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Remarks of Huntly Collins

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Remarks by Huntly Collins, assistant professor of communication, as part of a faculty panel on Oct. 5, 2015 in the Union ballroom that kicked off a week of events marking the inauguration of Colleen Hanycz as the 29th president of La Salle University.

Thank you for inviting me to share my perspective today on the role of community service at La Salle University.

I am deeply touched by some of the stories lifted up by my colleagues here on this panel as shining examples of LaSallian values in action.

It was those values that originally drew *my own* attention to La Salle University back in the mid-1980s when I was a reporter at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and tasked with covering higher education not just in Philadelphia but also across the country.

Of all the schools I visited -- from the Ivy League to big state universities, from community colleges to private liberal arts colleges -- there were two schools that stood out to me. One was Haverford College and the other was La Salle University.

Why? Although each came from a different tradition -- Haverford out of the Quaker tradition and La Salle out of the Roman Catholic tradition -- both had what I would regard as *a moral compass* -- a commitment to serve “the greater good.”

Not only did these schools profess this ideal, but they actually lived it!

In today’s world, where the “me” rather than the “us” is at the center of our culture, it’s amazing that community service is even on the agenda of higher education.

“Selfies” fill social media. Reality TV turns us inward to maudlin melodramas. We are consumed by the need for *things* – the \$350 Nike LeBron sneakers; the latest cool car, the one that looks like what you saw on the auto-racing game Gran Turismo; the new iPhone 6 – Gotta have it because it’s faster and holds more pictures – of me!

To commit one’s self to helping others is to swim against the tide.

Still, our students at La Salle seem to do so even though a large number of them must hold down part-time jobs in their free time in order to pay college costs.

A small but growing number are also working full time. Last year, for example, I had a student who was taking a full load at La Salle while also working the graveyard shift as a nursing aide at a Pottstown nursing home for 35 hours a week.

That doesn’t leave much time for community service. Even so, hundreds of our students seem to find a way.

At La Salle, our commitment to service stems not only from Catholic social teaching but also from the teaching of St. John Baptiste de la Salle who, as we all know, gave up the opportunity

to rise in the Catholic hierarchy of 17th century France in favor of using his own money to found free schools for poor children who were taught a practical education in the vernacular rather than in Latin.

I am proud to be a part of that LaSallian tradition today – and we should all be proud to be a part of the global network of LaSallian schools that serve more than 1 million students in 77 countries on six continents. Thank you, Christian Brothers!

Even though this year, for the first time since its founding in 1863, La Salle University is now headed by a lay president rather than a Christian Brother, we have only to look at this past weekend to get an idea of all the ways the LaSallian tradition of service is continuing under our new president, Colleen Hanycz.

During Saturday's LaSallian Day of Service – despite high winds, rain and cold from a hurricane swirling up the Atlantic seaboard -- members of our community fanned out across the metropolitan area and put shoulder to the wheel as they gave back to a community in need.

Because of the vibrancy of Center City Philadelphia, it is easy to forget that Philadelphia is also *the poorest big city in America*.

More than 430,000 of our 1.5 million residents live below the federal poverty line. Of these, nearly 200,000 live in what the federal government calls “deep poverty,” less than half the federal limit of about \$24,000 a year for a family of four.

Most shockingly, *39 percent of Philadelphia's children are poor*.

Pope Francis has called on us to travel to the “periphery” – to people living on the margins of our society. At La Salle, we don't need to go very far to reach the periphery. We just need to step outside our own doors and enter the low-income neighborhoods that surround us.

By educating a large number of students from low-income families, often students who are the first in their family to attend college, La Salle is serving people on the margins.

Through our award-winning BUSCA program, the university is reaching out, in particular, to educate Spanish-speaking natives, many of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants.

Through our state-supported ADP program, La Salle has educated more than 1,400 low-income students from across the state, and the program's graduation rate has exceeded that for the university as a whole.

La Salle is also serving people on the margins through its many community-service initiatives.

