A Christian university must take into account the gospel preference for the poor.
This does not mean that only the poor will study at the university;
It does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence--
excellence which is needed in order to solve complex social issues of our time.
What it does mean is …
that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed:
to provide science for those without science;
to provide skills for those without skills;
to be a voice for those without voices;
to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic
qualifications to make their rights legitimate

From “The Task of a Catholic University,” a speech delivered at Santa Clara University on June 12, 1982 by Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J.

This statement was written by the President of “Universidad Centroamericana” (UCA), a Jesuit University in El Salvador in 1982. A philosopher and theologian, Ellacuria and his community were a defining factor in the implementation of the educational mission of the University. For this they died. On November 16, 1989, at age 59, he was assassinated with 5 colleagues and two employees by soldiers of the Salvadorian army. One could say that they gave their lives for what they really believed to be essential.

Their story and his ideas about the mission of a University, brings us to the heart of “our essential question: “As members of a Lasallian university community, what is our moral obligation to promote economic justice in our city, in our country and in the global community to which we are inevitably tied?”

It is not my intention to give a definition of what I mean by economic justice. I will speak about the essential question from the perspective of what has been my specific field of research: Lasallian studies. From that standpoint and horizon, I will examine the significance of the essential question.

My plan is as follows:

- A contemporary Lasallian story of compassion and justice in today’s world
- De la Salle’s story
- Our story
I. A contemporary story: The Luurnpa Catholic School and Wirrimanu Adult education center … a parable.

The context: aborigines in Australia and European education: as children, they were separated from their parents and culture. They were subject to economic injustice and cultural disintegration. They were a “lost generation.” What was the impact on their dignity as a human person, on their rights and responsibilities?

The actors: Brother Leo Scollen with two brothers, two sisters of Mercy and two lay teachers, the Wirrimanu aboriginal community at Balgo in 1982

Location: Balgo Hills, some 285 kms. south of Halls Creek, in the remote Kimberly region of western Australia.

Their needs: limited prospects for permanent employment, overcrowded housing, poor literacy and numeracy, limited health and educational prospects, limited government services, endemic alcohol and drug abuse, and other issues related to isolation and remoteness.

The purpose: to create a school which they named “Luurnpa Catholic School” (Luurnpa is the red rumped Kingfisher, the dreaming bird central to the life and culture of the Kutjungka.

The structure: literacy through Kukatja language and culture.

The story: to save their language:

  - kids identified the image and the word is written phonetically.

  Then the kids bring their written sheets for validation by the elders in the community.

  The adults authorize the inclusion of the word in a dictionary for the Kukatja language.

Here we see the patient labor of research conducted by linguists, social workers, anthropologists and educators. It is difficult to imagine what went through their minds and hearts during those years of accumulated wisdom.

What were the characteristics of this research?

- It was community based research. Collaborative research designed and conducted by experts, students and elders in the community. Not a research on the community but a research for and with the community.

- Research that generated new knowledge. A new knowledge that led to excellence in teaching.

- Research and teaching with the capability to create social change, transformation and advancement. In the process they developed social responsibility, dignity, participation, habits of discipline and work.

The story keeps unfolding today. You can find more about it at www.Luurnpa.wa.edu.aus.

This story raised for me a number of issues regarding education when I first visited Balgo. This story continues to question my understanding of what I consider to be essential in the Lasallian educational mission.
For Leo and his colleagues what really mattered was neither a theory nor a pedagogical approach. Because at the heart of the theory and the pedagogy that they were discovering, there were real faces and voices of real people. There were the children, the elders, the adults and families in the aboriginal community. They are the ones who gave a living impetus to the research and the resolve to action.

Their pondering and the response of that Lasallian community to their own essential question had names and faces, a lesson to take for us.

II. De La Salle’s story

In 17th century France

The story of De La Salle and his associated Brothers starts with the recognition of dramatic need.

The needs of the artisans and the poor, children abandoned to themselves, of youth roaming the streets, acquiring habits that would be difficult to eradicate or correct in the future. As a result, the lack of practical knowledge and skills for life led these people to a marginal place, a place without voice, without work, alienated and marginalized in society, without a future. That is to say, without salvation, i.e. without life. As a result of economic injustice, workers engaged in menial and insecure jobs, the poor and their children found themselves increasingly powerless and unable to grow and develop.

