The Ignatian *Examen*: A Paradigm for Setting Mission Priorities at AJCU Schools

**Why an Examen?**

While the mechanics of the institutional self-study process are in some respects similar to the various accreditation processes in which Jesuit schools participate (e.g., a small peer review teams visits the school and meets with a variety of groups, a report is written in advance, etc.), the starting place is wholly different, and rooted firmly in the Ignatian tradition. The principal purpose of the self-study is not to subject the school to external scrutiny. Rather, it is to provide every Jesuit school with the personnel, structure, and opportunity for deep reflection on how it expresses its Jesuit, Catholic mission, and how it will set mission priorities for the future.

To that end, the Society of Jesus envisions the current self-study process as an **Examination of Consciousness (“Examen”),** which is the pattern of spiritual self-reflection described by St. Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises. By recommending the Examen as a framework for the self-study, the Society has underscored the need for a process that is: (a) institutionally reflective, (b) sensitive to the distinctive circumstances and potential of each school, and (c) undertaken for the purpose of mission.

**The Examen for Individuals**

For an individual, the Examen provides an opportunity to reflect on the events of the day, noting one’s interior movements of “consolation” and “desolation,” and growing in an awareness of God’s invitational presence. Over time, these daily snapshots of our spiritual selves reveal essential trends and directions in our lives. They clarify the arc of our relationships and the many choices that lead us toward or away from a free and generous life. Just as putting thousands of tiny, still frames of film together creates a “moving picture” that tells a story, regularly practicing the Examen helps us put the still shots of each day together, to see with greater clarity where we are in the narrative of our life, and where God is calling us to be.

The structure of the Ignatian Examen is designed to aid us in meaningful, daily reflection. Ignatius suggests some simple steps, which can be paraphrased as:
Becoming gratefully aware of God’s presence and gifts
Reviewing the events of our day, and noticing our spiritual and emotional responses
Selecting one or two experiences from the day that “stick” in our consciousness, and asking for insight on them
Taking responsibility for our failings, and asking God for help and support
Envisioning how we might live in a renewed way tomorrow, in light of God’s transforming love
Closing in prayer and thanksgiving

What sets the Examen apart from other reflective spiritual practices? Do not most of us already acknowledge the wisdom of the maxim attributed to Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living”? Many of us pray and reflect for our own spiritual growth, and to heighten our awareness of God’s desires for us. But the Ignatian Examen goes a step further. **The purpose of the Examen is to help us grow in spiritual readiness for mission.** Because God’s love flows in an outward direction – continually healing, renewing, creating, and restoring – we, too, are called to love in an active, encompassing way. The personal self-reflection that the Examen entails always has spiritual and practical consequences for others.

A number of helpful print and electronic resources explore the practice of the Ignatian Examen for individuals, including:

- **The Daily Examen** (Loyola Press)
- **The Daily Examen** (Society of Jesus in the U.S.)
- **Rummaging for God: Praying backward through Your Day** (Hamm)
- **A Simple, Life Changing Prayer** (Manny)
- **Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from Your Day** (Thibodeaux)

