

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKS...NOW WHAT ABOUT RESEARCH?

Karen O. Spohn, Ph.D.*
Assistant Professor, Division of Business Administration, Rivier College

Keywords: Mission, Research, Professional Development

Abstract

Dr. Karen O. Spohn, Assistant Professor of the Division of Business Administration, presented this speculative essay at the Engaging the Times Colloquium at Rivier College on November 10, 2006.

1 General Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today on this topic of how professional development and scholarship can meet the objectives of the Mission at Rivier College. From my title “Professional Development Works... Now What About Research?” you can infer that I found the topic of professional development more straightforward than the topic of scholarship. For this reason, I will begin with professional development first.

2 Professional Development

Professional development, if successful, provides faculty and the campus community with a better understanding of the Mission particularly in the areas of pedagogy, scholarship and service. Professional development, if successful, keeps Mission in the forefront of conversations among faculty and the larger community. This Colloquium and other programs that have been offered throughout the years accomplish both of these objectives. As I have attended many meetings, some members of the audience have expressed concern that the Mission is not as present as it was in the past. Unfortunately, I do not have that historical perspective for comparison, so that may be true. I can only say from my own experience as a relatively new faculty member that the Mission is not absent but present here. I relay my own experience as anecdotal evidence.

When I began my first year as a full-time faculty member, I began my official journey towards tenure. J. S. Fearweather refers to the tenure track process as a “three-legged stool” with each leg representing the three areas of pedagogy, scholarship and service [1]. Each leg of the stool, however, is a different length. You can visualize and many of you have experienced the difficulty of balance. In my first year, the Mission was one of the many items I juggled as I attempted to achieve stability. In my second year, I spent more time worried about the length of each leg of that stool and what combination would serve the Mission best. By my third year, I no longer needed the stool as a lever to direct me to where the Mission fit. By this time, I had attended a number of professional development seminars on Catholic teachings that were informative, had conversations with faculty and staff that were enlightening, and had discussions with the Division of Ministry that were revitalizing. By this time, I

had come to a better understanding of the language of the Mission. Its presence flows through every activity I do here. It is a natural question that I now ask in everything I am involved.

For example, the design of the proposed finance degree for our undergraduate students includes socially responsible investing as part of the investment course and micro lending as part of the money credit and banking course. The proposed program includes the development of a student investment group that would eventually manage funds and be involved in the decisions of administering micro loans. If this program was constructed at another college or university, you can be assured these topics may not have been included as the chosen hallmarks of the design. Conversations with Mary Ellen McGuire, the Director of Campus Ministry led me there. The voice of one has the power to reverberate throughout the campus. Continue your dialogue, someone is listening.

The Mission follows me to the classroom. Dr. Tim Doherty so eloquently reminded us last month to consider the classroom experience through the eyes of students and not just our own. The Mission flows through students, faculty and all aspects of the college community and yes the Mission even began to affect my research and the questions I asked. Professional Development works, now what about research?

3 Scholarship

The collaboration of scholarship and the Mission was not as straightforward for me. As a researcher, two questions arose. My first question asked the following: How could the Mission transfer across all disciplines? It was easy to see how my discipline of economics, a natural framework for poverty issues, is aligned. I questioned how individuals in other realms here had as clear a diagram. My second question asked the following: If the quality of research is dependent upon its level of objectivity, how could I reconcile that my research may be directed by the Mission itself? Similar questions with respect to separating ideology and objectivity are addressed in literature concerning research and social justice issues. [2]

Fortunately, by my third year and by the time I was asked to address these questions in this public forum today, those same seminars, discussions and reflection have led me to a broader clearer understanding of Scholarship and the Mission. My own revelation has striking similarities to what I teach students in the classroom.

In my economics courses, I first start by shattering the fallacy about economist: the idea that economists don't agree on anything. In the classroom, I try to give students an understanding of the most important division of economic thought. It is not macroeconomics and microeconomics but positive and normative economics. The economics of what is and the economics of what should be. It is in positive economics that economist agree on a great deal of information and theory which has allowed economics to progress and exist as a social science. This basis makes economics more than a fad. It is in normative economics where individuals debate what should be the policies that exist.

This same enlightenment led me to examine the Mission and social justice issues in the same division of thought. It is in this division of thought that I found my answer to the connection of Mission and scholarship. The direction of the Mission statement is twofold. First examine what is and then second address what should be.

First, the Mission statement reads "The challenge to the College community is to search for truth through the dialogue between faith and reason." The broader scope of the Mission is to search for truth. This shatters the fallacy that social justice has a narrow view. This search for truth allows for raising questions and crucible testing all ideas even if they are the ideas of the Mission itself. The Mission's

values have withstood the test of time. It can be challenged in the search for truth. It is not a fad as Dr. Virginia Ryan reminded us at last month's colloquium.

This broader definition allowed me to feel comfortable with a research agenda that served my discipline. An agenda that searches for the truth and concentrates on "what is" in my discipline is one that supports the Mission. This interpretation is more transferable across research in all realms of study. Be true to your discipline in your research and you serve the Mission.

My second question, as I mentioned earlier, addressed the issue of a directed research agenda. This question became more relevant as I found myself, after professional development programs, asking different questions in my research. What about my initial concern of the Mission directing my research? Let me be honest, it has and it does but no differently than where I was educated directs my interest in corporate governance issues and no differently than a conversation with a peer directs my interest in a new subject area.

