

# ‘Without a Vision, the People Perish’ *Lessons from Wheeling*

By Jessica Wrobleski

**When I last** wrote for *Conversations* (September 2016), I offered a hopeful spin on the purchase of Wheeling Jesuit University by the Diocese of Wheeling Charleston (DWC). As I write today, it is evident how tragically misplaced such hopes were. In April of 2019, the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus announced it would end its affiliation with the university after the administration eliminated numerous departments and its service programs following a declaration of financial exigency. The school will operate as Wheeling University in 2019-20 thanks to a \$2-million gift from the DWC.

So, what happened? And are there lessons that other Jesuit institutions might carry forward from Wheeling—particularly as a way of deepening the conversation around *cura apostolica* as the last issue of this magazine invited us to do?

The first question is difficult to answer because of the complexity of the story and the lack of transparency that marks the school’s history. Some of the obscurity is due to the way in which WJU was bound up in the unfolding scandals in the DWC and its af-

filiate, Wheeling Hospital. But while the 2017 restructuring of WJU may have signaled the end of the Jesuits’ educational mission in West Virginia, such an arrangement would not have been necessary were it not for many years of mismanagement. In my view, however, the most serious problem for WJU was the lack of a consistent vision for the school.

Following the 2017 buyout, which made the bishop the “sole member of the corporation,” it became even less clear what vision was guiding the school. Although a Declaration of Shared Purpose was signed by representatives of the Society of Jesus and the Diocese, the Jesuits had effectively lost control of the school by the end of 2016. The board hired Dr. Debra Townsley to facilitate a financial turnaround in 2017. In addition to cuts to programs and personnel, handbooks were revised to effectively eliminate shared governance, and the board itself was restructured to approximately half its former size. In July 2018, Townsley resigned unexpectedly and Dr. Michael P. Mihalyo was selected as the university’s new president within a month—with al-



most no involvement from the WJU community. In a strange inaugural address, Mihalyo stated ominously that because of the changes in the higher education world “there are some institutions that will fail.” He continued to say, “I don’t feel particularly comfortable proclaiming my vision for the future” of Wheeling Jesuit University, but “we have a great deal to do in a short amount of time” to allow the school to make the changes that would be necessary for it to move forward. As I left the ceremony, I couldn’t help but think of the biblical proverb “without a vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). It had long seemed to many faculty and staff that as an institution, WJU simply did not have a strong sense of what it was supposed to be.

While I haven’t even scratched the surface of this story, I’d like to turn to the matter of what any of this might have to say to other Jesuit schools. Whether they are those, like WJU, who struggle along with the struggling places they are located, or those more affluent institutions that may find it difficult to pursue excellence without elitism, I believe that all would be well-advised to give thought to the following.

First, transparency and shared governance are crucial to long-term success. Sharing information and seeking input from stakeholders regarding important decisions are not simply nice ideals, they are best practices. Boards and administrators should keep the lines of communication open, to share information forthrightly, and respond meaningfully to the questions and concerns of those within a university community.

Second, I think the WJU story calls for attention to the costs and benefits of partnerships. I am aware that this is not simple when the acceptance of a large monetary gift may seem to be necessary to a school’s survival, or attractive in terms of building prestige. But perhaps this is an opportunity to think seriously about building partnerships among Jesuit institutions as an expression of *cura apostolica*, so there is less temptation to turn to partners who may not share the same values. We were told on many occasions that WJU would have closed without the money from the DWC, and so we should be grateful and accept whatever changes or cuts were required. I am not trying to deny the truth of that claim, but rather to suggest that gratitude needn’t mean ab-

solute submission—and perhaps institutional survival is not an end in itself.

This brings me to my final point: “without a vision, the people perish.” Jesuit schools have a gift in the recently adopted Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, which can serve to orient and guide a vision that is rooted in Ignatian spirituality and committed to walking with the poor and marginalized, accompanying young people on a journey of hope, and caring for creation. I am acutely aware of how the challenges of higher education will tempt many smaller, tuition-dependent schools to abandon a distinctive mission in order to be more “marketable,” while more prestigious institutions can treat these apostolic preferences as icing on a perfectly good cake rather than the core of their identity. But I am convinced that the future is in leaning into our distinctive—and sometimes countercultural—identity, not in diluting it.

One of the most tragic things about the loss of Wheeling Jesuit is how students, faculty and staff truly embraced the work of seeking justice and finding God in Appalachia, and how much good was done there—often in spite of the institution. Visitors from the Maryland Province, Jesuit novices, and others from across the AJCU would regularly observe that WJU’s ongoing work in Appalachia as “what the Society ought to be doing”—and yet Jesuits on campus would often note with frustration that many of their brothers did not want to be assigned to WJU because of its lack of prestige and its reputation as an unsophisticated backwater that was incidental to the vision of Jesuit education in America. I hope that moving forward, the Society and the AJCU will attend to its own poor and marginalized, and not only its “flagship” institutions, as a way of envisioning a more hopeful future for all.

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