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A New Chapter for the Mission Priority Examen

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A proclivity toward self-reflection lies deep in the DNA of Ignatian spirituality. Early in the Spiritual Exercises—and, more important, core to our humanity—is the essential desire to know, and be known by a God who finds us worth loving. Through the reflective practice of the Ignatian Examen, we are invited to consider who we are and who we are called to become.

A true Ignatian Examen involves not only the mind, but also the heart and the spirit. It is, by definition, a partnered experience with God and the world around us. Ignatius' practical predisposition led him to incorporate this method of reflection into everyday practice—twice a day for himself and his Jesuit brothers. He knew, too, that the habit of placing ourselves in unobstructed spiritual view, day after day, would be foundational for making choices that are consistent with an integrated life.

By extension, the values of self-reflection and integration are also evident in the way Jesuit colleges and universities hope to function. The longing to learn binds intellectual pursuits with questions of meaning. Unabashedly practical questions sit comfortably alongside the philosophical, and the entire project is construed as a community undertaking, rather than a loose collection of scholarly parts. There is a “we” about Jesuit higher education, and a responsibility for charting the future in ways that rely on the institutional self-understanding that the Examen provides.

In this spirit—and at the request of then-Superior General Adolfo Nicolás—the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States (JCCU) and Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), launched the pilot *Mission Priority Examen* (MPE) in 2016. Over the course of five years, AJCU colleges and universities undertook a process of self-reflection inspired by the Ignatian Examen. A confluence of realities lent further

urgency to implementing the MPE. To name just a few:

- The pace of turnover in Jesuit university presidencies and other key leadership positions is accelerating, and fewer Jesuit are available to serve in these roles. New presidential leadership can bring committed, thoughtful individuals to the campus. However, depending on the preparation of a president, provost, vice president or dean, such turnover can also put institutional memory and a deep expression of the mission at risk. The issue of leadership preparation is not a simplistic “Jesuit vs. lay” conundrum. Both Jesuits and non-Jesuits may be exceptional mission leaders, but leadership support is essential.
- More is now required of Boards, who hold the institution's wellbeing in trust. Their nuanced understanding of the school's mission commitments can make all the difference in authenticating its claims to being a Jesuit, Catholic institution that is theologically sound and responsive to current needs.
- The Society of Jesus has asked every Jesuit institution around the world to put its work in the context of four [Universal Apostolic Preferences](#), and to exercise a spirit of reconciliation in all that it does. Jesuit universities are exploring what this means for their students, faculty, staff, and institutional citizenship.
- Churchgoing and religious affiliation continue to decrease in the U.S. Gallup reported in March 2021 that, “Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend.”¹ How will Jesuit institutions, whose mission includes the spiritual development of students—and who

identify as spiritual works—address this issue on campus?

- The process of racial reckoning in the U.S. and heightened concerns about environmental sustainability have placed sharpened questions about human and planetary dignity before American higher education. Jesuit universities are invited, further, to address these issues in the context of our mission.
- Divisive social and political environments require new means of dialogue, and of sharing the intellectual resources of the university widely.
- The question of institutional survival is at the forefront for some U.S. colleges and universities, and most are experiencing at least some financial pressure. How will Jesuit schools continue to make a distinctive contribution to American and Catholic higher education in a time of constrained resources?

These and other signs of the times have an impact on Jesuit higher education today, especially when viewed through the lens of our mission. In short, the MPE offers a snapshot of the collaborative “we” in Jesuit university life.

As a pilot process, the MPE yielded both important insights and needed improvements. After a year’s hiatus for planning and revision, the second iteration launched in Academic Year 2021-2022. This second cycle will run for seven consecutive years with adjustments along the way. A Joint Commission of the AJCU and JCCU revised the original document for the MPE, which has now been approved by the leadership of both groups and published as [*Characteristics of Jesuit Higher Education: A Guide for Mission Reflection*](#). Specifically, it notes that this second round of MPEs seek to:

- Respond to new emphases of the Society of Jesus that have evolved in recent years, including the theme of reconciliation from General Congregation (GC) 36, and the Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAPs) guiding all Jesuit works.

- Accentuate the importance of the MPE process as a primary mechanism for self-review by institutions on how they live out their Jesuit, Catholic mission, and as an essential tool for the Society to discern and re-affirm its continuing relationships with Jesuit colleges and universities in the U.S., Canada, and Belize.
- Anchor the MPE process as a shared endeavor of the schools and the Society. While ultimate responsibility for affirming Jesuit identity rests with the Society, designing and conducting the MPE process should be a joint and proactive responsibility of the Society and AJCU schools.
- Communicate that recognition of an institution as a Jesuit college or university does not rely on the presence of Jesuits on campus, but rather on the demonstrated commitment of these institutions to live out their Jesuit mission and values in ways that are real, enduring, and grounded in a well-prepared community of leaders personally dedicated to an Ignatian vision.

Among the most significant changes in the *Characteristics* revision is the expansion of Characteristic Three: The Pursuit of Faith, Justice & Reconciliation. Here issues related to the UAPs, the Society’s commitment to reconciliation, and the imperatives of racial and environmental justice are highlighted as important, *interrelated* emphases for every Jesuit college and university. While each of these themes is also addressed in the context of other Characteristics, they are presented in Characteristic Three as a unified whole, the subheading of which reads: “The Jesuit University actively responds to the most morally urgent issues of our times in ways that reflect the deepest sources of the Jesuit, Catholic tradition; anchor healing in truth; and recognize the fulfillment of justice as the forging of right relationships.”²

Right relationship is, in fact, the hinge on which all the elements turn. To place ourselves in right relationship with those around us, and with the created world, implies a thousand acts of faith in God and each other. It drives us toward teaching and scholarship that are responsive to the world’s most significant issues. Its fruits are evident in

racial, gender, environmental, economic, and other forms of justice, and in an attitude of kinship among us.

At its heart, the MPE is about recognizing and righting our relationship with the distinctive mission of Jesuit higher education. Where is our college or university in alignment with our deepest purpose? Let's celebrate it. Where are we missing the mark? Let's acknowledge it. And what will we do, going forward? Let's commit to and plan for it in collaboration with others. Examens, freely undertaken, lead us toward discernment and action. HJE

Notes

¹ Jeffrey Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup, accessed November 16, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

² Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, “Characteristics of Jesuit Higher Education: A Guide for Mission Reflection” (2021), 15, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d1dd88e4b0dec65a6594f0/t/612fafa56362bb224b00f773/1630515115139/A+Guide+for+Mission+Reflection_09-21.pdf.