

Transformational Experiences: Threading Franciscan Spirituality Across the Curriculum

Abstract

The campus culture of Franciscan universities is unique as they provide faith-based environments that may guide students on a transformational journey. Such institutions must be intentional and seize occasions to model and inspire the spiritual development of college students. A survey of faculty members regarding their classroom practices and desire to impart such values through their teaching provides insight as institutions seek to further nurture a student's relationship with Christ.

Keywords: Franciscan; Spirituality; Catholic; Values

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Introduction

Troubled by the current war in the middle east, crimes of violence and “the diabolical forces of hate, terrorism and war” on humanity Pope Francis urges believers to choose peace (Rousselle, 2023) and stresses the importance of teaching young people to resolve crisis through the promotion of “true values” lacking today (Vatican News, 2023). Pope Francis has underscored that, “the world needs Christ more than ever, needs his salvation and his merciful love,” (Harris, 2016).

Helping students to live the gospel provides renewed attention to spirituality and a sense of hope as we guide our youth to “look to the Lord for a solution” (Rousselle, 2023). Responding affirmatively to the papacy call is very relevant to today’s world and necessary to support the moral development of our youth. Catholic Franciscan institutions are positioned to respond to this call and decisively help students to live the gospel, providing direction and a framework for students to make sense of the world and choose actions for positive change (Ray, 2017, as cited in Mann, 2020). Such a response aligns with the teachings of Francis who loved unconditionally and is foundational to the culture of Catholic Franciscan institutions that promote peace, diversity, and inclusion (Horan, 2023).

Cultures promoting deliberate religious education can cultivate insight leading to the formation of noble character, personal identity, and spiritual development (Mann, 2020; Nono, 2023). The timing is fitting as undergraduate students report high levels of spiritual interest and desire for spiritual growth as they matriculate to college. Astin & Astin (2010) determined that 80 percent of college students report “having an interest in spirituality” with a desire to seek opportunities for spiritual growth. A national poll of 1,200 students conducted by Harvard University, Institute of Political Affairs, noted that 70 percent of the students surveyed

acknowledged that religion was important in their lives (Braskamp, 2007) as they embarked on the phase of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2014) first identified the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) noting its significance for the solidification of values, behaviors, and relationships that shape the future of an individual's life. Arnett stressed the importance of this developmental stage and concluded that emerging adulthood was a significant period of religious and spiritual development intertwined with one's character and identity.

Franciscan universities are unique in their mission as they provide an environment rooted in the tenets of St. Francis of Assisi that seek to guide each student on a transformational journey. Franciscan spirituality is directly intertwined with the character trait of human compassion as students become tomorrow's leaders, they must be equipped to face the most exigent societal problems. Caring for the poor and sick is intragryal to the Catholic Franciscan beliefs that emphasize empathy, and selflessness through service. Building a culture that intentionally weaves the Franciscan tenets into the classroom, across both curricular and co-curricular activities can have a lasting impact on the students' development of values, attitudes, and beliefs (Astin, A.,1993). Feldman & Newcomb, (as cited in Rashedi, et al., 2015), concur that such actions serve to foster a more solid sense of spirituality in the emerging adult. Therefore, we must recognize that religion and spirituality promote the expression of compassion as a countenance of one's calling and commitment to serve God.

Ironically, as college students report high levels of spiritual interest little is known as to how post-secondary institutions support and foster the dimensions of spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011; Riera, 2016). Today, more than ever, Catholic Franciscan institutions must recognize that intentional and directed support for exploring spiritual development is critical. Acknowledging that students have a strong desire to seek spiritual development and that such is

foundational to the life-long formation of the whole person, we must proactively seize the opportunity to support student spiritual development.

Background

The mission of the university through the interaction of its members shapes the campus culture that ultimately influences student development. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, (1990, p.1) directs that Catholic institutions of higher education must provide a full faith experience for its students that impart and preserve a Catholic faith-based identity. Pope John Paul II (1990) in the Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* provided key guideposts to direct the endeavors of Catholic institutions. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* which means “from the heart of the Church” was affirmed by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops on May 3, 2001.

