
Original Research

Solidarity, Reflection, and Imagination: Exploring Student Formation and Community Engagement from a Faith-Based Anchor Institution Perspective

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Abstract

The Catholic, Jesuit inspired mission of Saint Louis University (SLU) – “the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity” – firmly places serving humanity in line with the institution’s goal for academic excellence. Importantly, service in the tradition of Catholic, Jesuit education is embedded in a broader vocational goal of forming people to build a just and equitable society. It remains to be seen in what manner and to what degree SLU students reflect the qualities such experiences are intended to aid and develop. What follows is an attempt to identify contemporary expressions of Ignatian education, a well-educated solidarity, depth of thought, and depth of imagination, within the students who took part in community engagement activities supported by SLU’s Center for Service and Community Engagement. The present study drew upon assessment data from three distinct undergraduate experiences. Each of the three attributes were evident, either directly or in a latent form appropriate to the nature of the activity and the level of the student participants. While it is not possible to quantify a direct measure, the results indicate that the programs are generally succeeding in promoting an Ignatian inspired formation for its students.

Keywords: community-based learning, Jesuit higher education, faith-based institutions, vocation, place-based community engagement

Saint Louis University (SLU) is one of 27 institutions that make up the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) in the United States and part of the network of approximately 189 Jesuit institutions of higher education around the world. Jesuit higher education is guided by a spirituality that seeks justice. Inspired by the tenets of Catholic social teaching and its intellectual and social justice traditions, a Jesuit education places great emphasis on forming people for others. Students are “exploring the distinctive and constructive ways in which their knowledge and talents will best serve society” (Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, n.d.). As such, the Catholic, Jesuit inspired mission of Saint Louis University, “the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity,” firmly places serving humanity in line with the institution’s goal for academic excellence.

Importantly, service in the tradition of Catholic, Jesuit education is embedded in a broader vocational goal of forming people to build a just and equitable society. Additionally, a common feature amongst many of the United States based colleges and universities is that they are situated in urban environments. The main campus of SLU is located in midtown Saint Louis at a nexus of the city’s cultural and social life. This reality both challenges and invites SLU to live its mission in real time as both neighbor and resource for the immediate community. This opportunity for a place-based approach to education and engagement is consistent with an anchor institution mission. According to Sladek (2017), “The stronger and more broadly held anchor mission goals become within institutions, the more opportunities will be identified to help reduce disparities in home communities, and build meaningful partnerships with outside groups to advance those goals” (p. 25). While this focus has been central to the Society of Jesus since the beginning of the Order (Bergman, 2011), the Jesuits revisited their mission in 1975 and unequivocally stated, “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement” (“GC 32”, 2009). Interestingly, this declaration was preceded some two years by remarks of the Superior General of the worldwide religious order, Father Pedro Arrupe, S. J., on the nature of the Jesuit educational enterprise. In 1973, he argued that seeking justice must be the cornerstone of Jesuit schooling and in the process coined a phrase that has served as one of the principle standards for Ignatian identity in Jesuit education ever since. “Today our prime educational objective,” he stated, “must be to form men-and-women-for-others; men and women who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ” (Arrupe, 2004, p. 173). To stress this point, he continued, “men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce” (p. 173).

Arrupe’s successor, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. further articulated this emphasis on the relationship between faith and justice. Throughout his years as Superior General, he continued to develop a contemporary understanding of this commitment to education in the Ignatian tradition.

In 2000, speaking to the American Jesuit Colleges and Universities, Kolvenbach asked his audience to consider the qualities of a graduate of a Jesuit university (2008). He reflected, “The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become” (p. 155). He suggested the notion of a “well-educated solidarity” (p. 155) as a way to encapsulate the Ignatian character of educating the whole person. Such a graduate would possess an “educated awareness of society and culture with which to contribute socially, generously, in the real world” (p. 155). In order to do so, he made an assertion that, like men-and-women-for-others, has become an icon of education in the Ignatian tradition:

Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed. (Kolvenbach, 2008, p. 155)

Building upon the work of his predecessors, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J. continued to develop a contemporary understanding and application of Ignatian formation in higher education (Nicolás 2009, 2010). Once again, considering the current cultural climate, Nicolás spoke of a “globalization of superficiality” (2009, p. 2) as he noted some of the negative attributes of the information age. Evermore “connected,” equipped with continuous, instant access to nearly unlimited sources of data, our students are at increasing risk of superficial relationships as well as underdeveloped comprehension and shallow insight. “Shallow, self-absorbed perceptions of reality make it almost impossible to feel compassion for the suffering of others; and a contentment with the satisfaction of immediate desires or the laziness to engage competing claims on one’s deepest loyalty results in the inability to commit one’s life to what is truly worthwhile” (p. 3). He reflected that Jesuit higher education is challenged to “promote in creative new ways the depth of thought and imagination that are distinguishing marks of Ignatian tradition” (p. 3). As with the others, he explained that such an education, “encompasses and integrates intellectual rigor with reflection on the experience of reality together with the creative imagination to work toward constructing a more humane, just, sustainable, and faith-filled world” (p. 5). The Jesuits clearly articulate that to really be people for and with others, indeed, to be educated within the Ignatian tradition, community engagement is a constitutive element. Students’ community engagement efforts do not simply begin when their schoolwork is done. This approach to education is not only consistent, but meant to be in dialogue, with the scholarship of the broader academic community. “The Jesuit tradition,” Nicolás stated, “has always combined a healthy appreciation for human reason, thought, and culture, on the one hand, and a profound commitment to faith, the Gospel, the Church, on the other” (Nicolás 2010, p. 10). According to Mitchell (2008), critical service-learning encourages students to “see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (p. 51). Thus, scholarship such as critical service-learning (e.g., Mitchell, 2008;

