

Preparing to Live the Institutional Mission: An Evaluation of a Pilot Program with Engaged Students

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Abstract

The current study investigated how a select group of mission-engaged, upper division students ($n = 7$) compared to a random sample of junior- ($n = 20$) and senior- ($n = 20$) year students in their perception of an urban, Catholic, and religious-order-sponsored university's identity. Across two years, we assessed mission identity and mission-driven activities of seven *Vincentian Mission Fellows (VMF)* enrolled in a pilot program for engaged junior-year students. The program blended service and community action in real-world settings beyond the university. The seven participants were surveyed at the start and end of each academic year, yielding four measurement waves. Results indicated that engagement in the *VMF* program refined student perceptions of the university mission in terms of its institutional identity as compared to stratified random samples of peers at baseline (juniors) and upon completion (seniors). Such programs at Catholic colleges might facilitate lifelong commitment to creating a more socially just community through public service.

Mission statements are an organization's means of publicly proclaiming for critical assessment the institution's objectives, expectations, and values.¹ Within higher education settings, mission statements

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Portions of this study were presented at the 2009 annual meeting of the *Eastern Psychological Association* in Pittsburgh, PA, as well as the 2009 annual *Midwestern Psychological Association* in Chicago, IL. The authors express gratitude to Fr. Ed Udovic and Ms. Georgianna Torres Reyes for their support in this project. Special thanks go to Dr. Gerry McLaughlin, who took the time to review this paper prior to submission. Address correspondence to the second author at DePaul University, Department of Psychology, 2219 N. Kenmore Ave. Chicago, IL 60614: jferrari@depaul.edu

¹ Barbara A. Holland, *From Murky to Meaningful: The Role of Mission in Institutional Change* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 53.

focus the energies of employees to balance the relationship between educational goals and the needs of the outside world, and to integrate objectives held by diverse stakeholders, enabling everyone to work toward common goals.² Institutional missions may be conveyed through administrative operations, academic programs and policies, and student services.^{3,4} They identify the institution's intentions to accomplish goals and its premise for action.⁵

Forming a credible institutional identity, whether for a public or a faith-based school, requires a university to identify its strengths and to create its mission statement around these qualities.⁶ In the context of higher education, it is important to emphasize the institutional identity in terms of its values. *Institutional values*, for the sake of the current research, are defined as goals and outcomes, as well as procedural operations, which are actualized to students and staff, reflecting the identifiable benchmarks of the organization.^{7,8}

These identifiable benchmarks are what set the institution apart from all others and should characterize student qualities as well.⁹ The skills and competencies that students acquired through their higher education may reflect their school's mission and values.¹⁰ For instance, if a public or a Catholic university in its mission statement claims to promote and foster public service, intellectual integrity, critical thinking, moral and civic development, and/or racial and religious tolerance,

² Gary A. Berg, et al., "Mission Possible? Enabling Good Work in Higher Education," *Change* 35.5 (2003): 40.

³ Joseph R. Ferrari and Shaun E. Cowman, "Toward a Reliable and Valid Measure of Institutional Mission and Values Perception: 'The DePaul Values' Inventory," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25 (2004): 51.

⁴ Joseph R. Ferrari and Jessica Velcoff, "Perceptions of University Mission Statement by Senior Administrators: Relating to Faculty Engagement," *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006): 331.

⁵ John Amis, et al., "Values and Organizational Change," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 38.4 (2002): 460.

⁶ Berg, et al., "Mission Possible?" 42.

⁷ Joseph R. Ferrari, et al., "Impact of School Sense of Community within a Faith-Based University: Staff and Faculty Perceptions on Institutional Mission and Values," *Social Psychology of Education* 12 (2009): 515-528.

⁸ Joseph W. Filkins and Joseph R. Ferrari, "The DePaul Values Project and the DeVI: A Case Study on Assessing Student's Perceptions of a Private University's Core Mission and Values Projects," *New Directions for Institutional Research* 122 (2004): 83.

⁹ James Woodrow, "Institutional Mission: The soul of Christian Higher Education," *Christian Higher Education* 5.4 (2006): 314.

