
A Distinctive Education: Reflections by Georgetown Jesuits on Education at Georgetown

A Contribution to the Conversation

Executive Summary

GEORGETOWN is in the process of engaging the university community – faculty, students, staff, alumni – in a broad conversation about creative ways to improve our curriculum so that it better serves our undergraduate student body. As a contribution to that conversation, Jesuits at Georgetown wish to offer some reflections about the qualities of education in the Jesuit tradition.

In the main body below, we highlight three broad themes that are rooted in our experiences both as Jesuits and educators at Georgetown:

1) *A WORLD RICHLY UNDERSTOOD AND RELIGIOUSLY EXPLORED*

The world is known in multiple ways – in empirical studies, in artistic interpretations, in the performance of commitments and ideals, in the unearthing of social constructs, in the reflective pondering of the whole. Within these multiple investigations, a Georgetown education also includes occasions where students can apply their new understandings of the world to explorations of meaning and purpose. It encourages students to ask, with the great philosophical and religious traditions, the big questions of human life.

2) *FORMATION AND CURA PERSONALIS*

The whole person, in his or her distinctiveness, is the center of a Georgetown education. It is an education which brings together the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, athletic, social, and ethical. It focuses on the intellectual, not in a compartmentalized way, but as integrated with other dimensions of human existence. This holistic and integrating education endeavors to free the student for critically self-aware life choices.

3) *VOCATION AND CALL TO SERVICE*

The Catholic tradition has long emphasized the innate social dimension of human existence. We flourish only within communities. In turn, all bear a responsibility for nurturing the community and common good. The work for a world more just and gentle (or, in more Christian language, the labor for the kingdom of God) is expansive enough for all forms of human work. The growth into human excellence is rooted in the discovery of a personal vocation within the human community. This calling draws forth the students' desires and gifts and grounds their unique identity. A life lived well is a life lived generously.

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Background

In light of the university's new initiative to revise and improve undergraduate education, the Office of the Provost has invited the members of the Georgetown community to engage in a dialogue about how to transform our curriculum so that it better serves our student body. The dialogue is important, and we hope that all will contribute to its development.

Over the course of the last year, the members of the Georgetown Jesuit community have been meeting regularly to discuss how we might contribute to that conversation. Our views are, like any gathering of faculty, diverse.

Rather than offer a comprehensive reflection on all the various qualities and goals of such an endeavor, we thought it a more helpful service to speak from our own experience as Jesuits and reflect on how that identity gives rise to some distinctive educational emphases.

The Spiritual Exercises as Introduction to Jesuit Education

We root our reflections in our spiritual heritage and identity as members of the Society of Jesus (i.e., the Jesuits). There are few better introductions to that heritage and identity than the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. These "Exercises" are a collection of meditations in which the individual imaginatively and prayerfully interprets his or her life in light of the biblical narrative. Jesus calls his disciples: How am I called, what am I called to do, in this moment? Peter loses his courage: How do fears trouble me? Mary trusts in God's promises: What promises do I hope in?

Though the "Exercises" can rightly be described as a guide for making retreats, their real value lies in the kinds of personal experiences and religious imagining they foster. As something lived and experienced, the Spiritual Exercises focus on neither abstract truths nor impersonal norms. They foster an encounter with the transcendent and do so within the historical and existential particularity of one's daily life; they draw the person's life story into a dialogical narrative with the person of Christ.

While the experience of these meditations is unique to each person, the Exercises presuppose some foundational themes that will mark all spiritual journeys: the experience of a divine and forgiving love that in turn enables us to recognize our complicity in sin; a personal calling that frees us to embrace our truest passions in following Christ and in service of others; the redemptive possibility of a self-giving love that invites us to attend to the cries of those who suffer; the experience of enduring goodness that gives hope for a world in which the Spirit always labors.

These themes, as evoked by the Spiritual Exercises, are at the core of our identity as Jesuits; they shape our worldview and inform our efforts and aims in all we undertake. We have found these organizing principles of our experience to be eye-opening, life-giving, and liberating. It is thus humbling and heartening that many of our colleagues have themselves undertaken the Exercises and can out of their own insight and conviction speak to the ethos of the Exercises.

The 450 years of applying the insights born of the Exercises to the work of education have generated a rich variety of visions of what a Jesuit education entails. Yet, it is clear – even as one looks across the history of Jesuit education and at the multiple forms which Jesuit education takes in the present (i.e., universities and colleges, college preparatory schools, Nativity schools, Cristo Rey schools, refugee camp education) – that there are recurring themes, ones that have shown a remarkable adaptability and time-tested fruitfulness.

