

The Integration of Faith and Character Education as a Paradigm for Student Development in Catholic Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the conceptual integration of faith and character education as a paradigm for student formation in Catholic higher education as a paradigm for student in Catholics higher education aiming to analyze their conceptual relationship and formulate an integrative framework for student development. The research employs a qualitative library research approach using conceptual-analytical synthesis of contemporary scholarship on character education, emerging adulthood, faith development, and Catholic educational identity. Data were analyzed through content analysis to identify conceptual patterns and theoretical relationships across the selected literature. The findings indicate that the integration of faith and character education provides a holistic framework for student formation by connecting moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action within a transcendent horizon of meaning. This integration emphasizes that intellectual development, spiritual formation, and moral responsibility must interact dynamically in the educational process. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes an integrative paradigm of student formation that involves four interrelated dimensions: academic experience, spiritual experience, campus community, and personal reflection. The study contributes theoretically by advancing a systemic conceptual framework that bridges theological, developmental, and pedagogical perspectives in Catholic higher education. Practically, the proposed paradigm offers a foundation for designing student formation programs that harmonize academic rigor with spiritual and moral development in a coherent and reflective educational environment.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Keywords:

Faith and Character Integration;
Student Formation; Catholic
Higher Education; Emerging
Adulthood; Moral Identity

Article History:

Received: 18 March 2026

Revised: 10 April 2026

Accepted: 28 April 2026

Published: 15 October 2026

How to Cite in APA Style:

Lirung, M., Thein, A. (2026). The
Integration of Faith and
Character Education as a
Paradigm for Student
Development in Catholic Higher
Education Institutions. *JPAK:
Jurnal Pendidikan Agama
Katolik*, 26(2), 300-308

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Introduction

The development of higher education today is concerned not only with strengthening students' academic competence but also with an increasingly complex crisis of values within campus life (Astin & Lindholm, 2010; Glanzer et al., 2017). Numerous studies point to rising individualism, academic pragmatism, and a weakening of students' personal integrity (Moulin-Stožek & Metcalfe, 2020), as education has tended to prioritize intellectual achievement over character formation and spirituality (Lickona, 1992). As a result, higher education risks producing graduates who excel academically yet remain morally and spiritually underdeveloped (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Glanzer et al., 2023).

This challenge is especially significant within Catholic education, since the integral formation of students—encompassing maturity of faith, moral integrity, and social responsibility—constitutes an essential part of the institution's mission (Glanzer et al., 2017; Second Vatican Council, 1965). The integration of academic and spiritual experience has been shown to contribute to students' sense of life's meaning, ethical commitment, and prosocial character (Astin et al., 2010; D. Lapsley & Kelley, 2022); yet the transmission of faith and Christian values to younger generations faces increasingly complex challenges amid social change and technological development (Widiatna, 2022), leaving the holistic aims of Catholic education not yet fully realized.

Conceptually, character education is understood as a process of moral personality formation through the internalization of values, attitudes, and habits reflected in ethical behavior (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006), encompassing three dimensions—moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action—that together require the integration of understanding, disposition, and conduct (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lickona, 1992). In higher education, character formation occupies a strategic position in shaping students' moral integrity, since campuses serve not only as sites of intellectual development but also as environments for forming moral identity and social responsibility (Mayhew et al., 2016; D. Lapsley & Kelley, 2022). Faith formation within Catholic higher education, meanwhile, is understood not merely as the transmission of doctrine but as a process of internalizing values that shapes one's orientation to life, existential meaning, and ethical commitment (Sullivan, 2013). Catholic education regards faith and reason as complementary dimensions in the pursuit of truth (John Paul II, 1990), forming the integral human person who possesses not only intellectual capacity but also wisdom and moral responsibility (Glanzer et al., 2017; Second Vatican Council, 1965), a formation further strengthened through reflection, academic dialogue, and involvement in campus community life (D. Lapsley & Kelley, 2022; Moulin-Stožek & Metcalfe, 2020).

Emerging adulthood is a transitional period between adolescence and adulthood marked by identity exploration, the search for meaning, and the formation of personal commitments (Arnett, 2000). During this phase, moral development involves the gradual internalization of values that consolidates into a stable moral identity (D. K. Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004), while spiritual development centers on the search for meaning and a relationship with the transcendent, which in turn strengthens psychological well-being (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant & Astin, 2008). Morality and spirituality are mutually reinforcing: spirituality provides the

framework of meaning that underlies moral orientation, while morality represents the concrete actualization of spiritual values in daily life (King & Boyatzis, 2004). The integration of faith and character education is therefore understood as a framework that unites both dimensions, in which faith serves as a source of values for one's orientation to life and ethical judgment (Glanzer et al., 2017), while character education cultivates virtue through the interplay of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1992). Within Catholic education, character formation cannot be separated from its spiritual foundation (Purwanto & Tarihoran, 2025), and this integration has been shown to strengthen students' ethical commitment, social responsibility, and psychological well-being (Moulin-Stožek & Metcalfe, 2020).