¹⁰ Ferrari and Cowman, "Towards a Reliable and Valid Measure," 51.

then it is important to evaluate whether such virtues are actualized and realized by students.¹¹

However, only a few higher education institutions successfully used their mission statements as a strategic plan to identify their distinguishing characteristics or niche which set them apart from the rest.¹² One study by Rapp¹³ assessed first-year students' expectations, perceptions, emotions, and knowledge about the university. Results showed that 50% of the time, students had misconceptions about the university. This outcome increased the distance between student expectations and experiences at that institution. In order to close this gap, program administrators must understand student perceptions of the institutional mission.

Among faith-based colleges and universities, such as Catholic universities, the student affairs department seeks to convey to students the values, philosophy, and faith teachings of the institution regardless of the student's personal religious preference. Several studies found that students enrolled in faith-based colleges and universities more frequently engage in community service than students enrolled in non-faith based institutions.¹⁴

The current pilot study explored the role of service and engagement in preparing students to understand the mission of a Catholic, urban institution. We consider this study important, perhaps even necessary, for any Catholic universities wishing to design and evaluate programs that promote student understanding of their mission. Catholic universities are committed to producing people who both understand

¹¹ Thomas Erlich, "The Impact of Higher Education on Moral and Civic Responsibility," *Journal of College and Character* 2 (2000): 10. Mark J. Halstead and Monica J. Taylor, "The Development of Values, Attitudes and Personal Qualities: A Review of Recent Research," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 30.2 (2000): 201.

¹² Rosanna Tamburri, "Survival of the Fittest," *Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, University Affairs* (1999).

¹³ S.P. Rapp, "Experiences of First-Year Students Regarding the Personal, Social, and Academic Expectations of a Private Midwestern University," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 61 1-A (1999): 107.

¹⁴ Cynthia A. Low and Paul J. Handal, "The Relationship between Religion and Adjustment to College," *Journal of College Student Development* 36.5 (1995): 410. L.L. Newman, "Faith and Freshmen: A Qualitative Analysis of Faith Development of Traditional First-Year Students at a Baptist Institution," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 60.4 (1999): 4-A. Robert C. Serow and Julia I. Dreyden, "Community Service among College and University Students: Individual and Institutional Relationships," *Adolescence* 25.99 (1990): 564.

and practice the Christian faith as well as the virtues specified by the particular charism of the University.¹⁵

Our pilot study focused on DePaul University, a large, Catholic institution located in the city of Chicago, IL. The university's benchmark characteristics are its *urban, Catholic, and Vincentian* qualities and all the values that are naturally associated with these terms. The *urban* identity of the university is expressed by connection and outreach to the community. Its connections include delivering quality education to locations in and immediately around the metropolitan area of the city of Chicago as well as to the global community. The university states that it expresses its *Catholic* mission and values by direct service to the poor and economically disenfranchised through outreach programs such as student engagement in volunteer and community service directed at impoverished communities.¹⁶ Although DePaul is a Roman Catholic school of higher education, its institutional uniqueness is related to a *Vincentian* identity through respect for human dignity, diversity, and individual "personalism."¹⁷

The Vincentian Mission Fellows Program

The current study was an exploratory, pilot examination of a two-year program designed to promote increased awareness of the institutional mission of DePaul University. This program, known as the *Vincentian Mission Fellows (VMF)*, was fashioned to create future alumni who may become intensely engaged in "living the mission" and would carry this into their personal and professional lives as adults. We examined whether a small, diverse group of junior-year students who were highly active in campus activities might report stronger perceptions of the university's mission and commitment to Vincentian values through service, study, reflection, heritage trips, and individual mentoring.

This program was intended to facilitate a lifelong commitment to public service toward building a more socially just community. This

¹⁵ A.J. Dosen, *Catholic Higher Education in the 1960s: Issues of Identity, Issues of Governance* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009). Louise Sullivan, *The Core Values of Vincentian Education* (Niagara, NY: Niagara University Press, 1997). J. Patrick Murphy, *Visions and Values in Catholic Higher Education* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1991).

¹⁶ Dosen, *Catholic Higher Education in the 1960s*. Sullivan, *Core Values of Vincentian Education*. Murphy, *Visions and Values*.

