

June 2023

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Recommended Citation

Angeli, Elizabeth L.; Jamison, Serina; and Jones-Landwer, Susan E. (2023) "Preparing Humanities Students for Employment: Reimagining Career Exploration and Education through Ignatian Spirituality and Discernment," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*. Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53309/2164-7666.1426>

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol12/iss1/9>

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Preparing Humanities Students for Employment: Reimagining Career Exploration and Education through Ignatian Spirituality and Discernment

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Abstract

Graduate students in the humanities are hungry for career exploration as they face limited academic career options and feel called to work beyond the academy. Career preparation is typically left to graduate advisors, and then, the focus tends to be on academic career preparation. This article details how a required introductory graduate class was reimagined to integrate career exploration using a framework at the heart of Ignatian spirituality and education: discernment. We outline the course and two assignments that can be adapted and applied to any graduate course. Then, we share reflections on how the class has impacted our own professional and personal formation, and we end with heuristics for educators to use when preparing to teach similar graduate courses.

Introduction

It's a question many of us and our students resonate with: "What will you do with a degree in that?" Although many majors within the humanities, social sciences, and sciences do not have clear career paths, which can be both liberating and terrifying, the humanities have struggled to prepare students for the wealth of career options available to them. A recent special issue of *Daedalus*, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, captures how humanities embolden students not only for careers, but for life: Humanities courses "may or may not teach skills that lead directly to employment, but they can broaden our experience of the world and allow us to build enduring resources that may help us remain creatively resilient in times of unforeseen adversity."¹ That same special issue raises the question that we take up in this piece: "[H]ave our institutions of higher

learning diversified sufficiently to readily bring expertise based on community knowledge, growing new scholarship, and passion to understand new perspectives to the world of the public humanities?"² One part of this diversification includes introducing our students to the range of professional opportunities available to them outside of academia *because* they have studied the humanities, not *in spite* of them studying the humanities.

This need for career diversity was reflected in an internal survey of graduate school alumni, current PhD students, and faculty at our institution.³ Results indicate that, across STEM, humanities, and health professions disciplines, participants rated career exploration, change, and diversity as important (4.38 on a 5-point Likert scale) and should be a graduate education requirement. Yet across disciplines and groups, there was a statistically significant difference ($P < .05$) between

the level of importance participants placed on career exploration and how well they reported their graduate program prepared them for it. Furthermore, when it came to requiring career exploration, there was a significant difference between alumni (65.4%) and current PhD students (71.6%) and faculty (46.7%), with faculty not seeing career exploration as important as requiring career-related or discipline-related content. These results call for faculty to respond to the rising need of our students and to the experience of our alumni.

Likewise, national trends suggest that the range of career employment outside the academy is diverse for graduate degree holders. The Humanities Indicators' most recent report shows 56.2% of humanities PhDs work in postsecondary education, followed next by management (13.7%) and arts, design, entertainment, and media (8.8%).⁴ Master degree recipients' occupations vary more widely, with 22.6% working in precollegiate teaching, followed by postsecondary teaching (14.7%), management (11.1%), and arts, design, entertainment, and media (10.6%).⁵ The data illustrates that humanities graduates work in all sectors of the workforce, whether their coursework prepared them for it or not.

Some graduate programs are beginning to intentionally prepare students for all sectors of employment, including University of Washington's Simpson Center for Humanities, CUNY Graduate Center, and Stanford, which offer fellowships, workshops, and career diversity and public-facing coursework. These programs often receive external funding from sources like the Mellon Foundation or the National Endowment for the Humanities. Yet receiving external, or even internal, funding for career diversity is not the reality for many humanities' graduate programs. What's more, graduate curricula are already packed with disciplinary content and research and teaching requirements, and the thought of adding more material can be prohibitive. How can already full, and perhaps lower-funded, programs introduce students to and prepare them for career diversity?

