

THE JOURNEY INTO ADULTHOOD

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT FORMATION



BOSTON COLLEGE

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College is a critical stage in the development of young adults. They leave behind old ways of understanding, believing, and relating to the people around them, and move toward new forms of identity and more critically aware forms of knowing, choosing, and living authentically. American colleges and universities have largely moved away from the goal of helping students address the full scope of these challenges, focusing primarily on their intellectual development. The result is a disconnect between the classroom and the other parts of students' lives. Boston College proposes an explicit and intentional approach to a broader vision of student formation, drawn from the understanding of what it means to be human that is at the heart of the Jesuit educational tradition. In this view, student formation has three interconnected dimensions—an **intellectual** dimension, a **social** dimension, and a **spiritual** dimension—and a student's growth along all three dimensions ideally moves toward integration. Fostering this integrative movement is the responsibility of all the adults in the university. Their roles give them different points of entry into students' lives, each of which is an opportunity to engage students in the kind of "expert conversation" that helps them pay attention to their experience, reflect on its meaning, and make good decisions in light of what they have learned. This conversation already happens in many places at Boston College. An explicit and intentional concept of formation will draw all the adults in the university community into a collective effort to build on what we are already doing well in order to facilitate the full human flourishing of all our students.

Why Student Formation?

A college or a university undertakes a significant responsibility when it admits its students. They arrive on campus talented, diverse, ambitious, eager to be challenged, but only partway along the road from adolescence to adulthood. The campus—its classrooms, administrative offices, residence halls, dining rooms, chapels, and playing fields—will be the principal setting for four critical years of their development as human beings. Does this development happen automatically or does it need to be supported and facilitated? And is it guided by a vision of the qualities students ought to possess when they graduate?

Every college and university forms its students. The structure of the curriculum, the standards embodied in the faculty, the architecture of the campus, the way student residential life is organized, the community's customs and traditions, the distinctive language the institution uses to talk about itself—all these communicate a sense of values worth pursuing and shape habits of mind and heart that will achieve these values.

Every college and university forms its students. This is formation. Some colleges do it implicitly, some are explicit about their goal. This essay proposes an approach to formation at Boston College that is both explicit and intentional. It does not spell out specific programs in detail; rather it is meant to encourage reflection about the foundational educational principles that could guide a philosophy of student formation.

“Formation” can be a problematic term if it suggests indoctrination, imposing values from the outside, stamping each student from a common mold that blurs unique gifts and aspirations. It can be a useful term, however, if it means that a college proposes certain intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual standards to its students as worth acquiring and living by, equips them with the knowledge and skills to understand and critically interpret the world in light of these values, and yet respects their freedom to discern how these standards can be embodied in the decisions they make about their own lives. This concept of formation, it will become clear, is rooted in the principles that have historically animated Jesuit education.

Emerging Adulthood

Young men and women face important developmental challenges as they emerge from adolescence and move toward adulthood. They leave behind old ways of understanding themselves and of relating to the people and the world around them and they try out new forms of identity. The college years are a time of experiment, sometimes rebellion, tentative and probing commitments, and emerging identity. A key part of this transition is an intellectual transformation. The forms of knowing that worked in childhood—when everything was dearly true or false, right or wrong, good or bad, and guaranteed by the authority of parents and teachers—prove to be inadequate. Established patterns of thinking do not fit lived experience; authorities conflict or fail. The momentous realization dawns that all knowledge has a relational and contextual character: if I had been born into a different family or a different society or attended other schools or been raised in a different religion, I would see the world differently. But this insight, pivotal though it may be, is fragile. Neither the classroom nor the rest of life allows one to stop here for long. Teachers demand evidence rather than opinion; sincerity doesn't excuse every kind of behavior. If knowledge really is shaped by the context and relationships in which it is composed, then some kinds of knowledge—knowledge that is grounded in careful observation and reflection and takes more evidence into account—are more reliable than others.

Slowly, amid multiple “truths” and diverse values, a new sense of critical awareness dawns, the conviction that one has to take responsibility for one's own thinking and knowing and choosing. Some ways of composing truth and making moral choices are more adequate than others; some beliefs deserve allegiance because they are more persuasive and life-giving. Moving toward adulthood is seen as joining others in discerning what is adequate, worthy, and valuable.

Paralleling and intertwined with this intellectual transformation is the challenge of forming a stable sense of self in relation to other people. College students are newly independent of their parents' immediate oversight. They have to figure out how to live with roommates.

They encounter peers whose beliefs, values, racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, and sexual orientations may be different from their own. How are they going to relate to them? What can they learn from them? Who among them will be their real friends? They are challenged to enlarge their understanding of the groups they belong to, of who is to be included in the community of their concern. Questions about sexuality become more intimate and serious as they try to envision the kind of person with whom they might want to spend their lives. In these tentative probings toward a new sense of identity, a prominent theme is how to balance the need to be independent and the yearning to belong, how to compose an increasingly differentiated sense of self and at the same time integrate that self into an increasingly meaningful network of relationships. Slowly, the sense of self shifts from inherited roles and relationships to a new awareness of the person behind these masks for whom one now takes responsibility and a new understanding of self and of the social communities to which one belongs.

Emerging adulthood also entails critically reassessing and appropriating in forms more adequate to current experience the beliefs, practices, and tacit values of family and faith community that sustained childhood and adolescent religious identity. Almost half of first-year college students report that they feel insecure in their religious views and describe themselves as doubting, seeking, and conflicted. The challenge they face is, in part, intellectual. College offers the opportunity of entering into a dialogue with philosophical and religious traditions that have wrestled with questions of faith and meaning, including the tradition in which one has been raised, and of connecting faith and understanding in a new synthesis. But the challenge is also more personal and intimate—how to experience one’s relationship to a God whose image changes and becomes more complex, how to locate oneself in a transcendent order of being or within a horizon of ultimate significance that is trustworthy enough to ground a sense of living fully and authentically.

