

Vincentians in Action: An Interfaith Model for Civic Learning and Spiritual Growth

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Abstract

How can one promote and connect the values of spirituality, community, and civic engagement in a culturally and religiously diverse group of student leaders? Using DePaul University's Vincentians in Action Program (VIA) as a framework, this paper explores ways of integrating civic engagement with spiritual and personal growth.

Vincentians in Action (VIA) is a values-based developmental leadership model for student leaders engaged in weekly service and justice work at DePaul University, Chicago. VIA provides an interfaith, reflective framework to promote, enhance and integrate the values of spirituality, community and civic engagement through co-curricular involvement.

Before describing the history and structure of the VIA program, it is important to offer a brief institutional overview of DePaul University in order for readers to understand the context of the university which gave rise to VIA:

- The total enrollment at the university in 2005-2006 was 23,148.
- DePaul has a longstanding commitment to diversity. Today, minority students make up nearly 28 percent of the total student population.
- Once known as the little school under the "el" train tracks in Chicago, DePaul now ranks as the nation's largest Catholic university for the eighth consecutive year and remains among the 10 largest private universities in the United States.
- The principal distinguishing marks of the university and its mission are its Catholic, Vincentian, and urban character.
- 29% of the Fall 2005 freshmen were first-generation students from families in which neither parent had a college degree. This continues the mission of the university to serve first-generation college students.

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- The most recent data show that 36% of the undergraduate population is Catholic. DePaul also has significant student populations, representing a wide variety of religious traditions, including Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist student groups.
- The Religious Order The Congregation of the Mission, otherwise known as the Vincentians, founded DePaul University in 1898 and continues to sponsor the university today.

History

The VIA model for spiritual growth and civic learning emerged at DePaul as a pedagogy to develop the leadership skills of the forty student coordinators of the DePaul Community Service Association, (DCSA). DCSA consists of 15 student-led groups involved in advocacy programming and weekly community service. The student coordinators of each of these groups, which are housed in DePaul's University Ministry, are required to meet together weekly to reflect on their service experience.

Less than a decade ago, these weekly reflections rarely included any mention of faith or spirituality. While there may have been many reasons for the lack of spiritual openness in these dialogues, one of the most commonly reported explanations was that students were reticent to speak publicly about their faith or spiritual beliefs for fear of offending peers who might believe differently. Additionally, some of the students who identified themselves as activists would often demonstrate cynicism or hostility toward any organized religion. Such sentiments inevitably tended to derail or truncate any spiritual reflection. Despite the fact that over the years an increasing number of students who professed various faith commitments became involved in service, the content of the service reflections continued to be mostly secular, and the link between spirituality and civic engagement was rarely broached.

This dynamic began to change, however, during the 2001-2002 academic year, when DePaul's University Ministry department underwent a strategic planning process to ascertain the effectiveness of the Department's service and justice programming. An integral part of this process involved 10 focus groups carried out with key university stakeholders, including 110 students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community partners. In addition, a random sample of hundreds of students was surveyed, and a number of interviews took place. Extensive benchmarking also occurred with colleges and universities with similar programming in order to research best practices.

One of the central findings that emerged from the research was the need to develop and define more clearly a spiritual component of University Ministry's service and justice programming. This finding was particularly significant since a number of departments in the university were also involved in service and civic engagement. The question was therefore beginning to be asked, "What makes University Ministry's programming distinct?"

Given the fact that DePaul's campus is so culturally and religiously diverse, the goal of raising the spiritual component of the programming posed both an opportunity and a challenge. How could one best promote and connect the values of spirituality, community, and civic engagement in a language that might appeal to such a diverse audience? How could one create a safe space that would encourage trust and open dialogue?

A multi-faith audience, which included student leaders, staff, faculty, and community partners, as well as a cadre of committed Daughters of Charity and Vincentian priests, addressed these issues. After a lengthy discernment process, the answer finally began to emerge. Why not

look to the life of St. Vincent de Paul, the patron saint and founder of the Vincentians, to examine the values upon which he built his own life? Students could then explore what wisdom his life of committed service could offer to their own experience.