This article details how a graduate class was reimagined to integrate career exploration using a framework at the heart of Ignatian spirituality and

education: discernment. In doing so, this class became a formation class, not for entry into religious life as formation is traditionally thought of, but as a way to form hearts and minds by teaching students how to identify areas of desires, values, freedom, consolation, desolation, and authenticity, all of which are foundational elements of Ignatian discernment and spirituality. In the Ignatian discernment tradition, these words are interrelated and hold specific meaning. "Desire" refers to our deepest longings that bring us closer to inner freedom and authenticity or, as Ignatius outlines in the Sixteenth Annotation, closer to God's call for us.⁶ We experience "freedom" when we let go of "disordered attachments," those surface desires that may be weighing us down and limiting our discernment process, such as attachments to power, prestige, or efficiency.⁷ Putting those desires first, Ignatius would say, means we are not free to choose what will bring us closer to our authentic self and to God's call. Freedom allows us to pay closer attention to the inner movements of our spirit.⁸ When our spirit moves closer to freedom and our deepest desires, we experience consolation, "every increase in hope, faith, and charity."⁹ Desolation is the opposite and can be experienced in a variety of ways, including restlessness, complacency, fear, or anxiety.^{10, 11}

Students applied these concepts to career exploration, ultimately learning which kinds of opportunities aligned with their values, desires, and freedom.

We begin this piece with Elizabeth (Liz), the course's professor, outlining the course and the guiding principles of the course's redesign. Then, Susan and Serina, who were two graduate students in the class, detail two course activities that they, in turn, have implemented into their own teaching practices. We close with how this class has influenced us and suggest ways readers can integrate these activities into their coursework and programs.

Laying Groundwork: Introducing Students to Discernment

In response to English graduate students' requests for more career exploration, Liz was asked to teach "Studies in Modern Theory and Critical

Practice,” an introductory required graduate course, with a new focus on public humanities and career diversity. She sought to create a class that showed how English graduate degrees are not necessarily in service to a career but teach students transferable life skills, such as cultivating curiosity, synthesizing perspectives, and developing empathy. As a publicly engaged interdisciplinary scholar in healthcare and technical communication, Liz drew on her academic research and consulting experience when developing the public-facing components of this class. She is also a trained spiritual director who has a private practice and works with Marquette University’s Campus Ministry as a retreat leader. This training informed much of the course’s redesign.

Specifically, Liz saw this class as an opportunity to integrate Ignatian discernment into curricula so that students would leave the class equipped with habits of heart, mind, and soul to “discern complex choices in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres.”¹² In doing so, the class enacted the Apostolic Preference that calls for deeper alternatives to secularism, and the practice of discernment provides one alternative.¹³ The power of a personal discernment practice lies in knowing how to sit with uncertainty amidst complexity and waiting until clarity emerges before acting. Letting go of disordered attachments, such as money or status, allows us to make freer choices in spheres that all too often are clouded by such attachments. Thus, we can enact personal freedoms in ways that may embolden others to do the same.

Seen this way, discernment and career diversity share similar goals: being open to new career ideas asks students to embrace uncertainty, create knowledge and articulate it to multiple audiences, release limiting beliefs and attachments, and cultivate relationships with those around them. Discernment equips students with ways of knowing and living their values, truest desires, and embodied wisdom.^{14, 15, 16} When students befriend their values, desires, and inner wisdom, then they can begin to learn what life is asking of them and what they are asking of life.

In addition to being aligned with the Jesuit mission, discernment is capacious enough to

accommodate students’ varied experiences and engagement with religion, faith, and spirituality. The main challenge, though, was how to integrate Ignatian discernment, a concept rooted in Catholic theology, into the class without alienating students who do not identify as Catholic, religious, or spiritual, and/or who have been harmed by religious institutions. Latest data from the Fetzer Institute informed Liz’s decision to use discernment as a practice, not as an introduction to a faith tradition. The Institute found that the “more spiritual than religious group rose from 18.5% of American adults in 1998 to 33.6% in 2020,” and findings suggest that these “effects come from a combination of people lowering their ratings of religiousness while raising their assessments of spirituality.”¹⁷ The study also found that the “growth in spirituality vs. religiousness is also shown by people’s reports that over their life their spirituality has increased more than their religiousness.”¹⁸

With this data in mind, course readings were rooted in spirituality that eschewed overt religious language. Required course texts included Jenny Lee’s *Spark Change: 108 Questions for Spiritual Evolution*, Rebecca Walker and Lily Diamond’s *What’s Your Story? A Journal for Everyday Evolution*, Parker Palmer’s *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, and Philip Sheldrake’s *Befriending Our Desires*. Sheldrake’s book introduced students formally to discernment. Although it uses terms and Scripture passages religious-identifying students recognize and resonate with, this text does not assume knowledge of Catholic principles or concepts, and it is not limited to discussions of Catholicism. Rather, Sheldrake explains discernment in detail and depth within the context of Ignatius’s life and makes connections beyond Christianity, drawing on the works of Aristotle, Etty Hillesum, and Achaan Chaa, thus broadening discernment’s scope, relevance, and relatability.

