Beyond the Thin Black Line

J. A. Appleyard, S.J.,
Boston College

How do we picture Jesuit and Catholic identity in the colleges and universities where we work? I shall suggest five models. The first three sum up Jesuit work in higher education since the end of World War II, and most of our institutions have gone through all of them in succession. The fourth and fifth models, just visible here and there, may be new ways of organizing our presence.

Three Older Models

Thirty or forty years ago Jesuit presence followed what we might call the **Family Business Model**. After the end of World War II most Jesuit institutions expanded rapidly. Many built dormitories for the first time and began to attract national student bodies. The 30's had been rich in vocations, and reasonably adequate numbers of Jesuits were available for this expansion, and they succeeded in maintaining something like a continuity with the pre-war identity of these institutions.

They were still visibly "Jesuit": the undergraduate curriculum centered on a structured sequence of philosophy and theology courses; campus life was marked by the outward signs of religion; all the key administrative jobs were in Jesuit hands, and authority flowed downward from the paternal rector-president. Large numbers of lay people filled out the roster of instructors and staff, but upward mobility in administrative jobs was reserved for the younger sons of the owners' family.

This model was severely strained by the pressures of the 60's. The old integrated curriculum was largely abandoned and student discipline was steadily liberalized. Numbers of Jesuits left the campus, even the order and the priesthood; few were available to take their places. Most institutions set out to upgrade the quality of their programs and students and faculty. As the mainstream criteria for hiring and promotion were increasingly accepted, new faculty members often did not appear to have any experience of or interest in the religious dimensions of education. (Today even many Jesuits have no experience of Jesuit education before they enter the Society.)

Then in the late 60's and early 70's Jesuit communities separated themselves from the civil corporations which governed the institutionsÑlegally and financially in most cases, sometimes even physically, and certainly symbolically. Jesuits seemed to be looking for a new role in the institutions we once thought of as "ours." We were urged by the national Jesuit Conference to develop rationales for our work; local communities put out pamphlets and statements of purpose.

The model no longer seemed to be the Family Business. Instead we had become what someone called **The Oldest Family in Town**. We lived in the big house on the hill; many of the streets and parks in the town were named after our relatives; we weren't anywhere near as wealthy or as influential as many of the newcomers to town, but our opinions were still respected and we were thought of as an ornament to the town's reputation.

This model might have worked if our resources and our numbers had not dwindled fast. In 1988 Regis College in Denver had four full-time Jesuits on its faculty and three in its administration. Even at the institutions with relatively large numbers of Jesuits, the case is not fundamentally different: at Boston College, for example, Jesuits make up about 6% of the full-time faculty. In many schools Jesuits are considered minorities in need of affirmative-action support. Typically the few Jesuits who are full-time teachers are scattered throughout the departments, a few bunched in theology and philosophy perhaps, but very thin on the ground elsewhere. In some institutions the only major Jesuit administrator is the president.

A friend of mine calls this situation the **Thin Black Line Model**. It is our variation of the thin line of red-jacketed officers which kept the British Empire together in its final days. A picture comes to mind from an old movie, Beau Geste perhaps. The last few survivors are trying to keep the besieged fort from falling to the enemy. They prop the dead soldiers up on the battlements to make it seem as though the fort is heavily defended. They run from one part of the walls to another firing their guns, hoping for a last-minute rescue or willing to die in defense of their commitment.

Shifting Jesuit Roles in These Three Models

To me the most interesting part of these models is the different roles played by the Jesuit participants in each of them. The most striking aspect of the Family Business Model of the 40's and 50's was the power of the provincial superior. He assigned Jesuits to institutions and moved them frequently, appointed deans and chairmen, and even reviewed textbook changes in some departments. His representative visited classes on campus every year to check instructors (lay as well as Jesuit) for competence and orthodoxy. Rome too was influential, since the rector- president was appointed by the general superior there, and academic programs and even building plans had to be approved in the Jesuit headquarters. The concrete local embodiments of Jesuit presence in offices and classrooms were, of course, individual Jesuit teachers and administrators, but they were curiously interchangeable. A man might teach philosophy one year, be a dean of students subsequently, then go off to give retreats, and return as director of athletics. It almost seemed that their special qualifications mattered less than the fact that they were Jesuits. If they flourished in their jobs, their success was the Society's success, just as the success of the institution as a whole meant that the Society's apostolic intentions were being achieved. The institution and the Society were, for all practical purposes, identical.

