



***'A concrete way of redefining Jesuit Pedagogy for the modern age' -The Road
Through Xavier:
A comprehensive Ignatian course of study for student formation***

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Abstract

Throughout its history, “training of the mind” has been the influential ministry of the Society of Jesus. Within this context, this paper outlines, with qualitative and quantitative evaluative data, the “Road Through Xavier,” an innovative present-day four-component curriculum for the whole-person Ignatian formation of university students.

The Road Through Xavier is a four-year program with multiple components designed to educate each person intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Upon a thorough understanding of the components and meeting with involved faculty and staff, the US Midwest Provincial Assistant for Higher Education, Fr Daniel McDonald SJ, was highly supportive of this effort. In a report to the Provincial in 2018 he wrote:

I continue to be engaged with what Xavier [University] may have discovered in their GOA First Year Experience and Road Through Xavier. I find that they have employed a concrete way of redefining Jesuit Pedagogy for the modern age. They are intentionally working on not just the academic formation but the personal formation of students. As this evolves over the next few years, it can and should be shared with other Jesuit higher education institutions. This will be a significant contribution to student formation through teaching and learning. It will also provide Xavier and other institutions which see the value of this with a strong advertising campaign. Parents and students will embrace this clarity; they will desire this educational experience. It might just help clarify parent and student discernment about where their child or self will go for university.

As such, we share the details of the Road Through Xavier formational curricular program.

Background

The Road To Xavier is an award-winning website³ created in 2008 to introduce admitted students to the mission and culture of the University. It offers an easy and centralized way to take placement tests, register for classes, preview co-curricular activities, and meet future classmates. Once the admitted student becomes a matriculating student, they enter the Road Through Xavier – a set of high impact learning experiences that each student will engage during their 4-year path to graduation. Initiated in 2019, the four components comprise the curricular structure to accomplish Xavier’s mission of educating “each student intellectually, morally and spiritually.”

4 COMPONENTS OF THE ROAD THROUGH XAVIER - THE MAP

1. First Year Experiences

Early in the Road Through Xavier are three important “points of interest.” These first-year engagements orient students to Jesuit university life and the high impact Ignatian learning experiences that are ahead in the next three years.

(a.) MANRESA is a 4-day program designed to smooth the transition to Xavier. Led by staff in student affairs with significant involvement of faculty and staff across the University, Manresa precedes the first day of classes (offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic). The early transition and adjustment to academic, spiritual, and social life is supported with numerous engagements including small group peer mentoring, course advising, success coaching, recreation, entertainment, and religious ceremonies. Along with an introduction to Ignatian values and *The Student Commitment* (Student Government Association, 2014), Manresa prepares new students for the educational experience encompassing intellectual excellence, companionship, and service to others.

(b.) GOA is a zero-credit course taught by staff with master’s degrees; it meets six times each semester and is required for graduation. Named for Goa, India where St. Francis Xavier traveled from Europe to experience new opportunities, cultures, and customs, this course invites students to reflect on two questions:

Who am I in this new environment?

What do I want to accomplish at Xavier?

To foster their reflection, students in these intentionally small classes engage in discussion and activities related to college and life skills, including Ignatian values, study skills, financial planning, and wellness.

(c.) FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS (FYS) are interdisciplinary classes centered on the meaningful ‘Call to the Greater Good.’ Examples of these creative classes include: “Ethics, Justice and the Environment,” “Slow Food: We Are What We Eat,” “Entrepreneurship: How to Outswim the Sharks in the Tank,” “Sport at the Service of Humanity,” ‘Villains and Antiheroes,’ and “Marriage:

Crisis & Renewal. With a focus on life purpose, each semester begins with a 'Spark' - a discussion led by Xavier and Cincinnati community members on vocation and career passion (Spark was offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic).

2. Immersive Learning

Students in their second year participate in a community engaged immersive learning experience on the Road Through Xavier. These experiential learning opportunities, available through curricular and co-curricular offerings (e.g., Alternative Breaks, Study Abroad), invite students to address injustices within in a local, regional or international community. Direct interaction with the poor, the marginalized, those whose dignity has been violated - inspires students to respond to the Jesuit call to serve others and promote social justice. As former Superior General Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (2000) underscored, *"Solidarity is learned through 'contact' rather than 'concepts.' Students in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed."*

It is for this reason that immersive learning experiences, and associated Ignatian reflection, are set within the academic structure of specific classes and co-curricular opportunities rather than extra-curricular activities. This context reinforces the connections between the knowledge and learnings of a student's discipline and the call to be agents of change throughout their career and life.

