

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 34

Article 8

10-1-2008

Making Critical Connections: Identity and Mission Officers Tell What Works

Jennifer G. Haworth

Megan Barry

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Haworth, Jennifer G. and Barry, Megan (2008) "Making Critical Connections: Identity and Mission Officers Tell What Works," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 34, Article 8.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol34/iss1/8>

MAKING CRITICAL CONNECTIONS:

Identity and Mission Officers Tell What Works

By Jennifer Haworth and Megan Barry

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, Fr. Kolvenbach’s reminder is helpful for two reasons. For starters, it highlights that formation for Ignatius was ultimately about discerning how he could best “live the magis.” Second, it underscores that formation is a process that, if better understood and practiced, might encourage more faculty and staff to become “partners in mission” on our campuses.

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 Jesuit campuses has increased. Generally speaking, these programs introduce faculty and staff to the Jesuit mission in higher education and to key Ignatian values and ideals. Recently we surveyed and interviewed mission and identity officers at AJCU institutions to learn more about their faculty/staff mission formation activities. Our ten-item online survey focused primarily on documenting the scope, perceived value, and “best practices” central to the effectiveness of these programs. Eighty-one percent of survey recipients responded; seven participants offered further insights in short (30 minute) follow-up telephone interviews with us.

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

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 speaker or luncheon series (52 percent), and multi-session mission/identity orientation (49 percent);
- **Spiritual formation:** (1) Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life 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).

Which of these many activities “make the most dif-

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.

ference” in fostering faculty/staff understandings of the Ignatian mission? According to the mission and identity officers we surveyed, the top vote-getters include (1) immersion trips and service days – which often enliven mission themes through direct, hands-on experience – and (2) spiritual retreats and mission-themed seminars that prompt participants to reflect on their lives in light of their own faith commitments and key Ignatian teachings. (See Table 1 for more results.)

Best Practices

We learned quickly that practices – rather than specific programs – matter most in faculty and staff mission formation. Specifically, conversation, relationship, and action emerged as practices that consistently enhance faculty/staff understandings of and engagement with the Ignatian mission. While we discuss each separately here, their formational value was most pronounced when they operated as a kind of gestalt at an institution.

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 with one another “we discover what we care about, we discover shared meaning, and we discover each other.”

Conversation is essential to the mission formation process for two key reasons. First, it opens a space for faculty and staff to connect their learnings about Ignatian values and principles to their own lives. As Mary Flick, the director of mission programs at St. Louis University, told us: “Faculty and staff have to work through the information. The discussion piece is critical for that – they need to talk it through themselves and make it their own.”

Once underway, conversation becomes an important mission formation practice for another reason: if done well, it invites faculty and staff to participate in an authentically Ignatian way of reflecting upon their lives. Joe Appleyard S.J., vice president for mission and ministry at Boston College, illustrated this point as 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. We begin by encouraging people to tell their own stories... 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... From my point of view, this dynamic 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.

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

Relationship makes mission “real.” A few weeks ago one of us 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 with us, we see that person’s humanity more concretely. He or she becomes “real” to us.

From the Ignatian mentoring program at Xavier University to the colleagues in Jesuit education seminar at Seattle University, we continually heard about the vital role of relationships 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.

The dynamic at work here is straightforward: when faculty and staff share their experiences and stories, they begin to move beyond the institutional “roles” they occupy and to see each other as “real.” The simple act

When someone shares his or her narrative with us, we see that person’s humanity more concretely.

of listening invites this change of perspective and encourages the formation of relationships. As these grow and deepen, they nurture in faculty and staff a sense of belonging to something “bigger” – in this case, an enhanced sense of mission – that adds new meaning and purpose to their work and lives.

Because Ignatian spirituality is grounded in the core value of relationship – between us and God, others, and the broader world – it makes sense that relationship-building surfaced as a key practice in Ignatian mission formation programs. Like Ignatius, today’s mission and identity officers understand that listening and dialogue not only invite and deepen relationships, but they also make mission “real.”

The simple act of listening invites this change

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

The core practice of immersing themselves in Ignatian values and principles in some active, intentional way helps faculty and staff to grasp the mission of our institutions more fully by acting themselves into new ways of thinking. Action can take many forms – an

immersion trip, the *Spiritual Exercises*, an Ignatian mentoring program, or working on a teaching, research, or co-curricular mission-funded project. The activity is far less important than the choice to engage it intentionally with an open mind and heart.