In the Oldest Family in Town Model, after the legal and financial separation of most Jesuit communities from the colleges and universities in the early 70's, these roles shifted significantly, especially the rector's. As president he had been the visible embodiment of the nearly total identity of the religious community and the institution; after separate incorporation he became the most visible symbol of the split between these two entities. His focus was now internal Jesuit community matters and whatever concerned the lives of individual Jesuits other than their work. But this was a strange distinction for most Jesuits, and they often perceived the rector's concerns as peripheral, indeed irrelevant, to what mattered in their lives. The provincial superior all but disappeared from the scene, exercising his influence only indirectly through local Jesuits. The Jesuit administrators, and especially the president, now represented the Jesuit purpose in the institution and they formulated the Jesuit vision. The Jesuit community, which had no role as such in the earlier model, experienced the first stirrings of discussion about planning and renewal, but the burden of figuring out what was going on fell largely on the individual Jesuit, no longer so interchangeable now but evaluated for his professional qualifications and his personal influence. He found himself in endless talk with fellow Jesuits, often in small communities, about work and vocation. The academic institution and the Society were clearly no longer identical, but no one quite knew what to make of the distinction.

In the third model, the Thin Black Line of the 80's, these roles shifted again. The provincial superior re-entered the scene. Representing the newly articulate voice of Jesuit General Congregations and the wider Church, he typically found himself prodding the local community to move beyond a narrow vision of its work. He was also now a key factor in recruiting scarce Jesuits for jobs in the institutions. The rector and the local Jesuit community increased in importance, at least they did if they became involved in serious discussion about the Jesuit role in the institution. The individual JesuitÑscarce, wooed, highly visibleÑnow felt most acutely the pressure to be a SuperJesuit: ground-breaking researcher, skilled teacher, residence- hall advisor, pastoral counselor, social activist. The most significant fact about this model, however, may be the tension which came to light between the roles of rector and president. As the crisis of numbers escalated and the need for a vision increased, who was responsible for the Jesuit enterprise? Individual rectors and presidents may have found ways of accommodating their roles, but it is safe to say that this question has found no satisfactory structural answer yet.

A Transitional Model

What of the future? I would like to suggest two more models for examination. One is a transitional model, I think, which appeals to those who want to see something done. It starts from the assumption that, even as things stand at present, there are concrete steps which could protect the presence of Jesuits and insure the Jesuit identity of these institutions for some time to come. We might call this the **Realpolitik Model**. It acknowledges that the reasonable way to insure influence is to devise legal structures which protect that influence. One example would be the kind of "sustaining agreement" which some institutions (Xavier University in Cincinnati, for example) have worked out among the province, the Jesuit community, and the college and university administration.

Some institutions have statutes which state explicitly that the board of trustees bears the responsibility for maintaining the Jesuit and Catholic character of the institution, and some boards of trustees have standing committees to deal with issues that fall into this area. The rector of the community or the provincial superior is frequently a board member, and in some places the rector gives an annual report to the board about the Jesuit community and its work. In several institutions Jesuits are explicitly mentioned among groups who should benefit from affirmative-action policies.

The most dramatic suggestion of this sort I have heard is that Jesuit colleges and universities should be regularly "accredited" as to their Jesuitness. Accreditation, of course, is a routine experience of academic institutions, but it has far from routine effects. The institution prepares for it by careful review of programs and resources; the visits of the accrediting team allow widespread discussion of fundamental issues; in the aftermath their recommendations often provide leverage for important changes. Who would accredit Jesuit institutions? Perhaps a team made up of administrators and faculty members from comparable Jesuit institutions, along with an "outside" provincial and rector?

The main virtue of this Realpolitik Model is that, aside perhaps from the accreditation proposal, all these structural strategies are things which could be implemented now. Indeed they are being done in one or another of our institutions. At very least they buy time, so we can figure out a sounder plan. There are four weaknesses of this model in the long run, however. One is that it doesn't address the problem of diminishing numbers of Jesuits. Cleverly designed structures won't insure the Jesuit identity of our institutions if there are no Jesuits to benefit from them. A second weakness is that it relies primarily on change from the top down, at the level of trustee boards and rectors and administrators. It doesn't have much to say about what the rest of us are doing. The third is that it relies, fundamentally, on Jesuit control of the institution, not all that different in spirit from the first three models. A fourth weakness is potentially the most serious of all: the model ignores the men and women who aren't Jesuits but who are drawn to work in Jesuit colleges and universities explicitly because of Ignatian spirituality or implicitly because of the view of education they find in these institutions. More on this point shortly.