Three educational themes rooted in the experiences of the Spiritual Exercises

Three such themes have proven themselves helpful in our endeavor to articulate our views regarding a Georgetown education in the Jesuit tradition: first, a foundational vision shaped by a religious imagination; second, an understanding of the individual's life as a pilgrimage driven by personal choices before a personal God; third, a sense of vocation summoning one to a life of generosity and service.

Applying these three to our work as educators, we offer the following reflections about an undergraduate education at Georgetown University.

1) A WORLD RICHLY UNDERSTOOD AND RELIGIOUSLY EXPLORED

First, a Jesuit education cultivates a rich vision of the world. It is scientifically sophisticated, humanistically enriched and experientially informed. It is also shaped by an engagement with the great questions, religious and philosophical, that form the boundaries of human knowledge.

There has always been a strong pragmatism in Jesuit education, but the starting point lies in vision. Hence the Jesuit motto “Contemplatives in Action:” we can only act in a world that we first see. Indeed, Jesuits have long valued the vocation of the scholar, in all disciplines of learning, because the world itself is seen as good and, thus, good to know.

The humanities have had an important role in cultivating this vision, helping students develop a knowledge – nuanced, imaginative, empathetic – of our world, so that so that they might become more readily engaged in the full complexity of human affairs. The natural, medical, mathematical, and social sciences contribute importantly to testing and clarifying our ideas and illuminating the multitude of causal connections marking our world. Embodied forms of knowing – enacted in the performing arts, spiritual practices, and, more recently, community based learning – have likewise been an important part of the Jesuit educational tradition. Such forms of human expression and activity are similarly essential to the realization of otherwise abstract theoretical presentations and principles. Moreover, they train our affections so that our knowing of the world is enhanced and guided by well-formed passions.

Finally, serious investigations of our world ineluctably raise the larger questions of human existence – e.g., questions about the meaning of life, human destiny, and the fundamental reality

that grounds all existence. An important part of a Jesuit educational experience is that students are invited into a critical, intellectual engagement with these questions. Such engagements help students develop supple minds appreciative of the complexity of the human condition and ultimately at home in a world of mystery. While theology and philosophy have a special role in raising these questions, all of the various ways of studying and knowing our world can (and, we hope, will) contribute. Broad and interdisciplinary explorations of religious and philosophical traditions help raise these questions and show examples of how some have sought to respond to them.

In light of Georgetown's Catholic identity, we believe that engagement with the Catholic tradition provides one important opportunity for exploring these questions. At the same time, recent Jesuit documents underscoring the importance of interreligious dialogue suggest that discussions across religious traditions can help to clarify one's own beliefs and commitments even as one gains a sophisticated understanding of those shared by others. As the university's document "Centered Pluralism" well argued, Georgetown's commitment to its Catholic identity can and should be fostered in tandem with a broad and respectful pluralism.

In this regard, for Jesuits what is at stake is a specific kind of vision, one that has been termed "sacramental." It involves the conviction that the divine can and does appear within the earthly and the human (thus, the Jesuit motto: "finding God in all things"). This sacramental worldview is a cherished part of the Catholic, Jesuit tradition. It has encouraged in Jesuit scholarship a ready eagerness to reflect on how the concrete and particular manifests the divine. In the language of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, "And for all this, nature is never spent; /There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

2) FORMATION AND *CURA PERSONALIS*

Second, a Jesuit education attends carefully to 'where each student is,' i.e., to each student's whole, concrete reality. This is in keeping with the Jesuit experience of God dealing with each of us personally, embracing us not as generic individuals, but as unique persons with distinctive histories and aspirations. Incorporating such personalized concern into the educational context allows us to better facilitate the multiple and interconnected dynamisms at work in our undergraduates – e.g., the intellectual, psychological, emotional, athletic, social, ethical, spiritual – as each of them continues their particular journey of young adulthood.

A sense of biographical narrative is key for the Spiritual Exercises. People's lives unfold like a novel, each chapter connected to the preceding chapters and to those which follow. A narrative interpretation is particularly applicable to the life of our undergraduates. Students come to college at a critically important juncture in their life journey. This presents Georgetown with an opportunity and a responsibility; the experiences that students have during their years on the Hilltop will be important, decisive even, in shaping not just what they know but who they become. Appreciation of this sense of journey has given the Jesuit educational tradition a keen interest in formative concerns and in the ways in which such concerns intersect academic work.