The Course Outline

The true spirit of the course is best summarized in the opening paragraphs of the syllabus:

This class gives you what many academic contexts don’t: time and space. This semester, you will have time to be, ponder, wonder, dream, question, and create. With that in

mind, this class likely won't be like one you've taken before. In addition to time and space, it gives you tools and resources to ask and answer questions like, "What do I offer the world? How can that knowledge be transformed into public-facing work and/or academic work? How can I talk about English in a way that's recognizable to communities outside of the humanities and that captures the depth, range, and expansiveness of English as a field?"

This course will teach you the methods of discernment to learn how you can move into, out of, between, and with public-facing and academic-facing spaces. We will discuss ways to make English public. To do that, you first must learn for yourself what that means and how, why, and if you are the person to do it. Why did you choose English? What gifts do you bring to your projects? What has English prepared you to do? Who has English prepared you to be? What models exist for humanities specialists to do public-facing work? How do their stories speak to you or spark resistance in you? If models don't exist, how can you create one?

This course is writing intensive—be prepared to write. A lot. You will be writing as a way to learn and discern, and to share knowledge, synthesize insights, and consolidate key learnings. The writing will be a mix of informal assignments, some of which will be for you only and some of which will be submitted for completion credit. Other writing will be more formal in that you'll be sharing it with an audience, i.e., me (Liz) and the class.¹⁹

The first time this course was offered it ran on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for 50 minutes. To give students time and space to ponder and wonder, each class began with a four-minute free-write reflection to a prompt in Jennie Lee's *Spark Change: 108 Questions for Spiritual Evolution*. As a way to pay attention to the inner life, students and Liz took turns leading the reflection by choosing prompts that spoke to where they each were on our discernment journey that day; example prompts include "What motivates me?"²⁰ and "Is my consciousness based

in love or fear?"²¹ Then, everyone journaled responses for four minutes and shared a word or phrase that summarized a key learning of their reflection, always knowing they had the option to pass and not share.

The class met in person Mondays and Wednesdays to discuss readings and to complete in-class activities that invited students deeper into course material and their discernment journey. Fridays were asynchronous so that students had time and space to complete activities in *What's Your Story*, a workbook-journal filled with "transformational writing prompts for personal and global change."²² The book is organized into 13 sections, "Ready," "Set," "Go," "Waking Up," "In Your Body," "With People," "At Work," "Facing the Screen," "Getting Outside," "In Community," "Coming Home," "Twilight," and "Letting Go."²³ Each Friday, the class focused on one section and worked through the workbook by the end of the semester. Students chose three prompts from the assigned section to work with, and similar to *Spark Change*, students completed prompts they felt called to in the assigned section. Then, in a discussion board post, students listed the prompts they chose, explained why they chose those prompts, and summarized what they learned, sharing only what they felt comfortable with. Students replied to two other people as a way to invite students to read, reflect, and respond to another's discernment journey.

In-class work and discussion boards provided springboards for students to begin their discernment journey. The major course assignments asked students to engage in deeper creativity, imagination, and wondering, three hallmarks of Ignatian discernment. We present two of those assignments here: Discernment Maps and Informational Interviews.

Discernment Maps

More than just decision making, discernment is an intentional, life-long process of determining what brings a person closer to their authentic self. The Discernment Map is a visual representation of that process, requiring students to identify key people, moments, and events that guided them to their current position and to consider how and why these people, moments, and events were

influential. This process, usually associated with where individuals make decisions based on where God is calling them, can be adapted to be used in professional learning settings in secular communities, which we discuss later. In this section, we will focus on how the Discernment Map activity was used in our English graduate course.

The Map is a heuristic in which students reflect on their personal and professional journeys, and it leverages three parts of discernment: desire, freedom, and authenticity. Before creating their map, students identified their desires and recorded what values fed those desires in an effort to determine their authentic selves. For example, a student might desire a career in public policy and climate change because they value advocacy, the environment, and writing. Another student may desire a career in accounting because they value finances and financial freedom. The goal is not for students to evaluate their desires, but to determine what truly drives them to live in authenticity. This process to authenticity can be a difficult one, since we are socialized to place value on things based on our environment, experiences, or the media.

These external factors can cloud our ability to go after the things we truly want because of outside expectations. So, students were invited to be honest with themselves in order to practice letting go of what Ignatius calls “disordered attachments.” Through this reflection, not only do students get to know themselves better, but they are also able to understand why they make the choices they make because the Map invites students to practice identifying areas of consolation and desolation, that is, what contexts and people have moved them to and away from freedom and authenticity.

