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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reclaiming the Jesuit Notion of Desire: Considerations for the Modern Educational Context

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ABSTRACT

Amid a documented "meaning crisis" among adolescents and young adults, this article reclaims the Jesuit notion of desire as a pre-discernment, animating force for purpose, belonging, and holistic formation. Drawing on Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit educational tradition, I argue that genuine desire, properly named, tested, and ordered, can orient learners toward flourishing. The paper traces desire's historical role in Jesuit mission and pedagogy and proposes contemporary applications for both Jesuit and secular institutions organized around six practices: examining, expressing, envisioning, encountering, experiencing, and engaging. These practices cultivate attention, imagination, and communal responsibility, linking interior movements to outward action. While not a panacea, desire-oriented formation offers actionable pathways to counter disengagement and to renew education's end: forming persons capable of meaningful, hopeful lives in service of the common good.

Keywords:
Ignatian spirituality; desire, discernment; meaning crisis; Ratio Studiorum; Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm; formative education

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"Ite, inflammate omnia."

—The salutation of St. Ignatius of Loyola
in letters to the Society of Jesus's original missionaries.

Young People and Meaninglessness: A Contemporary Crisis

Amidst the various descriptors applied to modern day youth, a 2024 report from the World Happiness Index offers a profoundly sobering adjective: *adrift*. Lacking an enduring sense of both happiness and meaning, young people around the globe increasingly report living an aimless life. Absent an abiding sense of purpose, the consequences for young people's—and society's—immediate future and beyond present as dangerous: "[w]hen happiness wanes, so does motivation, productivity, health and life expectancy."[1] Owing to pressures ranging from global economic instability to technology's socially destabilizing effects to systemic sustainability challenges, the arrival of "The Meaning Crisis"[2]—and its critical consequences for adolescents and young adults—appears as an incontrovertible reality. The sense of purposelessness among young people in the United States in particular has been chronicled at length. Emily Esfahani Smith identifies contemporary meaninglessness markers such as the pernicious increase in suicide among 15- to 24-year olds in the country and, in more recent years, the notable *decrease* in a reported sense of meaning alongside an *increase* in perceived social detachment among high school and university students.[3] Jonathan Haidt points to the near-doubling from 2010 to 2018 of the percentage of US high school seniors who agreed or mostly agreed with the statement "Life often feels meaningless."[4] Research conducted by William Damon and team indicates that among American 12- to 22-year olds, only 20% feel a sense of purpose in their lives, 25% have no aspira-

1 Ruma Bhargava, "A Generation Adrift: Why Young People Are Less Happy and What We Can Do About It," *World Economic Forum*, April 8, 2024, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/04/youth-young-people-happiness/.

2 Grace Greenwald, *Distinctive Pedagogies that Address the "Meaning Crisis" in Higher Education: Case Studies from Microcolleges and Living-Learning Institutes* (Springboard Foundation for Whole Person Learning, 2024), https://indd.adobe.com/view/50a1af48-a183-4a1e-91bb-c70ae0defa91.

3 Smith notes that suicide rates tripled during the second half of the twentieth century and continued to climb during the 2000s. The latter research (reported sense of meaning and social detachment) was conducted in 2010. Emily Esfahani Smith, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* (Crown, 2017), 22, 58.

4 Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024), 195.

tions at all, and nearly 60% have participated in purpose-related activities or conceived of broad aspirations for themselves but "they do not have any real commitment to such activities or any realistic plans for pursuing their aspirations."[5]

It would not be an exaggeration to characterize the modern malaise as a *generational* crisis. In addition to low levels of overall reported happiness, young people are challenged to identify the meaning or purpose in their academic pursuits. Absent sensing an abiding relevance in their coursework or genuine desire to grow in holistic ways, attending class becomes reduced to an exercise of "doing school," a phrase created by Denise Pope to convey American high school students' participation in educational activities as if engaged in a zero-sum contest: "Having cleverly determined what kind of behavior gets rewarded in school, they have devoted themselves to pursuing strategies that lead to this kind of success."[6] Schooling itself takes on the quality of an "end" toward which young people proceed. In lieu of secondary or tertiary education propelling individual and social growth, complete with engagement of life's essential and enduring questions, formal education can assume the prospect of being performatively completed. Viewed as such, drudgery prevails. The march to a diploma or other form of credentialing invites a cadence marked by a learner's listless slog instead of an enlivened sprint.

In addition to the individual challenges posed to those who avoid—or, due to limited educational opportunity, are barely exposed—to the possibilities of realizing fuller and more profound dimensions of life, significant and harmful societal consequences present as realistic possibilities. Meaninglessness among youth can translate into purposelessness among adults, triggering a series of health-related and economic ramifications. Though seemingly distinct in nature, students' engagement (or the lack thereof) in their studies and the collective cost of maintaining societal health represent intertwined concepts. The downstream effects of a youth meaning crisis, exacerbated by disengagement from formal study, portend deep challenges for individuals and society. A 2023 report by the US Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, identified the correlation between meaning and purpose in an individual's life and their connection to a community or communities. The report further linked life purpose to health: "[a] sense of meaning positively contributes to health because it motivates greater self-regulation in pursuing goals—including

5 William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (Free Press, 2008), 8.

6 Denise Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (Yale University Press, 2001), 150.

health goals."[7] The costs of social isolation (and their attendant impact on individuals' sense of meaning) are significant; among older adults alone, the prevalence of isolation generates an additional $6.7 billion in Medicare spending per year in the United States, while loneliness-related absenteeism from work renders an annual cost of $154 billion to society.[8] Meaning matters—to one's sense of self; to one's relationship to others; and to the economic, social, political, and cultural fabric of communities and society.

Amidst mounting evidence that meaninglessness persists among young people and, consequently, engenders a series of interrelated personal and communal challenges, this paper explores a potential pathway toward advancing purposefulness within younger generations.[9] Far from constituting a comprehensive, "silver bullet" solution as a standalone initiative, the cultivation of *desire* within young people nonetheless represents a worthwhile pursuit. Operating from that perspective, I present the notion of desire as it has been conceived within the Jesuit educational tradition, and given this paper's focus on young people, explore desire's role within Jesuit pedagogy to understand its place in formative education and development. Exploring how desire has appeared, overtly and subtly, throughout the Society's work, I offer considerations for "reclaiming" desire and its potential to inspire policy and programming in both Jesuit and non-Jesuit educational settings.

Broadly, the notion of desire is offered as a construct that includes the sense of imagination, inspiration, and abiding energy that a young person could draw from as they undergo formative life experiences. In contrast to the spiritlessness of youth that appears endemic in the modern day, desire serves as a "spark" of potential and possibility and, as such, deserves its own distinction, as it occupies a slightly different space than related concepts such as "discernment" or "vocation." Desire represents something of a pre-discernment development—an initial interior movement that has the power to animate deeper discovery of an individual's authentic sense of self and lead one to living out one's vocation. As such, desire deserves treatment, for it serves as a precursor to or basis for discerning and living

7 US Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), accessed May 7, 2025, https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf, 33.

