

Presence of Ignatian Gifts in the Exercise Science Practicum Course

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I teach in the Exercise Science program at Xavier. As I reflected on how I could best support the students' path through their time at Xavier and prepare them for their next adventure, I had to first start my own adventure. A part of my nature is to be curious, which has led me down several different paths that seem to lead to the same goal, reflection and growth. I strongly resonate with Maya Angelou's quote "Do the best you can until you know better. Once you know better, do better." For me, this is both a call to learn more *and* to reflect and grow from that learning. The Exercise Science program follows a cohort style progression through the major ending with a 400-hour internship practicum. Their internship is meant to provide space and opportunity for them to practice what they've learned. Students are tasked with identifying their own objectives for the course, a total of three. What I've seen over the years is students consistently choosing 1 or 2 objectives related to soft skills. They are choosing leadership skills, communication abilities, administrative tasks, understanding the collaborative team at their location, patient/client relationships, etc.

Before I could choose how Ignatian pedagogy could help deepen their experience I needed some answers first. It seemed inauthentic for me to ask students about their life goals without having explored my own. Therefore, the first actionable step I took for this project was to perform a "Why Discovery" session. Finding your why is a phrasing coined by Simon Sinek where he's published several books, given a TedTalk and now owns a company around the topic. I came across the workbook "Find Your Why" by Simon Sinek, David Mead and Peter Docker. It outlines two areas of discovery, one for your business and one for your self. My mentor, Laney Bender-Slack, is a professor of education and trained in qualitative assessments. It was a perfect opportunity to gain insights about my life purpose through story-telling and then theme analysis. After some preparation including reading the book and reflecting on the prompts to identify important stories of my life, Laney and I spent 3 hours together for my Why Discovery. A summary of the process of finding your why is to identify stories from your past that you had strong emotional responses to, telling them to your moderator, and then the moderator responds with open ended questions to get to core emotional themes across several stories. In the end we came up with several pieces of sentences but did not completely identify my "Why Statement". A why statement should follow the cadence of "To _____ so that _____." A way we could use this for Xavier's mission is "To educate the whole person so that students are inspired to think and communicate effectively, foster a love of lifelong learning, serve others, and find God in all things." Finding your why statement is not an isolated task. You need another person you can trust to be vulnerable with and to help see themes where you cannot. It is truly a deeply connected practice and I am grateful to Laney for being such an amazing moderator.

After going through my why discovery process, I focused my reflection toward the students. I wondered, how can I help a group of students reflect on their experiences at Xavier, through their internship course, that roots them to their Jesuit Catholic Education. And I realized, the answer was in the question. Asking the students to self-identify how the Ignatian Gifts showed up for them became the task. The students were given a survey that included questions about the Ignatian Gifts, the Exercise Science program student learning outcomes, and the Practicum course student learning outcomes

(SLOs). The Ignatian gifts were: Reflection, Discernment, Solidarity and Kinship, Service Rooted in Justice and Love, Cura Personalis, and Magis. Students were given a description of each Ignatian Gift and asked to respond to the prompt, “how well do you engage in _____ during your practicum?” with a 5-point Likert-scale from ‘not well at all’ to ‘extremely well’. They were then offered space to add explanation of how they engaged in it or not. For the SLOs, students were given the student learning outcome and then asked to respond to the prompt “I feel confident and competent in this student learning outcome as I approach the completion of my degree.” with a 5-point Likert-scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. And again, had space to elaborate on their response for each one. After completing the survey there was an in-person group meeting where the questions were reviewed. The in-person session was meant to further the qualitative assessment of students’ experiences and identify any new themes.

From this project I was able to identify which Ignatian Gifts were active in the students’ experiences and which were not. I also learned from the in-person session that student’s valued how they were treated collectively in the program which led to greater feelings of confidence while at their internship. Here is a story from one student to provide an example. Kat (not her real name) noted that throughout her coursework as an Exercise Science student she was spoken to more as a peer by her faculty than a subordinate. She noted that her interactions with the faculty included highlighting failures and learning from the experience as well as asking questions to clarify understanding. This happened both by the student and exemplified by the faculty (i.e. when faculty didn’t understand they asked clarifying questions and acknowledged when mistakes were made). The key piece for her was normalizing curiosity and generating comfort in clarifying questions. Because of this judgement free environment Kat stated that she was able to ask more questions at her internship which helped her learn more, engage with the people more, and gain more respect from her supervisor. She noted this connected to the Ignatian Gift of Solidarity and Kinship and helped her realize the value of community and empathy.

Students in this project collectively identified strong connections to Cura Personalis, Solidarity and Kinship, and Discernment. Areas that need more attending to include Service Rooted in Justice and Love, Reflection, and Magis. (See the pie charts for details on each, with dark blue representing “Extremely Well”.)