It is important to note that the word “map” refers to a visual, textual, or auditory product that represents a journey—it does not need to be a literal map or chronicle timeline, although it can be. To guide students through the Discernment Map process, students center their Discernment Map around the following questions: “What do I really want?” and “What has led me here?” Students then work through various questions to guide their process starting with, “Who are you right now, today?” which requires them to reflect on their current condition and positions, like

being a graduate student in the humanities. Next, students answer various questions meant to have them reflect on their past and the decisions that brought them to their present. Those questions include:

1. Where and when did your journey to today start?
2. Whose voices informed your journey, both in positive and negative ways? “Voices” is broad here; it includes family, friends, classmates, teachers, or that random person who you met that changed your perspective.
3. What places and spaces influenced your journey?
4. What books, movies, songs, or artwork influenced your journey?
5. What values, desires, spaces, and items influenced it?
6. What experiences led you to where you are?
7. What turning points or shifts can you identify? What and who informed them? What happened next?

After students engage in reflecting on their past and present, they then look ahead, asking themselves, “Where do you anticipate your next place on your map will be?” while keeping in mind the question, “What do I really want?” This follow-up question is an important one. It grounds students in their consolations so that they do not answer this question from a place of external expectation. Finding what they want within themselves is necessary for the authenticity of the assignment. Ultimately, the only requirement for the Discernment Map is that students confront themselves honestly and gracefully. Gracefully, because we must be mindful to not be so self-critical that it prevents the process. Honestly, because if we’re not honest with ourselves, we are unable to get to where we truly want to be and go.

After students complete the Discernment Map, they answer the following reflection questions:

1. Explain the process you followed to create your discernment map. For example, why did you include the people, places, and things you included? What got

“left out”? How did you know it was okay to leave those things out?

2. What was challenging about creating this map?
3. What was easy about creating this map?
4. What surprised you?
5. What questions are you left with?

The reflection part of this activity serves an important purpose, for students to explain how they made their decisions. In doing so, students engage in meta-cognition, which can solidify key learnings and open up new paths to explore.

Together, the Discernment Map and reflection can be used in college courses in the following ways:

- An icebreaker (maps could be created quickly in class, or the questions in the prompt could be used on their own, aside from creating an actual map)
- Capstone project
- Mid-semester check-in
- Beginning-of and end-of semester activity
- Team building to apply discernment and course-specific content

In addition to being used in classes, the Discernment Map has been adapted by our university’s Office for Mission and Ministry and Campus Ministry as an Examen to open staff meetings. They share that the Discernment Map opens conversations that other forms of the Examen prayer do not, and they attribute that success to the Map’s focus on visualization and creativity. In addition to integrating Discernment Maps into our own classes, the three of us have offered Discernment Map workshops at academic conferences, professional development meetings, and local community events. The creativity and openness people bring to this activity has been consoling. Students and workshop attendees have created actual maps, poems, vignettes, pro/con lists, drawings, collages from magazine clippings and tarot cards, TikTok videos, and PowerPoint presentations. It is worth noting that sometimes participants approach this activity with resistance—we welcome it. Following Ignatian principles, we know that resistance often speaks to something deeper, and resistance is a place where we then invite people to start their map journey.

In our graduate class, students continued this journey by completing the next assignment, Informational Interviews.

Informational Interviews

In today’s ever-competing academic climate, universities must prepare graduate students for success outside of the academic job market. How can what students read, write, analyze, and discuss in graduate courses teach them skills they can use in occupations outside of the classroom? How can class content facilitate students’ discernment process and empower them to make decisions aligned with *cura personalis*, “an education that is respectful of the unique needs and identity of each student”²⁴ that allows for students to make choices that are “more conducive for the end for which [they] are created”^{25, 26} For our graduate class, the Informational Interview assignment was the answer to both of these questions.

The Informational Interview assignment offers a framework in which students can apply their discernment process to their career interests, learn more about career options, practice cold emailing and interviewing, and create a network of mentors and contacts. Students are asked to pick three people to interview with regards to a career or opportunity in which they wish to learn more, and to date, students have interviewed professors, corporate trainers, professional writers, community leaders, and local artists. Interviews are a minimum of 20-30 minutes. Students prepare their own questions to facilitate the discussion, and they are required to end all interviews with, “What else should I have asked you?” This question usually prompts the interviewee to share additional information and insights not captured in the prepared questions.

