

Exploring Student Understanding and Practice of Discernment and Reflection

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Messina Learning Outcomes

Jesuit Mission and Values

- Develop habits of discernment and reflection in the Ignatian tradition.
- Explore and articulate values and principles involved in their personal decision-making.

Critical Understanding

- Develop habits of reading, writing and intellectual conversation that support academic excellence and engagement.
- Demonstrate increased knowledge and use of campus resources that aid critical thinking.

Connections to Loyola Community

- Establish healthy, mutually beneficial and respectful relationships with others including faculty, administrators, staff and peers.
- Demonstrate a sense of belonging to the community at Loyola University both in and out of the classroom.

Integrated Learning

- Integrate multiple sources of knowledge gained through various disciplinary lenses, texts, instruction, out of class experiences and personal reflection to offer a perspective on the interdisciplinary theme of the community

Discernment at Loyola

At the heart of Ignatian spirituality is the practice of discernment – an art which St. Ignatius learned through sustained careful attention to and reflection on his own experience. Discernment is based on several presuppositions, including: 1) humans have freedom, and their choices have consequences; 2) some choices are better – and freer – than others; 3) human choices are not only between good and evil, but are often between lesser goods and greater goods; 4) it is possible through attending to motivations, feelings, and patterns of decision-making to improve the freedom, goodness, and authenticity of one’s choices. The early Jesuits also discovered the art of “communal discernment,” whereby they were able to make corporate choices for their future as an apostolic body through shared deliberations. For Ignatius and his Jesuits, discernment involved prayer and the enlightenment of grace; they sometimes referred to their own practice of ongoing discernment as “seeking God’s will for their lives.” As they trained others in the practice of discernment, however, the art became practical as well as spiritual. Thus, Jesuit institutions have been known over the centuries for teaching people – regardless of their individual faith convictions – to think critically, to inform their consciences, and to cultivate habits of ongoing reflection and self-evaluation.

Loyola’s commitment to carry on the tradition of discernment includes encouraging the practice of regular reflection and self-examination which foster awareness of personal freedom (or lack thereof), a sense of personal responsibility for choices and actions, and a balance between enlightened self-interest and promotion of the common (“greater”) good. The University encourages this habit of reflection and self-examination by introducing its constituents to the Jesuit practice of the examen (a daily self-review) in a variety of venues – e.g., through its Messina courses, and through various projects of the Jesuit-Lay Committee. Loyola likewise encourages critical thinking and reflection by including the study of ethics in its curricula, and by offering seminars and employing pedagogies (such as debate) which foster both the expression and critical refinement of opinions. Loyola seeks in general to foster open expression and careful consideration of a wide range of viewpoints and positions, cultivating in its constituents an awareness that argument or difference of opinion can be accommodated without compromising mutual respect. In service of this core value of discernment, the University continues to recruit qualified Jesuit faculty and administrators who can share their particular expertise in discernment within the Ignatian tradition; but Loyola also offers to all of its constituents a variety of supports, resources, and opportunities – including Ignatian retreats – to enhance their efforts at making freer and more well-informed choices.

Discernment

How do you personally define discernment?



Discernment is a practice that is personally meaningful to me.

Strongly Disagree
or Disagree



What do you find challenging in regard to discernment in your own life?

Neither Agree
nor Disagree



In the previous question, you responded “Neither Agree nor Disagree.” Please briefly describe why you selected that choice.

Agree or
Strongly Agree



Describe a way in which you personally take part in the act of discernment.

