

Academy Institute as Citizens for Justice
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As I listened to Reverend Father Kohlvenbach speak at our conference, I knew we could all hear Christ's voice in Reverend Father's call to do something about the cries of the poor, beyond simply sympathizing. The growing economic wealth in our world is a joy, but also a danger. I was pleased to hear him call for changes in the structures of society and new partnerships between education and social activity. The concerns he shared with us are part of the great tradition of our Catholic heritage, part of the papal encyclicals *De Rerum Novarum*, part of *Quadregesimo Anno*, part of *Populorum Progresio*. This is part of the experience and contribution of Catholicism in the United States.

Where do we go from here? Our plans and programs must all make a resounding difference. In this essay, I will outline how I hope we, as academic institutions, will expand our relationship to our cities and to the poor in the coming century. I will tell you about what Connecticut College and the development corporation I head has been doing in this area, and I will share my thoughts on what we have learned about making progress.

Connecticut College is a coeducational, highly selective liberal arts college in New London, Connecticut. The college is about to celebrate its 90th anniversary. It is situated on the top of a hill on 800 beautiful acres totally untouched by the economic difficulties in the city of New London. I am a graduate of the college and have been president for almost 13 years. I am also the volunteer unpaid president of the New London Development Corporation, a non-profit that is leading the economic development of New London. New London is a city of 25,000 citizens. Sixty-five percent of the children in the schools are on government assistance. Seventy-five per cent are children of color. New London has the fourth weakest economy in the state of Connecticut and the eleventh highest tax rate. This is one very poor city whose children score in the lowest category on the state's mastery tests and drop out of high school at the rate of 50 percent.

You might ask how a French professor got into this position of being simultaneously head of a highly selective college and an economic development corporation. The answer is faith and family. My grandfather, who arrived in the U.S. from Italy in 1889 as a boy of nine, was deeply committed to his Catholic faith and wanted most in the whole world to be a doctor. He did become a doctor and was in fact the first Italian-American to graduate first in his class from Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1907. With this achievement, he could have practiced medicine anywhere. But he surprised his professors by choosing to return to East Harlem, where he practiced medicine for 57 years among the poor and also worked with the sisters in Mother Cabrini's then new order. He felt called to be a transforming agent in his society and he helped bring people in his community to opportunities in the priesthood, in medicine, and in law. I am proud to be his granddaughter and the granddaughter of his wife Rosa who worked right along beside him all through that epoch and gave his daughter, my mother, and their five other children, 12 years of Catholic education.

Our Catholic faith has also motivated my sense of commitment to the poor. I have been privileged to be a Eucharistic minister for 25 years. And I am proud to be the wife of 32 years of a splendid man who is not a Catholic and the mother of two young people who are. I have lived a very

fortunate life with everything to be grateful for and never enough ways to express that gratitude. I tell you all this as a way of explaining why I was not satisfied to be “only” the president of a highly respected and selective liberal arts college situated on a beautiful hilltop above a troubled city. As the granddaughter of Augusto Rossano, as a Catholic, a wife and a mother, I had to go down the hill.

Connecticut College has been involved in the city of New London for all of the college’s 90 years. We know that one of the volunteer activities of our students in 1915 was in a settlement house called the B. P. Learned House. But over these 90 years New London’s fortunes have been declining while the college’s have been rising. All through the 19th century, the city depended on whaling and in the 20th century on defense spending—particularly building submarines. In recent years, fewer submarines have been built, which meant fewer well-paid blue-collar jobs. New London’s people have experienced profound economic difficulties for the last 50 years and more particularly for the last 30 years. With its high unemployment and very low level of owner occupied housing, New London was only marginally in better shape than the struggling cities of Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven.

The college’s commitment to volunteer service is a great asset to New London and the surrounding communities. Our students do the kinds of things your students do—literacy training, visiting in the prisons, working in early childhood programs and in the schools. We have had a splendid donor, Carolyn Holleran and her husband, Jerry, who have given the college \$1.5 million to start the Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy, to bring together our service learning courses, a whole program in micro-lending and micro-finance, and a set of funded student internships downtown. In other words, the college is an active citizen in New London, just as many of your colleges are in your cities. But times are changing as the song goes. I believe that academic institutions need to change the way they engage their cities, and two changes in particular have occurred that are especially noteworthy.

