

Article

# A Review of Spiritual Development and Transformation among College Students from Jesuit Higher Education

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**Abstract:** The college experience can be a critically important and enriching time for personal as well as academic growth and development. For many students, college is their first foray into a more independent world and lifestyle no longer under the careful, and sometimes critical, eyes of their parents, families, and schoolteachers. When students go far away from home to attend college, they need to find ways to live independently, manage their many needs, and attend to the rigors of academic life in higher education. Additionally, the college years offer a unique and important period for spiritual growth, development, and transformation. The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the developmental tasks and challenges of the college years and provide examples of how colleges can be intentional and strategic about spiritual growth and development by focusing on strategies offered by Jesuit higher education.

**Keywords:** college; spirituality; Jesuit; higher education

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## 1. College Is a Special Time of Life for Development, Educational and Otherwise

The traditional college student years, from about age 18 to 22, are special and important times for the transition from adolescent to adult development. There are a variety of phrases that have become popular to describe people within this age range, including “emerging adults”, young adults”, extended adolescence”, and even “adulthood.” (Plante and Plante 2017). Many traditionally adult responsibilities, activities, and expectations have been delayed in recent decades, such that people are getting married and having children at later ages as well as delaying entry into the work world, with more and more young people choosing and expected to attend college and even graduate school (Furlong 2009; Vespa 2017).

The college years can be a unique and rich opportunity for not only intellectual and academic growth and development but for personal and spiritual growth and development too (Plante 2013, 2018). Of course, not everyone attends college or has similar college experiences. Actually, most college students live at home and not on a college campus, and attend local community colleges or nearby public universities as commuting students, frequently working full or part time jobs while doing so (Levine and Dean 2012). However, many college students, especially from the middle and upper socioeconomic classes, do travel, often somewhat far away from their home communities and even across thousands of miles, and experience a total immersion experience by living and learning on a college campus for four years and sometimes longer (Bloom 2018).

Through these fully immersive experiences, these students have the unique opportunity to further develop their whole selves beyond just academic and educational growth and development, to develop personally and spiritually as well. Much can be learned, experienced, and nurtured outside of the classroom setting while in dormitories, fraternities, and sororities, through diverse campus events,

and outside of class sessions. Being with a wide range of diverse peers from different cultures, traditions, religions, ethnicities, and geographical locations can be enormously enriching and transformative as well (Gurin et al. 2002).

Throughout these educational, extracurricular, collaborative, and immersive college experiences, there are particular and expected developmental tasks that college students must go through, and successfully encounter and address, to transition successfully from their youth to full adulthood. These developmental tasks can be summarized as the “four I’s”, and include identity, independence, intimacy, and impulse control (Plante and Plante 2017). It is important that we understand the developmental challenges and goals of college-aged students in order to be strategic and intentional about efforts to support and nurture their spiritual development during this important time of life. Much has been written and discussed about college student age cognitive development (e.g., Lapsley and Woodbury 2016), social-emotional development (e.g., Shim et al. 2017), spiritual development (e.g., Fowler 1981; Hall et al. 2016), and career development (e.g., Hughes and Gibbons 2016), and thus will not be repeated here. Rather, a focus on the four I’s will be presented in this paper.

## 2. The Four I’s of College Age Developmental Tasks

Identity refers to questions of “Who am I and who do I want to be?” Developing one’s own unique identity while becoming separate from family, community, and other childhood influences, college student forge an emerging personal identity during the college years. This includes how they understand and experience themselves, and how their activities, behavior, interests, and relationships further develop and mold their identity while in a college environment. Academic majors selected, extracurricular activities pursued, and relationships formed all help to form a unique personal identity.

Independence speaks to the fact that for many students, college is the first time in their lives where they are out from under the watchful eye of their parents and families and must become more independent of their influences and their ongoing and perhaps chronic corrective feedback. They learn to make their own decisions about their life habits involving eating, sleeping, drinking alcohol, and sexual expression, while they also have to manage their responsibilities and obligations in their classes and perhaps a campus or off campus job as well. Natural consequences and outcomes such as failing a class, being hungover, gaining or losing significant amounts of weight, painful relationship break ups, and so forth all provide students with the feedback that they are either on the right track in these efforts or perhaps not.

