

**Making Critical Connections:
Faculty/Staff Mission Formation Efforts at AJCU Institutions**

Jennifer Grant Haworth and Megan Barry

Loyola University Chicago

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In his 2004 Creighton University address on “Cooperating with Each Other in Mission,” Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach S.J., then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, began his remarks with this important reminder: “St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, wrote his *Spiritual Exercises* while he was still a lay person.”

As we consider the “mission and identity” question in our nation’s Jesuit colleges and universities, we find Fr. Kolvenbach’s reminder helpful for two reasons. For starters, it highlights that Ignatius engaged in a process of formation that ultimately helped him to better discern his vocation – what Frederick Buechner refers to as that place where “your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” – as well as how he could best “live the magis” in his life. Second, it underscores that formation is a process, and that understanding what contributes to that process may be beneficial to how we form faculty and staff as “partners in mission” on our campuses today.

Especially since 1995, when the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus called for “greater cooperation with the laity in mission,” the number and range of mission formation programs on our nation’s Jesuit colleges and universities has increased. Generally speaking, these programs are intended to introduce faculty and staff to the Jesuit mission in higher education as well as to key Ignatian values and ideals. At their best, they also engage faculty and staff more deeply in the Ignatian charism, contributing to their formation as “partners in mission.”

While mission and identity officers might have a sense of the kinds of mission formation efforts operating at our nation’s Jesuit colleges and universities, it’s likely that most faculty and staff do not. Recently, at the invitation of Kevin Quinn, S.J., the Executive Director of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University, we were asked to survey AJCU

institutions to learn more about the state of faculty and staff mission formation activities nationally. Our brief, ten item online survey focused primarily on three research questions:

- What types of mission formation activities are commonly offered to faculty and staff at AJCU institutions?
- Which of these activities do mission and identity officers most strongly value in forming faculty and staff as “partners in mission”? and
- What insights can be gleaned from innovative and “highly valuable” programs about “best practices” in mission formation efforts with faculty and staff?

In mid-January, 2008, we invited 43 mission and identity officers at all 28 AJCU institutions to complete the online survey. Eighty-one percent chose to participate; the largest percentage (56 percent) were employed at institutions enrolling more than 7,500 students. In an effort to develop a richer understanding of our survey data, in late February, 2008 we conducted short (30 minute) telephone interviews with seven of the surveyed mission and identity officers who expressed an interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Three interview respondents came from large (greater than 12,000 students) universities, while two each were from middle (5,000 – 11,999 students) and small (less than 4,999 students) institutions. Four of the seven were men; two were members of the Society of the Jesus.

What did we learn? We briefly report our findings here before describing three “best practices” that contributed favorably to the formation of faculty and staff as “partners for mission.” We then discuss two implications that flow from our findings, both of which are directed toward further deepening faculty/staff mission formation efforts on our campuses.

Survey Results

Orientation programs. Speaker series. Retreats. Mission or Ignatian heritage weeks. Annual service days. These are just a sampling of the breadth of mission formation efforts that AJCU institutions offer to faculty and staff. Generally speaking, these activities fall into three

“formational” categories – educational, spiritual, and experiential – as well as a support/incentive category that promotes mission-sensitive policies and grants programs.

Our survey results indicate that the most commonly offered formational activities at AJCU institutions include:

- **Educational formation:** (1) Half- or full-day mission/identity orientation for new faculty/staff (86 percent of respondents), (2) mission-themed formal speaker or luncheon series (52 percent), and multi-session mission/identity orientation (49 percent);
- **Spiritual formation:** (1) Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life (19th annotation) retreat (91 percent of respondents), (2) Lenten or Advent evening of reflection or retreats (51 percent), and mission-themed weekend retreats (43 percent);
- **Experiential formation:** (1) International service immersion trips (71 percent of respondents), (2) annual community service day (53 percent), and (3) U.S.-based service immersion trips (33 percent);
- **Support/Incentive:** (1) Grants for mission-related non-core curriculum development (66 percent of respondents), (2a) grants for mission-related research projects (50 percent), and (2b) policies supporting engagement in mission activities (50 percent).

Besides developing their own institutional programs, mission and identity officers take advantage of off-campus mission formation efforts offered through AJCU or other sponsoring Jesuit institutions. For example, 75 percent of survey respondents send – and fully fund – a delegation of faculty and staff to the triennial Western or Heartland-Delta conferences, as well as to their accompanying biennial “faculty conversations” gatherings. Similarly, nearly four out of every five financially support the attendance of one or more representatives at the AJCU Leadership Seminar, AJCU National MAGIS retreat, or Collegium programs.

