

ITEST Member Spotlight

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On my last day as an undergraduate, I sat in a grassy quad under the spring sun and heard a commencement speaker offer a vision for interdisciplinary education. “The biologist should be talking to the psychologist. The business expert should be talking to the chemist. The art historian should be talking to the mathematician.” I thought – “Where was this message for the last four years?”

As a math major, my favorite course had been “Art and Civilization”; two semesters of a professor putting works of art on the screen, and asking, “What does this work say about what it means to be human?” (An upper-level course in advanced calculus came in second in the favorites list.)

There were certainly instincts in many professors and students and course commitments that crossed specialties and invited big questions and collaboration. But the ethos of the campus was to dig in and master a particular area. Do research. Succeed? Zero in and master the trail.

Later graduate work in theology, a decade as a Campus Minister at Saint Louis University, and eventually the chance to teach full time in the Department of Theology Studies at SLU has given me the opportunity and the great grace to ask my students to think of connections between areas of study, especially between faith and reason, and most excitedly, the relationship of science and religion.

I find in many students an almost audible sigh of relief in their reflection papers and conversations, when they understand that they do not have to choose between the pew and the lab bench. (If pressed on this, many will choose the lab.) A lot of voices in our culture tell them they cannot have both commitments. I introduce them to the cottage industry of authors and programs where robust study and interactions are taking place, to support and nurture their faith-based worldview and their commitment to science. Teaching historical foundations for key issues helps them see what was actually at stake in the Galileo case, and in Darwin’s impact. I invite them to see the foundations that believers in God offered for the rise of science in the west. I invite them to overcome cliches and assumptions and ask the real questions they have. In this sort of work, we can show our students that sophisticated questions and challenges can be handled in an informed, deep way. Myths can be debunked. We can show that a nuanced way of reading scripture, with awareness of its historical context, and its power to invite the understanding that the living God is involved in creation and history with strength and truth and mercy, is a deep part of our tradition.

Along the way, key professors in undergraduate and graduate studies have supported me, as my colleagues do now. And some invited me to join ITEST. Charles Ford, the mathematician who I knew on two campuses and remained friends with, invited me to get involved. I had several chances to meet Fr. Bob Brungs, SJ, and be drawn by his invitation and work. I owe much to the example and energy of Sr. Marianne Postiglione and Sr. Carla Mae Streeter. Being part of a Jesuit university has deeply nurtured the approach to science and religion that allows me to work and think and teach.

I have a one-minute reflection I offer my students. As they are tempted or goaded to think that faith and science do not get along, I put a picture on the screen of SLU’s hospital on South Grand. “Ever heard of something called a ‘Catholic hospital?’” (They have.) What do you figure

goes on in there? Dancing around the bed, chanting? Burning of incense? Actually, I was in the place, and it was full of MRI machines, scientists, pharmacy resources, labs ... and a chapel. There are people who go into both the faith and science spots. So why do people think they have to choose one over the other?

I am privileged to be part of vital conversations as my students prepare for their own future work.

Now for a true confession. I am a lousy ITEST member when it comes to showing up at things. I haven't been to a conference for a while. But I am deeply enriched by membership and its resources and support. I find ITEST's publications vital. The connections I still have with members help me know that the *Ekklesia* is wide and committed to exciting study and witness.

I find that all of my own questions, struggles, study, and ongoing conversations have given me a vocation.