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Matthew L. Davidson Ph.D.

Institute for Excellence and Ethics, mdavidson@excellenceandethics.org

Robert W. Davis Jr., Ed.D.

The University of Scranton, robert.davis@scranton.edu

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Sport at the Service of Human Development: Distinctly Jesuit Athletics¹

Matthew L. Davidson, Ph.D.
President

Institute for Excellence & Ethics
mdavidson@excellenceandethics.org

Robert W. Davis, Jr., Ed.D.
Vice President for Student Life
The University of Scranton
robert.davis@scranton.edu

Abstract

This article describes the underlying theory and practice of a distinctly Jesuit approach to athletics, which was represented at the 2016 Vatican Conference, *Sport at the Service of Humanity*. The approach has been developed and implemented in a collaboration between the Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE) and the athletics departments at Le Moyne College and The University of Scranton. The article recounts the context that was the foundation for the work, the process for developing this distinct type of athletics department, and the early results of the ongoing work. The steps included here represent a rigorous and replicable model for unique formation and unique community through the athletics experience, which demonstrates the potential to advance mission without compromising excellence or margin.

Sports in the United States Today: A Complicated Context

The concept of *sport at the service of humanity* may simultaneously leave one inspired and challenged, or simply intrigued and perplexed. The cognitive disequilibrium is likely exacerbated when one contextualizes sport at the service of humanity within the contemporary spectrum of athletics from youth to professional sports. Much of what one hears or sees today across the continuum of athletics, specifically intercollegiate athletics, appears to be in tension with, if not in direct conflict with, the vision of sport existing for the service of humanity. Across the board, the escalating cost of sport is at an all-time high. The cost-benefit analysis of athletics is undoubtedly hard to estimate. However, for many there are growing concerns that the monetary, moral, and opportunity costs of intercollegiate athletics outweigh the promised benefits—to the participants and sponsoring organizations. The monetary tension includes the vast sums of money around major college athletics, which is contrasted by reports indicating roughly 24 out of 230 athletics departments in colleges and universities with major sports programs, raise enough revenue to operate their sports program, while the rest operate in a deficit requiring subsidy from their

institution.² For students and their families it begins early in life with the escalating costs of youth sports, which is now characterized as a \$15 billion industry fraught with specialization and professionalization.³ The youth sport machine presumably exists to earn collegiate and professional success, and as a result the families are willing to outlay hundreds if not thousands of dollars each year for their children to chase that dream.

Monetary costs notwithstanding, the opportunity costs of sport participation are a hidden cost to student-athletes that is emerging as an area of concern. Increased specialization and professionalization seemingly prevent opportunities for diverse life experiences, which are rendered impractical if not impossible due to the substantial sport-preparation and competition commitments. Much time is dedicated to the physical and technical formation of athletes, but little attention is given to the opportunity costs to mind, body, and spirit during their college experience and through their transition into post-athletic endeavors. The cost of athletics comes at the expense of student-athlete “well-being.” Healthy, balanced, “well-rounded” persons represent the positive antidote to the stressed out, maxed out athletes who have neglected the chance

to invest in the sort of whole-person development with a diverse portfolio of life experiences that would presumably prepare the student athlete to thrive in life after sport.

Threats to integrity within the intercollegiate athletics experience are longstanding, including but not limited to hazing, cheating, and sexual assault with little in terms of remedies for those who cross the line. Most recently, reports chronicle FBI investigations into illicit payments to top college basketball players, coaches, and programs.⁴ In terms of academics, one is left to question the integrity of the system, which admitted that “North Carolina was guilty of running one of the worst academic fraud schemes in college sports history”; however, the NCAA did not issue any penalties since “no rules were broken.”⁵ More seriously, the rape conviction of a male Stanford University swimmer is a case that highlights the problems around sexual assault and athletics, as well as the perception that certain athletes are given preferential treatment. In this specific case, the judge sparked widespread outrage by giving the star swimmer a three-year probationary sentence for the rape that instead could have resulted in a maximum penalty of 14 years in prison.⁶ Concerns around integrity like these are concerns for all college-age students; however, they are particularly prominent today given the media exposure of and the monetary investment in athletics.

