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## Exploring, Deciding, Becoming; Discernment at the University of Notre Dame

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**Exploring, Deciding, Becoming; Discernment at the University of Notre Dame**

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### **Abstract**

This grounded theory case study explores the nature of discernment at the University of Notre Dame, synthesizing five modes of data collection to draw conclusions about the following research questions: When students face an important decision such as choosing a major or career path, what do they do, where do they go, and with whom do they speak? Additionally, what factors enable or inhibit practices of discernment, and what opportunities exist to cultivate a culture more conducive to discernment? I found that students highly value relationships with family members, friends, and mentors as well as academic exploration and time to reflect. Students also reported that discernment is an inherently difficult process and that social supports help them overcome challenges. I theorize that healthy relationships equip students with the perspective to discover themselves and their interests, talents, and purpose. I therefore recommend that the University prioritize building a culture of strong relational trust, providing transformative experiences, and coordinating a cohesive plan surrounding discernment.

**Exploring, Deciding, Becoming; Discernment at the University of Notre Dame**

Discernment is an important skill. Without it, one could not distinguish between the good and the bad. With a well-developed capacity to discern, on the other hand, one can make wise decisions that lead towards the realization of a meaningful and fulfilling life. Discernment is especially important in this moment in time. Digitalization, secularization and modernization has led to what some call the meaning crisis (Vervaeke et al., 2017). Mental health diagnoses in college campuses continue to rise (Lipson et al., 2022). Amidst these factors, college students find it increasingly difficult to make decisions and find happiness (Gordon & Steele, 2015; Storey & Storey, 2021). The University of Notre Dame has committed itself to developing students who can discern with wisdom and resilience how to live a flourishing and fulfilling life ((Runyon, 2022; *Strategic Plan // University of Notre Dame*, n.d.).

This case study investigates the nature of discernment at the University of Notre Dame. The study seeks describe the current understandings of discernment from both faculty/staff and students, to explore the practices by which students discern, to identify the factors students perceive to be inhibiting or enabling their effective discernment, and to generate recommendations for university leadership towards developing a culture that values greater discernment.

This study claims that healthy relationships are essential to discernment, serving both to support and to inform. Relating to others enables young university students to discover their interests and gifts, to decide on a path in and after college, and to become a person that they could not have imagined. I argue that relationships are not merely important but *essential* to discernment, that relationships are the central factor driving discernment. This is not to say that other practices of discernment such as exploration and reflection are not relevant, but only that

they are secondary factors. Relationships are the primary factor because, as students explore and reflect, are mediated by the value hierarchies that are informed by the communal context in which they find themselves.

Thus, to improve discernment, the University of Notre Dame must develop a comprehensive and cohesive strategy that, across the matrix of University entities, provides students with rich academic and co-curricular experiences, develops leaders and models of discernment, and cultivates cultures of strong relational trust

This paper seeks to deliver a compelling account of discernment at Notre Dame to demonstrate the centrality of both transformative experience and meaningful relationship in effective discernment. In the background section, a review of literature explains some concepts related to discernment and summarizes relevant research. The method section describes the process by which this research was completed. The results section then presents the research data, both quantitative and qualitative. The final section discusses these results in light of the literature, attempting to provide tangible suggestions towards promoting effective discernment in higher education, particularly at the University of Notre Dame.

## **Background**

### **The Nature of Discernment**

Discernment has happened since the dawn of time and has been profoundly articulated by widely influential philosophers such as Aristotle, St. Paul, St. Ignatius, Bernard Lonergan, James Martin, and Jonathan Vervaeke. In this line of thought, discernment generally refers to a systematic decision-making method, “both a process and a skill for discriminating... critical to reaching judgments of truth, value, and how to act” (Miller, 2020). Discernment could be framed both spiritually and psychologically. Framed spiritually, discernment “means skill in

discriminating between those influences that enhance or lead to a fuller relationship with God or transcendent reality or, where no belief in transcendent reality is held, to fuller appropriation of one's value system" (Koenig, 2014, p. 502, as cited in Miller, 2020, p. 381). Discernment is a "spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice. Discernment is faithful living and listening to God's love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual calling and shared mission" (Nouwen 3). In other words, discernment is the ability to recognize God's will and the courage to follow it, leading to an experience of communion with God.

Perhaps the most popular and influential school of thought when it comes to discernment in the Christian tradition is Ignatian spirituality. Named after St. Ignatius of Loyola and recorded in the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, Ignatian spirituality helps students of Christianity develop the capacity to discern, so that they become more aware of and attentive to God's will and able to make decisions accordingly. In Ignatian spirituality, successful discernment leads to feelings of consolation. According to James Martin, SJ, consolation "is the sense of God's presence and those interior feelings that lead to peace, tranquility and joy... to feel encouraged, confident, and calm in your decision" (316). Desolation, on the other hand, is a sign of a poor decision. Desolation is the opposite of consolation. One becomes agitated, restless, and unhappy. Experiences of desolations and consolations are "points of departure for discernment, or, to be more precise, there are no more than components in the more comprehensive practice of the discernment of spirits. Such discernment is the prolonged and careful examination of the proposed judgments and decisions that arise in conjunction with consolations and desolations" (Byrne 28). Discerning proposed judgments with effectiveness should lead to consolation, to communion with God, for "God's will is to give us greater glory, which means God wills for us

to participate in, and indeed to be in union with, the unconditional love and goodness that is the very being of God” (Byrne 24). Thus, discernment is the evaluation of thoughts, feelings, proposed judgements, indeed all contents of consciousness, so that one can make decisions most conducive of consolation and growth towards God’s love and goodness.

### ***Psychological Discernment***

Discernment can also be framed philosophically, in a way that is accessible to those without faith in a transcendent reality. Framed psychologically, “discernment is an intentional practice which develops the ability to act in accordance with those agencies that are conducive to integration of the personality and which avoids or resists those influences that would bring about psychic fragmentation or disintegration” (Koenig, 2014, p. 502, as cited in Miller, 2020, p. 381). Discernment helps one make decisions that lead towards integration, harmony, and flourishing.

A useful theory here is Bernard Lonergan’s Generalized Empirical Method (GEM). The GEM models the process by which human beings arrive at understanding, judgements, and actions. The GEM include four steps (Doran, 2008):

1. Experiencing: attending to data
2. Understanding: inquiring, coming to understand through insights
3. Judging: reflecting, passing judgment on understandings
4. Responding: acting in accordance with judgments of meaning and value

In experiencing, one directs focus according to one’s salience landscape (Vervaeke & Ferraro, 2013). A salience landscape acts as a hermeneutic lens through which one sees the world.

Influencing this lens are the values one holds (Milfont et al., 2010). Thus, the value hierarchy one holds influences their discernment, which, in turn, influences their perception of experience, the foundation of discernment. When making decisions, “ people engaged in self-appropriation

[i.e. discernment] gradually discern that among the many activities of in their own consciousness, a select few play a more significant role in knowing, valuing, and deciding than do the others” (Byrne 32). What one deems as important will play a greater role in their discernment.

### ***Empirical Research***

Although discernment is not a new, tracing its origin to ancient philosophy, the concept has become a subject of growing interest in empirical research.

Discernment stems from the Latin word *discernere*, which means to

Despite the interest in discernment within the fields of management and leadership, discernment in education has received less attention. One study investigated the factors that impact students’ choice of major, finding that students value X, Y, and Z, in that order. At the time of the present study, there was no research regarding the process by which students discern.

### **Notre Dame Context**

The University of Notre Dame is dedicated to forming students who are capable of discerning important life decisions: “Promote a culture that values greater reflection and discernment so that students have the opportunity to recognize God’s call, identify their gifts, and share them in service with others” (*Student Affairs // Strategic Plan // University of Notre Dame*, n.d.). This objective is strongly influenced by Christian spirituality and the Catholic intellectual tradition.

The founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Blessed Basil Moreau, “wanted Saint-Croix to be an institution that excelled academically but was also spiritually formative in the Catholic faith, one where students constantly strove, much like members of the religious community, to imitate the ideal of the Holy Family and be a sign of the true communion possible



with God...a form of pedagogy emerges that accurately reflects the process by which a child gradually evolves into an adult. It is a vision that takes young people from their earliest days of grappling with ideas and making sense of the world around them to preparing them through formation in faith and values for lifelong discipleship in a supportive environment that nourishes their gifts and fuels their desire for God” (King 8). The primary values of a Notre Dame education include:

- Mind: “seeking understanding through the integration of faith and reason”
- Heart: “discerning one’s personal vocation in service to the Church and world”
- Zeal: “enkindling the desire to use one’s gifts to boldly proclaim God’s Word
- Family: “embracing Christian community as the context for lifelong formation”
- Hope: “trusting in the Cross and God’s promise of the kingdom”

At Notre Dame, education is more than the mere accumulation of knowledge: we shall always place education side by side with instruction; the mind will not be cultivated at the expense of the heart. While we prepare useful citizens for society, we shall likewise do our utmost to prepare citizens for heaven” (*Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, 417).

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of this case study is to understand the factors that enable or inhibit practices of discernment at Notre Dame and to develop recommendations for University administration towards the goal of developing a culture more conducive to discernment.

