Newtonian Academics and the Conservation of Jesuit Momentum

The Jesuit education is something more than higher education. It is the result of those priests who knew that without rigorous academic training, faith would ultimately become separated from reason. And so even though the Jesuits had no grand plan in the beginning to create a vast network of top notch schools, it happened anyway - the same way gravity seems to form the order of space without explicitly intending to do so. I use the term gravity because truly, the education I received at Wheeling Jesuit pulled me against my will to become something more than I was ever intended for. So with that, I just want to tell you my story and how I was dragged kicking and screaming through the academic door as a sort of proof of the existence of this power of Jesuit education.

Now…I was a computer science major, and I eventually went into a career that took great advantage of my degree, but what I’m going to talk about today is the core curriculum. Although we sometimes see it as just a hurdle that we have to get over to get back to our classes within our major, it is the core curriculum that changed my entire perspective on learning and education. So here is my little story on how the gravity of the Jesuits grand plan in the 16th century took hold of me.

In high school, I truly was an intellectual bum. I did the absolute bare minimum of work to get by. I can’t recall of a single time that I studied for a test, and homework was a compulsion only occasioned by a red bold faced warning of failure and point deductions. I got B’s, and that was good enough for me.

By 11th grade I already had a job fixing computers at an accounting firm, and I had no interest in going to college. I was making more money than all of my friends and the technology sector was on the upswing of the “dot com bubble”. What did I need college for? Senior year went by and halfway through, my parents began turning up the “you’re going to college” lectures. At this time, my mother got an application to Wheeling Jesuit College, basically filled it out for me, had me sign it, and in the mail it went. That was the extent of my college search.

Eventually I got the drift that all of my friends would be shipping off to one college or another, and my circle of hangouts would essentially be a wasteland at the end of summer. I was thankfully accepted to Wheeling, and I begrudgingly moved in at the end of August in 1997. I still had no idea how serious these Jesuit professors were, and I was positioned, academically, like a broken down car on the tracks of a barreling freight train. Almost simultaneously, I received D’s or Fs on my first papers due in my first classes of the first semester. I used to get B’s for just staying awake, now I was putting in a slight amount of effort, and I couldn’t manage anything more than embarrassing red inked comments in the top margin of my papers. I was running in a marathon without having even walked a single training mile. But I wasn’t just getting poor grades…I was also perceiving something very new, these professors were actually disappointed in me. I could see in their faces that they knew I wasn’t reading the material, I wasn’t prepared for class, I couldn’t engage in debates and I was more of a nuisance than a presence in class.
Soon we had our 1st semester freshmen academic review. I had a stellar 1.8 GPA. I was told I would be asked to leave if I couldn’t bring it up to a 2.0 by the end of the year. This was a shocking moment in my life. I realized that I would be physically removed from my new home because I couldn’t perform academically. It seemed too embarrassing to even contemplate. I began reading, and I brought my grades up slightly – just enough to keep my residence. That first summer, all I could think about was how much these priests and lay professors wanted out of us. I knew I had upset most of them, and I was at a crossroads.

My history course was with Dr. Cox, who is no longer here. He demanded so much attention. His academic background was the history of Eastern Europe. He basically wrote “THE book” on the history of Serbia. I thought... what it would take in terms of experiences and academic rigor to write a book on the history of an entire culture - to speak their language. I began to see that this Jesuit school didn’t just want correct answers on quizzes, it wanted total immersion in academia. At that point, I simply didn’t have what it took yet, but I began to feel the forces at work. I at least had a glimpse of the stairs I was expected to ascend.

I then had to select religion and philosophy courses. I wanted something off the beaten path, and so I took Fr. Steltenkamp’s Native American Indian Religions. I finally entered a class with a notebook, and I was actually prepared to discuss the required texts BEFORE class. Before we even began, Fr. Steltenkamp told us his story of slowly developing a love for learning. He explained that he never saw himself as someone who was going to have a PHD, but his experiences, and no doubt, the Jesuit compulsion, pushed him far beyond where he ever envisioned himself. The way he explained his humble beginnings as a teacher to then having written two books. Black elk, holy man of the Oglala Sioux and Nicholas Black Elk. This was not just an academic writing, but a culmination of intense research and real life experience with the Lakota Sioux people on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. He wrote a book that changed the way people thought about an historical figure. This had a profound effect on how I saw my own abilities at this compact but amazing college in the mountains. I saw that I could be someone who both wanted to learn, and someone who was good at learning. At this point, I had shed my academic laziness. The skin of apathy no longer fit.