The language of “being spiritual but not religious” seems to be a placeholder that young adults use as a way of talking about this double challenge. It allows them to distance

themselves from the requirements of institutional religion and preserve their freedom to find their own way, but if they take it seriously it entails some degree of self-conscious commitment to an interior quest that could re-orient their self-understanding and the way they live. Like the challenges adolescents face in moving beyond the identities, social roles, and ways of understanding the world that worked in childhood, the task of dissolving and recomposing convictions about what is ultimately true, real, and dependable, and of learning how to live in ways that correspond to these convictions, is one of the central undertakings of emerging adulthood.

College is normally a safe haven for all these explorations but they will not end with graduation. In the U.S. today, marriage, parenthood, and settling into a career typically do not occur until the early thirties. If adolescence ends at about age 18, adulthood continues to emerge over another decade or more and not a few young men and women find the years of real maturing are their twenties. Nonetheless, for those who go to college the intellectual, social, and spiritual growth of their student years is likely to be a crucial chapter in their development. Much is at stake in the vision of human flourishing a college or university proposes to its students and in how well it helps them negotiate the challenges of these years and lay the foundation for a mature adulthood.

American Higher Education and Student Formation

American colleges and universities have taken a variety of approaches to the responsibility of helping students grow into adulthood. In the early 19th century, virtually all institutions of higher education operated on the model of liberal arts colleges. They preserved a classical curriculum centered on literature, languages, science, history, philosophy, and religion, and assumed that their role involved shaping students' characters as well as their minds. These institutions were small enough to involve faculty members closely in their students' lives; administrators scarcely existed as a separate group. The curriculum often culminated in a senior course in "moral philosophy" taught by the president, which pulled together everything students had learned and applied its lessons to the world students would enter

upon graduation. In the aftermath of the Civil War, consensus about how to live seemed increasingly unrealistic as the goal of a college education. Under the influence of the Land Grant Act of 1862, universities expanded rapidly and added programs of professional training at the undergraduate level in fields like engineering, business, and agriculture. New disciplines developed, such as psychology, economics, and sociology, and these became part of the university curriculum. The German universities, eminent in the natural sciences, offered a compelling model of empirical investigation in these fields; older fields such as literature and history soon adopted the same standards. The research productivity of the faculty became the most significant measure of a university's reputation.

Agreement about the nature and purpose of a college education fragmented under the influence of these developments. Was it to educate students in the wisdom of the past, teach them intellectual skills, prepare them for careers after graduation, or develop their characters? In 1885, the president of Harvard proposed that students should no longer be required to take any particular course since it was evident that they were capable of deciding for themselves what they needed to study. The unspoken correlate was that faculty should be free to teach whatever interested them. This purely elective approach to education was an extreme stance, and even Harvard retreated from it (introducing the concentration or major as a way of giving a focus to a student's studies), but it was prophetic of a tension that persists today between the view that useful and trustworthy knowledge comes from the disciplined study of a particular field and the conviction that there is a core educational experience valuable in its own right because it informs the experience of being human. It has been an unequal contest. The slow death of the idea of liberal education in all but name has been a constant in most of American higher education.

This tension mirrors the separation of the academic from the other formative dimensions of an undergraduate education. The common view is that the university is about the disciplined acquisition of knowledge, colleges have no business acting in loco parentis, and students should be free to choose how to live their personal lives. Paradoxically, colleges and universities have

discovered they need scores of professional staff to help students deal with their personal lives, but the implicit bargain is still that the faculty is responsible for their academic development and someone else—psychological counselors, chaplains, student-affairs professionals—will look after the rest. The disconnect is almost complete and specialization is the norm. “We have become parts of people relating to parts of people,” one BC administrator has said. Students trying to negotiate the challenges of emerging adulthood can find expert help for particular issues in different offices across the campus but they may have to connect the parts on their own.

The most striking shift in American higher education’s understanding of how it will educate students has been the distancing of most universities from any role in fostering the faith lives of their students or their students’ search for a comprehensive understanding of how they might live as human beings. Philosophy and theology are disciplines one can study alongside geology and linguistics; in most universities, they no longer have any role in shaping how students understand the meaning of their lives. If religion has a formative function, this is a private matter, the province of the chaplain.

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Boston College has not been immune from these influences, but in significant ways, BC has preserved elements of an older tradition that envisions education as a process that has not only intellectual and social but also spiritual dimensions and understands that it is the institution’s responsibility to facilitate students’ connecting these different parts of their lives as they deal with the issues of emerging adulthood. This tradition is rooted in the history of Jesuit and Catholic higher education and in the distinctive understanding of human nature and the path of spiritual growth described by Ignatius Loyola, who founded the Jesuits. This still vital tradition is a useful guide to thinking about what student formation might mean today and to developing a contemporary model for it at Boston College.

Jesuit Education

When Boston College was founded in 1863, the Jesuit educational tradition was already three hundred years old. Ignatius Loyola and the group of friends who became the first Jesuits did not set out to work in education but they were all graduates of the University of Paris and they were formed in a spirituality that disposed them to value an intellectually engaged faith. So, when citizens of Messina in 1547 offered to fund a school for lay students, Ignatius seems to have seen an opportunity to embody the Jesuit mission of helping people by bringing the message of the Gospels to the wider culture in a new and more systematic way, through education. Soon, Jesuits were founding schools across Europe, in Asia, and in Latin America—35 or more colleges by the time Ignatius died in 1556, more than 800 in the next two centuries—and education had become their principal work.