A New Way of Working as Jesuits in Universities

A more interesting model of Jesuit presence in colleges and universities may be slowly taking shape at the grass roots. I first noticed this model operating when I realized that, at Boston College, when we are writing speeches and putting together bulletins and looking for things we can point to as distinctive of a Catholic and Jesuit institution, we usually tend to mention the same examples: for example, the Pulse Program, a set of courses about social justice which involve academic study and off-campus volunteer experience; the Faith-Peace-Justice Program, an undergraduate minor which combines courses from many departments; the large number of local and international service programs students volunteer for; the Perspectives Program, an interdisciplinary version of the undergraduate

core; the Lonergan Institute and the new Jesuit Institute, both of which are oriented towards research in areas where faith and culture intersect.

As I thought about these programs (and I don't doubt that similar ones exist on other Jesuit campuses) I was intrigued to realize that in spite of some clear differences they tend to share several common features:

- they have all been started by a few individuals, both Jesuits and lay people;
- they began life to some degree outside the ordinary structure of the university;
- they have increased in size and in the scope of their activities, and it has become easy to introduce new people into their structures in order to continue them; in short, they are an efficient use of a small number of committed people;
- more important, they provide places where people who have a distinctive ideology can articulate and apply it in such a way that they feel their views are valued by the university community and influential in the society at large-
- most important, the people involved in these programs tend to overlap and therefore to form a critical mass of opinion and energy within the institution as a whole;
- finally, these groups are beginning to establish contact with like-minded people in other Jesuit and Catholic universities; they learn from one another, and are energized by their common successes.

I wonder whether in these programs we aren't inventing a new way of working as Jesuits in academic institutions. For lack of a better name, I propose we call this the **Tocqueville Model**, after the young Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville who visited the newly independent United States of America at the beginning of the 19th century. Tocqueville thought that one of the distinctive things about Americans was our propensity to create "voluntary associations" alongside official government structures, in order to provide some benefit for ourselves or to bring about some desirable change in the society at large. "As soon as several inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world," he wrote, "they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found one another out, they combine."

Here is a contemporary and relevant example: the Chronicle of Higher Education (18 May 1988, pp. A 4-8) published an article about the enormous proliferation on university campuses of centers, think-tanks and institutes, calling them part of the "hidden university"Ñstructures where academics can talk to each other about matters of common interest, raise the questions they consider important, find support for their research and writing, and devise ways of making their views influential in the larger university.

Why have these structures sprung up? Perhaps because they are an effective way for groups to influence institutions which do not fully share their particular ideologies. Is this

the case in Jesuit colleges and universities? Forty years ago we might plausibly have thought that every Jesuit college and university produced men and women who shared an ethical and religious view of life, and that this view would be continuous with that of the Christian tradition. Nowadays, I suspect, we would say that while this view is available in our institutions, it is by no means obvious that their ordinary operation will produce it in all or even in most of our graduates. These institutions are different places now: more diverse, more in the mainstream of American values, more determined to be judged by prevailing academic standards, some would say more secularized. Paradoxically, though, the programs which follow what I have called the Tocqueville Model, with their distinctive ideologies and relatively high thresholds of commitment, are often flourishing within these institutions, and indeed give them a visible identity the institutions point to with pride.

What would be necessary to turn these tentative steps into an explicit model for Jesuits' future work in universities? First, we would have to find ways of getting all the parties in the Jesuit presence equationÑthe provincial, the rector, the president of the institution, and individual Jesuits working in the institutionÑinto the conversation about our work as Jesuits, and we would have to find ways of making the local Jesuit community the effective setting of this discussion. No small challenge!

The Jesuit community is going to be a problematic factor in this new model, I suspect, as we make more deliberate choices about our living arrangements. Some of the issues are spatial: Will the community building be at the center of the campus or marginal? Will there be one or several communities? Some are psychological: Will the community image be that of a retirement facility, a religious cloister, a private home, a busy center of activities? Other issues are functional: Will the community be, and be perceived as, a lively forum for discussion about the institution's identity and the collective Jesuit work there?

