Overview of Approach

AJCU Commission on Student Spiritual Growth and Mental Health

Towards a Hope-Filled Future

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Context

In December 2021, as the Covid-19 pandemic was waning, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an urgent advisory about the mental health of adolescents and young adults. A national survey had recently revealed that 1 in 3 high school students and fully 50% of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. This represented an increase of 40% in ten years. These results were released during a period in which longstanding racial disparities that exacerbated health- and employment- related inequities resulting from the global pandemic were also being exposed, when racial justice issues were already in the global spotlight, impelled by the world's online witness of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Uncertainty, injustice, and isolation, as well as Naim's three "Ps" of populism, polarization, and post-truth, highlighted in Fr. Arturo Sosa's 2022 address to the International Association of Jesuit Universities, were terms that only underscored the major challenges of our times.

At the same time, 2021 data gathered by the Springtide Research Institute underscored the important role that trusted adults play in navigating the uncertainty of these times. Their 2023 data also revealed that almost 3 in 4 young people report that they do not trust organized religion although the 50% have had experiences that they name as sacred. The Institute defined these sacred moments as "times marked by intimate, affirming, authentic moments of connection with others." Young people who experience sacred moments reported higher rates of belonging, flourishing and life satisfaction.

The overarching questions presented to our Commission included the following: How do we reconcile the mental health crisis with the spiritual longings of young people at this time? And, how can we, at Jesuit institutions of higher education, accompany our students through this historical moment and the challenges of our time? Members of the AJCU Commission on Student Spiritual Growth and Mental Health met monthly between March 2023 through May 2024 and identified the following principles which helped to guide our communal reflection and discernment process. These principles contextualize the resources that we developed for use by Jesuit institutions of higher education, especially AJCU members.

Our Commission's Approach

- *Holistic and Interconnected*

  In thinking about the mental health of young people as well as factors that positively contribute to their experience of spirituality, we wanted to approach these issues in a holistic manner. We treat mental health and spiritual growth as interconnected with each other, and both influenced by broader social issues. That is, mental health and spirituality are at once deeply personal to each person while simultaneously reflective of much greater shared realities that are also social, political, religious, economic, and ecological in nature. As such, we sought to honor the unique elements of individual psychological and spiritual experience while also attending to the broader realities and communities that shape us. These realities are manifested differently in response to our varied and intersecting social identities—formed by race, gender, and sexual orientation, for example—as well formed in relation to our religious traditions, cultural values, political orientations, and economic conditions. We seek to acknowledge and honor these differences in personal experiences, institutional contexts, and regional realities, as we engaged in shared discernment about how to help our Jesuit institutions partner and accompany students in co-creating a future with hope.

- *Attention to context/place*

  We do not believe in a "one-size-fits-all" approach to these issues. Rooted in the Ignatian tradition, we engage in a composition of place, taking seriously the need to respond to the complexities and realities of local contexts, including our physical places and geographic locations, community demographics, cultural values and origins, religious (and non-religious) traditions that are represented within and across our Jesuit institutions. We seek to honor individual, shared, and intersectional identities and take seriously our shared value of "responding to all persons where they are at" as well as the call to carefully discern or read the "signs of the times." Our approach is thus invitational not prescriptive, based in listening, paying attention to each other, and communal discernment.

- *Focused on multiple levels: Individual, Interpersonal, Institutional*

Supporting students in their spiritual growth and mental health requires attention to their well-being at multiple levels using a variety of approaches. While mental health services and campus ministry are absolutely critical resources that our institutions provide to support students and foster their growth, a holistic approach requires attention and action at multiple levels: individual, interpersonal, and institutional. It also requires a shift in how we view our primary tasks at each of these levels:

Primary task at the Individual level: Vocational Discernment

- *Perspective:* How do we help our students better understand reality, learn from their experiences, and embrace authenticity? How do we support our students in growing in interior freedom and sense of purpose?
- *Values:* How do we foster recognition of intrinsic human dignity, the infinite goodness of each person who is sacred and beloved, as well as the inherent goodness of the created world?
- *Skills:* How can we help our students build their capacity to grow in reflection, discernment, and to be empowered to raise their voices?
- *Ignatian Resources:* How can we help our students cultivate their interiority, navigate unrest, clarify their deepest desires, grow in gratitude and generosity, and learn from Ignatian Spirituality (like the *Examen* and other elements of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola)?
- *Impact on spiritual growth and mental health:* How do we help our students develop awareness, tap into what energizes and integrates them, grow in wholeness and wisdom?

