Leadership Discernment Guide

Create time for prayer

Discernment is rooted in relationship with God. While it is important to nurture this relationship regularly through prayer, set aside some time to pray specifically for wisdom and clarity in the decision you are facing.

Clarify your discernment question

One decision can easily spiral into multiple decisions. Perhaps you are considering several different leadership positions. Perhaps, in addition to selecting a leadership position, you also need to decide whether you will live on campus, add a minor, or study abroad. Although it is important to notice the many layers of a decision, discernment tends to work best when focused on one question at a time.

Take some to time to clarify in your own words what your question is (e.g. I will accept the RA position or I will not accept the RA position).

Gather information

Learn as much as you can about the position or opportunity. What does occupying this role look like on a daily or weekly basis? Will you be working on a team? What sort of time commitment does this role require? If you can, speak to someone who has held this role previously and ask about the experience—although, keep in mind that each person’s experience will be unique.

Reflect on the “why”

Now that you have gathered some information about what the position looks like, take some time to ask yourself why you are drawn to it.

- What initially drew me toward this role?
- Having learned more about it, do I still feel drawn to it?
- What gifts am I excited to bring to this role?
- Will this role allow me to stretch myself in a positive way?
- Do I have the time to commit myself to the demands of this role?

Be attentive to consolation and desolation

Consider each option with attention to the experience of consolation and desolation. Consolation is characterized by peace, joy, and a sense of God’s closeness. It can also be characterized by sorrow for sin or the desire to combat injustice, although the underlying experience is one of peaceful movement toward God. Desolation is characterized by disquiet, despair, or even a sense of being isolated or removed from God’s love. At this link, you can read more about consolation and desolation.
Ask yourself: What am I allowing to guide my experience? Desolation does not come from God and should not direct our choices.

**For example:** I have been prayerfully considering accepting the position of Faith and Formation Ambassador for the last week. Whenever I have considered accepting this role, I have felt a sense of “rightness,” peace, and excitement. When I reflect upon the ways this role will invite me to share and grow my faith, that peace deepens. Shortly before I am to accept the role, I experience a sense of dryness in my prayer life. I begin to question whether I am falling short in my pursuit of faith and whether I am adequately suited to serve my peers as an FFA while God feels distant. I am tempted to reject the offer, believing my earlier peace was inauthentic.

One could characterize this as an experience, first, of consolation and, subsequently, of desolation. Desolation, which is a natural part of the spiritual life, can make us feel as though we have failed and that God is no longer close to us. The practice of discernment helps us recognize that desolation does not come from God and should not guide our decisions. We may indeed realize that there are good reasons *not* to accept a position, yet discernment teaches us that (even if difficult or disappointing) this realization will be accompanied by an underlying sense of peace.

**Use your imagination**

St. Ignatius believed that our imaginations are not only a gift from God but also a spiritual tool. One Ignatian discernment exercise directs you to spend a few days (or longer, if possible) imagining that you have decided between two options. Over those few days, you no longer weigh the two options but rather put on the mentality that you have fully adopted a specific path. You imagine taking the next steps (formally accepting the offer, sharing the news with friends, preparing for your role) and pay attention to your response. Do you experience peace or unease? Next, you take a few days with the other option, taking note again of how it feels by comparison.

**Talk it out**

Sometimes we need a sounding board. Consider sharing about your thought process with a friend or mentor. Through compassionate listening, this person can reflect back to you where you are naming desire or hesitation.

Time with community can also offer encouragement and connection when making a large decision feels overwhelming or isolating.

**Utilize other reflective tools**
• **Explore different forms of prayer:** If you are unsure where to start, a simple prayer that many cherish is the *Examen*, which invites reflection on the day with gratitude.

• **Be creative:** Creativity can help us notice and process our emotions while also serving as a stress-reliever. Allow space for the creative outlets that you find nourishing, whether artwork, journaling, playing music, or another activity.

• **Listen like a friend:** Making decisions is challenging and having self-compassion is important. Try listening and responding to yourself as you would to a close friend.

• **Make a pro/con list:** It might not seem like a very spiritual tool, but a list can be a helpful way to organize our thoughts. Be mindful that a list may not capture the weight that certain factors carry.

• **Recall previous experience:** Have you had to make difficult decisions in the past? Did you experience peace or clarity? What helped you to make this decision?

**Take action**

Eventually, we must come to a decision. Part of the discernment process is trusting in the work we have done and moving forward with confidence that God will continue working in our lives at each next step.