

Exploring Student Understanding and Practice of Discernment and Reflection

Mary Ellen Wade, Associate Director of Messina

Loyola University Maryland

www.loyola.edu/messina

mewade@loyola.edu

Session Abstract

As first-year students make the transition to college, taking time for formal and informal methods of self-reflection is important. Looking inward to examine personal areas of joy, passions, and interests can provide clarity as students begin to explore future personal and professional goals. This session will look at the results of a qualitative assessment conducted of first-year students at Loyola University Maryland regarding their understanding and practice of the acts of discernment and reflection. Attendees will also learn how these findings relate to stages with in the practice of Appreciative Advising and briefly learn how this data has informed our work.

Research Findings

In 2015-2016 Messina examined student understanding and practice of discernment and reflection as a part of its cyclical assessment of program learning outcomes. Discernment is a practice infused at Jesuit institutions as a tool of “reflective awareness” (Manney 2015). Utilizing qualitative surveys, Messina was able to gain meaningful insight about first-year student understanding/ practice of these areas.

In fall, students were asked to define discernment, and responses were coded with a score between 0 to 4. Students receiving a (0) had no definition or an incorrect definition. Students receiving a (1) had a beginning knowledge of discernment, while students receiving a (4) had an advanced grasp of the topic. With an n=321, (0): 215, (1): 83, (2): 20, (3): 2, (4): 1. Student definitions were rudimentary- a variation of “the ability to judge” was a frequent response. Despite receiving a score of (0) for their definition, 24 scored a (1) or a (2) for their example of how they personally practice discernment. A little over 8% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that discernment is a personally meaningful practice. Within those responses, students were able to indicate tangible, measurable reasons.

In spring, students were provided with the university definition of discernment and asked to indicate personally relatable and non-relatable areas. Students described a strong connection between definition elements and college- particularly the freedom of choice. Students resonated with taking a step back to examine personal priorities/passions. In regard to reflection, students described barriers to, university resources supporting, topics considered, and insights about practicing reflection.

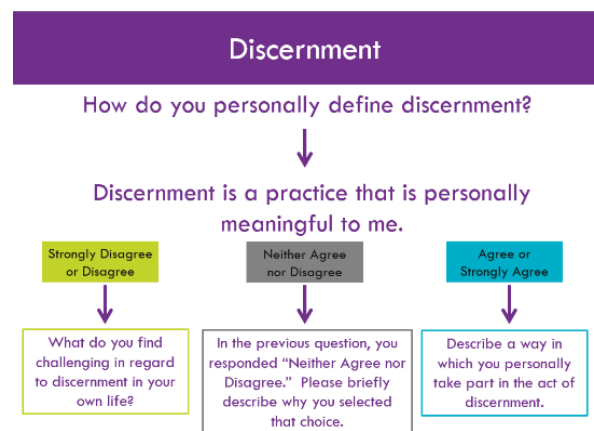


Figure 1: Questions about discernment on the Fall 2015 Messina Student Survey

Key takeaways from both surveys included a broad range of knowledge and application among first-years on these topics; opportunities exist to provide continual support in knowledge/application of discernment; and noting that our students value reflection when they have made time for it- so finding ways to demonstrate the importance of personal reflection is essential.

Discernment and reflection practices are universal applications for students in college and lifelong pursuits at both secular and religious institutions. Fostering habits of discernment and reflection directly support the stages of Discover, Dream, and Design for those utilizing Appreciative Advising among students. (Bloom, Hutson, He 2008) and components of discernment tie in closely to work by Marcia B. Baxter Magolda on Self-Authorship. (2009) Further information including the complete data mapping of student responses can be found on our program assessment page at:

<http://www.loyola.edu/departments/messina/about/program-assessment>

Implications of Research

Developing an understanding of how our first-year students interpret and practice discernment and reflection was important not just for our program to assess an area of our learning outcomes but also knowing that these topics can create opportunities for approaching advising conversations, career development, student leadership opportunities, and other areas both within and outside the classroom.

Following the knowledge gained from our 2015-2016 first-year student survey responses, this data was used to inform our practice for the current academic year. This included the incorporation of an introductory reflection activity for all first-years facilitated by administrators during fall orientation to provide insights about their new students. This activity had students contemplate questions about where they find joy, what they enjoy doing, what they value, and goals for the year.

A copy of this activity is attached to this paper. Responses were compiled and returned back to the student's faculty members, peer leader, and student development administrator for their Messina class to provide insight to these leaders about who their students are from day one. Additionally, there is an intention that these questions will be revisited at the end of the first year with each student in the context of their Messina course.

This research is an area we will be re-exploring with students in their senior year at Loyola to get a sense of how their definition of discernment has grown and to gain a better understanding of what experiences shaped this area in the pursuit of fostering a mission-driven experience.

References

- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2009). *Authoring your life: developing an internal voice to navigate life's challenges*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Pub.
- Bloom, J. L., Hutson, B. L., & He, Y. (2008). *The appreciative advising revolution*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Pub.
- Manney, J. (2015). *What do you really want?: St. Ignatius Loyola and the art of discernment*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor.
- Mission, Vision, and Values. (n.d.). Retrieved December 14, 2015, from <http://www.loyola.edu/about/mission-vision-values>

Loyola University Maryland: An Experience Grounded in Core Values

As a Jesuit institution, your experience at Loyola will be grounded in these ten core Ignatian values:

- ❖ Academic Excellence
- ❖ Integrity and Honesty
- ❖ Community
- ❖ Service
- ❖ Discernment
- ❖ Focus on the Whole Person
- ❖ Diversity
- ❖ Justice
- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Constant Challenge to Improve

While you may be unfamiliar with these ten areas, over the course of your next four years at Loyola you will have opportunities both within and outside the classroom to learn about, experience, and live these values. As you begin to embark on this new experience, taking a moment to look inward and reflect about your talents, the things that bring you joy, and what you personally value is an important first step.

Messina: Outcomes for this Experience

Your experience in Messina is designed to instill the intellectual curiosity and self-knowledge necessary for a successful start to your Loyola education. As a result of participation in Messina, you will show progress to a deeper and fuller understanding of the interconnections unique and essential to a Jesuit Education in a contemporary world. Below are the specific Learning Outcomes of Messina that you can expect to experience and engage with during your seminar class and enrichment sessions over the course of this year. Successful attainment of the following outcomes is not only the aim of the Messina but it is the shared responsibility of all – faculty, administrators, peer leaders, and students.

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.

On the opposite side of this page we would ask you to take a few minutes to think about and respond to the following questions. This paper will be collected back at the end of this session to provide your Messina faculty, mentor, and Evergreen an opportunity to better understand who you are early on in the semester. You may find that as a class or as an individual you will be asked to reflect on these areas at future points during the year. As you begin, please legibly print your responses- thanks!

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Full Name:

Preferred Name:

Messina Class (your mentor or
Evergreen will give you this info):

Messina Theme (your mentor or
Evergreen will give you this info):

What pronouns do you use?
(ex. she, her, hers)

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?
