Each fall, approximately 2,000 undergraduate students report for their first semester at the University of Notre Dame. With them comes an inexhaustible list of remarkable accomplishments, unique talents and tireless passions. At Notre Dame, inspired by the initial vision of both Blessed Basil Moreau, the founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, and Rev. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., the founder of the University, we hope that these new students spend the next four years developing their academic and personal interests by taking advantage of the endless opportunities to educate both mind and heart. Here, we prepare graduates to be, as Blessed Basil Moreau wrote, citizens for society and citizens for heaven.

With each new class comes incredible opportunity. Great leaders – known and unknown – have graduated from the University, and these new students certainly have great expectations placed upon them. Each new academic year, and the cohort of students that represents it, regularly marks the University’s next step toward being a preeminent Catholic, research university.

Yet with each new class comes daunting challenges. Today’s first-year students bring with them significant rates of anxiety and mental illness. Some of them struggle with hidden lives consumed by substance abuse, hyper-sexuality or poor self-image. In a world swirling with technology designed to create better and faster communication, many students find themselves struggling to make intimate, face-to-face connections with the people around them.

The Spirituality Study executed by the Office of Campus Ministry during the spring semester of 2015 sought both to assess the evolving needs of Notre Dame students and to capture a qualitative glimpse of their interests, successes, challenges and desires.
Through conversations with students, staff and faculty, the Spirituality Study committee (“we”) observed the current lives of our students, especially in terms of their spiritual life. From that, we questioned how both Campus Ministry and the wider campus community are meeting the needs of these students, and what implications and recommendations we can draw from our observations to help create a more effective and relevant response to their spiritual lives and needs.

The Spirituality Study committee was comprised of 29 members, including 23 students, five staff members, and one Holy Cross priest. The students came from a variety of backgrounds, majors and classes, and were assigned to one of five working groups: Retreats and Pilgrimages, Everyday Spirituality, Collaboration, Student Life Input and Benchmarking. We gleaned wisdom from campus interactions, including one-on-one conversations, focus groups and self-reflection, and from a variety of peer institutions and ministries across the country. Benchmarking institutions included Yale University, Boston College, Texas A&M University, Duke University, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Loyola University Chicago, Northwestern University and the University of Dayton.

This brief report represents a qualitative snapshot of today’s students and does not seek to be exhaustive or comprehensive.

More than anything, this report seeks to begin a conversation that focuses on the ever-evolving needs of our students and the ways in which our campus, particularly through Campus Ministry, can best serve them. We hope to inspire a dynamic, evolving conversation that will shift as the lives of our students change.

We can summarize the Spirituality Study committee’s observations, implications and recommendations into four basic categories:

I. Diversity of faith engagement
II. The search for authenticity
III. A restless campus culture
IV. Challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth

The first part of each category highlights observations from both campus interactions and exchanges with peer institutions. Following these observations are key questions and implications that include recommendations designed to respond to our students’ current needs.

We recognize that this report and its recommendations cannot be a comprehensive response to the questions raised in this study. We also recognize that Campus Ministry may or may not move forward with each suggested recommendation.

We hope, however, that these observations, implications and recommendations plant the seed for continued dialogue about how we may more effectively meet the needs of our students in the years to come.
I. Diversity of Faith Engagement and Practice

Every Notre Dame student has his or her own story with his or her own priorities, curiosities and idiosyncrasies. Some students come from suburban, Catholic high schools in the Midwest while others come from the other side of the world. Some students are captivated by Notre Dame football while others are more interested in music or art. Some students arrive as pre-professional majors while others arrive entirely unsure of what they want to do following graduation. These same differences exist in terms of students’ faith and spirituality.

“Students span a wide spectrum of spiritual maturity, religious affiliation, religious practice and faith engagement.”

Students span a wide spectrum of spiritual maturity, religious affiliation, religious practice and faith engagement. In addition, age or class year are not typical indicators of what a student’s spiritual life might look like. Some freshmen may have a more mature relationship or engagement with their faith than a senior and vice versa.

The Spirituality Study committee observed that students fall into one of four open-ended categories of faith engagement or religious practice.

1. Students who have little to no engagement with faith, or who may be antagonistic to the practice of faith in their lives.

2. Students who might have the desire to grow in their faith, but who simply get caught up in other activities, distractions or alternate priorities.

3. Students who attempt to engage in their faith but may not be doing so in a consistent or integrated manner.

4. Students who are either already cultivating or will soon cultivate a deep engagement with their faith.

We recognize that not every student fits into one of these categories, but we offer them as a more digestible way to understand the different sub-sections of faith engagement on campus.

