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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

## Individualized Formation Plans

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[Author Note: What follows is a paper submitted for the Jesuit Pedagogy course taught by Professor Cristiano Casalini in May 2025. In response to a prompt that asked students to develop a novel approach rooted in the history of Jesuit education, I proposed the development of an “Individualized Formation Plan” as a tool to structure the accompaniment and formative education of students at Boston College High School. At the end of the original paper, there is an update pertaining to the development of the initial IFP that will be piloted this year (2025–26) with 25% of the incoming freshmen class at Boston College High School.]

This past April, there was a poignant moment at our Senior Awards Convocation. The final awards are not plaques, trophies, or certificates. Rather, the final awards are invitations to members of the graduating class to address their peers and the entire school community at the culminating events of their high school career. In January, faculty and staff are invited to nominate students who embody the ethos and values of our Jesuit, Catholic high school. Faculty and staff nominate young people who have grown in their *Faith*, *Commitment to Justice*, *Intellectual Competence*, *Openness to Growth*, and capacity to be *Loving* (characteristics of the *Graduate at Graduation*). Despite their young age, the ten selected students are already remarkable humans. Masters of their craft on the theater stage, a cancer researcher, a journalist who has visited the southern border to report on the inhumane conditions faced by migrants, gifted musicians, State Champion athletes, and leaders of every student organization on campus.

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Among them were also some of the most scholastically curious and brilliant young men in the class—intellectuals who have been accepted at the most prestigious and reputable institutions of higher learning in the world. To a person, the ten young men standing there were described as loving, compassionate, and generous of spirit by the adults who nominated them.

While the cohort was being described, with all their accomplishments listed for the over two-thousand-person audience comprised of their classmates, parents, family, friends, and faculty, the boys gathered and started to smile and greet one another. With hugs and pats on the shoulders, laughter and some visible embarrassment, authentic anticipation and fraternity swirled at the front of the gymnasium. And with the announcement of the first speaker, the young man who would address his peers, his brothers, and the entire BC High community at the Baccalaureate Mass was named.

The beauty of this moment burst forth as the young man's face froze in shock and disbelief. The nine around him exploded in applause and celebration, shaking his hand, hugging him, and hugging one another. And finally, his shock gave way to gratitude, and a smile that belied gratitude and pride graced his face. A moment of grace so profound that it brought tears to my eyes as a member of the faculty.



Ten brilliant young men dropped any veneer of stoicism to match the gravitas of the ceremony. Not a hint of jealousy to be observed among them. Instead, joy and love for their brother and classmate. Jesuit, Catholic high

school mission accomplished—ten young people who had harnessed their gifts and talents, excelled in their fields, such that they were nominated by the faculty to speak at various ceremonies. And when one of them was selected, they all exploded in celebration for him.

This left me with questions: How did these ten get here? What happened along their journey that motivated them to thrive in their own right? Who mentored them and in what fashion? Were there particular experiences that served as a springboard for them? I knew many of them well, and those that I didn't know, I knew by reputation. These were fully formed "men for and with others." These graduates will represent the values of the school and the legacy of Jesuit education well into the future. I was left with a core lingering question—how do we systematize the formation experience of these ten to touch the souls of each student in the school in a similar way?

While those questions ruminated in my mind, enriched by the readings of the Jesuit Pedagogy course taught by Professor Casalini, I went back to work as a school counselor. Helping one student at a time navigate high school, adolescence, and life, one challenge at a time. Celebrating achievements and successes that we learned of one student at a time. Arrupe's suggestion, "let us give all ourselves in creative fidelity to God,"<sup>1</sup> echoed as I considered the ten and the nearly 1,200 other students in the school. What is the creative, novel approach that enables us to deeply and authentically practice "cura personalis" for such a daunting number of students? Could there be a creative frame that met each student where they are, sought to know them with depth to understand their particular skills, gifts, and talents, and then accompanied and mentored them toward their potential?

The lightbulb came while participating in a meeting with a mother of a neurodiverse student. We were discussing his Individualized Education Plan (IEP). We reviewed the accommodations and modifications recommended by the IEP and discussed the support that would be available in our school. And as the conversation ended, she expressed joy and appreciation for the fact that her son was understood, and his needs would be met—the swirl of questions in my mind landed in creative adaptation of a modern educational practice that has been refined since the late 1970s for our Jesuit educational context. IEPs are legally binding documents in public schools. They are effective, however, not because of their legal requirements, but the collaborative expertise of educators who work to meet the requirements of the document in the full service of the individual student.

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1 Pedro Arrupe, "Dialogue with Former Jesuit Students," in *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses—III*, ed. Jerome Aixala (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1981), 103–9.