8 US Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, 9.

9 For the purposes of this paper, "young people" refers to those between the ages of 14 and 29 years old, which generally covers adolescence through young adulthood.

a life of meaning and purpose. While it could also serve to lead a person into activities that run counter to their best interests, including harmful behaviors such as lust or greed, desire is conceived of as a reflection of one's "best self" within this paper. Consequently, it appears with the occasional "genuine" or "authentic" descriptor to reinforce the notion of desire as that which leads one in living a unique and profound life.

Below, five definitional dimensions of desire, anchored in Jesuit spirituality, are offered and serve as the basis for exploring desire's potential for advancing education and formation in young people.

Desire: A Foundational Role in the Jesuit Spiritual Tradition

Located centrally within the Jesuit tradition, desire occupies a meaningful place within the spirituality that was developed and proclaimed beginning with St. Ignatius of Loyola and has persisted over five centuries. The bedrock spiritual work of the Jesuit order, the *Spiritual Exercises*, characterizes desire as a sensation that deserves to be heeded and not ignored. Pivotal in the spiritual pilgrim's journey, desire serves to lead one toward the ultimate, vocational end, or "desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we were created."[10] This "Principle and Foundation"[11] of the *Spiritual Exercises* articulates the guide by which an exercitant ought to orient their thoughts, words, and actions: all intentions and endeavors should point toward God. Desire, then, shapes the contours of one's vocational decisions; in line with the Jesuit tenet of "finding God in all things," "everything has the potential of calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God."[12] Desire serves to beckon or invite those willing to explore the depths of their faith and, ultimately, respond

10 The text represents a contemporary translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* in David L. Fleming, S.J., *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), [23]. The contemporary reading of the same text reads "Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me."

11 Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, [23]. The contemporary reading translates the initial section title of the *Spiritual Exercises* as "Foundation: Fact and Practice."

12 This text comes from the contemporary version of *The Spiritual Exercises*. While there is not an equivalent sentence in the literal version, there is mention in the traditional reading, as in the contemporary version, of indifference toward "all created things" and an invitation to focus on what leads to God. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, [23].

by "elect[ing] for the greater glory of God our Lord."[13] The prominence and consistent appearance of desire's place in the *Spiritual Exercises* reflect its significant role in advancing the spiritual journey.[14] A first characteristic of desire, anchored in the Jesuit spiritual tradition, is *its role as a core determinant of noticing and acknowledging God's presence*."

The characterization of desire in the *Spiritual Exercises* demonstrates a second important dimension of its definition, or *its relational nature*. While an exercitant necessarily spends time in quiet and contemplative space, they are also called to participate in dialogue with a spiritual director and, importantly, with the divine. Paralleling the experience of St. Ignatius, the exploration of what an exercitant deeply desires never entails a solitary pursuit but always involves a clarity-seeking dialogue with God.[15] In addition to providing needed direction on emerging desires, engaging the divine aids in the process of discerning whether observed desires serve to lead one toward or away from the greater glory of God. A third characteristic of desire concerns *its inherent imaginative quality*. In their work on desire and its role in the missionary history of the Jesuits, Emanuele Colombo and Marina Massimi assert that the Order's missionaries have explored their desires through the *Spiritual Exercises* by engaging their visual faculties. As the spiritual pilgrims participate in daily and weekly exercises, Colombo and Massimi write, they are invited to discern the presence of God by picturing the life of Jesus and rendering a *compositio loci*, or "visual composition of place."[16] The entirety of one's senses play a role in the spiritual journey as the exercitant participates in an expanded form of imagination vis-à-vis their desires. As well, through contemplation with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they envision the unfolding of the global human drama "with human beings 'so diverse in dress and behavior: some white and others black, some in peace and others at war, some weeping

13 Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, [185]. The contemporary version of this line, which refers to the process of making a "good and sound election," reads, "to respond better to God's call."

14 As Emanuele Colombo and Marina Massimi detail in writing about the appearance of the *Spiritual Exercises* in the sixteenth century, "for the first time in Western spirituality, desire and its satisfaction—and not a theological or anthropological doctrine—became the criterion for recognizing the divine action on human beings." Emanuele Colombo and Marina Massimi, "In the School of Desire: Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuits, and the Missionary Vocation," in *Images of Desire in the Mediterranean World*, ed. Agostino Paravicini Bagliani and Pietro Silanos (SISMEL – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2024), 492.

15 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 492.

16 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 494.

and others laughing, some healthy and others sick, some being born and others dying.'"[17]

Another foundational document in the Jesuit tradition, the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, contains no fewer than fifty substantive references to "desire" or "desires" in guiding the formation of the Society's members. As evidenced by the regular mention of desire in the text, attention to one's underlying motivations and aspirations merits due consideration.[18] The *Constitutions* provide a fourth dimension of desire, or *its ongoing and enduring role in the formation of an individual*. Adherents of the *Constitutions* are called to cultivate a sustained vocational call to serve Christ, or to "continue to make a general confession in the manner stated, every six months beginning from the last, thus procuring a continuous increase of integrity and virtues and intense desires in our Lord to give great service in this Society to his Divine Majesty."[19] The call to follow Christ serves as profound motivation for those entering the Order; they are directed "to abhor in its totality and not in part whatever the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible energy whatever Christ our Lord has loved and embraced."[20] Further, desire involves *fully embodied engagement*, a fifth characteristic. Barton Geger, S.J. writes of St. Ignatius's characterization of authentic desire as articulated throughout the *Constitutions*; the Jesuit founder describes desire as "wholehearted, ardent, intense, holy, genuine, and pure."[21] The descriptors reflect a call to explore desire by carefully noticing affective and corporal activity. As well, the potential for the emergence of acute feelings and emotions through consideration of desire reflects the need for the whole body to assume an observant posture.[22] Further, the embodied element of desire aligns with the commitment to *action* emerging from exploration of desire. With insight into one's desirous inclinations, an individual is invited to make such understanding manifest and translate desire into meaningful life activity.

17 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 494–95.

18 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: A Critical Edition with the Complementary Norms*, ed. Barton T. Geger, S.J. (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2024), 588.

19 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 113.

20 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 114.

21 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 115.

22 Further detailing the nuances of the concept, the notion of desire is distinguished from that of willing something, which involves an individual's pursuit of an objective good. Drawing upon St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, desire represents something to which one is "affectively or sensually drawn" and ought to be cultivated in order to lead a follower to objective goods. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 114–15.