Intimacy refers to both close friendships as well as sexual relationships. College students develop more freedom to figure out how they want to be in a relationship with others and what strategies they might use to pursue or not to pursue intimacy, sexual expression, and peer relationships. When students live in close quarters with peers within large dormitories, eat in dining halls, and take classes together, it creates many opportunities for intimate relationships and close friendship to occur but also to sour as well.

Finally, impulse control refers to the often very difficult challenges of managing impulses in multiple areas of living. These include desires for fun activities, and putting off studies and perhaps less gratifying work-related activities. Furthermore, managing impulses while being surrounded by peers, including roommates, who may engage in destructive and irresponsible behaviors, experience significant impulse control challenges, find themselves getting into significant trouble by failing classes, harm themselves or others, drink to excess regularly, and so forth make these developmental tasks that much harder to negotiate.

In their efforts to develop skills with the four I’s, student can too often do the “wrong thing for the right reason” (Plante and Plante 2017). For example, students may desire intimacy (which is an appropriate and healthy need) but go about it in problematic by, for example, engaging in alcohol-infused sexual assaults and hook ups. They may appropriately want to develop an adult and mature identity but might focus too much on being an athlete or partygoer that may not be as healthy, sustainable, or the best use of their time and energy while in college, where the primary agenda is,

or at least should be, educational and academically-based. Students may want to be independent from family and other influences, such as their professors, but then not take appropriate actions when they actually could use much needed help and guidance (e.g., failing a course).

### **3. The Unique Opportunities within Faith-Based Colleges and Universities for Spiritual Transformation**

Faith-based educational institutions generally take the spiritual development of their students, as well as their faculty and staff, seriously by offering a variety of strategic and intentional programs and opportunities to nurture spiritual development and transformation for all segments of the campus community, but most especially for their college students. These programs include on-campus religious services, opportunities for pastoral care and spiritual direction, courses in religion and spirituality, extracurricular spiritually-based activities such as retreats, social justice volunteer programs, immersion trips, and meditation sessions and instruction. Faith-based institutions often take mission and identity, steeped within the cultural and traditions of spirituality and religion, very seriously, and suggest that higher education sits within a particular informed way of thinking, being, and viewing the world. This is not to say that faith-based institutions, as a rule, insist on common beliefs and practices among their faculty, staff, and students. This may be true at certain very conservative religious schools who offer statements of faith and behavior that all students, faculty, and staff must agree to and sign (Daniels and Gustafson 2016; Wagner 2006). Most faith-based colleges and universities admit students and hire faculty and staff from all or no faith traditions, but typically expect that students and employees acknowledge and support the mission and identity of their institutions.

Research informs us that the adolescent and early adulthood years are an important time for spiritual development, identity formation, and potential transformation, and allows young people an opportunity to discover for themselves the advantages and richness of spirituality and religion (Fowler 1981). While secular colleges and universities typically are not motivated to engage in religious and spiritual development of their students, faith-based institutions are expected to do so by many diverse stakeholders (e.g., parents, trustees, alumni, students, and donors). Certainly, being thoughtful and mindful of adolescent and young adult development would serve them well in regards to their program development.

### **4. The Example of Jesuit Higher Education**

In this article, the focus of spiritual transformation of college students will use the example of Jesuit institutions and, in particular, Santa Clara University. There are 27 Jesuit universities across the United States and about 150 worldwide (Nicolás 2011; Traub 2008). The Jesuits are a Roman Catholic religious order of men called the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits were founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who was from the Basque region of Spain (Martin 2013; O'malley 1993; O'Malley et al. 2006). The society began in the 1530's while St. Ignatius was at the University of Paris with several others who became well known in their own right (e.g., Saint Francis Xavier).

Higher education at both the secondary and university level is one of the main apostolic missions and ministries of the Jesuits (O'malley 1993; Schwickerath 2011), who are also active in social justice activities (Kolvenbach 2008) as well as retreat centers offering a popular approach to spiritual development entitled, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (see Loyola et al. 1991). Jesuits are often referred to as the intelligentsia of the Catholic Church, given their engagement with high-quality higher education (Mahoney 2003). Some of the Jesuit universities in the United States include Georgetown, Boston College, College of the Holy Cross, Santa Clara, and most any university with the words Loyola or Xavier in their title.

The 27 American Jesuit colleges and universities form a consortium (the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, AJCU) affiliated with one another and collaborate regularly. The 27 university presidents, provosts, religious superiors, deans, and so forth meet yearly and talk regularly about various trends in Jesuit higher education working collaboratively and synergistically. While each

school remains independent from the others, they are all in continuous collaboration and conversation with one another and share similar values and agendas, and a similar mission and identity, about the integration of faith and justice into the intellectual and academic life of the academy.