Even so, the formation of students at religious institutions of higher education continues to face fragmentation across academic, moral, and spiritual dimensions (Ezechiugo, 2023), as character education is typically developed within its own pedagogical framework, while faith formation is relegated to a parallel pastoral domain that remains poorly integrated with the academic process (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lickona, 1992; Welch, 2026). Existing research on character education and faith formation has also concentrated largely on primary and secondary education, tending to treat the two domains as separate rather than building a coherent conceptual framework. Studies that explicitly examine the integration of faith and character education as a unified paradigm for student formation—grounded in the dynamics of emerging adulthood—within Catholic higher education remain relatively scarce, leaving a conceptual gap in formulating a model of student formation that coherently integrates theological, pedagogical, and psychological dimensions.

In contrast to earlier studies that have tended to separate the moral and spiritual dimensions, this study proposes an integrative approach that situates faith and character education within an interdependent relationship, as a unified paradigm for student formation, while also connecting it to the developmental dynamics of emerging adulthood. By doing so, this study offers a conceptual contribution toward bridging the fragmentation of the academic, moral, and spiritual dimensions, and proposes a more systemic, holistic, and contextually grounded framework for student formation within Catholic higher education.

On this basis, this study aims to analyze the conceptual relationship between faith formation and character education and to formulate an integrative paradigm for student formation within Catholic higher education. Theoretically, this study contributes a conceptual framework that integrates theological, pedagogical, and psychological perspectives in understanding student formation holistically. Practically, it provides a foundation for developing policies and programs of student formation that harmonize the academic, moral, and spiritual dimensions within a reflective, integrative, and sustainable educational process.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach in the form of interdisciplinary library research, integrating theological, pedagogical, and psychological perspectives to conceptually examine the integration of faith and character education as a paradigm for student formation in Catholic higher education

(Moleong, 2022). The theological perspective is used to understand the nature and role of faith formation within the framework of Catholic education; the pedagogical perspective is applied to analyze the concepts and practices of character education in higher education; and the psychological perspective—particularly the theory of emerging adulthood—is used to explain the dynamics of students' moral and spiritual development.

Research data were obtained through a systematic literature search using academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and SINTA. The search employed the keywords faith formation, character education, student formation, and Catholic higher education, limited to publications between 2000 and 2025. Sources were selected according to inclusion and exclusion criteria covering thematic relevance, academic credibility (peer-reviewed articles), and theoretical contribution. Literature selection proceeded in stages, beginning with an initial identification that gathered approximately 120 relevant sources. This was followed by screening based on titles and abstracts to assess their fit with the research focus, then a full-text review to evaluate the depth of their content, ultimately yielding around 35 core articles for in-depth analysis.

Data were analyzed using the content analysis technique developed by Krippendorff (2018), focusing on identifying patterns, themes, and conceptual relationships within the literature reviewed. This process was iterative, beginning with open coding to identify key concepts, which were progressively refined through repeated reading and cross-source comparison until categorical consistency was achieved. Subsequently, the main themes were grouped and conceptually synthesized to systematically formulate the relationships between concepts.

To ensure conceptual validity, this study applied theoretical triangulation by comparing multiple perspectives within the literature and conducting critical reflection on the consistency and coherence of the resulting concepts. The analysis was then deepened through a reflective-critical approach to construct a coherent conceptual framework for the integration of faith and character education in student formation. This approach is therefore not merely descriptive but also explanatory in comprehensively accounting for the interrelationships among these dimensions.

Results

The Integration of Faith and Character Education

The conceptual analysis shows that faith and character education are intrinsically related in student formation and should therefore not be understood as two independent domains. Faith functions as a source of values that provides both a normative foundation and an orientation of meaning for moral life, while character education constitutes the space in which such values are actualized through concrete action. Their integration is thus not merely conceptual but also operational within the practice of student formation (Glanzer et al., 2017).