While a breadth of faculty and staff mission formation activities are offered at AJCU institutions, we wondered which really made the most difference in fostering faculty/staff understandings of our Ignatian mission. Accordingly, we asked mission and identity officers to examine a list of 35 common mission formation activities and then to rate those that, based on their experience, had been “most valuable” in forming faculty/staff as “partners in mission” on their campuses (see Table 1). Those most highly-rated included immersion trips and service days which brought mission themes to life through direct, hands-on experience in another culture or through a service project, as well as spiritual retreats of various lengths and mission-themed seminars that prompted participants to pause from the busyness of their daily lives and reflect on their experience in light of their own faith commitments and key Ignatian teachings.

Table 1: Mission Formation Activities Most Valuable in Forming Faculty/Staff as “Partners in Mission”

Activity	Extremely Valuable (%)	Valuable (%)
Immersion Trips	76%	21%
Spiritual Retreats	72%	28%
Service Day	66%	33%
Mission-themed Seminars	62%	38%
National Conferences	50%	50%
Mission-themed Orientation for new faculty/staff	32%	68%
Mission & Identity Day, Week, or Month	33%	66%
Grants for mission-themed courses or co-curricular activities	27%	73%
Mission-themed Speaker Series	25%	75%

We invited mission and identity officers to discern further those activities they believed were most formative for faculty and staff when we asked them to respond to this question: “Let’s assume that funding has been dramatically cut for your office and hard choices must be made

about mission and identity programming for next year. What three programs or activities would you absolutely NOT cut because of their value in forming ‘partners for mission’ at your institution? Put differently, what programs or activities would leave a very deep void in your mission formation efforts if you could no longer offer them?”

Table 2 provides a prioritized listing of the activities survey respondents most frequently mentioned. Once again, retreats, immersion trips, and mission-themed multi-session seminars were perceived as central to faculty/staff formational efforts. Interestingly, however, orientation programs rose in importance on this list. As interviewees later told us, while these programs have less overall *formational* impact, they play a foundational role in *informing* new faculty and staff about the Ignatian mission and heritage of our institutions.

Table 2: Mission Formation Activities that, if eliminated, would leave a “Deep Void” in Forming Faculty/Staff as “Partners in Mission”

1. Retreats
2. Mission-themed orientation program for new faculty/staff
3. Immersion trips (international & domestic)
4. Mission-themed multi-session seminars
5. Grants for mission-themed courses and co-curricular activities
6. Participation in national conferences (e.g., Heartland-Delta gatherings, AJCU Leadership Seminar, National MAGIS retreat, Collegium)

These findings not only illustrate the range of mission formation activities at AJCU institutions, but, perhaps more importantly, they also provide insights into what activities are really “most worth doing” with faculty/staff. Simply identifying these activities, however, seldom goes far enough; what matters most is how those programs unfold and affect their participants. If we really want our mission formation efforts to “make a difference,” we need to take the next step of exploring what practices cut across programs and how they contribute meaningfully to shaping faculty and staff as “partners in mission.”

Best Practices

Three key practices – conversation, relationship, and action – surfaced in our study that consistently enhanced faculty and staff understandings of and engagement with the Ignatian mission. While we discuss each practice separately here, we stress that their formational value was most pronounced when they operated as a kind of gestalt in the institutions of which they were a part.

Conversation invites formation. In *Turning to One Another*, Margaret Wheatley reminds us that conversation is – and always has been – “the natural way that human beings think together.” As we talk and spend time with one another, she explains, “we discover what we care about, we discover shared meaning, and we discover each other.”

Perhaps no other practice was as highly valued in our study as conversation. In both their survey and interview responses, mission and identity officers stressed that conversation was essential to the mission formation process for two key reasons.

First, conversation opens a space for faculty and staff to connect whatever they are learning about Ignatian values and principles to their own lives. As Mary Flick, Director of Mission Programs at St. Louis University told us, “We have to give them information, but we also have to let them work through it. The discussion piece is critical for that – they need to talk it through themselves and make it their own. And if they can do that with others from different parts of the university, that’s all the better.”

