

A Jesuit University: Service

Exploring the Jesuit and Catholic dimensions of the university's mission

Student culture at Jesuit universities, and particularly Boston College, is so marked with an ethos of service that it sometimes seems to be the defining characteristic of Jesuit undergraduate education. There is ample precedent for this, first of all in Ignatian spirituality, which from its beginnings saw that becoming conscious of the gifts we have received from God, and seeing the vivid example of Jesus, we would inevitably be led to ask what we can do in return. This insight leads inevitably to the desire to join in the work of Jesus by responding to the needs of our fellow men and women. The centrality of justice in Jesuit thinking over the past three decades provided a further framework for the development of the concept of service. In a [1973 address](#) to graduates of Jesuit schools from around the world, Pedro Arrupe, S.J., superior general of the Jesuits, said that the goal of Jesuit education was to produce "men for others." This soon became one of the best known slogans of Jesuit education.

Nonetheless, thoughtful observers have never been happy with the tendency to identify service programs as the essential element of Jesuit education. Students at most elite private colleges and universities engage in service in huge numbers. And merely volunteering some time need not produce significant changes in students' attitudes or behaviors. The quality of the service program seems to matter more than the number of hours spent in service.



Prof. Patrick J. Byrne, of BC's Philosophy Department, has explored this topic in an important article, "[Paradigms of Justice and Love](#)" that appeared in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* (Spring 1995). Simply put, his thesis is that service programs produce significant change in students in direct proportion to the quality of reflection and analysis that accompany the service activity--reflection on both the socio-political causes of the problems and on the personal learning that one experiences in the act of serving. These, of course, are the distinctive features of the more than thirty-year-old [Pulse Program](#) at BC, of which Prof. Byrne was one of the founders. In varying degrees, they also characterize the subsequent service programs that are so well known at BC – [4 Boston](#), [Urban Immersion](#), [Appalachia Volunteers](#) – and programs in many other Jesuit colleges and universities.