## **Method**

### **Grounded Theory Case Study**

A grounded theory case study investigates a concept, such as discernment, in a particular context, such as the University of Notre Dame. Without assuming a prior conceptual framework, the study aims to generate a theory that is grounded in the contextual data. A mixed-methods approach was taken, and the following five modes of data collection were conducted:

- Textual Analysis of Moreau First Year Experience (MYFE) Reflections
- Faculty and Staff Interviews
- Student Interviews
- Student Focus Groups
- Student Survey

Aside from the textual analysis of MYFE reflections, the modes of data collection were undertaken in an exploratory sequence, that is qualitative followed by quantitative. An iterative and inductive thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups first revealed common themes which were then tested quantitatively with a survey to determine significance. By synthesizing and triangulating these modes of data collection, this study hopes to draw conclusions that are trustworthy and meaningful.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this case study:

- How do faculty and staff members at Notre Dame understand discernment?
- How do students at Notre Dame understand discernment?
- How do students at Notre Dame practice discernment?
  - What do they do?
  - Where do they go?
  - With whom do they speak?
- What factors inhibit or interfere with student discernment?
- What factors enable or enhance student discernment?
- What opportunities exist to cultivate a campus culture more conducive to effective student discernment?

### **Natural Language Processing of MYFE Reflections**

In addition to the interviews, focus groups, and survey, a textual analysis of student reflections from the MYFE course was conducted. A corpus of 1,400 anonymized files containing roughly 2 million words (the Bible contains about 0.8 million words) was analyzed

using natural language processing, i.e., data mining with words. This process revealed both the predominant latent themes as well as the contexts in which first-year students discussed discernment.

### **Faculty and Staff Interviews**

In the Fall of 2022, I interviewed 18 faculty and staff members at the University of Notre Dame who were identified as influential leaders in the area of discernment, including assistant deans, academic advisors, leaders in the Office of the Provost, and leaders in the Division of Student Affairs. I used university organizational charts to recruit a broad sample of participants. I used a semi-structured interview protocol, asking about leaders' understanding of discernment and their perceptions of discernment as it manifests in both student life and the organization. (Appendix B). I then conducted an inductive thematic analysis of field notes taken during interviews to identify common themes. These interviews revealed the ways in which faculty/staff understand discernment as well as perceived organizational strengths and weaknesses.

### **Student Interviews**

In the Spring of 2023, I interviewed 7 undergraduate students: 3 first-years and 4 upper-class (juniors or seniors). Academic advisors sent an invitation to participate in this research to students who they thought would be able to speak well on the subject of discernment. I developed a semi-structured interview protocol based on my interviews with faculty/staff members as well as my literature review (Appendix C). All participants signed informed consent. After recording and transcribing the interviews I used an inductive, iterative process of thematic analysis to recognize common themes. These interviews revealed the ways in which these particular students discerned their majors and/or careers, including the experiences and relationships that were especially important to them.

### **Student Focus Groups**

After completing an initial analysis of student interviews, I then developed a semi-structured protocol to conduct focus groups (Appendix D). The focus group protocol was based on the research questions, initial insights gained from interviews, and the Division of Student Affairs strategic goal related to discernment (Appendix E). I spoke with 30 students divided into six focus groups – three groups of first-year students ( $n = 12$ ) and three groups of upper-class students ( $n = 18$ ). Participants were recruited by convenience sampling; an invitation to participate in the research was sent to first-year students in a newsletter, academic advisors invited students they thought could speak on discernment, and students from my classes were also invited to participate. Each participant received a packet of five pages, each page corresponding to the research categories: 1) understanding of discernment; 2) practices of discernment; 3) inhibitors of discernment; 4) enablers of discernment; 5) opportunities to improve discernment. Participants had several minutes to record their notes in the packet before turning to group discussion. Focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed. All participants signed informed consent and received a twenty-dollar compensation. Participant notes were digitized, tabulated, and thematically analyzed. These focus groups revealed the ways in which these students understand and practice discernment, the factors they perceive to inhibit or enable discernment, and the opportunities they believe would promote greater discernment.

### **Student Survey**

After conducting and analyzing faculty/staff interviews, student interviews, and student focus groups, a quantitative survey was developed to test whether conclusions that emerged inductively could be tested deductively on a greater sample size. Various stakeholders were contacted for feedback and suggestions. A pilot survey was then sent to previous participants.

Necessary revisions were made, and the final survey with its results can be seen in Appendix F. The survey was then distributed via the 'FirstYear@ND' newsletter as well as to the Hall Presidents' Council, so that hall presidents could send the survey to their respective residence halls. The residence hall with the greatest participation rate was rewarded with a \$150 incentive, and five random students received a \$20 prize. 249 students completed the survey. Results were tabulated and analyzed, revealing a wealth of information related to the aforementioned research questions.

### **Limitations**

Because this case study uses multiple modes of data analysis, the conclusions should be credible, despite some limitations. First of all, there is a degree of response bias, since those who agree to participate in this research or respond to a survey about discernment are likely already interested in or have knowledge of discernment. Participants in focus groups and interviews may likewise have had a heightened awareness of discernment. Finally, student reflections in the MYFE may not accurately reflect students' genuine thinking. Still, even though the students who participated in this study may not completely represent the student body, their experiences and perspectives are no less valuable. Furthermore, although the present study is confined to the context of this case and conclusions may not be generalizable to other institutions, this study should still reveal objective, dependable, and transferable insight into the nature of discernment.

### **Results**

The results section is organized in the following manner. I first briefly present some findings from the faculty/staff interview, to help contextualize the student experience. I then present the textual analysis of MYFE reflections followed by results from the student survey. Finally, I explain the data from the interviews and focus groups as a thematic narrative

corresponding to the five main research questions: 1) understandings; 2) practices; 3) inhibitors; 4) enablers; and 5) opportunities. The narrative drawn by interviews and focus groups reference findings from the survey.

I have chosen to organize the results in this way – first quantitative then qualitative – because I want to create a compelling and cohesive narrative. So, I present the quantitative results first so that the explanation of qualitative results can reference the previous quantitative conclusions.

### **Interviews with University Leaders**

#### ***Definitions***

When speaking with faculty and staff members with expertise and influence in the area of discernment, three common themes strongly emerged: 1) discernment is a process; 2) discernment is directed towards the good; and 3) discernment happens in relation to others and to God.

These university leaders consistently described discernment as a process. Seven of eighteen leaders made explicit references to the process of discernment. They described it as a “lifetime *process*,” a “*process* of reflection and action aimed at becoming who one is called to be,” a “*process* of evaluating life orientation and choices and taking next steps towards vocational goal at that point,” the “*process* by which students identify their calling or vocation and do so while imbedded in a matrix of (co) curricular mentor and service opportunities,” the “*process* of making decisions – a journey that you take with God, trying to find God’s will and follow it” (emphasis added). According to these university leaders, discernment is a lifelong process of discovering oneself, one’s relationship with God and others, and one’s vocational calling.

University leaders also emphasized the importance of relationship and community to the process of discernment. Discernment helps one “become more deeply aware of who they are in relation to God and the gifts they have been given and how they are called to share those gifts.” According to the Director of Campus Ministry, the goal of discernment at Notre Dame is for students to “leave Notre Dame with a deep relationship with God that informs their lives.” Discernment should lead students toward an appreciation of community, a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. Then, after being formed in and by their respective communities, students at Notre Dame should grow in wisdom and contribute to the formation of other members in their communities.

### ***Discernment Mechanisms at Notre Dame***

According to university leaders, there are many discernment support mechanisms available to students. There are five universal discernment structures, experienced by the vast majority of the study body.

- Residential Life Experience – the ‘Port of Entry’
- Welcome Weekend
- Core Curriculum – a Liberal Arts Education of Mind and Heart
- Moreau First Year Experience (MYFE)
- Academic Advising

Other discernment structures, like Career and Professional Development, Campus Ministry, and co-/extra-curricular activities are self-selective; the students who are already interested in discerning seek these structures.

### ***Student Challenges***

When asked about what challenges they believe students are facing when it comes to discernment, university leaders commonly mentioned the following points:

- stress and pressure
- fear and uncertainty

- identify foreclosure / moratorium
- high academic and career expectations
- misconceived and unhelpful social narratives
- an underdeveloped capacity to discern

### ***Administrative Challenges***

University leaders articulated two main challenges related to supporting student discernment at Notre Dame.

- Lack of clear, cohesive, and comprehensive discernment strategy'
- Communicating a Catholic vision of human flourishing with a student body steeped in a secular society, how to translate the Catholic ethos to nonsectarian population

### ***Administrative Opportunities***

- Broad buy-in, consensus on meaning of discernment and strategy for supporting student reflection and discernment; clearly articulated discernment strategy, comprehensive and cohesive, informing and guiding both arms of the University, that is Student Affairs and the Academy
- Expand Discernment process beyond the first year
- integrate discernment into curricular structures
- develop cultures of discernment
- improve narration of the discernment journey
- publish a discernment website

## **Textual Analysis of MYFE Reflections**

A textual analysis of student reflections from the Moreau First Year Experience (MYFE) revealed common themes within first-year students' writings as well as the context in which students described discernment. A corpus of 1,400 anonymized files containing roughly three million words formed the basis of analysis. Topic modelling, an unsupervised machine learning process used to enumerate latent themes, can help describe the contents of the corpus. If the corpus is modelled using eight topics, then the corpus can be said to reflect the following themes and in the illustrated proportions:

**Table 1**

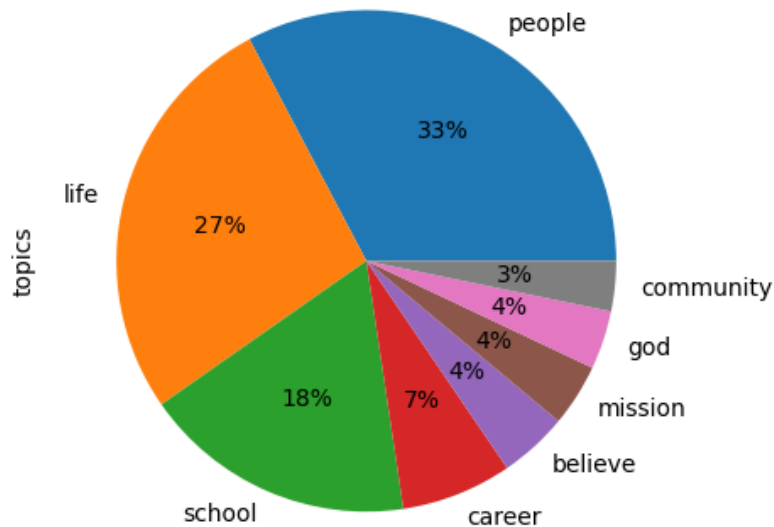
### ***Topic Modelling***



<i>labels</i>	<i>weights</i>	<i>features</i>
<i>people</i>	0.866	people life think things good know something t...
<i>life</i>	0.713	life others people community important however...
<i>school</i>	0.467	school college friends new time first high i've...
<i>career</i>	0.189	life career well-lived always lived time lives...
<i>believe</i>	0.117	believe faith vulnerability relationships stor...
<i>mission</i>	0.106	mission life statement career others well-live...
<i>god</i>	0.100	god leadership leader world true response refl...
<i>community</i>	0.085	community expectations hope encountered syndro...