The four essential characteristics of a Catholic university noted in this document clearly outlines the identity and mission of Catholic colleges.

- I. The College publicly professes an institutional commitment to the Catholic Faith.
- II. The College promotes reflection upon the “growing treasury of human knowledge” in light of the Catholic Faith.
- III. The College promises fidelity to the Gospel as taught by the living Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church; and,
- IV. The College seeks to instill in its students the desire to serve the common good through works of justice and charity, to answer the Church’s universal call to holiness, and to serve the Church’s mission of the evangelization of the world.

It is the fourth characteristic delineated in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (Pope John Paul II, 1990) that directly speaks to evangelization. It is the singular assignment of Catholic institutions to help students to love and live the gospel and ultimately deepen their relationship with Christ. Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, clearly explained that evangelization begins with the practice of works of mercy, justice, and charity. Pope Francis elucidates that we must guide students to “put the word into practice... not to

‘dwell in the realm of words alone’ ...rather to perform works of justice and charity which make the word fruitful” (Garvey, 2018, para. 13). The introspection of thoughts, feelings, and actions foster the development of virtue-based habits and provide the essential foundation that allows students to live the gospel.

Creating a Transformational Experience

It is the engagement of the student in an all-encompassing experience that ultimately influences the development of the whole person (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Accordingly, education is an active process that requires immersion, which allows the student to see things for themselves and to make the experience their own. These sentiments parallel Saint Augustine’s teachings about the importance of experience, prayer, and self-reflection as key elements to foster learning and ultimately one’s relationship with Christ. Augustine’s *On the Teacher* (Hanchin, 2017) explains that diverse forces of the experiential opportunity, occasion for prayer, and reflection allow the student to hear the word of God. These elements serve to raise spiritual awareness, to shape one’s moral compass, and further illuminate the student’s relationship with Christ.

Dewey noted that experience was the root of learning that further underscores the teaching of Saint Augustine. Dewey’s (1959) model of learning directs that experiences provide the individual with the opportunity to reflect and deliberate over an event and thereby grow from the experience as it serves to clarify values and ultimately awaken the soul. According to Dewey, experiences allow the student to be introspective as they interface with the world. The development equates to a dance between the cognitive processes of assimilation and accommodation as the student “passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands and contracts” (Dewey, 1933). The environment, experiential opportunities, and

cognitive processes by the student converge to raise spiritual awareness and deepen one's relationship with God. Faculty who integrates the Franciscan tenets into their curriculum can inspire the spiritual development of the student through experiential learning opportunities that incorporate the practice of virtues. Therefore, faculty are an essential resource and hold a prominent role in helping students to live the gospel.

Today, more than ever one must acknowledge faculty as a viable resource and examine to what extent they serve as stewards of the Catholic Franciscan mission. Laypersons must become increasingly more responsible for disseminating the Catholic beliefs and promoting the mission of the institution as religiously vowed men and women decline on campus (Franchi, 2022; Morey, 2003). This is critical as we work to expand a Catholic culture. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (2000, p.15) noted that in order to preserve the Catholic faith and impart the Catholic identity all faculty, "are expected to be aware of and committed to the Catholic mission and identity of their institution." Therefore, educating the masses, especially faculty about the Catholic faith ultimately contributes to the preservation of Catholic identity and aligns with characteristic II noted in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (Pope John Paul II, 1990).

Assessment provides an opportunity to understand how faculty embrace this role and to assess to what degree they intentionally design occasions within the classroom that influence the spiritual development of students. The respective answers provide insight and value as Catholic Franciscan institutions look onward to further embrace this role in helping students to live the gospel.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to investigate to what extent faculty are agents of the Catholic Franciscan mission through curriculum, pedagogy, and content. The survey was

specifically designed to gather baseline data as a means to determine to what degree faculty members embrace the Franciscan tenets and how they weave key dimensions of Franciscan values into course curricula. These foundational questions are critical as we begin to understand if, and to what level the faculty take an active role in the evangelization of our students. This article presents survey data gathered from faculty across the School of Health Science and Education (formerly the School of Health Sciences) a member institution of the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities.

