

HEARTLAND DELTA VII: Balancing our Economic Realities with Our Call to the Margins
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Welcome by Rev. Michael J. Sheeran, S.J.

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For almost forty years, I was at Regis University in Denver.

I often asked myself, “Why do so many people stay at Regis over the years?” So, I asked a few of them. They said that they “find something meaningful there” or that “it’s more than just a job.” Some kidded that they’re “lifers.” That, I wager, goes for a good number of you.

Two years ago, Rev. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, addressed the board chairs and presidents of the twenty-eight U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities, as well as the Jesuit Provincials. He observed that the institutions think they compete with each other, and urged them to change their thinking because they all share the same Jesuit mission in education.

At all of our schools, he argued, we teach different specialties, but have one mission with two dimensions:

- Academic excellence
- Learning to find meaning in life by serving others

Different “tag lines” or slogans are often used:

- Rev. Pedro Arrupe, S.J.: “Men and women for others.”
- Fr. Nicolás: “Conversion to humanity” – Not converting Buddhists or Methodists to Catholicism, but converting Buddhists and Methodists and Catholics to serve Christ in need in their neighbor.
 - Many of our schools call this “transformational education.”

It is common to hear at our twenty-eight institutions, “We can’t just inform with theory in the classroom; we have to bring ourselves and our students to the margins of society where they can meet Christ in need and decide to find meaning in serving Him.” Sometimes, those on “the margins” include the ostracized kid in a dorm or the poor who are so easy not to notice at the bus stop when we drive to work.

One challenge of today’s conference is to help our schools when they are squeezed financially by rising costs that can’t be met with tuition increases. Having a virtual meeting like this is an experiment in cutting those costs. But the need to cut costs can also become an excuse for being satisfied to supply only information when our students still need the formation of encounter with the neighbor, ranging from that kid who is lonely in the residence hall to the ex-con gang member in LA to his cousin, the victim of gang warfare in El Salvador.

Let me raise something a bit controversial: One way that our schools can better achieve their common mission is by sharing resources. We’re finding that we don’t all need to offer a Master’s degree in everything. It may be that we can do a better and cheaper job of offering an online Master’s program in education or nursing if six schools share the cost of building a single set of courses and the faculty of each school teaches the set using assignments reflecting their school’s emphases.

And maybe we can piggy-back on other schools' immersion programs and create richer experiences for our students. Maybe groups of four or five schools can use consistent business office practices and share a single software license.

Right now, all of these suggestions and similar possibilities are under exploration by the presidents, CAOs and CFOs in hopes of cutting costs while enhancing mission effectiveness. It's a tall order.

Many of the folks in today's audience would consider themselves "lifers" – people who stay inside this Jesuit network because they find their work here especially meaningful. Listen today to the presenters. Think about how your school might both economize and better teach students how to be men and women for others.

But don't lose sight of something related. What makes you a "lifer" is that your department, your shop, your cluster of co-workers is where you have learned to find meaning in serving your neighbor. And that experience, in so many different locations, is the core, the guarantee, that yours is a Jesuit school.

Thank you for being here today. Thanks for considering how your Jesuit institution might be even more effective a place for turning out "men and women for others." And, above all, thanks for modeling – wherever you work – a life that finds meaning in serving your peers and your students.

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