First, our young people do more volunteer work, and they see first hand the problems of poverty and how poorly most areas are dealing with addressing the needs of economic and social development. More of today’s students, having seen more of the conditions of poverty, having studied service learning courses with us, actually expect us to do as much for others off campus as we do for them and for our own institution. They expect us to be change agents, especially where we can all see the problems first hand. But for the most part, Connecticut College, like most colleges, has been simply patting down the problems in our cities. We have not been making systemic, systematic, and lasting change. We have not exerted ourselves to solve the underlying problems of our cities in the same way we exert ourselves on our campuses to make real success emerge. We have been performing palliation, not transformation. And we have felt comfortable in that role of palliator. Ultimately, the truth is we do not only teach our students in classrooms and laboratories, in libraries, and with technology, but also by example, by how they see us deploy ourselves, how they see us put our personal time and effort at risk for people who cannot stand for themselves. Our students are observing us. They see that for the most part, we make partnerships with those who can benefit our institutions but we do not close the triangle by getting those philanthropies deeply involved with the poor in our own cities.

Second, over the past twenty years, the world has seen a rising global consensus for democracy as the political system of choice and market economies as the economic system of choice. Of course, in both cases these are very broad consensuses with different locally appropriate forms of democracy and market economies developing in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, this is a crucial trend stemming in part from the failure of Communism in so many countries, and in part from the yearning for freedom and opportunity released by the knowledge spread around the world by

technology. Despite the rising global consensus for markets and rising global consensus for democracy, there is no similar clarity, no similar global consensus around the ideal social system. What kind of social system will best support democracy and appropriate forms of market economies and at the same time enable all human beings to experience peace and justice and prosperity, to know the benefits of competition and also of security? Academic institutions with all the knowledge available to us ought to be engaged in experimenting in partnerships with the corporate, government, and non-profit sectors in developing some models of the kind of social system that supports democracy and markets, competition, and security. Where does the system come from if not from people positioned as we are in American society?

These two changes put pressure on colleges to rethink the way we engage our cities. Can we content ourselves to continue to do some fine things in our cities when we have the capacity to do more and influence the possible shape of social system development? My students engaged me in this question and changed my life. This can happen if we really listen to our young people. They call us to be a transforming force, rather than simply a palliating force, in our communities.

In the course I teach, Literature, Service, and Social Reflection, I get a chance to listen deeply to my students. In this service-learning course students read civic and sacred texts on generosity and modern American novels by and about disadvantaged individuals. Each week students also do three hours of community service work with people very much like those they read about in the novels. They reflect and write on the texts—in the books and in the lives they are engaging each week. One day a student in my class asked me, “Why is the college still sending us to literacy programs to teach fifth and sixth graders to read?” I answered, as I think many of you would, that we were responding to a need. These children who still do not read well in fifth grade are primarily low-income children, many of whom have unemployed parents and related economic problems to contend with. The student said, “My older sister went to Connecticut College six years ago. She volunteered at the same school where I am volunteering. In fact, I am working with the younger sibling of the child my sister worked with six years ago.”

My first reaction was: “How wonderful!”

But my student did not agree. “Six years ago, the college knew that there was something wrong,” he said. “We knew that life and the educational system were letting kids get to the fifth grade without learning to read. Why did we not do anything to change the system? Why am I finding six years later this younger child with exactly the same problem as the older sibling had? In those same six years, we have tripled our endowment, built a brand new science building, and started another interdisciplinary academic center. We know how to meet the challenges and opportunities we face on campus. Why do we not use those same strengths to address the challenges in the city?”

Why not indeed? The day I was asked that question turned out to be one of my last carefree days on campus. That day was an annunciation of sorts. All I could think was: How can this be? I know not economic development. But I think that I was called, and all of us are called, to hear these annunciations, not only from the cries of the poor, but from the voices of our own students. In the remainder of this article I will describe what happens when one person in an academic institution tries to hear the call of changing times and new, challenging, and even dangerous roles for us in higher education.