The schools were a success, in part, because they combined the best features of the two existing educational systems—the medieval university’s emphasis on speculative truth and scientific knowledge, and the newer Renaissance academy’s humanities curriculum, meant to foster character and prepare graduates for public life. They also implemented a methodical and structured style of teaching and of organizing the curriculum that was a feature of the college where Ignatius and the first Jesuits had studied at Paris. The distinctive spirit of Jesuit education, however, was rooted in an understanding of the meaning of human existence that emerged from the formative spiritual experiences of Ignatius Loyola and gave a particular coloring to all the ministries Jesuits undertook.

Sent as a young boy to be trained for a career in the service of the Spanish empire, Ignatius knew the world of court politics and the rough life of a soldier but he tells us that until he was wounded in a military engagement and sent home to recover or die he had very little knowledge of his own inner life. Lying in bed and gazing at the stars, he began to pay attention to his feelings and desires and to the thoughts that brought him joy and sadness, enlightenment and confusion. In these experiences, he slowly understood that God was communicating with him in a personal and direct way. He felt that he was being invited

to open his heart in response and to put his own gifts and talents at the disposal of God's promptings.

His first idea of following Jesus was to imitate the behavior of the saints as he imagined it, fasting to the point of weakness, letting his hair and fingernails grow, and dressing in rags. He began to have beguiling but unsettling visions in prayer. Gradually, he realized that he had to subject these experiences to examination, use his intellect and reason to understand their meaning and their bearing on how he would live—a process he came to call discernment. He came to see that hatred of self and things human was not what God was teaching him, rather that God was at work in all the things of the world, sustaining them and bringing about some good through them. He began to see his own gifts and desires in this light, especially the talent he had for helping people grow in the Spirit. He realized that if he were to do this well he needed a formal education. So, he made his way eventually to the University of Paris, where he studied philosophy and theology, and encountered the friends who became the first Jesuits.

A third decisive experience was his conviction that he was being called to serve others. When he lay recuperating at Loyola wondering how he might respond to God's great love and generosity toward him, his models for the life he wanted to lead were Jesus and his disciples and the way they helped those in need. The phrase helping people became the most common way he spoke of what he was doing. It was the phrase the early Jesuits would use to describe the works they would undertake when they decided to stay together as a group after they finished their studies and set out to follow the Gospel.

Ignatius later said that in these experiences God was teaching him as a schoolmaster teaches a pupil. This may be the most important remark in early Jesuit documents for understanding the germinal idea of Jesuit education: teachers, by

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helping students pay attention to their experience and reflect on it, will lead them to

understand the unique meaning and value of their lives and their ambitions in God's sight. Through their human gifts and their educated use of them, God's vision for the world will be accomplished.

It is difficult to appreciate how radical an insight this would become once Jesuits committed themselves to the project of education. We have to remind ourselves of how profoundly Ignatius was seized by the realization that God could be "found in all things" and how this influenced his life on an affective level. It led him to believe that his experience and in some sense the world around him were to be trusted. Only much later at Paris would he encounter the humanism of Thomas Aquinas, which offered an intellectual framework for this religious experience. Christianity has always wrestled with the tension between world-affirming and world-denying perspectives. For Aquinas, this was a misleading dichotomy. Human beings, the account of creation in Genesis says, are made in the image and likeness of God. Christian theology claims more, that in Jesus of Nazareth God chose to be a human being. If absolute Mystery is human, whatever makes us more fully human makes us more like this Mystery. Human culture and religion, then, are not competing but complementary values, each enriching and challenging the other. To be sure, sin can corrupt human designs and human institutions; neither Aquinas nor Ignatius was naïve about the human capacity for self-deception and self-interest, nor unaware of the ways in which humans can fail to flourish or be deprived of the means to flourish. But human nature is God's handiwork, our fundamental vocation is to be human, so the more fully human we become and the more fully we make it possible for others to realize their humanity—through art, science, commerce, religion, the social and political institutions we create, and so forth—the more we embody God's vision for our world and deepen our own participation in this vision.

Jesuits, largely because of their experience of running schools, would amplify this humanism into one of their defining characteristics. Thus, the apparent paradox that the early Jesuit schools set out to achieve an essentially religious goal through the study of Greek and Roman literature, science, mathematics, and the other subjects of the Renaissance curriculum.

Moreover, the schools became centers of civic life, libraries, theaters, and repositories of scientific equipment and specimens, and therefore resources for the intellectual and cultural life of the community. Jesuits thus began, in the words of one historian, to put into practice a “civic mission” of working for the this-worldly good of the communities where they lived, understanding that this too was a means to the progress of souls.

Jesuits carried this civic humanism into numerous social initiatives. One remarkable instance was the creation in the 18th century of independent communities in the jungles of Brazil and Paraguay to protect indigenous people from exploitation by the colonial powers, a project that earned Jesuits the fierce opposition of the Spanish and Portuguese governments and was one of the reasons they were temporarily suppressed as a religious order by the pope in 1773. In 1975, Jesuits would again affirm their commitment to linking the service of faith and the promotion of justice in all their ministries—a development that has given rise to the contemporary saying that Jesuit schools produce “men and women for others.”

Encounters with different cultures and religious beliefs also influenced Jesuits’ thinking about education. Through the experiences of men like Francis Xavier in Japan and Matteo Ricci at the court of the Chinese emperor, their understanding of how God was at work in human culture broadened and became more complex. They discovered their role was not simply to bring the news of the Gospel to these cultures but also in some sense to learn how these cultures were part of the plan God has for the world. They understood that plan from the perspective of the Gospel but began to see that the Gospel perspective was enriched by understanding how others experienced and expressed their humanity.

