Creating Changes in Faith Practices through an Entry-Level Theology Class at a Catholic University

Abstract

Undergraduate, entry-level, theology instruction at Catholic universities are expected to meet a wide range of learning outcomes. This article asserts that these courses can and should be designed for learning outcomes not only in the cognitive domain, but in the affective domain as well, which in turn may impact personal choices and faith practices of students. A three-semester scholarship of teaching study involving 175 undergraduate students, using quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, suggests that students’ affective learning and personal choices, including faith practices, can be impacted if certain foundational premises are incorporated into the course.

Introduction

After teaching entry-level, undergraduate Christian theology courses at two American Catholic universities, the primary author-researcher of this study began to ask the following question: to what extent might an entry-level, undergraduate Christian theology course in a contemporary American Catholic university impact the faith practice of students?

The documentation of real change and the question of what creates that change is the basis of the study presented in the following article, which is divided into five sections. Following the introduction, the second section presents the broad context for the question. The third section explains the methodology of the study. The fourth section introduces the findings, the fifth section draws conclusions based on the study, while the sixth and last section makes recommendations for instructional strategies in undergraduate theology instruction.

Background of the Question

Theology courses in Roman Catholic colleges and universities draw on educational practice and developmental research in higher education; scholarship in theology going back millennia; contemporary concerns of identity and mission in American Catholic higher education including evangelization, personal meaning, and spirituality; and religious freedom in the multi-religious, pluralistic milieu that is an undergraduate classroom. As such, the background for this study is diverse.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the undergraduate years are a time of significant personal growth, especially regarding beliefs and attitudes. This has been repeatedly affirmed by developmental psychologists and sociologists for the past decades, perhaps starting with Astin’s (1977) landmark study, *Four Critical Years*. Since then, his research at UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute continued to indicate that undergraduate students develop beliefs and attitudes during this stage of life. His most recent book utilizes a 7-year longitudinal, mixed
methods study including 112,000 surveys; 15,000 interviews; and over 100 universities (Astin, 2011). He and his colleagues conclude that students are interested in spiritual and religious ideas; they grow spiritually, defined as being more caring, tolerant, connected with others, and involved in spiritual questing or searching; and that religion and spirituality positively influence college students’ lives. Further, colleges and universities can foster spiritual development in a variety of ways, including utilizing pedagogy that encourages questions and conversation about meaning and purpose.

Daloz Parks’s (1986) *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By*, rewritten and retitled in 2000 as *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, draws the same conclusions as Astin, though from a more explicitly religious faith perspective. She maintains that young adults aged roughly 17-30 experience a distinctive stage of development in their self-consciousness of interpreting meaning from life (6). She concludes:

At its best, higher education is distinctive in its capacity to serve as a mentoring environment in the formation of critical adult faith… higher education inevitably functions, at least to some degree, as a mentoring community for those who are young adults in faith… Thus every institution of higher education serves in at least some measure as a community of imagination in which every professor is potentially a spiritual guide and every syllabus a confession of faith (159).

In sum, the manner in which undergraduates test their new consciousness will make a difference for the rest of their lives.

Where Daloz Parks (1986) classified those aged roughly 17-30 as “young adults,” Christian Smith, along with a number of co-authors, has been a prolific and significant voice interpreting research related to the religious faith and practice of American teenagers and emerging adults (those aged 18-23 years) using data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith and Snell, 2009; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, and Snell Herzog, 2011; Smith, Longest, Hill, and Christofferson, 2014). Broadly speaking, his thesis is similar in all these works: youth and emerging adults need to be explicitly guided to both critique larger negative social and cultural forces, and these emerging adults need to be engaged by other adults throughout their emerging adulthood years (i.e. through their early 20’s) to foster adult lives of purpose, meaning, and character.

Astin, Daloz Parks, and Smith all represent a larger body of research in a variety of fields that overwhelmingly indicate that the undergraduate years are a significant time of personal, spiritual, and religious growth. There is an increasing awareness that universities and colleges ought to be explicit in encouraging students to evaluate questions of meaning, value, ethics, and belief. Ken Bain (2004), award-winning author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, shares a poignant anecdote about an instructor in a medical school who taught her students excellent “clinical reasoning skills” but increasingly realized that her students were seeing patients as “‘disease manifestations’ rather than human beings.”