Stoeker, 2016), which seeks social justice and embraces a more political nature of community engagement informs and extends the Jesuit position. Similarly, the charge to connect learning with Nicolás' experience of reality roots Jesuit education in the community and supports the anchor mission, "to accept responsibility for the collective well-being" (Gomez, et al., 2019, p. 92). University resources along with faculty, staff, and students working with community partners, can fuel positive growth and development in local communities.

There is a danger that community engagement, if not grounded in proper relationships with community members, risks bolstering hierarchical power structures (i.e., "power over" others, Kreisberg, 1992) and relational asymmetries (e.g., more skilled or competent, more financially stable, more social capital versus less...). However well intended, this can inadvertently drive a deeper wedge between self and other, the "server" and the "served," and create an "us-versus-them" mentality (Sokol, Hammond, Kuebli, & Sweetman, 2015). Ultimately, such encounters do not represent what Nicolás referred to as a "profound engagement with the real," (2009, p. 4) nor do they lead to Kolvenbach's well-educated solidarity.

Within this context of the evolving identity of education in the Ignatian tradition, SLU endeavors to create learning environments that equip students to discern and develop their sense of calling and leadership in light of their faith commitments and their academic and professional pursuits. Service at SLU is inextricably linked with educating men and women about the importance of building God's kingdom by seeking greater justice in the world (Sokol, Sweetman, Wassel, Franco, Huffman, 2020). Service is not an arbitrary addition to academics, Jesuit schooling and the university experience. As Kolvenbach (2008) explained, "when faculty do take up interdisciplinary dialogue with socially-engaged research in partnership with social ministries, they are exemplifying and modeling knowledge which is service" (p. 158). The calling to serve is embedded in the essential work of the University, in teaching students to discover their vocation and a deeper sense of purpose, as well as the anchor mission of urban, Jesuit institutions. This is evident in the development of a new undergraduate core curriculum that will go into effect in the fall of 2022 (Saint Louis University, 2020b). The Center for Service and Community Engagement (CSCE) staff and other community-engaged scholars on campus helped to ensure that the Core would exhibit qualities of Ignatian tradition. This is especially clear in the *Cura Personalis* sequence and the Reflection-in-Action attribute. *Cura Personalis*, a Latin phrase for "care of the whole person," is the name of a three-requirement sequence in the new Core focused on students' holistic development. The sequence asks students to "explore fundamental questions of identity, history, and place," and reflect on how being situated in their particular communities, such as urban, midtown St. Louis, impacts and becomes part of who they are (Saint Louis University, 2020b, p. 6). Students will be guided in structured processes of vocational reflection and discernment to foster justice in their personal and professional lives and then to turn their focus outward to their communities to address "how their skills, competencies, and knowledge transfer to professional, personal, and/or civic vocation(s)" (p. 7). The Core's Reflection-in-

Action component is an experiential component via which students engage in meaningful learning opportunities beyond the walls of the University and reflect on how their community engagement enhances their understanding of acting, in the Jesuit tradition, “with-and-for-others” (p.11).

SLU’s annual Survey on Student Service consistently shows that nearly 80% of enrolled students engage in volunteerism during their time at SLU, as compared to the national average of 26% for college students (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2015). As an institution, SLU has received many community engagement accolades, including several Presidential Honor Roll recognitions by the Corporation for National and Community Service, a 2015 Community Engagement Classification by the Carnegie Foundation, and a Number 1 ranking for community service by the *Princeton Review* (Franek, Soto, Koch, & Aliperti, 2018).

Yet, with all of these efforts and intentions, it remains to be seen in what manner and to what degree SLU students reflect the qualities such experiences are intended to aid and develop. What follows is an attempt to identify the qualities of Ignatian education that are envisioned by the Society of Jesus within the students who took part in community engagement activities in the urban context of St. Louis supported by SLU’s Center for Service and Community Engagement.

Method

The CSCE engages in ongoing, programmatic assessment of all of its work. The present study draws together assessment data from three distinct undergraduate experiences, developed and supported by the CSCE: the New Student Day of Service, the Vocational Inquiry Through Advocacy and Service Program (VITAS), and Claver House. These data do not represent a unified longitudinal study, as the individual students vary from program to program. Nonetheless, the conclusions we draw form a uniform narrative of the impact of community service and its value in promoting students' vocational choices. Such a programmatic analysis is helpful for understanding how CSCE-supported activities contribute to Ignatian formation and vocation development and what might be done to enhance or improve outcomes at the program, center, and university levels.

Drawing upon the remarks of Frs. Kolvenbach and Nicolás, three primary questions guided the study:

1. How did students exhibit qualities indicative of formation consistent with a “well educated solidarity?”
2. How did student reflections reveal qualities that suggest a depth of thought?
3. How did student reflections and actions reveal a depth of imagination?