3. Vocational Discernment

With a mindset on being persons for and with others, students in their third year have reached the next stop on the Road Through Xavier - vocational discernment. Psycho-socially they are primed for discernment as they straddle late-adolescence and early adulthood and experience anxieties that arise when confronted with major life decisions (Murray & Arnett, 2019). Guided by faculty and staff, the 'emerging adults' deepen their formation through Ignatian reflection on

fulfilling career and life choices. These vocational discernment retreats are available through student affairs centers, academic groups, and discipline-specific offerings.

4. Capstones and Undergraduate Research

A student's journey on the Road Through Xavier culminates with a scholarly capstone project. This final stop in the senior year invites the full integration of Jesuit educational values – academic excellence, spiritual discernment, and leadership for the common good.

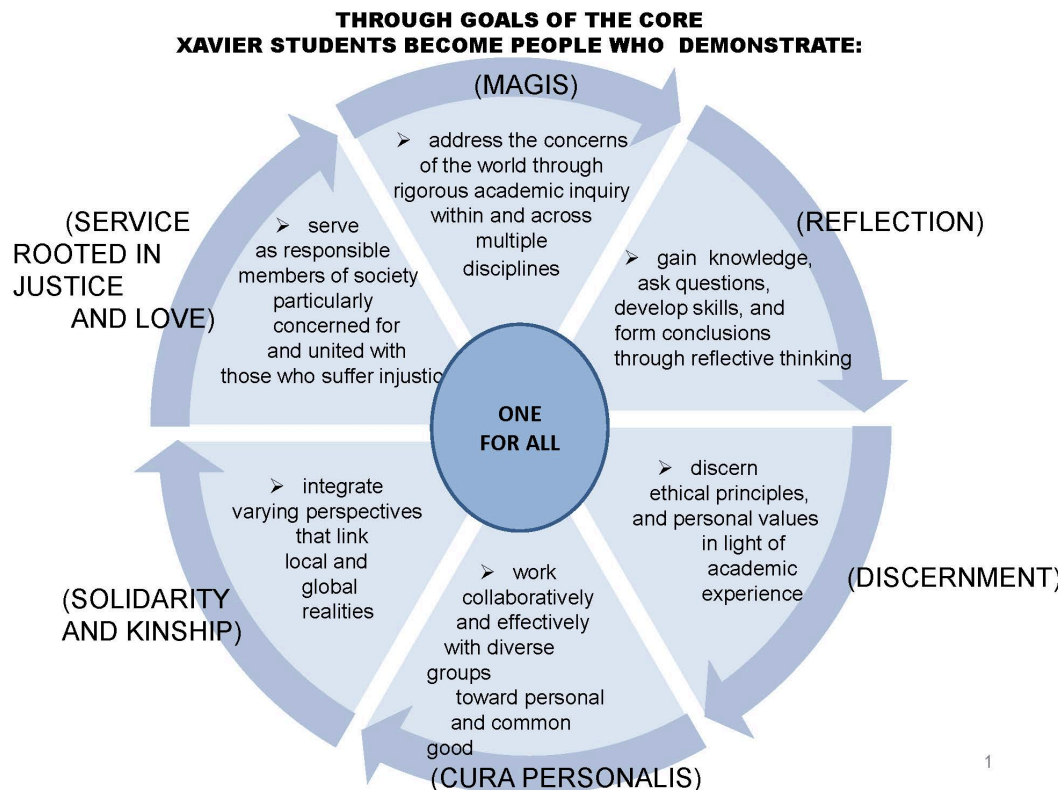
THE ROAD

The four components, or 'attractions,' on the journey to graduation are significant experiences embedded within a robust Ignatian core curriculum. Using the traveling metaphor, it's the actual road; the journey itself that serves to shape and form us. As Cormac McCarthy (2006) writes in his Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Road*, "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world." (p. 110).

Xavier's core curriculum was revised in 2014; it was done so with a re-commitment to (1) the liberal arts, (2) the Catholic intellectual tradition, and (3) Jesuit education. With regards to the liberal arts, the core liberates and humanizes by deepening students' understanding, developing their abilities, and promoting openness and respect. Furthering the Catholic intellectual tradition, Xavier's core brings faith into dialogue with reason, and thus addresses the whole person, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. And carrying Jesuit education into the twenty-first century, Xavier's core develops men and women for others—one for all—committed to six distinctive Jesuit values: *Magis*, Reflection, Discernment, *Cura Personalis*, Solidarity and Kinship, Service Rooted in Love and Justice; see Appendix 1 and Figure 1 for details.

