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Deepening the Universal Apostolic Preferences through Discernment at Xavier University

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Abstract

Following Fr. Arturo Sosa, S.J.'s promulgation of the Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAPs) and as part of Xavier University's strategic planning, the Center for Mission and Identity invited faculty and staff to participate in a semester-long Discernment Group to learn about each of the UAPs and to brainstorm ways to deepen Xavier's expression of each, resulting in a strategic proposal (one of the President's Annual Goals). Based on the principles of Ignatian Communal Discernment, the Discernment Group met throughout the Fall 2019 semester in prayerful discussion and reflection and produced documents for each of the UAPs, which were then shared and vetted by the university community. The Discernment Group concluded with the creation of a document outlining Xavier's current best practices, next steps, and aspirational goals. The work of integrating the UAPs into the life of Xavier University is an on-going effort, which is now guided by the document — a strategic plan for the decade. This discernment process may be effective for other Jesuit Catholic institutions seeking methods to advance the UAPs.

Introduction: A Call to Discernment

In February 2019, Fr. Arturo Sosa, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, shared with the whole Society a letter promulgating the Universal Apostolic Preferences. In spring of 2019, the Xavier Board of Trustees approved the university's [strategic plan for FY2019-FY21](#), the first goal of which is "to embody the gifts of our Ignatian heritage and the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus (2019-2029) amidst a robust educational experience in a nurturing, safe, well-maintained, and beautiful campus environment." Charged in this way, in the fall of 2019 the Center for Mission and Identity took up the work of exploring ways to integrate and deepen the Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAPs) at Xavier. The first Universal Apostolic Preference is to show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment. This first UAP is a real gift, an invitation to a way of proceeding during these tumultuous and trying times. In the early autumn of 2019, when Xavier University's Center for Mission and Identity was

looking for a way to discuss and implement the Universal Apostolic Preferences, we recognized that the first UAP was the way forward — discernment would guide the process. Out of the earliest conversations, it became quite clear that a Discernment Group was the most effective way to achieve our goals.

The Discernment Process

Once we had decided that a Discernment Group was the best option, we set about finding participants, using several methods. The pre-requisites for participation in the Discernment Group were: curiosity, interest, optimism, and trust. We personally invited a few participants based on past experience with Mission and Identity programs. We then sent a general invite to those who would be presenting at the 2020 Commitment to Justice Conference and to members of CAPE (Connecting Administrative Professionals for Excellence), Xavier's administrative assistant affinity group. We also sent a general announcement to the campus

community to bring in others who were called to do this work; in this announcement, we also included a link to the UAPs, so the announcement served an educational function beyond soliciting participation. Our goal was to bring together a diverse and experienced group representing a broad section of the university. In the end, our [Discernment Group](#) numbered twenty-two members, including three Jesuits, from across the university: nine faculty and thirteen staff/administrators. The opportunity fulfilled the criteria to be a [Province Ignatian Educator of Distinction](#), a province network, campus, and public recognition of a person's commitment and competence in animating the Jesuit tradition of academic excellence. Participating faculty and staff met weekly for an hour from September 17 to November 19, 2019, with an hour of preparation and reflection between meetings. Debra Mooney Ph.D., Xavier Vice President for Mission and Identity, and Thomas E. Strunk Ph.D., Associate Professor of Classics and Director of Faculty Programming for Mission and Identity, co-facilitated the group.

Since the Universal Apostolic Preferences were new to many of the participants, we shared with group participants [Fr. Arturo Sosa's letter](#) announcing the UAPs before the first meeting. At the first meeting, we began, as we did for each of the meetings, with a prayer. We then presented an overview of the UAPs, including the video "[What If God Spoke to You?](#)" a succinct and inspiring overview of the UAPs. We discussed the choice of language — "preferences" rather than "priorities" — and the idea that this was an invitation to explore new possibilities rather than check the boxes for what we were already doing. In addition, we discussed the general purpose and direction of the group. We also introduced the Ignatian daily examen and asked participants to spend time in reflection and prayer with the examen. We closed the first meeting by having participants draw one of the four UAPs out of a basket to determine which of the four UAP groups they would work with. We did this because we did not want to pre-determine the groups or merely rely on the experts to think through each UAP, for example the Sustainability professor working on care of our common home or the Jesuit working on the Spiritual Exercises and discernment. We wanted people to be free to bring fresh ideas, while relying

on the shared wisdom of the group for the final outcomes.