Data collected from the three programs varied in nature. The New Student Day of Service program provided 621 student responses to a survey designed to assess questions of purpose and openness to diversity. VITAS supplied data from a pre/post-test style survey of 106 students. Claver House furnished four project posters authored by seven students as well as observations from faculty and staff advisors. The results of each of the data sources were then analyzed for evidence or attributes of the research questions (Patton, 1997).

Historical Context of CSCE

In the fall of 2000, the Lilly Endowment invited SLU to submit a proposal for their Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. This invitation gave rise to SLU's VOICES Project and a model for students, faculty, and staff to integrate their scholarly and professional pursuits with an explicit focus on personal purpose and meaning-making. Faculty developed new reflection modules and service-learning courses, student leaders participated in retreats, and dozens of speakers talked about "wisdom in the professions" and living lives committed to service and justice.

In 2009, SLU launched the Center for Service and Community Engagement, intended to carry forward the mantle of the VOICES Project by bringing together students, faculty, staff, and community partners through service, community-based learning, and research. VOICES strengthened partnerships with key institutions in the city, including Saint Louis Public Schools and the Archdiocese of Saint Louis. The CSCE has continued these partnerships and formed new ones. The CSCE scaffolds programs to encourage personal and social responsibility by transforming student volunteers into effective servant leaders and advocates of social justice. The CSCE's goals are threefold: (1) Serve by connecting students, faculty, staff, and alumni to volunteer opportunities in the community, both locally and globally; (2) Learn by promoting community-based scholarship through campus-wide service-learning efforts and university-community research partnerships; and (3) Engage by encouraging personal and social responsibility in SLU volunteers and challenging them to become effective servant leaders and advocates of social justice.

The New Student Day of Service

To recognize SLU's long-standing commitment to the community and to better introduce new, incoming undergraduates to the university's culture of service, a "New Student Day of Service" program was launched as part of fall welcome activities during SLU's bicentennial year of 2018. In the short time since its inception, the CSCE has used the opportunity of this new service tradition to reinforce messaging about the mission-centered significance of using one's education to promote the common good.

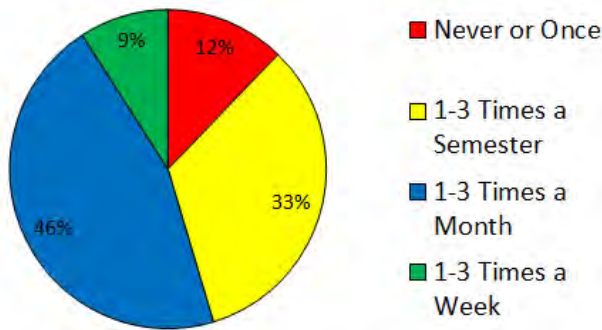
Method

In 2019, the 1,800 new students who were participating in the service day's activities were asked to complete an assessment of their experience and attitudes and thoughts about being challenged by the world's complex social issues and diversity. About one-third of the students ($n=621$) finished the questionnaire that was emailed to them the day after the New Student Day of Service experience. 70% of the respondents were women and identified as white; almost all were traditional first-year, residential students. The undergraduate population at Saint Louis University is 66% white and 60% female (Saint Louis University, 2020a). Based on past assessments administered by the CSCE, the demographics of the survey respondents are not unusual.

The principal metrics used in the questionnaire were Ernest Pascarella and colleagues' *Openness to Diversity and Challenge Scale* (1996; Whitt et al., 2001) and Kendall Cotton Bronk and colleagues' *Claremont Purpose Scale* (Bronk, Riches, & Mangan, 2018). The first scale is an 8-item measure that gauges college students' attitudes toward challenging ideas and new people on a standard 5-point Likert scale. For the most part, the items assess students' openness to connecting with others, especially those who are different from them (e.g., "I enjoy having discussions with people whose ideas and values are different from my own"). Higher scores indicate a sense of connectedness to others and an attitude of being "at home" among differences, a "one world" mindset, so to speak. The second scale is a 12-item measure, again on a 5-point Likert scale, designed for use with later adolescents and emerging adults, and assesses three inter-related dimensions of both short- and long-term purpose: 1) goal-directedness (e.g., "How hard are you working to make your long-term aims a reality?"); 2) personal meaningfulness (e.g., "How well do you understand what gives your life meaning?"); and 3) a beyond-the-self orientation (e.g., "How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?"). Higher scores, as Bronk et al. have said, suggest a "long-term, forward-looking intention to accomplish aims that are meaningful to the self and of consequence to the broader world" (Bronk et al., 2018, p. 2). Pascarella's measure is frequently used in higher education settings and was developed by student affairs professionals. Bronk's scale was also developed for use with adolescents and emerging adults and, given the questions emphasis on community and service, was a reasonable fit for the nature of the service day program.

The student participants were also asked to report on their community service experiences that they completed during the 2018-2019 academic year before entering SLU. They rated the frequency of their service (see Figure 1) as either none or just one experience ($n=74$), 1-3 experiences per semester ($n=200$), 1-3 experiences per month ($n=275$), or 1-3 experiences per week ($n=55$). We explored students' responses with one main question in mind: Does amount of service make a difference? That is, does amount of community service impact incoming college students' sense of purpose and openness to being challenged in diverse contexts?