Primary task at the Interpersonal level: Right Relationships

- *Perspective:* How do we help our students come to clarity about the quality of their relationships and the kinds of beliefs and practices that contribute to—or detract from—personal and collective flourishing?
- *Values:* How do we strengthen awareness of the interconnectedness between love of God and love of neighbor? What does a "preferential option for the poor" mean for our relationships with others and how we see ourselves, especially in the context of social marginalization and oppression? How do we see ourselves as part of creation and our place within the natural world? What opportunities do we provide for students to participate in communities of faith/spiritual companionship?

- *Skills:* How can we help our students build their capacity to receive and extend care (for self, others, and all creation)? How can we foster skills related to community building, particularly communities in service of faith, justice and reconciliation?
- *Ignatian Resources:* How can we draw from the Universal Apostolic Preferences to equip and empower our students to journey together in a spirit of compassion, solidarity, and hope?
- *Impact on spiritual growth and mental health:* How can we create and sustain the conditions for right-relationships on our campuses, so we build a culture of inclusive belonging in the pursuit of equity, integral well-being, and kinship?

Primary task at the Institutional level: Whole Person Education

- *Perspective:* How do we practice reflection, assessment, and stretch our imagination so that our institutions are accountable to *cura personalis* at every level?
- *Values:* If the measure of our success is who our students become, then how can we bolster how we equip and empower them to be bridge-builders, peace-makers, and committed to social and ecological justice?
- *Skills:* In the face of widespread social fragility and fracture as well as distrust for institutions, how do we deliver on transparency, accountability, and help rebuild social trust?
- *Ignatian Resources:* How can we leverage our Jesuit heritage (including the documents of the General Congregations) to help our students be transformed and transformative, especially in the pursuit of reconciliation and restorative justice?
- *Impact on spiritual growth and mental health*: How can our policies and institutional priorities ensure we are doing everything we can to form integrated persons who model authenticity, vulnerability, and solidarity for the global common good?

- *Centrality of Relationships*

Since the earliest days of his papacy, Pope Francis has championed a "culture of encounter" to bring people together in a spirit of mercy and earnest dialogue, discernment, and collaboration. Interpersonal encounters are transformative learning experiences and they happen all the time on our campuses. However, encounters can also leave people misunderstood, misrepresented, and sometimes, even mistreated. For this reason, it is important to establish a moral framework to ensure mutual respect, curiosity, humility, generosity, and boundary-breaking solidarity (as outlined in *The Ethics of Encounter*, by commission member Marcus Mescher).

Moreover, a "culture of encounter" is the floor, not the ceiling, of the kind of community we hope to cultivate on our campuses. Instead, we aim to construct a culture of inclusive belonging that takes seriously the ways we shape others and are shaped by others through our relationships. In fact, our relationships and shared practices are the most potent pathways to formation. Aristotle's insight that we are what we repeatedly do (that choices become habits, forming character) was partially correct; it is more accurate to say we are what we repeatedly do *together*. For this reason, this commission identifies and uplifts relationships as central for supporting the spiritual growth and mental health of our students.

Overview of Commission "Deliverables"

As a result of our work together in 2023-24, the Commission on Student Spiritual Growth and Mental Health offers the following resources below and/or on its AJCU website:

1. Listening to our Students: Circle of Hope

To support student spiritual growth and mental health, we need to center the voices and concerns of our young people. In July 2023, at the National Jesuit Student Leadership Conference held at the College of the Holy Cross that year, we took the opportunity to ask students, representing Jesuit universities across the country, to reflect on the central questions of the Commission, focusing specifically on hope. We filmed their communal reflection and invite you to watch them share their thoughts as we asked them the following questions: What diminishes and what kindles their hope? And, how can we better accompany them into a hope-filled future? In this video, we seek to uplift and center their experiences and concerns as the basis for our responses and actions as staff, faculty, and administrators at Jesuit institutions.

2. Responding to our Students: Discernment Tool for Institutional Policies

While we may encourage students and members of the campus community to engage in the Ignatian practice of discernment, we do not often consider "what it would mean to utilize the principle of discernment on an institutional and structural level" (from the Discernment Tool). A subcommittee of the Commission on Student Spiritual Growth and Mental Health has developed a structured way for institutions to use communal discernment that seeks to illumine the "human impact policies have on our students."

3. Connecting to Resources: Best practices at AJCU and other Catholic Institutions of Higher Education

The Commission identified a sampling of practices at Jesuit and/or Catholic institutions that may serve as useful resources in addressing (a) students' desire for connection/belonging, (b) need for institutional support in addressing students' well-being and their capacity to bring themselves fully and authentically into educational spaces, and (c) the critical role of trusted adults who show up and are present to students (mentoring and more). See below for some links that may be of interest.