As clarity emerged from the discernment process, it became increasingly evident how Vincentian virtues and values continue to have a far-reaching impact on the culture of DePaul today. The majority of students involved in service and justice at DePaul, whether or not they identified with a religious faith or spiritual tradition, could relate their involvement at some level to the narrative of St. Vincent De Paul.

In order to develop the content of the VIA curriculum, therefore, the obvious first step was to identify the needs of the student leaders and examine these in the light of Vincentian values. As a result, key knowledge, skills, and values were identified and developed into a core curriculum. Based upon ongoing needs assessments and yearly evaluations, the curriculum continues to be shaped.

It was at this juncture in the discernment process that a Vincentian priest from Colombia, Fr. Guillermo Campuzano, C.M., became involved in helping University Ministry develop a pedagogy based upon a Vincentian framework. Through conversations, meetings and presentations, he shared his discernment principles, which are rooted in Vincentian values. Campuzano also introduced staff and student leaders to books, literature, and people, steeped in the Vincentian tradition. Together the group began to develop a Vincentian framework of reflection to support and enhance an ethic of civic engagement.

One of the primary sources that Fr. Guillermo presented to the staff was an article by Fr. Theodore Wiesner, C.M., *Experiencing God in the Poor* (1987). In this article, Wiesner outlines three “ways of spiritual life” through which he posits a person of faith passes when engaged in service. He identifies these three ways as “The Way of Appreciation,” “The Way of Dialogue,” and “The Way of Solidarity.” Wiesner describes these three ways as a model through which experiencing God in the poor is seen as a process of spiritual growth. The model can help us understand those who are a part of this process of growth. We realize that we are not all at the same stage of development. It can also assist us by giving us some idea of development of our own spiritual journey, and some awareness of the dangers and problems to be faced (p. 221).

Since DePaul operates on a quarter system with students engaging in service for three quarters each year, the framework of the three ways served as an ideal structure within which to organize the content of the VIA curriculum. It has been the experience of University Ministry staff that while Wiesner’s article is clearly written from a Christian perspective, the pathway of spiritual growth described therein seems to resonate with students of many faith traditions and spiritual backgrounds. Consequently, *Experiencing God in the Poor* became the cornerstone of the pedagogy that eventually came to be known as Vincentians in Action or VIA.

Structure

Once the core components of the VIA curriculum had been identified, the following structure was instituted. Thirty-five to forty student coordinators of DCSA receive a small St. Vincent de Paul scholarship from the Division of Student Affairs to lead their respective service and justice groups. Each DCSA Coordinator commits to recruiting DePaul student volunteers (now totaling more than 130 each week) and facilitating a weekly service experience with a local community partner in Chicago’s south- and west-side neighborhoods. The DePaul Coordinators travel with their volunteers to their sites. After the service experience, the coordinators lead a weekly reflection session with their volunteers. Additionally, the coordinators are required to

meet as a group on a weekly basis for ninety minutes to engage in interfaith dialogue, critical reflection, and community building. These meetings are led by a team of senior VIA student leaders, who consult with University Ministry staff on a weekly basis to plan the meetings and discuss how to integrate a designated Vincentian value from the VIA curriculum. Often the format of the meetings will incorporate some of the following components: use of multimedia, lectures, small-group work, literature and research reviews, guest presenters, and interactive reflection exercises. Community building is always emphasized through the sharing of food, retreats, social gatherings, and more.

At the weekly VIA gatherings, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist student leaders, as well as students from other spiritual backgrounds, take turns beginning the meeting with a prayer and a communal sharing of food. After eating and socializing, a “check-in” follows in which all the students reflect on their service experience and assess their overall progress. The meeting continues with any business updates and “shout-outs”—announcements about faith, service, or justice opportunities happening that week at DePaul or in greater Chicago. Finally, the meeting ends with a 45-minute VIA portion that includes a reflection and interfaith dialogue, highlighting a theme experienced during one of the Ways. This portion is led by a senior VIA student leader.

While a diversity of themes is included each year, the core VIA themes covered during each yearly cycle tend to include the following.