Discernment Rubric

	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Responding to the question: “How do you personally define discernment?”	Does not state a definition of discernment or definition provided is not a correct explanation of what is discernment.	<p>Definition provided presents little depth of understanding the topic of discernment. It may include one of the elements listed below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection • Decision-Making • Choices 	<p>Definition provided presents some knowledge about the topic of discernment. Definition may begin to make a personal connection to discernment. Definition includes at least one of the elements listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a Practice • Reflection • Prayer • Self-Evaluation • Well-Informed • Choices • Improvement • Decision-Making • Practical • Spiritual • Giving Attention 	<p>Definition provided presents some knowledge about the topic of discernment. Definition makes a personal connection to discernment. Definition includes at least two of the elements listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a Practice • Reflection • Prayer • Self-Evaluation • Well-Informed • Choices • Improvement • Critical Thinking • Common Good • Decision-Making • Practical • Spiritual • Giving Attention • Relationship with God • A way of life, ongoing 	<p>Definition provided clearly demonstrates a clear knowledge of the topic of discernment and a personal connection to the topic. Definition mentions three or more of the following elements of discernment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a Practice • Reflection • Prayer • Self-Evaluation • Well-Informed • Choices • Improvement • Critical Thinking • Common Good • Decision-Making • Practical • Spiritual • Giving Attention • Relationship with God • A way of life, ongoing

Discernment Definition

	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Responding to the question: “How do you personally define discernment?” (n=321)	215	83	20	2	1

0-1 Scores:

- Choosing a path for the rest of your life
- The ability of how well you do something.
- Deciding between two options
- The ability to judge
- the ability to make choices
- Understanding, determining meaning
- Making rational and informed decisions
- The ability to judge a situation and evaluate it

2-4 Scores:

- I always think of the phrase St. Ignatius said: "motions of the soul." I define discernment as examining whether the choices I make align with the core of who I am and the path I want to be on.
- A "figuring out" process for both little and big decisions and how they will make an impact in who I become in life. Usually involves me praying.
- I define discernment as personal discovery or problem solving that can be achieved through extensive reflection and personal examination.
- Discernment is deciding for yourself which choices fit the best for you in order to improve your way of living and obtain a closer relationship with God in your life.

Discernment: Level of Personal Meaning

Discernment is a practice that is personally meaningful to me.

Strongly Disagree	24	7.45%
Disagree	3	0.93%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	61	18.94%
Agree	165	51.24%
Strongly Agree	68	21.12%

Practice of Discernment: Coding Process

	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Responding to the question: “Given this definition, please describe a way in which you have personally taken part in the act of discernment during your first year of college.”	<p>No response was provided or example provided is not actually the practice of discernment.</p>	<p>Example provided suggests that this may be the practice of discernment, but more information is needed to truly evaluate the response. Minimal details are provided.</p>	<p>Example provided is a rudimentary sample about their practice of discernment; few details are included in this response.</p>	<p>Example provided includes some specific details of how the student utilizes the practice of discernment.</p>	<p>Example provided shows that the student has a clear knowledge of what discernment is and includes strong details regarding their individual practice of discernment.</p>

Example of Discernment Practice

	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Responding to the question: “Describe a way in which you personally take part in the act of discernment.”(n=233)	59	118	38	17	1

0-1 Scores:

- Doing homework instead of using phone
- I judge people
- Judging the amount of studying needed for an exam
- Literally every decision made in life is discernment. If I choose to drink water as opposed to tequila on a particular Friday night, that would be an example of discernment.
- By determining if a decision is beneficial or not
- I discern between good and bad choices
- I think about things before I judge them

2-4 Scores:

- I often think about whether I am where I should be in life, and whether I am headed in the right direction. I pray to God and ask him for wisdom so that I may know which paths He is calling me to take.
- I believe it is important to take a step back and reason with decisions that you need to make or are currently making and reflect on your life to make sure that you are where and who who aspire to be.
- I take part in the act of discernment by reflecting on my decision-making often to ensure that I am staying true to my values and becoming a better person on a day-to-day basis.
- I reflect on important decisions that I have to make and pray to God for guidance

Challenges of Discernment: Coding Process

	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Responding to the question: “What do you find challenging in regard to discernment in your own life?”	No response was provided.	Example provided suggests that the student may not actually know what discernment is. Minimal details are provided.	Example provided describes a challenge but few details are included in this response.	Example provided includes some specific details of what the student finds challenging about the practice of discernment.	Example provided shows that the student has a clear knowledge of what discernment is and includes strong details regarding what they find challenging about discernment.