Most students perceived Campus Ministry as a place for the “spiritually elite,” in which only students who fall into the final category are welcome. This perception discourages some students from participating in Campus Ministry offerings.
Recommendations

Overall, Campus Ministry must always recognize, serve, and celebrate the diversity found on campus. Campus Ministry cannot and should not be an organization that caters to a select few, but should strive to be a place where all are welcome and valued. The reality is that Campus Ministry must focus on serving all students regardless of their faith background or religion, or their personal comfort or commitment to spiritual or religious practice. All programs, events and ministries should recognize, serve and celebrate the diversity of the students they welcome. Particular attention should be paid toward interfaith ministries and to serving the unique needs of students who are not Catholic. Campus Ministry needs to help the campus community discover and explore the beauty in the diversity of religious practice.

Campus Ministry also needs to consider “low-barrier” entry points for students to engage their faith. These entry points must provide safe spaces for students to come as they are and feel welcomed and accepted. In time, these entry points should also encourage students to consider or investigate a deeper engagement with their faith. It is important to offer these entry points in a non-threatening, non-intimidating fashion that continually fosters an accepting and loving environment.

Create an outreach team

The committee suggests Campus Ministry create an outreach team of diverse students to offer more “low-barrier” entry points for students to engage in their faith and become more familiar with Campus Ministry. More often than not, these entry points would be social in nature and not be related to any specific faith or religious practice.

At the same time, the outreach team could work to break down the stereotype that only certain types of people participate in Campus Ministry events or engage in their faith at Notre Dame. The end goal of these entry points is not to increase participation in Campus Ministry events (as an end in itself), but to help more students develop their faith and their relationships with God. This invitation to engage in one’s faith could continue to blossom within Campus Ministry or in a variety of other ways or places across campus.
II. The Search for Authenticity

Our students are craving authentic, life-giving, healthy, and whole relationships. They seek relationships characterized by honesty, maturity, vulnerability and a mutual respect for one another. Additionally, they are searching for the time and space to cultivate these relationships and a place in which it is acceptable to be vulnerable with one another in a safe and supportive environment. Students also need mature mentors who model this life of authenticity and are willing to walk alongside them in the realities of life’s joys and struggles.

Some students feel the need to project images of themselves to the campus community that do not entirely match their true identity. They feel pressure to conform to certain standards or expectations of behavior, dress, language and attitudes, even to the extent that few places or times exist on campus where students feel free and comfortable simply to be who they are. Weakness and failure are seldom admitted or accepted let alone shown or shared with others. Many students experience a separation between actual behaviors and their own ideals.

Still, students are yearning to find the acceptance, love and encouragement to shed these masks and share themselves with others in a real and authentic way.

Recommendations

Campus Ministry can be a place where students are supported and encouraged to cultivate a life of authentic living, if they create opportunities to welcome more students into times and spaces where personality masks are shed or deconstructed.

Create a physical space

Campus Ministry could investigate the possibility of creating a physical space on campus for students that would cultivate authentic, intimate relationship-building. This would be a designated spot on campus where students would feel safe and comfortable to simply come as they are and be who they are; a place where students could relax and develop friendships. The Coleman-Morse First-floor Student Lounge might provide such a space.

Initiate a regular event for faculty and staff mentors to share

In addition, Campus Ministry could initiate a regular event for faculty and staff mentors to share their real lives and stories with the greater campus community. Inspired by the “Agape Latte” program founded at Boston College, this type of event would foster a culture of authenticity and healthy vulnerability. Campus mentors would share testimonies about their personal lives, through the lens of their own faith or spirituality. These events could model a healthy practice of authenticity for our students.
A feeling of restlessness undergirds the experience of many undergraduate students. At times, students are acutely aware of this restlessness, while at others, dissatisfaction resides under the surface, often unconsciously hidden from awareness or attention. This feeling of restlessness can stem from a variety of factors.

The often rigorous academics at Notre Dame can form a foundation for this restlessness. As a top-tier university, the academic standards are understandably high, and students spend considerable time and energy on their intellectual pursuits as academics.

Additionally, various commitments place extreme demands on students’ ability to manage their time. Saturated schedules make it difficult for even two or three students to find a time to get together, not to mention five or six. Academic responsibilities, extracurricular interests, residence hall activities, campus jobs and social events mean that even idle time, such as waiting for a friend at the dining hall, is consumed with catching up on emails, checking social media or listening to music. With what seems like every second of every day filled with some sort of stimulation, finding time for oneself seems to be a luxury that no one can afford. In fact, it becomes viewed as a weakness or an unproductive enterprise.

