Engagement, Collaboration, and Commitment to Mission through Research

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Sunday, September 25th through Tuesday, September 27th the fifth annual International Symposium on Lasallian Research was held on the Twin Cities campus of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, and was co-sponsored by the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN) & Saint Mary’s Institute for Lasallian Studies. There were 130 participants from seven countries representing eighteen universities and nine other ministries present for the event. Among the welcome additions to the processes this year and important to acknowledge were simultaneous English/Spanish translation. The research agenda continues to grow in depth and scope. Much of the work is grounded in the objectives established by the International Association of Lasallian Universities5 to further the mission through research into educational innovation, work on the environment and sustainability, as well as improvements to health and nutrition. Participants present were also there in response to the invitation of the Institute’s Lasallian Research and Resource Services in Rome. Additional opportunities to expand collaboration and research toward fulfillment of the mission of RELAN were also an important part of the desired action planning. Brother William Mann’s opening communication to participants expressed hope for the forging of “strong and solid research partnerships between and among the people, institutions, and Districts represented.”6

The opening keynote from Dr. Todd Reinhart, HIV/AIDS Research: A Lasallian Response, focused on his years of research on the pathogenesis of HIV-1. He focused on how chemokines play multiple roles in HIV-1 infection and AIDS through nonhuman primate studies of simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). He has mentored over 25 masters, doctoral, and postdoctoral students, and through his many years of research Dr. Reinhart raised the challenges of finding the Achilles’ heel of the virus. This keynote also proposed the use of plant-derived polyphenols, which might pharmacologically inhibit inflammatory chemokines and their receptors, as a potential way to better understand how these chemokine inhibitors can be used in the treatment of infectious diseases and other ailments such as cancer.

The Monday morning keynote address Lasallian Youth and Family Ministries: Lasallian and Trauma Informed Care7, was co-presented by Drs. Judy Van Wyk and Camela Steinke. Dr. Van Wyk described her work with Dr. Lawrence Grebstein focused on turning the tides of male juvenile delinquency. This work included a significant longitudinal study of how adolescents’ experiences of victimization and crime perpetration are linked. The Ocean Tides program (a Lasallian residential program) was part of the study. Dr. Steinke went on to describe other work with trauma informed care they have been developing. They reported on their work with childhood trauma’s far reaching impacts. The new poverty represented by this early trauma was investigated, grounding the work in Lasallian concepts. The nature of healing versus punishment was proposed as part of the model.
In the third keynote, Dr. Melchor Victor Frias IV, MD reported on an important study of pediatric issues and changing research methodology. Challenges and Concerns in Conducting a Phase 1 Clinical Trial on a New Drug for Multi-Drug Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR-TB) among Children (a first in the world for MDR-TB). He described his work with multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. The need for valid information about children has led to a change to accepted practices which has allowed conducting stage one clinical trials using children. The courage and commitment of the children to improving the lives of others was described as remarkable. Progress with new drug therapies seems likely, though Dr. Frias points out this is just the first stage in testing. Another important aspect of the work was the new research method which has included in depth qualitative work about the experiences of the patients and their families.

Attendees had the opportunity to hear from researchers in many areas in the break-out sessions. As might be expected, a fair amount of attention was devoted to issues related to educational practice. There were many important projects generally situated within the Innovations in Education track but being applied across an impressive array of contexts. Lugo-Cruz and Aguilar-Cervantes reported upon critical work targeting the improvement, success, and learning of indigenous communities in Mexico. In what would seem an important topic for all of us, there was a session exploring the nature of attention, and competition for it, within the brain. In a related vein, Kim and Heiberger explored the use of mobile learning and its barriers. In another session a service learning project explored the juncture of industry and academia via the making of an animated movie about the lives of De La Salle and Saint Benilde Romancon. Saez also examined the value of a service learning endeavor, in this case as an approach to technical writing. Al-Arja interviewed families of Palestinian children under house arrest in Jerusalem and did a qualitative analysis of the findings. One of the research collaborations between faculty members at different United States universities explored the possibilities inherent in a Lasallian challenge to “Unbridled Capitalism” and what that might suggest regarding the maintenance of a foundational focus.