Figure 1. Community Service Experiences for Incoming SLU Students ($n=621$)



Data analysis

First, the researchers analyzed the impact of students' frequency of service on their attitudes of *Openness to Diversity and Challenge* and found a significant effect. Because of the positive, moderate correlation between the two primary dependent variables, the researchers conducted individual One-Way ANOVA's, instead of MANOVAs which are best conducted when dependent variables are highly negatively correlated or when they are strongly correlated, around or higher than 0.60. In order to control for the increase in Type I error rate with multiple ANOVAs, Bonferroni correction was employed.

In Post-Hoc, follow-up T-tests, the difference between engaging never or once in service and more frequent, consistent service (of 1-3 times per month or week) on students *Openness* was significant (see Figure 2). That is, more consistent, frequent service experiences were associated with higher self-reported levels of openness and connectedness to others different from oneself.

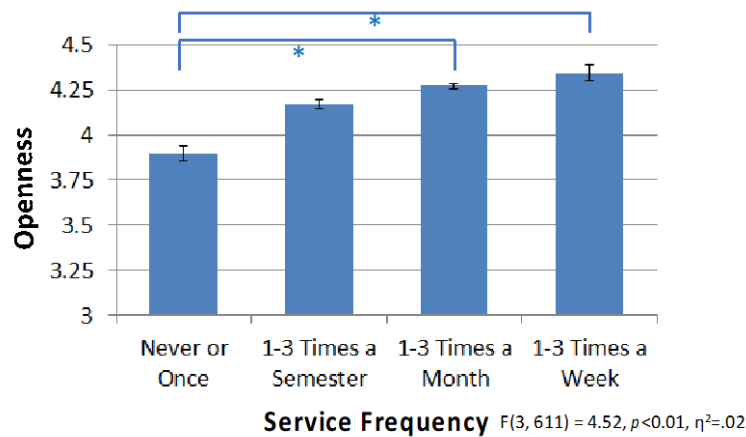


Figure 2. Relationship between Amount of Service and Attitudes of Openness to Challenge

Second, the researchers analyzed the impact of service frequency on students' self-reported *Purpose in Life* scores. Similar to *Openness*, the researchers found an overall significant difference in service frequency on students' *Purpose* (see Figure 3). In Post-Hoc, follow-up T-tests, a similar pattern emerged for the impact of service frequency on *Openness*, in that more consistent, frequent service was associated with higher levels of *Purpose*.

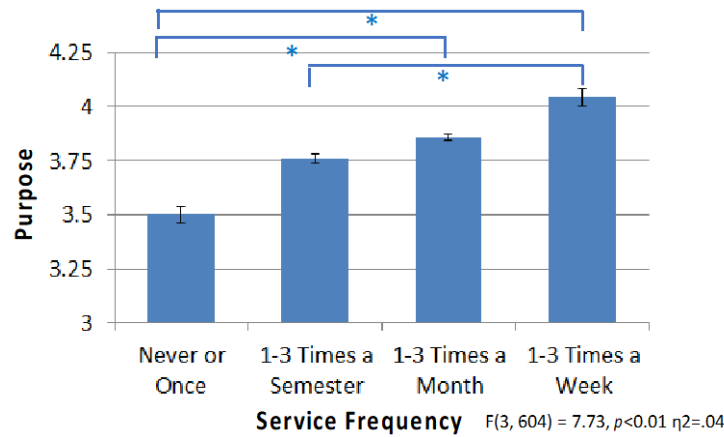


Figure 3. Relationship between Amount of Service and Sense of Purpose

Finally, the researchers also found students' scores on the *Purpose* and *Openness* scales were positively, significantly correlated, as shown in the following correlation matrix (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between *Purpose* and *Openness to Challenge* scales

	Openness	Purpose in Life	Goal Directness	Personal Meaningfulness	Beyond-the-Self Orientation
Openness	1.00				
Purpose in Life	0.38**	1.00			
Goal Directness	0.31**	0.82**	1.00		
Personal Meaningfulness	0.17**	0.83**	0.53**	1.00	
Beyond-the-Self Orientation	0.47**	0.67**	0.42**	0.28**	1.00

n=621; *p<0.05; **p<0.01

Overall, then, we surmised that more frequent, consistent service experiences positively impacted college students' sense of purpose and openness to challenge and diversity. Community engagement experiences become opportunities for intersection and connection with others who support students' meaning-making, personal growth, and spiritual formation, while at

the same time contributing to a greater collective sense of social responsibility and purpose (Laboe & Nass, 2012; Sokol, Donnelly, Vilbig, & Monsky, 2017). Creating experiences like the New Student Day of Service provide worthwhile and challenging opportunities for students to enrich their sense of purpose, and they provide an important touchstone for vocational discernment. Other SLU-supported service activities promote similar opportunities for growth, while at the same time, enhance important urban university-community partnerships.

The VITAS Program

Through mentoring and reflection, the Vocational Inquiry Through Advocacy and Service (VITAS) Program provides students who are engaging in community service and social justice advocacy a chance to explore how that work will influence their lives after graduation. The program was launched during the 2016-17 academic year with seed funding from the Lilly Endowment and NetVUE (Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education). VITAS serves as both a professional development opportunity for faculty and staff mentors, as well as a personal development opportunity for students.