**Figure 1**

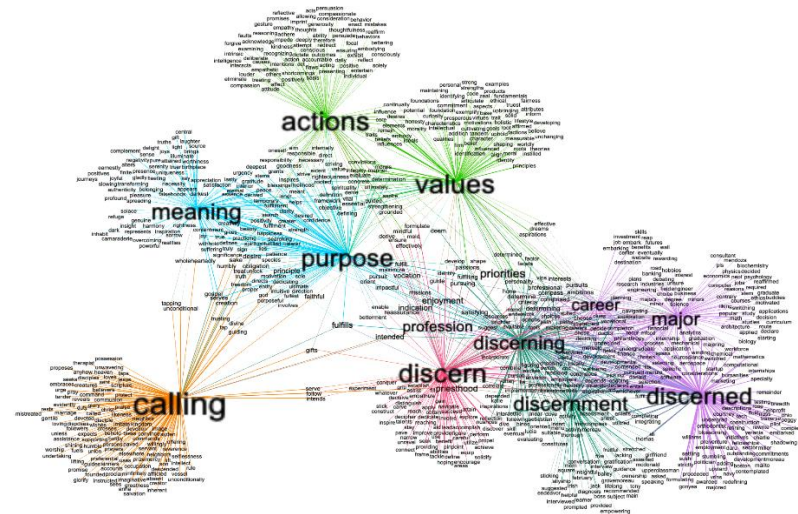
*Topic Modelling Pie Chart*



The corpus was then filtered by sentences that include stems of the word discernment (discern, discerned, discerning, and discernment). Examples include:

- We must be patient with ourselves as we *discern* who we are, what we want from life, and what we are meant to do.
- I also think that my curiosity and my pursuance of truth through this curiosity will be important these next coming years as I attempt to *discern* what I think the truth about the world, people, and God, as well as my major and future job.
- I seek wisdom to *discern* my future.
- Although at times difficult to come to terms with, college is an experience with unimaginable changes both good and bad, which I am positive will shape me into the





Investigating the table of semantic distances further, the ways in which first-year students conceptualize discernment begin to emerge. It seems that students generally conceive of discernment in three ways: aspiring/pursuing, discovering/exploring, and deciding/determining. Interestingly, ‘mom’ is also a common nearby word for discernment. The following table displays some selected words and their respective semantic distance weights to illustrate this point.

**Table 2**

*MYFE Selected Semantic Relationships*

<i>Reference Word</i>	<i>Nearby Word</i>	<i>Semantic Weight</i>
discerned	pursued	0.9102
discerned	integrating	0.9038
discerned	aspiration	0.8992
discern	discover	0.8861
discerning	determining	0.8846
discern	decide	0.8825
discerning	exploring	0.8629
discernment	mom	0.7999

**Student Survey**

### ***Demographics***

Of the 332 students who began the survey, 249 finished the survey. Of those 249 respondents, 218 completed the demographics section. Respondents were skewed towards first-year students, they were more often female than male, they were predominately white and Catholic, and they came from the various school and colleges. This demographic data can be found alongside all survey data in Appendix F. Because of both response bias and the convenience sampling method, respondents may not fully represent the student body. However, when significant testing and data from other data sources converge on the same conclusion, one can be relatively confident that such a conclusion is, in fact, a real occurrence on campus.

### ***Discernment Index***

The Discernment Index (DI) is a 16-point scale score designed to reflect one's capacity to discern. In the DI, there are four sections: 1) attentiveness and aspiration; 2) exploration and conversation; 3) evaluation and reflection. 4) skills and understanding. Each section contains four statements, and respondents were asked to describe the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements on a 5-point Likert scale, where 'Strongly Agree' is a score of 5 and 'Strongly Disagree' is a score of 1. In total, 249 respondents completed this section of the survey. In general, respondents scored higher on the attentiveness and aspiration as well as the exploration and conversation sections, and slightly lower on the measure of evaluation and reflection as well of skills and understanding. The aggregate scale score across all four sections revealed a mean of 4.04 and standard deviation of 0.49. In other words, respondents on average moderately agreed with statements designed to measure their capacity to discern. Results from the DI including all 16 points and scores for each scale as well as the aggregate DI score are displayed below.

**Table 3***Discernment Index*

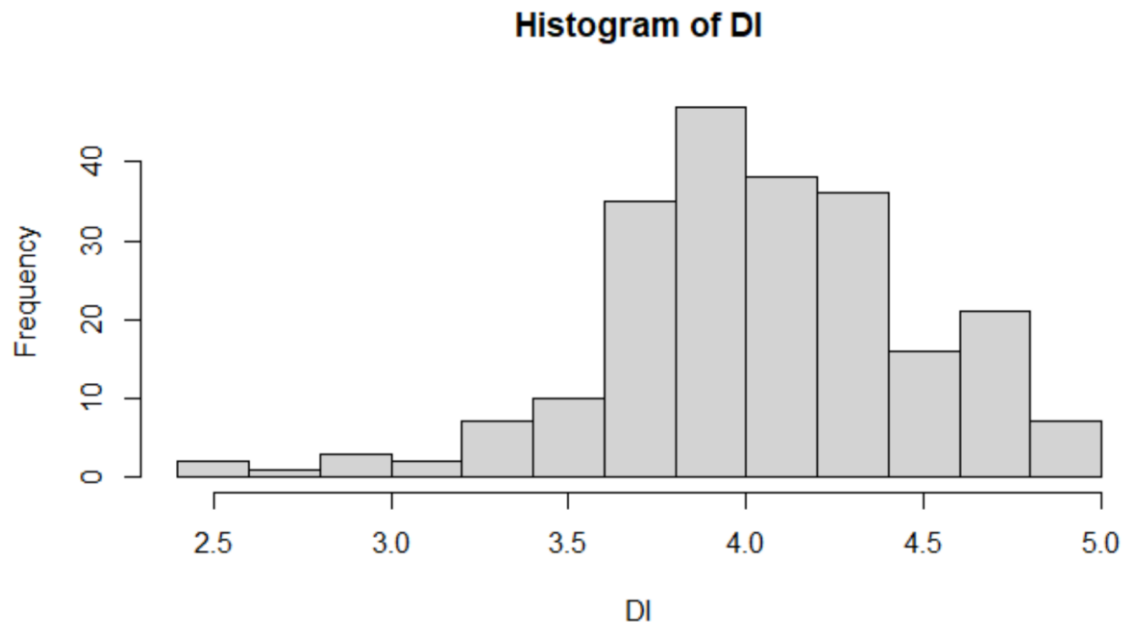
<i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (0-5 Likert Scale)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Attentiveness and Aspiration</i>		
I am interested in deeper discussions about the meaning and purpose of my life.	4.15	0.95
It is important that I spend time discerning my future path in life.	4.40	0.76
When encountering a new experience, I regularly think about how it makes me feel.	3.95	0.88
I am motivated to pursue life goals.	4.48	0.75
<i>Exploration and Conversation</i>		
When making a decision, I seek out relevant information from a variety of sources.	4.21	0.67
I seek advice from people I trust.	4.55	0.71
I explore different experiences to see what I enjoy.	3.98	0.86
I see a future full of possibilities.	4.27	0.84
<i>Evaluation and Reflection</i>		
I spend time in self-reflection.	3.84	0.96
I consider how my actions line up with my values.	4.03	0.87
Before making an important decision, I carefully evaluate my options.	4.43	0.70
I use tools such as a pro-con list or a decision matrix to help inform important decisions.	3.31	1.24
<i>Skills and Understanding</i>		
I feel confident in the life decisions I have made thus far.	4.08	0.80
I know what is truly important to me.	4.13	0.81
I have a good understanding of where my life is headed.	3.45	1.03
If I had to make a big life decision, I would know what to do.	3.31	1.02
<i>Scale Scores</i>		
Attentiveness and Aspiration	4.24	0.63
Exploration and Conversation	4.25	0.54
Evaluation and Reflection	3.90	0.64
Skills and Understanding	3.74	0.71
Aggregate Scale Score	4.04	0.49

*Note.* n = 225

Respondents of the survey demonstrated a moderately high capacity to discern, as measured by the DI scale score ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ). The distribution of DI scores can be seen below.

**Figure 4**

*Distribution of Discernment Index Scores*



### ***Relationship Valuation***

Respondents were asked to value their relationships with others on a 3-point Likert scale. The survey asked: “When discerning your major, career, or life goals, how highly did/do you value conversations with the following people?” Respondents could then choose “Not at all,” “Moderately Value,” or “Highly Value.”

Respondents in the student survey highly value relationships. They value family members most highly ( $M = 2.86$ ), followed by friends ( $M = 2.54$ ), professors ( $M = 2.42$ ), and mentors ( $M = 2.39$ ). Respondents in the survey also moderately value industry professionals ( $M = 2.36$ ) and academic advisors ( $M = 2.13$ ).