Contributions to Innovations in Education continued with a description of university faculty teaching practices in Mexico City and a look at public private partnership accountability, particularly around distribution of resources also in Mexico. A comparative analysis of culturally responsive teaching was found to be quintessentially Lasallian. A Lasallian lens was used to look at inclusive teaching practices. Oh showed work on a “calling based” approach for career development of college students based upon Lasallian spirituality. Dr. Steinke expanded upon her keynote address looking at trauma informed education and its relationship to Lasallian values. Fascinating work is being done exploring interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary experiences and “social memory” at Unilasalle in Brazil that might have implications for all those involved in higher education.

Another of the identified key research areas for study were Health and Nutrition. Presentations associated with this focus included an exploration of behavior monitoring for autism therapy assessment. The biomechanics of shoe height design, Zeitoun’s evaluation of chemical compounds of oil, leaves, and fruits from regions in Palestine to aid in the local development of medicines, and Lynch and Giakos’ examination of optical imaging techniques for early lung
cancer detection represented additional significant health and nutrition work. Also important was DiAnna-Kinder’s work on why parents refuse the HPV vaccine for their children.

The Environment and Sustainability focus was addressed by presentations about water filtration, using personal solar powered filtration and reducing biosorption of copper, upgrading wastewater treatment systems to operate with co-digesting systems and research on a significant increase in flooding in the Northeastern United States of America.

Another subset of presentations described as Lasallian Studies were focused on Lasallian history, principles, and applications to practice. In Colombia efforts are being made toward social justice objectives. Education is being put to work via a program called Utopia to be a peace laboratory, research and transference center, and leadership school. In another session Munoz previewed forthcoming work on Lasallian pedagogy exploring historical challenges and changing realities to help inform practice today. Pang offered an analysis of De La Salle’s focus on the lives of impoverished children in conjunction with Karl Rahner’s work on a theological conception of childhood as an openness to mystery. Tristano looked at the mental world of the founder. Colonna and Cremin reported on research into art and discernment and the themes of stained glass at the Generalate. Boyle and Ahern explored the challenge of Dorothy Day in a Lasallian framework and Parina presented on a capstone project about spiritual conceptions and practice of lay faculty and staff in Philippine higher education.

Two research panels were also held. The first (from Manhattan College) included a look at humanitarian concerns and the refugee crisis, socioeconomic status on news media consumption, and an analysis of “speaking geek” intertextuality and code switching. The second panel (Unilasalle, Bogota) shared a look at the pedagogy of interiority and spirituality of the higher education professor and an exploration of the value and challenges of humanistic formation.

This is not a comprehensive listing of the work but it is representative. The conference concluded with a series of round-table gatherings centered around particular identified interests or concerns in which participants could be involved. This represented next steps in the ongoing research and collaboration agenda. Among the topic areas were; emerging women’s concerns, business departments, elderly, gaming in the classroom, health promotion for children, civic engagement, association between institutions, and Lasallian formation resources. The number of people in each group and the specifics of their respective agendas are unknown but the groups seemed committed to acting and member engagement seemed high.

Each presentation delivered this year contains suggestions, indeed, perhaps imperatives, for further research. Progress on the forging of partnerships is underway. All the positive energy generated by and for the work (associated by the mission) will surely continue to drive the established agenda forward and help to grow the vision of what more might be done.

Endnotes

1. This is a report on the fifth annual International Symposium on Lasallian Research.
2. Jack McClure is the Program Director of the EdD program and Associate Professor. He has been with Saint Mary’s for more than 11 years serving as faculty and in an administrative capacity. He has a B.F.A. from Drake, an M.S. from the University of Wisconsin Stout and a PhD from the University of Minnesota in Adult Education-Human Resource Development.

3. Rani Roy joined Manhattan College 4 years ago, and is currently the AVP for Student & Faculty Development at Manhattan College, where she oversees departments including Center for Graduate School & Fellowship Advisement, Grants Administration, and Study Abroad. Rani is an alumna of Columbia University's Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science where she received a B.S. in Biomedical Engineering. She continued on to graduate school where she received a NASA Graduate Student Researcher’s Fellowship, funding her PhD studies focused on tissue engineering at Cornell University.

4. Patricia Kayser Vargas Mangan is the director of postgraduate research and extension at Centro Universitário La Salle Canoas in Brazil. She has a master’s degree in computer science and a PhD in Systems and Computation Engineering from COPPE / Sistemas de Universidade Federale do Rio de Janeiro.