Methodology

A non-experimental, research design was employed with a convenient sample of faculty from the School of Health Sciences and Education. As a survey instrument was not available for use in this research study, a brief survey tool was developed that contained six forced choice questions and two open-ended questions that reverberate the focus of this study. Respondents selected the most appropriate response on the Likert scale from most positive, first being: 1) absolutely essential, 2) very important, 3) somewhat important, and 4) not important.

Once approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) the descriptive survey was administered electronically using Survey Monkey, to all of the 40 (N = 40) faculty members within the School of Health Sciences and Education. An invitational email was sent during the spring 2018 semester that contained a brief description and information regarding the research project. Faculty who received the email and chose to participate were directed to click on the study's URL to access the survey. The process of administration and completion of the survey took approximately 10 minutes. The survey remained open for a period of three weeks from the initial launch date at which time the survey was closed. Respondent data was gathered

by the university Office of Institutional Research from 32 participants for an 80 percent response rate.

Research Questions and Survey Results

The first question asked: “In your work with students, how important is it to help them think about the intersection between Franciscan values and the field of Health Science?” The data from question 1, shown in table 1, reveals a clear emphasis, as 81.25 percent of the faculty surveyed believe it is at least very important to help students to see the intersection between the Franciscan values and the field of Health Science. The results lead one to assume that faculty surveyed understand the Franciscan values and seem to embrace the tenets in their teaching.

TABLE 1. Question 1 “In your work with students, how important is it to help them think about the intersection between Franciscan values and the field of Health Science?” Responses are shown with the number of respondents in boldface font, and the percentage below the listed value in italicized font.			
Absolutely essential	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important
8 <i>25.00%</i>	18 <i>56.25%</i>	6 <i>18.75%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>

The second question asked the faculty member to “Indicate the importance of each of the following educational goals for your students.” The responses and results shown in table 2 use a Likert scale as previously defined. Participants who did not respond are noted in the rightmost column and will be listed as No Response (NR).

TABLE 2. Question 2 “Indicate the importance of each of the following educational goals for your students.” Responses in each category are shown with the number of respondents in boldface font, and the percentage below the listed value in italicized font.					
	Absolutely essential	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important	NR
2A. Develop moral character	18 <i>56.25%</i>	6 <i>18.75%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>

2B. Develop their sense of compassion and humility toward others	22 68.75%	2 6.25%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	8 25.00%
2C. Enhance their spiritual development	4 12.50%	12 37.50%	6 18.75%	2 6.25%	8 25.00%
2D. Help them deepen their faith and live the Gospel	5 15.63%	8 25.00%	5 15.63%	6 18.75%	8 25.00%
2E. Inspire their commitment to community service	9 28.13%	13 40.63%	2 6.25%	0 0.00%	8 25.00%

Question 2 seeks to understand to what extent faculty embrace the educational goals associated with the over-arching concept of evangelization. At first glance, these results suggest that the majority of faculty surveyed appear to see value in the incorporation of the Franciscan tenets into the course curriculum for health care professionals and seem to embrace the mission of the institution. However, deeper examination reveals a disparity in the results from question 1 (81.25 percent) compared with the overall response rate and level of response from question 2 must be pondered. It is important to note that for questions 2A through 2E; only 24 responses out of 32 participants were received for each of the respective portions of question 2. The 25 percent decline in response rates gives one pause and requires additional analysis in understanding how faculty view their role and to what point they seize opportunities to impact student spiritual development.

Contemplation of faculty responses for question 2A portray that 75 percent of the faculty surveyed responded that it was at least very important to develop the moral character of the student as an educational goal. The results initially suggest that faculty embraced their role in the moral development of students. However, further consideration leads one to question if the curricular emphasis on health care ethics may have inflated the results for question 2A.