In his formative years, De La Salle had been far removed from that reality. Immersed in a social class with prestige and financial security he appropriated the heritage of the catholic intellectual tradition. Through a medieval curriculum, he studied the classic languages (Latin, Greek) literature and philosophy as a foundation for his future studies in theology in two universities, Reims and Sorbonne.

He therefore had to read the Classics, and followed the course of studies determined by the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy), using classic methods of learning (translations, debates, and presentations). In general, we can affirm that in his formative years as a university student, he was totally disconnected from the reality as experienced by the majority of people in France.

His gradual immersion in the life and culture of the poor is going to transform him in ways that he could have not imagined.

His association with a group of teachers, who begin to call themselves Brothers, over the years, led him to a radical option for the poor. In his forties, he made the commitment to associate himself with the Brothers in order to keep together and by association gratuitous schools for those who were most vulnerable and abandoned. Especially for them, they created a network which they called the Society of the Christian schools. These schools were unlike any existing schools of the time.

Rather than repeating the curriculum, and pedagogy of his youthful years, De La Salle and his first Brothers developed their own curriculum. They examined the greatest obstacles preventing the students from learning. Interestingly, they chose to teach their students in their own language. Under the leadership of De La Salle, together they managed the development of their educational project.

Recent scholarly research on the sources of some of the writings of De La Salle (and in particular of his book: The Conduct of the Christian Schools), indicate that no practices were introduced
and nothing was ever taught and included in their manuals without the experimentation, successful experience and systematic and critical examination by the best teachers. Best practices.

De La Salle read extensively the authors of his times so that could speak with authority about education, schools, pedagogy, catechetics and spirituality. But most important, he kept his eyes open on the book of life, the life of the community and those they were trying to serve.

It is safe to affirm that their research was conducted in pre-scientific times, before the rise of Psychology, Sociology, Pedagogy and scientific methods of research. But it is also clear that this research was community based, conducted in collaboration with the Brothers and families, aiming at the transformation of the community and for the advancement of each student: giving new life.

The Christian perspective was explicit: “I have come to give life in abundance.” However, it is important to note that these first schools of the Brothers were not aiming exclusively at an “other-worldly” salvation, but at a salvation from oppression, from the lack of dignity and a salvation for their useful incorporation in society. Academic excellence and order, curriculum and methods, were not invented in a vacuum. With these skills and tools, the Brothers were ready to create social change, contributing to the transformation of society and working for the common good and the advancement of the poor.

Thus, this typically Lasallian kind of active research generated new knowledge that had an impact in teaching and a direct application in society. This kind of research has a practical knowledge of life.

The contemporary story of Brother Leo in Australia resonates with the foundational story of De La Salle. Central to both stories, there seems to be a compassionate empathy rooted in a vision of faith and a passionate love for the poor. The fundamental question -- the essential question in both stories -- does not emerge as a theoretical and abstract inquiry about justice, or any of the themes of catholic social teaching for that matter.

The essential question certainly challenges and critiques our pedagogical approaches. But most significantly, the essential question in the Lasallian tradition should bring us to the heart of the lives of those who are most vulnerable and who face critical economic challenges in our neighborhood, our city, our country, in the world.

III. The essential question for us today at La Salle University

Each one of us is called to answer the question from the perspectives of our own specific academic discipline.

The essential question does not invite us to abdicate our mission of academic excellence, excellence which, in fact, is needed in order to solve complex social issues of our times.

| We must ask ourselves these two questions: |
| Are we intellectually present where we are most needed? |
| Regarding our pedagogical approach and our scientific research, are they providing science for those without science, skills for those without skills? |
Are they giving a voice to those without voice, i.e. an intellectual support to those who do not have a face, who have no recognition in society?

In conclusion, at the very center of the essential question, we -- as faculty and students together -- we are ultimately led to live in compassionate and effective solidarity with those more dramatically affected by economic injustice.

Disconnected from them, our conversation on the essential question will become abstract theory without power. In the Lasallian tradition, the conversation is not sustained by lofty thoughts and brilliant theories.

In the Lasallian tradition, we begin to address the essential question as a learning and serving community when, from the particular perspective of our academic disciplines, we take a closer look at the needs of those who are most vulnerable: to put a human face on those in need.

*We cannot do everything, but there is a sense of liberation in realizing this.*

*This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning a step along the way, and opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and to do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master-builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*

*Archbishop Oscar Romero*