Clearly, sport at the service of humanity is an aspirational vision of what sport can be, not necessarily the current state. In the ideal, sport at the service of humanity likely conjures a vision of human beings overcoming the constraints of race, politics, economics, and gender through the experience of sport. It is a vision that our shared humanity is discovered and what divides us is diminished through the shared experience of kicking around a soccer ball or learning to play lacrosse. Changing the world through sport is a noble vision, one that the Catholic Church has embraced for much of the last two centuries, especially during the last 60 years from St. John XXIII to Pope Francis.⁷

Jesuit Higher Education: A Conduit for Human Development

There are over two hundred degree-granting Catholic institutions of higher education in the United States.⁸ These institutions served 875,000 students during the 2015-2016 academic year.⁹ Twenty-eight colleges and universities in the United States are sponsored by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). These Jesuit schools make up the largest single sponsorship within the broader context of Catholic higher education in the United States. The animating “charism”—or special mission and values of these Jesuit schools—is derived from the teachings of St. Ignatius Loyola and his first companions. The Jesuit charism traces back almost 500 years, when St. Ignatius Loyola and the first companions were confirmed by Pope Paul III as a religious order called the Society of Jesus, whose members—ordained priests, brothers, and men in formation—are commonly referred to as Jesuits. This Society is now a worldwide Catholic order with over 70 institutions of secondary and post-secondary learning in the United States alone.¹⁰

In terms of higher education, the Jesuits founded and still sponsor the oldest Catholic college in the United States, Georgetown University, which was founded in 1789.¹¹ The Society was founded as a missionary order, and Ignatius first believed that sponsoring schools would hinder the Jesuits’ flexibility to achieve the goals of the Society in the service to the Church, which was “to help souls.”¹² He eventually came to see that Jesuits should give “themselves to learning—including secular disciplines—so they could teach and form the future leaders of civil society.”¹³ This flexibility is a testament to his leadership. There are distinct characteristics that both made, and continue to make, Jesuit education different when compared to a secular school or even another Catholic institution. The charism of the Jesuits calls for a specific type of mission-centered leader, a leader who is rooted in the foundational experience of the Jesuits.

The Society of Jesus was built on Ignatius’ and the first companions’ experiences of God transforming them individually and collectively. This experience led to a certain “way of proceeding.” This way of proceeding is “based in

the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius; Ignatian Spirituality is grounded in intense gratitude and reverence. It begins with and continually reverts to the awareness of the presence and power and care of God, everywhere, for everyone, and at all times.”¹⁴ This focus on an ever-present, active God invites a participating person to be always “finding God in all things.” In essence, this spirituality “invites a person to search for and find God in every circumstance of life, not just explicitly religious situations or activities.”¹⁵ These types of activities have included sports as far back as the early days of Jesuit education. This search for God in all things has included educating not only the intellectual student but the whole student: mind, body, and soul. As such, an athletics department at a Jesuit college or university provides unique opportunities for growth, development, faith, and community.

Sport at the Service of Human Development

For competitive coaches and athletes, those for whom winning and performance are critically important, it would be a mistake to begin by trying to change the system or world of intercollegiate sport in which they participate. Many coming to the topic—sport at the service of humanity—might argue that the realization of the vision begins and ends with the “problem of competition.” Many would point to Vince Lombardi—devout Catholic and football coach—advocating that “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing” as the archetype of all in sport today that is antithetical to *sport at the service of humanity*. However, as the saying goes, *conciseness rules out nuance*. And there is always nuance. Lombardi claimed to have been misquoted, arguing that the spirit of his message was that, “Winning isn’t everything. *The will to win is the only thing.*”¹⁶ The bottom line in sports is that excellence matters both in general and to college coaches and student-athletes engaged in intercollegiate athletics.

This may in fact be the battle cry of many coaches, athletes, and even parents today. However, winning isn’t the only thing, and when it is, that is precisely when our human development is stunted and our humanity is in jeopardy. *Sport at the service of winning* sends the message that the ends justify the means. Sport at

the service of winning means that coaches exist to win championships, and athletes exist as the raw material that fuels those pursuits. The cost of sport exclusively at the service of winning is human development and basic humanity. Athletes and coaches become robots, pawns in a manipulative power struggle, where they give all and are left with nothing. Even if they get the trophy or the fame or the riches, they are left without their humanity. This is sport at the service of winning to the detriment of human development and humanity.

The foundation for intercollegiate athletics at the service of humanity can be found in the term *magis*. *Magis*, “a Latin adverb that meant ‘more’ or ‘to a greater degree,’ is now commonly used as a proper noun to denote a key element of Ignatian spirituality.”¹⁷ The popular translation that lays the foundation for this context is “a restless desire for excellence grounded in gratitude.” In practice it can be described as creating a *championship experience*. A championship experience is descriptive of the process and conditions for excellence. It describes the quality and commitment to excellence, the culture and resources provided for proper support of mind, body, and soul. More importantly, a championship experience is one that provides for competitive excellence, safety, care of self and others, and the opportunity to reflect on what God has been trying to communicate to the athlete through sports. It is an experience that instills pride and is pride-worthy. It is an experience where you may not have won it all, but where you were prepared, cared for, and empowered to reflect on your human experience in a faith filled environment.