For our second meeting, we focused on the process of communal discernment. For our purposes, we define the process of Ignatian Communal Discernment as incorporating the following:

- Beginning the process in a state of Ignatian indifference¹
- Outlining the pros and cons of the decision with respect to our mission, vision, and values
- Being a contributor and an active listener in brainstorming a solution
- Assuming good intentions on the part of others
- Giving close attention to the viewpoints of others — especially when there is disagreement
- Being mindful of feelings of unease or agitation (Ignatian desolation)
- Noticing God's presence and will
- Deliberating until there is a shared sense of contentment with a decision (Ignatian consolation)



Discernment group members in their respective UAP group brainstorming

Aside from laying out these principles, we shared with the group the results of a survey of the Xavier Board of Trustees, which asked, "What aspect of Ignatian Communal Discernment speaks most strongly to you?" Our Chief Human Resources Officer, a Discernment Group participant, shared an instance when she utilized the approach with the Benefits Committee; this case study underscored how the outcome was

much different (and better) than when approaching the decision with predetermined results in mind.

Following the meeting we provided participants a reflection worksheet, including such prompts as:

- I know I am experiencing Ignatian consolation when I . . .
- I know I am experiencing Ignatian desolation when I . . .
- The closest experience that I have had at Xavier to engaging in the Ignatian Communal Discernment process is . . .

We then spent the next four weeks focusing on each of the four UAPs. While starting with the first UAP — “to show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment” — might have seemed obvious, we decided, having already discussed Ignatian Communal Discernment, to save the first UAP to the end as a way to circle back to some earlier themes. We thus began with the second UAP — “walking with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice.” In preparation for this UAP, we shared with the Discernment Group the *Cincinnati Enquirer* series [The Long Hard Road](#), on the poor and underserved in Cincinnati. For this meeting and the next several weeks, our meetings took on a set structure: an opening prayer, discussion of our reflections from the previous week, and then an examination of the new UAP. For this session, Dr. Blis DeVault, Professor of Communication Studies and member of the Discernment Group, shared with us her film [A Slice of Pie: A Love Story](#), winner of the 2018 Arlin G. Meyer Prize in Performing Arts. The film tells the heartfelt story of the couple who began the nearby restaurant Moriah Pie, which allows people to pay whatever they can afford for their meal. The film focuses on how the restaurant builds community in an economically depressed area. The couple who opened Moriah Pie, Robert and Erin Lockridge, attended the viewing and engaged in the lively conversation afterwards. The idea of community service behind the restaurant, which is just a few blocks from Xavier’s campus, and the creation of the film by a Xavier University professor provided the Discernment Group with a concrete example

of accompanying the marginalized right in our own neighborhood. After this meeting, and for each of the UAPs, we asked the participants to bring back a few current best practices, next steps, and aspirational, yet realistic, goals, which we then collected the following week. We also gave the group some reflection questions to discern over the course of the next week:

- How does *A Slice of Pie* relate to UAP two?
- What are other examples (e.g. programs, projects, curriculum, etc.) at Xavier that address the poor/outcast/marginalized outside of your own area in a mission of reconciliation and justice?
- Who are the marginalized near us and among us?

At our following meeting we moved to the fourth UAP — “to collaborate in the care of our Common Home” — as you can tell, we were discerning our own order through the UAPs. In preparation for the meeting, we had participants read an excerpt from Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si* and shared some additional internet resources. Dr. Kathleen Smythe, Discernment Group participant and Professor of History, provided us with a reflection on being in balance with the environment. Dr. Smythe has done extensive work on sustainability in her teaching, research, and service, but this was no academic lecture loaded with statistics and data. Rather Kathleen offered us her lived experience of caring for the Earth; her presentation included photos from the local environment and her own poetry. Kathleen provided for us a notable example of how one person can care for our Common Home.



Discernment group members brainstorming

We then asked the group to reflect over the next week on the following questions:

- If you find the fourth UAP compelling in any way, why do you think this is so?
- What connections did our discussion of care for Our Common Home raise today that you have not thought of before? What connections did our discussion of care for Our Common Home raise with last week's discussion on the poor and marginalized?
- How have you experienced the relationship between care for the environment, your relationship to God and/or prayer and discernment?

For the third UAP — “to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future” — we decided to invite four student leaders, ranging from first-year to senior-year, to speak with us about their thoughts for a hope-filled future. The students came from a variety of backgrounds and had different experiences at Xavier, such as their majors and career goals. Throughout the week prior, we gathered questions for the students from the Discernment Group participants. We led off the discussion with some of these, such as:

- What are you hopeful for in the future?
- Have you ever experienced hope in the classroom?
- Does Xavier make you feel hopeful?
- What does our generation misperceive about your generation?

Once the conversation began, however, questions and comments came organically from those present. For many participants this meeting was one of the highlights of our time together. We delighted in the eloquence and ability to reflect demonstrated by our students. We found that part of creating a hope-filled future is simply interactions between the youth and their elders, which has the potential to build hope for each group.

In the week following our meeting with the students, we reflected on the following questions:

- What were some points of intrigue/surprise you learned from the students?
- What offered students consolation and desolation regarding their future?
- Do you think these are influenced by generational differences or are they universal/consistent/existential across generations?
- What offered you consolation and desolation regarding your future when you were about twenty years old? How about now?
- What does the comment in the UAP document mean to you, “To accompany young people demands of us authenticity of life, spiritual depth, and openness to sharing the life-mission that gives meaning to who we are and what we do”?

