

Good Practice in Practice

MORE THAN BEDS **Spirituality, St Martin's and Students. A Case Study**

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For many, the student experience includes leaving home and family to attend a University. This paper addresses the purpose and mission of the Charles Sturt University, addresses the issue of student needs and the importance of spirituality, briefly details the role of St Martin's College, considers the issue of the College as community, focuses upon the 2004 St Martin's College student experience and predicts challenges for the future.

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The mission of Charles Sturt University is: Charles Sturt University will be a bold and innovative leader in providing an accessible, adaptable and challenging learning environment to develop graduates and research that meet the needs of its regional, national and international communities.

The University seeks to achieve this mission by committing itself to, and being accountable for:

- providing a student-centred educational environment to develop highly employable graduates who will be able to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of their University and wider communities and have the capacity for, and commitment to, continued personal and professional development;
- producing high-quality research of significance to its regions and the professions, and of national and international distinction;
- undertaking dynamic and sustainable regional engagement; and

- ensuring effective resource management and generation.

Statement of Values

The key values relevant to Charles Sturt University achieving its mission are:

- the discovery, preservation, refinement, and dissemination of knowledge through teaching, research and scholarly inquiry, which draw strength from each other;
- social justice- equity of opportunity, tolerance, ethical conduct and accountability;
- intellectual independence and freedom of inquiry;
- personal, regional, national and international enrichment;
- economic, social and environmental sustainability; and
- participation, cooperation and collaboration.

Universities, at least in the Western Tradition have origins that have frequently focussed upon spirituality and an early acceptance that spirituality is a key component of the holistic

development of graduates. Notwithstanding the origins of Universities, they are now primarily places of secular learning in which spirituality sits uneasily.

John Ralston Saul, the Canadian academic and "trend thinker" says (1997 p3):

"The portrait of our society is one that is addicted to ideologies – a civilization tightly held at this moment in the embrace of a dominant ideology: corporatism. The acceptance of corporatism causes us to deny and undermine the legitimacy of the individual as a citizen in a democracy. The result of such a denial is a growing imbalance which leads to the public good. Corporatism is an ideology that claims rationality as its central quality. The overall effects on the individual are passivity and conformity in those areas which matter and non-conformism in those areas which don't"

"What the corporatist approach seems to miss is the simple, central role of higher education- to teach thought. A student who graduates with mechanistic skills and none of the habits of thought has been educated. Such people will have difficulty playing their role as citizens. The weakening of the humanities in favour of profitable specialization undermines the universities ability to teach thought."

THE STUDENT

Students are human beings – not only "human doings," and an essential part of a University education is to teach thinking and understanding within a value system that inclusive. In my own field of Social Work, I have coined the phase:

"If you think and don't do- you are useless;

If you do and don't think- you are dangerous;

Fundamental to thinking and doing is being".

The student may holistically be perceived in terms of intersecting circles. These circles highlight the physical needs of students (food, clothing and shelter); the mental/emotional needs of students (academic programme, mental stimulation, freedom from harassment and stress, security etc); the social/relational needs

of students (relationships with peers, opportunity for recreation and rest, relationships with the academic and general staff , recognition of changed relationships in the family of origin, possible development of new family of procreation relationships, development of new ways of thinking etc); and spiritual (re-assessing and developing new answers to existential questions, re-considering the integration of new learning with the student's sense of being etc).

These intersecting dimensions of the student's life are set within an environmental, political, economic and cultural context which defines, limits and places boundaries upon the student experience. For example, the necessity for many student's to work to support themselves at University may be a limit on the student's capacity to develop social or spiritual aspects of his/her life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPIRITUAL

By spiritual, I mean the broad existential questions of who am I, do I matter, do I have responsibility to others, how am I connected to the cosmos? A University education ought to be a reminder of the enormous diversity of the world in which we live. A recent book by Bill Bryson (*A Short History of Nearly Everything*) and an outstanding book by the Jewish rabbi, Jonathon Sacks (*The Dignity of Difference*) have been reminders that the world we live in is complex, unique, brilliant, troubled, joy-filled and creative. I have been reminded as well as to the privilege that most of us enjoy and the responsibility that it also brings. Two-thirds of the world's children are born into families that earn less than AUD\$3 per day. Australians with an average income are in the richest 10% of the world. Today's 30,000 children will die of malnutrition or preventable diseases. Whether, as students studying to be teachers or nurses, agriculturists or information technologists, accountants or business people, artists or radiographers, TV Producers or bio-medical scientists, or social workers or any other of the courses that are offered through Charles Sturt University, the skills and abilities that are developed are for the whole community.