After digesting the assignment prompt, students return to their Discernment Map and other class activities to help them determine who to interview and how they align with their personal and professional goals. The Informational Interviews can become integral to a student’s path forward, as it prompts them to initiate contact with people in disciplines of their interest, schedule a face-to-face meeting, and follow-up with a thank you and next steps to maintain contact and develop new

relationships, which may lead to employment after graduation.

To ensure students are prepared for cold calling and emailing, they complete scaffolding assignments about how they should reach out to their chosen contacts, how to create interview questions, and how to engage in discussion with their chosen interview contacts. In these “warm-up” assignments, students post drafts of their cold email or phone scripts and interview questions, and we discuss them as a class for feedback and edits.

Once students schedule and complete interviews, they prepare a seven-minute class presentation in which they share their project findings:

- Who did you interview and why did you choose them?
- What are your key takeaways from the interviews?
- What will you do with your key learnings, i.e., are they informing a final class project idea, a dissertation idea, or internship?

Informational Interviews allow students to set a path forward in an industry and profession that they may be well versed, or alternately, know very little. With new contacts made and perhaps old contacts revisited, students should be able to identify needed skill sets for prospective employers, consider next steps for their career, and continue to develop relationships with people already in the field who may in turn let students know about future opportunities in their area of expertise. All of this is in conjunction with *cura personalis*, because it allows for students to take what they love and/or are drawn to so that they may enter into a field that allows for space in their talents, abilities, desires, and faith, which are all things students need to consider when looking for employment after their academic studies.

Discernment in Action

Liz’s Reflection

As the course professor, I admit that I’m not typically transformed by the classes I teach. This class was different. I allowed myself time and

space to engage in the class activities alongside the students, even though I already had completed them as a business owner and in my personal spiritual direction work. Something was different about engaging in these assignments within the context of this class, though, and new insights and pivots emerged for me as a result.

The Informational Interviews were based on Lean Launch, a form of early-stage customer discovery I completed as the owner of a small business, which I co-owned with two partners. We formed a corporation based on my research on first responders’ writing practices and education; together, we built an online training platform that integrated research-based writing pedagogy into interactive learning modules with a short film of a scripted, realistic 911 response. During the summer before I taught this graduate class, my business partners and I were accepted to the National Science Foundation’s iCorps program, a business accelerator for new entrepreneurs, and as part of that, we were tasked with conducting 40 customer discovery interviews in four weeks to test our business’s biggest assumptions and to learn about our customers’ biggest pain points, how they were currently fixing them, and what they were willing to pay for a solution. At the end of this experience, we learned that, although all customers saw medical report writing practice and training as a huge pain point that lacked effective solutions, customers weren’t willing to pay to fix it. This insight was hard to hear, especially because my entire research agenda since graduate school was dedicated to better understanding and solving this problem. I brought these findings to my own discernment practice, wondering how, why, and if I should be dedicating my research time and personal time to this endeavor when the community I worked with wasn’t willing to commit resources to it. Ultimately, my business partners and I decided to dissolve the corporation, and I pivoted away from my EMS research and moved into discernment-informed classes and research, which resulted in this class. My experience with Lean Launch made me wonder what insights students could learn if they would talk to their own “customers,” or people whose perspectives could inform their own success, and I developed the Informational Interviews assignment for this course.

Pivoting away from over 10 years of work with EMS was a tremendously difficult decision, one I brought to my monthly spiritual direction sessions and discernment practice. I developed the Discernment Map in an effort to embody and represent what I was thinking and feeling in my own discernment journey. The map helped me get out of my head and tease out connections and tensions I felt deeply but struggled to articulate. The map emerged as one way to capture the imagery, colors, and voices that were part of my interior life. And, knowing that I'm not the only academic who struggles with getting out of my own head, I anticipated that students might benefit from an activity that asked them to engage their creativity and imagination in ways that produced something other than an academic paper or discussion post.

Serina's Reflection

As an English graduate student and an educator, I found that this class gave me the space to confront why I chose my path and where I would like to go next. I've always wanted to be an educator, and my latest goal was to earn my PhD and become an English professor, teaching African-American Literature and writing curriculum. And though those have always been my goals, I felt I was being pulled by expectations and disordered attachments.