Similarly, faculty response rate of 68.75 percent for 2B that development of a students' sense of compassion and humility toward others was essential suggests that faculty fully embrace these Franciscan values. However, one explanation suggests that the personality attributes associated with health care professionals, such as caring and compassion may have skewed the results for question 1 and possibly for question 2B.

These deductions are further supported with the corresponding results to questions 2C and 2D. The results to question 2C demonstrate that only 50 percent of faculty respondents surveyed believed that it was very important to enhance a student's spiritual development with 40.63 percent of faculty respondents to question 2D believing it was very important to help students deepen their faith and live the Gospel. These results further suggest that the majority of faculty respondents may not fully align their role with the mission of the institution.

Additionally, 68.76 percent of the faculty surveyed responded to question 2E that it was very important to inspire student commitment to community service. Later in this survey question 7 further posed, "Do you incorporate service-learning projects into your curriculum?" and 13 responded yes, (40.63%), with 10 responding no, (31.25%), and 9 did not respond (28.13%).

Question 3 queries: "Do you incorporate Franciscan values into your classroom curriculum?" The results are as follows: 18 (56.25%), responded yes; 6 (18.75%), responded no and 8 (25.00%) did not participate in this portion of the survey. The survey further asked the participants in question 4 to "indicate the values that you frequently incorporate into your curriculum." These results are shown in table 3, ranked from the most incorporated to the least incorporated values.

TABLE 3. Question 4

“Please indicate the values that you frequently incorporate into your curriculum.” The listed values reflect the number of respondents with respect to each value.			
	Incorporate	Don't incorporate	NR
Service	16	1	15
Respect	15	2	15
Humility	13	4	15
Generosity	11	6	15
Joy	9	8	15
Love	8	9	15
Reverence	7	10	15
Prayer	4	13	15

The values of service, respect, humility, and generosity, which reflect qualities associated with professions in the health sciences were among the most incorporated. The values of joy, love, reverence, and prayer, which align with spiritual growth were less emphasized by faculty in the course curriculum. Examples of how faculty weaved these values into the classroom curriculum were evidenced through faculty responses to question 6 where they were asked to share *an example of a time when Franciscan values were part of your classroom curriculum*. It is interesting to note that the examples shared speak to the values of service, respect, humility, and generosity.

The first example shared by a faculty participant intertwines stories from the life of St. Francis. Specifically, the students are directed to read the story of Francis and the Leper. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage reflection and discussion as a means to build a sense of compassion. A second example was shared by a faculty member who focuses on the importance of having reverence for life citing, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. Personal reflection and discussion are utilized to help students understand that we are created in God’s image and that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit that must be cared for with respect to morality, diet, and exercise. A

third faculty member spoke of respect for humanity and the value of diversity. Specifically, they discussed with students the need to extend care to underserved populations, such as the homeless, mentally and/or intellectually challenged, or imprisoned regardless of the individual's ability to afford medical services. Lastly, a faculty member shared that the Prayer of St. Francis is used to begin a lecture and to orient students to the disparity in this country and in the world. Further explaining that we must recognize and seize opportunities to be an instrument of peace, to be patient, and to care for others as children of God. As educators, we recognize that these examples provide the individual students with the opportunity to see the good or God in others as Francis did in his own life.

Question 5 further asked how often these Franciscan values are incorporated into classroom curriculum. Table 4 notes the frequency of incorporation of Franciscan values into classrooms with 46.87% incorporating these values at least monthly and 34.38% incorporating these values at least weekly.

TABLE 4. Question 5 “How often do you incorporate Franciscan values into your classroom curriculum?” Responses are shown with the number of respondents in boldface font, and the percentage below the listed value in italicized font.				
Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	NR
2 <i>6.25%</i>	9 <i>28.13%</i>	4 <i>12.50%</i>	1 <i>3.13%</i>	16 <i>50.00%</i>

Implication and Limitations of Findings

This study was limited by three primary factors: (a) the study involved a small number of participants (N = 32), (b) study participants included only the faculty teaching courses across the School of Health Sciences & Education; and (c) the study was conducted at only one Catholic Franciscan institution.