Figure 1

Student learning outcomes mapped onto the Ignatian values



Outcome results along the road

MANRESA:

Beginning in 2010, seven student learning outcomes (SLOs) have been identified and assessed as a result of participation in the orientation that precedes the first day of classes: goals, resources, time management, belonging, involvement, identity and difference, and characteristics of a Jesuit education. Two additional SLOs are added for group (student) leaders: the ability of the student leaders to identify signs of distress in a first-year student (and match appropriate resources to student distress symptoms) and the ability to participate in conversations about identity and difference. As a result of participating in Manresa for the 2019-2020 academic year, 93% of first year students are able to identify two goals for their first year, 79% are able to describe at least two strategies for effectively managing their time, 96% are able to identify the functions of at least three support services or recourses to assist them in being successful, 92%

are able to identify one other student with whom they've made a connection, 96% are able to identify at least one opportunity for campus involvement that fits their interest, 84% are better prepared to participate in conversations about identity and difference, and 88% are able to name a characteristic of Jesuit education.

Further, by participating as student group leaders, 82% of group leaders were able to list three common signs of distress in a first-year student while 98% were able to identify signs of distress and 97% agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to make appropriate referrals. And finally, all group leaders and 87% of Manresa staff agreed or strongly agreed that they are better able to participate in conversations about identity and difference.

GOA:

Beginning in 2016-17, three SLOs have been assessed with first-year students being able to:

- develop or enhance their knowledge of self,
- understand and navigate academic and faculty expectations, and
- identify resources and services to assist with their success at Xavier University.

For the 2019-2020 academic year, 90% (N=381) of students were able to identify three personal educational values, 95% were able to identify National Association of Colleges and Employers career readiness competencies, and 68% were able to describe how to build both skills inside and external to the classroom. Regarding academic expectations, 91% (N=398) of students could identify the difference between high school and college expectations and 97% could identify an academic resource. Through participation in non-credit Goa, 78% (N=325) of students could name two campus resources that could assist them with two of eight wellness dimensions.

IMMERSIVE LEARNING:

Beginning in 2018, XU's curricular and co-curricular experiences were collected and assessed using four SLOs, Students will be able to:

- analyze systemic challenges and the causes of injustices within the context of the Immersive Learning experience (ILE),

- articulate an awareness of other perspectives and worldviews through direct contact and interaction with diverse populations,
- demonstrate the development of intercultural competence through engagement, discernment, and reflection, and
- identify personal and societal responsibilities in the promotion of social justice.

While Immersive Learning is not per se a graduation requirement, we found that more than 51% of Xavier students participated in an ILE in the 2018-19 academic year. For the 2019-20 academic year, there were 3,172 (45% of all students (undergraduate and graduate)) students participating in an ILE. The number of ILEs rose to 4,690 in 2020 with 35 courses from 18 departments offering an ILE representing an increase from nine departments in 2019. In terms of demographics, 49% of underrepresented students, 60% of commuter students, and 43% of residential students participated in at least one ILE over the course of the year. By class, seniors comprised the majority of the ILE participants (48%) followed by juniors (22%), sophomores (15.3%), and the first-year students (14.7%).

Perhaps most relevant in today's multicultural world, pre and post Qualtrics surveys were administered to all students in Spring 2019 and comparing the 182 respondents from the pre-survey to the 102 respondents from the post survey find that students reported gains in:

- self-awareness and their ability to recognize societal privilege,
- awareness of their assumptions about those who are different,
- an interest in future opportunities to learn about others and to build new relationships,
- student knowledge, attitudes, values, and perspectives related to diverse populations, and
- their comfort level when working with people from diverse backgrounds.

CAPSTONE/RESEARCH:

As is common at many academic institutions, all students engage in an intensive capstone research/scholarly/creative project. At Xavier, the final stop on the road for seniors integrates the previous three stops; such that, the academic journey has transformed them intellectually, morally, and spiritually into ethically-minded citizens.

Conclusion

In summary, it is the integration of academic knowledge with Ignatian values that makes Xavier's Road Through Xavier compelling. Our qualitative and quantitative assessment shows that students are broadening their understanding and practice of *magis*, reflection, discernment, *cura personalis*, solidarity and kinship, and service rooted in justice and love, while also completing rigorous academic programs that result in an impressive 98% placement rate (jobs in desired field, graduate/professional school acceptance, and volunteer/service positions) for our graduates.