Once underway, conversation becomes an important mission formation practice for another reason: if done well, it invites faculty and staff to participate in a way of seeing and talking about their lives that is authentically Ignatian. Joe Appleyard S.J., the Vice President for Mission and Ministry at Boston College, illustrated this point when he described their semester-long faculty/staff seminar on student vocational formation:

Our seminar reflects the Ignatian dynamic of paying attention to experience, reflecting on that experience, and then making good decisions based on what is learned through that process. For instance, in our seminar, we begin by first

encouraging people to tell their own stories – that sets a kind of tone. They end up weaving their own narratives in an authentically real way. Because of this, people learn to respect each other’s experiences – both professionally and personally, from the old to the young to the professional and the clerical. The dynamic continues as the seminar unfolds. We’ll read something but then engage in a conversation where participants make sense of it in light of their own and others’ experiences. This leads people to see that everyone in the seminar is making a contribution because each has some knowledge or experience that benefits our students and the realization of our university’s mission. This dynamic characterizes the seminar and, from my point of view, it reflects an Ignatian way of proceeding. We need to be about talking with one another about our lives and our work and helping each other discern good decisions in light of them.

For Joe and many other mission and identity officers, encouraging conversation among and between faculty and staff reflected “the way an Ignatian university ought to operate.”

Ignatius Loyola stressed conversation in his relationship with his companions, inviting them to walk and talk with him as friends do – with familiarity, intimacy, and within the everyday ordinariness of their own lives. For Ignatius – and for today’s mission and identity officers – this kind of conversation was and is vital to forming others as partners on a shared journey.

Relationship makes mission “real.” A few weeks ago one of us was walking across campus and spotted a student wearing a t-shirt that said, “You can’t hate someone whose story you know.” Think about that for a moment. When someone shares his or her narrative, something happens that changes the way we see that person. According to Lee Burdette Williams “that something” is simple: when we choose to listen to another’s story we also choose to recognize that person’s humanity, making him or her “real” to us.

Relationship-building emerged as a second core mission formation practice in our study. From the Ignatian Mentoring Program at Xavier University to the Colleagues in Jesuit Education seminar at Seattle University, we heard story after story about the vital role that relationships play in forming faculty and staff as “partners in mission.” As Debra Mooney, Xavier’s Associate Vice President for Mission, offered:

The Ignatian Mentoring Program is so valuable to our faculty because it focuses on developing personal relationships first and foremost. Senior faculty are paired

with junior faculty and they get to know each other as people. The junior faculty hear about the senior faculty's joys, successes and struggles and they also talk with them about their own. The senior faculty also talk a lot about their own personal experiences in trying to integrate the Jesuit mission into their teaching, scholarship, and service, and what has – and hasn't – worked for them. The relationships they form are powerful. Interestingly, while both benefit a lot from the program, many of the senior faculty begin it wondering if they have a deep enough understanding of the mission. Quickly they come to see that they do . . . that they are making an important contribution to the faculty they mentor individually and that they are helping to advance the mission of the university, too.

From our vantage point, the dynamic at work here is very straightforward. When faculty and staff share their experiences and stories, they begin to move beyond the institutional "roles" they occupy and begin to see each other as "real." The simple act of listening ushers in this change of perspective and encourages the formation of relationships. As these relationships grow and deepen, they nurture a sense of belonging to something "bigger" – in this case, an enhanced sense of mission – among those involved that adds new meaning and purpose to their work and their lives.

We were not surprised that relationships emerged as a core practice in our research. After all, Ignatian spirituality is grounded in the core value of relationship – between us and God, us and others, and us and the broader world. Ignatius believed that listening and dialogue invited and deepened relationships. Today's mission and identity officers seem to believe the same, perhaps because they know that there is nothing more "real" to the formational work of mission than relationship.

Action stimulates partnership. What begins with conversation and forms into relationship has a good chance of moving into partnership when it is put into action. As Kahil Gibran once mused, "A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle."

When faculty and staff consciously intentionally choose to immerse themselves in some active way in Ignatian values and principles, this core practice – perhaps more than any other – helps them to grasp the mission of our institutions better, as well as to act themselves into new

ways of thinking within them. Action can take many forms, such as participating in a U.S.-based or international service immersion trip, committing to daily prayer and weekly spiritual direction through the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life retreat, giving back to others through an Ignatian mentoring program, or working on a teaching, research, or co-curricular mission-funded project. The actual type of activity is far less important than the choice to engage in it intentionally with an open mind and heart.