Challenges of Discernment

	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Responding to the question: “What do you find challenging in regard to discernment in your own life?”(n=29)	0	8	10	5	4

1-4 Scores:

- I do not find myself judging others
- Sometimes it's easy to forget what's most important/ what the right thing to do is.
- The actions of others and how they impact me
- Peer pressure, distance from home, distance from friends and family, etc. make it hard to discern
- A huge part of discernment is finding a balance between how you discern certain morals and values, in comparison to how others discern their morals and values. For example, when coming to college I had a lot to discern, including who I wanted to associate myself with and how I wanted to make the best out of my four years at Loyola University. Some people act differently than I typically would, which I had to discern and judge whether or not it was healthy for my well being.
- I think that my schedule is so busy that I don't really have a lot of down time where I can clear my mind and reflect on myself.
- Peer Pressure around those who choose to make the wrong decision often blurs the lines as to what is the right decision. Do we do what is morally right or do we do what is considered the social norm?
- You have outside social pressures that may cloud your judgement based on what others are doing and thinking.

Discernment: Final Observations in the First Semester

- Broad range of knowledge and application among first-years on this topic
- Opportunities exist to provide continual support in both knowledge of and application of discernment during a student's time at Loyola both in Messina and beyond Messina
 - What currently exists or what potential exists?
- Where do we want/expect first-year students to be at in their understanding of discernment by the end of their first year?

Spring Survey: Discernment Definition Revisited

Students were provided with the description of discernment from the Loyola Mission, Vision, and Values website and then asked the following questions:

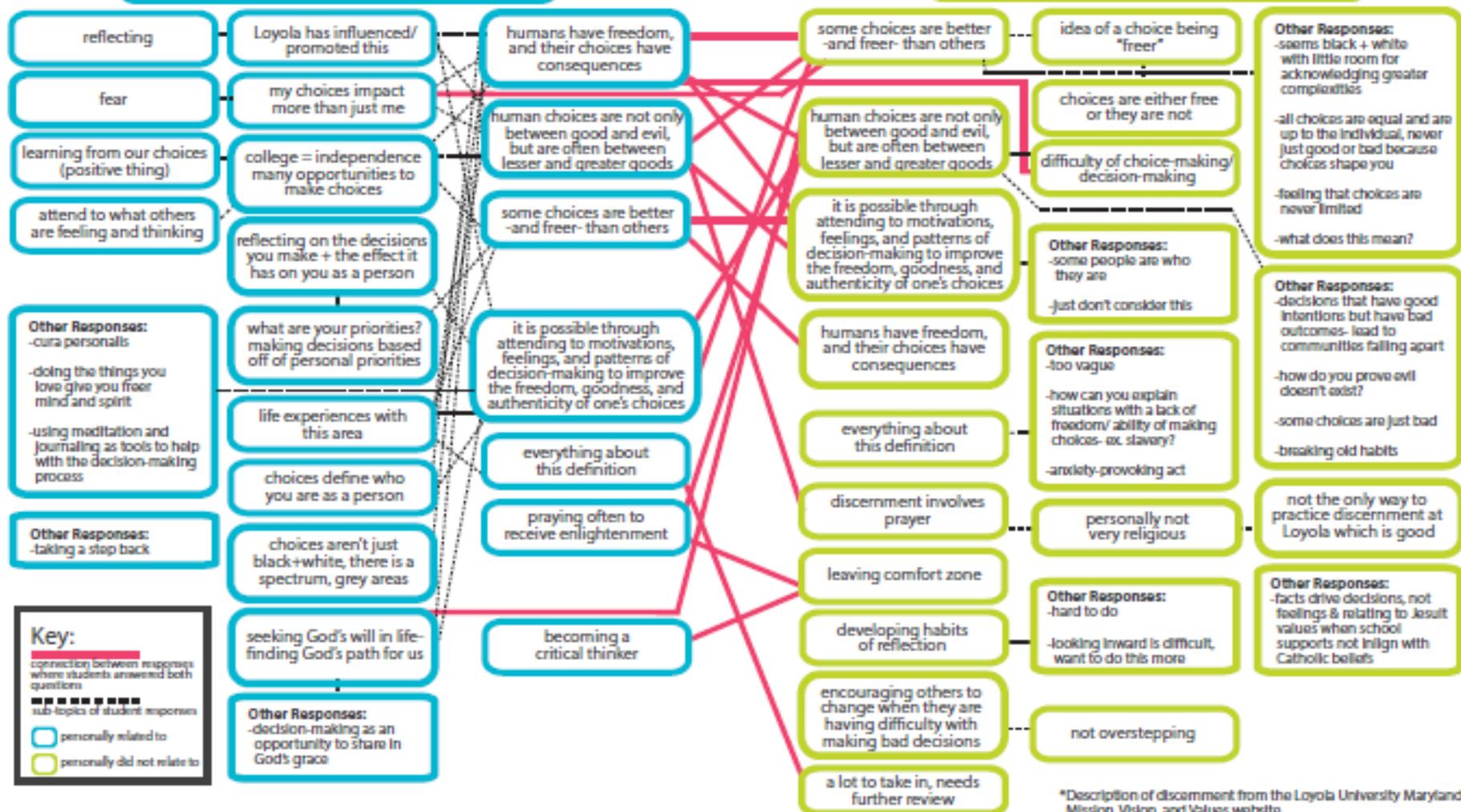
- What elements of this definition of discernment do you find you are able to personally relate to? Why? If none, leave blank.
- What elements of this definition of discernment do you find are difficult to personally relate to? Why? If none, leave blank.