**Table 4***Relationship Valuation*

<i>When discerning your major, career, or life goals, how highly did/do you value conversations with the following people? (3-point Likert scale)</i>				
<i>Relationship</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Family Members	2.86	0.37	236	
Close Friends	2.58	0.54	236	
Professors	2.42	0.64	228	
Mentors	2.39	0.73	155	
Industry Professionals	2.36	0.57	227	
Academic Advisor (School/College)	2.13	0.77	214	
Alumni	2.06	0.68	217	
Career Counselor	2.03	0.74	153	
Counselor/Therapist	1.98	0.77	131	
Academic Advisor (First Year)	1.82	0.75	225	
Spiritual Director	1.82	0.79	125	
Hall Staff Members	1.79	0.72	224	
Peers who are not close friends (classmates, dormmates, etc.)	1.74	0.55	233	
Rector	1.69	0.71	220	
Moreau Instructor	1.62	0.70	219	

*Campus Entity Valuation*

Respondents were likewise asked to value campus entities on a 3-point Likert scale: “To what degree did the following programs and offices help you discern your major, career, and/or life goals?” They could then select “Not at all helpful,” “Moderately Helpful,” or “Very Helpful.”

Overall, respondents moderately valued campus entities. Respondents valued their school and college advising offices the highest ( $M = 2.21$ ) followed by the core curriculum ( $M = 2.14$ ), career and professional development ( $M = 2.11$ ), the office of first year advising ( $M = 1.95$ ), and their residence halls ( $M = 1.91$ ). Comparing the valuation of campus entities with the valuation of relationships above, the valuation of relationships is significantly higher than the valuation of campus entities. There are five groups of individuals whom students valued on average higher

than campus entities. This lends credence to the claim that relationships are more important than programs or offices alone.

**Table 5**

*Campus Entity Valuation*

<i>To what degree did the following programs and offices help you discern your major, career, and/or life goals? (3-point Likert scale)</i>				
<i>Campus Entity</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
School/College Advising Office	2.21	0.65	201	
Core Curriculum	2.14	0.68	225	
Career and Professional Development (Center for Career Development, etc.)	2.11	0.64	177	
Office of First Year Advising	1.95	0.69	211	
Residence Hall	1.91	0.77	213	
Health and Wellness (UCC, UHS, McWell, Center for Student Support and Care)	1.74	0.77	153	
Other (please explain)	1.72	0.84	36	
Moreau First Year Experience course	1.7	0.65	220	
Student Development (MSPS, GRC, SAO, RecSports, etc.)	1.7	0.7	168	
Campus Ministry	1.63	0.68	165	

***Inhibitors of Discernment***

Respondents were asked to respond to the following statements reflecting inhibitors of discernment, answering the question, “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*).

Overall, respondents agreed that discernment is a difficult process ( $M = 4.25$ ).

**Table 6**

*Inhibitors of Discernment*

<i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (0-5 Likert Scale)</i>			
<i>Inhibitor</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Discernment is a difficult process.	4.25	0.78	
Psychological challenges such as anxiety, impostor syndrome, or fear of the unknown interfere with my ability to discern.	3.78	1.17	



Social pressures such as excess competition or expectations from others interfere with my ability to discern.	3.64	1.13
I feel like I do not have enough time to discern.	3.29	1.03

### *Enablers of Discernment*

Respondents were then asked to respond to the following statements reflecting enablers of discernment, answering the question, “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” on a 5-point Likert scale.

**Table 7**

### *Enablers of Discernment*

<i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (0-5 Likert Scale)</i>		
<i>Enabler</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
There are people who care about me and my well-being.	4.63	0.58
I can access resources to help me discern.	3.79	0.81
I feel a sense of encouragement from others to spend time discerning.	3.60	1.01

*Note.* “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” 5-point Likert Scale: Strongly disagree – Strongly agree

### *Opportunities to Improve Discernment at Notre Dame*

Survey respondents were asked to rate several opportunities on a 5-point Likert scale from “not at all useful” to “extremely useful.” These opportunities were inductively generated from student suggestions during interviews and focus groups. Students responded most favorable to the opportunity of providing greater academic flexibility ( $M = 4.12$ ). Mentorship programs were also deemed very useful ( $M = 3.94, 3.86, 3.81$ ). Several other opportunities fell between moderately and very useful. Interestingly, although students in focus groups voiced appreciation for the MYFE and suggested enhancements and an extension to the course, survey respondents did not view such opportunities favorably. This could however be due to the relatively large

proportion of respondents who were first-years or the perception of MYFE as merely another requirement.

**Table 8**

*Valuation of Opportunities*

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*Below is a list of initiatives in which the University could support student discernment. For each, please rate the opportunity on its potential to support student discernment at Notre Dame. (0-5 Likert Scale)*

---

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Greater academic flexibility to take courses in different departments.	4.12	0.83
A mentorship program to partner students with professors and alumni.	3.94	0.93
A mentorship program to partner students with industry professionals.	3.86	0.94
Integrating discernment into academic coursework such as having professors discuss their discernment.	3.81	0.96
A mentorship program to partner first-year students with upper class students.	3.73	0.98
Promoting discernment through academic departments with events such as major fairs.	3.66	0.95
A comprehensive discernment website featuring a central database for all relevant discernment resources and opportunities, a timeline of discernment processes, and additional tools.	3.59	1.06
More offerings of 1-credit or pass/fail discernment electives and enrichment courses.	3.47	1.14
More discernment programming such as career panels, retreats, self-organized discernment groups, etc.	3.13	1.08
Include more explicit discernment frameworks, tools, and practices in the Moreau course.	2.97	1.18
Continuing a course similar to Moreau beyond the first year.	1.95	1.20

---

*Additional Questions*

Respondents were asked to respond to additional questions regarding their experience with discernment at Notre Dame as well as other constructs of interest such as sense of belonging, satisfaction with discernment, and discernment of one's life calling. Students generally reported a moderately high sense of belonging ( $M = 4.19$ ) and, albeit to a lesser degree, satisfaction with their discernment experience ( $M = 3.88$ ). Students responded less positively,

however, to the statement, “I have discerned my calling in life.” ( $M = 3.10$ ). These results are displayed in tables 9 and 10 below.

**Table 9**

*Discernment at Notre Dame*

<i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (0-5 Likert Scale)</i>		
<i>Field</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Notre Dame provides sufficient opportunities to support my discernment journey.	4.05	0.82
In general, Notre Dame administrators, faculty, and staff demonstrate commitment to discernment.	4.04	0.77
In general, Notre Dame students demonstrate commitment to discernment.	3.92	0.80
I feel like I belong at Notre Dame.	4.19	0.90
I am satisfied with my discernment experience at Notre Dame.	3.88	0.89

**Table 10**

*Additional Questions*

<i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (0-5 Likert Scale)</i>		
<i>Field</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Sd</i>
Principles of faith, religion, or philosophy guide my decisions.	3.74	1.18
I want to address societal needs.	4.12	0.84
I have discerned my calling in life.	3.10	1.13

**Correlation Testing**

To investigate the relationship between the several variables measured in the survey, including the aggregate Discernment Index (DI), the inhibitors and enablers, and the additional questions measuring participant’s satisfaction with discernment, sense of belonging at Notre Dame, and discernment of a life’s calling, Pearson correlation tests were conducted, and the results are displayed in the following table.

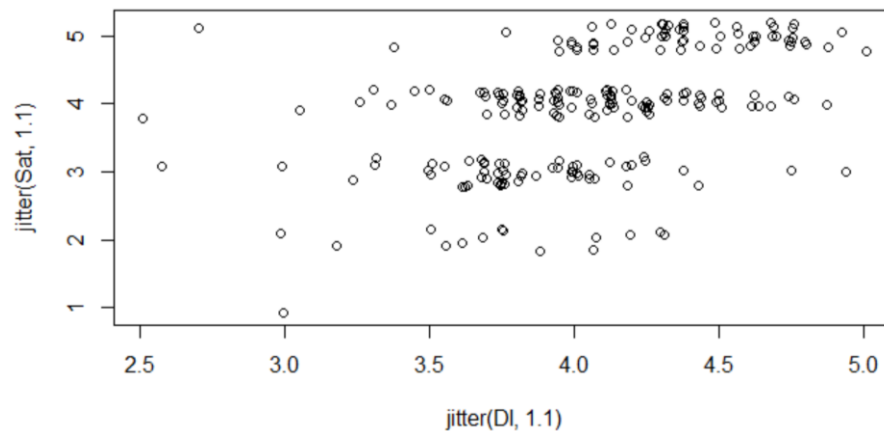
**Table 11***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Variables of Interest*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Discernment Index	4.05	0.44	-									
2. Satisfaction with Discernment	3.88	0.89	.53***	-								
3. Sense of Belonging	4.20	0.88	.45***	.58***	-							
4. Discerned One's Calling	3.11	1.12	.45***	.4***	.19**	-						
5. Others Who Care	4.63	0.54	.35***	.24***	.37***	.09	-					
6. Social Encouragement	3.57	0.99	.42***	.31***	.19**	.23***	.13	-				
7. Access to Resources	3.81	0.78	.28***	.36***	.29***	.16*	.27***	.52***	-			
8. Psychological Challenges	3.76	1.18	-.19**	-.28***	-.25***	-.26***	-.08	-.15*	-.26***	-		
9. Social Pressures	3.65	1.12	-.21**	-.34***	-.25***	-.33***	-.01	-.12	-.19**	.67***	-	
10. Time Constraints	3.3	1.02	-.19**	-.37***	-.1	-.27***	-.07	-.14*	-.14*	.3***	.27***	-

Note.  $n = 225$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

**Validity of the Discernment Index.** Since the DI is designed to measure one's capacity to discern, one could hypothesize a correlation between the DI score and the satisfaction variable (*I am satisfied with my discernment experience at Notre Dame*) as well as the calling variable (*I have discerned my calling in life*). Correlation tests revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between DI and both satisfaction ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ) and calling ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ) variables. In other words, for every one-point increase in the DI score, one could expect a .53 point increase in satisfaction and a .45 increase in calling. The greater one's capacity to discern, as measured by the DI, the more likely one is to report feeling satisfied with their discernment experience and to report feeling that they have discerned their calling. Thus, the DI is a valid measure of the capacity to discern.