Participants

In the fall semester, faculty and staff who were selected as mentors engaged in a series of sessions to prepare them to work with students on the topic of vocational discernment. This included reading and discussing two primary source materials: *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation (2015)* by Tim Clydesdale and *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life (2017)* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans. Mentors represented diverse areas of campus. In the spring semester, students who were accepted into the program were divided into small groups of four to six. Each group met periodically throughout the semester with their assigned mentor. These small-group sessions consisted of activities designed to provide students a chance to reflect on and discuss the concept of vocation, and to explore their purpose and calling in life. At the conclusion of the program, each student wrote an essay on their experience.

Method

Participants in the first cohort ($n=63$) were administered a pre-test survey to measure, among other items, how often they talk to peers and SLU advisors about vocation, how often they seek out resources about vocation, and how much time they spend reflecting on their potential vocation(s). The same participants were then administered a post-test survey measuring the same items, as well as levels of agreement on how beneficial the program was, how effectively they were able to connect their community service and/or social action activities to vocational discernment, and levels of anxiety about their future. Both surveys utilized a 5-point Likert scale model to gauge frequency of or level of agreement with the above behaviors.

Participants in the second cohort ($n=43$) completed a written reflection at the conclusion of the experience, which addressed 4 questions:

1. What does vocation mean to you?
2. How did VITAS affect your vocational discernment process?
3. What did you learn about yourself through VITAS?
4. As of right now, what do you see as your vocation(s) after graduation?

Faculty and staff mentors then read the reflections essays, with key themes emerging through codification as well as through direct observations made by the same mentors while leading the small group reflection sessions.

Data analysis

During the first cohort, 63 student participants were administered a pre and post-survey. Results included: (1) 91% of students said the VITAS program was beneficial for their vocational discernment; (2) 78% reported feeling less anxiety about their future as a result of the small-group sessions; (3) 88% were able to effectively connect their community service and/or social action activities to their vocational discernment; and (4) In the post-test, students reported a significant increase in how often they talk to peers and SLU advisors about vocation, how often they seek out resources about vocation, and how much time they spend reflection on their vocation, compared with pre-test scores.

During the second cohort, 43 students submitted a reflection essay at the end of the experience. Key themes from the essays (by question) included:

1. What Does Vocation Mean to You?
 - a. Students were asked this question before the program started as part of the application process, as well as on their final reflection essay.
 - b. Pre-program definitions were largely split into either a focus on Career or Calling.
 - c. Post-program definitions reflected a stronger vocational understanding of career and calling not being mutually exclusive, but cohesive. See Figure 4.

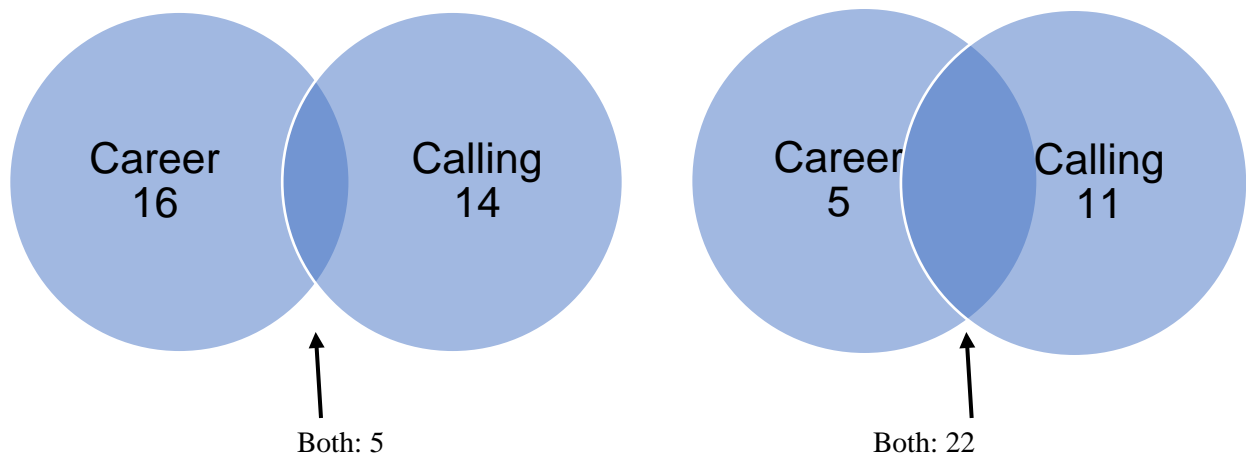


Figure 4. Students' understanding of vocation, pre and post VITAS Program.

This was illustrated in a student's reflection:

Before completing the VITAS program, I believed the meanings of vocation and occupation to be the same. I now realize that vocation means so much more than the career path or job that I have. I now view my vocation as the intersection between my passions/interests, the ways in which I can tangibly make a difference and where the world needs me the most.

2. How Did VITAS Affect Your Vocational Discernment Process?

- a. The program provided a rare opportunity to reflect on how current activities and experiences may be shaping vocation.
- b. VITAS eased anxieties associated with the future. Students were able to come to peace with their academic majors and career decisions. They benefited from improved self-confidence.
- c. It was a chance to connect with other students who share same anxieties and concerns, listen to their stories and go from feeling a sense of competition to vulnerability.
- d. Vocation is not a finality; it is ever evolving. Students recognized that it was okay not to know exactly what they want to do after graduation, and they understand it may change on a regular basis

One student shared:

What VITAS clarified for me was not the surface level, what-job-am-I-going-to-have aspect of vocation – this has actually become a little less certain. Rather, what became

clearer were the underlying realities, the inner movements of the heart and the patterns of thought accompanying my prayer and action as I discern.