However, there is a perception in higher education that learning outcomes or course goals need to be measurable in order to be fairly assessed, and so instruction and assessment emphasize the demonstration of cognitive outcomes: will students “understand” or “analyze” or

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1 Bain, pages 89-90.
even “evaluate” in order to meet a given standard? This is understandable but limited in that it overlooks affectivity and ultimately personal change and growth manifest in student decision-making. There are at least two reasons for focusing learning outcomes in the cognitive domain and avoiding learning outcomes in the affective domain and involving student life choices. First, there is academic objectivity: these outcomes are difficult if not impossible to accurately and fairly assess using any credible measure or experience. Second, these outcomes are by nature personal and value-oriented, which might seem to counter the value-free aegis of empirical reason prized in higher education. These reasons justifiably caution any instructor advocating the inclusion of affective and behavioral learning outcomes. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition that a university education needs to create experiences that change students in positive ways that go beyond their intellectual growth.

The cognitive instructional challenges of “changing the brain” (Zull, 2002) of students and especially “creating significant learning experiences” (Fink 2013) are key components of this growing recognition. Zull claims that learning causes neurological changes in the brain in the form of more neurons and neural networks, so an instructor should incorporate teaching strategies that change students’ brains, such as repeatedly practicing higher-order thinking and involving students’ emotions and utilizing instruction that engages the four main regions of the brain which involves more neurons and more neural networks (Zull, 2004). Zull asserts instructional pedagogy should therefore involve each of these regions by sequentially promoting student experience, reflection, abstraction, and active testing of ideas (Kolb, 1984).

That instructional pedagogy should align with how students learn or “change their thinking” is the basis of Fink’s (2013) Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses (2nd ed.). He has developed a learning taxonomy that incorporates important learning that does not fit in a cognitive taxonomy such as Bloom’s. His major categories are: foundational knowledge, application, integration, the human dimension (personal and social awareness), caring (developing new feelings, interests, values), and learning how to learn. Instrumental to this taxonomy is a teaching paradigm where students actively engage in learning they care about, interact with others, and receive constant feedback on their thinking. Numerous case studies have been done in undergraduate courses using Fink’s work on significant learning experiences in a variety of academic areas such as Spanish (Davis, 2009), music (Kelley, 2009), biology (Mester, 2009), economics (Miners & Nantz, 2009), education (Nicoll-Senft, 2009), art history and philosophy (Rose & Torosyan, 2009), and religion instruction (Jones & Hilaire, 2012).

The importance of pedagogy that “changes the brain” and “creates significant learning experiences” aligns with Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) Understanding by Design and especially their emphasis on “essential questions” expanded on in McTighe and Wiggins’ (2013) Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding. Essential questions should guide course design, lesson planning, and instructional practices. For Jesuit and Catholic university theology instruction, the teaching and tradition of the Catholic Church provide the initial form and content of questions that invite students to engage in questions of meaning and value. The significant learning experiences are therefore intended to change students in their understanding of Catholic theology as well as potentially impact their values and life choices.

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2 Drawn from Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy, see Anderson, et al. (2001).
3 Zull cites Kolb on pgs. 13 and 233.
St. John Paul the Great’s 1990 Apostolic Exhortation *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is the primary directive for Catholic universities worldwide. This document’s first section, “Identity and Mission,” outlines parameters for Catholicism to be essential and evident on campus. It encourages students to “continue the search for truth and for meaning throughout their lives,” and then cites Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* calling for the “development of religious, moral, and social sense” which will enable “them to acquire or, if they have already done so, to deepen a Christian way of life that is authentic” (23). The “Identity and Mission” section concludes with two paragraphs on “Evangelization.” It is unequivocal: “By its very nature, each Catholic University makes an important contribution to the Church's work of evangelization… Moreover, all the basic academic activities of a Catholic University are connected with and in harmony with the evangelizing mission of the Church” (¶ 49). For a university’s Catholic identity and mission to become operational, faculty must understand and value this directive; and this is especially important for theology faculty.4

The course that is the subject of this study is part of a university founded by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). The mission of the Society of Jesus, which includes all of its universities and colleges, has been articulated since 1975 as “the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.”5 Twenty years later this pairing of “faith” with “justice” continued, with the explanation that “faith” means explicitly “Christian faith” as it is “deeply rooted in the Scriptures, Church tradition, and our Ignatian heritage.”6

Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., superior general of the Society of Jesus, 1983-2008, elaborated on the mission and identity of Jesuit higher education. In 1989 he addressed Jesuit higher education leaders at Georgetown University. He affirms the mission of the order as the service of faith through the promotion of justice7 and then proceeds to define characteristics of the Jesuit Apostolate of Education, beginning with the characteristic of Jesuit education as “value-oriented” in that values provide motive and meaning, identifying a person for who they are.

