

*This article was written in 1980 – when the Center for Social Concerns was still a dream.*

# Views from the Top

Four college presidents explain why institutions cannot separate meeting the needs of the students and of the community. (We present one of them here.)

**by Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president, University of Notre Dame (Indiana)**

When I reflected upon Notre Dame's obligations to respond to the needs of our surrounding community, I thought of the statement of Dr. Albert Schweitzer that I often share with our students:

I do not know where you are going or what you will do in life, but I do know this: that you will never fulfill your potential or be really happy as human persons until you have learned how to serve others, especially in their human needs, wherever you go, whatever you do.

It is my conviction that the University of Notre Dame was founded with a similar vision for serving the world community. We believe that our Judeo-Christian heritage challenges us to remember that love of God and love of humankind cannot be separated.

I realize that the needs in South Bend-Mishawaka have changed radically since 1842 when Notre Dame was founded there, and especially during the past 27 years when I have been president of the University. We at Notre Dame try to instill in our students a sensitivity to the needs of their campus community, of the local community, of the national community, and throughout our interdependent world. I am convinced that all of the learning that takes place at this University is useless unless it is somehow linked to a lifelong response of service to one's neighbor. I am very skeptical about student who want to postpone their service involvement until graduation. In no way can they be educated to be humane unless there is some continued contact with the voice and pain of those in need and poverty.

We feel that our obligation and capacity to respond to the needs of the surrounding community must be seen in the overall context of our mission as a university. It is our moral responsibility to educate all levels of the university to these needs and to encourage creative responses by faculty, administration, and students.

There are multiple ways by which we try to enable our students to function as capable and caring citizens. We stress in our literature to incoming students the importance of this aspect of our University. We attempt through the trained staff in the residence halls, the liturgical celebrations, and the opportunities for caring relationships both on and off the campus to challenge and facilitate the maturing process of students as they discover various aspects of caring.

We hope to provide a milieu at Notre Dame where undergraduate students can become competent and compassionate lifelong learners and citizens. Competence is critical to enable students to avoid the worst aspects of being naïve do-gooders. We hope all of the college programs for our undergraduates provide an education that enables students to analyze the structural causes and effects often leading to poverty, injustices, and the death of hope. We hope that the lifelong process of developing the competence of their minds might be integrated with their compassionate responses of the heart. Compassion means that the students have the capacity to suffer with those who suffer whatever they suffer – physical pain, injustice, loneliness, spiritual desolation, ignorance, blindness, and all the rest.

The compassionate learner does not condemn, does not patronize, does not look down from on high. But compassion does not come naturally. Nor can the University give a Ph.D. in compassion. A Christian university has the obligation to point out that compassion is a gift from God, and that the suffering encountered by Jesus Christ in His attempt to serve helps to continually purify one's motives. All the social service in the world is sterile and antiseptic and inhumane without compassion. All the education and professional training in the world is less effective if compassion does not enable it to get beyond the problem directly to the person who is suffering. And if one can study all the subjects that our Christian

colleges and universities offer and emerge without compassion for the personal suffering all around us in the world today, then we really have not lived up to the ideal that brought these institutions into being, the great dreams of their founders.

In the rest of this statement, I will concentrate on some of the specific ways we provide service-learning opportunities for our undergraduates to achieve this goal. (The programs in the Law School with prisoners, migrant workers, etc., and those of our faculty and graduate programs will not be considered here.)

During the 1960's, many student groups interested in providing service in the South Bend community developed on the campus. They developed programs serving the retarded, tutoring in the schools, and visiting some local nursing homes. Concurrently certain programs sent many students during the summer to Latin America as part of our desire to have more opportunities for intercultural service involvement.

During the 1970's, we have seen the need to institutionalize our service-learning opportunities through an Office for Volunteer Services and a few specific programs in various colleges at the University. Now 18 different volunteer groups are coordinated out of the office. We estimate that about 1,000 of the 6,900 undergraduates have been involved in these service projects each year during the past 10 years.

During the past four years, the Office has been able to clarify with the **persons on site** the precise needs of the groups who have asked for service. The matching of community needs with student desires and limited time to serve is a continual tension for us. Students are encouraged to take courses that complement their service involvement or that can respond to some of the questions emerging in their involvement. Recently we have discovered the need to provide more workshops and reflection groups that enable students to see the relationship of direct service (one to one) and social action (justice-related issues).

The University provides courses that directly relate to the service involvement of students in the local community. Since 1971, we have had a course in the Department of Theology called Theology and Community Service. This course enables students to reflect in an interdisciplinary way on the meaning of care and Christian compassion, suffering, death and dying, and the psychodynamics of senior citizens living in nursing homes. More than 400 students have participated in this course during this decade, and 800 senior citizens have been their teachers.

The Psychology Department has provided a variety of courses in the areas of aging and retardation, with opportunities for students to combine service interactions in the local community with theoretical and academic reflections in the classroom.

The Sociology and Anthropology Department has provided courses related to criminal justice issues in student service projects in the Family and Children's Center, the county jail, the state prison, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Some premedical students work in the emergency room of the hospital. Government and economics majors take advantage of work-study and other programs coordinated by our Institute for Urban Studies. Seniors in accounting (CBA) help lower income groups fill out their tax forms as part of a course. We encourage these professors and others to collaborate with community persons so that the needs of both groups are met.

We have a real challenge in the 1980's. During the past three years, our Center for Experiential Learning has been exploring and evaluating innovative ways of reflecting on service relationships. New links with faculty, residence hall personnel, and community resource persons are being developed. With the increased academic pressures and gradual decrease in numbers of students in service projects, we look forward to learning other methods from *Synergist* and NCSL in the future. We must avoid the temptation to use the local community only for career exploration and learning for ourselves. We hope our local community continues to challenge us to share authentic responses of competence and compassion.

In summary, it is our hope to make the campus a caring place where students will reach out to one another. This needs to be extended beyond self-interest to the local community and to our national and international responsibilities. We hope that we will graduate students with a sincere commitment to work for social justice on both the local and global scale. If we lose touch with this mandate as a university, we will have lost our soul in the midst of striving for excellence in other areas of our responsibility as a Catholic university.