The study focused on understanding how faculty support the mission of the institution through the presentation of course curriculum and pedagogy that incorporate the Catholic Franciscan tenets. The findings submit that Catholic Franciscan institutions must be more intentional in the alignment of mission with academic programming to firmly enhance the spiritual development of students.

These results highlight a primary limitation of the study, the assumption that faculty surveyed understood and embraced the University's mission based upon their association with the institution. This limitation was evidenced through the failure of the researcher to incorporate survey questions that seek to address to what extent faculty report an understanding of the mission; what extent faculty embrace the mission; and what extent faculty have a willingness to weave the mission into course curriculum so to provide experiences that seek to enhance the spiritual development of students.

Suggestions for Future Research

An initial study should be fashioned to query, what needs to change for faculty to be engaged as agents of mission. Future studies must seek to answer the questions posed and to ultimately assess: To what extent do faculty embrace and feel a sense of responsibility to promote the mission of the University? How we can best prepare faculty to transmit the mission to students, walk with them on their transformational journey and more intentionally help them to live the gospel. Additionally, the results suggest that we more specifically evaluate the factors that influence faculty perception of the Catholic Franciscan mission and the variables that can inspire faculty to fully incorporate mission into their teaching.

It is recommended that the survey tool be modified to incorporate the areas noted and that the sample population be expanded to include all full-time faculty from across the institution.

These changes would expand the population sample and provide additional insight into the willingness of faculty to further embrace and understand the institutional mission. Ultimately, the results of such a study could provide foundational guidance for the development of faculty workshops to weave the mission into the curriculum and to embrace evangelization more tenaciously.

Conclusion

Pope Francis invites all to be steadfast in the “journey of faith” as we embrace the mission of evangelization and quest to help students to live the gospel. This study offers insight and recommendations for institutions committed to the proactive design and promotion of Franciscan spirituality within a Catholic framework. Second, we must acknowledge faculty as a viable resource and seek opportunities to deepen their understanding of the University’s mission. Helping faculty to embrace the Catholic Franciscan mission is a predominant first step as, “We Christians were not chosen by the Lord for little things” rather we must “push onwards toward the highest principles” and stake our lives “on noble ideals” (Pope Francis, 2013).

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TABLE 1. Question 1

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TABLE 2. Question 2					
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2A. Develop moral character	18 <i>56.25%</i>	6 <i>18.75%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>
2B. Develop their sense of compassion and humility toward others	22 <i>68.75%</i>	2 <i>6.25%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>
2C. Enhance their spiritual development	4 <i>12.50%</i>	12 <i>37.50%</i>	6 <i>18.75%</i>	2 <i>6.25%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>
2D. Help them deepen their faith and live the Gospel	5 <i>15.63%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>	5 <i>15.63%</i>	6 <i>18.75%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>
2E. Inspire their commitment to community service	9 <i>28.13%</i>	13 <i>40.63%</i>	2 <i>6.25%</i>	0 <i>0.00%</i>	8 <i>25.00%</i>

TABLE 3. Question 4
 “Please indicate the values that you frequently incorporate into your curriculum.” The listed values reflect the number of respondents with respect to each value.

	Incorporate	Don't incorporate	NR
Service	16	1	15
Respect	15	2	15
Humility	13	4	15
Generosity	11	6	15
Joy	9	8	15
Love	8	9	15
Reverence	7	10	15
Prayer	4	13	15

TABLE 4. Question 5

“How often do you incorporate Franciscan values into your classroom curriculum?”

Responses are shown with the number of respondents in boldface font, and the percentage below the listed value in italicized font.

Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	NR
2	9	4	1	16
<i>6.25%</i>	<i>28.13%</i>	<i>12.50%</i>	<i>3.13%</i>	<i>50.00%</i>