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FIVE MISSION-INSPIRED QUESTIONS TO GUIDE CORE RENEWAL

Can a core curriculum work like the Spiritual Exercises?

By Jennifer Grant Haworth and Christopher Skrable

Almost 500 years ago, St. Ignatius Loyola compiled a series of meditations which we know today as the Spiritual Exercises. Over the span of 20 years, the Basque warrior-turned-priest paid close attention to and reflected on his own experiences as a spiritual pilgrim and guide, recording his learnings in a little book he hoped would welcome others into what George Aschenbrenner, S.J., has described as “the truth and wise intimacy of a new life.” Today the Exercises are regarded as the foundational “curriculum” of the Society of Jesus, offering a distinctive way of proceeding that informs Ignatian spirituality and thus Jesuit education.

As education professionals who have been formed by and now accompany others through the Exercises, we have come to cherish the ways in which they—and those who serve as guides in them—welcome participants into both a **course of study** (the subject of which is the purpose and meaning of their life) and a **way of learning** (or exercising) that evokes their active participation. In this respect, the Exercises are analogous to and foundational for the core curricula of our Jesuit colleges and universities, where educators invite students to encounter knowledge in ways that promote engagement, commitment, and faith-doing-justice in service to humanity. A core curriculum, like the

Exercises, aims at the transformation of those who experience it.

In an era when more and more Jesuit institutions are rolling out new core curricula, what insights might the “curriculum that started it all” hold for us as we engage in the work of core development and reform? As we examined the Exercises, we were drawn to its introductory materials, which offer guidance to those who facilitate others’ journeys through it. In this essay, we identify five guiding questions inspired by these sources and explore the considerations they raise for “the core” at our Jesuit institutions.

Question 1: How does the core curriculum reflect and foster the “end for which [our students] were created”?

In the “Principle and Foundation” of his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius clearly articulates the end for which God has created us: to be with God forever. He also identifies the gifts of love and freedom as the means by which we may obtain this end. According to David Fleming, S.J., the Exercises are intended to help retreatants develop freedom around their self-limiting visions so they may “come to know God more easily, make a return to God more readily,” and “choose what better leads to God’s deepening life” within their daily experience. The response to which retreatants are called



Division V: Philosophy and Religious Studies

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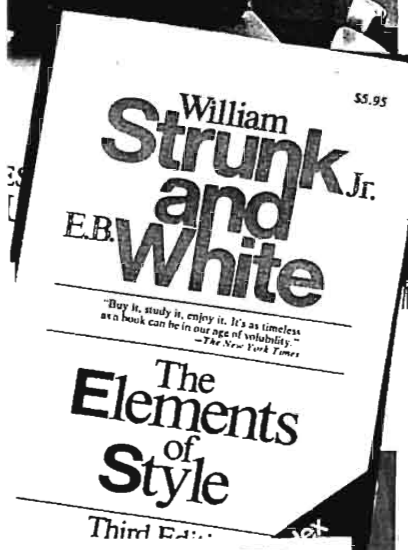
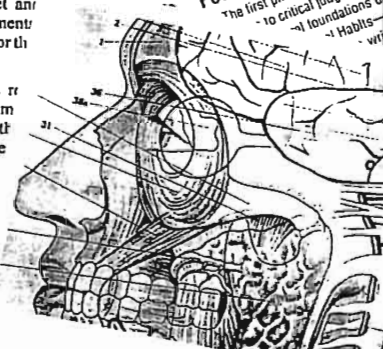
Religious Studies is a fundamental part of human communities through its keeping with the Unive Catholic tradition.

In both philosophy students to those disc for courses that will

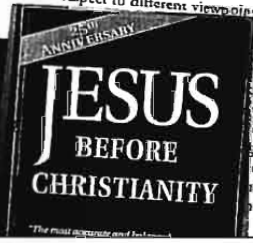
Requirement: philosophy at the problems and topic 300 level.

Phase I: Foundations of

The first phase gives a student to critical judgment and foundations of Habits



expresses its Catholic character by including liturgical life, by its and Christian morality, and by its ec...
 earning. Rockhurst University has gained who are committed to developing a deep u... discovering ways to share that understandin... educational institutions. It is through excell... growth of the very best of what each student... one of our students is a unique reflection of... that student's gifts and potential the world wi... its students how to think. Students learn to a... appreciate new concepts and expand the... respect to different viewpoints.