Interestingly, the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Iesu* (Ratio Studiorum), first issued in 1599 and updated in 1832, is the founding document that outlined and standardized a Jesuit educational formation program. As described by the Superior General, Fr. Luis Martin SJ in 1892, this "Method and System of the Studies of the Society of Jesus" is not specifically about "subject matter" or sequencing but rather about the "training of the mind" (Catholic On-line, n.d.) Similarly, Fr. McDonald, in expanding on his statement that the Road Through Xavier is "redefining Jesuit Pedagogy," he added that Xavier educators "are intentionally working on not just the academic formation but the personal formation of students." In summary, at Xavier University our Road Through Xavier serves as our contemporary version of the Ratio. With a generous spirit, we share this model believing it can be readily molded and adapted to the specific situations, circumstances, and culture at any Jesuit higher educational institution.

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Footnote

³ In 2009, the Xavier University Web Services team was presented with the Grand Gold award from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education during their annual Circle of Excellence Awards for the strategic enrollment web site for accepted students, The Road To Xavier. It was the first Grand Gold award presented in the ten year history of CASE's web category.

APPENDIX 1

MAGIS

Invites us to work in a spirit of generous excellence.

Goal: Students consider the greater good in pursuing academic excellence.

- Objective 1a: Students recognize and cogently discuss significant questions in the humanities, arts, and the natural and social sciences – in *Liberal Arts Perspectives courses*
- Objective 1b: Students apply the approaches of multiple disciplines to a significant issue. – in *First Year Seminar* and *Ethics/Religion and Society elective*

REFLECTION

Invites us to pause and consider the world around us and our place in it.

Goal: Students gain knowledge, ask questions, develop skills, and form conclusions through reflective thinking.

- Objective 2a: Students find, evaluate, and logically convey information and ideas in written and oral presentations – in *Composition/Rhetoric and Writing and Oral Communication flagged courses*
- Objective 2b: Students evaluate problems using quantitative methods and arguments – in *Mathematical Perspectives, Scientific Perspectives and Quantitative Reasoning flagged courses*

DISCERNMENT

Invites us to be open to God's spirit as we consider our feelings and rational thought in order to make decisions and take action that will contribute good to our lives and the world around us.

Goal: Students gain knowledge, ask questions, develop skills, and form conclusions through reflective thinking.

- Objective 3a: Students identify and critically assess multiple dimensions of an ethical issue in an attempt to reach a conclusion – in *Introduction to Ethics, Philosophical Perspectives, Literature and the Moral Imagination and Ethics/Religion and Society elective*
- Objective 3b: Students examine the nature of beauty, truth, and virtue as means of gaining a sense of the divine – in *Theological Foundations, Theological Perspectives, Literature and the Moral Imagination and Ethics/Religion and Society elective*

CURA PERSONALIS

Invites us to view each person as a unique creation of God.

Goal: Students work collaboratively and effectively with diverse groups toward personal and common good.

- Objective 4a: Students describe and examine the multifaceted character of society and how the inclusion of different perspectives can influence one's worldview – in *Diversity Curriculum Requirement, Social Sciences Elective and numerous other core courses*
- Objective 4b: Students discuss and evaluate what constitutes human wellness – in *Natural or Social Sciences Elective and numerous other core courses*

SOLIDARITY AND KINSHIP

Invites us to walk alongside and learn from our companions, both near and far, as we journey through life.

Goal: Students integrate varying perspectives that link local and global realities.

- Objective 5a: Students examine the diverse, complex, and interdependent nature of people in the world – in *Historical Perspectives, Second Language Requirement and numerous other core courses*
- Objective 5b: Students examine the interconnections between humans and the natural environment – in *Natural Sciences Elective and numerous other core courses*

SERVICE ROOTED IN JUSTICE AND LOVE

Invites us to invest our lives into the well-being of our neighbors, particularly those who suffer injustice.

Goal: Students serve as responsible members of society particularly concerned for and united with those who suffer injustice.

- Objective 6a: Students investigate the root causes of injustice with compassion and academic rigor – in *Ethics/Religion and Society Elective and numerous other core courses.*
- Objective 6b: Students describe the evolution of their vocation and aspirations to contribute to the world – in *First Year Seminar and other core Xavier experiences.*