23. Values have three anchor bases. First, they are anchored in the "head." I perceive, I see reasons why something is valuable and I am intellectually convinced of its worth. 24. Values are also anchored in the "heart." Not only the logic of the head, but the language of the heart tells me that something is worthwhile, so that I am also affected by its worthiness. "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also." 25. When the mind and the heart are involved, the persona is involved, and this leads to the third anchor base, namely the "hand." Values lead to decisions and actions--and necessarily so. "Love is shown in deeds, not words."

Kolvenbach includes curriculum, courses, and faculty as responsible for a value-oriented education, seeing the academic and intellectual component of a Jesuit university education as part of a “fuller human context” that intrinsically involves a pastoral dimension without which an education risks “remaining cerebral, not fully human in its quest for God’s love and guidance.”8

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4 *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, see paragraphs 16, 19, 20, and 29. 5 The 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Decree 4, #2. 6 The 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Decree 3, #4: 53.4. 7 See paragraph 11. 8 Paragraphs 27-31.
Throughout the literature there is an inherent balance between presenting a Catholic worldview and theology with respecting the religious freedom of students. The “General Norms” of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* explain that “Catholic teaching and discipline are to influence all university activities, while the freedom of conscience of each person is to be fully respected.”

This was amplified for the United States context by the U.S. bishops in the 1999 USCCB document, “The Application for *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* for the United states,” where they state: “Recognizing the dignity of the human person, a Catholic university, in promoting its own Catholic identity and fostering Catholic teaching and discipline, must respect the religious liberty of every individual, a right with which each is endowed by nature” (Article 2, #4). The footnote to this goes even further: “The university's Catholic identity should in no way be construed as an excuse for religious indoctrination or proselytization” and references the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Fr. Kolvenbach demonstrates balancing this tension for Jesuit institutions. In 2000 he addressed the Conference on Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education at Santa Clara University, insisting Jesuit education “propose Jesus and his message of God’s Kingdom in a spirit of love to everyone,” as opposed to proselytizing or imposing the Catholic religion on others. In a 2007 article entitled “The Service of Faith in a Religiously Pluralistic World: The Challenge for Jesuit Higher Education,” Kolvenbach reminds Jesuit university faculties that “many students come to a Jesuit, Catholic university because they expect to be helped to grapple with questions of faith in explicitly Jesuit and Catholic ways.”

The mission statements of the University, College, and Theology Department that house the course that is the subject of this study reference the norms for higher education expressed in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and the directives for the Society of Jesus. The Theology Department Mission Statement adopted in 1996 specifically cites the classical Anselmian expression that theology is “faith seeking understanding,” directly quotes paragraph 13 of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* where the four “essential characteristics” of a Catholic university are outlined, and includes the following statement from *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*:

> Since the end of the Society and of its studies is to aid our fellow men and women to the knowledge and love of God and to the salvation of their souls; and since the branch of theology is the means most suitable to this end, in the universities of the Society the principal emphasis ought to be put upon it (*Part Four, Chapter Twelve*).

The department *teaching* mission states: “The intellectual and personal formation of our students is paramount.” Further:

> While refraining from proselytizing or indoctrinating, we continually foster active reflection on the content of our courses believing that theological disciplines are essentially paths for personal wisdom, for Christians the Triune God known to us in Christ Jesus. As part of students' personal formation, we are committed to fostering attitudes of service to the people of God and to the entire human family.

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9 *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Article 2, paragraph 4.
The teaching mission then acknowledges that “the theological disciplines have an important part to play in exploring and implementing these themes of the Jesuit mission.” These statements clearly anticipate “personal” or “affective” outcomes from theology instruction.

The course that is the focus of this study fulfills a university core curriculum requirement for the “Christian Tradition.” On its syllabus, immediately below the “Course Description,” four instructor-specific “Foundational Course Premises” are listed. These four explicit premises are personal and affective: 1) Relationships and community in the class is the basis of learning; 2) Conversations, not propositions, are educational; 3) Student questions are essential; 4) Students’ own ideas and experiences are foundational to engaging the content. The syllabus also includes the four core-curriculum mandated “Learning Objectives”:

1. Students will identify and discuss the fundamental teachings, history, and practices of Christianity.
2. Students will identify and discuss the distinctive teachings, history, and practices of Catholicism.
3. Students will identify and describe the key elements of the Jesuit intellectual tradition in its more specific religious sense, its historical foundation and its spirituality.
4. Students will identify and discuss particular challenges facing Christianity (in general) and the Catholic Church (more specifically) in the contemporary world.