Joe Orlando, Director of the Office of Mission and Jesuit Identity at Seattle University, helped us to understand why action - as a practice - was so critical to the mission formation of faculty and staff. In describing their annual trip to Nicaragua, he observed: "Immersion is important because it touches people viscerally and intellectually. It tends to tap into deeper values, giving them legs." In much the same way, Lucien Roy, the Vice President for Mission and Ministry at Loyola University Chicago, said of their yearlong Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life retreat:

The retreat has probably been the most influential mission formation activity we've offered to faculty and staff over the last decade. There are many reasons for this: it requires people to commit to daily prayer for an academic year, the relationships they form with their spiritual directors are often deep and vital, and the weekly small faith sharing groups help faculty and staff meet others from across the university who are committed to spiritual growth. But perhaps more important than any of these is the dynamic of the Exercises themselves. Over time, participants begin to see and act differently, and I believe that happens because they're actively reflecting on their experiences in their prayer and with their directors and members of their small faith sharing groups. Doing that intentionally over eight months cannot but change you in some way.

It made sense to us that action surfaced as a key mission formation practice in our study. When men enter the Society of Jesus, they participate in several intentional and "action-oriented" experiences, including spiritual and service immersion activities, that not only form them in the values and principles of the Society, but also challenge them to discern thoughtfully those values, principles, and desires they want to live out in their own lives. Why wouldn't Jesuit colleges and

universities harness the wisdom of a practice that has guided the formation of their founding order for nearly five hundred years?

More centrally, however, it seems to us that action is a practice that challenges newcomers to “act themselves into a new way of thinking” by encouraging them to live as “contemplatives-in-action.” Here they can be shaken by the realities of poverty and injustice in a developing country, disarmed by the graces of the Exercises, or confronted by the often difficult questions that accompany the authentic integration of mission themes into curricular and co-curricular projects – and not have the option of walking away easily from these challenges. The discoveries that faculty and staff make during these experiences often deepen the value they place on Ignatian ideals and encourages their transformation into “partners in mission.”

Implications

Our research found that today’s AJCU institutions provide a full complement of faculty and staff mission formation programs, of which four in particular – spiritual retreats, immersion trips, multi-session seminars, and mission orientations – are of greatest perceived value. Additionally, we learned that within and across these programs, three “best practices” – conversation, relationship, and immersion – contribute favorably to the formation of faculty and staff as “partners in mission.”

While these findings suggest several implications for strengthening faculty and staff mission formation efforts on our campuses, two seem especially important to mention here.

First, if we are really serious about partnership, then our institutional formational efforts must be guided by an “Ignatian way of proceeding.” It is one thing to inform faculty and staff about the Jesuit mission in higher education, but a different one altogether to value them as co-creators of the mission. An Ignatian way of proceeding invites faculty and staff into the latter role, stressing a dynamic that welcomes conversation, builds meaningful relationships, and encourages active engagement. In many ways, this dynamic embraces the wisdom of Ignatian pedagogy, valuing the experiences people bring to our institutions, encouraging them to reflect on

and learn from those experiences (through reading and interaction with others), and supporting their desires to learn more about mission through deeper engagement as “contemplatives in action.” To be sure, while the time and (human) resource demands of this way of proceeding are significant, actively “walking our mission talk” in “deeds and not words” sends a clear message to faculty and staff that our institutions are committed to respecting and valuing them as real partners in mission.

The second implication flows naturally from the first. We agree with Boston College’s Joe Appleyard that “conversation,” especially when it involves “talking with one another about our lives and our work and helping each other discern good decisions” is what “Ignatian universities ought to be about.” When applied to the mission formation of faculty and staff, the implications of this kind of thinking are clear: not only is it critical to view and respect faculty and staff as partners in conversation, but it is just as important to encourage them to be attentive and reflective about the contributions they are making – and might choose to make – as co-creators in the shared work of mission. Here we would argue that an Ignatian “way of proceeding” suggests a **process** for meeting what we see as the real **goal** of mission formation: helping faculty and staff discern the “magis” they most want to give as part of their daily work of bringing the Ignatian mission of our institutions to life.

For at least the last thirty years there has been growing concern about how our nation’s Jesuit colleges and universities will sustain their Ignatian identity as the number of Jesuit brothers and priests continues to decline. As discussion deepens around this topic, it seems to us that the central mission and identity issue really has very little to do with achieving “critical Jesuit mass” and far more with forming faculty and staff who have made “critical Ignatian connections.” Indeed, when faculty and staff experience conversation, relationship, and immersion, our research suggests that they make connections to the Ignatian mission that invite them – much as they did Ignatius nearly 500 years ago – to discern more authentically how and where they can best use

their gifts in service to others. From where we stand, shouldn't that be the critical "magis" we most desire from our partners in mission?

Jennifer Grant Haworth is Associate Professor of Education and former Associate Vice President for Mission and Executive Director of Evoke at Loyola University Chicago. Megan Barry is Faith and Justice Coordinator in the Office of Mission and Identity at Loyola University Chicago.

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