The journey of selfhood should also ideally include the cultivation of a freedom to choose our truest selves. The movement toward a freedom that is first and foremost interior but that extends as well to one's place in the world stands as a central goal of the Exercises. Progress towards the fullness of such freedom requires a flexible and growingly sophisticated understanding of self, i.e., a critical consciousness that opens persons up to choose well out of an awareness of their own dignity and gifts and that enables them to make reasoned choices free from bias, prejudice,

and self-centeredness. For many, this will involve a freedom to choose an intellectually-informed, religious end as part of one's spiritual journey.

3) VOCATION AND CALL TO SERVICE

Third, a Georgetown education provides students with the formative opportunities and the critical skills needed to become “men and women for others.” The value of community and the shared responsibility of fostering the common good have been central elements in the Catholic social tradition. It is a worthy aspiration, then, that during their time on the Hilltop, students will discover in Georgetown a laboratory for building community. In that lived experience of community, students will come to appreciate the varied and hard-won virtues of community life – e.g., a collaborative spirit that prizes common projects, a dialogue that learns from diversity, and a solidarity that expands hearts beyond the limits of self-interest.

Academic endeavors can contribute to the project for the common good in a variety of ways: sensitizing students to the challenges facing various communities (our own but also those facing the national and global communities); helping students to see connections between esoteric learning and practical responses; challenging students to develop balanced and sophisticated understandings of these issues; providing students with the resources to discover real life responses to these challenges. The Jesuit educational tradition places great value on how knowledge can contribute to the common good. Such contributions not only build on the good already abiding in the human community but also soberly address the failings of and challenges to that human community. They solve, ameliorate, and reconcile in accord with the nature of the problem and our real human capacities.

Ethical reflection and hands-on, experiential learning complement the study of such problems in classroom and laboratory, ideally encouraging the students to develop hearts and minds ready to contribute fruitfully to the work of social justice and the common good. An aim of such an education – linking heart and mind, as it would ideally do – would be to encourage our graduates to make their professional commitments and choices after leaving the Hilltop in harmony with a deep-seated dedication to the common good. We hope that students will begin to see themselves as participants in the work for a better world. As these experiences shape and inform their self-understanding, we hope that their association with the work for others will deepen into a sense of vocation, where they feel drawn to place their talents and gifts in service to a greater good and, in so doing, discover new meaning and purpose in their lives.

Conclusion

These reflections are not exhaustive. We highlight these three themes because of their origin in the Spiritual Exercises and because of their broad desirability. These complementary characteristics seem to reflect well the motto on Georgetown's shield, “*utraque unum*,” which points to the essential complementarity of the intellectual and the spiritual, of reason and faith. Appreciation of this mutually enhancing complementarity, we believe, has been, is, and should remain at the core of Georgetown's character. We have ourselves experienced the fecund confluence of scholarly pursuit and a passionate dedication to the religious. It is part of Georgetown's contribution to the academy that it fosters creative engagements between these two great aspirations in ways that nourish both the mind and spirit, of scholar and student alike.

We close with the words which former president Timothy Healy, SJ offered on the occasion of Georgetown's bicentennial.

THUS THE RIVER EDDIES, but the hill has made sure that we have never bowed to either of two heresies – that the bachelor’s degree is for making a living rather than for life itself, or that one can debase the arts and sciences to make them “value free.” Neither fallacy has ever clouded the renaissance Jesuit vision that everything human, as well as the nature in which mankind sits, is filled with the laboring presence of God and thus worth the struggle to enjoy, understand and celebrate.

Georgetown by its Catholic instincts links together learning and doing in all that it does, the Catholic vision that wisdom, to be complete, must lead to virtue.

This sacramental vision sees secular reality as more than itself, grasps the numinosity of even material fact and much more of spiritual being. Ignatius of Loyola urged on all Jesuits the vision of God as “laboring in all things under the sun,” and in that he included ourselves. Of all our heritage as a Catholic institution this sacramental view is the farthest reaching. At its best it leads us beyond the contemplation that is bound by time into the contemplation that is both worship and prayer. All our striving reaches toward a world transformed – our double vision is both dream and debt.

Humbled by that knowledge, but with prideful hope in those who come after us, we bid welcome to the years from 1989 to 2089. On this hill, by this river, amid this city, may Georgetown’s heart’s truth be sung in a century’s turning.

Timothy Healy, S.J.
Georgetown: Meditation on a Bicentennial
Washington ~ 1989

We offer these reflections with an invitation to further conversation. We welcome discussion of the issues confronting Georgetown as a Catholic and Jesuit, student-centered research university and encourage interested individuals or groups to contact any of the Jesuits signed below.

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