- **Desire for connection/belonging**
    - *Sample programs*
        - Community building in Housing: Casa Madríz at USF
        - Restorative Justice Practices at LMU
        - Student Transition and Success
        - Addiction and Recovery: Education and Support
        - Black Achievement, Success, and Engagement at USF
    - *Resources*
        - Erik W. Carter presents 10 elements of belonging; Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty cites his work in her book, *Dutiful Love*, which addresses how to empower individuals and families affected by mental illness
        - Marcus Mescher explores how to develop Pope Francis' call to build a "culture of encounter" so that it leads toward a "culture of belonging" in *The Ethics of Encounter*.
        - Terrell Strayhorn does a lot of work on belonging in relation to diverse college students and engagement.
        - Listening to Learners 2023: Increasing belonging inside and outside the classroom
        - Bibliography on Restorative Justice as well as listing of University-based Restorative Justice programs (courtesy of USD Center for Restorative Justice)
        - *Hidden Brain* has a new series on mending our fraying social fabric, called "US 2.0" (see this episode, for example)

- **Support for well-being and authenticity** (showing up freely/fully as who you are, wherever you are in your journey)
    - *Sample Programs*
        - Pastoral Counseling services (for example: grief, pregnancy, LGBTQ+ affirming spiritual support) at Boston College
        - Dimensions of well-being at Xavier University
        - Mental health promotion and suicide prevention through the Fresh Check program at Saint Louis University
        - Faithfully Queer Retreat at Holy Cross
    - *Resources*
        - JED Foundation Report: A Decade of Improving College Mental Health Systems (2024)
        - The Instructor Mental Health Landscape (here)
        - Literature on slowing down, in order to notice and connect in more intentional/meaningful ways:
            - The Slow Professor (here)
            - The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry (here)
            - The Art of Communicating (here)
            - Learning about nonviolent communication (here)

- **Mentoring and more**
  - Sample Programs
    - POP Circles ("power of peers") peer mentoring program at Georgetown University (for doctoral students)
    - Smooth Transitions to a predominantly white institution (PWI) for minoritized students at Xavier University
    - Promoting civic discourse at Marquette University and supporting dialogue at Xavier University through the Take It On initiative
    - Sharing stories and developing empathy at Marquette through Narrative4 and at Xavier University through the "Dear World"
  - Resources
    - Blog post on peer mentoring at Elon University.
    - Learn about the power of Storytelling through organizations like Dear World and Narrative4
    - DOI: 10.1111/socf.12519
    - Creating institutional spaces for reflection: Manglos-Weber, N.D., & Avelis, J. (2019). Expanding the Reflexive Space: Resilient young adults, institutional cultures, and cognitive schemas. Sociological Forum, 34(3): 664-684. DOI: 10.1111/socf.12519

Additional References

- December 2021 Surgeon General Mental health Advisory
- Center for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2011-2021
- Springtide Research Institute, The State of Religion and Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty
- Romano SD, Blackstock AJ, Taylor EV, et al. Trends in Racial and Ethnic Disparities in COVID-19 Hospitalizations, by Region — United States, March–December 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2021;70:560–565. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7015e2
- Fr. Sosa's 2022 address to the International Association of Jesuit Universities: Discerning the Present to Prepare the Future of the University Education of the Society of Jesus
- Springtide Research Institute, The State of Religion and Young People 2023: Exploring the Sacred

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Postscript: A note on our Commission process

The following table illustrates how the commission discussions and presentations between March-December 2023 were synthesized. The table was used by commission members to identify two key areas that the group wanted to focus on. Subsequently, two subgroups were formed in January 2024, one focused on the critical role of relationality/relationships as core value in supporting student spiritual growth and mental health and the other supporting communal discernment around institutional policies. In addition to the development of the Circle of Hope methodology and video, the commission developed resources focused on these issues.