This integration can be further understood through the framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Faith enriches not only the cognitive dimension through the understanding of moral values but also deepens ethical

sensitivity and fosters engagement in moral action. In this respect, faith values serve to bridge the gap between moral knowledge and lived practice, so that character formation does not remain at the normative level but achieves a deeper internalization ([Berkowitz & Bier, 2004](#); [Lickona, 1992](#)).

This study also identified limitations that arise when character education and faith formation are conducted separately. Character education without a spiritual foundation—including approaches developed within a secular paradigm that emphasize behavior and moral rationality—tends to be reductive, since it stops at normative compliance without transcendent meaning, and therefore fails to address students' existential need to find deeper meaning in life. Conversely, faith formation that is not integrated with character education risks becoming a privatized religious experience with little bearing on social action. This fragmentation reflects a discontinuity between the reflection on values and the praxis of life, which hinders the formation of students' moral integrity. The integration of faith and character education is therefore not merely a pedagogical alternative but a conceptual necessity for overcoming the limitations of both approaches. It represents a more comprehensive approach to formation, capable of coherently connecting the reflective and practical dimensions. This integration strengthens the understanding, internalization, and actualization of values in students' personal and social lives, thereby forming a conceptual foundation for holistic and meaningful student formation in Catholic higher education.

Moral and Spiritual Development Among Students

The findings indicate that students are situated within the phase of emerging adulthood, a period marked by identity exploration, the search for meaning in life, and the formation of moral and spiritual commitments ([Arnett, 2000](#)). Within this phase, moral and spiritual development does not occur separately but proceeds simultaneously and mutually influences one another, such that the formation of moral identity is closely tied to spiritual development, particularly in the determination of values and life orientation ([D. Lapsley & Kelley, 2022](#)). This development is shaped by academic experience, social relationships, and personal reflection: academic experience cultivates critical thinking and ethical awareness, social relationships enrich the understanding of values through interaction, and self-reflection enables the internalization of experiences within one's personal identity structure. This process confirms that moral and spiritual development is dynamic and context-dependent within the environment of higher education ([Astin et al., 2010](#)).

Further analysis shows that morality and spirituality exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship: spirituality provides the orientation of meaning for moral action, while morality serves as the concrete expression of spiritual values in daily life ([King & Boyatzis, 2004](#)). The integration of the two produces consistency between students' beliefs, values, and actions, whereas their separation risks producing inconsistency between professed values and actual conduct. A purely cognitive approach to morality tends to yield normative understanding without existential engagement, while a spiritual approach not integrated with moral praxis risks becoming a subjective experience with no bearing on social life. An integrative approach to formation is therefore needed to accommodate moral and

spiritual development simultaneously, so that higher education produces not only intellectual competence but also moral maturity and spiritual depth. These findings confirm that the integration of morality and spirituality is an essential prerequisite for the formation of students' whole personal identity. Furthermore, they support the argument that student formation in higher education cannot be undertaken partially but must be designed within a framework that accommodates the full dynamics of human development.

An Integrative Model of Student Formation in Catholic Higher Education

The analysis shows that the fundamental problem in student formation lies in the fragmentation of the academic, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Higher education tends to emphasize intellectual development while character and spiritual formation proceed separately, producing a discontinuity between knowledge, values, and actions in students' lives and hindering the formation of a whole person (Astin et al., 2010; Glanzer et al., 2017). Existing models of formation also tend to be partial: character education often focuses on the cognitive dimension, while faith formation is confined to the pastoral domain and remains disconnected from the academic experience. This pattern reflects a dualistic approach that separates the reflection on values from the praxis of life, and is therefore inadequate to meet students' holistic developmental needs

In response, this study formulates an integrative paradigm of student formation that emphasizes the unity of faith and morality, the integration of reflection and action, and holistic formation. This paradigm rests on the understanding that education involves not merely the transfer of knowledge but also the formation of value orientations, personal identity, and social responsibility. This is consistent with Catholic education, which affirms that faith cultivates Christian character, such as love, self-sacrifice, and peace, as concrete expressions of values in life (Jatmiko & Wilhelmus, 2024).

