Globalizing Liberal Arts Education through Residential Learning Communities

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It is my pleasure this morning to tell you about Santa Clara University’s effort for globalizing liberal arts education through the Residential Learning Communities initiative and the immersion programs of the Xavier Residential Learning Community. Before going into the details, let me begin with some institutional context.

This past fall, Santa Clara, “the Jesuit university in Silicon Valley,” enrolled about 4,900 undergraduate students and about 3,400 students in graduate business, engineering, law, education, counseling psychology, and pastoral ministries programs. We are designated in the U.S. News & World Report rating system as a Comprehensive University in the Western Region. In the past decade or two, the undergraduate student body has been averaging around 60% arts and sciences, 25% to 30% undergraduate business, and 10% to 15% undergraduate engineering; they are tied together by a common general education core curriculum primarily serviced by liberal arts faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Founded in 1851 as Santa Clara College, we are one of the oldest institutions of higher education west of Saint Louis. In those “old days,” my home academic department, the chemistry department, was assaying gold and making sacramental wine. About 15 years ago, the Board of
Trustees changed the school’s name from the University of Santa Clara, known locally as “USC,” to Santa Clara University, to avoid confusion of Santa Clara with “the other USC.”

The aim of Jesuit education is to help individuals become leaders of competence, conscience, and compassion. We want our graduates to excel and to bring to their lives an ethical perspective and a commitment to help build a more just and humane world.

The familiar Jesuit expression of “educating the whole person” has recently taken on an expanded meaning. Several years ago at a talk celebrating Santa Clara University’s sesquicentennial year, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Father Peter Hans Kolvenbach, set forth a new standard for Jesuit higher education. He said,

> We must therefore raise our Jesuit educational standard to “educate the whole person of solidarity for the real world.” Solidarity is learned through “contact” rather than through “concepts” … Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged. (Kolvenbach)

In my opinion, this can be said another way: “Education has a moral purpose.”

It can be argued that Father Kolvenbach has moved the discussion in Jesuit education from “education of the whole person” to “education of the whole person in solidarity with those in need.” Moving this tenet of liberal arts education into a broader and less solipsistic context is one of the great, but not entirely unique, contributions of Jesuit education today.
Like many of our institutions, Santa Clara has embraced educating for a global world in many ways. A few years ago, we conducted a yearlong Institute on Globalization that featured many inside speakers and outside speakers such as Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times* columnist. Many faculty used this globalization theme to network among themselves to link course topics. Another initiative going on now is the Future Directions project in which campus-wide discussions are taking place about what a Santa Clara education should look like in the year 2010 and the years out. The present Undergraduate Core Curriculum has a World Cultures requirement. Santa Clara’s three Centers of Distinction—the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics; the Center for Science, Technology, and Society; and the Ignatian Center for Community Learning and Jesuit Education—all have taken a strong global focus over the past several years.

And now to the Residential Learning Communities (RLCs). About 10 years old, the Residential Learning Communities are one way that Santa Clara aims for integrated education. All first-year students join one of the nine Residential Learning Communities, and in fact at the time of summer orientation they are organized into these groups. Students take courses that are “linked,” meaning that two courses will enroll about 15 of the same students in that Residential Learning Community. Thus, I could be taking the same English and history classes with my cohort group. This allows for me to have people to study and interact with outside of the classroom setting. Each Residential Learning Community is led by a faculty director and has several faculty associates. Some faculty live in the residence halls of the Residential Learning Communities.

In alphabetical order, the nine Residential Learning Communities are ALPHA, Communitas, Cypress, da Vinci, Delphi, Loyola, Modern Perspectives, Unity, and Xavier.
ALPHA is Santa Clara University’s longest-running Residential Learning Community and was the first RLC to bring students in a single residence together with some of the University’s finest professors in interconnected Core Curriculum courses. ALPHA is about the humanities. Over the years ALPHA students have debated morality and ethics, engaged in lively political debate, and served beyond campus as tutors for marginalized communities with underfunded educational resources.