Both historical and modern accounts of desire point to its ongoing significance within the Jesuit spiritual tradition. The missionary spirit that runs throughout Jesuit history features desire as an integral element.[23] Again, Colombo and Massimi capture the essence of desire by chronicling its place within Jesuit missionary efforts, and particularly its extensive appearance in the narratives conveyed by the Society's early missionaries. Consistent across the text of more than sixteen thousand preserved letters, or *litterae indipetae*, from missionary applicants between the 1560s and the suppression of the Order in 1773 were expressions of desire to embark on spiritual journeys to new lands.[24] Analysis by Colombo and Massimi reveals various desire categories within the letters' narratives, including:

- an uncontainable or unquenchable desire, including difficulty in accurately expressing the depth of desire,
- imagination, dreams, and temptation; in line with the *compositio loci* of the *Spiritual Exercises*, missionaries conveyed imaginative ponderings,
- anterior desire, or a series of vocational prompts leading a candidate to missionary desire,
- the desire for martyrdom, with frequent references to past martyrs, Jesuit or otherwise,
- indifferent desire, acknowledging that their futures were in the hands of God—and their superiors—and so expressed a willingness to consent to the determinations about their futures,
- the repetition of expressions of desire, including through multiple *indipetae*,
- and articulation of frustrated desire among would-be missionaries.[25]

More contemporary reflections on Ignatian spirituality point to the centrality of desire as a consequential step toward living a meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling life. In line with a foundational tenet of the Society of Jesus, meaning is realized through pursuits that are inclined toward (and respond to) the greater glory of God. Building on the notion of desire and its embeddedness within the Jesuit spiritual tradition, James Martin, S.J., conveys the profound link to the divine that inner impulses reveal, as "de-

23 While such history, now extending centuries into the past, reflects the nuances of a particular time and place in the Jesuit tradition, the enduring nature of desire in shaping the futures of young people underscores its importance both then and now.

24 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 501–4.

25 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 501–22.

sire is a key way that God speaks to us."[26] The communicative element of desire reinforces its social nature and reflects the depth inherent in desire exploration. Engagement between God and humans aimed at exploring interior movements provides a pathway to make sense of emerging aspirations or inclinations. Left alone, a feeling, sensation, or emotion could remain an isolated psychological or corporal experience. Through prompting and probing, reflecting and comprehending, desire is recognized as a potentially profound—and divinely inspired—experience. Related to Martin's categorization of desire as God-speak, Monika Hellwig identifies the cohesiveness that arises through engagement with the *Spiritual Exercises*. Participation in the spiritual routine renders "a wholly integrated universe, society, and personal life" akin to the spiritual life experience of St. Ignatius himself and which must be deliberately pursued by the modern day exercitant.[27] In addition to providing a means of connecting and engaging with the divine, the cultivation of one's deep desire offers a starting point for living a coherent, purposeful, and whole life.

Desire and the Jesuit Pedagogical Tradition

Stemming from the core concept of desire within Ignatian spirituality, desire carries significance throughout the history of the Jesuit educational tradition. In ways both overt and subtle, desire appears as a component of educational practice and represents an underlying dimension of the formative and holistic development of those who have experienced Jesuit education. One of the earliest references to desire as foundational to the Society's educational efforts appears in the emergence of the Society of Jesus itself. Pierre Favre, S.J., "First Companion" of St. Ignatius of Loyola, articulated a link between the *holiness* implicit in the nascent Order's spirituality and *knowing* through the Society's original charges.[28] In guiding the first Jesuit companions as they embarked upon formal academic training in Paris through the "Spiritual Aspects of Studies in Jesuit Formation," Favre instructs them to consider the alignment between their education goals and the enduring and deeper aim of their vocation:

26 James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (HarperOne, 2010), 58.

27 Monika K. Hellwig, "Finding God in All Things: A Spirituality for Today," in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. George W. Traub, S.J. (Loyola Press, 2008), 53.

28 James Martin, S.J., "Who Was Saint Pierre Favre?" *America Magazine*, November 24, 2013, accessed November 23, 2025, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/11/24/who-was-saint-pierre-favre/.

> [. . .] Our Redeemer Jesus Christ give all of you all the grace you need to enable you to carry forward your studies to your intended goal, without relaxing the bow of your intentions; so that in the end you might be able to delight in the Lord over the triumph you will win, if you do not extinguish the spirit of a holy thinking and feeling [*el espiritu del santo sentir*] with the spirit of knowing [*el espiritu del saber*].[29]

Favre links the pursuit of holiness with the pursuit of knowing, or of knowledge, writing further:

> This desire of mine and of the entire Society will be easily accomplished, with Christ as our leader, provided that the supreme instructor and the final printer of the letters is always your *repetitor*. This is the Holy Spirit, in whom whatever is known is known well, and without whom, whoever knows anything does not yet know in the way he should know it [1 Cor. 8:2].[30]

Favre identifies an end—*the* end—toward which a Jesuit's studies ought to be aimed, noting that educational pursuits should be directed toward Christ. As well, the Jesuit-as-learner receives instruction from Christ-the-teacher, as Favre makes clear the educative role that Christ provides: "If therefore Christ, our teacher, our light and peace, who is the way, the truth, and our life [John 14:6] desires us to keep his spirit not only through the feeling of the will and the heart, but also by means of the knowledge of understanding."[31] Favre emphasizes the idea that a new Jesuit's educational efforts comprise more than intellectual strengthening; learning ought to entail a *spiritual* awakening, consistent with the founding of the Jesuit Order through St. Ignatius's emphasis on the interior journey. As well, Favre establishes an aspiration, realized over centuries of operation by Jesuit schools, colleges, and universities, that Jesuit-led education necessarily aims toward constructing a holistic, whole-person, formative experience for its students.

The embedded nature of desire, and of discernment and spiritual freedom more broadly, appears in the development of one of the first Jesuit educational institutions, its sixteenth-century school in Coimbra, Portugal. From there, education manuals were developed and distributed to Jesuit schools and colleges throughout the world.[32] Desire appeared as

29 Pierre Favre, S.J., "Spiritual Aspects of Studies in Jesuit Formation," in *Jesuit Pedagogy, 1540–1616: A Reader*, ed. Cristiano Casalini and Claude Pavur, S.J. (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016), 37.

