

The Journey into Adulthood Understanding Student Formation

Boston College

College is a critical stage in the development of young adults. They leave behind old ways of understanding, believing, and relating to the people around them, and move toward new forms of identity and more critically aware forms of knowing, choosing, and living authentically. American colleges and universities have largely moved away from the goal of helping students address the full scope of these challenges, focusing primarily on their intellectual development. The result is a disconnect between the

Why Student Formation?

A college or a university undertakes a significant responsibility when it admits its students. They arrive on campus talented, diverse, ambitious, eager to be challenged, but only partway along the road from adolescence to adulthood. The campus—its classrooms, administrative offices, residence halls, dining rooms, chapels, and playing fields—will be the principal setting for four critical years of their development as human beings. Does this development happen automatically or does it need to be supported and facilitated? And is it guided by a vision of the qualities students ought to possess when they graduate?

Every college and university forms its students. The structure of the curriculum, the standards embodied in the faculty, the architecture of the campus, the way student residential life is organized, the community's customs and traditions, the distinctive language the institution uses to talk about itself—all these communicate a sense of values worth pursuing and shape habits of mind and heart that will achieve these values.

Every college and university forms its students. This is formation. Some colleges do it implicitly, some are explicit about their goal. This essay proposes an approach to formation at Boston College that is both explicit and intentional. It does not spell out specific programs in detail; rather it is meant to encourage reflection about the foundational educational principles that could guide a philosophy of student formation.

“Formation” can be a problematic term if it suggests indoctrination, imposing values from the outside, stamping each student from a common mold that blurs unique gifts and aspirations. It can be a useful term, however, if it means that a college proposes certain intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual standards to its students as worth acquiring and living by, equips them with the knowledge and skills to understand and critically interpret the world in light of these values, and yet respects their freedom to discern how these standards can be embodied in the decisions they make about their own lives. This concept of formation, it will become clear, is rooted in the principles that have historically animated Jesuit education.

Emerging Adulthood

Young men and women face important developmental challenges as they emerge from

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They encounter peers whose beliefs, values, racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, and sexual orientations may be different from their own. How are they going to relate to them? What can they learn from them? Who among them will be their real friends? They are challenged to enlarge their understanding of the groups they belong to, of who is to be included in the community of their concern. Questions about sexuality become more intimate and serious as they try to envision the kind of person with whom they might want to spend their lives. In these tentative probings toward a new sense of identity, a prominent theme is how to balance the need to be independent and the yearning to belong, how to compose an increasingly differentiated sense of self and at the same time integrate that self into an increasingly meaningful network of relationships. Slowly, the sense of self shifts from inherited roles and relationships to a new awareness of the person behind these masks for whom one now takes responsibility and a new understanding of self and of the social communities to which one belongs.

Emerging adulthood also entails critically reassessing and appropriating in forms more adequate to current experience the beliefs, practices, and tacit values of family and faith community that sustained childhood and adolescent religious identity. Almost half of first-year college students report that they feel insecure in their religious views and describe themselves as doubting, seeking, and conflicted. The challenge they face is, in part, intellectual. College offers the opportunity of entering into a dialogue with philosophical and religious traditions that have wrestled with questions of faith and meaning, including the tradition in which one has been raised, and of connecting faith and understanding in a new synthesis. But the challenge is also more personal and intimate—how to experience one's relationship to a God whose image changes and becomes more complex, how to locate oneself in a transcendent order of being or within a horizon of ultimate significance that is trustworthy enough to ground a sense of living fully and authentically.

The language of "being spiritual but not religious" seems to be a placeholder that young adults use as a way of talking about this double challenge. It allows them to distance

Jesuit Education

When Boston College was founded in 1863, the Jesuit educational tradition was already three hundred years old. Ignatius Loyola and the group of friends who became the first Jesuits did not set out to work in education but they were all graduates of the University of Paris and they were formed in a spirituality that disposed them to value an intellectually engaged faith. So, when citizens of Messina in 1547 offered to fund a school for lay students, Ignatius seems to have seen an opportunity to embody the Jesuit mission of helping people by bringing the message of the Gospels to the wider culture in a new and more systematic way, through education. Soon, Jesuits were founding schools across Europe, in Asia, and in Latin America—35 or more colleges by the time Ignatius died in 1556, more than 800 in the next two centuries—and education had become their principal work.