To be sure, not all Jesuits exemplified this humanism in all its facets. Throughout the centuries of their existence, Jesuits could be found on both the world-affirming and world-denying sides of the equation. Nonetheless, the view that working for the shared human good is a way of cooperating with God’s plan for the world is deeply rooted in Ignatian

spirituality. The word “working” here captures the unfinished, still unfolding quality of what God is doing in creation as Ignatius saw it. It explains the action-oriented, entrepreneurial, let’s-try-it-and-see-if-it-works style of the early Jesuits. It also lends itself to a distinctive view of education as not only rigorous intellectual mastery of a body of accumulated knowledge and of the skills needed to understand and interpret it but also as exploration across known frontiers in an effort to discover more about how the world and human existence embody God’s dream. Inseparable from this intellectual formation is the goal of shaping of character, of producing graduates who will take seriously the challenge of living good lives and making the world a better place. This has sometimes been a controversial ideal, too religious for some, insufficiently orthodox for others, but historically it has been the vision that has played a large role in Jesuit education. It has a direct bearing on how we understand student formation at Boston College.

Three Dimensions of Student Formation

If we look at the issues of emerging adulthood in light of the understanding of human flourishing and the geography of meaning that characterized the early Jesuit schools, a concept of student formation begins to take shape. It focuses on helping students develop their gifts of mind and heart, cultivate their interior lives, and make good decisions about how they will use their gifts to help others. As a first step in exploring what this agenda entails, let us say, for brevity’s sake, that in a Jesuit university student formation will have an **intellectual dimension**, a **social dimension**, and a **spiritual dimension**.

In a university, the **intellectual dimension** of student formation is the most obvious of the three, since a university is largely organized around academic pursuits. The rhythms of the semester, the week, and each day are shaped by courses, syllabi, classes, assignments, study time, papers, and exams. And many of the significant experiences of college life have an intellectual character: the exciting encounter with new ideas, intense late-night

discussions, developing a relationship with a teacher who becomes a guide and even a role model, discovering the appeal of ideas, falling in love with an academic discipline, doing original research, synthesizing knowledge and insights into a term paper or a senior thesis, finding a life's vocation amidst one's studies.

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It is also true that the standards by which students are measured are typically framed in terms of intellectual achievement: how well they master the knowledge central to their chosen discipline, learn the relevant skills and techniques, are able to formulate propositions and interpretations with qualifications appropriate to the available evidence, and develop an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the field and its connections to related fields. But it is important to take the term “intellectual” broadly, as standing for the different kinds of intelligence—linguistic, logical, mathematical, musical, visual, and so forth—that might be the gifts of individual students and the focus of academic development and evaluation. Jesuit education, while laying strong emphasis on the kind of excellence embodied in terms like reason and intellect, has also tended in practice to recognize that students are diversely gifted and to praise and reward them for their individual abilities.

The **social** and **societal** dimension of a student's formation should be equally evident in the common experiences of the college years—making new friends, learning to live with people different from oneself, joining clubs, playing sports, learning healthy habits of eating and exercising, developing social skills and leadership abilities, trying on novel personas, falling in love and breaking up, understanding better one's sexual identity. In the daily give and take of their social lives and in more dramatic experiences, young men and women grow into a coherent sense of identity, of comfort with themselves and with the other people in their lives and in the communities of which they are members. They learn to manage emotions, take responsibility for their actions, develop mature interpersonal relationships, work

collaboratively, and enlarge—across racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries—their understanding of who is to be cared for and who is to be included in their community of concern. In a Jesuit university, especially, they are likely to be challenged to experience directly the lives of those marginalized in our social systems, to reflect on social and political structures and how they can inhibit or advance the just flourishing of individuals and communities, and to decide how they can use their own gifts and talents to advance the common good.

Most colleges and universities will not claim any responsibility for the **spiritual dimension** of their students' development but it should be clear by now that this is an indispensable ingredient of Jesuit education. These are the years, after all, when young adults critically examine the religious beliefs and practices they have inherited from their upbringing and begin to take responsibility for their own spiritual journeys. They self-consciously search for horizons of meaning that can incorporate their new experiences and for communities that will nourish their newfound ways of being spiritually and religiously authentic and to which they can contribute their energies and talents. Powerful personal experiences are sometimes the catalysts for this journey—the deaths of family members and close friends, faith crises, dramatic experiences of the transcendent, encounters with significant ideas in the classroom, entering into the suffering of others in a service program, moving retreat experiences—but whether the spiritual journey is marked by flashes of lighting or quiet insights, the college years are one of the principal settings where this growth occurs. A Jesuit university will be explicit about its responsibility to provide resources that help students process these experiences and appropriate their meaning, so that they will develop mature spiritual lives and be engaged participants in their faith communities.

Students, of course, will come from different faith traditions and some may have no explicit religious commitment or be searching for a tradition to which they can belong. At BC, most students identify themselves as Catholic (about 65%) and a significant percentage are from other Christian traditions (20%), so a Christian, predominantly Catholic ethos will



Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Formation

be apparent, but students of any religious tradition or none ought to be able to find at BC a supportive environment for deepening their own faith lives or, in less explicitly religious language, discovering how to live authentically within a horizon of ultimate meaning.

We can picture the three dimensions of the formational experience as the sides of a **triangle**¹ with the multiple experiences available to a student filling in the center—academic courses, research projects, internships, extra-curricular activities, service programs, residence-hall life, friendships, religious activities, mentoring relationships, advising, counseling, work-study jobs, leadership programs, and so forth. For each student, the experiences inside the triangle and their arrangement will be slightly different. And, for some, significant developmental catalysts may fall outside the triangle altogether and have more to do with family crises, personal illness, natural disasters, and major socio-historical events such as war, depressions, and so forth. Whether inside or outside the triangle, the experiences have in common the potential to contribute—incrementally or dramatically—to the forward movement of a student’s developmental journey.