First, I sought the agreement of the trustees that I should see what help the city might use from the college. They agreed that if the city wanted more significant help and I felt I could lead the way, I could proceed. They saw that the college would benefit from a thriving New London rather than continuing to contend with the negative influence of the city, even two miles away. My trustees

understood the importance of deploying the president. If anyone else from the institution replaces the commitment of the president, the clear message to people downtown is that they are not important. They know, as we know, that the institution does not send someone else to meet with the trustees, parents, or major donors. For truly top priority activities, trustees send the president. If the commitment to the city is real, the president must be engaged.

Second, we determined that Connecticut College would not be able to give money to the city but that we would bring other resources. Academic institutions in the United States are among the most privileged institutions in the country. We are connected through deep longstanding relationships both to power and wealth and to poverty and to disadvantage. We are trusted by both sides and by the population in the middle as well. We have the power to be conveners. We have the power to be listeners and planners, and, for those of us blessed by our parents with spiritual faith, we have the power to invest our actions with prayer. We have the resources to create and sustain partnerships. We have the power to connect to our city work some of the philanthropists who give to colleges and universities.

Third, we admitted that the college would grow in strength from this effort. Any improvements in the city would be an advantage to the college. The respect of parents and prospective students would support our admissions. The admiration of alumni would improve their contributions and sense of commitment to the college. New and powerful opportunities for internships and volunteer work would create assets for our students. New candidates for faculty positions might be attracted to a college with such a sense of civic purpose. More faculty and staff might eventually be attracted to live in New London if it were in better shape, if its schools improved. All of these have occurred over the past three years except the last, and it is simply too soon to expect that change. We still have hopes.

And so I began the work of trying to understand what a college and its president could do. I spent a whole summer asking the citizens of New London who were in their 70s and 80s how they thought the college could help, and to a person they said, "Gather leadership. Convene a force that could help us out of the political and economic dead spots we are in." Then I went around and asked successful leaders from entities of all sizes to join with me for one year in a partnership to build up the city. I asked people in big jobs and small jobs and no jobs, people of color, people whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower. The 18 of us had our first meeting on September 19, 1997. We said, "We will stay together for a year and if nothing happens we will disband." We said, "We will focus on the assets of this city. We will not do any more studies. People are sick of studies. We will focus on mobilizing our assets." We had city and state officials there, and they said, "If you will revive this defunct entity, this non-profit New London Development Corporation (NLDC), we will fund a year of staff support time."

What happened next? One of the people I asked to be on the board was George Milne, who was at that time president of Pfizer Central Research in Groton, Connecticut, across the river from New London. He is a board member at Connecticut College. His son was in my class. George Milne commanded a \$3 billion operation, and I asked him to think about a particular New London asset, a 26-acre brownfield on the waterfront. It was a site with great potential and some major drawbacks such as the fact that it bordered a completely dysfunctional and smelly wastewater plant. It was adjacent to a defunct Navy base and to New London's downtown, which was full of empty buildings.

I asked George Milne if Pfizer would be interested in building something on this site. He said, "We are expanding, but we have already narrowed the choice down to two sites. They are both greenfields and right on I-95, and we are planning to build a beautiful research park." I asked Dr.

Milne if he would be willing to help prepare the land plans to market the 26 acres to another Fortune 500 company.

I did not have anything to lose, so I kept pushing. I pointed out the beauty of the waterfront location. I talked about the offices that would have sea views and the ionized ocean air. The great asset this site would be to recruitment of new employees. I tried not to focus on the wastewater treatment plant. Along with Steve Percy, a business leader in town, I kept taking George Milne down to walk the land and we moved ahead preparing it for a corporate site. We began to look at it within the context of the larger area, a peninsula of 90 acres that included a shuttered Navy base, a down-at-the-heels fort that nevertheless dated back to the Revolutionary War, and a down-at-the-heels neighborhood and marina.