**Figure 5***Discernment Index and Satisfaction with Discernment*

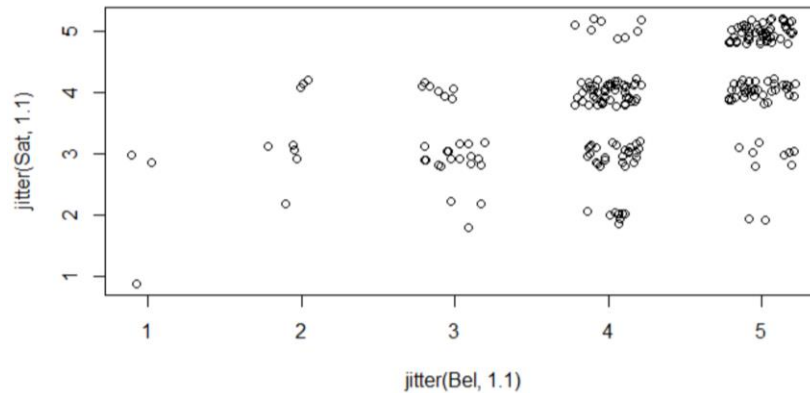


*Note.*  $r = .53$ ,  $p < .001$

**Sense of Belonging.** There is a relatively strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between reported sense of belonging and both the DI ( $r = .45$ ) and satisfaction with discernment ( $r = .58$ ). In other words, students who have a positive sense of belonging are likely to also have a positive experience with discernment and a higher capacity to discern. This does not demonstrate causality but rather correlation, and other factors such as transformative experiences or healthy relationships may influence this relationship. The following figures plot the correlation between participants reported sense of belonging and the DI and satisfaction variables.

### Figure 6

*Sense of Belonging and Satisfaction with Discernment*



*Note.  $r = .58, p < .001$*

### **Correlations between Enablers/Inhibitors with the DI and Satisfaction Variables.**

The DI and satisfaction variables were positively correlated with all three enabling factors (others who care, access to resources, and social encouragement) and were negatively correlated with all three inhibiting factors (psychological challenges, social pressures, and time constraints). Of the three enablers, social encouragement and others to care seem to be more strongly correlated with the DI, whereas access to resources was more strongly correlated with satisfaction. The inhibitors appear to be more strongly negatively correlated with satisfaction rather than the DI. This suggests that enablers of discernment have a stronger positive influence on the capacity to discern than the inhibitors have in the negative direction. In other words, the experience of enablers could potentially overcome inhibitors to develop a higher capacity to discern.

**Social Pressures and Psychological Challenges.** The single strongest correlation of the tested variables was the correlation between social pressures and psychological challenges, suggesting that psychological challenges are not merely individual issues but also reflective of cultural narratives.

**Demographics.** In this data set, there were no statistically significant correlations found between the DI score and gender, grade level, college/school, and other demographic variables. A correlation between grade level and DI had been hypothesized, but none was revealed. This could be due to low response rates from higher grade levels.

### **Student Focus Groups and Interviews**

Interviews with both first-year ( $n = 4$ ) and upper-class (junior/senior,  $n = 3$ ) students as well as focus groups with both first-year ( $n = 12$ ) and upper-class (junior/senior,  $n = 18$ ) students, revealed rich data that converges with statistically significant survey data on the following conclusions. First, students understand discernment as both a process and a skill of exploring and eventually deciding on a course of study, career, and other life goals, and this discernment is directed towards the good and should result in a sense of clarity and confidence. When students practice discernment, they do so by 1) seeking out new experiences; 2) taking time to reflect, evaluate, and pray; and 3) talking with others whom they trust. Of those three practices, conversation was the most commonly cited, with family and friends being the most frequent conversation partners. Participants in this study mentioned several factors that either inhibited or enabled their discernment. Inhibiting factors include 1) time constraints; 2) psychological challenges; 3) negative social pressures; and 4) the inherent difficulty of discernment. Enabling factors, on the other hand, include 1) general social support and encouragement; 2) conversations with others; 3) gaining experiences; and 4) awareness of and access to resources. Finally, when asked to think about ways in which the University could better support student discernment, participants responded with several clever suggestions related to 1) structure of academic curricula; 2) programs to foster relationships and build healthy cultures; 3) the possibility of a university discernment website; and 4) the implementation of the MFYE.

The following section is designed to construct a narrative that responds to the guiding research questions (understandings, practices, inhibitors, enablers, and opportunities) while corresponding to the survey data above. Each subsection will present first the quantitative data from the focus groups, that is, the tagged and tabulated latent themes. A more thorough explanation of those themes using qualitative data – students’ own language – will then follow. Latent themes from the focus group analysis are presented in tables, and tags, or participants’ words or phrases that were highlighted as representative of a certain theme, are presented in single quotes. Examples of student language are italicized and placed in double quotes.

### ***Understanding Discernment***

Students at the University of Notre Dame who participated in focus groups demonstrated a relatively solid grasp of discernment (compared to faculty/staff understandings and definitions in literature). Focus group participants commonly described discernment as an intentional and ongoing decision-making process (67%) and as a capacity of judgement (33%). They generally described discernment in terms of exploring (73%) and/or deciding (70%) a course of study (27%), career (60%), and/or life purpose (90%). Tags for the explore code include ‘explore,’ ‘find,’ ‘discover,’ and ‘seek.’ For the decision code tags include ‘decide,’ ‘determine,’ ‘figure out,’ and ‘choose.’ Tags for course of study include words like ‘major’ and ‘course of study.’ Tags for career include ‘career’ and ‘job.’ Tags for purpose include ‘life,’ ‘goals,’ ‘purpose,’ and ‘calling.’ The frequency of codes can be seen in the table below.

**Table 12**

#### *Understandings of Discernment*

<i>Definition</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Process	10	10	20
Skill	2	8	10
Explore	8	14	22



Decide	7	14	21
Course of Study	2	6	8
Career	5	13	18
Purpose	10	17	27

Students describe the process of discernment as “*the process of gaining a better understanding of oneself and the opportunities given to them in order to make an informed decision about ones next steps in life,*” “*the deliberative process one undergoes when making decisions that will have a lifelong impact,*” and “*the process of learning more about what your purpose is and what you are called to do in your life.*” The discernment process is “*intentional,*” “*thoughtful,*” and “*ongoing.*” Some students also described discernment as an ability to “*judge with wisdom and make decisions that are aligned with these judgements,*” to “*make the best decision based on your judgements,*” to “*deepen understanding of the problem and alternative solution,*” and to “*understand ones own core values, passions, and strengths.*” One upper class discernment described how discernment involves more than thinking just about one’s career:

*“I think of discernment, and I think of career discernment just because I feel like that’s the stage in my life that I’m at. That’s why I associate with it. But I think of discernment a little bit differently than I think of like career choice, where discernment, I associate a little bit more of a moral direction... I think that’s possibly just because that’s what like Moreau and stuff instilled in me. Like discernment’s supposed to be this like finding of your calling more than just finding where you’re gonna be for from nine to five for stuff. So I think of discernment as having a slightly moral direction to it. It’s still mainly I associate it with choosing a career, but not just choosing a career to choose one. Choosing one that you feel like you fit.”*

Another upper-class student described a similar sentiment, of searching for and hopefully finding a good fit:

*“For me it’s like searching for something. I think it’s a little bit different than just trail and error, but it could definitely include trial and error. But yeah, definitely just trying to*

*find something, search for something that is desirable... for me, it's just do what makes you happy, do what gets me out of bed in the morning."*

In addition to searching for something good and desirable, discernment also involves intentional thinking. An upper-class student defined discernment as *"thinking about what you want to do, like deeply thinking about it, not just quickly thinking about it,"* a first-year student said that discernment *"is being willing to ask the deep question, to muck it up a little bit and hope that in the end you get the big moment,"* and another said it involves *"thinking about what I want to do with my life."*

Participants revealed a common understanding of discernment as a process by which one comes to discover one's interests, talents, and longings, thereby deciding on a course of action, whether committing to a major, choosing a job, or other major life decisions. They also related discernment more broadly to a method of answering ultimate questions of meaning and value. In addition to an ongoing process, some participants described discernment as a skill, as a capacity for making wise judgements in accordance with one's values.

### ***Practicing Discernment***

Students who participated in this study commonly identified three ways of practicing discernment: 1) exploration (53%); 2) reflection (87%); and 3) conversation (97%). The exploration code includes tags such as 'explore,' 'research,' 'attend events,' and 'try out.' The conversation code includes such tags as 'speaking,' 'talking,' 'asking someone,' and 'seeking advice.' The reflection code includes tags like 'think,' 'evaluate,' 'pray,' and 'reflect.'