The many remarkable opportunities for students to get involved present a distinct challenge. Any given week includes countless lectures, recitals, sporting events, fundraisers, faith-enriching or service-based opportunities, workshops and more. These opportunities can often promote an unhealthy over-indulgence by students. The fear of missing out often encourages students to overcommit to or
participate in activities based on social pressure instead of individual desire. Some students pursue extracurricular activities as a way to enhance their resumes, and some get involved with too many activities instead of focusing their energy on a manageable number. In many ways, restlessness might stem not from a lack of things to do, but from excessive indulgence in the many experiences available to them at Notre Dame. We certainly cannot blame students for taking advantage of the wonderful opportunities put before them. On the other hand, students are often incapable of, and are seldom encouraged or taught to be judicious in balancing the amount or type of opportunities in which they become involved.

This challenge is not just a result of individual student pressures; it is characteristic of the University culture at large. Many faculty and staff maintain a similar pace and schedule in their work. The campus environment also promotes a culture of limitless improvement and the pervasive feeling of inadequacy, with ever more room for production, efficiency, effectiveness and recognition. While these questions and improvements in and of themselves are good, an insatiable thirst for perfection can become problematic.

At times, this University culture can often promote or even reinforce students’ attitudes that they themselves are not adequate, or that they must measure their own worth in productivity, efficiency, effectiveness or recognition. The campus culture often seems like it has little time or space to breathe, rest, process or keep up with the life it strives to sustain.

The restlessness found within students shows itself in a myriad of ways. For many, the various demands of campus life induce an ever-present stress which, while manageable, can be uncomfortable and difficult to navigate. Students find release from this stress in both healthy and unhealthy outlets. Some channel their restlessness by diving into a particular passion or interest, while others choose to workout frequently or find more time to socialize and unwind with friends. Many students find relief during hours of Netflix binges or a variety of other procrastination techniques. A culture of “work hard, play hard” exists in various pockets of campus as students sometimes find release from their stress with alcohol, drugs or sexual activities. For some, the pressure becomes too much to handle and avail themselves of on-campus resources such as the University Counseling Center or the McDonald Center for Student Well-Being.

“Restlessness might stem not from a lack of things to do, but from excessive indulgence in the many experiences available to students at Notre Dame.”
Recommendations

While many search for fulfillment in worldly things, only a relationship with God can bring about the truest joy and peace for which our hearts yearn. Campus Ministry can be a place where this good news is shared with all students. Programs, events and ministries can be a beacon of hope, joy and peace if they truly lead students to an authentic encounter with God.

Bear witness to the peace and rest found in God alone

Ultimately, God offers the peace and rest we seek. Campus Ministry can bear witness to the peace and rest found in God alone. Creating time and space to slow down and rest would be extremely beneficial for the campus community. Campus Ministry can be a voice and a place for the value and habit of creating time and space for self-reflection, prayer and a daily commitment to developing one’s relationship with God.

A realistic reflection on campus culture must constantly inform Campus Ministry’s outreach and programming. Facing already fast-paced and overcrowded schedules, Campus Ministry must find avenues beyond programming and events to address campus issues. In addition, better efforts to collaborate with partner organizations (e.g., student government, clubs, campus colleges and departments) would help to alleviate redundancy in programming on campus.

Create collaborative networks

Campus Ministry should also pay particular attention to residence halls and support the work of rectors, hall staffs and hall leaders, especially in spiritual support and faith-based activities.

Just as the University seeks to educate the mind and heart, so too can Campus Ministry, contributing to the intellectual life of campus and finding ways to engage the faculty in meaningful collaboration and conversation. Campus Ministry can be a place where faith and reason inform one another and where faith seeks
understanding, especially with natural partners like the Theology Department and the Institute for Church Life.

Campus Ministry should continue to build relationships with faculty and staff on campus, and should promote itself as an especially helpful resource to faculty or staff who might stumble upon conversations with students regarding vocational discernment, relationships, spirituality, sexuality and more. Campus Ministry could offer optional formation or professional development opportunities geared toward academic advisors, counselors, career specialists and student activities personnel. Additionally, the campus community could also benefit from reflection on the current climate, which sometimes over-emphasizes production, efficiency and continual improvement.