In addition to the four Core Curriculum-required cognitive learning outcomes listed above, the syllabus includes two instructor-specific learning outcomes that are explicitly affective. “Students will be able to demonstrate they have…

5. Articulated a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, their personal values through reflection on their lived experience in light of the Christian and Catholic tradition.”
6. An appreciation of the necessity in theology for asking questions and seeking answers and the ability to coherently communicate their analysis of theological themes and questions through discussion and written assignments.”

Methodology

Five sections of an introductory Christian theology course were surveyed over the course of three semesters: two sections from the fall of 2015, two sections from the spring of 2016, and one section from the fall of 2016. Each section included 35 students. Students were given pre-course, mid-course, and post-course surveys. There were some modifications to the survey instrument after the fall of 2015; however, the instrument was consistent between the spring of 2015 and the fall of 2016. This study provides a quantitative report on the latter three sections.

The questions on the pre-course surveys prompted responses related to religious affiliation, formation, and practice, including prayer; the acceptance of “God”; and their feelings about Christianity, and Catholicism and being required to take a Theology course. Questions were both open-ended (e.g. “Do you have a religious affiliation”) and followed a Likert-scale format. The mid-course survey asked the same questions as the pre-course survey, though added questions related to the progress of the course, for instance the course’s potential impact on students’ communal worship, understanding of scripture, moral decision-making, life-decisions
in general and decisions specifically related to prayer and volunteer service. The post-course survey focused on the same topics as the mid-semester survey, but expanded them to query if the course had an impact on their beliefs and practices in these areas to this point in their experience, and whether they thought the course may have an impact on their future decisions on the same topics.

After final course grades were submitted, the instructor-researcher used paired samples T-test comparison of means (Knapp, 2017). Students from each section of the course were then identified as having demonstrated “significant change” in their responses recorded on the Likert scale from the beginning to the end of the course. The criteria for significant change was an increase of two classifications on the Likert scale in response to multiple prompts related to personal values. For example, if at the outset of the course, in response to the prompt, “I expect this class to impact my moral decision-making”, a student indicated she “generally disagreed (2)” with the statement, but by the end of the course “generally agreed (4)” with the statement, that indicated an increase of two classifications.

Once students with significant change were identified from each class, these students’ self-identified religious affiliation and experience with formal religious instruction or formation was reviewed. Students representing a range of religious affiliations and educative and formative experiences were then invited to be interviewed. The goal was to interview three students from the two fall sections of 2015 and two spring sections of 2016, six students total per semester. Each student invited via email from the fall of 2015 was interviewed; seven students were invited from the spring of 2016, and six were interviewed. From the fall of 2016, six students from the same class section were invited and all were interviewed. In total, eighteen of the nineteen students invited to interview did so.

These eighteen students were interviewed for twelve to twenty-two minutes; each interview followed an identical script. The students were given the questions ahead of time so they could prepare their responses if they wished. Some students did so, while others did not. Once initial introductions and explanation for the interview were given, the same questions were posed to the students in the same order.

1. What significant experiences do you recall from our [theology] class?
   a. Were there any specific readings? Can you explain why they were/it was significant for you?
   b. Any specific activities? Can you explain why they were/it was significant for you?
   c. Any specific questions you were asked? Can you explain why they were/it was significant for you?
   d. Anything else that you can recall?
2. How has the course impacted you outside and since the conclusion of the [theology] class? Anything concrete? Connect to the specific parts of the class?
3. How was the learning experience in [theology] like or unlike prior learning on similar topics and themes?
4. Any final comments or insights?

Follow up questions only prompted further detail. The script closed with a formal statement concluding the interview and an expression of gratitude for sharing the time. The interviews were audio recorded for accuracy.
Findings

The survey data for the three sections over the latter two semesters indicated that the course had a positive impact on students’ personal prayer (See Table 1) and how they read and interpreted Christian scripture in their lives (See Table 2). Students also indicated that the course impacted how they made personal choices in their lives (See Table 3). Lastly, the course impacted their understanding of the connection between spirituality and daily life, and specifically impacted their practice of key elements of Jesuit spirituality (See Table 4).