Communitas students explore themes of individualism, community, and citizenship.

The Cypress Residential Learning Community offers students opportunities to experience the outdoors and to enhance their awareness of local and global environmental issues while pursuing their studies at SCU. It offers a classic residence hall culture, but one that encourages lifestyles that are socially just and environmentally sustainable. This community takes its name from California’s rare native Monterey Cypress, which is a metaphor for the beauty and fragility of our natural world.

As its name implies, the da Vinci Residential Learning Community reflects the broad interests of the famous Leonardo in everything from art to engineering. da Vinci students are connected by a common thread of interest in the natural world.

Delphi is a Residential Learning Community for students who share interests in arts, communication, and other fields. It has a twofold mission: to offer opportunities for students to integrate their interests with the broader education at Santa Clara, and to discover a vision of using arts and communication for a better world.
Loyola is home to a diverse group of students who share an active interest in exploring issues of faith and justice. Do you wonder where your best gifts meet the world’s greatest needs? Are you curious about the place of faith and spirituality in modern life?

The *Modern Perspectives* Residential Learning Community engages a range of economic, political, and social issues central to understanding our world at the start of the 21st century.

*Unity* is a four-year Residential Learning Community open to all undergraduates who seek a deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity as a catalyst for social and civic engagement. The theme of Unity is grounded in one of the University’s fundamental values:

We cherish our diverse community and the roots that must sustain it: shared values amidst diversity, close personal relationships, effective communication, respect for others, and an engaged concern for the common good of the campus, the local community, and the global society. (Santa Clara University, Strategic Plan 2001)

*Xavier* Residential Learning Community is about global solidarity and how one might contribute to making a more just world. One way that Xavier does this is through sponsoring immersion programs for the Residential Learning Communities to Mexico and El Salvador. Students from all the various Residential Learning Communities mentioned above are invited to participate in these programs.

Here’s how it works.

Trips to Mexico are twice a year: in November and in December at the time of Thanksgiving and December holiday breaks. Each Mexico immersion trip covers five days. The November trips
typically draw more than 50 students, and the December trips have about 35 students and are joined by a handful of faculty and staff. The immersion groups drive from Santa Clara in vans to the Tijuana border area on the first day, spend the next three days building houses, meeting people, reflecting on their impressions and experiences, and then drive back to Santa Clara on day five. The groups camp out in tents and cook their own meals.

The construction of the small homes is coordinated by Amor Ministries, a non-denominational Christian service organization in the San Diego–Tijuana area whose motto is “Come and Build Hope.” Amor Ministries supplies the materials, architectural plans, equipment, and a supervisor to build these houses. Amor Ministries has been doing this for the past 25 years. To finance the trips, each student pays about $250, and Xavier does the rest with fundraising efforts.

It is important to emphasize that these are not merely student service trips to Mexico. Before leaving Santa Clara, students spend four to five days in preparation meetings. The purposes of the meetings include planning and education to raise consciousness of what experiences are anticipated. The central activity of each trip is the daily meeting after dinner around the campfire to reflect on the day’s activities, impressions, and experiences. Students share their thoughts and what they have learned freely. Upon return to Santa Clara, there are one or two follow up meetings in the next academic term for the group to debrief and further reflect.

The whole point of the immersion trip is more global consciousness for the student. On crossing the border into Mexico, it is said that they are going from the First World to the Two-Thirds World because two thirds of world humanity lives in the conditions that they see on the trip. For example, they see people live in homes made of garage doors literally just gathered together to form a shelter. These people have come to the border area to escape the poverty of their
communities to look for economic opportunity. The initial reaction of students is shock and great anger: How can these good people be allowed to live in such poverty? However, through the reflection meetings and through building the homes and further engaging local people on the trip, the students begin to understand that they can make a difference, that they can really change the situation in other people’s lives. For example, a family that acquires the new home usually takes one whole generation of hard work to earn enough money for building this house. The immersion trip project advances this particular family one generation. By building these homes and interacting with the family, the students learn in a concrete way that they can make a difference.

