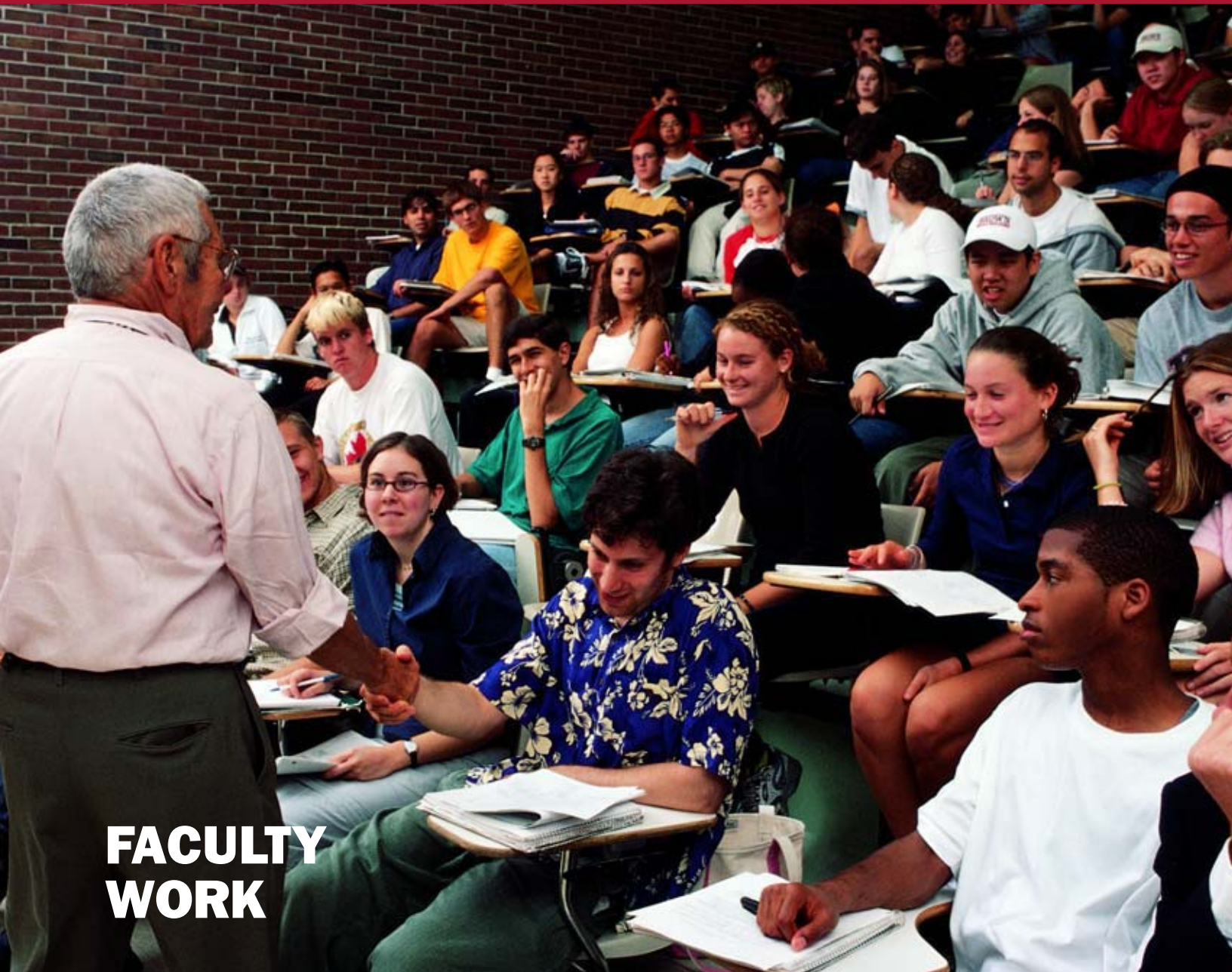


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MICHAEL C. MCFARLAND, SJ

“Other Ways of Knowing” and Liberal Education

POLLSTER and social commentator Daniel Yankelovich recently identified five trends that he claims will challenge higher education in the coming years. The fifth trend, which he calls “public support for other ways of knowing,” highlights the divide between the systematic, specialized, logical, evidence-based scientific method enshrined in academic culture, and other ways of knowing valued in “popular culture,” especially those with a religious basis. Yankelovich explains the notion this way:

At the heart of this fifth trend is the public’s growing suspicion that the nation has lost its way and must now rediscover the path of truth. For all its power and cogency, there is little that science and conventional academic knowledge can do to light this path. . . . Americans hunger for religious ways of truth seeking, especially with regard to moral values. By seeming to oppose or even ridicule that yearning, higher education pits itself against mainstream America. Unless it takes a less cocksure and more open-minded approach to the issue of multiple ways of knowing, higher education could easily become more embattled, more isolated, and more polarized. (2005, B6)

As Yankelovich recognizes, correctly I think, this is not simply a political conflict between clear-sighted and objective knowledge, on the one hand, and bias and superstition, on the other. Any institution genuinely dedicated to education has an obligation to battle ignorance and prejudice, no matter what the political consequences. Rather, he is identifying the legitimate yearning that our students have for wisdom, for a deeper sense of the meaning and significance of their lives and the world in which they live. In fact, as Alexander Astin and his colleagues have found, undergraduates have high expectations about the role that their colleges will play in their spiritual development (Astin et al. 2005).

Among the many things a liberal arts institution offers students is an environment in which to develop or refine a set of convictions, preferably shared with others, that can ground their decisions and commitments. Many colleges and universities with no particular religious commitments of their own are responding to this need in new ways—adding courses in religion, hiring chaplains, and starting or recognizing student organizations with a religious interest (as long as there is no religious test for membership). These accommodations to students’ search for a deeper truth have been helpful and much appreciated.

However, studying belief as a cultural phenomenon is different from experiencing it as part of a shared culture and a living tradition. And that is what colleges with a vital connection with their religious traditions have to offer.

The contribution of faith-based colleges

It is not that such schools try to substitute faith for scientific objectivity, authoritative pronouncements for critical inquiry, or uniformity of thought for genuine dialogue among diverse experiences, beliefs, and points of view. Unfortunately, critics—and even some supposed supporters—of faith-based colleges maintain and sometimes promote this impression. The fact is that colleges with a religious tradition view scientific inquiry—including inquiry about philosophical, ethical, and religious issues—and the development of a system of religious beliefs as complementary dimensions of the search for a richer, more complete truth than either could provide on its own. They also understand that this process can

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only be carried out in its fullness within a supportive community and drawing on a tradition of lived faith, reflection, and commitment.

Bringing together these disparate elements means grappling with some very difficult problems. The seemingly contradictory claims of science and faith must be distinguished and reconciled; free and open inquiry must be promoted, even as we recognize an authority that transcends questioning; virtue must be promoted, even as we acknowledge compromise, sinfulness, and failure; and, around a set of shared values, a community must be built that is welcoming to those who are different. Many institutions avoid these problems by focusing on a much narrower academic mission. Nevertheless, these are the very issues our own society is struggling with as it yearns for a deeper sense of coherence and meaning in a highly technological and pluralistic context. It is important to engage these problems in a serious way within a thoughtful, reflective environment that can call on some of our best intellectual and spiritual resources.

In the West, academic culture originally arose within a religious context; and the two still have much to teach each other. I offer my own experience as an example. As a Jesuit, a member of a Catholic religious order, I received a PhD in electrical and computer engineering at Carnegie Mellon University. As unusual as this might seem, it is consistent with the long Jesuit history of involvement in the sciences, technology, and in general, the leading edge of the culture. I taught and conducted research for many years in computer science and engineering but, because of my broader interests and background, I also became involved in teaching, writing, and lecturing about ethics and computer technology to engineers as well as a broader audience.

In my work on ethics, I drew from many common philosophical resources; but I also emphasized the social dimensions of information and technology and their relation to the common good, an insight I arrived at through my study of Catholic social ethics. Though this analysis originated in my own faith tradition, I was able to present it in a way that was credible to those who did not share the same background. This added an important dimension to discussions that tended to be based on individual rights or on utilitarian economic arguments.

Institutions committed to liberal education cannot shy away from the fundamental questions students are bringing with them about faith and the intellectual life, about the source and content of our ethical obligations, about the nature and meaning of the world and their place in it. Addressing these questions in a meaningful way will continue to require our best efforts. The experience, scholarship, and reflection of colleges that maintain a religious dimension in their missions are valuable resources and need to be part of the wider dialogue as the academic community explores questions that challenge us all. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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