Achieving a championship experience can only be done with the standard of *excellence with integrity*. The ancient Greeks used the term *arête* to describe “excellence of any kind”—the excellence of a work of art, a machine, or a person. *Arête* also referred to the excellence found in the “act of living up to one’s full potential.”¹⁸ Scholars argue that the person of *arête* is a person of the highest effectiveness, someone who combines their talents and abilities with strengths of character like courage, perseverance, resilience, wit and ingenuity to achieve real results.¹⁹ Integrity means not lying, cheating, stealing, or engaging in unethical, illegal, or unhealthy behaviors when

pursuing a goal. This definition of integrity speaks of the negative breaches of integrity that should be avoided. But integrity is also defined as “being whole and undivided.” This definition speaks to the desirable aspects of integrity to be pursued, things like growth, improvement, balance, and joy. Thus, integrity isn’t limited to not breaking the rules or the law. Integrity requires commitment to pursuing actions that are beneficial to oneself and others beyond the demands of a current objective or goal. Therefore, excellence with integrity means excellence that is honest, ethical, and fair; and, also excellence that achieves intrapersonal and interpersonal balance and harmony. All this considered is aspirational for intercollegiate athletes, however, at Jesuit schools what is most important is the experience of these worthy principles in an environment that reflects upon the experience through the lens of faith, and what that faith means to the athlete’s experience not only as an athlete but as a human being.

Sport at the service of human development means that in and through sport there is an opportunity to push mind, body, and soul to new heights. It is important to admit that, in the pursuit of excellence, winning is a critical component. The balance between winning at all costs and not competing is considered optimal is where human development finds fertile ground. In the optimal range, the pursuit of excellence and winning always prioritizes human development. In this way sport is not simply a metaphor for life, so much as it is a preparation for life. At some point in our human journey we will be pushed beyond the limits of our human capacity. Only then do we ever reach towards the divine for strength and guidance. Sport at the service of human development therefore must be strenuous, competitive, and fierce enough to promote human development and push participants to the edge where they meet limitations and as a result experience God. This experience of God through sports allows for the athlete to better understand their own experience as a human, but also their place in the world. This experience challenges the athlete’s physical, mental, and spiritual limits within the context of personal relationship with God in a context that may not always be obvious to those outside sport.

The Applied Work

In August 2013, the Le Moyne College athletics department began a collaboration with the Institute for Excellence & Ethics (IEE), a stand-alone non-profit dedicated to the development of character and culture. Le Moyne is a Division II athletics program with 18 intercollegiate sports. In November 2014, a similar collaboration began at the University of Scranton, a Division III athletics program that sponsors 23 intercollegiate sports. In both settings there was a widespread belief that athletics was aligned with the Jesuit mission of the college, but that they weren’t necessarily united coach-to-coach, team-to-team in a shared department-wide approach to mission. In both cases the work with the IEE wasn’t initiated in response to any obvious problems or crisis. Rather, there was simply a prevailing sense across the department that things were good, but could be better. There was a quiet but discernable struggle amongst department stakeholders to define how athletics found itself within the mission and vision of the college and in particular to articulate what differentiated the athletics experience at each institution. The IEE brought to the collaboration a commitment to “excellence with integrity,” a belief that moral character and performance character could form a synergy that lead to winning, but winning the right way. It also brought an affinity for and openness to the deepest Catholic Jesuit values that both Le Moyne and Scranton wanted to bring to the forefront. Both athletics departments brought to the collaboration a willingness to examine everything in the life of the department to audit its contribution (or net loss) to the overall institutional mission.

Intentional Culture Conversations to Determine Current and Desired State

At both settings, the collaboration began by each department engaging in the IEE’s “Intentional Culture Conversation Focus Group Process.” These conversations provided a forum for a continuous improvement dialogue amongst the diverse department stakeholder groups—coaches, leaders, student-athletes, parents, and alumni. The Intentional Culture Conversations helped to provide insight regarding both the current state and desired state of athletics. In terms of current

state what stood out at both Le Moyne and Scranton was the absence of the egregious overt problems like cheating, hazing, sexual assault and other behaviors undermining excellence and eroding ethics, which so often plague so many college athletics departments today. There was simply a sense that the departments had pockets of excellence, points of pride, and distinguished programs, many areas that seemed good but not great. In terms of desired state, stakeholders expressed a goal for excellence in three areas: athletics excellence, academic excellence, and excellence in whole-person development through authentic engagement of Jesuit values.