We must be honest as researchers in search for the truth that the questions we ask and analyze with objective scrutiny are not objective at all. If you think about it, the questions that develop in your research agenda are a result of the last answers given; the last pages read the last discourse with a colleague, and the last experience within a community. Through the research process we view the final selected research topic and analyze it with an objective scientific approach.

My concern that the Mission may direct my research remains and it should. It reminds us that staying true to our discipline is of equal importance. Research that is true to our discipline and commits to analyses that include the ethical process of interviews and recording of data, and the emphatic scrutiny of sources serves the Mission itself. Research that is discipline oriented is as important to the Mission to lend credibility to the Mission's intent.

The second feature of the Mission addresses the concept of "what should be." A second excerpt of the Mission Statement reads "To participate in the life of Rivier College is to strive for academic excellence, to take responsibility for ourselves and for others, and to engage in dialogue about basic human issues facing society, especially the plight of the poor and powerless. "

"Especially the plight of the poor and powerless..." This last phrase is particularly relevant for me. If you look at my background, you would assume I would find this an easy task. In my personal life, I had twelve years of Catholic education. In my formal education, I studied economics which provides a traditional framework for analyzing poverty and policy issues. In my professional life, I worked as a program manager of research projects at a university. Some of these research projects included a socioeconomic study of the working poor and a study of access to higher education for teens in Appalachian Ohio. This research led to funding programs that helped the local community. These projects are examples of applied research that directly impacts a community. My contract at that time, however, required that I do only research.

Again, I found myself first with a question rather than an answer. How does a teaching college encourage a research agenda directed specifically towards the poor and the powerless? This seems a difficult question for any college to answer, when faculty have fallen victim to national trends and are asked to do more with less and are expected to publish or perish. These scenarios encourage faculty to follow topics where funds are more readily available, where bigger and current databases exist in order to secure spaces in respectable journals. These scenarios do not always lead to topics of the poor and the powerless.

In a recent article by James L. Heft on "Catholic Education and Social Justice," he cites the Vatican Document (John Paul II 1990) that states that Catholic universities should be conducting research on the following: "the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family

life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level." Heft states "This Vatican agenda could overwhelm the best of faculty." He continues "Most of our Catholic universities in the United States address some of these issues: none address them all." [3]

Despite this tall order and the list of obstacles, there is evidence throughout this college that these topics are addressed. For example, the Rivier Online Academic Journal, this incredible initiative of Dr. Vladimir Riabov, provides a platform for those accomplishments. He as well as all the members of the college that are involved in and contribute to it should be applauded continuously.

The traditional initiatives such as the service learning program where students are our hands-on researchers and recorders of their experiences in the venues of the poor and the powerless demonstrate the connection of the Mission and applied research.

This creativity and diligence lays the foundation for the new initiatives such as the proposed doctoral in education program. This proposed program includes an applied research component that trains leaders and educators to answer questions that will improve and contribute to their local community.

4 Suggested Incentives

From my past and present experiences, I highlight some of the important incentives which would continue to encourage faculty and members of this community to build on the existing foundations that have been established here. These suggestions which I open for discussion include the following:

- Consider applied research and research projects that directly assist the local community and its members as equal weight as published materials.
- Encourage and look favorably on coauthoring and the collaboration of faculty and students within and outside of this community.
- Extend the funds and support for interdisciplinary teaching to interdisciplinary research as well.

Some of these ideas may run counter to the traditional aspects of academic research and evaluation of faculty still on the tenure stool. These are not novel ideas. For example, R. Eugene Rice emphasizes the collaborative approach in his discussions of faculty work and "the new academy" [4]. These issues are arising on this campus and other campuses as we speak. It is a direction that more and more colleges find themselves taking.

5 Summary

In summary, as a college community, we cannot view the Mission and scholarship in isolation as I have done here. We must include both Mission and scholarship in the bigger picture of Engaging the Times. In addressing the Mission in all categories (pedagogy, service, professional development and scholarship), we can have confidence in the character of this community and in human beings in general. If given the tools to find the truth and answer the question of "what is," individuals touched by this community will engage in active moral debate to address the question of what should be on all topics and especially the poor and the powerless.

References

- [1] Fearweather, J.S. Faculty who can do it all. *Teaching Professor*, Vol. 20 No. 3, 2006, p. 6.
- [2] Longres, John F. and Scanlon E. Social justice and the research curriculum. *Journal of Social Work Education*, Vol. 37 No. 3, 2001, p. 450.
- [3] Heft, James L. Catholic education and social justice. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2006, pp. 19-20.
- [4] Rice, Eugene R. Faculty work and the new academy. *Liberal Education*, Vol. 92, No. 4, 2006, pp. 6-13.

* **Dr. KAREN O. SPOHN** teaches economic and finance courses in the Division of Business Administration at Rivier College and serves as co-chair of the Division's Finance Advisory Board. Karen earned her Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Delaware in 1999. Prior to joining Rivier College, Karen's professional experience included positions as an economist and economic forecaster at a leading economic consulting firm, program manager of research for an economic development program and assistant director of an SBIR Assistance Center. Her current research interests include executive compensation, corporate governance, and business and economic forecasting.