¹⁷ Dosen, *Catholic Higher Education in the 1960s*. Sullivan, *Core Values of Vincentian Education*. Murphy, *Visions and Values*.

program not only engaged students in service and reflection but also promoted leadership abilities and taught the skills needed to live a Vincentian life. Another study by Cress, et al.,¹⁸ found that students in leadership programs increased their conflict-resolution skills, goal setting, implementation of planned program activities, personal ethics, and willingness to take risks. These students also demonstrated greater understanding of leadership theories, greater interest in developing leadership in others, greater commitment to civic responsibility, an increased likelihood of holding an elected or appointed leadership position, and greater cocurricular involvement. Cress, et al.'s findings illustrate the importance of developing strong leadership programs in university settings to provide students with the tools required to be successful in life after graduation. Furthermore, developing programs in university settings that project the institutional mission and values found at many Catholic colleges through a lifetime of civic engagement is important. A study by Ferrari, et al.,¹⁹ found that students engaged in two or more campus clubs or programs reported more favorably their impressions of the university. Student affair programs, therefore, would do well to include engagement opportunities which project the university mission and values, thereby communicating to students the philosophy and specific goals of the university.²⁰

The *VMF* program was a small pilot initiative created to facilitate a lifelong commitment to the mission and values of the institution, well past graduation. Its goal was to project these values into the community through its members. One study found that increased exposure to mission-related activities (both in and outside the classroom) related to heightened perception of aspects of the institutional mission and values.²¹ As mission-related activity engagement increased, students reported an increased understanding of the university's mission and values. Hence, students confirmed an increased awareness of and acceptance of the institutional atmosphere, a stronger belief in the importance of a more diverse faculty and student body, and a more robust

¹⁸ Christine Cress, et al., "Developmental Outcomes of College Students' Involvement in Leadership Activities," *Journal of College Student Development*, 42.1 (2001): 15.

¹⁹ Joseph R. Ferrari, Brendan J. McCarthy, and Lauren A. Milner, "Involved and Focused? Students' Perceptions of the Institutional Identity, Personal Goal Orientation, and Levels of Campus Engagement," *College Student Journal* 43 (2009): 886-896.

²⁰ Filkins and Ferrari, "The DePaul Values Project," 82. Ferrari and Cowman, "Toward a Reliable and Valid Measure," 51

²¹ Filkins and Ferrari, "The DePaul Values Project," 88.

belief in the lasting impact of institutional values on student lives after enrollment at the college or university.²²

However, simply engaging students in mission-related activities may not be enough. Instead, helping students to perceive and understand the value of the activities in which they engage may be advantageous. The *VMF* program addressed this point by engaging students and by directly involving them in reflective studies and work, in heritage trips that educate on the lives of renowned mission-related leaders, and in individual mentoring from a professional who exemplifies living the institutional mission. A combination of these activities may help to integrate the mission and values of the institution, making them clearer for students who can then integrate those values into their everyday lives. The current study assessed this initial exploratory program and investigated whether over two years any changes in perception of institutional mission emerged among students active in community service that centered around social justice.

Method

Selection of Participants

All participants were undergraduates in their junior year, affiliated with a medium-sized, faith-based, urban Midwestern university located in and around Chicago, including the downtown, urban center of the city. Initially, student affairs officials identified a total of 250 engaged junior-year students. These students were invited to complete an online questionnaire discussing their engagement history and experiences. A total of 101 students (69 females, 32 males, M age = 20) completed that survey, and after personal interviews with 25 engaged students, the administration selected 10 highly engaged students. After the first baseline wave, one female participant dropped out of the study, resulting in a total of nine students. Prior to the last data collection (wave 4), two additional female students dropped out of the study, leaving a final total of 7 for complete analysis.

The final seven *VMF* sample included 5 female and 2 male participants (M age = 21 years old, $SD = 0.0$), identified primarily as Latino/a (57.1%) and Roman Catholic (42.9%). As *Vincentian Mission Fellows*, these students underwent a two-year training and education program

²² Filkins and Ferrari, "The DePaul Values Project," 89.

to heighten lifelong commitment to engagement both in and outside of the classroom or institutional setting.