The schools were a success, in part, because they combined the best features of the two existing educational systems—the medieval university's emphasis on speculative truth and scientific knowledge, and the newer Renaissance academy's humanities curriculum, meant to foster character and prepare graduates for public life. They also implemented a methodical and structured style of teaching and of organizing the curriculum that was a feature of the college where Ignatius and the first Jesuits had studied at Paris. The distinctive spirit of Jesuit education, however, was rooted in an understanding of the meaning of human existence that emerged from the formative spiritual experiences of Ignatius Loyola and gave a particular coloring to all the ministries Jesuits undertook.

Sent as a young boy to be trained for a career in the service of the Spanish empire, Ignatius knew the world of court politics and the rough life of a soldier but he tells us that until he was wounded in a military engagement and sent home to recover or die he had very little knowledge of his own inner life. Lying in bed and gazing at the stars, he began to pay attention to his feelings and desires and to the thoughts that brought him joy and sadness, enlightenment and confusion. In these experiences, he slowly understood that God was communicating with him in a personal and direct way. He felt that he was being invited

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to open his heart in response and to put his own gifts and talents at the disposal of God's promptings.

His first idea of following Jesus was to imitate the behavior of the saints as he imagined it, fasting to the point of weakness, letting his hair and fingernails grow, and dressing in rags. He began to have beguiling but unsettling visions in prayer. Gradually, he realized that he had to subject these experiences to examination, use his intellect and reason to understand their meaning and their bearing on how he would live—a process he came to call discernment. He came to see that hatred of self and things human was not what God was teaching him, rather that God was at work in all the things of the world, sustaining them and bringing about some good through them. He began to see his own gifts and desires in this light, especially the talent he had for helping people grow in the Spirit. He realized that if he were to do this well he needed a formal education. So, he made his way eventually to the University of Paris, where he studied philosophy and theology, and encountered the friends who became the first Jesuits.

A third decisive experience was his conviction that he was being called to serve others. When he lay recuperating at Loyola wondering how he might respond to God's great love and

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understand the unique meaning and value of their lives and their ambitions in God's sight. Through their human gifts and their educated use of them, God's vision for the world will be accomplished.

It is difficult to appreciate how radical an insight this would become once Jesuits committed themselves to the project of education. We have to remind ourselves of how profoundly

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Moreover, the schools became centers of civic life, libraries, theaters, and repositories of scientific equipment and specimens, and therefore resources for the intellectual and cultural life of the community. Jesuits thus began, in the words of one historian, to put into practice a “civic mission” of working for the this-worldly good of the communities where they lived, understanding that this too was a means to the progress of souls.

Jesuits carried this civic humanism into numerous social initiatives. One remarkable instance was the creation in the 18th century of independent communities in the jungles of Brazil and Paraguay to protect indigenous people from exploitation by the colonial powers, a project that earned Jesuits the fierce opposition of the Spanish and Portuguese governments and was one of the reasons they were temporarily suppressed as a religious order by the pope in 1773. In 1975, Jesuits would again affirm their commitment to linking the service of faith and the promotion of justice in all their ministries—a development that has given rise to the contemporary saying that Jesuit schools produce “men and women for others.”

Encounters with different cultures and religious beliefs also influenced Jesuits’ thinking about education. Through the experiences of men like Francis Xavier in Japan and Matteo Ricci at the court of the Chinese emperor, their understanding of how God was at work in human culture broadened and became more complex. They discovered their role was not simply to bring the news of the Gospel to these cultures but also in some sense to learn how these cultures were part of the plan God has for the world. They understood that plan from the perspective of the Gospel but began to see that the Gospel perspective was enriched by understanding how others experienced and expressed their humanity.

To be sure, not all Jesuits exemplified this humanism in all its facets. Throughout the centuries of their existence, Jesuits could be found on both the world-affirming and world-denying sides of the equation. Nonetheless, the view that working for the shared human good is a way of cooperating with God’s plan for the world is deeply rooted in Ignatian

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spirituality. The word “working” here captures the unfinished, still unfolding quality of what God is doing in creation as Ignatius saw it. It explains the action-oriented, entrepreneurial, let’s-try-it-and-see-if-it-works style of the early Jesuits. It also lends itself to a distinctive view of education as not only rigorous intellectual mastery of a body of accumulated knowledge and of the skills needed to understand and interpret it but also as exploration across known frontiers in an effort to discover more about how the world and human existence embody God’s dream. Inseparable from this intellectual formation is the goal of shaping of character, of producing graduates who will take seriously the challenge of living good lives and making the world a better place. This has sometimes been a controversial ideal, too religious for some, insufficiently orthodox for others, but historically it has been the vision that has played a large role in Jesuit education. It has a direct bearing on how we understand student formation at Boston College.