¹(See Figure 1)

One Process Moving Toward Integration

Like all schematizations, the triangle simplifies complex realities. It doesn't do justice to the way the three dimensions of student formation constantly interact with and shape each other. For example, the motives that drive serious engagement in social issues are often spiritual or intellectual; the trigger of intellectual and spiritual development is sometimes an experience of social injustice; intellectual growth can provide an interpretive framework for social and spiritual experiences; religious questions often drive a student's intellectual quest; and so forth.

More importantly, growth along one dimension often can't be understood without taking into account the other two dimensions. Consider some of the qualities that we might want to see in graduates—discerning judgment, honesty, empathy and compassion, concern for justice, creativity, leadership ability, a willingness to examine critically one's own beliefs and to learn from others' beliefs, openness to truth wherever it can be found, the capacity to value diversity, a commitment to explore the foundational questions about life's ultimate meaning and to live by the wisdom earned, the capacity to work collaboratively for shared goals, an educated solidarity with the global community in its aspirations. Consider, especially, growth in moral decision-making and moral behavior. Are these the result of intellectual development only? Or spiritual? Or social? Or are they qualities that are outcomes of growth along multiple dimensions simultaneously?

It is this integrative quality of student formation and the deliberate goal of helping students accomplish it that we especially want to stress by using the term formation. It is better suggested by a three-dimensional **pyramid**,² with an arrow moving up through its center. The developmental experiences no longer lie on the flat surface of the triangle but occur within the three-dimensional space of the pyramid. Moving up through the center of

²See Figure 2

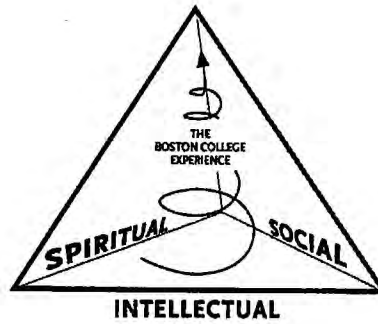


Figure 2: One Process Moving to Integration

the pyramid is an arrow that stands for an individual student's movement, over the four undergraduate years, through diverse experiences toward an integrated sense of identity. A straight arrow would represent a simplified concept of development; a spiral or even a wandering path with detours and temporary pauses unique to each student might better represent the fortuitous and unplanned quality of many experiences that turn out to be significant. But under the right conditions, the path moves toward connection and integration.

What are the right conditions? To some degree, the developmental process has a built-in momentum: physical and psychological capacities gradually emerge in response to the environmental and social challenges life presents to us. Yet development is not inevitable. Students can resist it, circumstances can delay it, but teachers and staff can also intentionally foster it, developmental psychologists say, by finding the right combination of challenge and support appropriate to where students are in their developmental journeys—challenge because students need to be helped to move away from comfortable ways of knowing and behaving, support because the new self that emerges is inevitably fragile and tentative.

Implicit in this understanding of the relationship of teacher and student is the assumption that education is, fundamentally, a **conversation**. Suppose we build on this idea. The life of a college or university is in some ways a never-ending conversation—in classrooms, dorm rooms, dining halls, at parties, in faculty offices, scheduled meetings, casual encounters, and work settings. The topics may be an economic theory, the results of an experiment, the Big

Questions that have engaged thinkers for ages, last week's statistics quiz, tomorrow night's party, the ups and downs of romantic relationships, political and social issues nationally and across the world, life after graduation, diets, family problems, and any number of other subjects. A student has multiple conversation partners: teachers, certainly, but also roommates, friends, coaches, campus ministers, academic advisors, counselors, work-study supervisors, parents and other family members. And some of the most important conversation partners may be the books they read, the thinkers they study, the works of art they experience, the organized bodies of knowledge they have to master, the cultural and religious and intellectual traditions they encounter, and the interpretive theories that are proposed to them.

Some of these conversations—walking across the Dustbowl with a roommate—may have a random and accidental character, some—wrestling with a chapter in an organic chemistry textbook—will have a very determinate and demanding character. What will connect these multiple encounters and turn them into the kind of developmental experience that results in new ways of understanding and being in the world—a conversion that Bernard Lonergan calls “re-horizoning”?

Ignatian spirituality suggests an insight. Ignatius' spiritual growth began when he came to understand that in the ordinary experiences of his daily life, God was somehow conversing with him and leading him in certain directions. When he undertook to help others understand how God was at work in their lives, the medium was always conversation about their experience, aimed at helping them discern how they should act. The early Jesuits thought of their characteristic activities as “ministries of the word,” and one writer has suggested that the central strategy in all their activities was “expert conversation” designed to help their interlocutors come to understand how God was at work in their experience and what this would mean for their lives. To do this they employed a three-part dynamic that seems to be characteristic of Ignatian discernment: first by helping them pay attention to their experience; then, by leading them to reflect on its meaning; and,

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fundamentally,
a conversation.*

finally, by encouraging them to decide how to act in light of this new understanding.

Can something analogous happen in an educational setting? What if we envisioned the role of the adults in the university as “experts” who help students learn the skills of discerning what is authentic, trustworthy, and reliable in their educational experience; as mentors who help them reflect on the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of their lives, the connections among these three dimensions, and the directions in which the connections seem to be pointing?