In my own field of Social Work, textbooks (eg Zastrow's 7th Edition) are recognizing the essential need for spirituality. The recent International Federation of Social Workers Conference had a theme and multiple presentations on spirituality from a range of religious and non-religious perspectives. Bolman & Deal (2003) in *Reframing Organizations*, state:

An organization, like a temple, can be seen as a sacred place, an expression of human aspirations, and a monument to faith in human possibility. A temple is a gathering place for a community of people with shared traditions, values, and beliefs. Members of a community may be diverse in many ways (age, background, economic status, personal interests), but they are held together by shared faith and a spiritual commitment to one another. In work organizations, faith is strengthened if individuals feel the organization is characterized by excellence, caring, and justice. Above all, they must feel that the organization is doing something worth doing - the work is a calling that adds something of value to the world. Significance is partly about work itself, but even more about how the work is understood..... Spiritual leader's help people find meaning and faith in work and help them answer fundamental questions that have confronted humans of every time and place: Who am I as an individual? Who are we as a people? What is the purpose of my life, of our collective life? What ethical principles should we follow? What legacy will we leave?.....Spiritual leaders offer the gift of significance, rooted in confidence that the work is worthy of one's efforts and the institution deserves one's commitment and loyalty. (p404-406).

Charles Handy, British oil executive, management scholar, best selling author, radio commentator and social philosophy argues in "The Hungry Spirit," that the search for meaning applies to individuals and to institutions.

A student experience that does not seriously offer the opportunity to consider the spirit is a lesser experience that denies capacity and stifles development.

Harry Blamires popularised the expression "the Christian mind" in a publication in 1963 (reprinted in 1997) that has had wide influence.

By a Christian mind he was referring not to a mind occupied specifically with religious topics but to a mind which could think about even the most secular topics christianly (that is from a Christian perspective). It is not a mind of a schizoid Christian who hops in and out of the Christian mentality as the topic of conversation changes from the bible to the daily newspaper. The Christian mind he writes is "a mind trained, informed, equipped to handle data of secular controversy within a framework of reference which is constructed of Christian pre-suppositions". Blamires goes on to list what he sees as the six essentials marks of a Christian mind:

1. Its supernatural orientation (it looks beyond time to eternity).
2. Its awareness of evil.
3. Its conception of truth.
4. Its acceptance of authority.
5. Its concern for the person (recognition of the value of human personality against servitude to the machine).
6. Its sacramental cast.

David Gill in his book "The Opening of the Christian Mind" proposes an alternative cluster of six characteristics which marks the Christian mind namely:

1. Theological (focussed on God and the Word).
2. Historical (informed by the past, responsibly alive to the present and thoughtful about the future).
3. Humanist (deeply concerned for the person).
4. Ethical (submissive to Gods moral standards).
5. Truthful (committed to Gods self revelation in nature and Scripture).
6. Aesthetic (appreciative of beauty as well as truth and goodness).

ST MARTINS COLLEGE

The College was established in 1992 through the vision of the Right Reverend Barry Hunter (Anglican Bishop of Riverina), and the generosity of Mr. George Tassell, whose bequest made possible the building of the first cottage and St. Mary's Chapel.

The college is the first non-University provided accommodation on the Wagga Wagga campus. I represent a genuine partnership of the secular (the University) and the religious (the Anglican Church).

The Name

The College was named after the Anglican Church in Moulamein, where George Tassell worshipped for many years. St Martin is a Saint from the fourth century and is best known as the Bishop of Tours, France. Notably, he cared for the poor, fought for truth, spread the good news of Jesus Christ and lived simply. Martin was conscripted into the army when he was fifteen. It was while he was in the army, on a bitter winter day, Martin saw a near naked man at the city gate trembling from the cold, begging for charity from passers by. Seeing that the passers by took no notice of the man, Martin cut his cloak in two pieces. He gave one half to the beggar and wrapped himself in the other half. While he was sleeping that night, Martin saw Jesus dressed in the piece of cloak he had given away. He heard Jesus say "Martin has covered me with his garment".