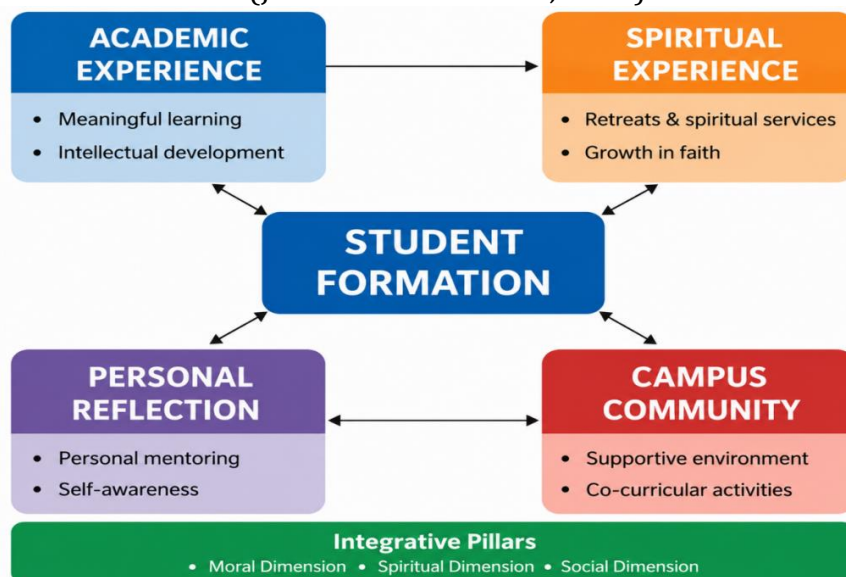


Figure 1. An integrative model of student development in higher education institutions

Figure 1 shows that this study further produces a conceptual model comprising four principal dimensions that interact dynamically and cannot be separated. As visualized in the system of holistic student formation, academic experience develops students' intellectual capacity together with ethical awareness within the academic context; spiritual experience deepens the dimension of faith and helps students find meaning in life within a transcendent framework; campus community provides the social space that enables the internalization of values through relationships and shared communal life; and personal reflection serves as the integrative mechanism that connects all of these experiences in the process of forming personal identity. These four dimensions are not linear but mutually influence one another dynamically, together forming a paradigm of formation that is holistic, integrative, and sustained.

Compared with partial approaches to student formation, this integrative model offers a conceptual advantage in connecting the various dimensions of student development simultaneously. In contrast, this integrative model places these principal dimensions in a mutually influencing relationship, enabling a deeper and more consistent internalization of values. Effective student formation must therefore be systemic rather than merely programmatic, requiring the integration of learning experience, communal life, and personal reflection as a single, unified process of identity formation.

This integrative paradigm thus offers a conceptual contribution affirming that student formation must be designed systemically and in an integrated manner. The model not only addresses the fragmentation present in higher education but also offers a formational framework capable of shaping students who possess moral integrity, spiritual maturity, and social responsibility. As the central findings of the study, this model carries both theoretical and practical relevance for the development of student formation in Catholic higher education.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the integration of faith and character education constitutes a fundamental conceptual paradigm for student formation in Catholic higher education. The findings show that educational practices which separate the academic, moral, and spiritual dimensions tend to produce fragmentation in students' personal formation, thereby hindering the attainment of integral selfhood. Within this framework, faith functions as the source of values and the orientation of meaning that underlies moral life, while character education serves as the means through which values are actualized in concrete action, encompassing the dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The developmental dynamics of students during the phase of emerging adulthood further reveal that moral and spiritual growth occur simultaneously and remain closely interrelated in the formation of personal identity. On this basis, an integrative paradigm of student formation has been formulated, comprising four principal dimensions—academic experience, spiritual experience, campus community, and personal reflection—which interact dynamically with one another. This paradigm underscores the importance of a holistic, integrative, and sustained approach to formation that connects the reflection of faith with moral praxis in students' lives.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, Catholic institutions of higher education should develop a consciously and systematically structured approach to student formation that integrates the academic, moral, and spiritual dimensions throughout the entire educational process. This can be achieved, among other means, by strengthening reflective pedagogical design, cultivating a campus community that supports the internalization of values, and offering faith-formation programs integrated with students' academic experience. More concretely, this integration can be realized through three principal steps. At the curricular level, value-based learning can be developed by incorporating elements of ethical and spiritual reflection into every course—for example, through reflective assignments, value-based case studies, and interdisciplinary dialogue that connects academic knowledge with moral and religious dimensions. At the level of campus programming, student formation can be strengthened through activities such as retreats, recollections, spiritual mentoring, and the cultivation of faith communities that encourage students' active engagement in living out Christian values in daily life. In terms of evaluation, assessment models are needed that attend not only to academic achievement but also to students' character development and spiritual maturity, for instance through reflective portfolios or experience-based assessment. Furthermore, empirical follow-up research is needed to test and validate this integrative paradigm across diverse contexts of higher education, ideally incorporating an interdisciplinary approach so that the resulting model of student formation remains relevant, adaptive, and capable of addressing the challenges of higher education in the contemporary era.

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