Way of Appreciation

- Reflective Practice and Facilitation Techniques
- Human Dignity
- Compassion
- Humility and Servant Leadership

Way of Dialogue

- Social Analysis: Finding Meaning Beneath the Data
- Simplicity; Simple Living; Stewardship
- Praxis: Integrating Dialogue and Action/Conscientization
- Suffering
- Responding to Misunderstanding

Way of Solidarity

- Finding Oneself in Solidarity
- Being vs. Doing
- Forgiveness and Love
- St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac
- Community and Civic Responsibility

Outcomes Sought

St. Vincent de Paul organized his life around core values. Through his life-long commitment to these values, he was able to reach out and care for the poorest of the poor and to raise awareness about poverty issues in seventeenth-century France. By encouraging students to examine the core values that motivate them to engage in service, VIA provides a pedagogy for students to reflect on how they make meaning in their lives and where they find a sense of purpose. Through encouraging students to examine the connection between their own spirituality

and their motivation for service, one intended outcome is that students will continue a commitment to spiritual growth and civic engagement long after graduation. Another goal is that students will be able to articulate the integration of faith, service, and justice in their lives while gaining an appreciation for the Vincentian focus on service to poor and developing a spirituality through this focus. Furthermore, the VIA program is intended to help students develop sound group facilitation skills, gain an appreciation for multi-faith prayer, sustain a commitment to social justice and civic engagement, and cultivate an ability to reflect on life purpose and meaning.

Evaluation

In terms of shaping the future direction of the VIA program, ongoing evaluations have recommended the need to develop pre- and post-VIA assessment methods for measuring spiritual growth and civic learning. Such instruments are currently being developed and will be implemented in the academic year 2006-2007. While pre- and post-VIA evaluations currently exist, they are based on qualitative data only. The need has also been identified to continue to deepen the interfaith application of each VIA theme, which is essential given the multi-faith context of the university. Achieving balance between the pastoral, business, and reflection portions of the weekly meeting continues to be a challenge. Finally, it has been proven increasingly important for the structure of VIA to remain flexible enough to respond to the signs of the times and to current events.

For four years the VIA framework has been utilized in multiple curricular and co-curricular settings at DePaul. For each of the last three years, the graduating seniors who have received the St. Vincent de Paul Leadership Award—the highest recognition that DePaul bestows upon a student—have also been senior VIA student leaders. Now young alumni of DePaul, these awardees—whose accomplishments are noted below—have chosen paths in life that exemplify civic responsibility, spiritual growth, and a dedication to the marginalized. Having completed a post-graduate volunteer commitment with L'Arche community of disabled adults, Scott Jeansonne is now in his first year of medical school and desires to work with underserved populations upon graduation. On completing an 18-month service commitment in Duran, Ecuador with Rostro de Cristo, Meredith Dean has recently been hired by the Illinois Hunger Coalition to coordinate outreach in public schools. Initially, serving with the Vincentian Service Corps, Jason Gill is now engaged in a second year of full time volunteer service, teaching with the Inner-City Teaching Corps in a south Chicago elementary school. Additional “VIA graduates” include Salvador Venegas, who helped open a Chicago Public School in the underserved Little Village neighborhood in Chicago and continues to serve as a teacher and administrator; Jenan Mohajir, who volunteers to coordinate a speaker series for an Islamic educational foundation; and Eitan Gordon, who has served as the president of Hillel at DePaul.

Simulation

When this paper was presented at the 2006 Institute on College Student Values, a simulation of a scaled-down VIA session concluded the presentation. The simulation focused on the value of compassion. The following description reflects that simulation.

The simulation, began with a prayer from the Islamic Tradition. Food was then shared, and individual participants were invited to introduce themselves and share their progress. A summary of weekly business items and shout-outs then ensued, which led into the VIA portion of the meeting.

To frame a discussion about compassion, a volunteer read the following definition by Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison (1982):

The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together means “to suffer with.” Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human (p.4).