This was the model I was seeking. And in the pages ahead, I would like to propose a framework for Individual Formation Plans. Adapting a refined educational best practice from modernity and informed by centuries of Jesuit education and mission.

With guidance from and inspiration from A. Taiga Guterres and his translations of the *Instructio* from 1934 and 1948, I propose that we consider capturing the spirit of those times and consider how we may adapt the Individualized Education Plan format to meet our needs in Jesuit schools. I believe Articles 7 and 8 from the *Instructio* are most pertinent in guiding this consideration:

#### Article 7

##### *According to the Spirit of the Ratio Studiorum*

We must keep in mind the essential and characteristic elements of our Institute and schools, which must always and everywhere be put into practice, especially things such as:

§1. The ultimate *end* of our education: i.e., to lead our neighbor to the knowledge and love of God. Accordingly, the primary concern must be that students along with academic learning, acquire habits worthy of Christian morals. [...]

§2. Special means conducive to this education:

- a) Religious instruction, taught with particular care and adapted to the age and formation of the young;
- b) Scholastic Philosophy, which, together with religious truth, should be applied as a norm to all areas of daily life;
- c) Our traditional methods of teaching, which not only aims at imparting knowledge but, above all, at ensuring the formation and development of the whole person with all their faculties;
- d) Personal interest in students, by which Ours, beyond the teaching and good example provided in the classroom, strive to guide and assist each individual with counsel and encouragement.

#### Article 8

##### *A System Proper to the Society*

Since it is evident that among the many new and varied educational systems of modern times, even the schools of the Society have been adversely affected, it will be very useful for the Interprovincial Committee to examine the question of organizing our academic curriculum in such a way that the principles of our *Ratio Studiorum* are adapted to the needs of the present day and that we achieve greater stability and uniformity in all of our schools.<sup>2</sup>

2 A. Taiga Guterres, "Articulating a Jesuit Philosophy of Education in the Twentieth Century: A Critical Translation and Commentary on the *Instructio* of 1934

These guiding frames (“to guide and assist each student” and “adapted to the needs of the present day”) taken into consideration with the systematic approach to educating and supporting neurodiverse students of IEPs, invites (if not requires) that we consider how to systematically and programmatically support all the students in Jesuit high schools with Individualized Formation Plans. IEPs would not have been an educational practice considered by the Jesuits during the periods of the *Instructio* (1934 and 1948), as the Individuals with Disabilities Act was not passed by Congress until decades later (1975).<sup>3</sup> IEPs were developed to ensure that students with cognitive, physical, or other disabilities would receive accommodations or modifications to the curriculum alongside their general education peers. As an aside, I believe we can see and perhaps recognize similarities with the objectives of Article 7 from the *Instructio* (“strive to guide and assist each individual with counsel and encouragement”).

The process of developing an IEP is rigorous. Neuropsychological assessments are conducted by a school psychologist. Test results are reviewed by a special education coordinator at the school or district level, and a draft of an IEP is created. All aspects of development (academic, social, physical), as well as strengths and weaknesses are considered. Measurable goals to support students’ growth are crafted, and faculty and special education staff are responsible for tracking measurable progress toward the agreed-upon goals. A meeting is held with family members to agree to the plan. It is shared with all faculty who work with the student, and it is reviewed annually.

While I was ruminating about the potential for Individualized Formation Plans that could be developed by adapting the IEP for a Jesuit context, focusing not only on academic, social, and physical development—but religious and moral as well—my mind returned to the fully formed students that celebrated their brother when he was selected to address our community. What was the story of these young men? Who were the Ignatian educators who mentored and encouraged them? Why were they effective? Before drafting an Individualized Formation Plan framework, I wanted to understand on the human level from these students how they experienced “counsel and encouragement” as individuals during their high school career and the impact accompanying mentors had on their formation.

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and 1948,” *Jesuit Educational Quarterly*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., 1, no. 1 (2025): 89–90, <https://doi.org/10.51238/1ZnRn8z>.

3 “History and Background: Special Education,” Ewa.Org, March 8, 2024, <https://ewa.org/issues/early-learning/history-background-special-education>.

I was able to conduct five interviews with students who had achieved academic excellence during their high school years and earned reputations as young men of impeccable character and faith. Each of the five students spoke about adults taking a particular interest in them by early junior year in a way that allowed for authentic connection and affirmation of their skills. The students recalled specific instances that changed the trajectory of their self-awareness.

- One student, now bound for Harvard as an English major, recalled his freshman Biology teacher telling him he could be a talented writer and that he should join the literary magazine.
- One student delivered a strong oration of a scene from *The Odyssey*, and his teacher told him, “I am going to make sure you join the acting troupe.”
- One student, who is going to study engineering at Northeastern, recalled a Robotics Club moderator who took extra time to teach him how to use the more specialized machines in the shop.
- One student was told by a teacher while on a service trip, “I see in you what all teachers hope to see in BC High students.” The student has been motivated ever since to be “Grad at Grad” and a “man for others.”

