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Blank Page, Blue Sky, High Risk:

An Interview with Chris Lowney, President of Jesuit Commons

Chris Lowney, formerly a Jesuit seminarian, later served as a Managing Director of J.P. Morgan & Co in New York, Tokyo, Singapore and London until leaving the firm in 2001. He served on J.P. Morgan's Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Investment Banking Management Committees. His first book, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company that Changed the World*, was the #1 ranked bestseller of the CBPA and was named a finalist for a 2003 Book of the Year Award from *ForeWord* magazine. It has been translated into ten languages. He is also author of *Heroic Living: Discover Your Purpose and Change the World*, and *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain*, which was nominated for La Corónica award. Chris was featured in the PBS-aired documentary, *Cities of Light*, which echoed many of the book's key themes. He currently serves on the board of Catholic Health Initiatives, a healthcare system comprising more than 70 hospitals across the United States. He is a *summa cum laude* graduate of Fordham University, where he also received his M.A. He is holder of five honorary Doctoral degrees.

In 2009, Lowney was asked to serve as the Volunteer President of Jesuit Commons, a start up project that attempted two pioneering initiatives, one to serve refugee communities through online-enabled university education, and the second, to create a “virtual commons” online, where different parts of the Jesuit network could collaborate, share resources and generate financial resources for worthy projects. In 2012, Lowney has stepped away from his leadership of Jesuit Commons. Marie Friedemann, General Editor of *Jesuit Higher Education*, asked Chris Lowney to reflect on the Jesuit Commons and Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins, as well as the future of the two initiatives.

JHE: How did you get involved in the Jesuit Commons and why?

Lowney: How did I get involved? I was asked! I am very devoted to the Jesuits, in part because of what I myself received from them by way of education and formation.....and in part because the Jesuit worldview and spirituality is very appealing to me. So when Jesuits ask me to help with something, I tend to be open to listen.

But as to why in the end I actually became involved as volunteer president of the initiative during its start-up phase, the reasons were at least three. First, the project was serving poor and disadvantaged communities, and that is where I want to devote time and energy at this point in my life. Second, the project was a start up with no blueprint and no plan, and "blank page, blue sky, and high risk" start ups are more fun and interesting to me than existing, established organizations, so the entrepreneurial nature of it also appealed to me. And, finally, the project had the

opportunity to leverage technology in really interesting, new ways, which was also appealing to me. When I say “leverage,” I mean, for example, that it was very appealing to try to pioneer something that might provide lessons learned for others who wanted to push the approach in different directions or on a broader basis in the future.

JHE: What is the Jesuit Commons and what is the Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins?

Lowney: The Jesuit Commons was conceived as an “umbrella” under which any number of collaborative initiatives might be launched within the Jesuit network. Frs. Charlie Currie, then President of the AJCU (Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities), and Paul Locatelli, then global secretary for Higher Education of the Jesuits, were the two early “shepherds” of the idea, working with a “coalition of the willing,” many of them volunteers from within the Jesuit university network, each contributing a set of skills

and ideas. I will add more later on the broad rationale underpinning the whole idea. But let me start by giving a couple of concrete examples; there were two distinct initiatives launched under the Commons umbrella at the outset.

One of these was Jesuit Commons-Higher Education at the Margins. It is an attempt to do online-enabled, university-level education for the very poor. As it turned out, Fr. Peter Balleis, the head of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) was very interested in bringing higher education to the communities JRS serves, and, after an assessment process, we settled on pilots in one refugee camp in Kenya, another in Malawi, and one with urban refugees in the Mideast. Those pilots are now up and running very well.

For those who are not already familiar with the project, let me give a *very* superficial description, using the two camps in Africa to illustrate. The refugee students apply for the program through a rigorous selection process—there is great hunger for this kind of opportunity in the camps! And we cannot come close to meeting the need. Right now there are refugees from all walks of life and nearly a dozen countries participating from the two refugee camps in Africa: so one can imagine what an incredibly rich, diverse pool of students this group represents.

The faculty are volunteers from Jesuit universities. Some of them have experience teaching online courses; others don't. Right now there are volunteer teachers from about fifteen Jesuit universities: so that is another terrific outcome of this project, bringing together academics from various Jesuit universities who are very willingly working in teams on this project.