3. What Did You Learn About Yourself Through VITAS?
 - a. Practicality vs. Imagination: It is okay to make decisions with your heart too, not just your head.
 - b. Students discovered their true passions and strengths. They understood what was energy-giving, and they rediscovered their childhood interests.
 - c. They learned a different definition of success: It isn't just about money or job prestige, but how you engage with the community around you. Careers are not the only thing that will define who they are (i.e., the concept of multiple vocations).

From a student:

I learned that it is okay to be vulnerable, and it isn't a sign of weakness. It's okay to not have my entire life planned out. Through VITAS, I feel that I have rediscovered some of the things in life that make me happy and give me joy, and how I can incorporate those into my everyday life, as well as into potential careers.

4. As of Right Now, What Do You See as Your Vocation(s) After Graduation?
 - a. A majority reported a reaffirmation of future plans/career/life goals.
 - b. Four students reported an intent to change a major or career path.
 - c. Thirteen students intended to engage in a year of service post-graduation.

A student reflected on their interest in pursuing a new experience:

Through our intentional discussions as a group and with guidance from my mentor, I have felt more and more confident in my decision to not take the GRE at this time and delay graduate school to pursue a year or more of service. Specifically, I have grown incredibly interested in pursuing the Peace Corps after graduation.

Based on the data above, it was clear that the VITAS program had a significant impact on the students who participated. Through sharing thoughts and experiences in a small group setting, led by a trained faculty or staff mentor, students were less anxious about the future, were able to engage in reflective conversations that they normally would not have, and were able to expand their concept of vocation beyond just a career.

Claver House Community in St. Louis

Responding to Nicolás' globalization of superficiality and tenants of critical service-learning, SLU has invested in place-based community initiatives that deepen relationships with partners, build a sense of the common good and shared humanity, and challenge the structural causes of injustice. This response is clearly evident in the monthly meetings of the Ville Collaborative, a grassroots organization that gathers neighbors as well as non-profit, faith-based, and local governmental organizations to share information and seek ways to work cooperatively in order to support and empower the neighborhood. The Ville neighborhood is in North St. Louis, about 1.5 miles north of SLU's main campus, and, for nearly 100 years, it had been a center of African American culture, and home to many Black professionals, businesses, and entertainers (4the Ville, n.d.). While once a thriving community, the Ville is now one of the more distressed areas of St. Louis. Nevertheless, it contains a variety of strong organizations working to stabilize and revitalize the community. SLU has been heavily involved in service activities in the Ville for many years (Belt & Bollock, 2020; Sweetman & Sokol, 2016). These activities have been built from many of the existing strengths of the neighborhood, particularly Claver House, a SLU-supported community and active member of the Ville Collaborative.

Claver House is an intentional faith community centrally located in the Ville, just around the corner from St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic Church. It was established in 2001 to be a place of hospitality and prayer. While the character of its mission has varied over the years to reflect contemporary expressions, it remains grounded within the Ignatian notion of experience-reflection-action (Korth, 2008). Claver House provides a place-based introduction to the Ville: a point of introduction to the residents, a place of reflection on the realities they face and our common humanity. Thus, it is uniquely situated as a setting that promotes relationships and active engagement. The house makes available a residential opportunity for individuals to live in community and to be immersed in solidarity with our neighbors. Over the years, this community has been home to a wide variety of individuals from many walks of life.

Extending beyond the residential community, Claver House Commons brings together several initiatives that seek to enable individuals and organizations to engage with the neighborhood and work together to respond to the challenges facing its residents. Science Saturdays, Project Read and Feed, and Claver House Commons STEAM Summer Camp are three such programs. On any given Saturday and all through July, children learn about nutrition and biology in the garden, explore circuitry and coding in the electronics and robotics class, discover aerodynamics and piloting skills in the flight simulation lab, learn about DaVinci and create their own murals and mosaics, read in the library, and develop and act out their very own improv scenes, and many others. Activities are limited only by the interests and abilities of the children who participate and the volunteers who organize and offer them. And no one goes home hungry. With support

from the greater community, Claver House Commons is able to provide breakfast and lunch for the children. Oftentimes, they are able to offer care packages for families.

Method

In 2018-19 Claver House hosted a number of SLU students, both as residents and volunteers for Claver House Commons Saturday morning activities. Members of the research team supported the student activities as advisors and collaborative volunteers. At the conclusion of the year, the students were invited to share their insights and experiences at the North Saint Louis Symposium via poster presentations. Four of these posters, broadly summarized in the excerpts below, were analyzed to evaluate how these students might reflect the characteristics of Ignatian formation and explore the challenges posed by the Jesuit leadership.

Claver House Community (Hennessy, C. & Belt, S., 2019)

Claver House provides an immersive environment for its residents to grow in relationship with one another and the community they serve. SLU students volunteer every Saturday and serve as mentors to youth in the Ville. Serving as youth mentors provides the opportunity to develop as competent and sensitive leaders. Through this collaboration, SLU students and faculty learn in action what it means to walk with others and to be for others, sharing in all the successes and obstacles that arise along the process.