**Conducting a Mission Priority Examen on Campus**

It is the hope of the Society of Jesus that all AJCU schools will enter into their institutional mission review and priority-setting processes prayerfully and with attention to the basic elements of the Examen. The dynamic of the Examen is easily adaptable for this purpose. Juxtaposing individual and institutional applications highlights the ways in which the Mission Priority Examen can draw upon this foundational Ignatian method of prayer:
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<tr>
<th>Individual Examen</th>
<th>Mission Priority Examen</th>
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<tr>
<td>Becoming gratefully aware of God’s presence and gifts</td>
<td>▪ The Campus Examen Committee reflects gratefully together on the school’s current Jesuit, Catholic mission commitments, and listens to the experiences of colleagues and students. With the President, they design an approach to the Examen process that is consistent with the schools’ circumstances and culture.</td>
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<td>▪ The Campus Examen Committee and President work with the Provincial Assistant for Higher Education to identify and invite a Peer Visiting Committee of (typically) four companions in mission (colleagues from other AJCU schools) to assist them in the Examen process.</td>
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<td>Reviewing the events of our day, and noticing our spiritual and emotional responses</td>
<td>▪ The Campus Examen Committee writes a brief and thoughtful self-study that includes points of alignment with the mission (spiritual consolation) and areas for renewal or growth (desolation).</td>
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<td>▪ Using the themes of Some Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities as a guiding document, the Campus Examen Committee and President articulate a few -- two to four is a good number -- clear mission priorities for the school, with the understanding that these priorities are likely to be adapted at later stages of the process.</td>
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<td>Selecting one or two experiences from the day that “stick” in our consciousness, and asking for insight on them</td>
<td>▪ The Peer Visiting Committee reads the self-study and spends several days at the school, meeting with various constituencies. The Peer Visiting Committee engages this work as companions in mission, who wish to see the school’s Jesuit, Catholic mission thrive and grow in every dimension of its work.</td>
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<td>▪ At the end of the campus visit, the Peer Visiting Committee meets with the President and Campus Examen Committee to talk together about the Peer Visiting Committee’s impressions and the school’s mission priorities.</td>
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<td>Taking responsibility for our failings, and asking God for help and support</td>
<td>▪ After the campus visit, both the Peer Visiting Committee and the Campus Examen Committee/President reflect prayerfully on what they have read and heard.</td>
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<td>Envisioning how we might live in a renewed way tomorrow, in light of God’s transforming love</td>
<td>▪ The Peer Visiting Committee writes a draft report that highlights the school’s mission successes, along with selected areas for growth and improvement. The draft report is shared with the school’s President.</td>
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An iterative exchange ensues, during which the Campus Examen Committee may suggest emendations to the Peer Visiting Committee’s report. The Campus Examen Committee/President may also choose to adapt their original self-study (especially their mission priorities), to reflect new insights gained through the Examen process. The school asks whether its current institutional priorities now call for adaptation or change, going forward.

Closing in prayer and thanksgiving

- At the conclusion of this dialogic process, the Peer Visiting Committee submits its final report, along with the school’s final self-study, to the National Coordinating Committee. The National Coordinating Committee reflects prayerfully on what it has received, and shares it with leaders of the Society of Jesus (i.e., the Provincial, and the Presidents of the Jesuit Conference and AJCU). These Jesuit officials receive the materials prayerfully and with a deep desire for the school to live its Jesuit, Catholic mission in the most authentic way possible.
- The Provincial and President of the Jesuit Conference add their own reflections in writing and send them, along with the self-study and Peer Visiting Committee report, to the Jesuit Superior General in Rome.
- Fr. General reflects on what he has received, and sends a letter to the Provincial that affirms the school’s mission priorities and Jesuit, Catholic identity. The Provincial contacts the President to share the General’s affirmation.
- The university President shares the news with his/her own campus, and sets in motion the next steps of acting on the mission priorities. Acting on the priorities reflects the true completion of the Examen process, which is a prayerful tool for mission in our schools.

Casting the self-study process as an Examen is important for helping every school recall the larger purpose of this important project. If Jesuit colleges and universities are truly seeking to deepen their mission commitments, then their very process must communicate that desire. A more detailed and specific series of steps for conducting the Examen is enumerated in the 2016-2017 Mechanism for Self-Study, Peer Review, and Assessment which is elsewhere on this
webpage. For New England and Maryland schools, a more targeted version of the 2016-2017 Mechanism is supplied by their Assistant Provincial for Higher Education.

Schools that find the Examen process helpful may choose to follow up in forthcoming years with additional “snapshots” of their campus, or to focus an Examen on one particular dimension of campus life. While not a requirement, this would certainly add depth to a college or university’s self-understanding and decision-making.