The students and faculty interact by email (sometimes by Skype), exchange assignments and questions, participate in online discussion forums with the other students, and so on. They are studying courses selected by the program administrators, but modified for cultural and other reasons—for example, one course curriculum, maybe for a sociology course, included an assignment to “visit a

nearby Starbucks and make observations,” not a very realistic assignment for students in Kakuma refugee camp!

By the end, the refugee students will receive a Diploma in Liberal Studies and Regis University in Denver, Colorado is the awarding and transcribing university -- so most of these faculty volunteers, for example, are teaching as “guest faculty” of Regis when they get involved.

There are a hundred other things I would like to say about the program. But I am aware of space limitations for this interview!

As one can imagine, there were no end of challenges and headaches along the way, ranging from internet bandwidth to energy supply to classrooms to textbooks to recruiting faculty (all on a volunteer basis!).

Yet with all those challenges and many more, the initiative has succeeded beyond any reasonable expectations. And it has generated some very powerful lessons: quality Jesuit education can be projected over vast differences using technology; staff at Jesuit institutions are very willing to work on a complex, multi-lateral projects if they are excited about the mission; students in materially-impooverished circumstances (like a refugee camp) can bring lots of riches to the learning process, among other lessons.

I hope some folks will read this and be motivated to learn more and perhaps even to volunteer in some capacity, as faculty members or in other ways. Those who want to learn more can go to the project website: <http://www.jc-hem.org> And those who might be interested in volunteering or participating could send an email to either Dr. Neil Sparnon, (ncsparnon@jc-hem.org) Academic Coordinator, or Dr. Marie Friedemann, (mfriedem@regis.edu) Chair, Interuniversity Curriculum Committee, JC-HEM

By the way, I said “we” a lot in the previous comments, but I don't want to leave the

impression that I did the heavy lifting. I will talk later about some of the folks and institutions involved. Those are the folks—not I—who solved challenge after challenge, brought educational expertise and entrepreneurial flair to the initiative, and made it successful. I tip my hat to them. And I also have to tip my hat to folks at Australian Catholic University and Jesuits in Australia, because our first model for the whole idea came from work they were doing with refugees in a camp in Asia.

JHE: And you mentioned a second initiative under the umbrella of Jesuit Commons?

Lowney: Yes, I felt we needed to try something that would try to push the boundary of what we mean by a Jesuit network or commons. So we also decided to try an experiment to use social media tools to build a "virtual meeting place" where different parts of the Jesuit network could find each other, collaborate, learn about each other's work, share resources and ideas, generate financial resources for worthy Jesuit-sponsored projects in developing economies, and so on. That may sound a little abstract, so let me try to translate it into more concrete terms.

I could think of a dozen ways to leverage the network in just a couple of minutes, and smarter people than I are reading this article and could think of two dozen more ideas: if my students are learning French or Spanish, maybe I would like to pair them off to trade language practice, English for Spanish, with Jesuit students in Spain or Latin America; if I want to arrange an immersion trip in Bolivia, maybe I would like to explore possibilities with Jesuit organizations in that country; if I am researching immigration issues in the United States, I could profitably connect with Jesuit-institution-based researchers in the countries of origin for these immigrants; Jesuit university alumni who want to direct some of their charitable dollars to projects serving poor communities in Africa might like to identify projects sponsored there by the Jesuits; folks interested in advocating around ecology issues might like to multiply and organize their voices

with like-minded folks in hundreds of other Jesuit institutions; those who want to pray together might like to organize a virtual prayer network spanning multiple countries.

There are at least two obstacles (actually more than that) getting in the way of fully realizing all the potential.

The first problem is that people can't find each other. They don't know who else is in the network or what others in the network are doing. So our first thought was: could we try to create an "ecosystem," so to speak, where such ideas as the above and many others can be tried, where people could find out what and who else is in the network, make contact, collaborate, launch projects, etc. There is currently no way to do this *at all*. There is no "Facebook," listserv, mailing list, directory, Google group, Linked In, etc., that caters to the Jesuit world. The Jesuits themselves can find each other (albeit sometimes with difficulty), but their lay partners who work with them in their institutions really can't.