## 5. Guiding Principles in Jesuit Higher Education

Jesuit higher education tends to focus on several similar key areas that speak to spiritual development and nurturance of their students. These include, in part, (1) educating the whole person or *curia personalis*, (2) becoming men and women for others, (3) reflection and discernment being contemplatives in action, and (4) faith that seeks justice (Meyo 2014; O'malley 1993; O'Malley et al. 2006; Tripole and Tripole 1999).

### 5.1. Educating the Whole Person, Curia Personalis

A popular motto or catch phrase for Jesuit education, both within secondary education at high schools as well as higher education at colleges and universities, is “educating the whole person” or *curia personalis* (Berdahl 1995). Colleges and universities primarily focus their efforts on educating students academically and intellectually. However, in Jesuit education the emphasis is on educating the “whole person”, thus educating the body, mind, and soul; this permeates their educational efforts. Therefore, curricular and extra-curricular activities (such as athletics, clubs, and social activities) are critically important in their efforts to educate the whole or complete person. Therefore, spiritual education and development is part of the core mission and value of Jesuit education.

### 5.2. Men and Women for and with Others

An additional popular phrase or motto for Jesuit education is “men and women for, and with, others” (Meyo 2014). This highlights the belief that a self-centered and egotistical life is insufficient to be fully human and to be well and fully educated. Active engagement with helping to make the community and world better for all, most especially those who struggle or are marginalized in some way, is critical for successful and effective education in the Jesuit tradition. “Being men and women for and with others” speaks to standing in solidarity with others focusing on mutuality and kinship with respect as equals is fundamentally important (Fremont 2008; Meyo 2014). Too often, well-intentioned helping efforts include an unhealthy and often insulting power dynamic that places, on one side, victimhood and, on the other side, the skills and resources (including financial) of the do-gooder. In Jesuit education, a spirit of solidarity and partnership that underscores mutual learning and relatedness is emphasized and is considered critically important in avoiding hierarchy, superiority of one over another, or one-upmanship (Kolvenbach 2008; Nicolás 2011; Potter 2011).

### 5.3. Reflection and Discernment Being Contemplatives in Action

We often joke that in Jesuit higher education if you are not reflecting then you should be discerning, and if you are not discerning then you should be reflecting. Ongoing reflection and discernment are highlighted and offered in numerous and comprehensive ways associated with all aspects of university life and, in particular, regarding spiritual formation and development. A process from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (Loyola et al. 1991) that we refer to as the 4 D's (i.e., discovery, detachment, discernment focusing on maximizing consolation while minimizing desolation, and direction) provides the needed structure for the reflection and discernment process to take place and helps nurture transformation and spiritual development (Plante 2017).

Jesuits, and those influenced or educated by Jesuit higher education, are considered “contemplatives in action” (Barry and William 2014), meaning that they active and fully engaged with the world rather than isolated behind the walls of a monastery or cloister. This notion of being contemplative yet active by being engaged in, and by, the problems of the world is an important cornerstone of Jesuit higher education. It suggests that students, and as alums after they graduate, are expected to roll up their sleeves and be active participants in the many troubles of the world,

helping to help create a more humane; just; sustainable; and, in general, better community for all, especially those in the most need (Kolvenbach 2008; Nicolás 2011). However, it further implies that they should do so with an ongoing contemplative, reflective, and discerning spirit.

#### 5.4. Faith That Seeks Justice

A phrase often heard on Jesuit campuses is something along the lines of “integrating faith, justice, and the intellectual life.” This phrase, or variations on the theme (e.g., “faith that does justice”), illustrates well the guiding principle of Jesuit higher education and the curricular and extracurricular programs and activities that enliven and enrich it. At Jesuit colleges and universities, faith may be centered in the Roman Catholicism of the Jesuit tradition but faith-related issues that are addressed are certainly relevant and applicable to most, if not all, other faith traditions as well. Faith is thus very broadly defined and applied, and is welcoming to both Christian and non-Christian traditions. Justice refers to the Jesuit mission of social justice, i.e., being especially attentive to and mindful of those who struggle with oppression, poverty, discrimination, and marginalization within society in an effort to be in solidarity and kinship with them and their struggles (Kolvenbach 2008; Nicolás 2011; Potter 2011). This emphasis includes “preferential option for the poor and marginalized” (Kolvenbach 2008), and seeks to develop a more just and humane world for everyone but especially for those on the margins of society. Finally, the intellectual and academic life is the primary mission of the university and is what they are designed to do at their very best. Colleges and universities are vortexes or gathering places to nurture engaged communities for intellectual growth and development that invite faculty, staff, and students as well as the local and larger community to come together in learning. This focus on “integrating faith, justice, and the intellectual life” is highlighted throughout many of the activities of the university and permeates planning, programing, and staffing for spiritual formation, development, and nurturance.