30 Favre, "Spiritual Aspects of Studies in Jesuit Formation," 38.

31 Favre, "Spiritual Aspects of Studies in Jesuit Formation," 38.

32 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 489.

a substantive element of academic content, as the insights offered by various Jesuit professors on the work of Aristotle, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas included notable conceptions of desire's dimensions. The constitutive elements of desire, or "appetite," included both "sensitive appetite"—"related to sensibility and thus to the movement of the internal and external senses"—and "intellectual appetite"—which "is directed by higher psychic processes; namely cognition . . . and will."[33] The Coimbra professors identified *will* as a potent force—one that can act on immaterial and material levels—whose psychic influence was worthy of close attention. Similarly, desire itself deserved not only careful observation but also meaningful ordering "in such a way that it was harmoniously articulated and oriented toward the common good."[34]

As well, the *Ratio Studiorum*, the Society's foundational 1599 document outlining the Jesuit approach to education, offers glimpses of desire as a core component of Jesuit schooling. Within the opening lines of the document, desire underscores the work of the Jesuit Provincial in advancing impactful education, as those inhabiting such roles are called to be inspired by and exhibit divine love:

> Since one of the leading ministries of our Society is teaching our neighbors all the disciplines in keeping with our Institute in such a way that they are thereby aroused to a knowledge and love of our Maker and Redeemer, the provincial should consider himself obliged to do his utmost to ensure that our diverse and complex educational labor meets with the abundant results that the grace of our calling demands of us.[35]

A desire-like inclination appears in the invitation for superiors to be moved by a profound sense of love for God. Compelled by such love and the "grace of our calling," they are driven toward action. Consequently, a "desire formula" emerges: knowledge and love, or reason and faith, are piqued, leading to meaningful, spiritually infused activity. The call to delve within oneself, and to help others make sense of themselves, is reflected in the commitment to humanistic studies outlined in the *Ratio Studiorum*. Rhetoric, poetry, logic, oratory, philosophy, and theology all represent substantive disciplines—and all conceivably contribute to learners noticing interior promptings and acting on such inclinations, in line with the contours of desire. John O'Malley, S.J., probes the humanistic tradition within Jesuit pedagogy and notes that when the aforementioned humanistic top-

33 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 499.

34 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 501.

35 Claude Pavur, S.J., trans., *The* Ratio Studiorum*: The Official Plan for Jesuit Education* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2005), 7.

ics were taught well, they "were believed to develop an upright, articulate, and socially committed person."[36] In line with the conception of desire, the student of Jesuit schools was called to act ethically (or "upright," suggesting alignment between authentic desire and action), to convey ideas in compelling fashion (putting words to interior observations), and to participate in communal action (reflective of their social commitments, or desire-led engagement beyond him or herself).

The Jesuit embrace of humanistic studies as conveyed by O'Malley further reinforces the necessity of interior exploration alongside developing a meaningful devotion to society at large. The duality of forming an inner awareness attuned to the nuances of desire and orientation toward others relates to another core dimension of the Jesuit tradition and pedagogical history. The notion of "contemplatives in action," termed by one of the original Jesuit companions, Jerónimo Nadal, S.J., helps explain the Jesuit approach to living in the world, and its tenets align with the conception of desire outlined in this paper. The exploration of the divine, and of one's core desire emanating from the presence of God, occurs in both the silence of prayer and the activity of daily life.[37] Through a self-reinforcing process, contemplation informs action, while action serves to deepen one's contemplative stance. As well, attending to the practice of contemplation in action invites relational consideration as one considers their connection to others and how one ought to operate within social contexts.[38] Contemplation in the Jesuit tradition is not restricted to "I / myself," but requires consideration of how one activates the desires emerging from a commitment to contemplation.

Of course, the project of recognizing and cultivating desire does not fall squarely on the student in Jesuit contexts, as the instructor plays a pivotal role in noticing and nurturing a learner's inner motivations. In 1703,

36 John W. O'Malley, S.J., "From the 1599 *Ratio Studiorum* to the Present: A Humanistic Tradition?" in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum of 1599: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (Fordham University Press, 2000), 127.

37 Agustín Udías, "Epilogue," in *Jesuit Contributions to Science* (Springer, 2015), 238.

38 Cristiano Casalini offers that the context in which a Jesuit would consider his vocation is broader than an immediate social space: "Like the anti-monastic culture of the Protestant Reformation, even for the Jesuits the world became an eminent place for the manifestation of the will of God and for the askesis of the individual, who is always in search of his/her worldly mission. In this way, the Jesuits always conceived of themselves as 'contemplatives in action.'" Cristiano Casalini, "Active Leisure: The Body in Sixteenth-Century Jesuit Culture," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 1, no. 3 (2014): 402, https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00103003.

Joseph de Jouvancy, S.J., wrote in his piece on Jesuit pedagogy, *The Way to Learn and the Way to Teach*, about the tone-setting energy required by an instructor: "if the teacher wants to fashion students of a certain kind, he should be that way himself, and even more outstandingly so, indeed just as original paintings from which copies are made ought to be the most fully furnished."[39] In addition to supporting students in their own desire-understanding practices, the teacher serves as a model for living out one's vocational impulses. As well, the teacher-student interaction with respect to cultivating interiority reinforces the social nature of advancing one's aspirations. Beyond instructing students in curricular content, the teacher can assume the role of interlocutor by discussing and exploring with students the authenticity of their desires, akin to the practice of a spiritual director.

The 1934 *Instructio*, or "New Instruction," issued to the Jesuits in the United States emphasizes the Society's commitment to cultivating the personal, interior, and spiritual development of those in the Order's schools.[40] Superior General Wlodimir Ledóchowski asserted that Jesuit education's end "is to help students know and love God more deeply" and, with that objective in mind, that its formal schooling ought to uphold a devotion to learning that surpasses intellectual development and attends to the "whole person."[41] Of particular note, Ledóchowski wrote that teachers, in seeking to emphasize the personal care of students, "strive to guide and assist each individual student with counsel and encouragement."[42] The charge for teachers to *direct*, *help*, and *exhort* students reflects the relational elements of offering guidance to those in their care. Learners are expected to be in conversation and community with their instructors; rather than existing in isolation, students' underlying motivations and outward expressions are to be engaged through interaction with educators. The closeness of the teacher-student bond coupled with the call to provide personal care cre-

39 Joseph de Jouvancy, S.J., *The Way to Learn and the Way to Teach*, ed. Cristiano Casalini and Claude Pavur, S.J. (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2020), 167.

40 For a critical English translation of this document, see A. Taiga Guterres, "Articulating a Jesuit Philosophy of Education in the Twentieth Century: A Critical Translation and Commentary on the *Instructio* of 1934 and 1948," *Jesuit Educational Quarterly,* 2nd ser., 1, no. 1 (2025): 73–114, https://doi.org/10.51238/1ZnRn8z.

41 Barton T. Geger, S.J., "Cura Personalis: Some Ignatian Inspirations," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014): 6.

42 Wladimir Ledóchowski, S.J., *Instructio pro Assistentia Americae de Ordinandis Universitatibus, Collegiis ac Scholis Altis et de Praeparandis Eorundem Magistris* ("Instructions for the United States Assistancy on the Governance of Universities, Colleges and High Schools, and on the Formation of their Teachers"), trans. A. Taiga Guterres.

ates space in which a young person's desires, wishes, hopes, or inspirations could be recognized, discerned, and cultivated.