... nurture the life of and the pursuit of truth within an environment to effective teaching, learning, and personal it. Consistent with Judeo-Christian principles, knowledge to human needs and seek to best of the human heritage. We encourage search for truth, values and a just existence. In this process, we examine and attempt to "How ought we to live?"

throughout the Exercises, therefore, involves far more than changing the way they think; it instead challenges them to act into a new way of being in the world that has the potential to transform their whole being—mind, heart, and will.

Like the Exercises, Jesuit education has a clear end in mind, and that end is also transformation. A Jesuit education invites students into a discerning community where they are free to explore their strengths and limitations, to identify and name their gifts and biases, and to act on their emerging callings to become “men and women for others.” At the same time, it challenges students to transcend their own narrow self-interests, exhorting them to consider how they might freely share the gifts of themselves and their education with others through committed lives of faith, knowledge, and service.

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The Principle and Foundation reminds us to begin with the “end in mind.” Rather than directing our attention to *what* should be included in the core or *who* should teach what content, this question urges us to focus on transformational education and its outcomes. This opens the door to ongoing dialogue about how the core can foster cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in students; what kinds of curricular experiences might promote *metanoia* (a change of heart and mind) in students; and what specific learning outcomes might make sense in a core, given an institution’s particular social context, students, and mission. It encourages us to challenge our students to demonstrate not only content-based understanding, but also values-based and ethical understanding, thereby increasing emphasis on the importance of students’ articulation of the narratives of their own

learning as a complement to the marks that appear on their final transcripts. When we make a habit of asking, “How does the core reflect and foster the ‘end for which our students were created?’” we take a strong step toward ensuring that the resulting core curriculum will be congruent with our guiding Ignatian charism.

Question 2: How does the core place learners and their learning at the center of inquiry?

In the first and second notes to the Exercises, Ignatius addresses the importance of “spiritual exercise” and the role directors play in facilitating it. Note 1 addresses exercise: retreatants are to participate in spiritual activities that will develop and tone their awareness of and desire to see, seek, and discover God’s purpose for their lives. In note 2, Ignatius counsels directors to keep their teaching “brief and to the point,” urging them instead to listen carefully to their retreatants, inviting elaboration and reflection on their experiences.

Simply put, these notes underscore that learners and their learning must be a primary consideration in the core. A growing number of educational scholars and national higher education professional associations have recently urged faculty and administrators to become more “learner-centered,” designing and facilitating curricular and co-curricular experiences that invite student engagement and ownership of their learning. Like Ignatius, these reformers grasp that transformational learning is fundamentally about students and the “laboring” they are invited to experience and that educators promote better learning when they see their role as designers and coaches creating rich contexts that encourage students to invest more fully and actively in themselves and their learning, as opposed to simply providing them with rich content for passive consumption.

Question 3: How does the core invite students into “deep learning” about themselves, others, and the world?

Ignatius taught that personal discovery, reflection, and engagement are at the heart of a learning that transforms. While he believed learning could be facilitated through a guide, he understood that *real learning*—the kind which effects changes in the way we think, value, and behave—is a personal experience requiring critical reflection, engagement, and the construction of “felt knowledge.” In the second note to the Exercises, Ignatius tells directors “what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in

knowing much, but in our understanding realities profoundly.” To foster this kind of “deep learning,” Ignatius reminds directors in notes 4 and 15 that the Exercises involve a dynamic relationship between the “prescribed” and the “experienced”: directors are to listen carefully for the “graces” retreatants are receiving, to recommend new reflections to help deepen the experience of those graces, and to move to the next set of meditations only after retreatants have sufficiently “savored” their experience.

This consideration invites an exploration of how core offerings welcome “deep learning” in students. Whether the core emphasizes breadth or depth, a key value must be integration. Students must be challenged to connect core ideas, skills, and values across their academic experience and relate them meaningfully to the realities of their own lives and the broader community. Only by deliberately and regularly engaging in this sort of reflective meaning-making—whether in class or in relation to other significant learning experiences—can learners move toward the transformative “felt experience” that Ignatius advocated.