Flat Stanley (Klco, N. & Belt, S., 2019)

To learn about ourselves, reach out globally, promote writing skills, and form relationships, the youth at Claver House have initiated the Flat Stanley Project with St. Martin De Porres School in Belize. With a liaison in both locations, the youth are finding their voice and diving into the opportunity to learn about a new culture and the individuals who live there.

Improv (Allen, K., DeLorimier, J. & Belt, S., 2019)

Children of all ages are invited and encouraged to creatively express themselves through improv. They are challenged to think out of the box and respond, react, and contribute in creative and thoughtful ways throughout these activities. Through listening, laughing, and performing together, the children hone their public speaking abilities and build confidence in themselves.

Robotic Operations Billiken Outreach (R.O.B.O.) (Muhammad, J., Pidatala, S., Shekar, A. & Belt, S., 2019)

The National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and Society of Women Engineers (SWE) at Saint Louis University established a robotics program in partnership with Claver House Commons' "Science Saturdays." R.O.B.O. is conducted at Claver House.

Representatives from NSBE and SWE who serve as positive role-models with diverse backgrounds would help increase minority contribution in STEM fields. The program seeks to encourage the students' passion for science and build upon their desire to learn.

Data Analysis

While it was more apparent in some, each poster revealed a quality of engagement with the children that appeared to be appropriately suited to the activities that were presented. The Improv activity sought to, "allow children to explore different emotions through creative and artistic expression in hopes of promoting and cultivating emotional intelligence, recognition, and expression on all fronts." The students involved in the robotics program recognized that there was room to foster deeper connections with the children by having them help, "developing future experiments." The Flat Stanley poster presented what the project hoped for the children involved: "Through this activity, relationships will continue to be built and discovery will flourish in the hearts and minds of our Ville youth."

Helping the children grow in their own sense of agency was another quality that emerged from each of the presentations. The community poster summarized this effort in terms of how the space aspired to be open to the children: "Claver House Commons strives to create a community where children in the Ville neighborhood can feel they belong." The Flat Stanley poster echoed this sentiment in terms of outcomes to which the project aspired: "Our youth have a place in this world and by asserting their communication skills they will be able to confidently claim it." Improv spoke of helping children "build confidence" and gain "emotional maturity", and R.O.B.O sought to foster a "diverse and supportive environment in creative thought." Returning to the Claver House Community poster, it appeared to gather these sentiments under the very purpose of the house itself: "We hope that these activities aid to stimulate a curiosity and enthusiasm that a child is able to follow by their own volition."

It is not known to what degree the different groups collaborated or discussed their individual poster presentations. However, it was rather clear that the students were operating along similar lines and shared a common sense of purpose. This quality revealed a sense of community to which the programs aspired. These students were invited to engage in the reality of the Ville neighborhood, and enter into relationships with children who live there. They were challenged to share their unique and varied passions. Each excerpt revealed a remarkable degree of agency with which the SLU students met this challenge. In each case, the focus remained squarely upon the relationships that the community engagement activities facilitated. One poster expressed this aspect of the experience in this way:

As St. Louis city has historically been separated by negative and divisive perceptions and policies, it is easy for a St. Louisan to stay in one's own separate world. Claver House

hopes to breach some of these divides by creating a space where these trends of separation are broken and the unusual can become more unremarkable.

While the posters revealed a quality of thought and imagination that was consistent with Fr. Nicolás' invitation, the encounters with the public during the symposium provided another glimpse of the depth to which the students were moved by their experiences. They spoke of their relationships with the children they had come to know. The development was likewise evident to the coordinators throughout the Saturday morning experiences. The students entered into the experience according to their own unique personalities and passions. Some were relatively shy, and it took them more time to begin to connect with the children. Not all of the children gravitated to the activities, which caused additional challenges and, at times, frustration. Not all of the projects proceeded as they were conceived, and plans had to be changed along the way. Students often went home exhausted but also inspired.

It is not easy for university students to find the time necessary to plan how they might go about sharing their unique talents and passions. Nor is it easy to compel them to give up Saturday mornings. Many of the students who completed these projects were already strongly motivated to engage in such activities. It remains to be seen how such an experience can be expanded to reach a greater number of university students. However, these programs are being developed to respond to newly established core curriculum requirements and preliminary efforts are encouraging. It will be interesting to follow these programs as they become more explicitly embedded in academic programs, particularly those that do not have direct connections to community engagement or social justice concepts.

Discussion

1. How did students exhibit qualities indicative of formation consistent with a “well educated solidarity?”

The New Student Day of Service revealed a clear association between community engagement and both openness and sense of purpose. Similarly, the VITAS program reported that 88% of the students effectively connected community service or social activities to their vocational discernment. The Claver House posters consistently revealed a sense of connection to the children, an investment in their success and well-being. It appeared to the researchers that this attribute was evident in each of the three programs in ways that were appropriate to their specific goals.

2. How did student reflections reveal qualities that suggest a depth of thought?

The New Student Day of Service correlations suggested a maturing depth of thought as participants considered their realities and advanced in their openness and sense of purpose. From the Diversity scale, 90% of students responded that they somewhat agree or strongly agree to the statement “I enjoy experiences that are intellectually challenging” Also, the service day was one of the highest ranked orientation activities and appeared to resonate with students’ reasons for attending SLU in the first place.

