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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

## A Response to Fr. Arthur Madigan’s “On the Roots of Boston College and Similar Institutions”

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[Editorial Note: This essay is a response to Arthur R. Madigan, S.J., “On the Roots of Boston College and Similar Institutions,” *Jesuit Educational Quarterly*, 2nd ser., 1, no. 3 (2025): 525–25, <https://doi.org/10.51238/gyFLZum>.]

Fr. Arthur Madigan’s 2009 essay on the roots of Boston College clarifies the multiple inheritances at work there and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> He says that the larger American undergraduate system is one that has “no one dominant end or purpose,” being heir to “the original English college, the classical American college, and the contemporary American college” (which has also absorbed German research ideals). The Jesuit inheritance (in conjunction with the Christian tradition that gave it birth) adds yet another level. “The Renaissance Jesuit collegium was focused on the formation of persons. The research university focuses on the development of knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Signals can therefore be mixed—those ones sent to faculty, students, and administrators (and one might add, to parents, benefactors, and the public). Different people with different conceptions get and often *want* to get different things from their college experiences for different purposes. Compatibility between parts is a challenge.

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1 Arthur R. Madigan, S.J., “On the Roots of Boston College and Similar Institutions,” *Jesuit Educational Quarterly*, 2nd ser., 1, no. 3 (2025): 521–25, <https://doi.org/10.51238/gyFLZum>.

2 Madigan, “On the Roots,” 524.

What is the next thing to be said, then, after Fr. Madigan has shown us so clearly this framework? Is the “purpose-diverse” institution, the one that abandons general coherence and vision and common articulable rationale (except at the highest abstract level of the search for “Truth”) what we must simply accept and use for our own various purposes? Is higher education’s multi-functionality by nature valuable precisely because it is a very complex system flexibly evolving for a wide variety of purposes in an increasingly complex, diverse, even volatile society?

My instinctive answer is “No, no, a *thousand* times no!” This situation as a whole is *not* acceptable, though parts of the system may be quite healthy according to the most proximate norms for particular purposes. Such a reaction finds ample support in recent torrents of criticism which indicate that something is seriously wrong. Here is a small sample of relatively recent works written by experienced educators:

- *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*
- *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* [The original subtitle, referring to Harvard, was: *How a Great University Forgot About Education*]
- *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*
- *The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage It Does, and What Can Be Done*
- *Don't Go to College: A Case for Revolution*<sup>3</sup>

Such books have in their genealogy Allan Bloom's 1987 *Closing of the American Mind*, which carries a most arresting subtitle: *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*.<sup>4</sup> (Impoverished souls? We might immediately suspect that perhaps Jesuit education can be expected to speak directly to that issue.) These titles tell us that there is indeed a crisis and it needs to be addressed, sooner

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3 Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Yale University Press, 2007); Harry Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* (PublicAffairs, 2007); Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); John M. Ellis, *The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage It Does, and What Can Be Done* (Encounter Books, 2021); and Timothy Gordon and Michael Robillard, *Don't Go to College: A Case for Revolution* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2022).

4 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (Simon & Schuster, 2012 [1987]).

rather than later. That perception is bolstered by large studies, such as *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*,<sup>5</sup> and many shorter essays and reflections that are no less disturbing, the sharpest and most devastating *cri de cœur* being “Higher Education Is Drowning in BS: And It’s Mortally Corrosive to Society,” which appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on January 9, 2018 (where it may once have read “Morally Corrosive,” as many references still cite it with that word).<sup>6</sup> The late Charlie Kirk, a popular YouTube personality, can still be seen online debating collegians and others in support of the thesis that “college is a scam.” In 2013, *Gallup* reported “Americans’ Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply.”<sup>7</sup> I have gone on at length here first because we tend to shield ourselves from bad news about ourselves, a positive confidence being necessary for survival; secondly, because the sheer quantity of these regularly appearing critiques has possibly numbed us and made it harder for us to examine the whole situation. It serves us to step back and look at the accumulated mass of material and realize that it is not just a small cranky set of ideologues expressing discontent.

At least we can say this: to Fr. Madigan’s description, which rightly helps us to face the truth about what we actually find in American higher education, we have good grounds to add some informed sense of the crisis and its urgency. How might we begin? We need to consider the dynamics of culture: “[Education] is the concentrated epitome of a culture.”<sup>8</sup> Reciprocally, we might add, education significantly shapes and reshapes the culture of which it is an epitome. Thus to reshape education can be to impact the larger culture and society for good or for ill. It is a serious task calling for constant attention.

In order to survive as what they essentially are, cultures have to pass on (often primarily through educational institutions) certain important goods, a range of spiritual and intellectual achievements as well as the prosaic ones of everyday culture (standard hygiene practices, machine maintenance, holiday celebrations, sports, etc.). In this way they can foster a healthy

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5 United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

6 Christian Smith, “Higher Education is Drowning in BS: And It’s Mortally Corrosive to Society,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/higher-education-is-drowning-in-bs/>.