Three Dimensions of Student Formation

If we look at the issues of emerging adulthood in light of the understanding of human flourishing and the geography of meaning that characterized the early Jesuit schools, a concept of student formation begins to take shape. It focuses on helping students develop their gifts of mind and heart, cultivate their interior lives, and make good decisions about how they will use their gifts to help others. As a first step in exploring what this agenda entails, let us say, for brevity’s sake, that in a Jesuit university student formation will have an **intellectual dimension**, a **social dimension**, and a **spiritual dimension**.

In a university, the **intellectual dimension** of student formation is the most obvious of the three, since a university is largely organized around academic pursuits. The rhythms of the semester, the week, and each day are shaped by courses, syllabi, classes, assignments, study time, papers, and exams. And many of the significant experiences of college life have an intellectual character: the exciting encounter with new ideas, intense late-night

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discussions, developing a relationship with a teacher who becomes a guide and even a role model, discovering the appeal of ideas, falling in love with an academic discipline, doing

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collaboratively, and enlarge—across racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries—their understanding of who is to be cared for and who is to be included in their community of concern. In a Jesuit university, especially, they are likely to be challenged to experience directly the lives of those marginalized in our social systems, to reflect on social and political structures and how they can inhibit or advance the just flourishing of individuals and communities, and to decide how they can use their own gifts and talents to advance the common good.

Most colleges and universities will not claim any responsibility for the **spiritual dimension** of their students' development-33(e152-1(o)2.)]TJ 0.muld52-1(o7(b)-27(e]TJ clear52-1(o7(t)28(y-1(on(

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Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Formation

be apparent, but students of any religious tradition or none ought to be able to find at BC a supportive environment for deepening their own faith lives or, in less explicitly religious language, discovering how to live authentically within a horizon of ultimate meaning.

We can picture the three dimensions of the formational experience as the sides of a **triangle**¹ with the multiple experiences available to a student filling in the center—academic courses, research projects, internships, extra-curricular activities, service programs, residence-hall life, friendships, religious activities, mentoring relationships, advising, counseling, work-study jobs, leadership programs, and so forth. For each student, the experiences inside the triangle and their arrangement will be slightly different. And, for some, significant developmental catalysts may fall outside the triangle altogether and have more to do with family crises, personal illness, natural disasters, and major socio-historical events such as war, depressions, and so forth. Whether inside or outside the triangle, the experiences have in common the potential to contribute—incrementally or dramatically—to the forward movement of a student’s developmental journey.

¹(See Figure 1)

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Questions that have engaged thinkers for ages, last week's statistics quiz, tomorrow night's party, the ups and downs of romantic relationships, political and social issues nationally and across the world, life after graduation, diets, family problems, and any number of other subjects. A student has multiple conversation partners: teachers, certainly, but also roommates, friends, coaches, campus ministers, academic advisors, counselors, work-study supervisors, parents and other family members. And some of the most important conversation partners may be the books they read, the thinkers they study, the works of art they experience, the organized bodies of knowledge they have to master, the cultural and religious and intellectual traditions they encounter, and the interpretive theories that are proposed to them.

Some of these conversations—walking across the Dustbowl with a roommate—may have a random and accidental character, some—wrestling with a chapter in an organic chemistry textbook—will have a very determinate and demanding character. What will connect these multiple encounters and turn them into the kind of developmental experience that results in new ways of understanding and being in the world—a conversion that Bernard Lonergan calls “re-horizoning”?

Ignatian spirituality suggests an insight. Ignatius' spiritual growth began when he came to understand that in the ordinary experiences of his daily life, God was somehow conversing with him and leading him in certain directions. When he undertook to help others understand how God was at work in their lives, the medium was always conversation about their experience, aimed at helping them discern how they should act. The early Jesuits thought of their characteristic activities as “ministries of the word,” and one writer has suggested that the central strategy in all their activities was “expert

Education is, fundamentally, a conversation.

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finally, by encouraging them to decide how to act in light of this new understanding.