Our expert conversations, then, would have a three-part strategy:

- **Helping students pay attention to their experience.** One of the central insights of developmental psychology is that we learn by organizing our experience and appropriating it in increasingly complex psychological structures by which we engage and make sense of our world. From infancy, learning is an active process but in our early years it happens without our being aware of it. Once we become adolescents, though, whether we continue to learn is largely a choice we make. One role of teachers and other adults in the university is to help students pay conscious attention to their experience—observing, wondering, opening themselves to the people and the world around them and especially to their own inner lives and the rich tapestry of thoughts and feelings, fears and desires, that grows more complex the more they let it register on their consciousness and the more they deliberately make the effort to fill in its details.
- **Helping them reflect on its meaning.** The outcome of paying attention to our experience may be a complex variety of unrelated insights and feelings that lead in contradictory directions. To connect the parts of our experience we need to examine data, test evidence, clarify relationships, understand causes and implications, weigh options in light of their possible consequences. We need, that is, to see the patterns in our experience and grasp their significance and directionality. Reflection is the way we discover and compose the meaning of our experience. It is partly an inward-looking activity—exploring the connections among our thoughts and feelings—but it

also involves looking outward for resources to understand our experience. Here is where the adults in the university can be especially helpful, for they have at their disposal bodies of expert knowledge—the different ways that philosophy, for example, or biology or sociology organize and interpret the world and help us understand it—as well as life wisdom that can help students find their way through multiple, even contradictory, insights and choices. The curriculum itself and the bodies of organized knowledge that compose it are standards against which reflection can be measured. Reflection is a kind of reality-testing of our experience. It demands emotional honesty, intellectual rigor, and thoughtful judgment. Its goal is the freedom that comes with authentic self-knowledge and accurate knowledge of the world.

- **Helping them decide how to act.** The knowledge and self-understanding appropriated by reflection have to be tested in action. In part, this is a question of making decisions that are consistent with our new selves and what they now know and value, but it also involves our relationship to others and to the world around us. What will the impact of our decisions be on them? Do our actions make a difference in the world? We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships, grow up in families and in social, cultural, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is in part to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take appropriate responsibility for them, and to contribute to nurturing and improving them.

The three parts of this dynamic may sometimes move in a linear way—first attention, then reflection, and finally deciding how to act—but in the ordinary developmental flux of life it is just as likely the three parts of the dynamic will be in constant interplay with each other. They will have a tentative, exploratory quality—describing experience in different ways, trying out understandings, experimenting with ways of acting—with pauses to consolidate, moments of ambivalence and even retreat, and loops of feedback to reconfigure the process. **Evaluation**, explicit or implicit, will be a key part of the dynamic and so will attention to

the larger **context** in which the discernment operates—the life experience of the individual, social and political and economic realities, and the horizons of meaning through which we understand our lives and assign value. The expert help of adults is particularly needed to push students to do the challenging work of evaluating their tentative discernments and of connecting them realistically with the contexts that have to be taken into account.

The interrelationships among the parts of the dynamic help us understand at a deeper level why the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of the formation experience can't be kept separate. The experiences we pay attention to are inevitably an amalgam of the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of our lives; reflecting on

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their meaning draws on resources from all of the dimensions; any action we take will imply consequences in all three dimensions. In the forward movement of the developmental process, the three dimensions coalesce into one. And all the adults in the university community have a role in it. Those whose responsibilities appear to lie along one dimension—faculty members, for example, campus ministers, or student-affairs professionals—have to be aware of how interconnected the three dimensions are and how their roles—and their example as role models—contribute to students' growth in all three dimensions.

The aspiration at the heart of the Jesuit educational tradition, then, is that every student will be an active and engaged learner, conscious of growing intellectually, socially, and spiritually, and of being able to integrate these dimensions of growth with his or her unique personality, talents, and ambitions. By internalizing the dynamic of paying attention, reflecting, and making good decisions, students lay the foundation for an adulthood where the practice of discernment about their experience and their actions becomes a way of life.

BC Student Culture: A Rich Experience

In many ways, something like this expert conversation already occurs in a number of settings at Boston College. Individual faculty members, administrators, and staff are skilled in helping students reflect on their experience and discern the direction of their lives, and a number of imaginative programs have been developed, especially in the last twenty or thirty years, which foster the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of students' development and help them draw connections among these different strands.

The **academic culture** is an example. Clearly, BC offers students programs of study, a faculty, and library and laboratory resources that rank among the best in the country, but it also offers them distinctive academic programs that encourage them to think broadly about their education and to make connections among its different parts. A substantial core curriculum, for example, puts a concept of liberal education at the heart of a student's academic development. The presence of philosophy and theology in the core communicates the idea that a central part of an education is to think systematically about the human quest for meaning and to reflect on faith commitments. Other signature programs—Pulse, Perspectives, and the A&S Honors Program, for example—propose intellectual frameworks that students can use to organize their thinking about the rest of their education. Cornerstone and Capstone courses encourage students to connect their academic experiences with life issues they confront outside the classroom. Still other academic resources—the opportunity to do research with faculty members, study abroad, internships—immerse students in real-world and real-time learning experiences. Mentoring relationships enable them to tap adult wisdom in support of their own intellectual development.

BC's **social culture**, too, could be said to foster this kind of formative conversation in a number of ways. The most striking example is the extent to which BC enables students to participate in service programs. Service is a big feature of college life these days in most institutions, but the standard surveys set a very low bar when they measure student participation. At BC, not only do 80% of students participate in service programs, many

do so in all four undergraduate years, in multiple programs, many of which involve serious commitments of time. Most students are in the high-profile programs—Pulse, international service and immersion trips, Appalachia Volunteers, and 4-Boston. The formative effect of these programs results not only from the experience of hands-on service they provide but also from the opportunities they create for students to reflect on both the societal issues they encounter and on the ways in which their own self-understanding changes as a result of their experience, through commitments that typically extend through an academic year, with weekly meetings and weekend retreats.

Service programs are only one of the ways in which BC encourages students' social formation. The whole organization of the student-affairs side of the university—residence halls, counseling services, student organizations (more than 200), leadership programs, alcohol-education programs, career counseling, AHANA programs—could be said to have this objective. Even the student judicial system, because of its educational strategy, can contribute to the formative conversation at BC.