The stress, anxiety and mental illness that affect our students on campus deserve serious consideration. Campus Ministry’s ability to address spiritual well-being and healing can complement the work of those groups that work to bring physical and mental healing. Campus Ministry can work with collaborative partners like the University Counseling Center, the McDonald Center for Student Well-Being, RecSports and others that recognize spirituality as an important component of overall health and wellness.

By creating collaborative networks with faith-based student clubs and organizations, residence hall staffs and leaders, and other departments, offices and colleges, Campus Ministry could spearhead efforts to unite various organizations and individuals that hold a common vision and mission. Campus Ministry can also help to foster conversations and opportunities for discernment on a personal and practical level.

Consolidate or reduce programming

Internally, Campus Ministry could consolidate or reduce programming to alleviate over-scheduling and dilution of time, energy and resources. Investing in efforts that support faith engagement and provide leadership formation could ultimately help to strengthen and streamline pastoral ministry and spirituality. With student clubs, Campus Ministry could organize shared projects that revolve around a particular theme, event or season to reduce redundancy. Within residence life, Campus Ministry could enhance their current support of spiritual life commissioners and other leaders who provide faith-based programming and ministries within the halls.

Restructure the retreat program

Campus Ministry could restructure its retreat program to respond to the evolving realities of students’ schedules, needs and spiritual lives. Historically, Campus Ministry has developed and offered many different retreats for a variety of student populations to the point of over-emphasizing retreats.
This overemphasis begins to equate attending a retreat as the only way to engage one’s faith. Instead, retreats should exist within a variety of options that encourage students to engage in their faith daily and develop a personal relationship with God. The committee suggests Campus Ministry streamline its retreat offerings to provide a less complex menu.

Launch a signature retreat

Campus Ministry could launch a signature retreat open to all students in varying class years. While class-based retreats can also be effective, a retreat including a diverse range of students and ages reflects the reality of a college student’s life. As previously mentioned, age and class year are not typical indicators of faith engagement or spirituality. In this way, the signature retreat would be designed to welcome a diverse range of students from all class years. This retreat would have one central theme, but would be offered multiple times each semester in different locations. Each unique retreat could expose students to a variation on a central theme in order to accommodate diversity among retreatants. A well-known, signature retreat program might also have the potential of reaching more students over time.

Pilot mini-retreats and expand resources

A new retreat menu could be supplemented by piloting mini-retreats and by expanding resources for students and staff who want to design retreats for a particular purpose (e.g. Residence Hall Retreats). These mini-retreats would be shorter in length (approximately three to six hours) and would also be open to all students. These retreats might be appealing to students who feel they cannot spend an entire weekend on retreat but who are still desiring some time away to reflect and pray. Campus Ministry should continue to offer the Build Your Own Retreat Workshop in order to train and empower students to design new retreat options to meet their unique needs.
IV. Challenges and Opportunities for Spiritual Growth

The committee employed a very broad understanding of spirituality as the way in which one channels the innermost desires and longings within one’s heart and the universal restlessness we all experience in our own way. Within the Christian tradition, we know that this restlessness reflects the inherent desire for communion with God, and that God alone offers the true fulfillment for our restless hearts. Spirituality is an innate component within each person’s life, whether we acknowledge or name it as such. In the broadest sense, then, every person actually lives out their own particular spirituality. A healthy, integrated spirituality informs daily actions, decisions and dispositions. Christian spirituality seeks God in all things. An unhealthy or unintegrated spirituality can compartmentalize faith and does not seek ultimate fulfillment in God.

Some students overlook, ignore or only express their spirituality in certain defined times and places. Challenges for spiritual growth include misplaced priorities that overshadow ideal or healthy dispositions. For some students, goals like accolades, material wealth or perfection become illusions clouding the way to finding true fulfillment in God. Other students might seek happiness in alcohol, drug use or sexual activity. Some students can get so wrapped up in these illusory goals, actions or objects that they become consumed by them. In this way, pursuing ultimate fulfillment down one of these paths can almost become its own “spirituality” of sorts, whereby misplaced priorities or goals frame or direct all of one’s decisions, actions or attitudes.

For others, integrating one’s personal spirituality into daily life is an explicit goal. These students hope to bring faith to all corners of their lives. They view their faith as having an impact or influence on every moment of their day. They seek to bring faith into academics, relationships, conversations, daily habits and so on. They desire an integrated spirituality that impacts their decision-making, relationships, morality, prayer and actions. Additionally, these students seek true challenge in their spiritual lives. When they seek out faith-based or religiously-motivated programs, events or ministries, these students look for an authentic motivation to live out their faith in concrete and active ways. At times, some of these students do not participate in Campus Ministry or other faith-based organizations because they do not find these groups inspirational or challenging.