A general student sample ($n = 1706$) responded to the following measures during fall 2007. Within this total sample, there were junior- ($n = 392$) and senior- ($n = 446$) year students. We then matched juniors and seniors based on age, gender, ethnicity, and religious preference. In these stratified samples, 168 junior- and 204 senior-year students met these criteria. Subsequently, a stratified random sample of juniors ($n = 20$) and seniors ($n = 20$) was taken. The junior-year student sample became the baseline comparison to *VMF* participants upon initiation of the *VMF* program (wave 1). The senior-year student sample became the comparison group to *VMF* participants upon completion of the *VMF* program (wave 4).

Psychometric Measures

All participants were administered Ferrari and Velcoff's²³ *DePaul Mission and Values Inventory* (DMV), a 39-item survey divided into two sections. Section one contained 16 questions rated along a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) which tapped into the university's benchmark *institutional identity* as an urban (sample item = "The university sponsors a variety of services and programs to demonstrate the connectedness to the community that is characteristic of its urban identity"), Catholic (sample item = "[The university] freely invites all inquiries to freely examine Catholicism, other faith traditions, and other secular values systems in light of their respective contributions to the human experience") and Vincentian (sample item = "I believe that we manifest Vincentian personalism by our care for each member of the university community") institution. This section of the *DMV* inventory is separated into the 10-item subscale of *innovative/inclusiveness* (author *M* score = 63.18, *SD* = 9.16; coefficient alpha = 0.76) and the 6-item subscale of *Catholic pluralism* (author *M* score = 27.65, *SD* = 4.52; coefficient alpha = 0.79) of the institution.²⁴

The second section of the *DMV* inventory contained 23 items rated along a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all important*; 4 = *very important*). The items of this section reflected how personally relevant to the participant a set of administrative *mission-driven activities* supporting the values

²³ Ferrari and Velcoff, "Perceptions of University Mission Statement," 329.

²⁴ Ferrari and Velcoff, "Perceptions of University Mission Statement," 332.

and vision of the school in each of the three benchmark areas was (e.g., urban sample items = “community based service learning” and “study abroad programs”; Catholic sample items = “Catholic worship services” and “Catholic sacramental opportunities”; and Vincentian sample items = “orientation programs” and “Student Vincentian Heritage Tours”). This section also included the 8-item subscale of *urban/global engagement* (author M score = 26.52, SD = 4.56; coefficient alpha = 0.86), the 6-item subscale labeled *university specific programs* (author M score = 26.61, SD = 4.52; coefficient alpha = 0.79), and the 9-item subscale called *faith formation programs* (author M score = 19.98, SD = 4.94; coefficient alpha = 0.86).²⁵

In a study by Ferrari, McCarthy, and Milner,²⁶ institutional mission perception was evaluated in terms of engagement level in student campus activities. The study, which asked whether increased engagement affected student perceptions of the institutional mission, found that, among institutional identity *DMV* subscales, perception of the university as innovative/inclusive and sense of Catholic pluralism increased significantly as campus engagement increased. Moreover, the study showed that in a faith-based university, the student body is welcoming of Catholic and other faith formation programs, which becomes increasingly apparent as students become more highly engaged on campus.

The current study builds upon these previous studies by examining whether students deeply engaged in an academic, service-based program report, over time, a stronger understanding of the university mission in terms of its institutional identity as well as its mission-driven activities.

In addition, participants completed Paulhus²⁷ *Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR)*, a 40 item 7-point scale (1 = *not true*; 7 = *very true*) containing two subscales: *self-deception* and *impression management*. Self-deception (author M = 7.5; SD = 3.2; coefficient alpha = 0.68-0.80) focused on a responder’s likelihood of wanting to present him- or herself in higher regard than is the actual case. Impression management (author M = 11.9; SD = 4.5; coefficient alpha = 0.75-0.86) dealt with the tendency for people to deliberately answer in a socially

²⁵ Ferrari and Velcoff, “Perceptions of University Mission Statement,” 332-333.

²⁶ Ferrari, McCarthy, and Milner, “Involved and Focused?,” *College Student Journal* 43 (2009): 886-896.