My Discernment Map revealed the journey of how I got to where I am today. Mapping my values was an illuminating process. Liz urged us to be honest about our values, to not think too much of them, and for the first time in my life, I wrote down my values without thinking I had to value the "right" thing. My reflection revealed that I actually valued things that I've previously rejected because I thought they contradicted my identity as an educator. For instance, I realized that I value wealth in the financial sense. I've always rejected the idea that I would make a lot of money because I accepted the rhetoric that educators had to struggle financially. While making the time to reflect, I was able to let go of this limiting belief. That struggling financially as an educator does not have to be true, and it ultimately forced me to expand my definition of what it means to be an educator and opened my eyes to different ways to make a sustainable living. More on that later.

As mentioned previously, the Discernment Map could take any form, and it took me a while to determine how I would display my journey. It dawned on me during a family game night that I could create a board game. I modeled my Discernment Map after the childhood game *Chutes and Ladders: An Exciting Up and Down Game for Little Children*. And at that moment, I thought to myself, "This is perfect! I mean, life is, after all, an exciting up and down game for growing people, right?" Honestly, though, through this process, I met myself. In discerning what I really wanted and what led me here, I realized that my "chutes" were me doing the things I was expected to do. As an English major, I was expected to be pre-law because that was the narrative that was fed to me by advisors and family members. And my "ladders," or turning points, were my inner self working to put me back on track to my desires: education. To get to what I wanted, I had to quiet the outside voices that told me that being an educator is a thankless career, a discipline where I will not make a sustainable living, and that I will not be respected. All of those voices revealed the reality of how the general public may feel about education, but that doesn't have to be my reality, and I don't have to internalize that narrative. My career can be fulfilling, I can sustain a great quality of life, I am respected. There may be times I may feel differently, but that was not my current reality, so I had to move in the direction that gave me life.

I also realized that in times when I thought I strayed from my path, I never truly rejected being an educator. So, the Discernment Map also allowed me to take a step back and see alignment in my path that I never saw before. Ultimately, this process gave me more clarity on what I want and where I will go next.

Susan's Reflection

As an English graduate student, I wanted to take classes that not only exposed me to different genres and canons, but also prepared me for the next steps in my career advancement. With a background in sales and non-profit, I was entering academia to become a professor. The Informational Interviews assignment was integral to my path forward in this process. I had been discerning a career path since my undergraduate

program, and upon entering my PhD program, I knew my path upfront, that I wanted to enter academia, but I didn't necessarily know the next steps to take. This assignment solidified my path forward by cultivating my curiosity and initiating a curation of contacts who I believed could provide a blueprint on needed academic job skills.

The Informational Interviews strengthened one of my already developed mentor relationships with Timothy H. Scherman, English Chair of my alma mater. Working with him on my Informational Interviews not only led me to participate in a post-graduate panel he organized, but also provided steps that I would need to take in order to secure a position in future universities upon graduation. Some of his key advice was focused on how research is indeed important in academia; however, classroom studies need to respond both to our historical narrative and to how these skills transfer over into other disciplines and non-academic employment opportunities. Additionally, he mentioned that archival work is still relevant, and combining this research with the Digital Humanities is attractive to research universities. He shared that the Digital Humanities, which uses data-driven science for text encoding, can analyze texts in ways that a single scholar could never do. Dr. Scherman recommended taking a Digital Humanities course for a competitive edge along with having at least three syllabi that are ready to go and marketable to future universities. Since I had some knowledge but nothing tangible as to what skills were needed in academia, the Informational Interviews assignment prompted me to cultivate a skill set that was dominant in academia while strengthening my mentor/mentee relationships. Using recommended skills as a checklist, the Informational Interviews also provided a timeline as to when I should reach certain benchmarks prior to graduation, thus increasing my chances of gainful employment.

For our final class project, we were asked to create a project that synthesized and represented our discernment process and key learnings from the semester. Based on my conversation with my mentor, one of the benchmarks I chose to execute immediately was to create another course syllabus for a dream course I hoped to teach. This would use my time efficiently by fulfilling the project requirement and by establishing a course that

could be marketed to future employers. Since my learnings from our graduate course were anchored in the discernment process, the goal of my course syllabus also had to be based in discernment. My dream course was on protest literature that fostered student learning and engagement by using historical artifacts. The course exemplifies protest literature as persuasive rhetoric that adheres to a definitive template, and it invites students to undergo a discernment process similar to my own experience in our graduate class. Through their semester writings, students discern which protest artifact best represents who they are, and the final project asks them 1) to pick a topic in which they hold firm beliefs to create their own protest artifact, and 2) to implement this protest artifact and bring it into a real-world situation. This project implementation could vary from writing to their elected official, facilitating a library display of their protest material, or organizing a student march, sit-in, or petition writing campaign. What the protest implementation looks like is ultimately up to the student; however, the requirement is that this humanities project be public facing and that personal discernment guides their artifact selection.