In reality, the contrasting groups described above cannot be so discretely categorized. These two groups likely represent opposite ends of a spectrum, with many students found somewhere in between. Certainly a student who seeks an integrated spirituality still struggles with unhealthy behaviors or habits. Alternatively, students consumed by a misplaced priority or
goal can still genuinely desire to grow in their spiritual life. The challenge and opportunity for Campus Ministry rests in assisting all of these students to move toward a more authentic, integrated spirituality, nurtured through a personal relationship with God.

Activities for faith and service housed under different offices present a distinct challenge on campus. Institutionally, Campus Ministry and the Center for Social Concerns operate in different areas of the university. In turn, this (both physical and non-physical) division inherently creates a separation of faith and service on campus – a separation incongruent with most religious practice and especially the Christian tradition. Many students desire a more explicit and intentional connection between faith and service on campus.

Finally, great opportunity lies in helping students cultivate a habit of personal prayer. In many ways, Notre Dame has a strong communal spirituality that thrives when the community gathers to pray. Mass and church attendance are high compared to other college campuses, and key moments in the life of campus are marked by liturgical celebrations. These include the First Visit to the Grotto, the Opening of the School Year Mass, memorial Masses to commemorate a student’s passing and more. Students enjoy a strong community built on a shared experience of faith and religious practice, and a diversity of students participate in these communal celebrations of faith.

At the same time, many students find personal prayer particularly challenging and some do not personally pray at all. Many of them feel that they do not know how to pray or were never exposed to different ways or styles of prayer. While the Notre Dame community typically prays well together, the individual Notre Dame student may or may not feel like he or she prays particularly well alone. Likely, the percentage of students who feel they have an intimate relationship with God through personal prayer is fairly low. The communal experience of liturgical practice does not always lead a student toward individual growth or transformation in prayer or faith.
Recommendations

Campus Ministry is traditionally known to serve students who are most engaged or already active in their faith, and must find alternate ways to engage all students, wherever they might be in their spiritual lives. Most importantly, rather than waiting passively for students to walk through the doors, Campus Ministry must actively go forth onto campus and encounter students where they are, within their natural comfort zones. Everything on campus – activities, classes, conversations, relationships, etc. – acutely impacts our students’ spiritual lives, and Campus Ministry should be aware of these movements and seek to find ways to help students continually transform and grow in a holistic and healthy manner.

Campus Ministry can spearhead better education and awareness of the spiritual life and spirituality in general. In particular, Campus Ministry should pay attention to assisting students in cultivating an everyday commitment to personal prayer and transformation.

Consider the needs of first-year students

How to serve first-year students and invite them into the vision of a holistic Catholic, Holy Cross education deserves significant consideration. This introduction to a Holy Cross education and spirituality should happen early on in their time at Notre Dame. Campus Ministry can be a helpful resource for First Year of Studies, Student Affairs and other collaborative partners who design and execute the orientation processes for all first-year, transfer and international students.

Cultivate an everyday commitment to spiritual growth

Campus Ministry can place more emphasis on cultivating an everyday commitment to spiritual growth by inviting students to integrate one’s personal spirituality into daily life. Campus Ministry must be a place that calls students to live out their faith in an active, authentic way, whereby one’s faith impacts one’s life in decision-making, relationships, morality, prayer and actions.

Bridge the gap between faith and service

Finally, more work needs to be done in bridging the gap between faith and service. The committee recommends that Campus Ministry continue to foster an awareness of the inherent relationship of faith with service, and service with faith. More explicit and direct collaboration needs to be developed between Campus Ministry and the Center for Social Concerns, and the ways in which the students and the broader campus community can witness and internalize the connection between faith and service within their own spiritual lives.
Conclusion

Through the process of the Spirituality Study, Campus Ministry has already begun to reimagine the ways in which it can serve the students on campus. In order to make the recommendations included in this report, the committee has critically evaluated Campus Ministry programs and ministries, particularly in the area of retreats, pilgrimages and spirituality. Within the limits imposed by time and resources, we hope with this report to inspire an ongoing conversation and reimagining of how Campus Ministry and the university at large can continually evolve alongside our ever-changing student body.

This report and its recommendations represent only the beginning of the ways in which Campus Ministry and the campus community can more effectively respond to the needs of students. We encourage all students, staff and faculty to take part in this discussion and help shape the future of student life on campus.

For updates or to provide feedback, please visit CampusMinistry.nd.edu or email ministry@nd.edu.