The name and the story encapsulate the interest of the College. St Martin was in the secular (military), he responded to local need with compassion and self depreciation. He responded individually when others did not. He responded graciously. The "otherness" endorsement and a sense of significance were Martin's outcomes (and half a coat!!).

The Mission

The Mission of Saint Martin's College Incorporated is a proclamation of the Christian message, faith and values as expressed by the Anglican Church, by an active presence which supports quality education and is a catalyst for advocacy and challenge to all members of the University Community at CSU Riverina.

In particular, the College respects the inherent dignity and worth of every human being and seeks to ensure that, within the scope of its work, human and social liberties are safeguarded.

It seeks to equitably deal with all people, displaying standards of honesty and integrity, respecting confidentiality and fairness where there are competing demands.

It seeks to contribute to the CSU, Riverina educational plan by providing maximum opportunities for people to study and succeed in undergraduate and post graduate courses.

It seeks to live the Christian message, faith and values.

It seeks to have clearly outlined priorities through a triennial plan with annual review.

Interestingly, the mission statement does not mention anything to do with housing, residential facilities or brick and mortar infrastructure.

The College seeks to be inclusive and value people of all faiths or no faith. It eschews any notion of separateness- but like St Martins – seeks to be in, and of use to, the surrounding community. It seeks to develop the whole student.

The College today

The College has grown from 8 residents in 1992, to a current capacity of 88. The college offers accommodation, pastoral care and social activities for the residents during the academic year.

The College has 11 cottages, with 8 bedrooms per cottage. They are fully air conditioned and heated. Each bedroom has a bed, cupboard, phone, desk, chair, small refrigerator, rubbish bin, doona, pillow and bed linen. Also, the bedroom has a data point connection to enable those with a computer to connect with the World Wide Web. Every cottage has a kitchen and a common room. The kitchen has a convention microwave oven and gas cook top. There is also a freezer. Each resident has a lockable food storage cupboard in the kitchen. Each cottage has a washing machine and clothes dryer.

St Martins College Board

The St Martin's College Board has overall responsibility for the college. There is one Student Representative Position on the College Board. The Board has 4 appointees from each

of the two Anglican Diocese and a University appointee as well as 2 Board nominees.

The College Staff

The Head of the College is responsible for the administration, management and pastoral care of the college. The Head of the College is full time and lives on site. The Administration officer is part-time.

There are three Senior Students (Residential Advisors). They assist in pastoral care and have current first aid training. The Senior Students take on special responsibility for Academic, Sporting, Christian and Social development programs.

ST MARTIN'S COLLEGE AS COMMUNITY

St Martin's is a special place. While it exists as a home for students that takes care of physical and social and mental/emotional issues whilst they are at the University, the college is more than bricks and mortar- being a community of people living, working, dreaming and learning altogether. Communities are relational, interactive and mutually inter-dependent. The Board sees that the community of St Martin's has the potential to shape future leaders of Australia and the world as a whole.

The College seeks to develop a community. Community is a concept that can be constructed in different ways. Some writers use the term to mean a geographic entity defined by physical boundaries such as a neighbourhood or locality. Others use the term to refer to common attributes which are used to identify membership (eg Christian community, gay and lesbian community, Goths, etc). The term is sometimes used to define both attributes and locality (Ashmont, Community of the Redeemer; Turvey Park Parents and Citizens Association).

Plant, in his book *Community and Ideology*, offers a systemic examination of the problems of the usage of the term *community*, emphasising the distinction between "descriptive" and "evaluative" elements in the use of the term. The evaluative ideological assumptions of the user of the term must be seen as integral.

Community can be locality, social activity, social structure and/or a community of sentiment (eg shared beliefs). Whatever the definition, the two fundamental communal elements of any social system are a *sense of solidarity* and a *sense of significance*. These two elements of community are closely linked. Rarely can a person feel a sense of belonging without also gaining a sense of significance.