Understanding the future of humanities and the need to have public-facing components, I was able to develop an undergraduate course immersed in discernment with tangible tools students could use not just in deciphering English literature but in future employment. The Informational Interviews were essential in my creation of a new course in the humanities for which I am currently teaching, and it allowed me to translate my findings so that I could implement stronger teachings for my current and future students.

Preparing to Teach Discernment-focused Assignments

An article about a discernment class would be incomplete without a discussion on how educators can prepare themselves for a class of this kind. After all, discernment involves vulnerability and honesty, and we believe that we wouldn't ask students to engage in work that we have not done ourselves, especially work as personal as discernment. Of course, we are not suggesting that educators overshare with their students about their own lives and discernment process; rather,

the act of engaging in reflection and creating Discernment Maps and Informational Interviews can help us understand the challenges students may face when doing them and thus better prepare educators to accompany students through discernment-based work.

Start with Yourself

In her role as an administrator at a local high school, Serina implemented the Discernment Map activity during professional learning sessions. She found that this process allowed educators to regroup themselves in their “why” for teaching and where they want to go in their profession. They explored why they became teachers and what motivated them to continue working toward equity in education by writing “Why teach?” statements. The teachers started the session by identifying their values. After Serina introduced core principles of discernment, the teachers explained their discernment process, what brought them to education, and ultimately to the high school, leveraging their values within that process. Staff also reflected on how their discernment process connects to their “Why teach?” statements. Asking educators, some with over 20 years of experience, “What has led me here?” forced them to confront themselves in a way in which they hadn’t done so before, and it brought them deeper into their experience.

Here, we follow a tenet of spiritual direction: a director can accompany a seeker as far as the director himself has gone. We find the same holds true in walking students through discernment. If we don’t know what authenticity, freedom, or attachments feel like for us, then how can we expect ourselves to guide students through it? The following ideas provide paths to develop your own discernment process.

- Create your own discernment map using the steps outlined above.
- Conduct Informational Interviews about a career that interests you.
- Work with a spiritual director. Your university may have a center for spirituality dedicated to faculty and staff, and spiritual direction may be available to

you at little to no cost. If you would prefer not to meet someone on campus, Spiritual Directors International maintains a database where you can search for a director using different filters, including religion, location, and specialty:

<https://www.sdicompanions.org/find-a-spiritual-director-companion/>

- Read about Ignatian spirituality and discernment. Sheldrake’s *Befriending Our Desires*,²⁷ Manney’s *What Do You Really Want?*,²⁸ and Martin’s *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*²⁹ are excellent places to get started. Contact your university’s Campus Ministry, center for faculty spirituality, or Office of Mission and Ministry for additional recommendations and resources.

Assessing Discernment-focused Assignments

One question Liz receives about this class is, “How is discernment assessed?” In short, it’s not. The purpose of assessing the Discernment Maps and the Informational Interviews was not to grade the final design, presentation, or even the content of the map or presentations themselves. Students are vulnerable in what they share in their maps and reflections—grading for “polish” or product can prohibit students from feeling safe to take risks and really delve into the work that these activities invite them to. Rather, the Discernment Map and Informational Interviews were assessed on a complete/incomplete basis by how fully the students articulated their key learnings so that an outside audience would understand and, on a practical level, how closely the assignment followed directions, such as submitting work on time.

For written feedback, Liz used a notice-appreciate-wonder format, a form of listening-and-response developed by professor and spiritual director Diane Millis.³⁰ In this case, the listener/responder is the professor, and they offer one noticing, appreciation, and wondering to the student about their map and reflection or Informational Interviews. Table 1 shows an example of what a notice-appreciate-wonder format can look like:

I noticed:	Your map took many pivots, twists, and turns, and you were able to relate them to each other in a way that made sense to someone outside your journey.
I appreciated:	The depth you went into with the reflection—you offered specific details into what you “left out,” and it helped me as someone outside of your journey better understand the map.
I wonder:	What would it look like to create a map of what was “left out”? Given how much detail you provide there, it might be interesting to capture those voices and see what they say to you.

Table 1. An example of the notice-appreciate-wonder feedback format.

This format was helpful for both students and for Liz as the professor—together, they could track trends in the student’s journey, and often, the “wondering” offered the student a next step from which to move to the next assignment.