More contemporary educational texts characterize the significance of desire and related dimensions as germane to the Jesuit education project. The 1986 document *Characteristics of Jesuit Education* offers various components to Jesuit schooling that support the process of individuals noticing and nurturing their authentic desires. In particular, the document emphasizes the development of the imaginative, affective, and creative dimensions of students' lives throughout their course of study, as "[t]hese dimensions enrich learning and prevent it from being merely intellectual. They are essential in the formation of the whole person and are a way to discover God as He reveals Himself through beauty."[43] Further pertaining to the cultivation of desire, the Jesuit Curia calls for "the formation of a balanced person with a personally developed philosophy of life that includes ongoing habits of reflection" as well as an education that promotes the development of "the role of each individual as a member of the human community," both elements considered relevant to contemplating and activating desires—and both appropriate to students' time as school enrollees and beyond.[44] As well, *Characteristics* stresses the active participation of students in their learning—"personal study, opportunities for personal discovery and creativity, and an attitude of reflection"—and encourages "life-long openness to growth," all of which reinforce the development of inner promptings and aspirations.[45]

Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach (1993) reaffirms the commitment to students' interior maturation. In calling for students' formation as "men and women of competence, conscience and compassionate commitment," they are expected to be "enlivened by contemplation" and realize a "full and deeper formation" that includes "a striving . . . to achieve one's potential."[46] Central to living out the ideals in *Ignatian Pedagogy*, and true to the example of St. Ignatius's life, the *Spiritual Exercises* feature prominently in the work. Such spiritual exploration involves "the continual call to reflect upon the entirety of one's experience in prayer in order to discern where the Spirit of God is leading," an entreaty to engage one's desires.[47]

43 International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE), *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* (General Curia of the Society of Jesus, 1986), https://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/characteristics_en.pdf.

44 ICAJE, *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*.

45 ICAJE, *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*.

46 International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE), *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach* (Jesuit Education Secretariat, 1993), https://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/pedagogy_en.pdf.

47 ICAJE, *Ignatian Pedagogy*.

The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm emerges as the next stage of educational development; the dimensions of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation are all given attention in the learning journey. Taken together, such elements reinforce learning as more than an intellectual exercise but, again, one that takes the whole person into account. The student is encouraged to become an agent of their own learning, including reflecting critically on their growth and development. Through careful noticing of the nuances and intricacies of their motivations, learners explore meaning—conceivably, of underlying desire—associated with their formation. Again, the role of the instructor and the mutually supportive relationship between teacher and student surface as vital dimensions of formative education. In the context of considering students' desires, teachers serve to "accompany their students in order to facilitate learning and growth through encounters with truth and explorations of human meaning."[48]

A more current articulation of the Jesuit educational approach, *Jesuit Schools: A Living Tradition in the 21st Century* (2019), offers a modern-day emphasis on interiority. Although principally focused on how Jesuit learners engage with and are impacted by society, the document also identifies the ways in which students' spiritual lives can be enhanced. Again, the *Spiritual-Exercises*-as-anchor appears as a central precept, as individual and communal discernment animates the process of Jesuit educational development. Learners are called to orient their formation vis-a-vis their societal surroundings: "Jesuit schools should be . . . Catholic, committed to in-depth faith formation in dialogue with other religions and worldviews."[49] In a related manner, the document cites the declaration by Pope Francis that an authentic sense of faith "always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."[50] Reflective of the Jesuit Order's evolution over the course of the twentieth century, more contemporary references to interior development within the Society's educational tradition involve broader, societal considerations. Learners within the Jesuit education context are called to both reflect on their own spiritual growth and contemplate responsibilities beyond themselves, recognizing where their individual desires may lead to engagement with local and/or global communities.

48 ICAJE, *Ignatian Pedagogy*.

49 International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education (ICAJE), *Jesuit Schools: A Living Tradition in the 21st Century. An Ongoing Exercise of Discernment* (Secretariat for Education, Society of Jesus, 2019), 18, https://www.cristoreybalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Jesuit-Schools.-A-Living-Tradition-in-the-21st-Century-1.pdf.

50 ICAJE, *Jesuit Schools*, 69.

Reclaiming Desire: Contemporary Educational Considerations in Jesuit Schools and Beyond

What do 500 years of Jesuit pedagogical history and Ignatian spiritual tradition portend for schools and universities and their commitment to cultivating desire in the modern day? What are areas of emphasis for educational institutions—both within and outside of the Jesuit school space—to make desire, and the process of engaging with desire, more present and palpable? What follows includes some of what can be gleaned from the existence and expression of desire within the Jesuit tradition and what it could confer on contemporary education. While not intended to serve as prescriptive policies or programs, the areas of emphasis represent considerations with respect to nurturing and potentially reclaiming or reviving the notion of desire among young adults within the context of formal secondary and higher education.

Examining

True to Jesuit spirituality, exploring one's sense of desire necessarily involves "going within" and spending time noticing and reflecting on inner promptings, an activity that appears particularly daunting vis-a-vis the increasingly fractured sense of focus in modern day life. The rise of the attention economy alongside the exponential increase in access to information has led to what Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon has characterized as "a wealth of information creat[ing] a poverty of attention."[51] Contending with the challenges of information and sound overload feels acute in school settings in which digital devices and a steady stream of cacophonous interruptions mark the typical learning setting. Still, educational institutions maintain at least partial control over the environments in which they reside.

While practical moves emphasizing the cultivation of attention in educational environments have begun to take hold in various forms, building or strengthening "a culture of quiet" within schools and universities represents a path toward meaningful reform. Supporting learners as they concretize their interiority-focused practices and understand their inner promptings requires time set aside to allow for careful noticing, reflection, and contemplation. The busyness of a typical day of formal schooling serves as a challenge to providing opportunities for experiencing periodic stillness and quiet.[52] The recent introduction of mindful practice into classrooms

51 Ally Mintzer, "Paying Attention: The Attention Economy," *Berkeley Economic Review*, March 31, 2020, https://econreview.studentorg.berkeley.edu/paying-attention-the-attention-economy/.