### 6. Specific Jesuit Education Programs to Support Spiritual Transformation among Students

There are a variety of ways that Jesuit colleges and universities support college student spiritual transformation and development. Some are likely to be found on every campus and offer similar programing, while others are unique to individual campuses. For example, every Jesuit college campus will have a campus ministry office and programing typically centrally located on campus, that is well-staffed, and that offers similar activities such as campus liturgical celebrations and prayer services, retreats, pastoral counseling and spiritual direction, and social justice engagement such as working in soup kitchens, food pantries, and homeless shelters. Additionally, campuses offer unique and specialty programs that may be found on some but certainly not all campuses. In this section, some of the spiritually and religiously orientation development and transformation programs for students at Santa Clara University will be highlighted to provide just one example of Jesuit college and university efforts to support and nurture spiritual transformation among their students.

#### 6.1. Arrupe Partnerships, Experiential Learning for Social Justice (ELSJ)

All students at Santa Clara University must complete at least one community-based learning course that is also called an “experiential learning for social justice” class (ELSJ) as part of their core curriculum. These classes integrate community learning and social justice concerns within an academic course offered in most departments. These courses connect with local nonprofit agencies where students spend two hours per week working within these organizations. For example, a local homeless shelter for mentally ill clientele is paired with an abnormal psychology class where various psychiatric diagnoses are discussed and clinical examples presented. Students are asked to interview clients at the shelter and present their observations to the class reflecting upon how faith and justice issues are integrated into these services and agencies. Other students in the class may choose to work at a center for autistic children or another agency that specializes in elder care. Students are asked to participate in several reflection sessions to discuss their experiences with trained reflections staff leaders. Students

are often engaged by social justice activities and learning about how faith communities can be integral in supporting those who are marginalized. It further helps them to see faith as being more active than passive, and can help with their spiritual identity formation as well (Kolvenbach 2008).

### 6.2. *The Bannan Institute*

The Bannan Institute is a series of speakers and panel discussions that focus on a particular theme for any given year (e.g., "What Good is God?"). Faculty, staff, students, and the local community are invited to attend, with opportunities for interactions with speaker receptions scheduled either before or after each event. In addition, a "Search for What Matters" series is also offered that involves a lunch hour talk by a current faculty or staff member reflecting upon and answering the question "What matters to me and why?" Speakers highlight what gives meaning and purpose to their lives and most highlight issues of spirituality broadly defined. These events provide a more intellectual yet personal approach to faith formation as well as an opportunity for students to look to mentors and models of faith in action (Daniels and Gustafson 2016).

### 6.3. *Spiritual Exercises, Retreats, and Reflection Days*

Spiritual retreats are common on all Jesuit campuses providing opportunities for students to nurture and develop their spirituality and learn about Jesuit inspired spiritual formation techniques and experiences such as the spiritual exercises and the examen practice (Loyola et al. 1991; Manney 2011). The spiritual exercises are very specific meditations and reflections that St. Ignatius developed 500 years ago (see Loyola et al. 1991). They are used in retreat environments that can last from a single weekend to thirty days. The examen is an end-of-day meditation and reflection that includes five parts. These include (1) presence (i.e., being present to the current moment and to the divine spirit), (2) gratitude (i.e., giving thanks), (3) review (i.e., going over the experiences of the day), (4) reflection (i.e., focusing on experiences of light, life, love, tension, fear, and confusion, during the day), and (5) responding (i.e., coming up with ideas for proceeding tomorrow) (Manney 2011). Spiritual retreats and related experiences offer students time to gather together with those of shared faith interests and focus their times on particular elements of spiritual development and transformation. Time away from campus and the stressors of student life, typically in a beautiful retreat setting, can offer renewal and a supportive environment for spiritual engagement (Schwickerath 2011).