²⁷ Delroy L. Paulhus, “Two-Component Models of Socially Desirable Responding,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46 (1984): 598.

desirable manner. The *BIDR* scale being used in this study is Version 6-Form 40 and is considered a reliable and valid measure.²⁸

Procedure

As part of the mission training program (*VMF*), each participant received individual mentoring. One form of mentoring was through monthly contact with a staff person working in the school's office of mission engagement and through reflective exercises and group discussions to learn more about the Vincentianism reflective of personalism and caring for others. Furthermore, each *VMF* member was assigned a professional mentor who practiced in their chosen career field and exemplified a lifestyle congruent with the mission and values of the university. That is, these professionals were successful in their career and also engaged in extensive community-based service initiatives. For instance, one student was interested in a career in accounting and was paired with a practicing accountant for corporate industries who also established and supervised a volunteer tax-prep program for economically disadvantaged individuals. Another student intended to become an architect and was assigned a licensed Chicago architect who also constructed housing developments for the poor in rural Kenya.

In addition, participants in the *VMF* program gained access to mission-intensive courses for the duration of the program. During the first year, students enrolled in *The Life and Times of Vincent de Paul*, which focuses on St. Vincent the man and the circumstances surrounding the times and experiences that led him to pursue his life's work. During the second year of the program, students enrolled in *Vincentian Spirituality and Struggle for Justice in a World of Change*, which explores the present and the future of Vincentian charism in a changing world. This course approaches specific examples of the work of the Vincentian family throughout today's world, contextualizing these works in the rich tradition and experience of Vincentians for over four hundred years.

A focus on heritage was also integral to the program. In their junior year of the program, the *VMF* participants were involved in a ten-day Heritage trip during spring break, which explained the foundations of a Vincentian lifestyle in Paris, France. In their senior year, the *VMF*

²⁸ Paulhus, "Two-Component Models," 598. Delroy L. Paulhus, *Manual for the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR-6)* (University of British Columbia, 1988): unpublished manual.

participants engaged in a ten-day spring break immersion program with the poor of Los Angeles, working daily at the largest Meals-on-Wheels program in the United States. Finally, seven *VMF* participants played an active role in leadership initiatives across campus and the Chicago area to better prepare them for future community roles outside of academia.

During the autumn and spring quarters (waves 1, 2, 3, and 4), *VMF* members were administered the *DMV* inventory and social desirability measures. Through the numerous *VMF* program requirements mentioned, individuals should have a better understanding of the university mission as well as its central values expressed through the notion of Catholic Vincentianism. These students were assessed longitudinally throughout the course of their enrollment in the *VMF* program.

During the autumn quarter of 2007, a general student sample ($n = 1706$) responded to a mass e-mail to all DePaul University students inviting them to complete an online survey. This survey included the *DMV* as well as social desirability measures. Student incentives to complete the survey included raffle items such as iPods, gift certificates, and the possibility of receiving future tuition waivers for course enrollment at DePaul. Stratified random samples of junior and senior-year students from this data set were subsequently examined for baseline and final program outcome evaluation respectively.

Results

Preliminary analysis determined whether there were any significant tendencies towards responding to our dependent measures in socially appropriate ways, as assessed by impression management and self-deception. Table 1 presents the *zero-order correlates* between both *BIDR* subscales and the five *DMV* subscales. As noted by the tables, there were no significant relationships indicating that students had responded in such a manner. However, the size of the correlation coefficients suggested we enter social desirability scores as covariates in our further analysis.

We proposed that the *VMF* program would refine student perceptions of the institutional mission and that these perceptions would be notably different across *DMV* subscales. Table 2 indicates the mean scores on the five *DMV* subscales across the four measurement waves. A *one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA)*, controlling for social desirability, demonstrated that perceptions of the university mission were

Table 1. Zero-order Correlates controlling for Social Desirability by Student Measurement Wave.