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Another distinctive aspect of student culture at BC is the way friendships form. Because of the way residence halls have been built, students live together by class and, after first year, in apartments. Though this segmenting of students has its critics, it does make it easy for groups of friends to form close bonds and stay together over four years. And a whole class tends to move

together from one area of the campus to another so that students find themselves surrounded by wider networks of friends and acquaintances. Even the fact that most students spend junior year off campus reinforces these bonds. The cohesive groups of friends that result can provide unusually intimate settings for conversation about life experiences and cement relationships that last well into adulthood.

There is also a visible **spiritual culture** that supports formation: in required theology courses, weekend church services, numerous lectures, rituals to mark special occasions, a large campus ministry staff, many student religious organizations, resident ministers and peer ministers in the residence halls, and even in the architecture of much of the campus and its decorative imagery. Students pray with frequency (40% say several times a week and the time they spend praying doubles over four years). But their religious and spiritual lives are not just a matter of private conduct. They talk about their faith—with friends especially (62% say several times a month) but also with faculty (16%), campus ministry staff (14%), and parents (50%)—and the frequency of these conversations triples over four years. 71 % attend Catholic services occasionally, 33% 2-3 times a month (higher than the national average for young Catholics). 34% attend other Christian services occasionally, 5% Jewish services, and 8% attend mid-week bible study or fellowship meetings on a regular basis. Some 40 small groups of 6-8 students meet weekly with an adult facilitator for prayer, reflection, and occasional weekend retreats, and the number of these groups is growing.

Retreats are an especially striking example of the spiritual culture at BC. Some 2500 students participate in an off-campus retreat every year—not all explicitly religious as retreats may be leadership-training programs, or focus on the issues that first-year students face (48 Hours), or introduce students to concepts of vocational discernment (Halftime)—but at least 1300 students every year do a retreat explicitly focused on reflection and prayer, such as the Kairos retreats, sponsored by Campus Ministry and structured around the main themes of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, or a weekend retreat that is part of one of the major service programs. Interestingly, 16% of students report participating in off-campus retreats not directly sponsored by BC and half of these are religious retreats.

Looking at all these programs and structures of student life that foster the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of students' formation, we can create a composite picture of the features that make these programs work. They typically organize students in small groups where they can comfortably process their experiences; they provide opportunities

for extended reflection; they take students out of their comfort zones and expose them to people different from themselves; they involve collaborative modes of working and hands-on experiences; adults are typically present as guides, mentors, and role models; they encourage students to create personal syntheses of what they have learned or experienced; they provide leadership development opportunities; and they often give students explanatory frameworks that help them connect what they have learned in a number of areas. If we wanted to multiply the successes of existing programs and develop new ones, these would seem to be the characteristics to focus on.

A Perplexing Question

This overview of Boston College's student culture raises a perplexing question: If we've devoted all these resources to student development, and we have all these programs that attract students and seem to have an impact on them, and we know what works, why are we even raising a question about student formation? Isn't it already happening?

Few experienced faculty members and administrative staff would insist that the answer is yes. There are too many reasons why we should not be satisfied with the status quo. To mention a few:

- Only small numbers of students can participate in many of the most popular academic and co-curricular programs. The determined and the self-directed may gain access to them, but how do we reach the others?
- Most students regard the core as something to be "gotten out of the way." Could we envision and teach the core in a way that supports and challenges the unfolding of the several dimensions of students' development over four years?
- Students say that some departments do a particularly good job of providing opportunities for them to synthesize what they have learned and connect it to other dimensions of

their lives. Should this be an ideal for all disciplines?

- Faculty members and academic administrators sometimes say that even highly ranked students can be intellectually passive, good at performing within requirements but not inclined to take steps on their own. How do we challenge all students to stretch themselves intellectually and move toward a confident independence in using their gifts?
- Students come to BC with widely varying degrees of religious literacy in their own faith traditions. How can we help them become educated participants in their faith communities?
- BC students are embedded in a wider culture that has powerfully shaped their lives long before they arrive on campus and supplied them with attitudes—about sex, race, money, body image, the use of alcohol, and what constitutes a good life—and inculcated modes of behavior influenced by these attitudes. A particularly vivid example is the influence of the media and technologies that are the currency of student life outside the classroom—instant messaging, cell phones, iPods, the Web. The technologies make it possible to be in instant and continuous contact, manipulate the self one presents to the world, or move in self-enclosed worlds of one’s choosing. The content available in these media (downloadable music, TV, video games, online gambling, pornography) is in itself a hugely important shaper of values and attitudes in the self-images it proposes, the fantasies it encourages, and the lifestyles it models. How do we help students sort out what is life-giving and what is noxious in this tide of experiences?
- The “work hard/play hard” culture—especially when it is centered around major athletic contests—often means heavy drinking, unplanned sexual activity, and the transitory relationships called hooking up. Can we be content to let these realities embody a de facto norm for many of our students?
- The very sociability of BC students and the way they form friendships may contribute

to what is sometimes called a “culture of niceness” at BC. If niceness means that differences—of race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual identity, and so forth—won’t really be engaged, then this culture may actually build walls and make it difficult for students to learn from each other.

- One of the biggest problems is that students, even when they take advantages of these resources, aren’t always helped to process their experience, connect it with the other experiences they are having, and figure out what kind of larger understanding of their lives is emerging from them.
- And perhaps the greatest challenge is that, for all the programs and resources we put at students’ disposal, we don’t seem to have been able to bridge the great gulf between students’ academic experiences and their lives outside the classroom or to connect faculty and student-affairs administrators in collaborative efforts to foster students’ formation.