In the VITAS program, this quality was clearly evident from the survey results as well as the qualitative themes and selected participant quotes. All of the results pointed to a successful effort to help students engage in thoughtful reflection. As one participant remarked, “what became clearer were the underlying realities, the inner movements of the heart and the patterns of thought accompanying my prayer and action as I discern.” Similarly, the reports prepared by the students at Claver House revealed a quality of consideration that pointed to a developing depth of thought.

3. How did student reflections and actions reveal a depth of imagination?

The nature of the data presented from the New Student Day of Service survey did not provide a ready avenue for insight into depth of imagination. However, the results did suggest a favorable disposition to this quality. In particular, responses to two questions seemed to indicate that the students possessed a positive inclination toward a deepening imagination. Included in the Openness to Diversity and Challenge Scale, “The experiences I enjoy most are those that make me think about things from a different perspective” 80% of students responding to the survey agreed or strongly agreed. Moreover, from the Claremont Purpose scale, students were asked, “How well do you understand what gives your life meaning?” 45.2% of the student respondents indicated that they understand quite well or extremely well, suggesting room for development in this area.

The VITAS program exhibited a depth of imagination in a couple of instances. The finding that 88% of the students were able to effectively connect their community service or social action activities suggests the sort of outcome that is made possible through the “real creativity” (Nicolás, 2010, p. 4) which is born of a depth of imagination. Furthermore, the themes that emerged as participants reflected on what they learned all point to this quality: (1) Practicality vs. Imagination: It is okay to make decisions with your heart too, not just your head; (2) Students discovered their true passions and strengths. They understood what was energy-giving, and they rediscovered their childhood interests; and (3) They learned a different definition of success: It isn’t just about money or job prestige, but how you engage with the community around you. Careers are not the only thing that will define who they are (i.e., the concept of multiple vocations).

As one participant reflected:

What VITAS clarified for me was not the surface level, what-job-am-I-going-to-have aspect of vocation – this has actually become a little less certain. Rather, what became clearer were the underlying realities, the inner movements of the heart and the patterns of thought accompanying my prayer and action as I discern.

Somewhat surprising to the researchers was the degree to which depth of imagination was evident in VITAS and Claver House and foreshadowed in the New Student Day of Service. It was assumed that this would be the more elusive trait. This result may serve as further motivation for those who develop such programs to provide ample opportunity and encouragement for students to engage on their own terms and to bring their unique gifts to bear. Finally, as noted above, the activities represented by the posters provide a compelling example of the sort of creativity that Fr. Nicolás described when speaking of depth of thought and imagination. The students reflected on the needs of the children and considered how they might bring their own talents and passions to the service of those needs.

Limitations

The New Student Day of Service survey response rate (33%) coupled with the pre-college service experience, suggest that those who responded to the survey were strongly predisposed to service. This can also be inferred from the student population who participated in VITAS and at Claver House. While SLU can rightly be inspired by these success stories, it presents a limitation to the study. It is likely that the students here represented a strongly favorable segment of the overall student population as they related to the questions posed by this study. It was unclear the degree to which this identity was present or developing in the general student population. A more universal response would provide a clearer understanding of how the university is doing along the lines of Ignatian formation. Still, the results serve to validate the approaches to these questions. The poster presentations offered students an opportunity to describe their experience in their own terms. They were simply asked to present their project to the broader community. The nature of the posters reflected individual personalities and forms of expression and communication. In this way, they offered an insight into the ways the students engaged the children with whom they worked. Again, this project may wish to develop the parameters of the presentation while striving to maintain as much autonomy as possible.

Another limitation of the study was that it did not address the identity and development of the faculty and staff. As Fr. Nicolás stated, “Jesuit education should change us,” as well (2010, p. 5). Additional research that includes the faculty and staff involved in Jesuit education would provide valuable insight into the progress of identity and formation in the Ignatian tradition.

Conclusion

This study explored three different community engagement activities sponsored by SLU's Center for Service and Community Engagement and attempted to identify qualities of Ignatian education within the participants. Each of the three attributes that framed the research questions were evident, either directly or in a latent form appropriate to the nature of the activity and the level of the student participants. While it is not possible to quantify a direct measure, the results indicate that the programs are generally succeeding in promoting an Ignatian inspired formation for its students. The ultimate question, who the students become, is an open question that exists beyond the scope of this project. Indeed, it is a question worthy of future consideration.

Jesuit education is grounded upon the development of a spirituality informed worldview that stresses God's love and desire for justice in the world. Returning to remarks of Fr. Nicolás, "In Jesuit education, the depth of learning and imagination encompasses and integrates intellectual rigor with reflection on the experience of reality together with the creative imagination to work toward constructing a more humane, just, sustainable, and faith-filled world." (Nicolás, 2010, p. 5). Such an approach naturally stands to enhance community engagement efforts of the academic institution. The examples considered in this article represent only a few of the ways that SLU and other Catholic, Jesuit institutions value and prioritize the intersection of academic excellence and community engagement from a faith-based position. They also represent how Jesuit higher education promotes and informs anchor mission work. Indeed, an institutional commitment to "depth of imagination" serves to inspire developing approaches that consider and embrace contemporary pedagogy and theory.

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