The real challenge for Jesuits in this model is how we understand our relationship to the significant new party in the equation, one which was not much of a factor in the earlier models but is now moving to center stage: men and women who aren't Jesuits but who are drawn to Ignatian spirituality's view of life and who will increasingly take over responsibility for the Catholic and even the Jesuit identity of these colleges and universities. So far this relationship has evolved mainly on the level of hospitality and talk: identifying these people, inviting them into the Jesuit community for dinner and conversation, organizing weekend discussions of what it means to work in a Jesuit college or university, forming bonds of friendship as well as professional commitment. Increasingly, this talk has generated networks of administrators organized from Washington by the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities; ongoing regional meetings of faculty members (in the Western Conversations among the six West Coast Jesuit institutions); and, in one case, regular gatherings of provincials, rectors, administrators, and faculty (the Heartland Conference of midwestern and southern institutions). It has also produced Conversations, a journal edited by Jesuits and lay men and women from Jesuit institutions around the country, which boldly reflects on the key

issues at the intersection of Jesuit, Catholic and contemporary American academic identity.

Colleagueship of this sort pales into insignificance, however, when compared with the bold reconceptualizing of Jesuits' work by the 34th General Congregation of the Society in 1996. The Congregation declares: "We need increasingly to shift the focus of our attention from the exercise of our own direct ministry to the strengthening of laity in their mission" (Decree 13, #19). Four centuries of Jesuit thinking and behaving are, arguably, reversed here. Instead of picturing lay men and women as extensions of Jesuit creativity and leadership, the Congregation says: "We collaborate with the laity" (Decree 13, #11). Jesuits do this by responding to their colleagues "desire for formation so that they are able to minister as fully as possible according to their call and gifts"and by helping them to "recognize and discern the apostolic possibilities of their lives and work" (Decree 13, #8). We have unique resources in our spirituality that we can put at the disposal of our colleagues for this purpose, especially the Spiritual Exercises, spiritual direction, and other kinds of formation in Ignatian values. The Congregation even suggests that these colleagues might include not just those who share explicitly a Catholic or Ignatian understanding of their work, but also those "who think they have gone beyond Christianity or any religious commitment," who "judge that neither Christian faith, nor any religious belief, is good for humanity" (Decree 4, #19). Even with colleagues whose "human spirituality becomes detached from an explicitly religious expression" we need to be able to find ways of communicating about the desires at the core of our human identity (Decree 4, #21). Because "the boundary line between the Gospel and the modern and post-modern culture passes through the heart of each of us," Jesuits too have to grapple with the modern critical questions within which we live if we are to speak meaningfully of our own experience and understanding of God as equal partners in dialogue with our colleagues (Decree 4, #20).

Here is a challenging new role for the think-tanks, centers, institutes, and other structures in which Jesuits and lay colleagues share commitments to the kind of mutual understanding and collaborative action that will influence the universities in which we work and the world we desire to serve. Here is also a challenge for Jesuits specifically, to put our spirituality at the service of our lay colleagues, to invest energy and the financial resources of our communities strategically, according to clear priorities, in structures that serve this purpose in the institutions where we work. There is a strong temptation for Jesuits to want to do this by ourselves, to keep control of the conversation, or if we can't then to stay inside the conversation that we can control and from it challenge the conversations going on around us. The 34th General Congregation says clearly that we can't work this way any longer, that all the men and women who are our colleagues are called to ministry and mission, and that the role of Jesuits is to help them discover and enrich this dimension of their lives.

Looking down the road three or four decades I can envision at least three kinds of colleges and universities that will continue to call themselves "Jesuit." One will be the kind of institution where Jesuits and lay faculty and staff and students are involved in a variety of lively programs that reflect Ignatian spirituality and contemporary Jesuit ideals

and that give a visibly distinctive identity to the whole institution. The second will be the kind of institution where Jesuit presence is protected at the level of the trustees and the statutes, but is embodied in only a handful of Jesuit teachers and administrators, and there is nothing distinctively Jesuit about the public influence of the institution, its curriculum or student life or faculty concerns. The third will be the kind of institution where Jesuit presence lives only in the rhetoric of the catalogue pages and the admissions bulletin. If we let circumstances make our choice for us, the second and third kinds of Jesuit institution will be our future. The first kind will come about only if we have the wit and imagination to make it happen.

Presented at **Assembly '89**, Georgetown University, June, 1989.
Printed in **Presence Magazine** (Loyola College Baltimore), 1990. Revised 1997.