**Table 13**

#### ***Practices of Discernment***

<i>Practice</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Exploration	11	5	16
Conversation	11	18	29

Reflection	10	16	26
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**Exploration.** When working towards a decision, students frequently cited a period of exploration that allowed them to discover a good fit (53%). This commonly involves intellectual exploration through academic coursework. By taking different classes, students discover their interests and talents and can therefore make a more informed decision. One first-year student said, *“I took the finance class and that was not for me,”* and then decided to change majors. Another first-year came in planning on majoring in chemical engineering, but *“very quickly found out that was not for me.”* One source of academic exploration that stood out was the first-year engineering course in the College of Engineering. Students frequently said this experience was helpful. As one first-year student explained,

*“The first-year engineering course requires you to do a bunch of discernment activities to figure out what you’re interested in. A couple that I picked were going to a meeting of the Notre Dame rocketry team, and I went to a talk by the CTO of Lockheed Martin. And both of those were really exciting to me, just hearing about what each of the groups was doing in their work and their research... and I thought that was something that I might like to study and figure out how to do myself.”*

An upper-class student similarly described how the first-year engineering course helped her feel confident in her decision to study chemical engineering: *“it helped me see other options and then know that I’d explored everything before coming back to chemical engineering,”* citing both an alumni panel and a student panel as particularly helpful, because it *“gives you an idea of what to expect.”* One first-year student who eventually switched from engineering to business described that, *“something that was really big was actually my engineering class last semester, which I really liked... being able to figure out like, oh, hey I thought this was for me, but it’s not.”*

Students mentioned other academic courses that helped them discern. One upper-class student, after disliking chemistry labs, moved to the College of Arts and Letters. There the student tried many different classes before settling on a major:

*“I tried PLS, I took PolySci classes and stuff, but the classes I enjoyed the most were history. And then one of my professors was an American Studies professor as well. So, I decided to switch into history and American Studies after sophomore year... I was just taking classes that I enjoyed and then switching majors. Yeah. Eventually landed on these two and couldn’t be happier.”*

Through academic exploration, whether introductory courses, labs, elective, or the first-year course in the college of engineering, intro courses, students gain the experience necessary to understand who they are – their talents, interests, and deepest longings.

**Reflection.** Focus group participants frequently described intentional reflection practices such as prayer, nonsectarian reflection, journaling, and walking around campus as an important step in their discernment process (87%). Prayer practices include the Catholic Mass and the Ignatian Examen, and the Liturgy of the Hours. One student said he practiced discernment by *“building strong and healthy practices of prayer, reflection, and all around every other aspect of your life... like personal reflection and prayer but also more formalized ways of praying through either the Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours.”* Students described nonsectarian reflection as *“quiet reflection on my personal values and if they align with what I’m actually doing,”* or taking time to *“lay in bed and listen to music and stare at the ceiling.”* One student mentioned that reflection occurs spontaneously after impressive experiences:

*“Coming from, whether it be a club event or doing something in a class that I found interesting or something along those lines, I think the self-reflection comes about naturally for me and it's almost a feeling of, wow, like I felt really fulfilled by that event or that experience, so maybe that's something I want to pursue.”*

Journaling came up as a reflective practice, keeping a “*daily journal of my thoughts and whatnot*,” for example. One student described her practice of journaling:

*“I love to journal, very helpful for processing all the things I’m thinking about. And then like adjacent to that, having a physical pros and cons list, like a running Google Doc or something with everything that I’m weighing.”*

These reflective practices – prayer, nonsectarian imaginative, exploratory, or value-based reflection, and journaling – occur often times in special places around campus such as the Basilica or around the lakes. One student described “*going for walks around the lakes and just like thinking about it for a good long time.*”

Students value reflection and describe it in various forms such as prayer, journaling, simply letting the mind wander. Students reflect both on new experiences and on their values.

**Conversation.** Nearly every focus group participant (97%) mentioned interpersonal conversation as an important practice of discernment. Furthermore, participants recorded the persons particularly important to their discernment journey. Table 14 displays the frequency of these conversation partners.

**Table 14**

*Conversation Partners*

<i>Person</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Family	6	13	19
Friends	5	13	18
Peers	2	4	6
Mentors	0	2	2
Professors	3	4	7
Industry Experts	5	7	12
Alumni	0	1	1
Advisors	1	3	4

One upper-class student, while discerning his career path, said *“the most helpful thing I’ve experienced is [advice that] came from my dad: to make as many connections as you can, talk to as many people as you can.”* The same student, a resident assistant, described an important relationship he enjoyed with his rector:

*“In terms of a more holistic view of discernment... Father Joe... Having the hall staff structure of we have these supervision meetings every two or three weeks... How am I doing on these goals I set? Am I becoming the person I want to be? And like actually taking the time to have those meetings has been really helpful because I am examining my life in a way that I wasn’t... And so those meetings and those types of things have been helpful on that side of discernment.”*

Another upper-class student, when asked to describe the factors that helped him discern, said,

*“For me it was my advising dean, Dean Russo. He helped me so much... He always made me feel better for being an Arts and Letters major, because I would always be like self-conscious about my studies because I had a lot of my friends from back home in business or engineering... But then I would talk to Dean Russo, and it would just alleviate all those anxieties I had. I felt secure with being in Arts and Letters after talking to him.”*

That same student also described the importance of the relationships in his dorm community. He describes a relationship with a resident assistant and the dorm community as a whole:

*“[He was] probably one of the biggest influences in my academic career... cause he was like a role model for me early on. He was one of the welcome weekend guys too. So he is one of the first people I met on campus. He’s very supportive. So I think I, yeah, looked to him too. And also honestly my whole community too, in Carroll. There’s not many arts and letters people in Carroll, but the few of us were very like supportive of each other... and it’s definitely a great environment to be in when trying to figure out what it is I’m doing, knowing that there are people in my community that are doing it and experiencing success.”*

These relationships can be characterized as supportive; they provide students with a sense of security and an opportunity to reflect on their values. Another form of relationship that emerged

was informative; they provide students with insightful perspectives. One upper-class student explained how she found an internship through a relationship with an older student in her residence hall:

*“My ‘big’ in Flaherty worked there and she said they were looking for more applicants for their summer internship program... Yeah. It was definitely helpful. I feel like having, like we do big/little pairings by major, if you can, and having someone older of your major helps a lot because then they can be like, ‘oh, like you should take this professor, and this is a good textbook. Here’s the textbook I had. Don’t buy it, I’ll give it to you.’ Just helpful things like that.”*

A first-year student who decided to join Navy ROTC described the importance of gaining perspective from several relationships:

*“I had a really good friend in high school who’s two years older than me who went to the Naval Academy. And so he was the first one that really gave me the idea of even doing this. And then, let’s see, I met a girl last year who’s the salutatorian of Notre Dame’s graduate class last year, an aerospace engineer who’s going to pilot school for the Navy, and that made me think a lot about it. And I just had a lot of like unexpected interactions with people who were joining the military and that kind of helped to dispel this, like I had a really strong impression of what I thought a military person was, and I think these random interactions with ROTC people dispelled those presumptions.”*

These relationships help students gain insight and perspective. One first-year student described this succinctly:

*“Talking with other people who are more experienced and have different perspectives. And then also talking with my peers, learning from their experiences, and then hoping to kind of add new knowledge or a new perspective on something to my life.”*

Relating to others helps students discern, because it provides them with insightful perspectives into their own talents, interests, and desires. Students highly value their relationships with friends and family. Other sources of support and perspective tend to come from persons with more experience such as mentors, professors, industry professionals, and upper-class students.

***Inhibitors***

The three most frequently mentioned inhibitors of discernment were psychological challenges, time constraints, and social pressures. Tags for psychological challenges include ‘anxiety,’ ‘depression,’ ‘fear of the unknown,’ ‘closed-mindedness,’ ‘fear of losing out,’ ‘mental health problems,’ and ‘imposter syndrome.’ Tags for time constraints include ‘lack of time,’ ‘busyness,’ ‘feeling rushed,’ and ‘too busy of a life to even think.’ Tags for social pressures include ‘pressure from others,’ ‘comparison,’ and ‘stress from friends.’ The following table displays the frequency of these inhibitors.

**Table 15*****Inhibitors***

<i>Inhibitor</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Psychological Challenges	9	13	22
Time	10	13	23
Inherent Difficulty	4	3	7
Lacking Information	6	7	13
Social Pressures	6	16	22
Personal Shortcomings	7	4	11

**Time Constraints.**

*“I feel like just not feeling like you have enough time to explore everything and feeling pressured to have to pick something. Because a lot of times it seems like everyone else has it figured out and you don’t, so then you feel like you need to figure it out quickly. Like you really don’t, it’s okay.”*

*“If [the classes] are too strict in the curriculum, then you may not get to explore every way that it could be applied or every path that you could take away from a certain class.”*

*“I feel like another thing with engineering is the curriculum is really tight.”*

**Psychological Challenges.**



*"I think the fear of switching is what hinders a lot of students. There are people that I know of that do not enjoy their classes or think they're just not growing academically... but for a lot of people, like the program they want to do or the job they want to have, they think that they need that specific program and which a lot of the times that will definitely help them get the career they want."*

*"My own head, honestly. Like it's easy to, I get most discouraged about that stuff when I convince myself that I'm not where I need to be... You start comparing yourself to other people. You start to get down on yourself... It's when I almost beat myself up that it hurts the most... My own doubts have been the main thing holding me back."*

### **Social Narratives/Pressures.**

*"I feel like Notre Dame students have a need to do things right... versus I feel like discernment means maybe I'm not gonna do it right. I'm gonna do what I think is right up here [pointing to head]. And if I'm forced to do something I don't think is right, I'm gonna think about why I'm forced to do it before doing it. I think the Notre Dame way is, don't think about why you're on that path. Just keep going. Just keep going. Just keep going. And I think that can hinder discernment, right?"*

*"When you're in the business school... I feel like it's just so competitive, and you kind get caught up in that to where you're like, this is the only thing at Notre Dame, right?"*

*"Maybe just what broader society indicates is most important in life... to be financially secure and get a good job and do all that being so important in broader society might make people think that's the most important thing and therefore they're going to doubt themselves more when that kind of stuff doesn't happen because they've been told that is why you're here... I tell people to run your own race... I think if people maybe broke a little bit out of the cookie cutter... entered into it with an open mind."*

*"If Notre Dame was a little bit clearer about certain channels and what they can be used for... a lot of students feel like they don't know what they're doing... And I think the guidance there could be a little bit better than just here's this tool... it was a little too easy to feel alone."*

### **Inherent Difficulty.**

*“There’s just a lot of choice and it’s hard to figure out... Because you’re saying no to so many things... [and] the scariness of not knowing.”*

### ***Enablers***

The three most commonly cited enablers were support and encouragement, conversation, and gaining experiences. Tags for encouragement include others who care, social support, ‘strong role models that normalize discernment,’ ‘peers encouraging conversation,’ accompaniment, and positive reinforcement. Tags for conversation include ‘talking to people,’ ‘seeking advice,’ ‘willingness of professors and ND alums to talk about their paths,’ ‘opportunity to talk to someone on the other side of a similar decision,’ and ‘open discussions with mentors about what is best for me.’ Tags for experiences include ‘extracurricular,’ ‘liberal arts education at Notre Dame,’ ‘doing things I love that help me know I’m on the right track,’ ‘making time to pursue activities that I feel genuinely excited about,’ ‘trial and error,’ and references to various fairs and student groups.