DISCERNMENT

Questions: What elements of this definition of discernment* do you find you are able to personally relate to? Why? If none, leave blank.
 What elements of this definition* do you find are difficult to personally relate to? Why? If none, leave blank.

PERSONALLY RELATABLE ELEMENTS

PERSONALLY NON-RELATABLE ELEMENTS



Discernment Definition

Element Number	Element	Relatable	Non-Relatable
1	“humans have freedom, and their choices have consequences”	39 responses	4 responses
2	“some choices are better – and freer – than others”	14 responses	13 responses
3	“human choices are not only between good and evil, but are often between lesser goods and greater goods”	18 responses	10 responses
4	“it is possible through attending to motivations, feelings, and patterns of decision-making to improve the freedom, goodness, and authenticity of one’s choices”	12 responses	6 responses

At the heart of Ignatian spirituality is the practice of discernment – an art which St. Ignatius learned through sustained careful attention to and reflection on his own experience. Discernment is based on several presuppositions, including:

- 1) humans have freedom, and their choices have consequences;
- 2) some choices are better – and freer – than others;
- 3) human choices are not only between good and evil, but are often between lesser goods and greater goods;
- 4) it is possible through attending to motivations, feelings, and patterns of decision-making to improve the freedom, goodness, and authenticity of one’s choices.

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Practice of Discernment: Coding Process

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Example of Discernment Practice

Describe a way in which you personally take part in the act of discernment.	N/A (0)	Beginning (1)	(2)	(3)	Advanced (4)
Spring 2016 (n=140)	22 15.71%	65 46.29%	39 27.86%	14 10.00%	0 0.00%
Fall 2015 (n=233)	59 25.32%	118 50.64%	38 16.31%	17 7.30%	1 0.00%

1 Scores:

- In college there is so much more freedom and some choices are more effective others are not as much. The less effective choices could have consequences that would negatively affect my class participation [sp] and grades.
- Since we are away from home, we have more freedom in making decisions for ourselves, and need to accept the consequences.
- I think I really learned a lot about choices and consequences and how to make the best choices for myself to better the outcome of my future.