Among them are the neighborhood nursing center, which provides poor people with access to quality medical care; the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program, in which students do everything from cleaning and painting houses to delivering groceries to low-income people in nearby neighborhoods; and the Inside-Out program in which prison inmates and La Salle students learn

side-by-side in academic seminars held inside the prison.

The university is also rightly proud of the way some of its academic programs have integrated service-learning into the curriculum. These include:

- The Leadership and Global Understanding program (LGU), which now places capstone students with faith-based institutions in our surrounding neighborhoods. As part of that program, one student developed a social-media program for a church-sponsored home serving women re-entering the community from prison.
- The Integrated Science, Business and Technology program (ISBT), where a project stimulated by in-class learning led to the transformation of two abandoned lots in North Philadelphia into two urban gardens, resulting in a 76 percent increase in access to fresh produce by residents in the low-income area.
- And senior capstone courses in the Communication Department where journalism students lift up the stories of people in Germantown and the surrounding area for a community-news website, and where public-relations students use their professional skills to promote social-service programs sponsored by Face-to-Face, a Germantown non-profit serving the poor and homeless.

If I've left out or short-changed your program, forgive me. The list is long and mentioning all of the worthy programs, I'm afraid, would run the risk of putting you to sleep.

But instead of just patting ourselves on the back, let's also take a few minutes to ask some *critical questions* about what we are doing and what we might do differently if we were to more fully live out our call to community service.

The first question I have is this:

To what extent, for us and our students, has “doing community service” become just another notch on our belts, another plus on our resumes, another way for the university to generate positive publicity, a way to make *us* feel good rather than really helping, in any *lasting* way, the people we aim to reach?

If this is our motivation, it quickly becomes transparent to those whom we serve and prompts them to turn away from us rather than embrace us.

One personal example: As a kid growing up with my disabled mother who was often unemployed, I hated it whenever the Episcopal church in my home town brought a food basket to the door of our one-bedroom apartment above a garage. While it might have made *the church* feel good, it only underscored *for me* how poor we were.

My second question is this:

In our community service, are we simply doing charity work, which addresses the *symptoms* of problems, or are we also addressing *the fundamental issues* that cause the problems in the first place?

For example, our students do a lot of tutoring in inner-city schools. But to what extent do we empower our students to become change agents working to reform the inequitable state funding formula that leaves our urban schools in need of volunteer tutors in the first place?

If we were to follow the path that Pope Francis has laid out for us and that Catholic social teaching has articulated for at least 40 years, we would not only be engaged in charity but also engaged in the much harder work of advocating for fundamental social change.

And one final question:

While we have an array of extra-curricular programs aimed at community service, to what extent have we integrated community service into the curriculum?

Our pre-professional programs – nursing, education, social work, business, communication and others – are naturals for community service. And many faculty in those programs are working hard to put their students’ skills to work in serving low-income communities around La Salle and elsewhere in the city.

But what are we doing in our general liberal arts curriculum? Yes, we have wonderful Explorer Cafes and engaging talks about social-justice issues sponsored by the Political Science Department and others. But what are we doing *in our classrooms*?

An argument could be made that by providing a strong, liberal arts education to a large number of students from low- or middle-income families, we are doing all that a university can do to serve the community.

Many, perhaps most, in the field of higher education would agree with that.

But La Salle has a special calling. It is a *specific* calling to serve *the poor*. For that reason, we also have a calling not just to expand our students’ knowledge base and teach them to think critically, but also to teach them to actually *use* their knowledge for the greater good.

As study after study has shown, there is no better way to teach students to use their knowledge than to have them apply it in the real world.

Which brings me to my own small part in helping this to happen in our senior capstone course called Community Journalism.

In this class, I ask students to leave the comfort zone of the campus to report news and feature stories in the Germantown neighborhood. If they are good enough, their stories go up on <http://GermantownBeat.lasalle.edu>, a website I created to be both a learning laboratory for our

students and a news outlet for a predominantly African-American low-income community, which is often ignored by the mainstream press.

In my view, providing “a voice for the voiceless” is one of journalism’s highest callings.