Ignatius’ notes invite conversation about how the core is taught. If directors are expected to help facilitate “deep learning” how might educators who teach in the core similarly exercise this practice? In what ways could educators honor and facilitate student engagement with the material so that students begin to construct their own self-authored, critically reflective understandings? How might they “live the tension” between subject coverage and depth in ways that provide students with enough freedom to explore and savor whatever speaks deeply to their souls? Good education today displays an array of “engaged pedagogies”: problem-based learning, authentic encounters and dialogues with difference, student-directed research, service-learning, case studies, and field-based clinical applications. What role might these engaging pedagogies play in inviting students, in the words of Dean Brackley, S.J., “to consider both [the] factual knowledge and practical experience [that] stresses individual and communal reflection,” and how might we systematically and deliberately incorporate them into our core curricula?

Question 4: How does the core accommodate learners of various ages and life experiences?

Ignatius repeatedly stresses that directors remain flexible, adjusting the retreat and its structures to accommodate persons of varying “age, education, and ability” (see note 18; also 4, 8, 9, 10, 17, and 19). This speaks to Ignatius’ belief that the “Creator

[deals] immediately with the creature” to effect personal transformation, and limits the role of the director to that of a third-party facilitator using the Exercises as a set of tools for supporting an already-existing relationship between God and the retreatant, rather than the omniscient administrator of a rigidly-defined “one-size-fits-all” program of spiritual growth.

Our contemporary reality confronts faculty, staff, and administrators with a similarly varied set of students. We are asked to provide meaningful, transformative educational opportunities to individuals who are diverse not only in their ages, but also in their educational backgrounds, life experiences, socioeconomic status, national origins, spiritual roots, and extra-curricular obligations. In this environment, Ignatius’ wisdom about flexibility and accommodation raises particularly important questions for our core curricula. For instance, how do we offer our core courses in formats and at times/locations that are accessible to students who work, have disabilities, are parents or veterans, or those who are part-time, distance-learning, or commuter students? How do our curricula respect and acknowledge the achievements of those who have fulfilled their general education requirements at other, less expensive institutions? Can we implement means for older, more experienced students to demonstrate their hard-won mastery of core skills, values, and content areas outside of traditional course-based assessment? And as an overriding consideration, how can we, as educators, best exercise “cura personalis” (care of the whole person) to provide developmentally appropriate, core experiences for *all* our students?

Question 5: How does the core draw upon the wisdom of all those involved in students’ formation at every stage of their college experience?

In notes 11 and 18, Ignatius reminds the director that all aspects of the retreatant’s development are important unto themselves. That is, the value of the Exercises is to be found, not in one’s arrival at any particular point in the retreat, but rather in each moment of the transformative journey *through* it. For this reason, Ignatius elsewhere offers additional considerations dealing with retreatant’s food, lodging, and leisure, all of which are constitutive elements of the experience of the retreat.

As our Jesuit schools have become more self-reflective through institutional and program-level assessment, we have become increasingly aware of the

ways that the entire college experience contributes to students’ learning. In reconsidering what learning experiences to include in a core curriculum, the insights of Ignatius and our own self-reflection prompt us to ask educators involved in civic engagement, service-learning, study abroad, living/learning centers, leadership development, academic advising, and campus ministry how they might more meaningfully contribute to transformative learning on our campuses. Engaging in this conversation helps us honor more fully the entirety of our students’ collegiate journeys—through the core and beyond.

In this essay, we have drawn upon the wisdom of “the curriculum that started it all,” seeking guidance for how our mission as Jesuit colleges and universities can meaningfully inform the development and revision of core curricula on our campuses. Ignatius invites those who follow the Exercises—and by extension, all those who enact Jesuit education—to a collaborative, open-ended, mission-inspired way of proceeding that seeks nothing less than our total transformation in grace, freedom, and love. Ignatius knew that such collaboration would itself occasion some challenges. Perhaps it was with these in mind that he chose to include a short “pre-supposition” at the end of his notes to directors. The first sentence of this final gentle word of advice bears repeating in full:

That both the giver and the maker of the Spiritual Exercises may be of greater help and benefit to each other, it should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it.

As 21st-century companions of Ignatius, may all of us take this supposition to heart as we work together to ask and answer the hard questions that our times, our students, and our mission of educating “women and men for others” demand of us.

Students must be challenged to connect core ideas, skills, and values across their academic experience.

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