To make a long story short, on February 4, 1998, Pfizer announced that it would build a research facility on those 26 areas, creating one million square feet of biotech space. And the governor announced an \$11 million overhaul of the wastewater treatment plant and \$20 million to create the first new state park in 20 years, focused around the old fort. NLDC was put in charge of recovering the Navy base from the Navy. And a municipal development plan was drawn up for redoing the rundown surrounding neighborhood.

Today, all these projects are moving forward. The new Pfizer building is nearly complete. It will create 2100 jobs in New London. Economic experts estimate that each of those jobs will in turn create two more service jobs in the area. An \$18 million park giving citizens access to the ocean all along New London's waterfront was dedicated on June 8, 2001. Work with developers is underway to restore downtown buildings for commercial and residential use. The Fort Trumbull State Park has been opened and universally acclaimed. In addition to Pfizer, \$25 million of new businesses have arrived in New London in the last 14 months. All of this economic development is going to add \$700 million to a tax base that just a few years ago was \$900 million.

At the same time, we are making progress on the social justice side. These initiatives include projects to improve early childhood education, K-12 education, health and wellness, economic opportunity, jobs, housing, and social integration through the arts. We are working on programs to reduce the health problems associated with poverty, to increase home ownership, to provide job training for the jobs we know are coming to the area, and also to create arts events that will attract people from all walks of life and their children, and provide opportunities for them to build reciprocally generous relationships. Together with the economic changes, this is transformation—not palliation.

How do we work in all these important areas at once? The first answer is partnerships, profound and complicated partnerships, that neither the college nor the development corporation necessarily always leads but often takes the initiative to convene. We bring to these partnerships the assets that we are used to employing for the college's interests. These assets include access to expertise, relationships with foundations, connections to people of influence and power, experience in planning and building things. We work closely with city council members, commissions, and state officials. We brought in first class architects, urban planners, and financial advisers. Student internships and a whole set of partnerships involve all three of the colleges in town—Connecticut College, the Coast Guard Academy, and Mitchell College. Faculty research projects, classes, and supervision of summer internships make important contributions. The city's staff, its social service agencies, and its businesses are involved in various ways, as are the town's diverse religious and spiritual communities. With all of the focus on the economic development, the social justice side is just as strong. We work on both and

have brought in partners like Fannie Mae, and Fleet and Citizens Banks, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Second, we work systemically, systematically, and inclusively. The systems are struggling, and sometimes, even broken in our cities—the school systems, the housing systems, the health systems, the systems that sustain businesses and jobs. Each system needs carefully planned support and all systems need support at the same time. There is no use in sequential help—one system after another. People experience the brokenness as destructive in their lives. Consequently, their problems accumulate in such quantity and density that the systems break. We knew we would need to address all the systems systematically and inclusively, which meant working with the leadership of each one, with the recipients, clients, and patients of each one, and with outside support of all kinds—from foundations, experts, and the state and federal government. We knew we would be accused of being overly ambitious—we decided to accept the criticism.

Third, we committed ourselves to hard goals—measurable objectives within clear quality indices and timeframes. It would be better to know where we were falling behind rather than kidding ourselves and others. It was my observation that it is easy to be well meaning and complacent with other peoples' poverty, disappointments, and difficulties. We should pressure ourselves to meet hard goals in this city building just as we would in our work at the college, the businesses or other enterprises represented by volunteers. My inspiration for hard goals was President Kennedy. I think back to the time when he wanted, in the face of the Sputnik challenge, to spur enormous advances in our space program. But he did not say, "I want to see a really, really improved space program sometime soon." He said, "Man on the moon by the end of this decade." That is what I call a hard goal. That means man, not monkey. It means on the moon, not near it. It means ten years, not "whenever." When you really want to make a difference, you need hard goals.

In the campus setting, we all know how to do this. We can say, as we did at Connecticut College, we are launching a \$125 million fundraising campaign. So when we got to \$138 million, we felt terrific. How do you translate this to the social justice setting? In early childhood, we work with all the partners—not just Connecticut College or just Pfizer or just United Way or just specific neighborhood groups—and together we work to create hard goals that are *our* goals, not goals we assign to others. One such hard goal is that in three years all New London children needing beyond-school opportunities (e.g., after-school, Saturday, and summer learning) will have access to quality beyond-school programming. Another hard goal is that over the next five to eight years, all New London children will have access to excellent preschool. Perhaps another hard goal is that the children in the new London's government-funded daycare centers will achieve the same school readiness scores as the children in the Pfizer daycare center. These are hard goals. We know we will not succeed at all of them, but we believe they will help us focus our energies and resources and succeed better than if we did not have them in place.