At the beginning of the semester, I ask my students to board the J bus and go into Germantown to walk and observe along pre-determined routes that are designed to expose students to the great economic contrasts in the community. Most of my students are white and have had little to no experience in a predominantly black community. Many are terrified.

Listen now to the voice of one student, writing in the class diary:

“As we walked down the street to the bus stop for our next class, a sense of anxiety attacked my body,” the student writes. “I was nervous about riding the bus, as well as walking the streets of Germantown. [But] I thought to myself, ‘If I can’t handle this, how am I supposed to handle moving away after graduation?’ I stood at the bus stop, upset and nervous about the tour I was about to go on. I wanted to just turn around and go home. I looked around and, when the bus pulled up, I followed my classmates aboard. This small step was huge to my personal growth.”

One small step...but the beginning of a true education!

This La Salle graduate, by the way, is now a television journalist at the NBC affiliate in one of New England’s largest cities where she covers a wide range of stories, including those in impoverished communities.

In my dreams, La Salle would have many more such courses, in a variety of fields, that could take students out of their comfort zones and send them forth into poor communities where they could work side-by-side with their neighbors to put into practice all of the ideals about social justice that they have learned in the classroom.

Admittedly, doing this kind of education is labor-intensive. It takes time. It takes a lot of hard work. It requires faculty who know and care about poor communities and who are able to develop grassroots connections within them.

Because this kind of learning is also integrative, it requires the expertise of faculty from many different disciplines. It can be inconveniencing for both faculty and students. And it is devilishly hard to evaluate.

But in the end, this kind of education is *transformative* for our students and goes to the heart of La Salle’s social-justice mission.

So here’s the key question:

Will La Salle University, during this period of retrenchment, put its money, however limited, where its mission is?

Again: *Will La Salle put its money where its mission is?*

As I thought about that question, I came up with 10 ideas, some of them realistic and affordable, some of them perhaps unrealistic and not affordable.

But ever the dreamer, I share these ideas with you now, hoping that they will, in the best tradition of American higher education, spark robust conversation and debate. So with your indulgence, here are 10 “what ifs:”

1. What if we seized the prioritization process as an opportunity to rethink our new but as yet not- implemented core curriculum and build into it social justice as a central theme?
2. What if we expanded our notion of faculty service so that joining the board of a neighborhood organization counted as much as joining a faculty committee to keep the wheels of faculty governance turning?
3. What if we truly empowered our Community Building Team so it had the resources to mount joint initiatives on pressing issues such as violent crime in the neighborhoods around La Salle?
4. What if we created a community choir, made up of students, faculty and people from our surrounding neighborhoods, to sing together on Sundays and put on concerts at neighborhood venues?
5. What if we asked our trustees to raise funds for an endowed chair in urban studies which would have a special charge to teach classes relevant to our urban mission and to help develop data-driven initiatives to work with our neighbors to revitalize our part of Philadelphia?
6. What if we created a special faculty sabbatical program in which faculty could take a semester without class work to develop deep connections and first-hand knowledge of the issues that plague our community, whether that be the high incarceration rate or low birth-weight babies?
7. What if we renovated some of our own now empty or unused space and rented it at sub-market rates to faculty members who would not only live on campus but also get involved in the neighborhoods surrounding the campus?
8. What if we expanded the Signum Fidei Fraternity, which has fewer than two-dozen students, and turned one of our larger dorms into a vibrant living/learning community for students and faculty who have a special interest in community service?
9. What if we were able to make 3/3 the standard teaching load, allow heavily experiential classes to run for four credits rather than three, and made it easier to team-teach classes across disciplines for full credit toward our class load?

10. And finally, ye apostles of assessment, what if we built into our assessment initiative not just measures of critical thinking and the acquisition of knowledge, but also measures of whether we have instilled in our students such qualities as curiosity, empathy and imagination?

You can't move a society forward unless you can first imagine a different and better future.

With Catholic social teaching and our LaSallian ideals guiding us, it is my belief that we can, indeed, usher in a better future if we work shoulder-to-shoulder with our neighbors to solve the problems that affect all of us. Our future – and our common humanity – depend on it.

Thank you.