2-3 Scores:

- (2) Going on the Kairos retreat allowed for me to religiously discern for my first time. I have religiously discerned on a far lesser extent before. This was an extremely life changing experience for me.
- (2) In Messina, we reflected on our motivations and our strengths, accenting the patterns of decision [sp] making we use.
- (3) I believe I have taken a part in the act of discernment in this past year through my own reflection of what I really wanted out of college. I reflected on my ambitions, my feelings, and what I had been doing when I didn't feel as if Loyola was the right place for me. Thankfully, I overcame that feeling after realizing what it was I wanted and where I could find it. It helped me make the decision to stay.
- (3) Personally I had a run in with Student Life that totally changed me because now I think long and hard before I act. I take time to reflect on past events and decisions to help mold the ones I have to make. Before I would just live in the moment, but now I know that I cannot afford to live so recklessly.

Reflection: Frequency

On average, how frequently did you make time for reflection over the course of your first year of college?

Never	Less than once a month	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
28	52	67	51	20
12.84%	23.85%	30.73%	23.39%	9.17%

How Students Experienced Reflection

Question: Please describe how you have personally taken part in the act of reflection during your first year of college.

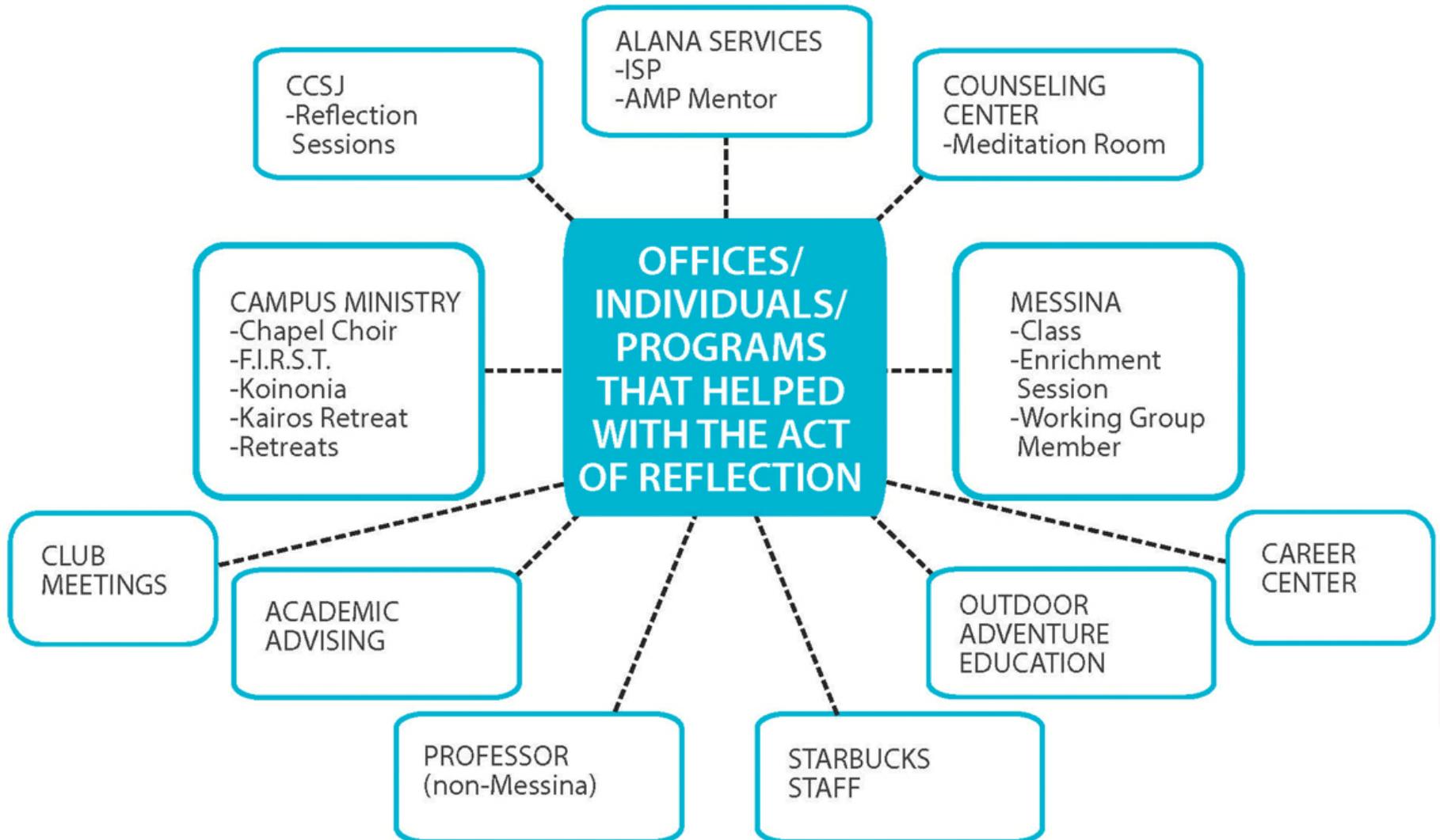
If you experienced barriers to being able to reflect, or if there were offices/ individuals/ programs that helped you practice reflection please also list these here.

