

# The ISI Difference

## A Student Discovers the Power of an ISI Education

By Christine Pyle

*Make a difference! Make your life count! Change the world!* Those who chant these mantras are contagiously enthusiastic, but they rarely articulate how to make a difference or why a proposed action is significant. During college I became frustrated by the lack of clarity about where to direct my talents, aspirations, and desire to serve others. Along with the rest of my generation, I want to change the world—and I long to know what it means to do so. How do I make my life count?

Last year, as a rising senior at Louisiana State University (LSU), I was considering a career in academia. However, I was not convinced that I could improve society through a studious lifestyle that seemed distant from the real world. How can a university professorship compare to the significance of serving as a foreign missionary, for instance? Shouldn't I be doing charitable work rather than writing and teaching? In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom discusses the tendency to discount intellectual endeavors in the face of "usefulness":

When there is poverty, disease and war, who can claim the right to idle in Epicurean gardens, asking questions that have already been answered and keeping a distance where commitment is demanded? The for-its-own-sake is alien to the modern democratic spirit, particularly in matters intellectual. Whenever there is a crunch, democratic men devoted to thought have a crisis of conscience, have to find a way to interpret their endeavors by the standard of utility, or otherwise tend to abandon or deform them.

Stricken by a crisis of conscience, I sought a better understanding of the intellectual life: What is the purpose of higher studies? Why is my field of literature significant? Why devote my career to academia?

Though these questions rattled me, the quiet thrill of study kept me from discarding academia altogether. Humane studies are undeniably "beautiful and intellectually rewarding," as Renaissance scholar Leonardo Bruni remarked. Reading and thinking can develop a rich, full inner life. I find satisfaction in analyzing primary texts, writing, and discovering connections among various fields. The delight of philosophy did for me what classes, tests, and papers alone could not accomplish: create an ever-increasing appetite for learning.

At this critical juncture, ISI stepped in to reorient the way I thought about my life. ISI's 2010 Honors Conference theme, "The Idea of a University," seemed specifically chosen to address my concerns. Recording my reflections in a blog, I delved into classic educational ideas in the pre-conference reading. John Henry Newman's unity of knowledge, Irving Babbitt's humanism, Albert Jay Nock's defense of the classics, and Allan Bloom's critique of relativism became the building blocks for a solid answer to my questions about academic purpose. My consciousness of modern problems was balanced by a compelling alternative—liberal education, or the Great Tradition of classical education that teachers had followed for centuries. By the time I arrived at the conference, I was deeply invested in the issues to be discussed.

In Annapolis, Honors Fellows and ISI faculty associates gathered within view of the statehouse in

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which George Washington resigned his commission as commander in chief of the Continental Army. While reliving history through our surroundings, the other students and I imbibed courage and wisdom from the conservative scholars who gave their time to mentor us. We talked deeply, dined leisurely, and listened to intelligent lectures. In small groups, we toured the cobblestone streets and contemplated the night sky above the harbor. Immersion in ISI made one thing clear: despite the problems in higher education, the age-old tradition of learning, reading, and finding truth is still alive.

This simple certainty transformed my personal relationship to learning. Paradoxically, I am now more conscious of my inadequacy as an heir of the Great Tra-

dition, yet I am freer to continue my journey of learning. If the goal is to become a whole person rather than to meet a quota, I can be restful and full of wonder in my reading. I can allow a great work to change me.

Attending the conference and then reading the ISI book *A Student's Guide to Liberal Learning*, by Fr. James Schall, rescued me from the paralyzing “booklist” mentality. Since my early teens, I’ve longed to read all the classics. I had booklists galore, feeling that I had to read a certain number of books and certain kinds of books to “arrive” as an educated person. But such lists inevitably grow faster than I can read! Recognizing my limitations, I humbled myself to start somewhere, for one worthwhile book will lead to others. Though I am



*The ISI reading group at LSU, which Christine Pyle reinvigorated, hosts a lecture by ISI faculty associate Vigen Guroian (second from right)*

“ISI ushered me into a vibrant intellectual community, and I am now inspired with a vision for the intellectual life.”

certainly still a fan of good booklists, they no longer rule me. Education is not about trying to learn everything; it's more about becoming through learning.