In conclusion, I would come back to the initial challenge—the challenge of working with the younger generation and beginning to draft models of successful social systems that would work well with democracy and markets. Mort Zuckerman, editor in chief of *U.S. News & World Report* wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that the twenty-first century would be the second American century. He built his argument on the assumption that the twentieth century is called the first American century because the United States was the dominant world power in those hundred years, just as France, Germany, and England dominated in earlier centuries. Zuckerman predicted this second American century based on the lack of a strong military opponent and on the extraordinary economic strength of the U.S.

But I would say to you—that is only part of the story. I would say that the twenty-first century will be known as the second American century because during the next hundred years, the U.S. will create a social system that will truly support the emerging democracies and market economies around the world and that will enable people in all societies to experience prosperity, opportunity, and justice. This work is crucial to sustaining the growing global consensus for democracy and market economies, and it is crucial for sustaining that consensus here in our own country. If this work is not done, then the \$46 trillion intergenerational private wealth transfer that is expected to occur between now and 2050 in the United States is likely to devastate our country, to rend apart the poor and the rich, and to convince large numbers of lower income people that their children will not live better than they are living.

We are in a very important moment now where our dedication needs to match the dedication of the World War II generation, which for me—and for many of you, too—is our parents’ generation. My father was a West Pointer in 1943, and his generation fought the war that Tom Brokaw brought so vividly to life in his book, *The Greatest Generation*. That generation fought to preserve the values in our Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Bill of Rights. Their sacrifices gave us the privilege of building in the last half of this century the nation that we currently enjoy. Now we must find the same level of energy and courage to meet a new challenge, the challenge of transforming our society on behalf of its best self, the self I believe the founding fathers had in mind when they said, “All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Our colleges and universities have always served as “think tanks,” as important generators of ideas and concepts. Now they must become at the same level “do tanks,” not just talking about transformation but playing an active role in it. Without this connection of “think-tank” and “do-tank,” our organizations, which have such enormous intellectual and economic resources at their disposal, will instead prepare the way for a weaker future and generations to come will look back on us as squanderers of opportunity. I believe that leaders of colleges and universities must make this work of the twenty-first century our work. We have an obligation to lead because of who we are and where we are and how we got there. We have to deploy ourselves now as conveners of the partnerships that make all the difference in America’s cities and among her poor. The resources to succeed are available. They need to be deployed courageously.

As people of faith and leaders in higher education, we have a special additional responsibility. We must live as Good Samaritans, keeping in mind that Christ did not tell a parable about a person who gave a great lecture on loving one’s neighbor. We must strive to live at the highest level to which Maimonides called the Chosen People to live. The great Jewish teacher and philosopher laid out eight stages of *Tzedakah*, or generosity. The lowest level of *Tzedakah* is to give little, infrequently, ostentatiously, and with little regard for the recipient. The seventh level is to give generously, frequently, anonymously, and respectfully. But the eighth level is something different. The eighth and highest level of generosity occurs when the donor enters into a partnership with the recipient. As academic institutions, we have an obligation to create true partnerships for and with the disadvantaged. We must remember that call of the prophet in Deuteronomy: “Justice only justice that you may thrive.” Prosperity is linked to making justice really happen. We have the capacity to draw our corporate and non-profit partners to different levels of engagement with this kind of systemic, systematic, comprehensive, and inclusive economic and social change.

In these new dedications, we will be inspiring the work of this new generation and drafting in our lives versions of a social system that is sustainable—supportive of democracy and markets, but also of a just and fulfilling life for all. We are blessed in this country. We have blessings that we owe back.

We find ourselves in a unique position to hear the words of Jeremiah, who said, “Build cities and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. Make the well being of the city your concern and the city will create your well being.”