These interviews were a powerful experience. It is impossible to hear the *Instructio* (“strive to guide each individual with counsel and encouragement”) when considering each of these anecdotes. To be in the room with these young men as they recalled the impact of these mentors on their formation was to see and experience Jesuit education in its full effectiveness. But their experiences were organic, they occurred naturally and perhaps slightly haphazardly. Ultimately, they were seen, and known, and they were provided with appropriate “counsel and encouragement.” And yet the question remained for me—How do we systematize this for all students? My answer remained the Individualized Formation Plan.

In *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, while describing “cura personalis,” the authors also seem to suggest something along the lines of the framework I am proposing. “The curriculum is centered on the person rather than on the material to be covered. Each student is allowed to develop and accomplish objectives at a pace that is suited to individual ability and the characteristics of his or her own personality.”<sup>4</sup> The entire section

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4 “The Characteristics of Jesuit Education,” in *Ignatian Pedagogy: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Jesuit Education from St. Ignatius to Today*, ed. José Mesa, S.J. (Loyola Press, 2017).

on “cura personalis” (originally rooted in the sections of the *Instructio* cited above, as noted by Guterres), sets a high priority on knowing the unique gifts, skills, and developmental milestones of each student. If we were to revisit our earliest readings in the course and the idea of the “cause prima” of the Order, we recall that the Jesuits are primarily devoted to “saving souls.” The *Instructio* and emergence of “cura personalis” as a central aspect of Jesuit education in the years that followed would suggest to me that to save a soul, Jesuit educators must first know that soul. And once that soul is known in its fullness, then a plan can be crafted to “counsel and encourage” that soul’s growth and salvation.

This framework for an Individualized Formation Plan is in a nascent stage. I would need more time to consult with colleagues throughout the Jesuit School’s Network in the United States, and Educate Magis globally, to gain full appreciation for the good work already being done. Fundamentally, however, I propose a shift away from providing a wide range of programming that students can opt into participating in during their four-year high school career, toward a more structured and systematic plan for each student. Much like the IEP is a single document, the IFP would be revisited, consulted, and adapted along with the individual student’s personal growth and journey through high school. I propose that each freshman and their family be welcomed with a thorough interview to ascertain personal history, familial history, personal interest, scholastic strengths, and growth opportunities. Within the framework of my high school, this interview (or interviews) could be conducted by a school counselor, advisor, or Head of House. The data from this interview should inform particular retreats for spiritual development, service opportunities, and co-curriculars that align with interest and would challenge the young person to develop beyond their comfort zone. There should be an End of Year interview with the students that would enable their counselor, advisors, or Head of House to suggest enrichment opportunities and the years that follow. This End of Year interview or meeting should also allow for a review of the year—academically, socially, spiritually—and wholistically. Based on the interviews with the seniors, I believe this would be the time for an adult mentor to share a vision of the possible future with the young person. Based upon the successes, growth, and interest, the adult should provide affirmative feedback on the possible arenas where the young person could thrive. This process should repeat in the sophomore year, tracking student engagement, growth, and formation. As the student continues to grow and develop, attention should be paid to potential opportunities to enrich their faith and religiosity with encouragement toward appropriate retreat and service opportunities. Functionally, the Individual Formation

Plan should be a living document shared between the student, their family, and a devoted mentor in the school that can be used to catalog and guide their growth and formation.

While I believe this idea holds promise, much work lies ahead to formalize this framework. I have greatly appreciated this course and am excited to continue working on the Individualized Formation Plan as a guiding document for my work with the incoming Class of 2029 at Boston College High School. I hope that in the years ahead, a standardized template that could be used throughout the Jesuit Schools Network could be refined through collaboration and perhaps shared with the global network of Jesuit educators via Educate Magis.