The presenters then briefly made reference to how all the prominent spiritual traditions recognize the value of compassion and emphasize the basic connection between serving God and serving others. A volunteer was then invited to read the following excerpt (Wiesner, 1987):

The first characteristic of [the way of appreciation] is the experience of the poor. We observe their suffering, hear their cry, study their character, actions, and situation. This exposure is essential to the development of this stage of the spiritual life This contact may be serving in a soup kitchen, visiting a hospice for the dying, a trip to some Third World country, or prison ministry. Whatever form it takes, it is important for us, since we so easily protect ourselves from the harsh realities of hunger and oppression, from the smell of the slums, the potential violence of the night. We can, of course, experience some of this through books, films, and the like. But there is no substitute for immediate contact

This experience leads to compassion, or at least can lead to compassion if we allow it to develop. We need to avoid putting obstacles in the way of compassion, by seeing the poverty and suffering of the poor as the result of laziness or ignorance, by washing our hands of the problem, or by claiming helplessness in the face of it. We need to nourish the sense of compassion by feeling with the poor as deeply as we can, by seeing compassion as God’s attribute, the way God feels about the world. (pp. 214-215)

The following example was then shared from the life of St. Vincent to illustrate a time when St. Vincent, moved by compassion, took action on behalf of justice:

In 1619, Vincent was serving as Royal Chaplain of the Galleys and was responsible for the spiritual well-being of the galley convicts of France. One day on visiting the convicts, Vincent was appalled to see the conditions that the prisoners were being held in. They were condemned to forced labor, packed into damp holes without light or air, and chained to posts so they could not sit or stand. Furthermore, they were completely subject to the whims of their jailers. On witnessing such inhumane treatment of other human beings, Vincent was so shaken that he appealed to the General of the Galleys asking to try to improve the conditions for the galley slaves, particularly those who were most sick.

As a result of his intervention, men were moved into a rented house and the Daughters of Charity and devout lay women came to care for them. Through his appeals for help, Vincent was also able to get donations to flood in. Moved by compassion, Vincent was able to stop many abuses to the galley slaves (Pujo, 2003, p.78).

Participants were then invited to engage in a journal-writing exercise, reflecting on an experience of compassion in their own lives. During a VIA session the students would be asked to share with their peers an experience of compassion which had occurred at their service site. However, a more in-depth reflection was not possible for this scaled-down simulation.

Finally, the group was invited to view a clip from the movie *Patch Adams*. The movie focused on Patch Adams, an unconventional medical school student who integrated unorthodox methods of relating to patients in his educational field work. In the scene viewed, Patch was on trial in front of the medical school judicial board arguing for more compassionate treatment of patients.

The simulation then drew to a close with a brief discussion about the movie clip. Finally, the following questions were posed to the group.

- Who has been a model of compassion for you from your faith community or spiritual journey? Why? What in this person's life speaks to you?
- What are you doing to integrate this sense of compassion into your own life?

Conclusion

In conclusion, in creating the VIA program, it is important to recognize some of the key institutional factors that supported the emergence of VIA. Without these, it would not have been possible for VIA to develop. First, DePaul University has 10 learning goals. Three of these goals highlight the development of service-oriented, socially responsible values, and an ethical framework; knowledge and respect for individuals and groups who are different from us; and self reflection and life skills. Second, DePaul's Division of Student Affairs encourages the integration of faith, leadership, and civic engagement in the DePaul student experience. Third, DePaul's President, Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., has set as a priority the need for the university to enhance its Catholic identity while championing religious pluralism. A final institutional factor is the prominence of Vincentian values across the university. Many of the themes covered in the VIA curriculum correspond directly with the virtues that characterize Vincentian spirituality.

Most of the student leaders who participate in VIA attribute the success of the program to the fact that the weekly meetings allow them to reflect on questions of faith and meaning with trusted peers in a safe space. It is their unique time, away from their volunteers and the pressures of their service sites, to enter into dialectic between their service involvements and Vincentian values. As the student leaders reflect with one another, they begin to develop a shared narrative, while at the same time deepening their understanding of their own unique motivation for service and justice. It is through such regular structured interactions that the struggles and successes of civic engagement are shared and questions of meaning examined. Simultaneously, it is through such gatherings that community is developed and trust is built. Ultimately, VIA invites students to

journey together over the course of a year or more, growing spiritually and developing a commitment to lifelong service.

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