Conclusion

In *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education*, Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch call for universities to create “a more socially responsive and engaged PhD, a degree that will return more to our students—and to the world—than the old, hermetic model.”³¹ Their chapter on career diversity illustrates how higher education has shifted from “Why should we [prepare students for more than academic careers]?” to “How should we?”³² Cassuto and Weisbuch rightfully argue for an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to revising graduate education accordingly, calling for changes from the admissions process to graduate curricula and advising. This approach doesn’t necessarily mean that curricula need a complete overhaul; rather, faculty can do their part by integrating career diversity discussions into current course offerings.

The Discernment Map and Informational Interviews are two activities that can be implemented into any graduate course, and they promise to support our students in their professional and personal development, giving them methods they can use beyond graduation.

As educators at Jesuit institutions, we have the ability, and the responsibility, to create classes that are sites of transformation for our students so they become agents of change in their “social, economic, cultural and political spheres.”³³ Speaking to these spheres, specifically spheres related to climate change, scientist James Gustave Speth says, “The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy . . . to deal with those issues we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.”³⁴ Discernment provides one way to help students identify disordered attachments that lead to selfishness, greed, apathy, and other desolations in all spheres of their lives. The activities presented here support students in taking next steps in this discernment journey so that they can move into the fullness of their lives, empower themselves, and change the spheres we all live in. The time is now. And it starts with you. HJE

Endnotes

¹ James Pawelski, “The Positive Humanities: A Focus on Human Flourishing,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 214.

² George J. Sánchez, “Opening the Humanities to New Fields & New Voices,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 83, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01930.

³ Marquette University Graduate School, “Reexamining PhD Programs at Marquette University: Toward Our Students Future” (unpublished PowerPoint, 2022).

⁴ American Academy of Arts & Sciences, “Occupations of Humanities Ph.D.’s,” American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2022, <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/workforce/occupations-humanities-phds>.

⁵ American Academy of Arts & Sciences, “Occupations of Master’s Degree Recipients in the Humanities,” American

Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2022, <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/workforce/occupations-masters-degree-recipients-humanities>.

⁶ Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

⁷ *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2017), 205.

⁸ David L. Fleming, S.J., *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2011), 90.

⁹ Fleming, 92.

¹⁰ Fleming, 92.

¹¹ *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 189.

¹² The Society of Jesus, “Showing the Way to God,” Universal Apostolic Preferences, <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/showing-the-way-to-god/>.

¹³ The Society of Jesus, “Showing the Way to God.”

¹⁴ Timothy Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York, NY, USA: Crossroad, 2005).

¹⁵ Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams, “Warrior Spirit,” Sounds True: Insights at the Edge, January 24, 2017, <https://www.resources.soundstrue.com/podcast/reverend-angel-kyodo-williams-warrior-spirit/>.

¹⁶ Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 3rd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

¹⁷ The Fetzer Institute, “Spirituality in America Today,” A Study of Spirituality in America, March 10, 2022, <https://spiritualitystudy.fetzer.org/blog/spirituality-america-today>.

¹⁸ The Fetzer Institute, “Spirituality in America Today.”

¹⁹ Elizabeth Angeli, “Studies in Modern Critical Theory and Practice: Public Humanities and Career Discernment,” (Class

syllabus, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Fall 2021).

²⁰ Jennie Lee, *Spark Change: 108 Provocative Questions for Spiritual Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2020), 99.

²¹ Lee, *Spark Change*, 123.

²² Rebecca Walker and Lily Diamond, “What’s Your Story?,” *What’s Your Story? A Journal for Everyday Spiritual Evolution*, 2020, <https://www.whatsyourstorynow.com>.

²³ Rebecca Walker and Lily Diamond, *What’s Your Story? A Journal for Everyday Spiritual Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2020).

²⁴ Barton Geger, “Cura Personalis: Some Ignatian Inspirations,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014): 6.

²⁵ Catherine Peters, “Cura Personalis: The Incarnational Heart of Jesuit Education,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 11, no. 1 (June 14, 2022).

²⁶ *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 40.

²⁷ Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*.

²⁸ Jim Manney, *What Do You Really Want?: St. Ignatius Loyola and the Art of Discernment* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015).

²⁹ James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York City, NY: Harper Collins, 2010).

³⁰ Diane Millis, *Re-Creating a Life: Learning How to Tell Our Most Life-Giving Story* (Bellevue, WA: SDI Press, 2019).

³¹ Leonard Cassuto and Rober Weisbuch, *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 113, <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.81097>.

³² Cassuto and Weisbuch, 115.

³³ The Society of Jesus, “Showing the Way to God.”

³⁴ Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us Into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2021), 9.