What are typical student outcomes? In addition to bonding with other students and making friends through this shared experience, all students return from the immersion trip feeling a deep appreciation for literally everything that they have. Another outcome is an appreciation for manual labor. For example, many of these students have never used a hammer before. At a reflection meeting in Xavier that I attended in December for the group that went to Mexico a few weeks earlier in November of 2005, one student told of her going home not far from the campus shortly after the trip to clean out her closet of clothes she no longer used. She took them to a family shelter. That’s not a surprise. The surprise, to her, is that she stayed to engage people at the shelter and to regard them as people that she wanted to interact with. The immersion experience gave her the courage and expanded her skill set to do this.

Another outcome typically seen is that students will change their academic major, or declare their major, as a result of the immersion experience. Another outcome of the Mexico trips is that students say “I really want to learn Spanish!” or “I took four years of Spanish and didn’t really
learn it—now I’m sorry!” Other students say that they really want to go back to Mexico, or go to other countries to experience their people, their culture, their history, and their struggles. The trip raises their global consciousness.

The immersion trips to El Salvador are two-week trips that occur every other year after the school year ends around mid-June, and typically they have 12 to 15 people. It is a smaller group, a longer immersion experience, and it costs more money. Students pay about $500 to $700 each and again Xavier does fundraising. It costs about $1,000 for each person, so Xavier heavily subsidizes the trip. Yes, there are scholarships for both the Mexico and El Salvador immersion trips. Before this trip begins, students take a one-unit course during the term in the College of Arts and Sciences called “Issues in Global Solidarity.” They learn about the history, culture, and religion of El Salvador—it is a microcosm of the Two-Thirds World. (I should mention here that the Jesuit community at Santa Clara University has strong ties to the Jesuit community in El Salvador, especially since the massacre of six Jesuits and two women workers at the University of Central America in San Salvador by members of the Salvadoran military in November of 1989.)

Again, the focus is on solidarity. The first week of the trip is spent touring the country and listening to people tell their stories. Students meet people in various circumstances and visit sites like sweatshops that make apparel for American consumers. The second week is dedicated to a collaborative service project. One year the immersion group went to the island of Zacatillo and worked with the residents to build a water system. In other years, the immersion groups helped to rebuild a school and to renovate a community center. As in the Mexico immersion trips, the El
Salvador trips have daily/nightly reflection meetings, and there are reflection and debriefing meetings upon return to the United States.

In addition to immersion trips, Xavier Residential Learning Community practices globalizing the liberal arts in many other ways, such as sponsoring faculty speakers who talk about their global or international interests.

The success of Xavier and its immersion programs is due to the hard work of its faculty director, Father Jim Reites, S.J., known to students as “Father J.” Like all of the faculty directors in the Residential Learning Communities, Jim is very entrepreneurial and very passionate about his work.

I will conclude with a story.

Last year while on my research sabbatical in the Chemistry Department at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, there was a two- or three-day symposium titled “Liberal Education: Dead or Alive?” sponsored by the Leslie Center for the Humanities. In one of the early panel discussions, Nicholas Negroponte of MIT, who heads the Media Center there, meaning to be intentionally provocative, turned to the dean of arts and sciences of Harvard sitting near him on the panel and said, “Liberal arts is dead.” Negroponte went on to say that liberal arts education in order to reinvent itself must emulate the sciences—it must be “hands on.” He asserted that educational experiences in the humanities and other areas of the liberal arts must be relevant and concrete to students. In this context, the Xavier Residential Learning Community immersion programs at Santa Clara are a way of doing “hands on” globalization in the liberal arts.

To see pictures and read some of the students’ written reflections on the web, go to
www.scu.edu/rlc/xavier/immersion/.

Thank you for your attention.

Works Cited


Santa Clara University, Strategic Plan 2001.