So we took a baby step at trying to create a virtual meeting place or clearinghouse for the network. Unfortunately, it didn't really gain traction, and after going at it for a while, given the various challenges I saw that would have to be overcome to succeed, I felt it best to pull the plug on that initiative a bit prematurely rather than invest more in something for which the time didn't seem to be quite ripe to succeed, among other things.

At a minimum, though, I hope we moved the needle at least a little bit on challenging some rather impoverished ideas (at least in my mind) of what the Jesuit "network" is about. Someone in a Jesuit university, for example, insofar as he or she thinks s/he is in a network at all, will probably think only of other Jesuit universities in the United States. Alumni typically think only of their own school.

But I would define the "network" as comprising, at a minimum, every graduate of every Jesuit school, from primary through university, all over the world: we start off with those millions of people. Then add in the institutions: well more

than two hundred institutions at tertiary level all over the world, many hundreds of high schools, parishes, retreat centers and social service agencies in more than one hundred countries, the Jesuit Refugee Service working with refugees in dozens of countries, a *Fe y Alegria* primary school system serving a million students in Latin America's poorest places. Most people don't even know how extensive the network is.

But just imagine the possibilities if we could engineer the "culture change" that would re-orient folks' conception of what network they are involved in and begin to unlock some of that vast untapped potential.

When I was asked to become involved in the Commons, it struck me that we really needed to experiment with the very widest notion of network,—that the core idea of the Commons was really about some broad, fundamental principles, namely: we Jesuit schools are part of a global network; that network has lots of talents, skills, needs, and interests; we can marry those together in interesting ways; and technology can help.

After all, the initial group involved in this (before I came along) chose to call it a "Commons" rather than something more specific. And it eventually was called "*Jesuit Commons*," not a "*university commons*," much less a "*United States university commons*," so I thought it important that whatever we do, we not tie ourselves exclusively to one specific idea (doing online enabled university education) but also experiment with pushing the boundary of Jesuit "commons" or "network" to see what other kinds of experiments could be done.

JHE: What challenges have you encountered and overcome in founding the Jesuit Commons?

Lowney: Well, as for the "umbrella" level of Jesuit Commons: we had one paid employee (I was a volunteer), no pool of funding beyond a grant for that person's salary, and could rely only on persuasion to get folks to help with the project -- in other words, we had no staff and no institutional resources that were committed

to the initiative at the outset. And all of the folks who then became involved at the Jesuit Commons level, by the way, all had other full time jobs! So how much time and effort they could devote to this was circumscribed by other obligations. So the ambitions I articulated above about catalyzing the network were probably unrealistic given those resourcing constraints, even before we started to confront the challenges involved in motivating people and institutions to move from "goodwill" for an idea like this to active work and engagement in something that was beyond the narrow scope of their work and institution—and add to these challenges whatever missteps I myself may have made along the way in trying to execute the idea!

The Higher Education at the Margins project, on the other hand, attracted funding from a very generous institutional funder, and that project ignited a lot of interest from faculty and staff at various Jesuit universities who were willing to help, and universities like Regis and Gonzaga stepped up in absolutely critical and invaluable ways to help the project to succeed; people like Bill Husson and Marie Friedemann were among many Regis colleagues who contributed importantly.. The head of Jesuit Refugee Service, Peter Balleis, personally committed himself to the project, Cindy Bonfini-Hotlosz at JesuitNet contributed lots of expertise, and Dr. Mary McFarland, a former dean at Gonzaga, did a superb job in leading the HEM project and implementing the concept. So, with that constellation of resources—plus a dozen more—the HEM initiative really took off. (I hesitate to mention the few individuals whom I did, not because they weren't integral to the project, but simply because there were many other critical cogs in the machine, and I hope I don't offend here by omission).

JHE: In what ways has Jesuit Commons changed or morphed within the last few years?

Lowney: Well, the project has been "morphing" since it started, and it will probably continue to morph! And I would like to say something in

general about “morphing” before answering your question specifically. I once read a very interesting article about technology start ups in the internet era, and the author observed that when entrepreneurs start or invent something, they don’t really know what their start-up is “for,” its best use or purpose. They certainly *think* they know what their technology or idea is for, how it should be used; but then the user community, the “market,” call it what you will—essentially “teaches” the entrepreneur how their idea or technology really can be used most impactfully, which might or might not be in line with the inventor’s original idea.

