



Father Richard Ryscavage

EDITORS' NOTE *Father Richard Ryscavage likes "to give credit where credit is due," and as an academic seeking research-based solutions for the world's problems, some of that credit goes "to the business community, which has generated so much wealth and lifted so many people out of poverty." It might sound unusual coming from a priest belonging to the Society of Jesus, the same religious order as Pope Francis and recognized for the excellence of its 28 colleges and universities in the United States and 189 worldwide, but Fr. Ryscavage sees great opportunity in teaching students how they can steer the ship of capitalism to assure that its achievements continue to benefit those in need. The Center for Faith and Public Life appealed to the entrepreneur in Fr. Ryscavage as a way to prepare young people to be global citizens with principles and values, and put those into practice in their lives and careers.*

Why did you launch the Center for Faith and Public Life?

Fairfield University offered me the opportunity to start this unique center where we could examine faith in public life and socioeconomic issues, and where faith could offer insights and values that were missing in many universities.

In many undergraduate programs, the idea is to teach critical thinking. It certainly is part of the Jesuit pedagogical tradition, but we also need to have values. Faith teaches us values, and values always enrich critical thought.

What is the mission of the CFPL?

We teach principles. If we teach Catholic social philosophy, we will have values, but we cannot teach a papal encyclical or some high-principle abstraction unless we do it with an experiential component, giving the socioeconomic context from which to understand these principles.

For instance, the preservation of human dignity is one of the great Catholic social principles. As a real-world example, I might show a video of rice being distributed by NGOs in Port au Prince after the earthquake in Haiti. They were throwing rice off the truck in big bags, which were

Preparing Young People to Lead

An Interview with Father Richard Ryscavage S.J.,
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hitting pregnant women and causing all kinds of chaos. There was nothing dignified about it. This image makes the lesson one the students won't forget.

How do you advance this through Fairfield University's curriculum?

We educate professors about it and we take a multidisciplinary approach, usually through the aspect of humanitarian assistance. We try to extend it through our teaching of business, history, engineering, elementary education, and other career fields. We will be one of the first universities to have a minor in humanitarian assistance.

I work closely with the business school. Fairfield has a large number of kids who go into financial services with investment banks on Wall Street, so we started a Fairfield on Wall Street organization. I arrange for senior executives to tell our graduates about ethical issues they confronted as they were moving up in the corporate world, and how they made the decisions they had to make. We have senior women executives talk to this group about trying to achieve a balanced life and not having to give up their social and family lives to be successful. Through this group, I think we really help them with their values-based decisions.

Issues surround even small ethical questions. Many of our graduates were quite upset about the Occupy Wall Street protests. We explored how to respond to that, and how to ensure that financial services are contributing to American society.

How did values and principles diverge from being core topics in education?

It's a little bit of the secularization thrust that got us into the situation we are in today. People are afraid to affirm certain values; they're walking on eggshells. "That's a personal-decision value," they say, "so we're not going to talk about it." But these issues should be addressed head on.

Is this program taking root at other colleges and universities?

Fairfield, Georgetown, and Fordham started the Jesuit University Humanitarian Action Network. It has great penetration now among Jesuit universities around the world because all Jesuit schools have the same core mission.

The next phase is disseminating this approach, so we are developing a model for other universities too, not just Jesuit ones. Whenever I talk to other schools and faculty, they get excited about the concept of bringing values back to liberal education.

Public educational institutions are more deeply affected by state and federal politics. They're averse to having anything to do with religion or "values." I would enjoy having a better dialogue with the public schools about this. Many people want to see religion removed from public affairs. We feel there is a role for religion in the public debate.

In addition to your values-based educational model, what else is the CFPL doing?

We conduct research of values at the center that extends deeply into public life. The Ford Foundation funded us to study undocumented students at Jesuit universities. We unveiled the research in Washington so we could reach as many legislators as possible. It was quite effective in getting them to talk about immigration reform. Some of the students spoke about their experiences, and it had an impact on the staffers, many of whom had never met an undocumented kid before. It turned a few heads, and brought a few tears as well.

What type of support has the center garnered based on these activities?

Some of our most important work is being supported by the Teagle Foundation, which focuses on undergraduate education in liberal arts. With one grant for developing learning tools, we created a sophisticated assessment for teachers to understand if students are actually learning.

Teagle started this because they're finding a narrowing of focus in their assessment of liberal education in the U.S. Students are no longer struggling with issues such as human suffering that were always a part of that education. Teagle fears we're losing liberal education's focus on these important issues, and they want to do something about it.

How would you like your various audiences – students, other universities, the business community, and the general public – to respond?

First, by supporting us in any way they can. Perhaps they could encourage bringing these ideas into the workplace or offer experiential opportunities for undergraduates to see, through the eyes of an executive, the challenges they might face in a career. Having students meet and talk to these people is such an important part of the education process.

I try to teach students that faith is not something to be ashamed of, but is something that can actually help in their lives, in their work, and with their families. I'd like to extend this in a more public way that brings it to the workplace. It's something that can benefit our whole society. ●