52 There are numerous factors that contribute to any given school day's activity. Supporting the learning needs of all students, engaging all teachers and admin-

represents one means of combatting the energetic, and sometimes frenetic, activity present in a school. In addition to mindfulness interventions in school settings leading to better learning outcomes and contributing to the development of calmer classroom environments, research shows mindful activities advance social and emotional skill building, general behavior, and physical health for learners.[53] While attention to interiority appears more closely aligned with Jesuit pedagogical practice, the adoption by secular schools of cultivating critical and contemplative thinkers—through mindful activities, contemplative reflection, and "silent pedagogy"—aligns with an approach aimed at building the capacity of learners to examine and contemplate carefully.[54]

A commitment to learners' inner noticing sensibilities represents an extension of emphases within traditional schooling. Broadly, educational institutions' principal investments of time and energy tend to center on the development of the mind and, to some degree, the body. Meanwhile, attention to the spirit—the animating, aspirational, and vocational dimensions of one's life—occupies a fragment of overall schooling activity.[55] Meaning and purpose-related pursuits require *intentionality*, both in terms of scoping appropriate activities and creating space to reflect on the significance of engaging such opportunities, including noticing where elements of desire appear in young people's lives.[56] The spiritual development that features in

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istrators, providing robust extracurricular opportunities, and responding to operational demands are among the reasons school days tend to be characterized as "busy" or "full." Cube Staff, "Beyond Numbers: What Really Makes a School Busy," *Cube for Teachers Blog*, September 30, 2025, accessed November 24, 2025, https://blog.cubeforteachers.com/busy-schools/.

53 Mindfulness in Schools Project, "Evidence and Outcomes: Education-Based Mindfulness," accessed May 7, 2025, https://mindfulnessinschools.org/the-evidence-base/.

54 Dana Weeks, "The Value of Silence in Schools," *Edutopia*, October 15, 2018, accessed November 24, 2025, https://www.edutopia.org/article/value-silence-schools/.

55 A report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling reports that college counselors devote, on average, 38 minutes per year on each student for college counseling activity. While not fully reflective of spiritual or interior development, college counseling serves as one marker of such work, as it involves students' exploration of understanding themselves as well as imagining their future, aspirational selves. Patricia M. McDonough, *Counseling and College Counseling in America's High Schools* (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2005), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228682837_Counseling_and_college_counseling_in_America's_high_schools.

56 According to "A National Study of Spirituality in Higher Education," which involved surveying 14,527 students at 136 colleges and universities, "[s]tudents

Jesuit schools and universities, and religiously affiliated educational institutions more broadly, can meaningfully extend to non-religious schools. In exploring how Jesuit pedagogy might translate to public schools, Benjamin James Brenkert found that such an educational approach can

> lead students through context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation to become citizens who are men and women for others; who practice the care of the whole person; who are united in heart, mind, and soul; who do things not for self but for others (and possibly a higher power); who become agents of change; and who strive always to do more good in the world.[57]

In line with a Jesuit pedagogical approach, creating contemplative and reflective space in a school's academic and/or co-curricular program can aid in advancing students' spiritual development, and more specifically, in supporting the cultivation of learners' collective sense of desire.

Expressing

Drawing upon both Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit pedagogical tradition, the element of expression serves as a notable dimension of cultivating desire. Borrowing from components of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm—notably, experience, reflection, and action—expression within the Jesuit education context could include a host of activities aimed at sharing elements of a learner's authentic self through varied forms of articulation. As well, engaging desires through intentional practice aligns with dimensions of Jesuit pedagogical tradition, namely its embrace of humanism. As John Padberg, S.J., chronicles, students in France's nineteenth-century Jesuit colleges, employing the methods espoused in the *Ratio Studiorum*, learned literature by carefully exploring both words and writing structures

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show the greatest degree of growth in the five spiritual qualities (equanimity, spiritual quest, an ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and an ecumenical worldview) if they are actively engaged in 'inner work' through self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation." Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, "A National Study of Spirituality in Higher Education: Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," *Spirituality in Higher Education,* Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/findings/.

57 Benjamin J. Brenkert, *Ignatian Pedagogy for Public Schools: Character Formation for Urban Youth in New York City* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 83. Brenkert's work explored the impact of a character formation program "based on the pedagogical philosophy of Ignatius of Loyola, as captured by the *Ratio Studiorum* (RS), Ignatian Pedagogy, and the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm," 5.

"so that ultimately the student could actively and correctly express himself in written and spoken word."[58]

Vital to one's formation, desires need to be acknowledged, addressed, and accounted for so they can be probed and understood deeply.[59] To that end, Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert link the significance of expression with the recognition of desires in their book *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*: "Only after women have noticed and named . . . desires can they be discerned in dialogue with the desires Ignatius names."[60] Borrowing from Dyckman, et al., James Martin, S.J., employs similar language in addressing the communicative element inherent in the process of naming one's emerging desires:

> Our deep desires help us know God's desires for us and how much God desires to be with us. And God, I believe, encourages us to notice and name these desires, in the same way that Jesus encouraged Bartimaeus to articulate his desire. Recognizing our desires means recognizing God's desires for us.[61]

As Martin points out, the articulation of desire invites the possibility of dialogue with the divine and, consequently, the chance to comprehend more profoundly the contours of one's core desires, including distinguishing between genuine desires and those that lead individuals away from their authentic selves.

Within secular school and university settings, there are, of course, numerous occasions and opportunities for learners to express themselves—visually, through writing, athletically, aesthetically, kinesthetically. In considering the cultivation of desire within and among learners, there exists space to connect such varied expressions to reflective contemplations of

58 John W. Padberg, *Colleges in Controversy: The Jesuit Schools in France from Revival to Suppression, 1815–1880* (Harvard University Press, 1969), 161.

59 The naming of one's desires, and one's fuller sense of self, contains elements of Charles Taylor's call to *articulate* one's identity, or as he offers in the conclusion of *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, "The intention of this work was one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation—and thereby to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit." Articulation, a topic worthy of deeper exploration beyond its treatment here, matters in forming a complete picture of one's identity. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 520.

60 Katherine Marie Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (Paulist Press, 2001).

61 Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 59.

emerging aspirations and elements of vocation. Given that an understanding of one's desires depends on their being named as such, educational institutions are invited to consider the expansive means by which learners could link their vocational reflections to expressive forms. With nuanced adjustments to academic assignments or extracurricular activities, students, whether in Jesuit or secular school settings, could write, speak, show, or convey through other means the specifics of the desire or desires that emanate from reflective examination. For example, summative assessments; co-curricular experiences; and informal, student-instructor conversations all offer opportunities for learners to reflect on the animating features of—the underlying desire inherent in—their educational activity. Through such reflection, students could adopt an agentive stance in the learning process as they personalize their learning and place themselves firmly in their educational pursuits.