		Vincentian Mission Fellows (<i>n</i> = 7)			
		Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
<i>DePaul Mission & Values scales:</i>	SDE	-.416	-.437	.034	.628
Inclusive and Innovative	IM	-.895	-.350	-.303	-.053
Catholic	SDE	.062	-.302	.163	.660
Pluralism	IM	-.662	.425	-.560	-.034
Urban-Global	SDE	.542	.361	.682	.584
Engagement programs	IM	.593	.429	.454	.759
Religious Heritage	SDE	.066	.621	.630	.608
of University programs	IM	.614	.511	.173	.812
Catholic & other faith formation	SDE	-.594	.229	.321	.583
programs	IM	.152	.302	-.240	.939

Note: SDE = Self-Deception; IM = Impression Management.

significantly different from start to finish of the *VMF* program in terms of both *institutional identity* subscales: *innovative / inclusive* subscales, $F(3, 18) = 9.05, p = .001$, as well as *Catholic pluralism* subscales, $F(3, 21) = 3.80, p = .029$.

However, no significant differences were found across measurement waves in terms of *mission-driven activity* subscales. Paired-sample t-tests (Newman-Keuls, $p < .05$) determined whether there were any specific changes in student perceptions between measurement waves. From wave 1 to wave 2 there were significant changes in student perception of the university as *innovative / inclusive*, $t(6) = -2.92, p = .027$.

Table 2. Mean Sum Score for each *DMV* subscale by Measurement Wave.

		Vincentian Mission Fellows (<i>n</i> = 7)			
		Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
<i>DePaul Mission & Values scales:</i>		55.14	61.14*	63.50*	65.00***
Inclusive and Innovative		(9.74)	(8.34)	(6.15)	(4.96)
Catholic Pluralism		35.14	37.71	38.00	38.14*
		(5.98)	(3.95)	(3.21)	(3.67)
Urban-Global Engagement programs		29.71	31.71	29.85*	30.00
		(2.36)	(0.76)	(2.26)	(2.89)
Religious Heritage of University		22.14	21.29	21.85	20.71
programs		(2.19)	(2.29)	(2.11)	(3.71)
Catholic & other faith formation		17.66	18.57	17.28	19.29
programs		(2.42)	(3.78)	(3.81)	(2.81)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 3. Mean Sum Score for each *DMV* subscale at Program Start and Finish as Compared to Stratified Junior and Senior Year Samples.

	Junior Year		Senior Year	
	Wave 1	Junior Year Matched	Wave 4	Senior Year Matched
<i>DePaul Mission & Values scales:</i>	55.33	57.10	65.00*	54.60
Inclusive and Innovative	(10.65)	(9.44)	(4.96)	(9.25)
Catholic Pluralism	34.50	33.10	38.14*	32.00
	(6.28)	(6.87)	(3.67)	(6.85)
Urban-Global Engagement	29.33	29.45	30.00	30.00
programs	(2.33)	(4.41)	(2.88)	(4.46)
Religious Heritage of	22.16	22.90	20.71	22.80
University programs	(2.40)	(4.43)	(3.54)	(5.26)
Catholic & other faith	17.66	17.95	19.28	18.45
formation programs	(2.42)	(5.13)	(2.81)	(5.06)

VMF ($n = 7$); Junior Year Matched ($n = 20$); Senior Year Matched ($n = 20$)

* $p < .05$

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

This trend continued from wave 2 to wave 3, $t(5) = -3.12, p = .026$. Significant changes were also seen in the *urban/global engagement* subscale from wave 2 to wave 3, $t(6) = 2.77, p = .032$.

Table 3 illustrates mean sum scores of each *DMV* subscale at the start and finish of the *VMF* program as well as the stratified junior and senior sample comparison groups. We found no significant differences in responding between *VMF* participants and matched controls in terms of *mission-driven activity* subscales. Figure 1 displays *VMF* mean sum scores on the five *DMV* subscales at program start compared to a stratified junior-year peer group. This figure demonstrates that at baseline, *VMF* participants did not show significant differences in their perception of the university mission when compared to a matched sample of students not in the program. Figure 2 displays *VMF* mean sum scores on the five *DMV* subscales upon completion of the program compared to a stratified senior-year peer group. This comparison, therefore, outlines the mean differences between those who went through the *VMF* program and those who did not.