Ignatian Foundation	Individual Level		Interpersonal Level		Institutional Level		Recommendations
	Resources	**Challenges**	**Resources**	**Challenges**	**Resources**	**Challenges**	
Holistic, Interconnected Approach *Cura personalis* *Cura apostolica* - Whole Person education - Integration of intellect & affect. - Holistic approach to spiritual growth and mental health - All levels of analysis dynamically related & interconnected	• Engagement in spiritual practices, such as mindfulness, reflection, yoga, meditation & prayer • High % of college students identifying as religious and/or spiritual • Openness/reduced stigma around MH issues among students	• Increase in mental health problems: anxiety, depression. Increase in suicide • spiritual struggles/ moral concerns, despair about the state of the world • danger of overemphasis on achievement/ success; perfectionism, need to attend to well-being, belonging • Need to foster resilience, grit, and growth mindset; support decision-making skills	• Desire for connection, support, belonging, & sense of community • Desire for authenticity in relationships (to bring full identity into spaces)	• Increase in loneliness, isolation, sense of disconnection • Related to social media, negative social comparison, FOMO, heightened social anxiety. • dealing with microaggressions; management of "in real life (IRL)" and online presence, interactions, and relationships	• Richness of Ignatian tradition, vocabulary, values, university missions to draw upon; high resonance and relevance for these times. • Access to retreats, Spiritual Exercises, examen, other contemplative practices • Access and availability of MH services, variety of student support	• Challenging context for higher ed leadership (polarization, gun violence, cancel culture, free speech/safe spaces; enrollments and limited resources) • Variability in level of in-person (faculty, staff) presence; practice of *cura personalis* on campus • Tension between free speech and creation of safe spaces • Unfilled positions and tension between *magis* (twisted into perfectionism, overwork) and self-care for faculty and staff.	• *All formation happens through relationships*: Prioritize creation of an organizational culture that emphasizes relationality, care, and belonging; create communal spaces for sharing and reflection ("culture eats strategy"). • *Support/resource mission formation* and professional development with "opt out" rather than "opt in" approach to foster comprehensive, inclusive participation among faculty/staff • *Representation matters*: Engage in intentional recruitment, hiring, retention for mission and diversity. • *Meet students in their spaces* ("Go to them") in addition to expecting students to find and access our service spaces ("Come to us"). • *Bridge student experience* between communities of origin and educational experience. Build on familial ties and community strengths and bring to university • *Right Relationship:* Pay attention to marginalized communities surrounding university; engage with reciprocity, mutuality, and solidarity. • *As institutions, engage Ignatian imagination and vision* (e.g., reconciliation, repair, collaboration). Model behavior for/with students in denouncing existential threats to Jesuit university values with prophetic stance.
Attention to Context *Composition of place* - Responding to people *where they are at* - Responding to *signs of the times* - Honoring identities and communities of origin - Respect for place and environment (*Care for our common home*)	• Identity: social positionality and intersectionality ▪ College represents developmental period emphasizing identity exploration ▪ Spirituality expressed as "unbundling & rebundling" religion"	• Multiple, varied losses post-2020 (consequence of multiple pandemics) • Family/financial pressures; intergenerational trauma • Disaffiliation & disidentification with traditional religion;	• Development of supportive mentoring relationships with trusted adults on campus • Engagement in High Impact Practices (HIPs): mentorship; community-engagement; classroom practices	• Need to recognize students' community ties and strengths, as well as impact of historical trauma • Often-invisible campus populations: for ex., residential graduate students, international students, BIPOC students • Credibility and/or historical mistrust of services among some student populations can constrain access and "approachability" of resources	• University as space for shared discernment; educating, forming, and accompanying young people towards a hope-filled future (Sosa) • Value placed on creating a "culture of care" on our campuses, with spaces of belonging, inclusivity (DEI), and community. • Students' *vocational discernment* seen as important work by institution	• Loss of trust in Catholic institutions, including effects on universities (Church sex abuse crisis, lack of inclusiveness for LGBTQ+ and women in leadership) • Living in a time where broader society devalues engagement with difference • Multiple competing agendas in relation to mission focus; DEI and mission often viewed as competing agendas when they are complementary	
Primary Task at each level through an Ignatian lens	**Vocational Discernment** *Values:* Recognizing intrinsic human dignity, goodness, and belovedness of self and others; inherent goodness of creation/world. *Skills:* practices of attention, reflection, discernment *Key Resources:* Daily Examen; Spiritual Exercises *Impact on spiritual growth and mental health*: growth in self-awareness, awareness of God's love; self-acceptance, resilience, growth-mindset.		**"Right Relationship" and Connection** *Values*: Interconnectedness between love of God and love of neighbor. Preferential option for the poor and marginalized. *Skills:* Practicing presence, listening, care for others & environment; accompaniment & solidarity; *Key Resources:* Universal Apostolic Preferences *Impact on spiritual growth and mental health*: growth in capacity to create community; increase inclusion, belonging, solidarity with others.		**Education towards Social and Ecological Justice** *Values:* Measure of success: "Who do our students become?" (Kolvenbach; Sosa). Formation of persons for and with others. *Skills:* (Re)building trust; creating accountability, transparency; practicing subsidiarity, openness to the Other, shared discernment. *Key Resources:* General Congregation documents; SJ Addresses *Impact on spiritual growth and mental health:* Becoming integrated, integral whole persons who help create a hope-filled future; becoming institutions embodying the Ignatian imagination & vision	