

Management Education at a Catholic University: An Essay

by Douglas K. Menikheim

It has taken me a long time to get around to writing this essay. I knew almost immediately what I had to say; I was reluctant to say it so I waited until the last minute in the hope a more conventional thought would make itself known. It has not.

My reaction was that little was accomplished by the Seminar except to provide a forum whereby victims were given an opportunity to further wallow in their pools of self-pity. The issue ostensibly was Management Education at a Catholic University. Apparently, in some way, there has developed a myth that liberal arts and management education are mutually exclusive. That is one of the silliest notions I've ever heard, yet we belabored it for one week.

I am not a scholar nor an academic. I am a retired naval officer, turned teacher. I enjoy influencing people (why I also loved the Navy) and St. Thomas provides a platform from which I can do that. Although trained as an engineer, my skills and what I have practiced and taught (leadership, organizational theory, intercultural communication and values orientation) focus on the "soft" side of management. This soft side is anchored in the liberal arts; philosophy, psychology, language, theology, history, ethics, spirituality - the soul of human kind. Yet here we were, acting as if a schism exists between liberal arts and management education. Perhaps it does and I'm too dense to see it. On the other hand, maybe it is only a convenient perception which allows people to stay in their comfort zones rather than venturing where they've never been. More correctly stated then, the schism, if one exists, is between faculty members and their inability/unwillingness to change/collaborate.

Why would that be? Because it is human nature to resist change. And, like every other institution, academia must change if it is going to survive which means individuals are going to have to get outside their scholarly expertise to improve ways of delivering knowledge. Faculties can no longer think of disciplines as being inferior or superior but rather find ways to collaborate. Cooperation must become the norm rather than the tendency toward elitism and isolationism. Old paradigms must give way to the new if universities - Catholic or otherwise - are going to survive. There is already a move afoot whereby the business community is having to provide remedial primary education for its entry-level employees. The same will happen to secondary education if we don't start doing more than talking about the viability of liberal arts and management education. Isn't it about time some action takes place?

Is the issue really the tension between liberal arts and management education or rather the fear of integrating the two, i.e., going beyond one's area of expertise? This thought came

from a private conversation I had with one of the full time faculty (a scholar) and his response to my question as to why members of the two communities just wouldn't/couldn't work together. His response, paraphrased, had to do with how difficult it was for scholars to go outside their area of expertise. I thought it was the most profound thing I heard during the week.

There is a point worth making here. In the general scheme of things, there's not much to distinguish the actions of a "Catholic university" from other moral institutions. The Catholic faith is not the only guardian of integrity, honesty and morality. There are other religions and professions which ground their beliefs in honesty (i.e., medicine, law, the military, to mention a few). So why is there so much effort to validate the Catholic way? Is there some doubt? Are people losing confidence in their faith? Is this concern just a symptom of a greater problem?

I ask these questions because I'm not of the Catholic faith. Having taught here for over ten years, I've always wondered what the term "Catholic university" meant? The term was used often, but no one I asked could give a satisfactory answer. Most seemed embarrassed to be queried. Were they embarrassed for themselves or me? So, I spent a week discussing this at the seminar and came away with an understanding, finally, that I'm not alone in trying to comprehend this vague concept of what it is to be a faculty member at a Catholic university.

I also wondered about a "Catholic university" because even though I'm not a Catholic, I'm very comfortable with the values of this university. I fit here; I belong. I have no trouble espousing the high ground in business classes - the right way is the moral way; tell the truth; values are what make organizations great - because that's how I was trained in my previous profession, the United States Navy. Even though our purpose was to defend the nation, meaning we might have to destroy others doing so, we were taught, with passion, that truth, honor and integrity were the only acceptable way. Of course, there are many well documented instances where this code has been breached in the military; so too in Catholicism, but then every institution suffers from the frailty of humankind.

So why this apparent defensiveness when trying to explain a Catholic university? Maybe it is because we don't spend enough time acknowledging that there are other ways to a moral life beside that outlined in Catholic dogma. In some way, we seem to be segregating ourselves in the belief that the Catholic way is the only way. Perhaps that is what we are so defensive about; excluding all the other possible ways to a moral life. We spend so much time talking about diversity and then don't practice it ourselves (witness how founding principles and legacies collapse in favor of economic practicalities, characterized by enrollment of the privileged). Yes, we are a Catholic university and proud of what that means, but we don't have all the answers. Maybe if we recognize the Catholic way as being one of many and then seeking ways of incorporating the best from others, might we be less defensive?

Regardless of the defensiveness, whatever its cause, the issue then is not so much management education vs. the liberal arts but rather how the two can be integrated to enhance the knowledge we deliver to our students. To do this - and I'm not forgetting there are other disciplines as well- there has to be a shared vision toward which people could move. This vision would recognize that individuals would need to move out of their areas of expertise and reward those who did. Ideally, a leader would be present to foster and support this paradigm shift. Whether that leader exists at St. Thomas is beyond the scope of this essay. If he doesn't (a gender-correct phrase for a Catholic university; what about diversity?), the responsibility for such a paradigm shift rests with the faculty. Perhaps a faculty seminar on Management Education at a Catholic University is a start, but only if something results beyond a bound book of essays, which I doubt few read.

I fear that may not happen because of the high level of defensiveness (maybe inferiority and envy, too?) I detected in the seminar room as well as in the book of readings. Participants and authors seemed focused on protecting their turf rather than finding ways of moving onward. If the status quo is inappropriate during these times of institutional change, doesn't the same apply in academia? If so, what can be done at St. Thomas to reduce the distance, perceived or otherwise, between management and liberal art educators?

First, an open mind is necessary. My way, nor yours, is the best. If we found ways of integrating our disciplines, might not the whole be greater than the sum of the parts? Second, scholars must become more willing to go beyond their areas of comfort (expertise). Elsewhere, risk and courage are required to bring about meaningful change. How willing are you to risk? What is the depth of your courage? Finally, absent a call from leadership to maximize the potential synergy which exists between liberal arts and management, it rests upon individuals to make the difference. A bottom up, one success at a time effort is required so we can avoid another well-meaning attempt of a seminar at which we only continue to beat a horse long-dead.

Although I'm as much of an outsider as one can be - non-Catholic, non-academic, ex-military, adjunct - and thus with little formal influence, I'm doing what I can, to "walk my talk," by making it a point to invite instructors from the liberal arts into my classes. There is no doubt they will enhance what I am trying to teach. Our disciplines are inseparable. I would welcome the opportunity to reciprocate the favor.

If more of this were to happen, perhaps a future faculty seminar could focus on "Developing and Broadening the Integration of Liberal Arts and Management"...?