For our final UAP, we returned to the beginning — UAP one: “to show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment.” We decided to have Dr. Gillian Ahlgren, Professor of Theology, join us from Washington, D.C. where she was spending a sabbatical. This was in the days before Zoom became a daily experience! Dr. Ahlgren, who has developed [*The Spiritual Exercises for the 21st Century: A Workbook*](#), shared with us her understanding of the Spiritual Exercises and their importance for our contemporary world. For the following week, we reflected on these questions:

- Where and when do you typically engage in an Ignatian daily examen?
- What are some joys and challenges of engaging in the Ignatian daily examen?
- As you Seek to Find God in All Things, have you encountered God in an unusual way, time or place?
- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. has said that, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Do you agree?
- How might the university more effectively engage communal

discernment in decision-making processes?

From this point on, Debra Mooney and Thomas Strunk deliberately stepped back and took on the role of facilitators almost exclusively, so that the four groups would have as much freedom as possible to brainstorm and follow the spirit. For the next three weeks, we engaged in brainstorming exercises: we would all come together at our usual time and place; we then broke into our UAP groups and worked on ideas for our UAP. Our way of proceeding was to spend the first week on things we were already doing that seemed to fit the spirit of the UAPs; these were our current best practices. This allowed us to recognize the good work we were already doing and to get a baseline reading of some of Xavier's best practices. The second week we aimed at identifying the next steps; we asked ourselves — keeping in mind the UAPs — what are those things that with a bit of effort and some resources we could do if we put our minds to it. In our final brainstorming session, we freed ourselves from the anxiety that comes with considering resources to help identify big projects that could be transformative for Xavier; these became our aspirational goals.

For each of these three sessions, we tried to identify three to five items that fit each of our three categories — best practices, next steps, and aspirational goals. These three sessions culminated with each UAP group producing a document with roughly fifteen items identified in total, which were then shared with the entire group; the other participants were then able to provide feedback, such as affirming the findings, offering suggestions, and adding other ideas. After the meeting, each group revised their documents a final time. To provide just one illustration from the final document, an identified current best practice for 'Showing the Way to God' is "The structure and programs of the Dorothy Day Center for Faith and Justice (campus ministry)," a next step is to "Develop a cohort of trained spiritual directors for the Spiritual Exercises," and an aspirational change is to "Develop chaplaincy programs for interested clubs, teams, programs and other intact groups."

While the Discernment Group was going through this process amongst themselves, we developed a

[resource page for the UAPs](#) on Xavier's [JesuitResource.org](#) site where one can find a great amount of material on the UAPs. In October, we also began to share our initial findings with members of the community in order to allow others to respond to what we were doing. The first group to see any part of our work was the President's direct reports (vice presidents), with whom we invited perceptions of current best practices. Just before our final Discernment Group meeting, Debra Mooney, as Xavier's Chief Mission Officer, shared our process with the university community in her Fall Convocation and solicited ideas on next steps and aspirational goals. During this gathering, the audience members were given handouts on which to write their ideas, which we then collected and incorporated into our document. Additionally, the documents were shared with the President's Cabinet, the Sustainability Committee, and other university stakeholders for feedback. We also sent a draft to the university community through a university-wide announcement soliciting comments. With the inclusive process used, feedback was affirming.

Concluding Thoughts

The final report, *Deepening the UAPs at Xavier*, was set in February 2020. It has subsequently guided and prioritized mission activities, which a process of this type should do, even in the midst of the pandemic. Despite all the structural changes, resource reallocation, and personal toil resulting from COVID-19 crisis management, it is clear that the discernment process resulted in a robust guide. An example of a direct outcome of the report, for instance, is that a resource on the steps and tips for leading Ignatian Communal Discernment processes was created and members of the President's Cabinet have been reporting on the use of the mindset in their decision-making processes at their monthly meetings. Similarly, each of the weekly gatherings of the President's direct reports now ends with a reflective examen of the processes within the meeting.

We have felt that methodically engaging the broader Xavier community over the course of a semester has resulted in a richer and deeper understanding of the UAPs at Xavier. Following Thanksgiving break 2019, we shared our proposal

with Fr. Dan McDonald, S.J., the Midwest Provincial Assistant for Higher Education, who was at Xavier for his annual visit. This was a wonderful opportunity to share our ideas and receive some feedback from someone with a wider view of the Jesuit apostolate in the Midwest. Fr. McDonald left us with these encouraging words, “This model of process might well be used

at the other [Jesuit] universities to provide a holistic outcome.” We believe that components of our model, with additions or subtractions, could be replicated by other AJCU schools keeping in mind the resources, needs, and opportunities of the local context. In this spirit, we share Xavier’s approach. ^{HJE}



Student interviewees

Notes

¹ Debra K. Mooney, “Ignatian Communal Discernment,” accessed March 11, 2021, <http://www.Xavier.edu/icd>.