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The AJCU Institutional Examen: A Shared Ignatian Experience

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Beginning this Spring 2016 semester, the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has embarked on an ambitious national review process in partnership with its 28 member schools and the Jesuit Conference, the umbrella organization representing the five regional Jesuit provinces of the United States. Ultimately, these Jesuit Institutional Examen experiences, designed to strengthen the shared Jesuit Catholic identity of our universities, will become a regular part of our on-going mission formation efforts within our communities.

History

With Examen peer review visits completed or scheduled at three Jesuit universities this spring (Xavier University, John Carroll University, and the University of San Francisco), careful preparation leading up to this point has resulted in the successful launch of this process. Among the steps leading to this point have been regional and national mission formation initiatives such as faculty conversation weekends, Heartland Delta conferences, and the Ignatian Colleagues Program, all of which demonstrated the advantages of collaboration among our schools; development and dissemination of the document [*Some Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities*](#) among the many Jesuit national professional network groups; and planning conversations among the AJCU Mission Officers and national office, Jesuit Conference, and Province Assistants for Higher Education in preparation for launching the process.

Goals

Among the hopes for this Examen process going forward are:

- Honest and authentic self-reflection at our schools on the sources of gratitude for our Jesuit Catholic mission activities and our aspirations for strengthening them;

- Effective and engaging peer review of these efforts and a sharing of best practices in mission promotion around the United States;
- Strengthened relationships among our AJCU schools and with our Jesuit provinces;
- Renewed confidence that we share “the educational vision of the Jesuit Order. Some people call this an affirmation of ‘communion.’ The deep purpose is the positive reassertion of vision.”¹

Elements of the Examen Process

- An internal review of the elements of gratitude and aspiration at each participating university, along with discussion of how the institution attempts to address elements of the *Some Characteristics of Jesuit Higher Education* document;
- Development of a written self-review document at the institution;
- Engagement with the peer review team, composed of colleagues from other Jesuit schools, to provide them with information on the Examen and university self-review, and to prepare the visit;
- Review team visit, review of advance materials, and listening sessions with the university community;
- Visiting team report on the visit and evaluation provided to the school, which then engages with the Provincial on the process;
- Recommendations and affirmation of the process results by the Provincial, who then sends these recommendations to the Jesuit Superior General in Rome for final review.

Throughout the development of this process and the initial pilot visits, provincials, the AJCU President Fr. Michael Sheeran, S.J., and the visiting teams have been careful to emphasize that the process and these visiting team activities are not intended to replicate the occasionally

Excerpts from *Some Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities: A Self-Evaluation Instrument*²

From the Preface

This document is intended to be used by Jesuit universities and colleges in the United States as a tool for self-improvement, particularly with regard to their fulfillment of their Jesuit and Catholic identity. It is the work of a task force created by the AJCU presidents and the Jesuit Conference USA Board (US Jesuit Provincials) when they met together in October 2010. The task force began with a document created at Loyola University Chicago which it then reworked and rewrote.

While this document focuses on the Catholic and Jesuit identity of our schools, it needs to be used in the context of the presupposition that an institution cannot be an excellent Catholic and Jesuit university unless it fulfills its mission to be an excellent university within the American academy, and therefore values highly academic freedom and peer review.

With that as a starting point, the document lists seven characteristics appropriate to Jesuit institutions and gives examples of ways in which each characteristic might be observed in concrete terms....

Characteristics

1. Leadership's commitment to the Mission: The University's leadership competently communicates and enlivens the Jesuit, Catholic mission of the institution.

2. The Academic Life: An academic life that reflects the Catholic and Jesuit Mission as an integral part of its overall intellectual commitment to research and teaching excellence: The University's academic life and commitments clearly represent the Catholic and Jesuit interest in and commitment to the liberal arts and Christian humanistic education for all students. In addition, academic programs can be found which are distinctively informed by the University's Jesuit and Catholic character, thus contributing to the diversity of higher education in the United States with an education shaped by the service of faith and the promotion of justice.

3. A Catholic, Jesuit Campus Culture: The University works to foster within its students, faculty, staff, and administrators a virtuous life characterized by personal responsibility, respect, forgiveness, compassion, a habit of reflection and the integration of body, mind, and soul.

4. Service: The University as an institution and all of its various parts seeks to insert itself in the world on the side of the poor, the marginalized, and those seeking justice. It does this in particular by using its academic and professional resources.


5. Service to the Local Church: The University offers educational and formational programs and resources that build up the local Church; in union with the local Church, it also provides a locus where people of faith can wrestle with difficult questions facing the Church and the world.

6. Jesuit Presence: The University values the presence, work, and witness of Jesuits on its campuses with its students, colleagues, and alumni.

7. Integrity: University Management and Administration reflect its mission and identity.

adversarial and overly detailed assessment activities of regional accreditation sequences in the U.S. Rather, they are to be conducted using the style and spirit of the Ignatian Examen, which begins and ends with gratitude for God's gifts in our lives and which includes honest self-reflection on those elements in our personal experience and reactions that may be the sources of God's invitations and engagement with us.

My own experience as a member of the John Carroll University Examen visiting team reinforced my own hopes that this process can become a powerful part of living out our shared Jesuit Catholic identity. My colleagues on the team from Le Moyne College, Marquette University, and Loyola University Chicago were thorough and thoughtful, and our counterparts at John Carroll had prepared well for our visit. Most importantly, the John Carroll community demonstrated a lived commitment to their mission, engaged with us enthusiastically and reflectively, and expressed both their gratitude for their current efforts and their honest aspirations for living out their Jesuit identity in the future.

Our visiting team was particularly grateful to John Carroll for volunteering to be in the first group of Jesuit universities to pilot this process, from which our AJCU colleague schools and our Jesuit provinces will be able to enhance the process, strengthen our collaborations, and learn from each other's best practices. Coordination and guidance for future institutional participants will be further strengthened through the creation of the Vice President for Mission Integration role at the AJCU, which Dr. Stephanie Russell of Marquette will begin this summer. Beginning in the 2016-17 academic year, 5-6 Jesuit schools will participate in the second round of Examen visits, which should become the annual average for these experiences. 

Notes

¹ Michael J. Sheeran, S.J. President, AJCU, to AJCU presidents and mission officers, "Reaffirmation of Jesuit Mission by the 28 Jesuit Colleges and Universities in the United States — A Brief Overview," November 17, 2015.

² Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, "Some Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities: A Self-Evaluation Instrument," (2012), accessed on April 26, 2016, <http://www.ajcunet.edu/mission-documents>.

To see an example of an Institutional Examen, Xavier University has posted their [Mission Examen and the resulting report](#).

