Contribution to the Jesuit Networking Workshop at Boston College

Chris Lowney, April 2012

"Can we…reorganize and re-imagine ourselves so that we can more effectively realize the universality which has always been part of Ignatius' vision of the Society." [Fr. Nicolás, Mexico City]

"It is as a worldwide community, and, simultaneously, as a network of local communities that we seek to serve others around the world." [GC 35]

I applaud this vision. The payoff will be extraordinary if Jesuits, their lay colleagues, and their students, graduates, parishioners, and others in hundreds of institutions can be galvanized in concrete ways around a shared sense of mission.

This universal sense of mission is the "end"; more effective networking is one important "means" to achieving the end. Instilling the more expansive sense of mission, which will not be easy, is key to achieving the more inventive networking that is desired. Jesuit institutions and individuals already do lots of networking: note the myriad Jesuit-related groups on Facebook and other social media, dozens of established networks and conferences, and so on. Individuals and institutions within the network typically connect in narrowly traditional ways (eg. I am a Fordham graduate looking to connect with other fellow graduates; or, I am a Boston College librarian looking to exchange best practices with other Jesuit college librarians).

This "transactional" networking is valuable and to be encouraged, but the above-quoted documents imagine a leap from transactional to "transformational" networking, where Jesuit institutions and individuals in them understand themselves as participating in a greater Jesuit mission that transcends the boundaries of their school or country, and are willing to lend their talent, time, or treasure as part of this broader mission.

This new way of working holds vast promise: I can think of no organization that combines a similar global reach, array of resources and skills, and contacts among the very poor and the very rich. But the network is at present extremely weak and its promise largely untapped (each of us will think of wonderful examples to contradict this assertion, but I would suspect that all the positive examples account for a fairly minimal percentage of the network's consolidated time and treasure; and I'm sure that most individuals in Jesuit institutions think of themselves as part of that particular institution, but not as part of a "universal body with a universal mission.") To turn the vision to reality will involve a profound change from the status quo, and fundamental culture change requires strong leadership and sustained, imaginative effort. Essential to success will be to attack this not as a discrete "project" to create some networking tools, but as a broader "culture change" effort with a strategy and sustained involvement from management of the Society at all levels.

Because the conference mandate is to surface ideas, I offer some specific ones below, but with some hesitation: the following are not intended as a menu or laundry list, but as ideas that might be included in a strategy for creating the purpose, knowledge, and access that are vital to a successful networking "ecosystem." That is, individuals within the Jesuit world must know why networking is important and what the Society hopes to achieve (purpose), must understand the scope and resources of the global network (knowledge), and must have access to others within the network. When this "ecosystem" is established through "top down" effort and nurturing, there is much better chance that good networking will begin to flourish horizontally.

Many of the below ideas refer to "the Society," by which I mean individuals such as Fr. General and Curia, Assistancy heads, Provincials, and heads of ministries, working collaboratively: the leadership group needs to deliver and reinforce the message, or else there will be little hope of response at ground level:

- The Society (at its various leadership levels) must inspire imagination and win buy-in by talking regularly about the scope of the global Jesuit network, by sharing success stories, and by inviting others to become involved in various ways.

- The Society needs to create online "roadmaps." I don't know of any one website where an individual could find out everything the Society is doing around the world, or even in his or her own country, or, in some cases, in his or her own city! Similarly, a "clearinghouse" of networks is needed to help interested individuals find their way to relevant groups (networks are proliferating within the Society around the world, but it is very hard for even motivated individuals to become aware of most of these)

- Every new hire (and new student?) orientation at a Jesuit institution should include an overview of Jesuit ministries around the world (in other words, lay colleagues should understand they are joining something larger than their own school or work)

- A global email directory/catalogus should be established so that Jesuits can find their colleagues around the world more easily (as I understand it, individual Jesuits don't have ready access to this information now? Ideally, lay colleagues in institutions might also be included in such directories, but this is probably a bridge too far at the outset).

- The large, separately-incorporated institutions (eg, the big universities in the US) need particular attention for any strategy to succeed. They have lots of resources and lots of individuals of goodwill, but they also exert enormous centripetal force on alumni and resources.

- The Society needs avenues to "broadcast" to its network in Jesuit institutions (and, ideally, to its graduates as well). That is, employees of a Jesuit university receive regularly receive email and other news about what is happening in their own school; they should similarly receive news about what is happening in the Society more broadly

- The Society also needs to be able to "broadcast" (or narrowcast) invitations to collaborate on priorities. On the one hand, the Society must be willing to say to its network in a fairly concrete way, "Hey, here are some important priorities where we could use some help, ideas, time, prayers, or resources." And, correspondingly, Jesuit institutions must be willing to let their staff (and graduates!) hear these messages. I would bet, for example, that there are willing staff and alumni volunteers around the network who could help the Society tackle its ten thorniest or most-under-resourced needs. The problem: there is no way of speaking to the millions of graduates, staff, parishioners, etc and informing them of these needs.

- The Society needs to catalyze greater interaction "at the seams," (i.e. not just "US college librarians meet US college librarians," but also: "US librarian meets African librarian," or "Mexico expert on migrant workers meets interested alumni of Jesuit schools in New York"). In-person meetings can be expensive, so the Society needs to role-model technologies that can help (webinars, listservs, etc, etc).

- The Society will need to find and celebrate some "easy wins." Ambitious culture change is very difficult to sustain. In the beginning, no one knows what to do "at the seams," and within a year, the effort starts to feel like a waste of time. Leadership needs to combat this tendency by sharing examples that have succeeded, and by constantly priming the pump: conceiving and seeding small networked projects that will help build a feeling of momentum until the culture takes hold

- The Society will need a networking-technologies strategy in order to accomplish some of the above. The Jesuit Commons website was a "1.0" version of some of this. A "skunk works," that is, a motivated, cross-functional project team, could be convened to envision and deliver a web 2.0 presence for the Society, across its various platforms.

- Graduates of Jesuit universities are a key and woefully under-exploited resource (beyond the borders of their own alma mater). Another "skunk works" team could brainstorm ways to better network graduates at local and international levels (eg a more vibrant WUJA or equivalent), and to help counter the centripetal force of the home institution.

Finally, the effort should be fun. People should feel as if they are creating something ambitious and new. There will be lots of false starts, and tolerance for failure and an appetite for prudent risk are important.