

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

In response to the focus on friendship and contemplation that Marian Díaz and William Mattison offered, Roundtable participants raised several key issues. Most prominent was an appreciation for framing Catholic higher education as an education in these practices, seeing that this focus offered a fruitful way for considering both knowledge generation and student formation. Participants considered the deficient forms of friendship that hinder collegiality, civility, and learning. They then discussed the ways that their colleges were already engaged in the task of fostering friendships, and asked what challenges remained in helping students to overcome the obstacles to authentic friendship.

Participants observed that authentic friendship is often lacking on our campuses, even though many have observed a veneer of generosity. One obstacle, several noted, is competition: students are accustomed to thinking of their educational trajectories as involving not friendship, but rather competition with their peers for such things as grades, internships, spots on an athletic team, and so on. Another obstacle is socioeconomic differences. One participant cited the example of a wealthy student who, after inviting a roommate from a low-income background to join her and some friends shopping, called to ask a parent to transfer hundreds of dollars into a debit card account for that purpose. The low-income-family student immediately perceived a gulf between their respective worlds. A third obstacle has to do with student assumptions about the very nature of relationships, influenced as they often are by online social networking, overscheduling, and alcohol use (including the effect of alcohol on sexual behavior).

Deficiencies in friendship are not limited to students, however. Some noted, for example, that they affect donors' willingness to trust a college to steward their gifts appropriately. Further, they can affect relationships between departments or divisions within an institution, even potentially impacting the emergence of collaborative research and teaching. Where there is mistrust—even if hidden underneath outwardly civil behavior—the learning process suffers.

Several people pointed to various institutional initiatives to foster friendship. One of the members of the Roundtable shared the effort of his institution to develop a program involving classes with a “fourth hour”—that is, an hour above the usual 3-hour requirement, which asked students to bring the insights from their academic work to bear on the way they lived their lives. He shared the difficulty arising from the perception that professors are about academic work alone, and that “student life”

matters are often left to other professionals. He observed, though, that this distinction between the academic and the personal is precisely what we hope to overcome if we are concerned about students as whole persons. Another participant pointed to a program at Saint Edward's University, the College Assistance Migrant Program,¹ which aims to smooth the transition of immigrant students to campus. Also cited were the Montserrat Coalition at Boston College,² which offers students from low-income background mentoring in the various aims of Jesuit education; and Georgetown's Doyle Engaging Difference Program,³ which aims to foster conversations among people of different backgrounds. These and other initiatives hope to encourage practices of civility.

The Catholic university, participants agreed, is called to challenge its members to reflect upon the centrality of relationships as they reflect the larger purpose of the institution to build a world that reflects the kingdom of God. There are thus specific ways that these institutions can manifest such a commitment, by holding up speakers, alumni, and friends of the university that break down barriers among people and live a commitment to friendship. Its curriculum, too, can manifest this faith through its "friendship with the dead"—those whose ideas have shaped our culture and whose writings and discoveries impact intellectual life in our time. The liberal arts can be seen as "transcendent" in this sense, helping us to see the ways old and new ideas accrue to the greater good of the human family. In addition, a sense of active hospitality—the theme of the Spring 2013 Roundtable⁴—can represent one form of such institutional commitment.

A final area of conversation among the Roundtable participants had to do with the burgeoning area of online learning, and the question of whether a commitment to friendship might be lost in the rush to focus too heavily on course content. Participants observed that with the changing technology, it was possible to imagine more sophisticated ways that professors could encourage teamwork and relationship-forming among students, but cautioned that such emphasis was at present not in the forefront of thinking on this new platform for learning.

1 See the description at <http://think.stedwards.edu/camp/>.

2 See <http://www.bc.edu/offices/mission/montserrat.html>.

3 <https://cndls.georgetown.edu/doyle/>.

4 See *Integritas* volume 1 (Spring 2013).