Envisioning

In line with notion of expression, cultivating authentic desire involves engaging one's imaginative and visualization-related capacities. Calling to mind the work of Colombo and Massimi, the *compositio loci* points to the *seeing* that resides within the desire-seeking process. Invited to render a visual representation of one's interior journeying through the *Spiritual Exercises*, an exercitant conceives of images that reflect the ideas, words, and wonderings that emanate through quiet practice. Within the Jesuit pedagogical tradition, learners have conceived of images through various means, including through visual and artistic approaches in both literal and figurative manner. Jesuit pedagogy's past includes an emphasis on theater and theatrical production, originating with the Order's sixteenth-century entry into the education arena.[62] Since the Society's beginnings, students of Jesuit institutions, acting in and producing various dramas, have brought ideas to life so that audiences have the opportunity to "see" different morals, messages, or ideals. Such visioning parallels the cultivation of desire, which requires a process of imagining—of *image*-ing—nebulous thoughts or aspirations. The emphasis on thorough and careful writing and speech within Jesuit education also serves to reinforce the clarity of thought and expression required for sensemaking desirous thoughts. Probing the par-

62 Michael Zampelli, S.J., "Performance Nineteenth Century Jesuit Schools," interviewed by Michael Donnay, *History of Education Society UK Podcast*, November 21, 2022, podcast, 40:44, https://historyofeducation.org.uk/season-2-episode-12-performance-nineteenth-century-jesuit-schools-with-michael-zampelli-sj/.

ticularities of poetry, philosophy, and oration, the Jesuit approach to learning has included bringing concepts and ideas to life in imaginative fashion.

Within both Jesuit and secular institutions, the idea of envisioning represents a worthwhile undertaking in advancing students' overall formation. Beyond giving form to emerging and imprecise ideas, an emphasis on envisioning within educational practice underpins the relational dimension of learning. In line with the imaginative element of desire, a reflective individual considers him or herself in communal space. As a member of a close or far-reaching community, or society more broadly, they give visual life to their place in social contexts. Doing so brings attention to the potential of an individual as they consider possible life trajectories. Thus, there is opportunity through envisioning to project the preferred possibilities of the future and one's role in shaping such a future. Considerations for schools, both secular and religious, include auditing curricular and co-curricular settings in which students give visual life to ideas. Service learning, for example, represents potentially powerful, envision-enhancing programming. As well, counseling, humanistic studies, externships, and athletic activities serve to make imagination and visualization manifest. Further, as learners conceive of their desire-inspired futures, envisioning ought to assume an externally focused posture—"Where can I make a difference in a local or global community?"—and be supported accordingly.

Encountering

The exploration of desire necessarily involves relationality as an individual experiences both interior contemplation and exterior-focused deliberation. The very origin of the Society of Jesus maintains a fundamentally social dimension, for it was founded "to help souls," or the whole person, in getting to heaven, itself an inherently relational act.[63] The foundation of the Order's existence serves as a reminder that the journey from acknowledging one's genuine desires to realizing one's true vocation requires cooperation with God. Just as delving into Ignatian spirituality occurs between an exercitant and director, Jesuit education, like schooling more broadly, counts on collaboration between the learner and teacher. The development of desire into a more formal and cohesive concept depends upon discussion, dialogue, and deliberation. Recognizing the significance of encountering others, schools of the Jesuit variety and beyond maintain a responsibility to nurture bonds between and among those in their respective populations. Through trusted relationships, individuals can engage one another in vulnerable and transparent ways; together, community members can examine

63 John W. O'Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 18.

if interior movements deserve further exploration or if new perspectives should be considered.[64]

As well, the relational element of desire involves not only understanding one's sense of self with another but also thinking *beyond* oneself and one's place in broader social arenas. Exploring desire includes imagining encounters with others, as individuals conceive of what they could or should contribute to their community(ies), to society, or to the world. Imagining the situatedness of a person in broader contexts requires consideration of one's relational qualities and areas for ongoing growth or space for initiating, maintaining, or repairing relationships. The exercise of encounter in Jesuit and non-Jesuit schools invites an assessment of how individuals authentically show up for one another in academic and extracurricular settings and where policies and programs serve to emphasize meaningful interpersonal exchange. The opportunities to listen, genuinely and nonjudgmentally, or understand the degree to which community members are known and feel a deep sense of belonging represent examples of approaches to encounter-focused work. Programming involving community engagement, experiential learning (whether local or global), connections with partner schools in different geographies, extramural research, and interaction with visiting professionals all serve as means of strengthening students' capacities to encounter others. Although the formation of purposeful, interpersonal connections has proven to be challenging in the modern day—as illustrated in the 2023 US Surgeon General's report, among other sources—the harmful realities of a frayed and fractured society underscore the need to support young people in building meaningful relationships with one another. As David Fleming, S.J., offers through the title of his work on the *Spiritual Exercises*, an encounter-friendly educational environment is one in which all can be "drawn into friendship."[65]

Experiencing

As the Society's early members endeavored to travel to new, faraway lands and expressed their collective aspiration to serve as missionaries, they gave words to the deep desires that had emerged in their lives. The animating impulses that appeared to them through prayer, dreams, and contemplation drove them to take such yearnings and put them into action. Though

64 St. Ignatius's commitment to indifference emerges as an area for consideration in this context. Through trusted relationship—in the case of St. Ignatius, between the Jesuit and God—there is opportunity to explore the authenticity of desire through indifference or submission to God's will. Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 497.

65 Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*.

embarking on missions to evangelize and advocate for their faith may have put them into situations of profound peril, even death, the would-be missionaries nonetheless allowed their zeal to lead them toward living out their calling. In short, they felt compelled to *activate* their desires. Centuries later, the spirit of translating interior inclinations into purposeful life paths remains relevant. The inclinations, aspirations, and impulses that inspire and animate individuals deserve due consideration; desire requires some form of experience in order to examine its authenticity. From academic exploration to co-curricular and community-focused pursuits, schools and universities offer ideal, low-stakes environments through which to advance the development of desire.

In Jesuit and non-Jesuit educational settings, opportunities for young people to probe the desires that appear to drive them and experience their possible futures—through controlled experiments, simulations, or experiential encounters—would aid in examining the veracity of their interior movements. Practically, religious and non-religious schools may offer explicit opportunities to shadow professionals, engage in conversations with various field experts, and participate in public fora in which alumni and invited guests offer insight into their own vocational and experiential journeys. Central to these and other activities that examine desire is a recognition of the role of *failure*, and the possibility that potential aspirations in fact represent misguided inclinations. Akin to the early Jesuit missionary aspirants, individuals' pursuit of desire may involve frustration as hoped-for life paths do not unfold. Educational environments allow for attempts at initiating potential life trajectories in relatively safe space while also gaining meaningful learning and insight. To that end, building a culture of accepting and embracing failure—and the learning that comes with it—represents an impactful course of action for religious and non-religiously affiliated schools.

