

Agents for Change or More Humane Oppressors?

Goals of Third World Universities

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On November 16, 1989 U.S.-trained Salvadoran soldiers murdered six Jesuit priests and two women who had taken refuge in their house for the night. The real target was the University of Central America (UCA), a thorn in the side of oppressive governments and violators of human rights. Nonetheless, the university celebrated its 30th birthday on September 15, 1995, and with its strengths and limitations attempts to prepare agents of change.

Among the strengths of this university model for social change we find a clear vision, effective teamwork, and community spirit, national reality as the principal object of study, Christian inspiration, academic standards, and effective use of limited resources. Among its problems observers point out a highly centralized governance structure, the devastating effects of over a decade of civil war on personnel stability, resources, and the quality of teaching and research. The UCA moved away from the developmentalist rhetoric of the 1965 inauguration day speeches, and moved toward becoming a creative and critical conscience for the nation and a reservoir of solutions to major social, technical, and ethical problems.

Academic Mission and Social Vision

The UCA attempted to be the voice of the poor until the day they could speak for themselves. It took sides, but in the way that its martyred president, Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. constantly insisted upon—in a university fashion (universitariamente). The UCA approach contrasted with that of the University of El Salvador, which committed itself more fully to political opposition in what Ellacuría considered subordination of scholarship and learning to a particular political solution. However, through public declarations and publications, the UCA did take stands on specific issues. The UCA planned for the future, built a university campus with appropriate facilities, and insisted on academic standards within the constraints of limited resources. The university insisted on preparing students professionally with a social vision, to overcome the oppressive structures that held the majority in subjugation and injus-

tice.

Structural transformation of society was the objective of university activity, and for this reason the primary emphasis at the UCA was social outreach—proyección social—in the widest sense of the term. Its publications, forums, research projects, and other public statements were signs of this commitment; research and teaching were to provide the underpinnings. The Jesuits experienced persecution from the beginning; they were constantly forced to clarify their positions and motives; they had to link their theoretical vision to concrete projects; and then evaluate the results with as much objectivity as they could muster, while at the same time, teaching, administering, writing, speaking out, and just staying alive.

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From its earliest days the UCA plunged into the middle of urgent national problems that captured the institution's ongoing attention and became the locus of its scholarship, teaching, and social outreach, especially the urgency for a negotiated political and social solution during the final decade before the president's assassination. The university began academic programs such as law and communication and published journals such as *Estudios Centroamericanos* and others in the fields of business administration, economics, theology, and psychology so as to translate scholarship into policy options. The UCA cooperated in applied research projects such as low-cost housing cooperatives, appropriate technology and energy sources, and mass education through dissemination of research in radio programs.

A cadre of lay colleagues formed a university community with the Jesuits and brought skills in communication, political analysis, engineering, and economics. Required community service programs gave students opportunities to use their talents to help solve serious problems: education, engineering, housing, defense of human rights, and now in public health.

Developing the Jesuit Model

In 1965 the Salvadoran bishops and the oligarchy wanted a Catholic haven protected from noxious influences outside, but the UCA saw its Christian inspiration as rooted in specific commitments to the poor rather than through juridical control or religious practices. The university curriculum was revised in the 1970s to broaden its scope and improve the quality of instruction, especially in areas of social awareness. Students participated in faculty research projects, tackling problems that were national priorities. The tightly centralized academic system helped strengthen a unified vision, with all department chairs reporting to the academic vice rector—rather than fortifying themselves into separate faculties that might have discouraged research and social outreach. A differentiated tuition program was established so that lack of funds would not keep out qualified students. There were also limitations in implementing the model—such as overdependence on a few key people rather than sustained development of a multilayered cadre of lay and Jesuit colleagues. A five-man board of trustees with a Jesuit majority selected from UCA personnel made all the important decisions at their almost weekly meetings. Theoretically, the higher education council had a role in university governance, and it was reformed in 1995. Nevertheless, the main texts were usually authored by the same few people.

How do younger staff members grow and take on responsibility when the reins are in the hands of highly respected giants? In postassassination discussions some seemed to identify power with influence: as many Jesuits as possible on the board of directors, decisions discussed in Jesuit meetings first, and then shared with lay colleagues. The martyrs had expressed the fear that there might not be any Jesuit successors available when the time came, and that the UCA might have to rely on lay people for positions in the future. But except for some annual retreat gatherings, there were few major efforts to prepare and retain lay colleagues. Serious financial problems, especially during the war, in addition to threats against the lives of faculty members in the 1970s and 1980s also had a devastating and cumulative effect on retaining lay faculty.

Issues for the Future

In contrast with Cardinal Newman's "idea of a university," the UCA vision of the university gives less importance to knowledge as a value in itself. A strong point of the UCA approach, however, is that it recognizes the "reality" dimension of any serious education—hands-on contact with the world as it is, rather than an isolated, textbook view.

But how does the national reality actually pervade the curriculum when, until recently, there has been little review of the curriculum, courses have concentrated on the technical specifics of the professional field, and there has been little supervision of what actually happens in the classroom. Integrating seminars at the end of the educational process would be very helpful, but the vast majority of students do not stay in the university long enough to write a thesis.

Related to the problem of attitudes toward the intellectual life is that of pedagogy. So many UCA faculty members rely on lectures as the only format for learning, with students dutifully taking notes. Because of the departure of more experienced faculty, young, inexperienced graduates hired as teachers tend to repeat the faulty methods to which they themselves had been subjected. In 1993 the UCA began to look at the curriculum as a whole, and to develop more dynamic pedagogical methods with the assistance of a new education department. The role of science and technology is another area for future growth of the UCA. With such a stress on explicit social issues little effort has been spent on the social impact of technology—health, environment, energy, industrial, and agricultural development.

If a really new political climate takes root in El Salvador, how can the UCA better prepare its graduates to take leadership roles in the community? What might a university run by the Jesuits and their colleagues in Latin America's smallest country have to say to universities elsewhere? Because of its urgent situation, the UCA staff has been forced back to basics so very often, and consequently the model they developed under pressure has much to say to other universities asking fundamental questions. The model can help put into relief the same complicated issues faced by other universities such as why does the institution exist in the first place, and whom does it really serve?

The UCA story is fascinating in itself—thirty whirlwind years that saw changes in orientation, the high price of commitment, and the development of a university model that brings to life social change and liberation, and the gaps that occur between rhetoric and reality. The starkness of both the vision and the reality forces us to pause and look critically at what we do in universities all over the world, and to examine honestly the ultimate effects: who are the beneficiaries, and are we consistent in our goals and our outcomes?

Editors Note: Fr. Beirne is author of a new book that discusses many of the issues in this article. The title is *Jesuit Education and Social Change in El Salvador* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1995), 289 pages, \$43. It is available from Garland Publishers, 1000A Sherman Ave., Hamden, CT 06514.