By my junior year, I started taking classes with all the professors that everyone feared. I was hooked. The Jesuit excellence in education had revealed itself to me through the methods and discipline of the professors. I was speaking up in class, I was debating with a modicum of logical acumen, and finally, I was getting A’s. The more credits I loaded up in my schedule, the better and better my GPA was getting. I made the deans list several times.

In my senior year I think I took around 40 credits. I gobbled up every required text. I felt more and more confident with every paper I had written. Now... when I tell you I graduated with a 3.01, it really is a modest accomplishment. Particularly in a room full of top notch students (today) competing academically, but for me, it was a seemingly insurmountable goal two years prior to graduation - and I owed that effort to the Jesuit educational plan, that is, to demand excellence in mind, body and spirit.
At graduation I stood proudly with my class, and yes, a huge part of my pride was due to just graduating on time, which was seriously in jeopardy after dropping out of a few courses in the first year and a half. But I was also proud because I knew at that moment of accepting my diploma, I earned every square inch of that paper. But I also felt something else at graduation. I felt as though I really wasn’t done with this learning business... in fact, it might just be the beginning.

I was hired a few months after graduation at PPG Industries in Pittsburgh in the computer operations department. I really enjoyed the challenges, and I advanced quickly within the company. However, I missed the academic challenges. I missed the debates in class. I actually missed reading the selected texts. Was I just missing the comforts of college? The camaraderie? The simplicity and regularity of a syllabus and a book list? I think it was more than that. The Jesuit education I had opened my eyes to the simple virtue of never wanting to stop learning. After six years into my job, I realized that I absolutely need to go back to school. I had no idea what I would study, but I knew I had it in me to go after an advanced degree.

I took the law school entrance exam, scored reasonably well, and I was admitted into the evening program at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. The evening was my only option because I had to maintain my full time employment at PPG to support my family. Now, I would be completely off the mark if I didn’t take a moment to acknowledge that at this time, my wife Melanie endured 1. A decision to go back to school full time in the evening, while we had our first child, and 2. A decision to ultimately leave gainful full time employment at the end of law school and begin something completely new. Without her sacrifices, it wouldn’t have been possible, and so we have to remind ourselves that our accomplishments are nothing without those who came before us, and those around us.

I began law school, and still with a lot of momentum to learn, I dove into my classes. I started out a bit rocky, but my determination combined with the skills of learning that I developed at wheeling, gave me the raw materials to make a go of it with this law business. Just like learning the basics of bricklaying, you cannot just give someone a trowel, you have to show them how to hold it, you have to show them how to plumb, you have to explain that if it’s too hot, the mortar will cure too quickly. Similarly, wheeling said wait a minute on the trowel…. Let’s first train your soul to want to learn.

I immersed myself into my studies (at Duquesne), and once again, I was loading up with additional credits and I was taking the professors that struck fear in the heart of man, and I was distinguishing myself among my peers. It wasn’t raw brain power... it was an academic rhythm...a “learning tuning fork” if you will, that was still ringing from that day of graduation here in wheeling in 2001. In my junior year, I wrote a simple letter to the academic dean at Duquesne law. I explained that I got almost straight A’s the last two semesters, and some sort of scholarship would be a big help. I received an equally brief letter notifying me that my last year and a half of school would be free. At that moment, I knew I had made something of myself. I had become the polar opposite of that academic bum that I used to be. 10 years prior to that moment, the academic dean at Wheeling told me I might have to pack up my bags and leave ...and now, an academic dean was investing in me. The financial benefit was completely secondary. Having the word “scholarship” anywhere near me was elating.
I am now a practicing criminal defense attorney. I get to use all of the academic skills I've learned in my education years every day of my life. I owe a major part of it to my education here at Wheeling Jesuit. It was the professors that made a difference.

Thank you for inviting me back.