Engaging

As evidenced by the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola and his own vocational devotion, the spiritual journey, including making sense of an individual's emergent desires, requires ongoing engagement. In addition to recognizing that exploring one's desires may ultimately lead down fruitless paths, a noticed desire may ultimately represent an initial step toward a more compelling and authentic sense of self. Returning to the chronicles of the Society's early missionaries, an observed aspiration could in fact be an *anterior* desire, the first of a series of perceived desires. In line with such a reality, regular engagement, discussion, examination, and consideration of desire—ideally, over the course of one's life—constitutes a meaningful de-

sire exploration. A lifelong attentiveness to inquiry about desire parallels the expectations of the Jesuit school student and graduate. In the 1993 letter regarding the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, Superior General Peter Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., advanced the earlier dictum that Jesuit education ought to form men-for-others with the revised pronouncement that "our goal as educators [is] to form men and women of competence, conscience, and compassionate commitment."[66] Participating in Jesuit education was, and is, an enduring, lifelong experience—a commitment—for the lessons offered in school and university settings serve as foundational for sustained engagement with Jesuit ideals.

Beyond the Jesuit education context, paying attention to the promptings and aspirations that emerge for individuals, and of lifelong learning more generally, represents an area of potential focus for all forms of schooling. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's "Future of Education and Skills 2030/2040" initiative, for example, proposes a future state of education marked by students who "learn to navigate by themselves through unfamiliar contexts, and find their direction in a meaningful and responsible way, instead of simply receiving fixed instructions or directions from their teachers."[67] Similar to the idea that desire may beckon an individual to something deeper and more profound over time, schools and universities would be well served to reinforce the necessity of ongoing engagement with learning and to create structures—through curricula, guidance counseling, co-curricular initiatives, and other programming—that encourage students to build a lifelong learning orientation, including their capacity to notice and reflect through sustained fashion emerging interior instincts and promptings. Partnerships and pipelines involving K–12 schools and both higher education and public and community education spaces (e.g. libraries, community and four-year colleges, and lifelong learning institutes, among others) reinforce expectations that learning—and engagement with one's evolving desires—is an ongoing, sustained, and lifelong endeavor open to, and expected of, all people.[68]

66 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Letter to All Major Superiors, July 13, 1993, accessed May 12, 2025, https://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/PHK_pedagogy_en.pdf.

67 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Future of Education and Skills 2030*, accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html.

68 The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions names the role of libraries in providing lifelong learning opportunities to citizens, noting that "In a society of lifelong learning—whether of a formal or informal nature—public libraries will be nodes connecting the local learning setting with the global resources of information and knowledge." International Federation

A Mode of Conclusion

A modern-day consideration of desire requires a return to the past and of its foundational appearance in the Jesuit tradition. Central to the formulation of the Society of Jesus, and of the spiritual journey of the Order's founder, desire has played a purposeful role in contributing to the formation of St. Ignatius and, over time, of Ignatian spirituality's adherents. Colombo and Massimi offer a pithy account of its significance in the Order's history and its enduring legacy in writing "[f]or Ignatius, desire was important because it defined one's innermost aspirations."[69] Desire, an early step toward fulfilling vocational pursuits, represents a person's inherent, and perhaps latent, wishes, hopes, longings, and yearnings—a movement in the direction of fuller life expression. As such, educational settings serve as potentially impactful platforms from which to encourage learners to notice, name, and nourish the aspirational opportunities in their lives by creating conditions for students to identify the sparks of meaningful interior movement. Considering "The Meaning Crisis" and its direct impact on the lives of young people worldwide, schools and universities, as hosts to formative stages of development for their learners, maintain a particular responsibility to ensure that desire does not go unnoticed.

As schools and universities, whether of the Jesuit or secular variety, continue to confront the pernicious challenge of meaninglessness, the history of Jesuit education offers a helpful guide on a way forward for learners and educators alike. Through examining, expressing, envisioning, encountering, experiencing, and engaging desire in a sustained manner, those involved in formative development can benefit from a meaningful starting point: a focus on animating innate human desire. Alongside the aforementioned ways in which educational institutions could enable a desire-focused culture, two additional considerations of the education space and its work in supporting young people's formation merit further

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of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), *The Role of Public Libraries in Lifelong Learning: A Project under the Section of Public Libraries*, IFLA, accessed November 24, 2025, https://www.ifla.org/the-role-of-public-libraries-in-lifelong-learning-a-project-under-the-section-of-public-libraries-ifla/. The MacArthur Foundation's support of connected learning (or "learning that is socially connected, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational opportunity") initiatives deserve mention given their focus on linking learners "with the often-fragmented spheres of home, school, and peer-based learning" in order to broaden and sustain learning engagement. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, *Research Network on Connected Learning*, accessed November 24, 2025, https://www.macfound.org/programs/pastwork/research-networks/research-network-connected-learning.

69 Colombo and Massimi, "In the School of Desire," 496.

exploration. First, embarking upon a vocational path ought to generate a meaningful sense of *joy* in any individual's pursuit of a deeper sense of self. In line with the Ignatian principle of consolation, a learner ought to have the opportunity to experience "moving toward God's active presence in the world."[70] Further, the willingness to participate in a life worth living, and of shaping a flourishing life, ought to serve as cause for celebration. Experiencing joy through the cultivation of desire should not belie the seriousness of enacting individual aspirations; moving from desire to fulfillment undoubtedly involves the requisite hurdles and obstacles that mark human life. Ultimately, though, a joyous undertone should feature in the cultivation of desire. Together with other institutions, schools and universities maintain some responsibility for encouraging joyful expression of human desire. In concert with programming and approaches that support social emotional health, spotlighting the joyous nature of discovering one's inherent potential represents a worthwhile objective.

Second, and in direct contrast to the challenging contemporary accounts of young people's lived experiences, nourishing desire ought to prominently highlight *hope*. In paying close attention to one's spiritual life, possibility, potential, and opportunity deserve meaningful mention. Embedded in the process of realizing desire in its fullest form, the imagination of a new life stage—or entirely new life direction—generates inventive thinking about *what could be*, and does so through enduring, ongoing engagement and exploration, or a sustained commitment to a "way of proceeding." Fundamentally, the sense of newness, of an individual recast in a different form, represents a desired or anticipated life coming to fruition. While the prospect of offering hope, and of accompanying students as they participate in formative development, occupies a central place in the work of schools, reinvigorating the sense of a hopeful future—for society, for individuals—appears as a worthwhile effort for educational institutions of all stripes. Unlike the fleeting messages and images shared through modern media spaces, a commitment to an aspirational future constitutes a persistent and substantial concern and therefore ought to feature in the cultural space crafted by educators. Amidst mounting evidence of a twenty-first-century meaninglessness epidemic, emphasizing opportunities to realize an abiding and enduring sense of hope, rooted in individuals' authentic desires, represents perhaps the most impactful instruction that schools and universities could offer to young people around the globe.

70 Vinita Hampton Wright, "Consolation and Desolation," *IgnatianSpirituality.com*, accessed November 24, 2025, https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/consolation-and-desolation-2/.