The vision at both Le Moyne and Scranton was to create a *department of excellence*, not simply a few “flagship programs” within the department, which many athletics departments intentionally or unintentionally create. The goal was total human development within each team. In other words, it wasn’t simply that one coach or sport might distinguish their program around academic excellence, while another focused on athletic excellence, and still another whole-person development. Instead the bold goal was to create a department-wide approach that would ensure a high quality experience across the board in all three points of emphasis for each and every team in the department. In essence, the goal was to create a “flagship department” with measurable evidence of excellence in academics, athletics, and whole-person development achieved through a commitment to the foundations of Jesuit education.

Distinctly Jesuit Championship Experience

Both departments believed that athletics could not simply be “aligned with” the Jesuit mission, but could actually be a “driver of” the Jesuit mission for the whole campus. The key design challenge was how to connect the two portions of the goal: (1) championship athletics experience, and (2) distinctly and powerfully rooted in the Jesuit tradition. The desire was not simply to be “aligned with” the Jesuit mission, not simply to avoid obvious violations of mission, but rather to have athletics provide a deep, authentic, and distinctive experience of the Jesuit mission, vision, and values. This process recognized that the core mission, or basic fundamental values, provides a

way that campus athletics leaders can make decisions within the context of their own institution. Mission is not a one-size-fits-all glove, but rather it is a beacon by which the institution should measure itself and ensure that they are moving forward in a way that is consummate with who they want to be and the type of students that they want to educate. This reality allowed athletics leaders—animated by the same charisma—a level of flexibility in creating the structure.

In both cases, the process was collaborative and engaged a wide range of stakeholders. This began with in-depth dialogue amongst the coaches and department leaders at each institution around five distinctly Jesuit values drawn from Ignatian education and spirituality. The task crafted for the department was to take each value and to explore its roots seeking ways to better understand it and connect it to daily life for coaches and student-athletes. The values were approached with the belief that these values weren’t simply important historical ideals of a bygone time, but that they held important ideals and insights for the opportunities and obstacles of the modern athletics department.

Examination of Five Jesuit Values

As part of its facilitation of the process, IEE took the lead in creating an examination of five distinctly Jesuit values and how those values were present in the context of creating a championship experience in each setting. The process included readings, reflections, and professional development experiences to provide a dialogue amongst stakeholders. At both campuses the following Jesuit values and the shorthand definitions were used through the process:

- ***Magis***—a restless desire for excellence rooted in gratitude.
- ***Cura Personalis***—care of the whole person in their own uniqueness—mind, body, and soul.
- ***Men And Women For Others***—love and service for God and one another in all things.
- ***Finding God in All Things***—mindful, grateful, faith-informed living.

- **Transformational Love and Justice**—a willingness to be the change everywhere all the time, and to go forth and set the world on fire.

There are obvious connections to athletics in each of these values. There are also obvious contradictions between the espoused ideals of the values and the reality of intercollegiate athletics as was described earlier. As one might imagine, the conversations amongst stakeholders were engaging, exciting, frustrating, enlightening—and occasionally, intense and heated. Emotions are real when you gather with colleagues early in the morning to talk about what it takes to create a championship athletic experience—one that also prepares student-athletes to find God in all things!

The conversations were focused very intentionally at the intersection between the *urgent* and the *important*. The “urgent” represented things like the need to win games and championships, the desire to achieve academic excellence in the classroom, and the real desire to raise additional support for essential facilities and program supports. These are very real day-to-day challenges felt by coaches and administrators. These day-to-day urgent priorities often operate in tension with “important” things like taking the time to understand, express, and implement core values of the mission. Urgent and important, mission and margin—these were two catch-phrases used to capture the work. The goal was to connect the urgent and important; in other words the hope was to advance the margin (wins, GPAs and graduation rates, whole-person development, and financial support) through the mission (the intentional culture built around our shared Jesuit values).

While these values conversations required great trust, they also began the process of developing great trust. This is where, in the IEE jargon, “the process is the intervention.” In other words, the very process of examining one’s core values with colleagues in a rigorous, grounded, and task-driven manner creates a sense of camaraderie and collegiality. As individuals shared their struggles and frustrations to meet urgent and important demands of the job, there was often a sense of compassion and a sense of shared struggle. For many individuals in a department—be it athletics

or academic—there is a sense of isolation, a sense of one struggling alone to deliver mission values amid the real-world frustrations that come with lofty goals and limited resources. With each session, no matter how unfamiliar the topic or uncomfortable the conversation, there was a shared sense of being in this together. Each session produced a deeper sense of self-knowledge and interconnectedness.

What Does a Distinctly Jesuit, Intentional, and Shared Culture Look Like?