Table 1: Outcome: Impact on Personal Prayer

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>df</th>
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Table 2: Outcome: Impact on How Christian Scripture Is Read and Interpreted in Students’ Lives

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Table 3: Outcome: Impact on Personal Life Choices

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Table 4: Outcome: Impact on Practice of Key Elements of Jesuit Spirituality

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<td>-5.193</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Post</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>-3.339</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A closer review of the data showed that some students demonstrated more significant change than others. The eighteen students interviewed were drawn from this pool of students. These students self-identified their religious affiliation and formation in the following manner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic but not Catholic high school</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic and graduated Catholic h.s.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran (but attended Catholic h.s.)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religious affiliation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The transcripts of the interviews were first coded based on students’ mentioning experiences or ideas that correlated with the “Foundational Premises” for the course given in the instructor-specific syllabus. Second, the interviews were then coded by students’ mentioning specific personal values or beliefs that they attributed to their course experience.

Weaknesses of the study include the large number of variables impacting validity and reliability, and the fact that some students self-select themselves into courses based on instructor reputation. Further research in the following areas are needed. First, designing significant learning experiences into undergraduate theology courses. Second, research into the disposition of the instructor towards evangelization, understood as “engagement” and “proposal.” Third, a broader study of students, instructors, and courses.

Student Experience of Foundational Course Premises

Premise 1: “Relationships and community in the class is the basis of learning”: 8/18 students recollected that there was a sense of community in the class or that they got to know a larger number of their classmates relative to other courses in their experience. One student said: “I felt like I could name every single person in that class. I walked in and I knew who I was talking to…” Another student, when prompted to explain what helped her understand the material elaborated: “It just felt like as a class as a whole, we were all learning together…. And it did feel more like a community just because everyone was participating and was on the same page.”

Premise 2: “Conversations, not propositions, are educational”: 15/18 students mentioned class conversations and/or discussions as memorable or important to their experience. For this course, conversations began on the assigned readings through online discussion posts due the night before the class would discuss the reading. “I just kind of like how you [instructor] in person did the discussion in class. You were able to make it very welcoming and very open for everybody. You would ask a specific person a question about their discussion post and ask their thought process on it. That little bit of conversation starter really improves the conversation. Another said: “The most significant experience for me would be the daily conversations we would have in class and then your [the student’s] ability to ask a question…”

Premise 3: “Student questions are essential”: 16/18 students stated that the fact that they could ask questions and were asked questions was memorable or important to their experience. A student who went to a Catholic high school had this to say about questions:

I think this course really did help deepen my faith in a way because going to Catholic school … we were told what happened… that’s what we believe, no questions. But this class finally opened up the doors to question the things you learned and when the class included the quote that said “doubt is important, it means you are realizing your faith,” that was super important to me and that impacted me b/c then I realized that I can question aspects of my faith and that’s okay, through that I develop more understanding.

10 Interview question 1.C. asks about what questions students remember being asked by the instructor. It did not include the student asking questions of other students or the instructor.
Another student explained: “[This] class especially encouraged a lot of questions and deep thought. It wasn’t just ‘Read this and then we’ll summarize what we read.’ It was, ‘read this, and then tell me what you didn’t understand, tell me what bothers you, tell me what you want to know.’ That’s what was really important.”

Premise 4: “Students’ own ideas and experiences are foundational to engaging the content”: 14/18 students noted that they felt they could share their thoughts and ideas in the class and that this was memorable or important to their experience. One student was able to connect the sharing of thoughts and ideas to his personal faith but significantly noted that, at least from his view, everyone was effectively invited to participate.

I would say [the class] definitely helped me understand my faith more, but also kind of gain an appreciation for people who don’t have the same faith as me. You [the instructor] just did a good job of incorporating everyone into the class, be it believers, not believers, anywhere in between. And so definitely it helped me understand things at my own pace and kind of how I wanted to take it personally.

In addition to comments that reflected the foundational premises of the course, students mentioned responding to the course in ways that suggested the course impacted their personal values and choices.

All eighteen students mentioned the significance of reading and understanding scripture in the theology course. For instance, one student with a Catholic school background stated: [Catholic high school and grade school] just want to get you familiar with all of the material and get familiar with the stories. And now we’re actually interpreting it more and putting it into our lives and putting it into use.” This student was encouraged to explain that response, to which she added, “Just like trying to apply the information to our lives and in that way change the way we behave and think about things.” However, no student mentioned reading scripture on his or her own.