The perplexing question, then, leads to a challenging conclusion: Though BC already does a great deal to foster student development, we fall short of our aspirations in important ways. If we really want to foster the full human flourishing of all our students, we need to be more intentional and thoughtful about what we’re doing and not doing, how we use our resources, what new initiatives might be needed, and especially how all the pieces of the student formation puzzle fit together. The purpose of this booklet has been to suggest a way of thinking about what this might mean in a Jesuit university. American higher education may have largely abandoned the goal of attending to the integral formation of students, but Boston College, if it is to be true to its inspiration, cannot fail to challenge its students to think about who they are as human beings and how they will live in the world.

A Mentoring Community

Sharon Daloz Parks, who has written thoughtfully about the developmental challenges of the college years and beyond, proposes that the key task of young adulthood is to discover

in a critically aware and self-conscious manner the limits of inherited or otherwise socially received assumptions about how life works—what is ultimately true and trustworthy, and what counts—and to recompose meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery.

This essay has been an extended reflection on how we might help our students do this more effectively. In American culture today and often in academic culture, the prevalent view is that recomposing meaning and faith is a private matter in which the community must be neutral. The whole thrust of the analysis here has been to imagine the university differently, as what Parks calls a mentoring community, an environment of men and women with different gifts and responsibilities and different points of entry into students' lives, who together take on the task of forming students in critical, adult ways of thinking, imagining, believing, and acting. It is not the purpose of this booklet to prescribe a program or policies for doing this. Programs have to be designed and implemented by the faculty members and administrators who have detailed knowledge and practical experience of their own areas and the responsibility for making programs work. Rather, the ambition of this booklet is to frame a concept of student formation that can contribute to conversations among faculty members and administrators about what student formation involves, conversations that will lead to projects and initiatives that turn reflection into action.

In a sense, this conversation is already going on in pockets of the university—in the periodic retreats and planning sessions of student-affairs personnel, for example; in the summer workshops of faculty in Perspectives, Pulse, Capstone courses, and the A&S Honors Program; and in the Intersections Seminars where faculty and administrative staff reflect together over a semester about their role in student formation.

The next step would seem to be to link the participants in these circles and draw them and others into a wider conversation about student formation, erasing the boundaries that typically separate those with responsibility for different parts of students' lives. The goal will be to share what we can learn from each other's successes and failures, develop a common language about student formation, and imagine more effective ways of helping students move

ahead on their developmental journey.

The Center for Student Formation, proposed in the recent strategic planning process as one of the initiatives that will define BC's institutional culture over the next decade, could be the catalyst for creating this wider conversation about student formation, assessing the effectiveness of current and future programs and focusing resources on the ones that work.

The goal of forming students for a mature adult life is not new. It has been at the core of Jesuit education and of BC's mission from its foundation. This essay proposes a vision of how that mission can be understood today and suggests what might be entailed if we commit ourselves more intentionally

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to it. The task is an ambitious one. It should involve every segment of the university—the faculty, academic and student-affairs administrators, support staff, and trustees—and it could have an impact on how we think about the curriculum, organize students' lives outside the classroom, describe a BC education to external constituencies, recruit students, raise money, even how we hire faculty and staff. It will certainly require resources of personnel, time, and money.

It is tempting to think we can implement a program of student formation quickly, from the top down. The challenging issues of student formation, however, may benefit more from the kind of conversation over time that enables faculty and staff who are in daily contact with students to recognize their own experience, explore the complexities of problems, see them in a fresh light, take ownership of them, begin to feel competent to deal with them, and imagine concrete steps toward resolving them. The structures that govern how student formation currently happens at BC were not created overnight. Rethinking and reshaping them according to a contemporary understanding of student formation will not happen overnight either, but these are goals worthy of the aspirations that led to the founding of Boston College and continue to guide its vision of who its students can and should be.

Further Reading

Two helpful books about emerging adulthood are by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (Oxford, 2004) and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (Jossey Bass, 2000). A good introduction to the intellectual development of college students is William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Schema* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970). A suggestive view of faith development is offered by James W. Fowler in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). Data on college students' expectations of how college will affect their spiritual lives can be found in "The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2005. The abundant literature about the impact of the college years on students is summarized by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005). Frederick Rudolph's *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (Jossey-Bass, 1977) is a useful guide to the history of American undergraduate education. An interesting argument for reconnecting students' out-class-lives with their academic education is advanced, from a student-affairs perspective, in *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, a publication of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the American College Personnel Association (Washington, DC, 2004). Ignatius Loyola tells the story of his conversion and his life up to the founding of the Jesuits in *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, edited with introduction and notes by John C. Olin (Fordham University Press, 1992). The three distinctive characteristics of early Jesuit education are suggested by John W. O'Malley, S.J., "How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education," in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 56-74. Also helpful is another essay in the same volume, by Howard Gray, S.J., "The Experience of Ignatius Loyola: Background to Jesuit Education," 1-21. For the civic and cultural missions of the early Jesuits see John W. O'Malley, S.J., "Five Missions of the Jesuit Charism: Content and Method," in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (38/4, winter 2006). The suggestion that early Jesuit ministries involved "expert conversation" comes from Willi Lambert, *Directions for Communication: Discoveries with Ignatius Loyola* (Cross-road Publishing Company, 1999). The three-part dynamic of these expert conversations is based on *A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education* (Boston College, Office of University Mission and Ministry, 2003). The relevance to education of Bernard J. F. Lonergan's concept of conversation leading to "re-horizoning" and conversion is developed by Gregory A. Kalscheur, S.J., in "Law School as a Culture of Conversation: Re-imagining Legal Education as a Process of Conversion to the Demands of Authentic Conversation," in *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal*, 28 (Winter 1996): 333-371. The crucial connection between reflection and the success of service programs is explored by Patrick H. Byrne, "Paradigms of Justice and Love," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* (Spring 1995). Statistical data about BC students is drawn from the *Boston College Questionnaire on the Undergraduate Experience* ("BCQ"), developed by James Fleming, S.J., for the Office of University Mission and Ministry.

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