

Funding Early Modern Jesuit Colleges

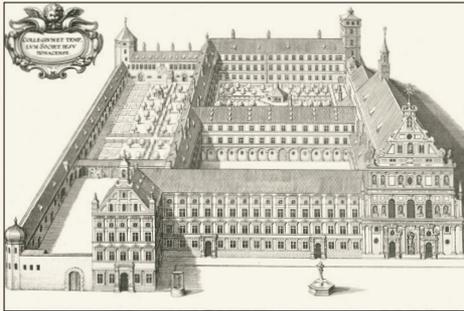
Within a decade after the founding of the Society, enthusiasm for the new colleges seized the Jesuit leadership in Rome. In 1551, Ignatius wrote to the provincials of Spain and Portugal encouraging them to open schools like those operating in Italy with suggestions as to how they might be funded—by the city, as happened in Messina and Palermo; by the nobility, as in Ferrara and Florence by their respective dukes, or as in Vienna by King Ferdinand; by some private individual, as in Venice and Padua; or by a group of individuals, as in Naples, Bologna, and elsewhere.

The result was the creation of the biggest network of private schools Europe has known, with something in the order of five to six hundred distributed across the continent. A basic principle informing the educational mission was that Jesuit education was to be offered free to the consumer; thus, the Jesuits cut off the most obvious source of revenue. Education had to be paid for however, and it could be argued that the genesis of the Jesuit college saw the birth of the educational fund raiser, instantly recognizable to the development office of any contemporary college or university.

The Jesuits targeted kings, dukes, and influential churchmen, who, in the building of a college, were offered the early modern equivalent of what development offices in our own times term “the naming opportunity.” It should be noted that the Jesuit building program followed upon an important watershed in building history. Gradually, from the mid-fifteenth century, the big donor came, as it were, out of the closet, and accepted the public renown that followed the construction of an elegant building for a recognized public good. The magnificent man, in the Aristotelian model, left a visual record of his presence in the urban landscape. Initially, the lines between endowment

The founding of colleges was the only aspect of Jesuit life for the sake of which members of the Society had authority to depart from their mendicant commitment to poverty to raise money, own property, and build endowment income. This initiative would eventually transform the Jesuits from mendicants to money raisers and managers, a conspicuous metamorphosis that was not completed overnight.

—Olwen Hufton



The Jesuit College of Munich, from Matthäus Merian, Topographia Germaniae. Matthäus Merian's 17th-century depiction of the Jesuit college and church in Munich.

A well-traveled visitor, perhaps exaggerating a bit, said in 1644 of the Munich college, “Of all the Jesuits possess in the whole world, this college is the most magnificent.” Few academic structures in the entire German lands could rival this college until the 19th century.

and building costs were not clearly drawn in the minds of Jesuit superiors, and big donors were slow to materialize. The working model that in the long run turned out to be the dominant model in western and southern Europe was offered to St. Ignatius Loyola in 1551 by Juan de Vega, the Spanish viceroys of Sicily. In this model, a civic government (prompted by a king, duke, etc.) invites the Jesuits to open a college with a specified number of classes requiring a specified number of teachers, and provides a residence, classrooms, and running costs. In

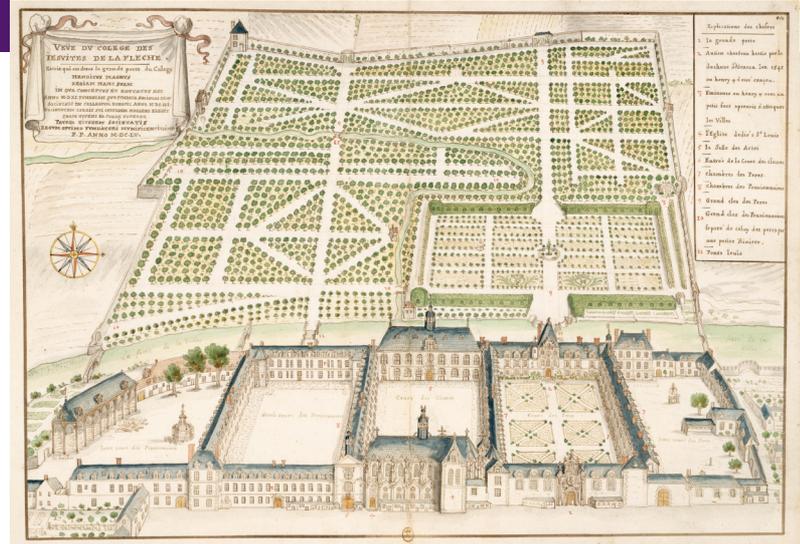
Sicily, at Messina, how the civic government would raise the funds is not detailed, but its own revenues from indirect taxes and deficit funding can be assumed. The endowment is thus a form of public funding, and gifts were expected to follow and permit a building program.

In the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, a number of rulers embraced the naming or commemorative opportunity (Henri IV at La Flèche, for example, or Duke Albert of Bavaria at Ingolstadt). These great flagship buildings were perhaps the

exception rather than the norm, and many rulers were allowed founder status when their contribution was in fact relatively small and the main burden of financing the building had been assumed either by a consortium of donors or by someone prepared to forgo the status of founder.

In the early days, women, particularly widows, were generous founders of Jesuit colleges because their estates were less constricted by the dynastic stranglehold on family wealth. Often, they did so quietly, as in the outstanding example at Ferrara, where the widow Maria Frassoni del Gesso put up some 70,000 scudi against the miserable 1,000 scudi loaned by the Duke Ercole d’Este, who nevertheless was given the founder’s title. Eventually, families sought to guard family wealth by active litigation or to push for legislation restricting the amount of money widows could bestow on a religious order.

It should be emphasized that the Jesuits were very aggressive with disposable income, even when in debt. They had to be so in order to keep going and to service debts by sustaining revenue. The early modern period was a debt culture, and to be in debt was the norm, provided one could service the income on loans. The nature and extent of Jesuit college revenues, particularly in France, belonged within a broader ancient régime financial and institutional structure. Privileged exemptions from state taxation, the exploitation of landed privilege through tithe, the dependence upon indirect commodity taxes at the discretion of municipalities or by the grace and favour of national governments, and the vagaries of certain types of deficit funding in the medium run made for doomed sources. They were part of a financial system that was under huge strain—enough we should remember, to provoke the French Revolution.



View of the Jesuit College at La Flèche and its Formal Gardens, 1655. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

The College Royal Henri-Le Grand, renowned for the science taught within its walls, was one of the most prominent Jesuit institutions in France. It was founded by Henri IV (1553-1610), who ceded the royal castle of Château-Neuf in La Flèche to the Society of Jesus in 1603. Henry envisioned his College as “the most beautiful in the world.” With the reconstruction and amplification of 1607, it became a truly massive foundation, disposed almost symmetrically over grand courtyards. The church, constructed by Étienne Martellange (1568/9-1641), had been intended to house the hearts of King Henri and Queen Marie de’ Medici, in evidence of Henri’s affection for the French Jesuits and their college at La Flèche.

One of the first pupils, René Descartes (1596-1650), who attended between 1607 and 1615, retraced the history of the system of education that had served him at La Flèche in the first part of his Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducted Reason (1637).

After the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, Louis XV reorganized the college into a Military Preparatory School, and in 1808, Napoleon transferred the Saint Cyr Military Academy to the site.

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