By observing other scholars and by pursuing my own questions about education, I discovered the value of investigating questions of pressing personal interest. It is healthy sometimes to follow the mind's flexible queries rather than the graven syllabus. Obeying this theory has revived my appetite for learning. For instance, last semester my medieval literature classes converged on a big-picture question: Was Christianity a complete rupture with or a continuation of the



*Christine Pyle at a meeting of the  
ISI reading group at LSU*

classical cultures? Intrigued by conflicting views about the transition from ancient to medieval, I interviewed professors, talked with a friend, and read up on scholasticism. I have begun a journey into a deep topic, and my life is richer as a result.

An academic lifestyle does not mean isolation from community. By placing a priority on building relationships and sharing ideas, ISI fosters a rich intellectual experience. At ISI's Honors Conference and at the subsequent ISI-Liberty Fund colloquia, reading and relationships complemented each other because of frequent opportunities for valuable conversation.

Interaction with people enhances study by stirring varied interests, provoking new questions, and refining solitary thoughts. Conversely, each book with which I engage can prepare me for deeper interaction with friends and inspire me with love for my community.

Stirred by these epiphanies, I returned to LSU to replicate the intellectual experience of the Honors Conference by establishing an ISI reading group. LSU has a history with ISI, especially through the laudable work of ISI board member Dr. William Campbell, professor emeritus of economics, and of ISI faculty associate Dr. James Stoner, current head of LSU's Department of Political Science. Several years ago, an ISI group flourished on campus and sent several students to ISI's Honors Conference. My Honors Program experience motivated me to revive it.

Now, a small group of committed students meets bimonthly at LSU to discuss ISI books and encourage one another in learning. The leader-



ship team is motivated, and the students who joined are earnest learners who appreciate ISI's mission (and its free books!). In our discussions, a freshman may dialogue with a Ph.D. candidate, an English major with a future engineer, and a political theorist with a student studying economics. Our newly formed reading group even hosted an ISI-sponsored lecture and student seminar with ISI faculty associate Dr. Vigen Guroian from the University of Virginia. We are also excited to be sending two students to ISI's 2011 Honors Conference.

I see the potential the group holds for influencing our campus—not on a mammoth, modern, “change the world” level, but on an individual, transformational, discipleship level. After all, a return to liberal education, as promoted by ISI, means a renewed focus on developing deep-thinking, liberty-minded persons. The fruit of liberal education is a certain kind of individual: a man or woman who delights in truth, knows morality and justice, understands the flow of ideas through history, and participates in the centuries-long conversation of great minds.

**M**y idea of changing the world is now, in contrast to today's rhetoric of novelty, foundational and enduring. I seek to revive beauty, goodness, and truth—those first principles that do not change. Best expressed in the words of A. G. Sertillanges, my aspiration is “to have a humble share in perpetuating wisdom among men, in gathering up the inheritance of the ages, in formulating the rules of the mind for the present time, in discovering facts and causes, in turning men's wandering eyes towards first causes and their hearts towards supreme ends, in reviving if necessary

some dying flame, in organizing the propaganda of truth and goodness.”

Intellectual work illumines what is good and encourages the best human impulses. Instead of formulating warped ideas to refashion the societal mind, conscientious scholars open the way for noble, true ideas to pervade society. Therefore, scholarship does not have to compete for significance with other vocations like missionary work or social work. The scholarly vocation affects foundations, ideas, and worldviews. Ideas formulated at one man's desk, when disseminated through teaching, writing, or speaking, influence individual lives in the wider world.

ISI ushered me into a vibrant intellectual community, introduced me to authors as varied as Sertillanges and Bloom, and offered a classical understanding of learning. A holistic view of education enables me to synthesize scholarship, community, family, and faith. I am inspired with a vision for the intellectual life—a vision that is stronger than the discouraging indications I see around me, a vision that profoundly answers my questions about significance.

*Christine Pyle recently graduated with B.A. degrees in English literature and French from Louisiana State University. She plans to work for a year, possibly teaching English in France before pursuing graduate studies in English. She was a 2010 ISI Honors Fellow.*