A *one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA)*, controlling for social desirability scores, determined that *VMF* student perceptions had significantly changed longitudinally across the four measurement waves when compared to the baseline group (juniors) and matched final comparison (seniors). *VMF* participants responded more positively in terms of the university's *institutional identity* as being *innovative/inclusive*,

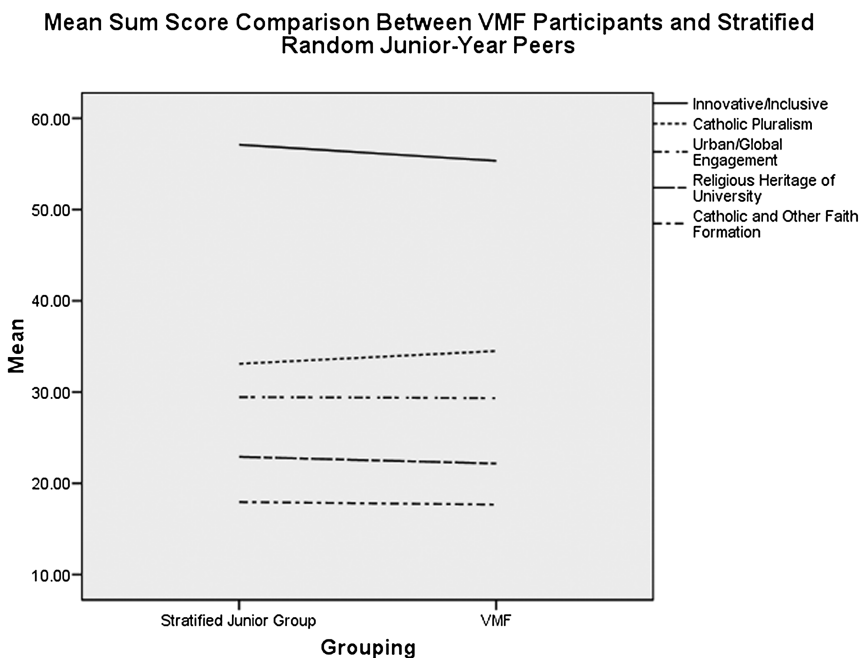


Figure 1. Mean Sum Score Comparison Between VMF Participants and Stratified Random Junior-Year Peers.

$F(1, 24) = 7.02, p = .014$, as well as in its expression of *Catholic pluralism*, $F(1, 24) = 4.66, p = .041$, when compared to stratified matched senior participants. Table 3 also shows that *VMF* participants exhibited similar *DMV* scores to a stratified matched random sample of juniors at baseline.

Discussion

The pilot study examined the institutional mission perceptions of university students engaged in an undergraduate educational training program called the *VMF* to determine whether those perceptions changed over time. We hypothesized that *VMF* participants would further develop perceptions of the institutional mission in terms of its institutional identity as well as its mission-driven activities. We found that the *VMF* program strengthened student perceptions in terms of the university’s institutional identity. More specifically, there was a developed belief and understanding by students that the university was innovative and inclusive and demonstrated a sense of Catholic pluralism. However, over time, these *VMF* participants did not report a significant