8/18 students indicated that the course broadly impacted their personal life choices. One student explained: “Before the course I was skeptical of God and didn’t pay much mind to it because I didn’t think that believing in something or not would affect my life. I thought I was just living my life to live it; to get a high-paying job, to live by whatever materialistic things there are and just die.” The student concluded my saying “[Now] I’ve separated myself from a lot of things I did and had before.” When pressed about whether the Theology course played a role in that development or whether it was coincidental, she said, “I don’t think it was a coincidence.” Catholic students mentioned attending mass more frequently or getting more out of mass. One explained it this way: “Once this class picked up I started going to mass more [where she hadn’t previously]. I definitely think there was a correlation with this class, because I was like ‘Oh, I’m busy, I don’t have time,’” but then again, with this class I started to go to mass more and now I go every Sunday, like every time.” She also said “I definitely pray more. When we did the Jesuit examen, since then I’ve found myself just praying more, finding more time to do that and stop making excuses, saying I’m busy.”

2/18 students mentioned prayer, though only one—the student mentioned above—explicitly stated she prayed more frequently.
However, 10/18 students mentioned spirituality and/or the Jesuit charisms/values as being significant. A student from a Jesuit high school commented that doing the examen was “impactful,” even when reminded that he had had experience with the examen in high school. Another student who practiced the examen for a week stated: “Since the theology class last fall, I reflect a lot more than I used to. [During freshman orientation] they really pressed that on us at first, the Jesuit values, and now I try to think about where God would be in my life in everyday situations, especially since the Theology class. I mean, it’s not like you [the instructor] were trying to persuade us to do that or anything, but it really invoked [pause] it got me thinking more.”

Conclusions

This research study endeavored to respond to the question “To what extent might an entry-level, undergraduate Christian theology course in a contemporary American Catholic university impact the faith practice of students?” Could such change be documented, and if so, could the causes of that change be identified? The study’s quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews indicate that some students experienced a significant change in their personal values related to religious faith and faith practice due to their participation in an undergraduate theology course. This study further concludes that the personal change evident in some of the students correlates with fundamental premises for the course.

The four premises explicit in the course syllabus flow from this university’s identity and mission and are informed by pedagogy for significant learning experiences, insights from sociological studies, and best practices in education. First, relationships and community in the class is the basis of learning; second, conversations, not propositions, are educational; third, student questions are essential; fourth, students’ own ideas and experiences are foundational to engaging the content. These premises become operational through instructional practices and assessment strategies intended to engage students in a variety of ways and propose the Gospel of Jesuit Christ to them in a meaningful way without proselytizing or indoctrinating. This includes encountering and defining prayer; defining spirituality and experiencing spiritual practices; understanding and evaluating scripture; and the invitation to consider the relevance of the course content, including Christian doctrine, for their lives. The evidence gleaned in the surveys and elaborated on in the interviews suggest these encounters were memorable, possibly valuable, and impacted some of their faith practices.

The final conclusion is that an undergraduate theology course can be a place of evangelization, carefully understood as “engagement” and “proposal.” This is evident both in Ex Corde Ecclesiae and documents from the Society of Jesus applicable in Jesuit institutions. What exactly “engagement” and “proposal” means is nebulous, but that does not mean it is not operative and important. It may be best understood as a disposition on the part of the instructor towards the content and the students that could be summarized as “Students need to meet the cognitive learning outcomes for this course; in doing so, they will engage the Catholic, Christian tradition and be invited to evaluate and incorporate its relevance for their lives: the extent to which they value and incorporate those tenets and doctrines remains with them.”
Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, this study closes with the following recommendations for strategies that align with the four foundational premises of the course.

To intentionally foster community in the class, instructors can:
• Refer to the importance of community for learning both in the syllabus and orally in class
• Learn each student’s name and a bit about each’s background
• Assign partners for brief, focused conversations in a variety of ways so students talk with different classmates
• Incorporate a brief ice-breaker at the outset of the course and continually encourage new conversation partners to learn each other’s names

To cultivate a climate of conversation in the class, instructors can:
• Facilitate and encourage questions and conversation among the students in small groups and the large class forum
• Provide feedback orally and in writing that responds to students’ ideas and promotes further response

To frame instruction around questions for and from the students, instructors can:
• Prepare “essential” questions for each lesson and share them with the students
• Frame questions and their responses as the start of a conversation with further questions and responses
• Hold students accountable in a variety of ways for responding questions

To explicitly invite students’ experience and ideas into their engagement with the content, instructors can:
• Encourage students to draw on their own experience in responding to questions
• Facilitate students’ assessment and possible re-evaluation of their experience in light of new understandings based on the course content
• Craft assignments and assessments that invite students’ assessment of the content after demonstrating they have met the cognitive learning outcomes
REFERENCES


