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"Leading Lives That Matter"

A Classroom-Centered Approach to Mission Integration for Posttraditional Learners

**By Janet L. Rumfelt,
Franklin Medford, and
Elisa Robyn**

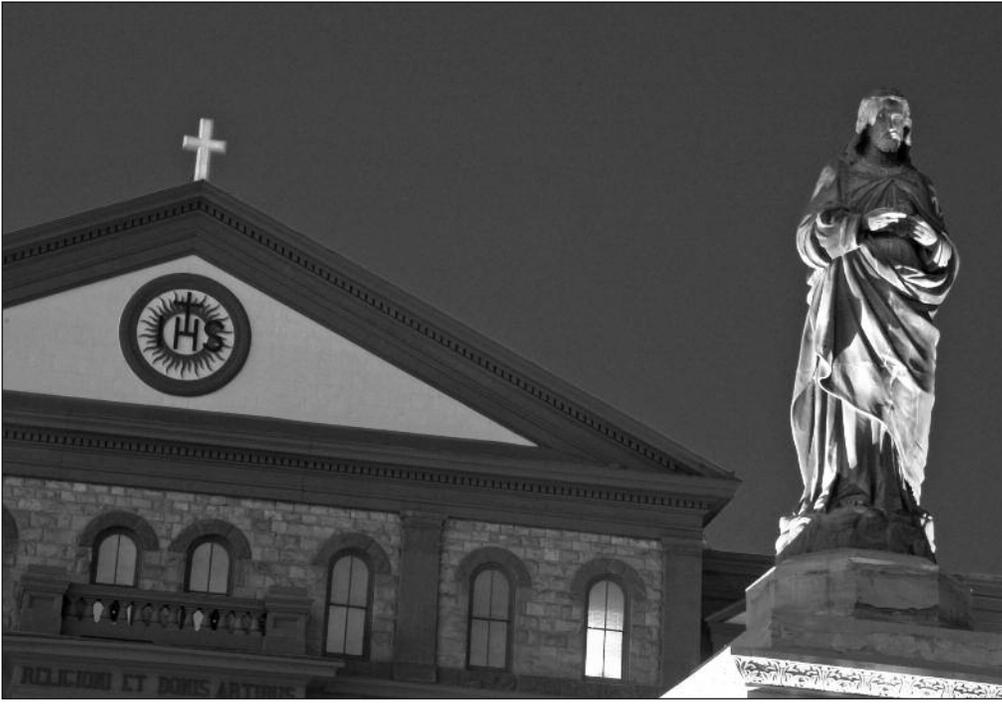
Jesuit universities and colleges all share the same challenges of integrating mission values into the experiences of our students. These challenges include finding the right curricular vehicles, providing faculty with a well-designed orientation to our Jesuit, Catholic identity and aspirations, and linking classroom content with cocurricular experiences, such as service learning, community-based engagement, and international immersions. But these challenges are magnified with posttraditional adult learners – that is, students over 25 who may also be balancing work and family responsibilities – as they pursue degrees in accelerated learning formats, diverse academic term options, and, particularly, online coursework.

These students often have full-time jobs and family commitments, and as a consequence, they lack the time to participate in cocurricular opportunities, campus ministry programs, and other mission activities. Online learners often face additional constraints due to geography. Adult learners typically come to this phase of their higher education experiences with varied educational, religious, and personal backgrounds, and a higher percentage of them are first-generation college students, which may provide benefits such as resiliency and a clear career goals, but they often face financial and familial challenges.

Regis University has grappled with these issues for many years in both our College for Professional Studies and our College for Health Professions, both of which have invested considerable energy into strategies for incorporating Jesuit mission values into curricular offerings. We recognize that the classroom, whether online or on-ground, must be the place where mission integration takes place for working adults. Efforts have included redesigning core curriculum courses, such as religious studies and philosophy, to fit the needs and experiences of posttraditional learners, incorporating service-learning opportunities into capstone courses, and preparing faculty serving these learners to redesign courses with Jesuit mission themes.

While these efforts were successful, we also recognized the need to broaden our strategic approach. We needed to respond not only to the needs of adult learners but also to those of learners who had already fulfilled core requirements at community colleges and were therefore not enrolling in the core course

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previously redesigned to infuse Jesuit values. At the same time, the online student population was growing, and their geographical distance required new avenues for mission integration.

This challenged us to rethink our strategy and ask where Jesuit values “live” in our curriculum. If not in our core, then where? In response to these questions, we developed a required undergraduate course that allowed for focused reflection on values fundamental to Jesuit education – a strategy that made economic sense for financially strapped students unable to take a series of new requirements and one that accommodated the busy schedules of learners with little time for contemplation.

This course, Humanities 366: Leading Lives That Matter, is based on Jesuit educational principles and draws directly from the Spiritual Exercises. It was designated a humanities course in order to provide accessible pathways into the content without respect to religious background. The course had to be taken at Regis – in other words, it could not be transferred in – and, by mandate, it would be among the first four Regis courses taken by the student. These two requirements ensured that all learners would have a facility with Jesuit values that could be further enhanced as they moved through their coursework.

In order to develop this course, the curriculum committee, composed of interdisciplinary humanities faculty, developed a classroom-centered approach to mission integration. They provided learners with a solid introduction to Jesuit values through the cultivation of a space (either virtual or on-ground) that allowed learners to reflect on how these values shaped their lives and their learning experiences. The end product was course

content that coalesced around the central question of what it means to lead a meaningful life.

Consistent with the principles of adult learning undertaken in an Ignatian key, the course opens with learners narrating a personal life experience and, in doing so, exploring how telling a personal story can facilitate the contemplation of meaning in one’s life. They reflect on the stories they are currently writing and on the ways in which their stories can be reshaped and retold. This is an especially important exercise since many of our learners are returning to college, finding a new career path, recovering from divorce, and experiencing other significant life transitions.

Learners go on to explore the relationship between morality and meaning and to ask how their identity – cultural, familial, psychological – and their experiences of suffering have shaped their sense of life’s meaning. They focus on the meaning of work and vocation, as well as the differences between the two, and ask how tradition – whether religious, cultural, or familial – shapes meaning in their lives. Finally, through investigating opportunities for service learning, they can explore how their personal gifts might be used for a greater good.

In addition to the required course readings (among other things, Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass’s edited volume *Leading Lives that Matter*), each section of the course is infused with a video introduction, followed by a discussion, to the six values that are central to Jesuit education at Regis: *cura personalis*, *magis*, men and women for others, unity of heart and mind, contemplatives in action, and finding God (or the sacred) in all things. These videos were filmed at a location recognizable as the Regis campus and are one example of how course content can bridge the gap between distance learners and the campus.

The final learning activity in the course requires learners to renarrate their autobiographical narrative in light of what they have learned and to reflect on how this revised story differs from their first narrative.

After taking Humanities 366, learners are exposed to Jesuit values infused across the curriculum, most especially in the required senior capstone that also focuses attention on the kinds of issues raised above. Additionally, we developed an online learning community to complement Humanities 366, providing students with a more informal, self-directed environment in which to continue the conversations begun in class. ■