

Student/Faculty Research: St. La Salle Would Approve

James A. Butler, Ph.D., '67

LA SALLE UNIVERSITY (“WHERE TEACHING COMES FIRST”) honors in its name the patron saint of teaching. What, then, in the name of Saint John Baptist de La Salle could the editors of this magazine be thinking in highlighting research, that legendary antithesis to teaching, that notorious culprit in undermining personal contacts between university educators and their students?

Of course, any 10-year-old sitting at the computer and googling “frog” (or, more likely, “cyberspace”) intuitively recognizes that research is essential for learning. And no one wants a teacher who simply mutters on for decades from those increasingly brittle graduate school notes. Far better it is for that teacher to be engaged in research of some sort, to be energized by new ideas and theories, perhaps even to be active in creating them.

Nevertheless, John Baptist de La Salle was a practical educator and did not have much interest in either theory or research. But it is, I think, the wrong approach to try to match everything that we do in a 21st-century university in Philadelphia to Saint La Salle’s experiences in teaching pre-college-age students in 17th-century France. We might as well speculate what he would think of the Eiffel Tower—or of Terrell Owens.

We should instead consider the Lasallian tradition as it has developed over the last three centuries. Brother Emery Mollenhauer, our former provost and now a professor of English, has written that the most distinctive characteristic of Lasallian identity over time has been “association or partnership or brotherhood (and of course by ‘brotherhood’ here I intend the concept that includes sisterhood).” Moreover, that collaboration among everyone engaged at all levels of the educational enterprise is non-hierarchical: followers of Saint La Salle are called “brothers,” not “fathers.” What is especially Lasallian is structuring educational experiences in a collaborative mode.

When the University asked me to attend national meetings to determine how we might encourage more faculty-student partnerships in research, many people whom I met indicated that we would fail. No faculty, I was told, with our “heavy teaching loads” (their words; most La Salle faculty I know think of “teaching opportunities”)

would take on the extra work. Not only that: The amount of money we proposed to pay faculty mentors was thought by people at other institutions to be laughably puny. I thanked those people for their views, but I also knew what my La Salle colleagues could and would do.

This issue of the magazine provides details about just a few of the many La Salle faculty members and students who have happily and fruitfully worked together on research projects. I must admit, though, that I did receive comments about those tiny faculty stipends; my colleagues expressed surprise that they were paid anything at all for this splendid opportunity to join with students in collaborative research. A number of these activities have produced joint publications or conference papers; in the Lasallian non-hierarchical spirit, students—at faculty insistence—have at times been listed as principal or sole authors. Through such research experiences, participating students experience the thrill of experiential, or experimental, or scholarly discovery, and faculty members teach students one at a time.

Our research model thus promotes, rather than limits, personal interactions between the older adults and the younger adults who together engage in the continuing mission of the De La Salle Christian Brothers. In too many institutions, research has become like the imperious conductor of the orchestra; at La Salle, research is increasingly a faculty-student ensemble (with an occasional bravura solo). I can almost hear that practical educator, John Baptist de La Salle, applauding.

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La Salle University Provost Richard Nigro, Ph.D. (left), awards the Faculty Distinguished Scholar Award to James A. Butler, Ph.D., '67, at the University's recent Honors Convocation.