### **IFP Development Update**

Much has happened since the IFP was proposed as the final project for the Jesuit Pedagogy taught by Dr. Casalini. In June, the Shields Center for Innovation invited faculty to participate in the inaugural Educator's Innovation Studio. I proposed the formal development of Individualized Formation Plans and joined nearly a dozen colleagues for a week of creative curriculum and resource development. The week on campus proved to be invaluable, with many colleagues and administrators present for the annual Melville Institute for professional development. With no students on campus, a reflective, productive, and collaborative atmosphere emerged through the week. I drafted the IFP (the Appendix features the Statement of Purpose), with intentional reflection exercises for students and conversations with mentors throughout all four years of high school. And I then began to engage my colleagues in conversation. The Director of the Center of Ignatian Identity and Formation offered feedback that led to the inclusion of Erikson's stages of adolescent development as a midyear reflection in the IFP. He also suggested the idea for Student-Led Conversations that could include students, parents, advisors, and Heads of House, during the sophomore year. Building on the foundation of the "Sophomore Interview," a popular reflective practice in some Jesuit high schools, this approach would expand the conversation to invite more adult mentors to listen to each student, gain a deeper understanding of their perspective and growth, and foster a collaborative approach to support the student throughout the remainder of high school. I shared the IFP draft with a paired school counselor and Head of House team who were on campus for the Melville Institute. They offered critical feedback and questions about the mechanics of the framework: Who would conduct initial intake interviews, and when? Where would the documents be saved to ensure

security, confidentiality, and accessibility? How could teachers access these documents to better understand their students?

I reached out to the Jesuit High School College Counselor Association to inquire about their practices tracking student formation. I received responses from Xavier High School in Cincinnati, Loyola High School in Chicago, Marquette University High School, Gonzaga Preparatory, Brophy Preparatory, and Saint Peter's Preparatory High School. Colleagues in school counseling from across the country shared an array of practices. Schools shared that they used formal "Sophomore Conversations," a "Sophomore Examen" with parents/guardians, graduation and senior exit surveys, family conferences, and more. But no school offered a standardized framework for all four years that holistically and strategically tracked and encouraged student formation on an individual level.

A draft IFP in hand, I spoke with our school administration. Our Vice Principal of Student Life approved a pilot of Individualized Formation Plans as a framework for standardized, holistic care for a quarter of the incoming Class of 2029. Boston College High School has a House system, and students in three of the twelve Houses will have an IFP implemented to track and encourage the holistic formation throughout their high school careers. Again, this framework is in its nascent stages, but there is excitement and hope for the tool. Colleagues and administrators believe it could help us fully know and support each student as they discover and pursue their potential and sense of purpose. This upcoming school year, with the launch of the IFP, will be one of trial and error and adjustment. But as Ignatian educators, we believe in the promise and potential of each student, and I hope this tool helps us enhance our practice as companions with our students on their journey.

## Appendix: Statement of Purpose for Individualized Formation Plans

Student Name and Year of Graduation:

House:

DOB:

Counselor:

Hometown:

Advisors:

Date of Most Recent Update:

Individualized Formation Plan (Draft)

Boston College High School

### *Our Mission:*

At Boston College High School, we hope that you will become a young person of integrity, educated in *a faith that does justice*, committed to *academic excellence* and *service to others*. As a student in a Jesuit school, you enter a centuries-old tradition of the pursuit of self-awareness and excellence that is rooted in a faith that calls us to do all things *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*.

At BC High, you will be surrounded by teachers and mentors who are committed to your holistic formation—your head, heart, and hands. We believe that you, and your peers, will be the change agents for a more loving and just society. We believe that you will live “for and with others” and in doing so make a tremendous positive impact on our world.

### *Seeing You through Christ’s Eyes:*

Our Jesuit tradition invites us to look at the world as Christ did, to seek *God in all things*, and to practice the commandment to “*love thy neighbor as thyself*.” This Individualized Formation Plan is an effort by the school to see you through Christ’s eyes. The early Jesuits were “determined to enshrine love as the cornerstone” of the Society. Just as Christ and the early Jesuits looked at one another with love and compassion, so BC High seeks to see and know you. This orientation invites the adults at BC High to:

- Envision and imagine each student’s talent, potential, and dignity
- Commit to unlocking the potential of each student
- Develop long-term relationships with each student, rooted in companionship and compassion

*Holistic Formation and Cura Personalis*

Jesuit educators are also rooted in a core belief and practice of holistic education. In the years ahead, you will often hear or encounter the phrase “cura personalis,” translated as care for the whole person. This document will also ask you and your mentors to consider your holistic psycho-social development. We will consider things like:

- Self-esteem and mental health
- Peer and community relationships
- Emotional regulation and resilience
- Growing independence and self-awareness

*Your Journey, Accompanied by Companions*

Fundamentally, this document is a tool to ensure that you are known: seen, heard, valued, challenged, supported, and accompanied. Just as your adult mentors will accompany you for all four years of high school, so will this IFP. This will serve as a *shared space* to reflect on your journey, your development, your growth, your passions, and ultimately your formation as a young person who embodies the *Graduate at Graduation (Religious, Committed to Doing Justice, Loving, Intellectually Competent, and Open to Growth)*.

This will serve as a shared space to weave the threads of your high school journey together in one place. You have all the agency in this space and in crafting your story. And you are surrounded by mentors committed to supporting you.

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