Can something analogous happen in an educational setting? What if we envisioned the role of the adults in the university as “experts” who help students learn the skills of discerning what is authentic, trustworthy, and reliable in their educational experience; as mentors who help them reflect on the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of their lives, the connections among these three dimensions, and the directions in which the connections seem to be pointing?

Our expert conversations, then, would have a three-part strategy:

- **Helping students pay attention to their experience.** One of the central insights of developmental psychology is that we learn by organizing our experience and appropriating it in increasingly complex psychological structures by which we engage and make sense of our world. From infancy, learning is an active process but in our early years it happens without our being aware of it. Once we become adolescents, though, whether we continue to learn is largely a choice we make. One role of teachers and other adults in the university is to help students pay conscious attention to their experience—observing, wondering, opening themselves to the people and the world around them and especially to their own inner lives and the rich tapestry of thoughts and feelings, fears and desires, that grows more complex the more they let it register on their consciousness and the more they deliberately make the effort to fill in its details.
- **Helping them reflect on its meaning.** The outcome of paying attention to our experience may be a complex variety of unrelated insights and feelings that lead in contradictory directions. To connect the parts of our experience we need to examine data, test evidence, clarify relationships, understand causes and implications, weigh options in light of their possible consequences. We need, that is, to see the patterns in our experience and grasp their significance and directionality. Reflection is the way we discover and compose the meaning of our experience. It is partly an inward-looking activity—exploring the connections among our thoughts and feelings—but it

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also involves looking outward for resources to understand our experience. Here is where the adults in the university can be especially helpful, for they have at their disposal bodies of expert knowledge—the different ways that philosophy, for example, or biology or sociology organize and interpret the world and help us understand it—as well as life wisdom that can help students find their way through multiple, even contradictory, insights and choices. The curriculum itself and the bodies of organized knowledge that compose it are standards against which reflection can be measured. Reflection is a kind of reality-testing of our experience. It demands emotional honesty, intellectual rigor, and thoughtful judgment. Its goal is the freedom that comes with authentic self-knowledge and accurate knowledge of the world.

- **Helping them decide how to act.** The knowledge and self-understanding appropriated by reflection have to be tested in action. In part, this is a question of making decisions that are consistent with our new selves and what they now know and value, but it also involves our relationship to others and to the world around us. What will the impact of our decisions be on them? Do our actions make a difference in the world? We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships, grow up in families and in social, cultural, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is in part to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take appropriate responsibility for them, and to contribute to nurturing and improving them.

The three parts of this dynamic may sometimes move in a linear way—first attention, then reflection, and finally deciding how to act—but in the ordinary developmental flux of life it is just as likely the three parts of the dynamic will be in constant interplay with each other. They will have a tentative, exploratory quality—describing experience in different ways, trying out understandings, experimenting with ways of acting—with pauses to consolidate, moments of ambivalence and even retreat, and loops of feedback to reconfigure the process. **Evaluation**, explicit or implicit, will be a key part of the dynamic and so will attention to

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the larger **context** in which the discernment operates—the life experience of the individual, social and political and economic realities, and the horizons of meaning through which we understand our lives and assign value. The expert help of adults is particularly needed to push students to do the challenging work of evaluating their tentative discernments and of connecting them realistically with the contexts that have to be taken into account.

The interrelationships among the parts of the dynamic help us understand at a deeper level why the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of the formation experience can't be kept separate. The experiences we pay attention to are inevitably an amalgam of the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of our lives; reflecting on

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their meaning draws on resources from all of the dimensions; any action we take will imply consequences in all three dimensions. In the forward movement of the developmental process, the three dimensions coalesce into one. And all the adults in the university community have a role in it. Those whose responsibilities appear to lie along one dimension—faculty members, for example, campus ministers, or student-affairs professionals—have to be aware

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do so in all four undergraduate years, in multiple programs, many of which involve serious commitments of time. Most students are in the high-profile programs—Pulse, international service and immersion trips, Appalachia Volunteers, and 4-Boston. The formative effect of these programs results not only from the experience of hands-on service they provide but also from the opportunities they create for students to reflect on both the societal issues they encounter and on the ways in which their own self-understanding changes as a result of their experience, through commitments that typically extend through an academic year, with weekly meetings and weekend retreats.

Service programs are only one of the ways in which BC encourages students' social formation. The whole organization of the student-affairs side of the university—residence halls, counseling services, student organizations (more than 200), leadership programs, alcohol-education programs, career counseling, AHANA programs—could be said to have this objective.