### 6.4. *Immersion Trips*

Domestic and international immersion trips are offered typically for a week during the academic year breaks such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Spring break, and occasionally during long weekends. Students meet with trip leaders and local residents to learn about their experiences, and they may also work for a short time engaged in community activities such as building homes, water, or electrical systems; serving in soup kitchens; or tutoring at-risk children. Reflection and group processing help students to integrate their experience with both academic material and highlight spiritual faith formation issues too, with positive expected spiritual development outcomes expected (Mills et al. 2007; Plante 2018; Plante et al. 2009).

### 6.5. *Additional Campus Opportunities*

Many additional campus services, centers, and programs enrich student spiritual formation in addition to those specifically mentioned thus far. There are numerous and generous opportunities for students, as well as the entire university community, to focus on spiritual formation and transformation. There is something for everyone, regardless of their religious or spiritual affiliation or level of interest and engagement. Certainly, more research could incorporate quality methodologies, such as the use of randomized trials, to examine the evidence for the success of these programs.

## 7. Do Efforts for College Based Spiritual Transformation and Development Work?

Most faith-based colleges and universities, including Jesuit ones, offer a variety of spiritual formation and transformation activities and programming with the desire that it will help transform student lives, enhance faith, and deepen spiritual and religious interests and commitments, and are thus worth the enormous effort and expense to provide them for their students. Colleges and universities, so used to constant and continuous assessment, likely request participants of these programs to provide their feedback through regular customer satisfaction surveys. Yet, these satisfaction surveys are certainly not adequate to determine if their programming efforts are effective. Surveys have significant limitations associated with face validity, demand characteristics, and confirmation bias, and typically ignore any kind of follow up or long-term impact assessment. To combat some of these problems, we have developed and validated several questionnaires that assess religious faith, compassion, vocational identity and direction, and ethics. We administered them to students who have participated in many of these activities, which are designed to nurture their spiritual development and transformation, such as immersion trips and community-based learning classes (Hwang et al. 2008; Plante 2010; Plante and McCreddie 2019). Furthermore, we have completed several longitudinal studies where entering first-year college students completed questionnaires before they participated in any of the university-sponsored or -affiliated programs and then completed them once again shortly before graduation (Plante and Halman 2016).

In one study, for example, we discovered that compassion increased among students over their college years and was statistically associated with involvement with religious service attendance and with engagement with community-based service-learning classes and related spiritual formation activities (Plante and Halman 2016). Additionally, students who felt connected to the university's mission and identity as a Jesuit Catholic school reported higher levels of compassion toward others by graduation. Another study revealed that experiences with immersion programs were associated with lower stress levels as well as better vocational direction (Plante et al. 2009). An additional study found that a spiritual modeling and meditation program on campus had improved self-esteem and stress management effects for students when tested following a randomized controlled study (Oman et al. 2008). Overall, research suggests that these spiritual and religious formation and transformation efforts appear effective at improving compassion, stress management, and vocational identity and discernment (Rashedi et al. 2015).

Unfortunately, few empirical research studies exist and no randomized clinical trials have been conducted to determine if these college-based programs significantly impact students over time, including long after they graduate. Much research is needed, and given the investment in time, money, and effort colleges and universities put into these programs, it would certainly be worth the additional effort and expense to properly research the outcomes associated with these programs.

## 8. Conclusion and Future Directions

Faith-based higher education institutions, in particular, are likely highly invested in the spiritual formation and development of their students as well as their entire campus communities. These institutions offer campus ministry services and activities, including religious services, pastoral care, spiritual direction, directed retreats, and social justice service opportunities. At Santa Clara University, as well as many other Jesuit colleges and universities, a diverse program that targets students but also engages other campus stakeholders is offered and is well funded and staffed. These programs, which include speaker series, topical conversation hours, immersion trips and opportunities in the local and distant communities, community-based learning courses, and so forth, all seek to help enhance and develop spiritual formation and development. Research findings, although limited, provide some evidence for their efficacy in spiritual formation and enhancing virtues and values such as compassion, ethics, and faith. More research is clearly needed and could include the use of randomized clinical trials. Collaborative research among different faith-based institutions is also recommended. Developing and offering evidence-based programming to develop and nurture spiritual

formation and development among college students and others on campus are needed and desired if we truly want to use the college years as a time to develop and nurture spirituality among students.

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