That’s a very interesting notion; certainly the most popular of recent start-ups, like Facebook and Twitter, validate the theory: they are both being used in ways their developers surely never imagined at the very outset.

That notion requires a lot of openness to risk, failure, reinvention, etc. And I would say that kind of risk tolerance was something I learned in my career at J.P. Morgan: many ideas and start-up investments never pan out in the end or require a lot of tinkering and course adjustments, so you have to have a high tolerance for failure and change and “making it up as you go along” if you want to be in that business, and the same is true of the projects that came under the Jesuit Commons banner.

I may be wrong about this, and forgive me if I am, but it strikes me that the university environment may not typically be as risk-open a culture as I just depicted, a culture of, “Hey, let’s try something. We’ll probably fail at first, but this is the only way we will learn.” I make that observation (right or wrong) because I want to point out that on the one hand I think projects such as Jesuit Commons are increasingly important for Jesuit universities as the “business” of higher education undergoes important changes in many ways, but, on the other hand, such projects call for a culture and approach that may or may not come easily to the typical university culture.

JHE: What might the future bring for Jesuit Commons?

Lowney: As for the Jesuit Commons idea, I come back to what I said early on about 21st century initiatives “morphing” as the user community interacts and generates ideas about where the initiative should go. In that regard, I am really pleased that Fr. Michael Garanzini, who has succeeded Fr. Locatelli as the Global Secretary for Higher Education for the Jesuits, has agreed to help shepherd Jesuit Commons into the future (in addition, by the way, to shepherding Loyola University, Jesuit higher education globally, and whatever else he has on his plate right now). I know he will be convening various representatives within the higher education community to brainstorm, “hey, what do we want to do with this? What should we be trying now?”

One could easily imagine lots of possibilities—just think, for example, of some of the very interesting ventures now emerging into open online learning for broad populations, a lot of these ventures non-credit, a lot of them involving various universities in unique partnerships, that didn’t even exist as recently as three years ago. I am not saying this is where the initiative should or should not go, nor by any means do I imply that online education is the only or best type of initiative for a Jesuit Commons. I only use this as an example of the wide range of possibilities out there for a Commons, something where Jesuit universities could very profitably collaborate.

Another very positive dimension is that Fr. Currie, without whom the Commons would never have gotten started at all, and who has been the most steadfast champion of the idea all along, will be able to devote a greater chunk of his time to the Commons now that he has stepped back from the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities. By the way, let me take the occasion to say that Fr. Currie was an unparalleled support to me personally in the time I was helping with the initiative. Remember I mentioned that everyone who was involved at the umbrella Commons level had another full-time job? He would be the quintessential example of someone who managed to nurture and implement this idea with a generous dose of time and wisdom,

despite having an important “day job” that kept him more than busy.

JHE: What dreams do you have for the Jesuit Commons or JC-HEM?

Lowney: It seems to me that the JC-HEM project is very well-positioned for the future, and I would not want to say what is *my* dream for the future of that initiative. We started off that project in the way most “start ups” are launched: a little seat of the pants, no bureaucracy, able to make decisions very quickly, more focused on results than on process. That was absolutely the right way to proceed at the outset, I have no doubt. You need that kind of flexibility and loose, entrepreneurial environment.

But then if you are lucky enough to succeed sufficiently to move on to a next more mature phase, as the refugee education project fortunately has, one of the dimensions of the next phase of any start up is to bring around the decision-making and governing table the right constellation of people for that next phase, for example, now is a really good moment to invite some of the universities who have been so supportive of the Higher Education at the Margins effort to assume more of a formal voice in helping shape the future. And it seems likewise sensible for me to step back, as I have done: I hope that I added value when this was a more amorphous start-up, but I think my added value would be much less from now forward. So, the dream for the next five years? To me, the first part of it is to get the right constellation of “dream-shapers” and “dream owners,” so to speak, in place to help create and guide this next phase. They could drive the Higher Education at the Margins project in any number of ways: deepening the presence in the three current pilots, expanding to other refugee communities, branching out to work with other marginalized communities, whether or not they are refugees, and so on. There are lots of possibilities.