There were several questions that guided each session, which included things like: What does this value look like in action? How is this relevant to individual and shared challenges? What does optimal implementation of this value look like? What are the challenges to optimal implementation of this value for student-athletes and coaches? The major, overarching question guiding the process was essentially, “What does a distinctly Jesuit, intentional, and shared culture look like?” At Le Moyne this was contextualized even more specifically by asking “what does it mean to be Inside the L?” At Scranton it was framed as “what is the Royal Way?” In other words, the department stakeholders were challenged to consider the following: If we do sport differently, driven by our Jesuit values as we are envisioning, what exactly would make the experience unique, powerful, and transformative? How does God and faith impact my experience? How would we know we are fully aligned with, and fully advancing the Jesuit mission, vision and values of the college? Presumably there are things that are misaligned with who we aspire to be, things that we’re not okay with; what are they?” What do we stand for? How, exactly, do we achieve excellence with integrity?

The sessions were driven by the belief that at its simplest level culture *is the ability to practice what you preach, and preach what we practice*. As a result of each session the following resources were created for each of the distinctly Jesuit values:

1. A foundational text around each value that provided a sort of leader’s guide to some essential knowledge and ideas around each value.

2. A set of *optimal performance indicators* for each value, or what we believed student-athletes should do better or differently as students, athletes, and people. In essence, these are what the values look like in action in daily life together.
3. A set of *optimal performance practices* for each value, or what we believed our coaches and staff should do better or differently around the values. These are the habits, practices, or shared culture that coaches engage in (or avoid) in order to create the collective habits that shape the individual habits.

In each setting the department stakeholders used the above resources as a guide to an in-depth conversation to establish a set of shared expectations for what each value would look like in action in every aspect of the athletics experience.

Creating a Department Touchstone

A touchstone expresses an organization's collective commitment to live according to its espoused values. It provides an organizational map and compass on the journey toward

becoming an intentional culture of excellence and integrity. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins reports that companies making the leap from good to great performance had formed a corporate culture typically expressed in a touchstone—a creed or “way.”²⁰ “Character” is often operationally defined as “values in action.” “Culture” is often defined as “a shared way.” Thus, a touchstone expresses the shared “way” an organization puts its values into action. It helps each member of the organization to feel connected to each other through these values. Over time it becomes the glue that holds the organization together and keeps it focused on what's important in the face of urgent day-to-day challenges and inevitable ups and downs. For each of the five distinctly Jesuit values, written reflections and group discussions were used to enrich the topic and to investigate all the dimensions of creating a championship experience throughout the department. Each line of the touchstone was meant to reflect the simplest distillation and articulation of the value.

Drawing from the work done together, each department was able to produce a touchstone that serves as a daily reminder of that work.

LeMoyne College Athletics Touchstone²¹

INSIDE THE L:

EXCELLENCE with **INTEGRITY.**

TOUGH LOVE and **TOTAL CARE** of each person in **MIND, BODY,** and **SPIRIT.**

LEADERSHIP, SERVICE, and **LOVE OF NEIGHBOR**—everywhere, all the time.

SPIRITUAL BEINGS who **SEEK** and **EMBRACE THE SACRED.**

TRANSFORMATIONAL LOVE and a commitment to **BE THE CHANGE.**

The University of Scranton Athletics Touchstone²²



THE ROYAL WAY

We **COMPETE** with an attitude of **GRATITUDE & GREATNESS** striving to **WIN EACH DAY OUR WAY!**

We **KEEP THE FAITH,** We **KEEP FIGHTING** — reflect and respond, grow and move on!

We demand **MUTUAL RESPECT, TOUGH LOVE** and **TOTAL CARE** from one another.

We **HONOR** God, the game, each other, and ourselves — **EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME.**

We **ARE ONE** in the **RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE** — **ONE FAMILY, ONE GOAL, ONE WAY — THE ROYAL WAY!**

Wherever we go, whatever we do —

WE ARE ROYALS!

THE UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON

Vision with Action

In the book of Proverbs it says, “where there is no vision the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18).

