also was invited to present a paper, "Agnes Arber: The Mind and the Eye," at the Biographs II Workshop at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, Germany (June 2008).


Dr. Paula Kay Lazorus (DNY, lazrusp@stjohns.edu) was a panel speaker for the Curriculum and Teaching session at the Barnard College's Annual Reacting to the Past workshop held in NY (June 2008); was a member of the Bova Marina Archaeological Project’s annual field season in Bova Marina, Calabria (July 2008).

Dr. Abu Serajuddin (Pharmaceutical Sciences, serajuda@stjohns.edu) presented a lecture, "Importance of Special Drug Delivery Systems in the Growth of Pharmaceutical Industry," at the Fall meeting of the New Jersey Pharmaceutical Association of Science and Technology (NJPhAST) in Mahwah, NJ (October 2008); presented a lecture, “Development of Surfactant and Lipid-based Solid Dispersions and Solid Microemulsion Preconcentrates for Oral Delivery of Poorly Water-Soluble Drugs,” at a meeting of the American Chemical Society held at Pleasantville, NY (November 2008).

Dr. Laura Snyder (Philosophy, snyderl@stjohns.edu) was the keynote speaker delivering a presentation entitled "Bold Leaps: Guesses or Inferences? John Herschel and Analogical Reasoning in Science" at a conference on Induction: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives held at the University of Ghent, Belgium; and published a chapter entitled, "The Whole Box of Tools": William Whewell and the Logic of Induction," in the Handbook of the History of Logic (Kluwer Press).

Dr. Scyatta A. Wallace (Psychology, wallaces@stjohns.edu) presented a paper, “Using Community Based Participatory Research to Develop Gender-specific and Culturally-Tailored HIV Testing Educational Materials,” at the Annual American Public Health Association meeting in San Diego, CA (October 2008); and presented a paper, “Living in the Hood: Perspectives from Black Youth about Their Neighborhood Context,” at the International Urban Health conference in Vancouver, Canada (October 2008).
involving beak size differences in a bird species. This is neither earth-shattering nor terribly innovative, but it is a first step. Stein’s workshop got me on the road to linking outcomes with active learning strategies.

Sometimes it’s difficult to figure out which session to attend at a meeting like this where several are running concurrently. Judy Krauss and Marybeth Ruscica from St. John’s were presenting on their work linking critical thinking activities with scientific inquiry. This project grew out of their involvement with the University’s Title III grant project. I was tempted to attend, but since I knew about their work, I abandoned them—after making a date to meet them for dinner—and went to a session on efforts to measure the development of scientific thinking over the course of a college education. This presentation gave me a number of ideas on how to do this, using tests administered early in a student’s college education and again right before graduation. One benefit of a meeting like this is learning from the work of others, so it’s not necessary to start from scratch on the assessment road—thank God.

At another point, I had to choose between a session on designing non-major science courses and one called “Promoting the Learning Focused Science Course.” The latter was presented by a faculty member from the US Air Force Academy, and so my inclination was to take a pass because that institution is so different from ours. On the other hand, I think the design of our Scientific Inquiry course is pretty good, so I decided to go with the USAF. I’m glad I did. Ken Sagendorf, a civilian who is Director of Faculty Development, explained how their biology course has been redesigned so that each session can be assessed for how well it achieved its learning outcomes. This may be more assessment than most of us want, but the design was simple, easy to administer, and powerful. Essentially, it asked how well did the instructor present the material, guide student activities to achieve the outcomes, and then assess their learning.

As I drove home from Providence, I realized that the conference hadn’t taught me that much new. The importance of defining learning outcomes and then assessing them is not hot news, but the meeting did provide me with solid examples of how to make assessment doable. Slowly even someone as thick-headed as myself is getting familiar enough with assessment that it is becoming almost second-nature to think about teaching in light of it. Almost.

Faculty Growth Grants Program
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