- Barriers to practicing the act reflection
- Offices/ individuals/ programs that helped with the act of reflection
- Topics considered by students while reflecting
- Insights on the act of practicing reflection

Barriers to Reflection

- Focus on other things including difficulty of schoolwork and being too busy
- Lack of self-care including fatigue, anxiety/depression with the latter developed both as reflection being a mechanism to inducing these feelings and as a barrier to approaching reflection
- Reconciling personal values/ Catholic values/ university values
- When forced to do this for a grade reflection felt less genuine
- Distinguishing between complaining and reflection

Offices/Individuals/Programs Supportive of Reflection



Topics Considered While Reflecting

- Contemplating the World (3)
- Who I am (12)
- Thinking about the semester/ year (12)
- My day/ week (26)



Insights on the Act of Reflection Among First-Year Students

ACT OF PRACTICING REFLECTION

HOW:

- alone - with help of friends/family - journaling/writing -
- in prayer - meditation - mentally reflect - in silence -
- group reflection activity - short breathing exercises -

WHERE:

- at church/Mass - going to bed - running/walking -
- sitting in room - on the Quad - at yoga -

WHEN:

- end of the day - when free time is available -
- morning -

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

- taking a step back - thinking after each class -
- developing a plan for improvement -

Discernment & Reflection: Final Observations

- More work can be done to help students see that discernment is more than just making choices
- Being more explicit with students on what discernment is or naming it when is happening
- Finding ways to demonstrate the importance of finding time to reflect is of use to students- with strong consideration given to how to have students convey this concept to their peers
- Further exploration of how first year students experience and understand other Loyola core values

Using Our Data to Inform Our Practice

- Office Conversations
- Welcome Week Values Reflection Activity
- Faculty/Mentor Training

Using Our Data: Office Conversations

- In what ways does ____ already promote the practice of discernment with the students you work with?
- When you address discernment, do you name it?
- Are there existing tools you are using that might be measuring student discernment in some way?
- Are there any positive changes you have seen among first-years utilizing ____ in the past 3 years
—or—
are there any negative changes you have seen among first-years utilizing ____ in the past 3 years that Messina could try to address?

Using Our Data: Values Activity

- One word you would use to describe yourself is:_____
- Where and/or in what do you find joy?
- What are some things that you are good at doing?
What do you like to do?
- What is one thing you value? How did you come to value this?
- Up to this point in your education, what has been your favorite academic subject? Why has this been a favorite area of yours?
- What are two personal goals you have for yourself this year?

Using Our Data: Faculty/ Mentor Training

- Spring 2016 incorporated training for our Mentors on Appreciative Advising
 - Stages of *Discover*, *Dream*, and *Design* present opportunities for encouraging discernment and reflection with our students
- Messina Modules and value-based connections
- Presenting the data to our working groups

Knowledge Sharing: Tools and Strategies

- What tools/strategies do you or your institution use to examine student discernment/reflection?
- What are ways you may provide those moments for values reflection and meaning-making with students?