Distinctly Jesuit athletics provides a powerful vision that has unified the athletics department, coaches and staff, student-athletes, parents, and alumni. However, a Japanese proverb says, “vision without action is a daydream.” Vision is essential but not enough. There must be a plan of action to go with the vision or cynicism results when the reality doesn’t match the rhetoric. Many athletics departments have identified their core values; some even have created a slogan, motto, or touchstone. However, intentional culture means that everything in the life of the department must transmit the vision and values. Following the initial work to study the current and desired state of the department and to translate the values into mission, vision, and optimal performance indicators, we then began the hard work of creating policies, rituals, traditions and habits. Each department approach utilizes a multi-tiered system of support that seeks to maximize resources and streamline intervention impact through an intentional approach for delivering universal and targeted programming to best meet the needs of all student-athletes and teams.²³

In each department the action falls into three categories. First, *Universal Programming* that intentionally delivers the knowledge, commitment, and practical skills needed by everyone. For example, *All-Department Presentations* are scheduled 2-3 times per year. These provide introduction and overview for all student-athletes, coaches, and staff members. A weekly *Sunday Playbook* reflection is created by members of the community and sent electronically to all department stakeholders through social media. The Sunday Playbook is designed to *encourage, enlighten and inspire* around the department touchstone. Universal programming is also delivered through social media and the department website as well as to all parents through newsletters and related communication.²⁴

Second, universal programming is supplemented by *Targeted Programming* designed to customize the goals, circumstances, and unique needs of particular sub-groups within the departments (e.g., particular teams, for particular times of the year or for those facing particular challenges or

opportunities, for head coaches and/or assistant coaches, for staff or for leadership). Targeted programming includes *Emerging Leaders Training* for emerging leaders identified by coaches. *Class Cohort Meetings* includes programming delivered to student-athletes in a particular class (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors). *Team Push-In Meetings* are brief meetings delivered to each team from coaches and administrators connecting the shared values and themes to the targeted needs of the particular team. *Team Service Projects* and *Student-Athlete Leadership Retreat* opportunities are examples of other targeted programming.

Third, and finally, *Intensive Programming* is provided for student-athletes (often in collaboration with existing college support services) for those individuals facing urgent and significant needs (e.g., academic failure, legal issues, injury, alcohol and substance abuse, disordered eating behavior, hazing, and other unhealthy social behaviors). The goal is to intentionally and proactively invest in the universal and targeted programming so as to reduce the need for intensive programming. In addition, the department philosophy is to utilize existing college services so as not to duplicate services. The approach seeks to mentor student-athletes on how to know how, when, and who to ask for help, rather than over-manage them in a way that prevents them from learning to advocate for themselves.

What Matters Is Measured

Many athletic departments talk about athletic excellence, academic excellence, and whole-person development. Many share data on team records, championships, GPA’s and graduation rates. Very few share data regarding their whole-person development efforts. Measurement is a unique feature of the distinctly Jesuit approach. The optimal performance indicators and practices drawn from the five Jesuit values provides a standardized measurement metric for benchmarking growth and areas for continuous improvement. Data are collected from teams using the *Excellence with Integrity Culture Assessment*. Team data is collected around the five Jesuit values and their optimal performance indicators and practices, the specific things that we intend to do better, differently, and more optimally.

The data are used as a tool for improvement, not as a weapon. No coach or team is going to be perfect. It's as simple as that. Initially, some coaches feared gathering data because the data could have been used against them. They worry that a student-athlete who didn't get the playing time they wanted is going to use this as a way of punishing the coach. However, the culture assessment does not work that way. The data creates a process for engaging in a dialogue with all stakeholders—coaches with the team, sport team supervisors with coaches. Fear of data is sometimes rooted in an unrealistic hope for perfection. Finding optimal implementation is not easy, simple, or one-size-fits-all for those striving to put their values into action amid real-world circumstances with diverse individuals. The data helps to identify the areas where teams and coaches are achieving optimal implementation, as well as those areas they are not. The data in the survey are presented on a 5-point "optimal performance" scale, which seeks to identify opportunities for creating a healthy, thriving culture of excellence. This assessment is important because it provides a standardized measure of the character and culture—something that is often missing. The culture assessment provides team and department trend data that is essential for rigorous implementation and benchmarking.

However, by itself the assessment process does not tell the whole story. It's important to remember that the goal was to create a "flagship department" with measurable evidence of excellence in academics, athletics, and whole-person development achieved through a commitment to the foundations of Jesuit education. *Achieving margin through mission* is how this approach is described in the process. Athletic departments will achieve higher levels of competitive sport excellence, higher levels of academic excellence, and differentiate the uniqueness of their particular brand of athletics in a way that helps programs to even raise essential dollars in support of athletics. In fact, by any number of metrics both Le Moyne and Scranton have achieved historic levels of athletic success in the past two years. They have invested time and monetary resources into the development of a sustainable culture of excellence. Most especially, they have invested precious time into the Jesuit

vision and values, which is valuable in and of itself.