In describing their annual trip to Nicaragua, Seattle University’s director of the office of mission and Jesuit identity, Joe Orlando, emphasized that immersion trips were “important because they touch people viscerally and intellectually. They tend to tap into deeper values, giving them legs.” Similarly, Lucien Roy, vice president for mission and ministry at Loyola University Chicago, said of their yearlong *Spiritual Exercises* in everyday life retreat:

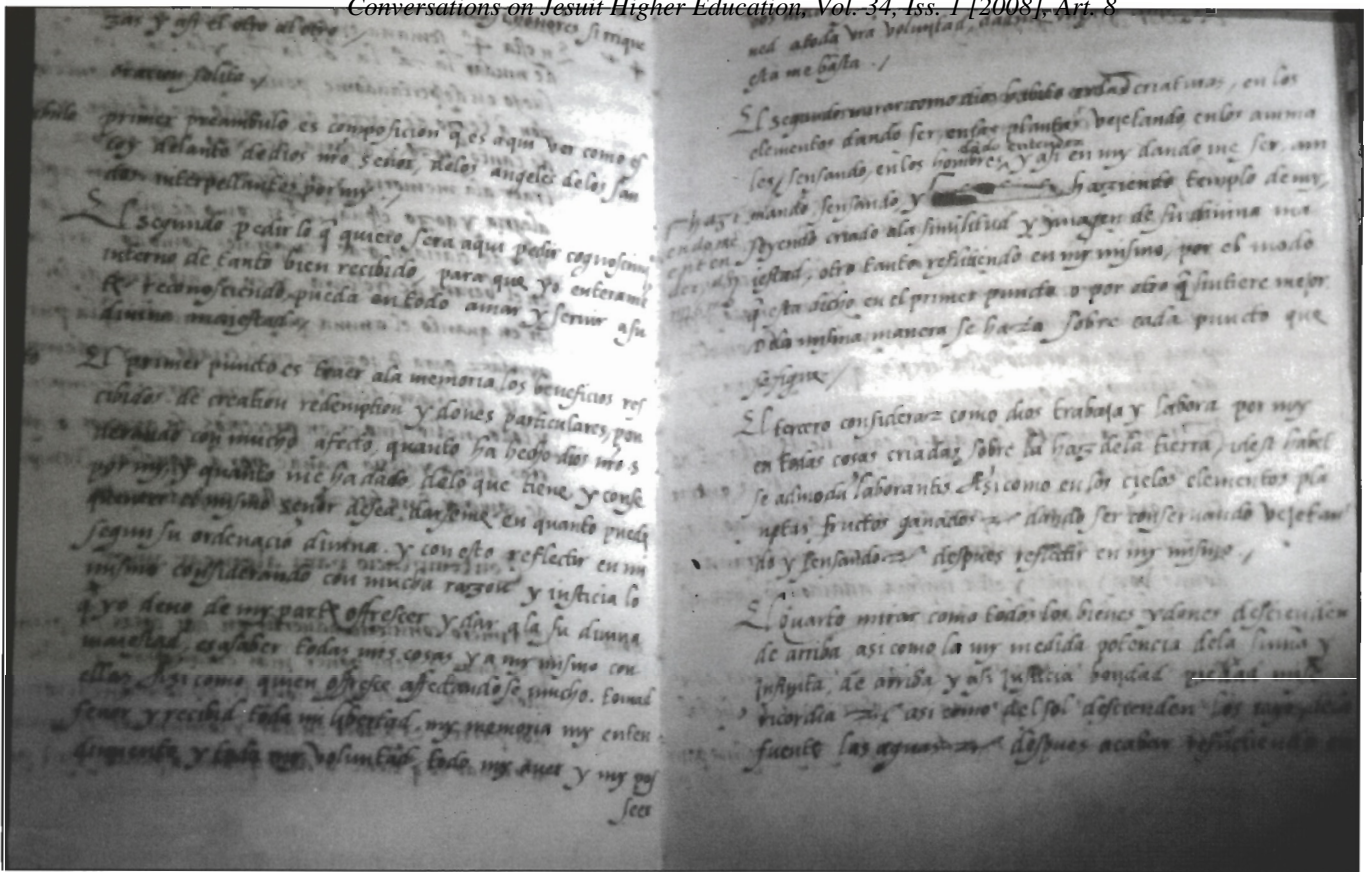
The retreat has probably been the most influential mission formation activity we’ve offered to faculty and staff over the last decade. There are many reasons for this... but perhaps the most important is the dynamic of the Exercises themselves. Over time, participants begin to see and act differently, 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.

Identifying action as a key mission formation practice in our study aligns with Jesuit tradition. When men enter the Society of Jesus, they participate in several “action-oriented” experiences, including retreats and immersions, that form them in the values and principles of the Society while challenging them to discern the values, principles, and desires they want to live out. 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 that action challenges partners in mission 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, disarmed by the graces of the Exercises, or confronted by difficult questions that often accompany the authentic integration of mission themes into curricular and co-curricular projects. The discoveries that faculty and staff make during these experiences often deepen the value they place on Ignatian ideals, further encouraging their transformation as “partners in mission.”

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	76



The *Spiritual Exercises*, with notes in the hand of Ignatius.

©2000 Jesuits of the Missouri Province.

Implications

While our research suggests several implications for strengthening faculty/staff mission formation efforts on our campuses, two seem especially relevant here.

First, our research suggests that mission formation programs affect participants more meaningfully when they are 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, through genuine conversation, meaningful relationships, and active engagement. While the 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 faculty/staff mission formation, the implications are clear: it is critical not only to respect faculty and staff as

partners in conversation, but also to encourage them to be attentive to and reflective about their current – and potential – contributions 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 clergy declines sharply. As discussion deepens around this topic, it seems to us that the central mission and identity issue has less to do with achieving “critical Jesuit mass” and far more with forming faculty and staff who make “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 like 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 desire from our partners in mission? ■