The strengths- based approach and /or a narrative approach to working in communities have been advocated. Moving away from a focus on deficits these approaches note the importance of 'solution focused stories' which are more likely to produce transformations than complaint focused stories. In communities, how particular situations are perceived will depend upon the leadership, the people involved, time and context.

An underlying theme is the question of what constitutes a community that can care effectively for its members. Kenny (1995) makes the point that community is essentially a subjective notion and that we define community as what we experience as community.

Ife (1995, p.90-91) talks about community as 'a form of social organization' with human scale (i.e. a size where interactions are readily accessible to all); identity and belonging (a sense of rights and responsibilities); 'gemeinschaft' (people can interact with each other in a variety of roles and as whole people); and culture (local culture expressing the unique characteristics of that community).

Communities can best be understood as organic rather than mechanistic; dynamic and interrelated with the environment, rather than constant in structure and form. Each community has its own attributes, depending on the local social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental and person/spiritual characteristics.

Community building refers to strengthening social interactions within a community by bringing people together and helping them to communicate in ways which build genuine dialogue, understanding and potential for social action. The fundamental principle of community building is empowerment and participa-

tion. Participation is seen as a key 'tool' in community development with Slocum & Thomas-Slayter (1995pg5) writing that it is

“a process of employment (that) can help to amplify traditionally unacknowledged voices. It can strengthen the confidence of all members of a group in the knowledge and capacity of each and may foster the ability to question and contribute to both local and international systems of knowledge’. This involves consciousness raising and knitting together “ a shared understanding of problems and a vision for the future that leads to commitment and ownership by the community’(p.5).

THE 2004 STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT ST MARTINS

In 2004, the residence of St Martin's recorded their student experience year for the St Martin's Annual dinner. This was a student-initiated project that reflected the concern for all aspects of the student experience – physical, social, academic and spiritual. I am very grateful for the student leadership and cohesiveness and energy that lead to this production. The DVD enabled students from a variety of courses (especially the TV Production programmes) to showcase both their year in review but also the talent and learning that is part of the University. As well as the DVD, students developed a parallel production of a St Martin's student magazine.

The student-produced DVD highlights the physical (much is centred around food and the buildings), the mental/emotional (as evidenced by the study and work aspects of the DVD), the social/relational (as indicated by the value and significance placed on community, shared experience and the sense of identity, sport, trivia nights, balls etc) and the spiritual (as evidenced by the Bible studies, the issues nights, the linkages with Churches and community activities including the Cancer Council Relay for Life etc). This is a masterly way of students recording their student experience.

The DVD has been used with the College Open Days for potential supporters and donors. This has provide a very valuable link between the student experience and the experi-

ence and interests of non-students. Its acceptance has been universally positive.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

A number of challenges face St Martin's in the development of the college and the enhancement of the Student experience. The challenge to keep the focus upon the development of community while needing to ensure the physical and financial future of the College is significant.

The College has a history project in development as it comes towards its fifteenth year of operation. As part of the development of significance and solidarity, it is time to remember and reflect on its outcomes and achievements and celebrate the achievements of its current and former residents.

The Anglican Church has moved rapidly to the notion of an eco-church and there is opportunity for St Martins to develop an ecocottage that provides a theology and a practical expression of that theology through the physical and social and communal infrastructure.

The opportunity exists to build small communities within the larger St Martins Community with the smaller communities having the opportunity for specialisation. In the future, there may be cottages that pool economic resources in order to meet their living and infrastructure costs but find ways to share their social and financial resources to the benefit of a third world project (eg child sponsorship etc). There may be cottages that take on responsibility for a community garden or have a focus upon music or drama etc.

The College has the opportunity to offer continue to offer diversity through its residential mix and to build cross-disciplinary solutions to the increasing complex issues of our society. It offers this opportunity to explore diversity from a position of a stated and secure value position.

CONCLUSION

St Martins is a partnership between the Church, the University, the Board, the wider community and most importantly the students. The student experience is multi-dimensional

and inter-dependant. It is life-affirming rather than life-denying. It is as much about giving, as getting. It is inter-dependant in the areas of physical, social/relational, mental/emotional and spiritual. Whole people require whole-person experiences.

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