Sport for Human Development: The Foundational Elements

Three foundational elements were present throughout the action and reflection process involved in designing an approach that could deliver on the goals of athletic excellence, academic excellence, and whole-person development:

1. In order to create a distinctly Jesuit championship experience, the Jesuit experience cannot be parallel to sport; it must occur in and through sport. After exploration, dialogue, and translation it was determined that the Jesuit characteristics of the institutions were not simply "nice," "good," or "important" things to know. They are an essential and foundational way of proceeding for and with student-athletes. Other approaches that are simply "aligned with" mission but not "built on mission" quickly become "another thing to do." When the power of the mission is reduced to a set time or place, something to be checked off like a compliance requirement, it loses all power. When the Jesuit experience is at the crossroads of premier academics and athletics, when it is *needed for* these core endeavors, then it will become truly powerful and transformative. In other words: "When mission values are *needed for* core goals, then mission values are *developed from* core goals."

The opposite of this reality becomes a "parallel track problem," where essentially organizations create two parallel sets of priorities: on track one you have mission and vision and on track two you have performance goals. The parallel track problem is partly pragmatic: when things get busy and resources are short then the important work of mission and vision ceases and all energy and attention get focused on performance goals. The parallel track problem is also a challenge to authenticity: unless mission and vision are connected to performance goals, they never quite have the required authenticity. It feels more like "a class about mission" rather than "the applied experience of mission." The magic of transformational culture happens when the

mission/vision track and performance goals tracks are combined and united as one.

The optimal performance indicators and practices that were collectively defined created a set of outcomes that were both needed for and developed from the experience of athletics. For example, consider the *magis* optimal performance indicators:

- Striving to continuously improve
- Pushing oneself outside of comfort zone
- Learning from mistakes and failures
- Using constructive criticism to improve
- Working on areas of weaknesses
- Working hard when things are not easy
- Being open to suggestions for improvement
- Working hard and smart
- Not obsessing about mistakes
- Exhibiting the positive attitude and persistent effort needed to continuously improve
- Seeking external help as needed

These are what coaches want and need student-athletes to do better or differently in order to achieve competitive greatness—on the field and in the classroom. By translating the distinctly Jesuit maxim of *magis* in this way coaches and student-athletes not only know what *magis* is, but more importantly, they see that they *need magis*, which takes it from *nice to necessary*. *Magis is needed for* advancing mission; it is also *developed from* this experience. In this way sport and athletics become a vital opportunity for education, faith filled experience, and preparation for life.

2. The experience is not something that is done for student-athletes; it's something done with them. How do student-athletes learn these habits? What's the programmatic mechanism that translates knowledge about these values into personal habits and stable dispositions of character? The answer is culture. Culture shapes character. Culture—the shared habits of the group—shape character—the habits, or values in action of the individuals. Or, more simply—the people are the program. Excellence in any of these values occurs when they are repeatedly practiced.

The idea that the people are the program is simple but profound and far-reaching in its implications. First, it implies that if student-athletes are to develop these individual and collective habits then the department coaches and staff must teach, enforce, advocate and model these habits. The “do as I say, not as I do” approach simply does not work. Defining the optimal performance practices amongst coaches created a shared culture around a shared set of best practices for coaches. For the value *magis*, for example, the following coaching practices were identified:

- Motivating and challenging growth and improvement
- Demanding excellence
- Communicating in a way that promotes growth and improvement
- Communicating in a way that respects and motivates
- NOT belittling, demeaning, or embarrassing
- Providing clear steps for improvement
- Helping to learn from mistakes

These indicators take the value *magis*, which is expressed in the touchstone as *excellence with integrity* and defines what that looks, sounds, and feels like in action—for the expectations, the circumstances, and the capabilities and sensibilities of the individual. Aristotle famously argued that “virtue is the mean between excess and deficiency.” Or, in IEE jargon: *forget perfect, find optimal*. In other words, there isn't one perfect way to implement any of these values. They are not five separate values; but rather five values working together in a dynamic synergy. It is not set up as *Magis Monday's* followed by *Men and Women Wednesday's*. Every day the group strives to put each into action while maintaining balance with the others.

The work of the coaches and staff is to engage in ongoing dialogue to define, refine, and continuously clarify what optimal looks like. So, for example, are coaches not allowed to ever yell or raise their voices? Are they allowed to denigrate, embarrass, insult and degrade players—so long as the team wins and the player gets better? What's the difference between tough-love and just tough? These are the kinds of practical challenges that define optimal implementation of


our values. Optimal performance is an ongoing process for student-athletes and coaches. No coach, administrator or staff would ever claim to have these values mastered or have this process completed. In this way, the process is very horizontal—something in which all stakeholders are equally engaged. Thus, the process is not something done to or for student-athletes, but rather something done with them. It is clear that for coaches and student-athletes the mission experience begins with what they know and are passionate about—athletics. The knowledge of a faith-centered culture focused on mission values is thus developed and expanded through action and reflection on the concrete, real-world, passion-driven pursuit of athletics.