7 Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply,” *Gallup*, July 11, 2023, accessed June 5, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>.

8 Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), xviii.

societal integration, and ground the base from which improvements can become possible, as the society tweaks its defenses against the dynamics of decline. Without the spiritual-cultural infrastructure, even a core religious foundation, a society loses that unifying coherence, that chain of wisdom and sensibility and meaning that is necessary to oppose the steady threat of the tendency to slide into barbarism.<sup>9</sup> A movement towards fragmentation and dissolution not only prevents progress to a higher level but it actually furthers a decline into more primitive, degraded, ultimately unjust and violent behaviors and states of being.

This infrastructural issue involves more than just “passing something on.” It is a matter of a deep and personal *assimilation* of our cultural-spiritual goods. It involves learning from others’ experiences and treasuring the best available insights (or path thereunto) into what makes a fulfilled or “blessed” human life (individually, socially, politically, economically, physically, and materially). Here is where the Jesuit educational tradition with its solid religious foundation at its best can carry something essential “for the life of the world.”

The particular question for the inheritors of the Jesuit tradition in education is now: How do we maintain our particular role and “voice” in the complex contemporary university, in its largely secularizing, professionalizing, research-oriented climate, with its post-Enlightenment individualistic and rationalistic disregard for the age-old moral and religious formational concerns of Jesuit education properly conceived? There is another wrinkle in the complexion of the Society of Jesus’s thinking today: there is a rift between a heavy emphasis on “social justice concerns” (which takes its cues especially from secular society) and what I would call a balanced approach to “educational justice concerns” (which strives for the full and proper formation of individuals in light of larger responsibilities, a rich cultural heritage, and a higher calling).<sup>10</sup>

I would contend that the Society of Jesus is almost natively designed precisely to be able to make a great contribution to the needs of this historical moment as described above. I have argued elsewhere at length that the Jesuit order from its very start has been deeply invested in, even partly constituted by, a dynamic of apostolic learning and teaching.<sup>11</sup> Its essential

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9 The famous historian Christopher Dawson is noted for his promotion of this understanding of societies.

10 Martin Tripole, S.J., has thoroughly explicated the history behind this tension in his *Faith Beyond Justice: Widening the Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> expanded and revised edition (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2024).

11 Claude Pavur, S.J., *In the School of Ignatius: Studious Zeal and Devoted Learning* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2019). See especially chapter 5 and the Afterword.

formula has us “defending and propagating the faith” and caring for “the progress of souls in Christian life and learning.”<sup>12</sup> Neither of these can be accomplished without a special, dedicated kind of learning and teaching.

So the question is not just accepting the multiple inheritances, but acting on Father Madigan’s final line: “it will be good for us to face up to the challenge of our diverse inheritance.”<sup>13</sup> Facing up to the challenge adequately, seems to me to call for a grand “*agere contra*” (action against) the solvent and fragmentational properties of the chemistry of the contemporary university, an action made for the sake of the Society’s core mission. I propose the following:

1. Adequately and consistently distinguish research (graduate) dynamics from personal formation (college) ones.
2. Renegotiate what should be involved in the major Jesuit role on Jesuit campuses.
3. Create a two-year Jesuit-run formationally-oriented college program within the university for all undergraduates, one that focuses on a new synthesis and expansion of the traditional Jesuit educational categories of Letters, Philosophy, and Theology. There would be a strong emphasis on a spiritually-attuned reading of Gospels and relevant Scripture, and also a new configuration of content that includes competent overviews of other areas of essential knowledge (e.g., economics, political theories, social dynamics). The program would be planned as a whole, without electives. It would be a coherent faith-based, reason-based, and culture-based type of education oriented to providing support for the essential conversions of the students (intellectual, moral, cultural, and religious).
4. Train Jesuits during their own standard years of formation for the expertise in and leadership of this program. They would all pass through a very similar course of studies and learn it so well that they would be able to administer such a program for others, maintain it well, and improve upon it over time.

Such a program would anchor a Jesuit *collegium*; institutionally assure its continued existence; give it a defining role that distinguishes the Jesuit university from others; make good on the investment of the Catholic founders and supporters of the enterprise who look for something substantial along

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12 See the *Formula of the Institute* in its 1550 version: [https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1550\\_formula/](https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1550_formula/).

13 Madigan, “On the Roots,” 525.

these lines; allow the Society to fulfill a major dimension of its true calling and its inherited responsibilities to the Church; provide an example of educational innovation that others might imitate; and, most importantly, enable it to influence all the students precisely in the ways that one should expect of a Jesuit school, particularly by promoting the students' mature encounter with the Christ of the Gospels in the service of the Church. At the same time, it would be contributing significantly to the much-desired redemption of American higher education and all individuals affected by that vast and complex enterprise. Let's do it.

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