**Table 16**

### ***Enablers***

<i>Enabler</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Encouragement	11	17	27
Conversation	8	17	25
Experiences	9	8	17
Discernment Activities	6	5	11
Intentional Time	1	6	7

### **Social Support and Conversation.**

*“I think one of the greatest resources that the students have are the professors, and I think there’s a lot of value in talking with the people who are teaching your classes and figuring out what they do beyond the classroom.”*

*“Just the willingness for people to talk... because that’s where I figure out what’s going on with all these different things and the kind of path that it’ll lead you down, when you’re talking with others.”*

*“Again, from my experience, talking to a lot of people from a lot of different background was very helpful.”*

### ***Opportunities to Support Student Discernment***

Students who participated in these focus groups discussed the following interesting and insightful opportunities to cultivate a culture more conducive to effective discernment:

- mentorship and shadowing programs
- integration of discernment into academic curricula and departments
- central discernment website with a database of opportunities, tools and resources
- explicit discernment programming and activities
- enhancement and extension of MYFE
- restructuring of academic curricula
- greater social support and encouragement

The most commonly mentioned opportunity was a relationship-based mentoring/shadowing, some sort of program to connect students with more experienced persons who would support and inform students as they discern. Tags for this code include ‘easy ways to shadow a professional,’ ‘one-on-one meetings with professors,’ ‘more opportunities to connect with older students in a particular major through a mentorship program,’ ‘assignments from Moreau to connect with alumni,’ ‘pairing us with an older student or recent alumni who had similar interests,’ ‘opportunities to shadow someone currently in a field that you might be interested in (not just healthcare),’ ‘shadowing faculty and grad students,’ and ‘mentor programs (Building Bridges, etc.).’

Participants were also interested in some kind of centralized discernment website that would be their one-stop discernment shop, containing a database of all relevant opportunities such as mentorship/shadowing programs, research, retreats, internships, service programs, etc. as well as tools and resources like prayer and reflection guides, values and career assessments, and day-in-the-life videos to help them discern. Tags for this code include ‘day in the life / sneak peak,’ ‘skills tests,’ ‘questionnaires from career center about personality and identity in relation to life plan,’ ‘greater advertisement of internship opportunities,’ ‘awareness of programs they have available,’ and ‘discernment website!?’

Participants likewise expressed interest in explicit discernment programming and activities such as career fairs, department days, and retreats. Tags for this code include ‘more career talks across professions,’ ‘within each department, having a class or event where students can learn more about their options,’ ‘career panel for all majors,’ ‘events within the dorm/people you are comfortable with,’ ‘Campus Ministry and College of Science collaboration event,’ ‘retreats,’ ‘career fairs,’ and ‘department days.’

Participants also suggested a greater integration of discernment into academic life, in coursework, with their professors, and with their departments. Tags for this include ‘integrate discernment into more classes – explicitly or implicitly’ ‘normalize discernment throughout courses,’ ‘enrichment classes,’ ‘create more low-stakes opportunities to explore interests unrelated to major coursework (more/earlier P/F class options, half-semester classes),’ and ‘every teacher should talk about their field.’

The final three kinds of opportunities participants noted were related to the MYFE, the structure of academic curricula, and general social encouragement.

Participants called for enhancements and/or expansions to the MYFE by, for example, extending the program beyond the first year in some form or adding more discernment requirements such as connecting with alumni. When asked why they thought MYFE was helpful they replied that 1) MYFE connects students together that they would never have otherwise met, that is, students not from their classes or residence halls and 2) MYFE requires them to sit down and think about their lives, whether they like to or not. Interestingly, this sentiment was not shared by the vast majority of survey respondents, who only moderately valued MYFE and did not strongly favor the opportunities of including more explicit discernment frameworks in MYFE or expanding MYFE. This is perhaps because the majority of respondents were first-years, and they would not want to add an additional requirement.

Participants also called for restructuring of academic curricula so that students would have more flexibility in their schedules and registrations to take coursework that would help them explore and discern. Tags for this opportunity include ‘reducing courseload or number of classes,’ ‘more promotion for double majors,’ ‘not limiting so many classes to just a particular department,’ ‘streamlining curricula for more time,’ ‘broader elective selection and room for research,’ ‘one-credit enrichment classes,’ and ‘more time, flexibility, or encouragement for first-year students to explore and consider a wide variety of majors and career paths (esp. with hands-on work or exposure to classes).’

Finally, participants mentioned an opportunity to encourage, motivate, and stimulate discernment, by emphasizing and articulating the process more clearly throughout student’s entire college experience. Tags include ‘continue to emphasize the value of discernment,’ ‘emphasize major and career discernment more heavily in the first-year,’ ‘make Career Center less scary,’ ‘use less formal language in classes/residence halls/career resources to make the

process more accessible,’ ‘introduce undergrads to the question of “what makes you happy” early on,’ and ‘encourage discernment across colleges.’

**Table 17**

*Opportunities*

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Mentorship/Shadowing	8	11	19
Integration	6	9	15
Website/Database	8	6	14
Programming/Activities	7	7	14
Moreau	5	6	11
Restructuring	3	7	10
Encouragement	3	7	10

### **Discussion**

This case study at the University of Notre Dame was designed to illumine the realities of discernment in undergraduate education. The following areas were considered: 1) understandings of discernment; 2) discernment practices; 3) inhibitors of discernment; 4) enablers of discernment and 5) opportunities to cultivate a culture more conducive to effective discernment. With this information providing insight into both the general nature of discernment and the ways in which students at Notre Dame experience discernment, this study attempted to draw recommendations for University leadership, grounded both in empirically rigorous data and in relevant theory, so that the University may realize to a greater extent the mission originally envisioned by Bl. Basil Moreau – to develop a premier Catholic university that cultivates the hearts and minds of young students, leads them to be forces for good in the world, and forms them into citizens of heaven.

This study reveals that students at Notre Dame generally demonstrate a firm grasp of discernment (relative to the understandings of faculty/staff as well as theoretical definitions of

discernment in the literature). They understand to be discernment as both a process and a skill of discovering, deciding, and becoming the person of their fullest potential, the person they are called to be, the person who lives a good life. Students describe this process as deeply thoughtful and intentional, as ongoing and progressive, and as ordered towards the good, towards peace and consolation. The skill, the capacity to discern, that both leads them through and is developed by this process involves attending to relevant information, gaining understanding of their talents and interests, rendering judgments on meaning and value, and taking a course of action. While students tended to describe discernment in the context of an academic or career choice, they nonetheless extended the concept to the broader moral scope, considering questions of purpose and value. Overall, students demonstrated an impressive understanding of discernment.

Students at Notre Dame practice discernment in a variety of ways that fall into three general categories: 1) exploration; 2) conversation; and 3) reflection. Practices of exploration involves seeking and finding information and experiences that provide them with insight into their talents and interests. Conversations likewise helps students gain perspectives on who they are and who they might become, as they seek advice and support from trusted family members, friends, and mentors as well as information from those who have travelled a path that they are considering. In order to evaluate the options and arrive at a decision with confidence, students engage in practices of reflection including journaling, prayer, and forms of nonsectarian reflection. These intentional practices of discernment help students discover and decide on academic and vocational paths.

In terms of factors that inhibit or interfere with satisfactory discernment, four categories stood out: 1) time constraints; 2) unhelpful social pressures; 3) psychological challenges; and 4) the inherent difficulty of discernment. Time constraints refer to both a general sense of busyness

and a lack of flexibility in academic curricula to explore intellectual interests. Unhelpful social pressures include cultural narratives of purpose and value, social influences on campus from sources such as academic competition, a sense that one needs to have his or her life planned out, what some students called ‘the rat race,’ that is, an unquestioning following of others towards an unclear goal, and distractions from social media channels. These social pressures strongly relate to students’ psychological challenges, which include mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression as well as more general experiences like comparing oneself to others, the fear of the unknown, and the fear of making a poor decision. Psychological challenges also relate to the inherent difficulty of discernment, as one must make a difficult choice amongst several tentative options.

Factors that enable or enhance discernment, on the other hand, fell into four categories: 1) social support and encouragement; 2) conversations with others; 3) awareness of and access to resources; and 4) gaining experiences. Social support and encouragement include knowing that there are others who care, experiencing encouragement and guidance from others to take the time to reflect and discern, and a sense of relational trust. Conversations with others also enable discernment because they provide both support and perspective. Awareness of and access to more explicit discernment resources and opportunities also enables discernment and includes knowledge of things like campus offices, online tools, and experiential opportunities like research, internships, and leadership positions. Gaining such experiences helps one to discern because one can test the waters and understand whether they would like to pursue a major or career in that field.