Even the student judicial system—

for extended reflection; they take students out of their comfort zones and expose them to people different from themselves; they involve collaborative modes of working and hands-on experiences; adults are typically present as guides, mentors, and role models; they encourage students to create personal syntheses of what they have learned or experienced; they provide leadership development opportunities; and they often give students explanatory frameworks that help them connect what they have learned in a number of areas. If we wanted to multiply the successes of existing programs and develop new ones, these would seem to be the characteristics to focus on.

A Perplexing Question

This overview of Boston College's student culture raises a perplexing question: If we've devoted all these resources to student development, and we have all these programs that attract students and seem to have an impact on them, and we know what works, why are we even raising a question about student formation? Isn't it already happening?

Few experienced faculty members and administrative staff would insist that the answer is yes. There are too many reasons why we should not be satisfied with the status quo. To mention a few:

- Only small numbers of students can participate in many of the most popular academic and co-curricular programs. The determined and the self-directed may gain access to them, but how do we reach the others?
- Most students regard the core as something to be "gotten out of the way." Could we envision and teach the core in a way that supports and challenges the unfolding of the several dimensions of students' development over four years?
- Students say that some departments do a particularly good job of providing opportunities for them to synthesize what they have learned and connect it to other dimensions of

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their lives. Should this be an ideal for all disciplines?

- Faculty members and academic administrators sometimes say that even highly ranked students can be intellectually passive, good at performing within requirements but

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to what is sometimes called a “culture of niceness” at BC. If niceness means that differences—of race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual identity, and so forth—won’t really be engaged, then this culture may actually build walls and make it difficult for students to learn from each other.

- One of the biggest problems is that students, even when they take advantages of these resources, aren’t always helped to process their experience, connect it with the other experiences they are having, and figure out what kind of larger understanding of their lives is emerging from them.
- And perhaps the greatest challenge is that, for all the programs and resources we put at students’ disposal, we don’t seem to have been able to bridge the great gulf between students’ academic experiences and their lives outside the classroom or to connect faculty and student-affairs administrators in collaborative efforts to foster students’ formation.

The perplexing question, then, leads to a challenging conclusion: Though BC already does a great deal to foster student development, we fall short of our aspirations in important ways. If we really want to foster the full human flourishing of all our students, we need to be more intentional and thoughtful about what we’re doing and not doing, how we use our resources, what new initiatives might be needed, and especially how all the pieces of the student formation puzzle fit together. The purpose of this booklet has been to suggest a way of thinking about what this might mean in a Jesuit university. American higher education may have largely abandoned the goal of attending to the integral formation of students, but Boston College, if it is to be true to its inspiration, cannot fail to challenge its students to think about who they are as human beings and how they will live in the world.

A Mentoring Community

Sharon Daloz Parks, who has written thoughtfully about the developmental challenges of the college years and beyond, proposes that the key task of young adulthood is to discover

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ahead on their developmental journey.

The Center for Student Formation, proposed in the recent strategic planning process as one of the initiatives that will define BC's institutional culture over the next decade, could be the catalyst for creating this wider conversation about student formation, assessing the effectiveness of current and future programs and focusing resources on the ones that work.

The goal of forming students for a mature adult life is not new. It has been at the core of Jesuit education and of BC's mission from its foundation. This essay proposes a vision of how that mission can be understood today and suggests what might be entailed if we commit ourselves more intentionally

The goal of forming students for a mature adult life is not new.

to it. The task is an ambitious one. It should involve every segment of the university—the faculty, academic and student-affairs administrators, support staff, and trustees—and it could have an impact on how we think about the curriculum, organize students' lives outside the classroom, describe a BC education to external constituencies, recruit students, raise money, even how we hire faculty and staff. It will certainly require resources of personnel, time, and money.

It is tempting to think we can implement a program of student formation quickly, from the top down. The challenging issues of student formation, however, may benefit more from the kind of conversation over time that enables faculty and staff who are in daily contact with students to recognize their own experience, explore the complexities of problems, see them in a fresh light, take ownership of them, begin to feel competent to deal with them, and imagine concrete steps toward resolving them. The structures that govern how student formation currently happens at BC were not created overnight. Rethinking and reshaping them according to a contemporary understanding of student formation will not happen overnight either, but these are goals worthy of the aspirations that led to the founding of Boston College and continue to guide its vision of who its students can and should be.

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