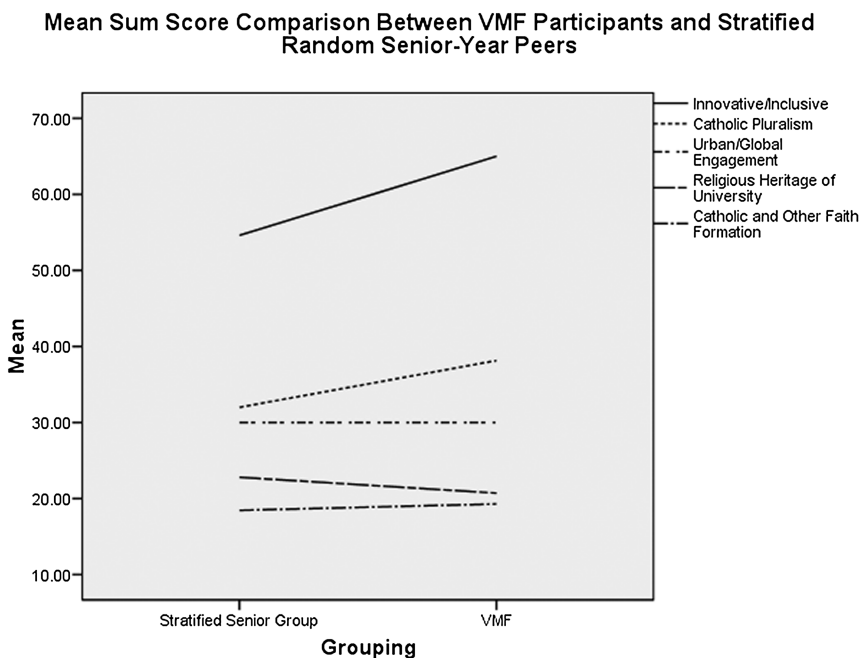


Figure 2. Mean Sum Score Comparison Between VMF Participants and Stratified Random Senior-Year Peers.

change in terms of newly developed perceptions in mission-driven activities.

Perhaps the nature of the *VMF* program itself, which involved participants selected based on university and community engagement, among other factors, affected this outcome. These participants might have reported a “ceiling effect” throughout mission-driven activities subscales such that students cannot respond more positively as they are already heavily engaged. However, our baseline assessment comparing the seven *VMF* participants with a stratified random sample of junior-year peer students suggests that the *VMF* students began at a relatively similar starting point in their perception of the university’s mission. Furthermore, when compared to a stratified random sample of senior peers, the seven *VMF* participants showed significant increases in their perception of the university as innovative and inclusive as well as in their perception of the university’s expression of Catholic pluralism. Taken together, these findings suggest *VMF* participants showed significant increases in their perception of the university’s *institutional identity*, both over time in the *VMF* program and when compared to a stratified random senior-year peer group which did not receive the program intervention.

Importantly, significant differences in *urban/global engagement* were seen from wave 2 to wave 3. This difference might be because of individual variance or sample size limitations. On the other hand, *VMF* participants, through a year of requisite training and service, may have gained implicit understanding of the importance of community engagement.

In addition, the seven *VMF* participants' static scores across mission-driven opportunities (such as faith-formation and university-specific Roman Catholic activities) may be because of their possible lack of religious heritage interest. This possibility is consistent with Ferrari, et al., (in press), which demonstrated no significant difference in highly engaged versus unengaged students in regard to their preference for programs related to the university's patron saint heritage. Future studies should examine mission perceptions in terms of spirituality and engagement. Such a study might determine if students who prefer opportunities to understand life purpose and engage in service-learning opportunities also develop personal values not necessarily related to traditional worship.

There were, of course, limitations to the exploratory study. Clearly, the very small sample size of *VMF* students ($n = 7$) raises concern with respect to strong conclusions that may be drawn. This evaluation project was only a pilot study. Future studies should increase the number of participants to explain the maximum amount of variability in our data. Yet, because this program also consumed a great deal of time and resources through service trips, individual student mentoring opportunities, and leadership training courses, a preliminary study such as this can help determine whether the time and energy needed to develop large-scale programs similar to the small-scale *VMF* is warranted.

Additionally, it would have been useful to include random samples of stratified junior- and senior-year peer groups from the original 100 engaged student data set and then to track these individuals across four waves. Administrative preferences for original data collection methods did not allow us to conduct this appropriate comparison. We acknowledge that sampling from the same data set of engaged students would be more advantageous.

The results of the current study reinforced the notion that programs like the *VMF* are advantageous in promoting a greater understanding of the mission of a Catholic-based university, which will then, ideally, lead to students living those values on and off campus. Future studies might address the role of previous religious involvement, political

affiliation, or spirituality issues in students prior to participation in such programs. Nevertheless, a Catholic institution that claims innovativeness must have university officials who are aware of changing student values and perceptions in order to better serve the needs of individuals through campus programs. The *VMF* pilot program was established in order to facilitate, through mission-driven components (e.g., training courses, service-learning programs, individual mentoring, and heritage trips), a better understanding of the university's institutional identity in students attending that university. It is possible that students, after involvement in the *VMF* program, considered their university as an innovative, inclusive, and pluralistic institution that invites all persons from all backgrounds. These values and attributes are advantageous when instilled in students and put to use in the outside community.