Of all the aforementioned practices, enablers, and opportunities, healthy relationship stood out as perhaps the most important influence on effective discernment. Relationships were



the most frequently discussed factor that helped students to discern, and, based on the survey, students' understanding of and capacity to discern is positively correlated with their sense of belonging and measures of social support, suggesting that relationships play a special role in effective discernment. Students described relationships that are supportive and informative, and these relationships can be both vertical or horizontal. It is likely that relationships play a key role because they provide students with new perspectives that lead to insight and, ultimately, the transformation of their salience landscapes and the reordering of their value hierarchies. In other words, through relating to others, students come to discover what is truly good.

In terms of opportunities to improve the culture at Notre Dame such that students are more likely to discern effectively and authentically, two categories of recommendations arise from this research. First, the University should improve awareness of and access to transformative experiences, as well as increasing the overall number and quality of such experiences. Transformative experiences include introductory and elective coursework, retreats, service learning, and student leadership. Secondly, the University should seek to develop faculty and staff members that are capable of fostering meaningful relationships with students, and the University should seek to promote cultures of relational trust. These relationships occur in spheres like residence halls, academic departments, and student organization. The University should seek to develop transformative experiences and meaningful relationships in the common elements of the Notre Dame experience – Welcome Weekend, residential life, the Moreau First Year Experience, academic advising, and the core curriculum. Finally, university leadership must seek to develop a clear, cohesive, and comprehensive discernment strategy that engages and coordinates the various programs, offices, and departments across campus.

### **Conclusion**

The University of Notre Dame is committed to developing students who can discern with wisdom and responsibility. As it currently stands, Notre Dame students face such barriers as psychological challenges, social pressures, time constraints, and limited resources, while they experience such enablers as informative conversations and meaningful relationships. Indeed, the survey shows that an experience of a sense of belonging is closely related to one's satisfaction with discernment. Thus, the University of Notre Dame should seek to develop cultures that are strongly characterized by relational trust.

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## Appendix A

### *Operational Definitions of Discernment*

The following operational definitions of discernment were articulated to provide participants in interviews and focus groups with an understanding of discernment (only after they had described their understandings of discernment):

#### ***Interview Definition:***

Discernment is a dynamic, continuous, and progressive process of reflection and action through which one comes to discover and embody answers to life's ultimate questions of meaning and value. Decision-making falls within but does not encapsulate the complete process of discernment. Discerning entails three sequential subprocesses, exploring, deciding, and becoming. In exploring, one becomes aware of potential possibilities. In deciding, one chooses to pursue a particular path. And in becoming, one enacts and embodies that decision.

For undergraduate students, like yourself, discernment involves deciding not only a course of studying, but also decisions of relationship, work and service, faith and spirituality, et cetera. To put it simply, when you discern, you decide what to do. So, in this case, what to study and which career to pursue.

#### ***Focus Group Definition:***

Process:

- Systematic decision-making method
- Continuous, progressive, and dynamic
- Applies to decisions both large and small
- Involves exploration, reflection, contemplation, and evaluation

Skill:

- Ability to discern one's calling, gifts, and unique opportunity to share those gifts
- Ability to make decisions in accordance with one's values
- Develops over time
- Involves attentiveness, intelligence, and a sense of responsibility

**Appendix B***Faculty/Staff Interview Protocol*

1. What is your position within Notre Dame, and what role do you play concerning discernment?
  - a. What structures do you oversee?
  - b. With whom and with which offices do you work with?
2. How would you define discernment at Notre Dame?
  - a. If discernment is a journey, on which stage do students begin as First-Years?
  - b. And what growth related to discernment would you like to see in students after four years at Notre Dame?
3. Does Notre Dame have a clear and cohesive vision for discernment that guides programming and activities?
  - a. In what ways is discernment a coordinated or cohesive administrative effort?
  - b. In what ways is it fragmented?
4. What structures - programs, curricula, relationships, activities, etc. - does Notre Dame provide to help support student discernment?
  - a. What is the intended outcome of institutionally administered discernment support structures?
  - b. What do you suppose are the most effective discernment support structures?
5. What makes it difficult for Notre Dame students to discern?

**Appendix C***Student Interview Protocols*

First-Year	Upper-Class
What do you currently study, and what factors led you to decide on that?	What do you study, and how did you make that decision? What plans do you currently have for post-graduation, and how did you decide on that?
When you hear the word ‘discern’ or ‘discernment’ what comes to mind?	
In your own words, how would you define discernment?	
Operational definition of discernment was provided (see Appendix A)	
What factors helped you discern or enhanced your discernment?	
What factors may have hindered or constrained your discernment?	
Thinking about Notre Dame students in general now, what factors – people, places, things, or experiences – help students to discern?	
Conversely, what factors – people, places, things, or experiences – hinder student discernment at Notre Dame?	
On a scale from zero to ten, zero being negative, ten being positive, how would you rate your discernment experience so far? Why that number? What would have brought that to a ten?	

**Appendix D***Focus Group Protocol*

Category	Questions
Understanding of Discernment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What does it mean to discern?</li> <li>– What does one do while discerning?</li> <li>– What are the goals of discernment?</li> <li>– Why would one discern?</li> </ul>
Operational definition of discernment was provided (see Appendix A)	
Division of Student Affairs Strategic Goal was discussed (see Appendix E)	
Practices of Discernment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In what ways do you practice discernment? Where do you go?</li> <li>– With whom do you speak?</li> <li>– What things do you do when facing an important decision?</li> </ul>
Enablers of Discernment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What has made discernment easier or more accessible?</li> <li>– What enhances your ability to make good choices?</li> <li>– What factors positively influence your decision-making process?</li> </ul>
Inhibitors of Discernment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What has made discernment difficult or inaccessible?</li> <li>– What constrains your ability to make good choices?</li> <li>– What factors negatively influence your decision-making process?</li> </ul>
Opportunities to Improve Discernment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What would help you do more discerning?</li> <li>– What could offices and branches of the University do to promote discernment?</li> <li>– What do you wish Notre Dame did?</li> </ul>



**Appendix E***Student Affairs Strategic Goal 5*[Division of Student Affairs Strategic Plan](#)**5. Reflection and Discernment**

Promote a culture that values greater reflection and discernment so that students have the opportunity to recognize God's call, identify their gifts, and share them in service with others.

**Objectives:**

- Deepen divisional and university-wide understanding of student experiences, realities and expectations, and other influences that enable or inhibit practices of reflection and discernment.
- Intentionally integrate opportunities for reflection and discernment into day-to-day work with students in a way that attends to and supports students' particular needs as they deepen their understanding of and relationship with themselves, God, and others.
- Cultivate a shared understanding of discernment and explore new ways to accompany students in professional and vocational discernment.
- Provide opportunities for students to identify and develop their individual gifts and pursue lives of impact and purpose.
- Offer opportunities for students to reflect upon and seek growth through their experiences at Notre Dame.

**Appendix F***Student Survey*

Discernment Index	
Scale	Statements
Attentiveness and Aspiration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am interested in deeper discussions about the meaning and purpose of my life.</li> <li>2. It is important that I spend time discerning my future path in life.</li> <li>3. When encountering a new experience, I regularly think about how it makes me feel.</li> <li>4. I am motivated to pursue life goals.</li> </ol>
Exploration and Conversations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When making a decision, I seek out relevant information from a variety of sources.</li> <li>2. I seek advice from people I trust.</li> <li>3. I explore different experiences to see what I enjoy.</li> <li>4. I see a future full of possibilities.</li> </ol>
Reflection and Evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I spend time in self-reflection.</li> <li>2. I consider how my actions line up with my values.</li> <li>3. Before making an important decision, I carefully evaluate my options.</li> <li>4. I use tools such as a pro-con list or a decision matrix to help inform important decisions.</li> </ol>
Skills and Understanding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I feel confident in the life decisions I have made thus far.</li> <li>2. I know what is truly important to me.</li> <li>3. I have a good understanding of where my life is headed.</li> <li>4. If I had to make a big life decision, I would know what to do.</li> </ol>

**Appendix G***Focus Group Results*

Table 1

*Understandings of Discernment*

<i>Definition</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Explore	8	14	22
Decide	7	14	21
Course of Study	2	6	8
Career	5	13	18
Purpose	10	17	27

Table 2

*Practices of Discernment*

<i>Practice</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Exploration	11	5	16
Conversation	11	18	29
Reflection	10	16	26

Table 3

*Conversation Partners*

<i>Person</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Family	6	13	19
Friends	5	13	18
Peers	2	4	6
Mentors	0	2	2
Professors	3	4	7
Industry Experts	5	7	12
Alumni	0	1	1
Advisors	1	3	4

Table 4

*Inhibitors*

<i>Inhibitor</i>	<i>First-Year (n=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (n=18)</i>	<i>Total (n=30)</i>
Psyche	9	13	22
Time	10	13	23
Inherent Difficulty	4	3	7
Lacking Information	6	7	13
Social Pressures	6	16	22
Personal	7	4	11
Shortcomings			

Table 5

*Enablers*

<i>Enabler</i>	<i>First-Year (N=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (N=18)</i>	<i>Total (N=30)</i>
Encouragement	11	17	27

Conversation	8	17	25
Experiences	9	8	17
Intentional Time	1	6	7
Discernment Activities	6	5	11

Table 6

*Opportunities*

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>First-Year (N=12)</i>	<i>Upper-Class (N=18)</i>	<i>Total (N=30)</i>
Mentorship/Shadowing	8	11	19
Website/Database	8	6	14
Programming/Activities	7	7	14
Restructuring	3	7	10
Integration	6	9	15
Moreau	5	6	11
Encouragement	3	7	10