3. An intense and intentional distinctly Jesuit championship experience results in *unique formation and unique faith-filled community centered on the Jesuit identity.*

The approach is not intended simply to provide *knowledge about* as much as an *experience of* the Jesuit mission, vision, and values. The goal is not simply an education about what the values mean and why they are important. The goal is to create an experience that is differentiated by unique formation and a unique community. Sociologist Gerald Grant differentiated schools that merely educate from what he called “schools that imprint.”²⁵ In other words, at some schools you learn reading, writing and arithmetic. You get an education. But at other schools the experience of *how* you learn reading, writing, and arithmetic is so unique, powerful and different, that the student is imprinted with a deeper set of values. Technical and tactical education—whether in sport or education—can be attained most anywhere. However, an education that imprints the mind, body, and soul of an individual is much rarer. This is what *Jesuit education* aspires to provide. As Kevin Quinn, S.J. said, “well-done education at a Jesuit university transforms a student and prepares him or her for work that promotes the common good, while allowing that student to discern his or her vocation in life and, in the long run, to flourish as

a human being.”²⁶ The unique formation and unique community in athletics at Jesuit institutions imprints the character of its members. (In fact, *character* in its original Greek means “enduring or indelible mark”). Simply put: *distinctly Jesuit athletics* seeks to provide a “culture that imprints our Jesuit values in and through the student-athlete experience.” *Distinctly Jesuit athletics* aspires to provide formation and community that is intense and intentional, a unique experience that distinguishes those who are imprinted by it.

Tools for the Journey

The distinct athletics experience at Le Moyne and Scranton are drawn from the deep spiritual roots of the Ignatian tradition. The efforts in place in these athletics departments seeks to create character habits in the individuals who experience athletics by ensuring that these values are at the core of our shared culture, our habits, rituals, and routines. The culture work is ongoing, and it aims to provide tools for the journey of life. It requires vigilant and ongoing effort to ensure that we intentionally practice what we preach and preach what we practice. Like the Jesuit tradition from which the approach is built, the work is always the same, and yet ever-changing and evolving. Given the bottom line world and goal-orientation of athletics, it would be easier to have a “scoreboard” that would declare definitively whether we have won or lost in the achievement of our noble goals. However, in this case there is no scoreboard, and that’s why Jesuit education matters. The journey can lead us to the right destination or lead us astray. Those who work at Le Moyne, Scranton, and other Jesuit institutions believe that sports can aid in learning habits that help one choose the right path and lead a person to the right destination and union with God. It is the process of being in a faith filled community, of shared dialogue around shared struggle that will guide us in the journey. “Wider, deeper, more authentic” is a constant rally cry as members of our communities try to continuously create an intense and intentional culture around shared values. 

Notes

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²Erik Brady, Steve Berkowitz and Christopher Schnaars, “College Athletics Finance Report: Non-Power 5 Schools

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³ Sean Gregory, “How Kid Sports Turned Pro,” *Time*, September 4, 2017, <http://time.com/magazine/us/4913681/september-4th-2017-vol-190-no-9-u-s/>.

⁴ Marc Tracy, “Report Ties Players at Top College Basketball Programs to Illicit Payments,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/sports/ncaabasketball/ncaa-college-basketball.html>.

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¹⁴ George W. Traub, ed., *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James Michener, *Sports in America* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1976).

¹⁷ Barton Geger, S.J., “What *Magis* Really Means and Why It Matters,” *Jesuit Higher Education* 1, no. 2 (2012):16-31.

¹⁸ Richard Hooker, “*Arête*,” last updated July 14,1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110104052613/http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/GLOSSARY/ARETE.HTM>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

²¹ “Inside the L,” Le Moyne College Athletics, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://www.insidethel.com/>.

²² “The Royal Way,” Scranton Athletics, The University of Scranton, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://athletics.scranton.edu/General-Information/Royal-Way/Royal-Way-Touchstone>

²³The model for the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model is adapted from educational and other settings needing a targeted continuum of rapid response interventions, systemic communication, and data-based monitoring.

²⁴ The *Inside the L* website from Le Moyne Athletics shows how the mission and vision are integrated within the core brand of the athletics department, <http://www.insidethel.com/>.

²⁵ Gerald Grant, “Schools That Make an Imprint: Creating a Strong Positive Ethos,” in John H. Bunzel, ed., *Challenge to American Schools: The Case for Standards and Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²⁶ Kevin P. Quinn, S.J., “Teaching That Transforms,” *America Magazine*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/teaching-transforms>.