And, similarly, Frs. Garanzini and Currie will be shepherding the broader discussion of whether there are other initiatives that the university network might want to take on

under the Commons banner, so to speak. And, by the way, that conversation is by no means only for US universities: from the outset, the idea was never that the Jesuit Commons would be a US-owned or operated venture. And, in fact, I know Fr. Garanzini has been actively involving universities outside the US in the “what now” or “what next” kinds of discussions.

Let me mention, by the way, a little more of the background about why I have stepped back from the Commons, because part of it relates to the Jesuit world. I just became the chair-elect of one of the larger hospital systems in the US (which will take a lot of time). That’s one reason, but I have also been helping launch a project to create a pilgrimage trail along the route of Ignatius of Loyola’s famous 1522 pilgrimage from Loyola to Manresa and Barcelona. I know that this is supposed to be an interview about the Jesuit Commons projects! But I hope I can sneak in a small advertisement for this other project that, while not part of the Commons, is nonetheless very relevant to the Jesuit family---I am sure loads of faculty, alumni, staff, or students would like to spend some time trekking, cycling, or driving the route, and they can find all the details at www.caminoignaciano.org . We just launched the route a few months ago, and it has been enjoying success beyond what we anticipated so far, even though we are just beginning to promote it in the US.

JHE: Any other closing thoughts?

Lowney: Well, maybe a couple.

However the initiative matures, I hope and trust that poor and underserved communities around the globe will remain a key concern, as I know they will. The Jesuit university network has incredible capabilities and can do a whole wide range of things that other higher education networks or institutions cannot or would not do. And, frankly, to put the poor and underserved at the forefront of consideration is one of those things that Jesuit institutions could willingly do that many other education networks would not. Many folks are aware of the meeting in Mexico City several years ago among representatives of

the Jesuit university network around the world. When Fr. General Nicolás addressed that meeting, he challenged the universities to take stock of the knowledge and resources they have, and to ask themselves who can benefit from that knowledge, and how can they make it accessible to others. That was a really important message, and I have heard it quoted a lot since then, so I know it resonated. And the Commons was in some ways one creative response to that challenge, and I think the Commons umbrella could offer a forum where the Jesuit university network could continue to conceive imaginative ways to meet Fr. General's challenge.

Another closing thought: I can't resist one last plug for the Commons project that didn't really pan out: the effort to create an online space or "ecosystem" where the Jesuit world could network, collaborate, trade resources and ideas, etc. I hope, in fact I would predict, that at some point in the future, the Jesuit world will take another run at invigorating its ability to network, however that gets conceived and however that happens (whether or not under a Jesuit Commons umbrella or driven by some other part of the Jesuit world is not important). To me, there is *so* much potential out there if this network could get itself galvanized to its fullest capacity. And, frankly, the world is rapidly getting networked anyway, thanks to various "conveners" like Google, Facebook, and thanks to formal and informal networks and groups organized around issues or common causes or shared interests or institutional alliances. Jesuit institutions, those who work within them, their alumni, those who have been touched by Jesuit spirituality, or who otherwise feel close to the Jesuits are all *already* participating in networks anyway (a few of these networks convened under a Jesuit banner, many not). They are making connections, collaborating with people, funding projects that appeal to them, and so on. The challenge is for the Jesuit world to continue to find ways to strengthen its collective identity, shared sense of mission, and mission effectiveness in order to be able to convene and catalyze many of those who already strongly identify with the Jesuit spirituality, mission, and

ethos. And when I say "network," let me borrow and co-opt one of St. Ignatius's famous quotes to make a point: Networks, like love, ought to manifest themselves in deeds not in words! My point is not, "hey, let's have a network and exchange contact info" in some vague sense; rather, "hey, we can really multiply our voice and power by collaborating on this or that particular initiative, or by exchanging ideas or resources in ways that make us both stronger, and so on." The Jesuit Commons and the JC-Higher Education at the Margins projects are wonderful examples of what is possible, and I look forward to seeing those continue to thrive and to seeing many more examples! 🙏