

## Report: The 2018 Vincentian Innovation Summit

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# REPORT: THE 2018 VINCENTIAN INNOVATION SUMMIT

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As we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st Century, global societies continue to face complex social challenges. Contemporary concepts of “innovation” are being used as frameworks for universities, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses as they address crucial issues such as poverty, healthcare, education, employment, etc. (Agola & Awange, 2014; Gigliotti, 2012, Fall; Lindskog & Hemphälä, 2017, January; Mirvis & Googins, 2018). Given its Vincentian Mission, St. John's University (SJU) is well-positioned to contribute to the discourse on innovations and social entrepreneurship that promote human flourishing (St. John's University, 2018), and many members of the SJU research community use innovative models in their work (Gevorkian, 2013; Maslak, 2018; Villalón, 2010).

On April 17, 2018, St. John's University hosted its first Vincentian Innovation Summit on its Queens, New York campus. The theme was “Advancing Lives of Dignity Through Our Values”. The Summit was well-attended by students, faculty, administrators, and staff from a variety of disciplines as well as members of the

business community. Presentations and discussions focused on enhancing professional preparation for university students, novel ways of applying digital healthcare technology in both education and clinical settings, and the general evolution of innovative thinking at SJU. This article summarizes highlights of the Summit.

After an invocation led by Michael Cummins, CM, Patrick Griffin, CM, Executive Director of the Vincentian Center for Church and Society, set the Vincentian context for the Summit with his opening remarks. Fr. Griffin noted that St. Vincent de Paul demonstrated innovative, analytical thinking in his efforts to improve healthcare, education, and peacebuilding in 17th century France, a time of profound poverty and social and political instability. Vincent believed that the indigent suffered more from a lack of organized

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poverty interventions than a lack of charity. Along with his followers, he developed active, novel ways of organization that included successfully involving and collaborating with various strata of French society (including the nobility and laywomen) to address challenges faced by the impoverished. Vincent also insisted that those who joined his movement work with underprivileged

populations in active partnership, emphasizing a respect for individuals' dignity and efficacy that was inspired by the Gospels. Fr. Griffin noted Vincent's attitudes toward "the poor" were based on his innovative stances, and Vincent's examples of innovative analysis, organization, collaboration, creativity, and compassion continue to inspire the St. John's University community as well as other Vincentian communities to this day.

At the first session of the Summit (*Improving Students' Employability Through Entrepreneurship and Innovation*), Luca Iandoli, PhD, Associate Dean of the College of Professional Studies, introduced speaker Winslow Sargeant, PhD, a business consultant and a Former Chief Counsel for Advocacy at the U.S. Small Business Administration. Sharing his own experiences of learning to be an innovative business leader, Dr. Sargeant urged students in the audience to recognize and cultivate their own creativity that in turn can be used to improve employability and address real-world challenges. "Remember that creativity is thinking new things, and innovation is doing new things. To become a successful entrepreneur, you do not need to come up with something completely new. You can improve something that already exists." Dr. Sargeant added that along with advancing their education, students should recall the examples introduced by Fr. Griffin of St. Vincent's use of teamwork and communication skills, as well as his broad vision, love, and compassion.

*Democratizing Access to Healthcare Through Digital Technology: The Case of 3-D Printing* was the second session of the Vincentian Innovation Summit. Moderated by Marc Gillespie, PhD, Professor, St. John's University Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, this session featured speakers Max Hergenrother, MFA, Illustrator and Adjunct Associate Professor, St. John's University Department of Art and Design and Nayan Solanki, Doctoral Student, St. John's University College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. Mr. Hergenrother and Mr. Solanki began their talk by providing a general overview of how contemporary 3-D printing processes are

allowing for the production of infinitely-variable three-dimensional objects based on a set of digital instructions read by a digital printer. According to the speakers, the emergence of this technology is creating new opportunities for designers, graphic artists and medical researchers to form innovative collaborations that result in customizable solutions for a number of medical conditions, including quick-dissolving 3-D printed pharmaceuticals and 3-D printed medical prostheses that can be customized to any given patient's physiology. Looking at these possibilities with a Vincentian lens, Mr. Hergenrother and Mr. Solanki noted that the costs associated with 3-D printed objects are declining, making them more affordable to a greater number of people, including those around the world who may not previously have been able to afford higher-tech medical devices. Additionally, digital files for 3-D items can be easily stored and shared around the world using innovative web-based digital repositories.

The relationships between innovation and human dignity received further analysis in the next session, which was an open forum panel on the theme of *Our Future in Innovation: A Discussion on the Future of Innovation at St. John's*, which was led by Basilio Monteiro, PhD and Mark Juszczak, EdD, both of the SJU College of Professional Studies. Dr. Juszczak initiated the discussion by highlighting the different ways in which the SJU community implicitly embodies the Vincentian Mission. He then invited the audience to consider the implications of SJU choosing to cultivate an institutional culture that more actively and more explicitly used human dignity as a framework for research and teaching.

Dr. Juszczak reflected on both the excitement and the real challenges of following an academic mission based on dignity. He suggests that the Vincentian concept of "poverty" needs additional examination, and that additional metrics of poverty need to be operationalized – two very tough intellectual problems. He also noted that dignity means different things to different people, but that across history and cultures, "dignity" has primarily focused on acknowledging the worth

of each human person and has examined how societies are arranged to promote general human flourishing.

Dr. Juszczak suggests that the SJU community has an opportunity to position the Vincentian values of truth, love, respect, excellence, and service as ways to actively distinguish itself from other universities. He asserts that choosing to do research and teaching that promotes human dignity is a positive way to build SJU's reputation as an innovative university.

Dr. Monteiro joined Dr. Juszczak in exploring innovative ways to interact with students within an academic culture centered on promoting human dignity and innovation. Dr. Monteiro underscored the importance of enhanced communication within the professor/student relationship as well as pedagogical techniques that include group projects, debates, real-life case studies, and problem solving. Drs. Monteiro and Juszczak both asserted that innovation depended heavily on critical thinking, and that students must be continuously challenged to apply critical thinking skills in course projects. Both professors also agreed that educational technologies were continuously creating additional opportunities to teach innovation in a number of novel ways, which they considered to be an additional feature of an academic mission driven by the promotion of dignity.

Katia Passerini, PhD, Dean of the College of Professional Studies at SJU offered some closing remarks for the first Vincentian Innovation Summit, reflecting on the relationship between *Disruptive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship*. Dr. Passerini used some examples from the tech industry to illustrate the contemporary phenomenon of “disruption” and noted that disruption had both positive and negative effects. She noted that current business and social indicators show that people now want both sustainability and substantive changes in consumer products and services, including higher education. She asserts that responses to these wants and needs will require innovative thinking, and in the case of SJU, it will also require full consideration of the concept of social

entrepreneurship, which calls for addressing societal needs using entrepreneurial principles that have been proven in business contexts.

Dr. Passerini went on to suggest that social entrepreneurship is a useful conceptual framework that can drive innovations in both teaching and research at SJU, which in turn will prepare graduates who contribute to efforts that result in positive social change. She then thanked all of the speakers and attendees and encouraged the group to continue exploring ways for the SJU community to continuously innovate and advance human dignity.

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