

Article

Exploring the Transformative Effects of Spiritual Retreat and Recollection Activities on Senior College Students

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Abstract

This study examined graduating students' perceptions of retreat and recollection activities through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism and Structural Functionalism. The focus was on how structured reflection helps them re-evaluate their values, relationships, and readiness for life after graduation, which aligns with the interactionist perspective's emphasis on how individuals create meaning through social interaction and self-awareness. Using a descriptive-comparative design, the study employed the Retreat and Recollection Perception Scale (RRPS), an instrument with four domains: Self-Perception and Personal Reflection, Values and Purpose, Relationships and Community, and Moving Forward. The instrument was found to be both valid and reliable. Data were gathered from 256 graduating students who participated in the activity. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and group comparison tests. Results showed a very high overall mean score, indicating that the retreat activity was perceived as meaningful and transformative. Students reported greater self-understanding, stronger values, improved relationships, and more optimism about the future. This supports the functionalist view that education and related activities serve a key function in transmitting core societal values and fostering social cohesion and integration. A significant difference was observed by age, with younger students giving higher ratings, while gender, religion, and institute showed no significant variation. These findings affirm that retreats foster holistic development and inclusivity, highlighting their role in preparing students emotionally, socially, and spiritually for life after college, thereby facilitating a smoother transition into adult roles as described in Transition Theory.

Keywords: Recollection, Reflection, Retreat, Student perceptions, Transformative learning

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Introduction

Graduating from college is a major turning point in a student's life. It often brings mixed emotions such as excitement, fear, and uncertainty about what comes next (Crutchfield, 2020; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). From a structural functionalism perspective, graduation is a vital ritual that facilitates the orderly transition of individuals from their student roles into adult economic roles, thereby ensuring a stable supply of skilled labor for society (McLaughlin, 2017). In the Philippines, students from public universities may face extra challenges, especially when dealing with financial pressure or limited support as they prepare to enter the real world (Estacio & Lapuz, 2019; Magnaye, 2020). Time management and psycho-social factors have also been shown to influence how students navigate academic demands and personal growth (Mariano et al. 2022; Miranda, 2018).

To help students reflect and prepare for life after college, many Catholic and Christian schools offer retreats and recollections. These activities, from a symbolic interactionism viewpoint, offer a space for students to engage in meaningful social interactions and self-reflection (McLaughlin, 2017), helping them interpret the symbols of their achievements (like the diploma) and form a new, post-graduation identity and sense of purpose. The shared experience in a retreat environment can foster a collective consciousness and social cohesion among peers, which is a key function of such communal rituals in society. Retreat facilitators also try to make these moments more meaningful by adjusting their approach to better connect with students (Ocbena, Eballa, Ocbena, & Victoriano, 2023). Still, there's not much research on how students actually feel about these retreats or how the experience helps them grow. Listening to students' reflections can help schools improve how they support graduates during this important transition (Tesoro, 2020).

Colleges and universities often focus on academic success and career readiness, which are manifest functions of education. However, opportunities for emotional growth and spiritual grounding can be limited. While students may leave college with the skills needed for employment, they may still feel unsure about their direction in life and personal sense of purpose (Lopez-Reyes & Galang, 2009; Magnaye, 2020). Without experiences that encourage reflection, students may graduate with credentials but remain uncertain about their identity and readiness for life beyond school, a potential dysfunction within the educational system.

To address this need, many higher education institutions have integrated spiritual retreat and recollection activities into their student formation programs. These experiences provide spaces where students can pause, reflect, and reconnect with what truly matters to them (Estacio & Lapuz, 2019; Trinidad, 2018). Through

journaling, prayer, quiet reflection, and meaningful conversations, students can rediscover their values, strengthen relationships, and gain a clearer sense of purpose. Studies have shown that such activities enhance self-awareness, emotional resilience, and hope for the future (Ocbena, Ebala, Ocbena, & Victoriano, 2023; Tesoro, 2020).

Despite these insights, there is limited research in the Philippine state college setting, where socio-economic challenges and resource limitations may affect how students experience and benefit from retreats and recollections (Estacio & Lapuz, 2019). Moreover, few studies have examined students' perceptions in a multidimensional way, capturing how such activities influence their self-perception, values, relationships, and readiness for life after graduation (Magnaye, 2020). While some private institutions have explored the impact of spiritual retreats on student growth, there remains a gap in understanding how these experiences unfold within the context of state colleges. By addressing these gaps, this study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how spiritual retreat and recollection activities can support students' holistic growth as they prepare to transition beyond college life.

Guided by these insights, the present study explores the transformative effects of spiritual retreat and recollection activities on senior college students in a state college in Davao Occidental. Specifically, it examines how these experiences influence four key areas of student development: self-perception, values, relationships, and preparedness for life after graduation. By documenting students' perceptions across these dimensions, the study aims to provide evidence-based insights for integrating holistic formation into higher education practices.

Methodology

This study draws inspiration from Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which emphasizes how deep reflection can lead individuals to re-evaluate their beliefs, values, and sense of self. In our experience working with students nearing graduation, we've seen how moments of pause, especially those offered by retreats and recollection activities, can prompt meaningful introspection. These settings allow students to step away from their usual routines and revisit their personal journeys with fresh eyes. Through quiet reflection, prayer, journaling, and guided conversations, they begin to question old assumptions, clarify their values, and prepare themselves for life beyond college. This theoretical lens guided both the development of our research instrument and the interpretation of the data we gathered.

To explore this, we used a descriptive-comparative design. This allowed us not only to capture how students perceived their retreat and recollection experience, but also to examine whether certain aspects resonated differently across groups. We developed a questionnaire - the Retreat and Recollection Perception Scale (RRPS). It focused on four key areas we believed were central to the students' experience, namely, Self-Perception and Personal Reflection, Values and Purpose, Relationships and Community, and Moving Forward. Each area included five items, with a total of 20 statements. Students responded using a 5-point Likert scale, indicating how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Before finalizing the tool, we sought feedback from experts in religion, education and psychology, and the RRPS obtained an Aiken's V score of 0.905, confirming its strong content validity. Reliability testing also showed high internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha scores ranging from 0.848 to 0.911 across domains, and 0.959 overall.

The participants in this study were graduating students from a state college in Davao Occidental. Out of 689 students, 264 chose to take part. After data cleaning, only 256 responses were retained for analysis. Eight responses were excluded because they were incomplete and some showed patterns of non-engagement. We used convenience sampling, primarily because we wanted to ensure that those who responded were genuinely willing and available. After the retreat and recollection sessions, we distributed the RRPS online via Google Forms. Each participant received a link along with a brief explanation of the study's purpose. We emphasized that their responses would remain confidential and that participation was entirely voluntary. Students were given time to respond at their own pace, and their answers were automatically recorded in Google Sheets, which helped us minimize data entry errors and streamline the analysis process.

To make sense of the responses, we applied both descriptive and comparative statistical methods. We began by calculating the mean and standard deviation for each domain to get a general sense of how students perceived the experience. A 5-point scale with corresponding qualitative descriptions helped us interpret these averages meaningfully. To explore differences between groups, we used one-way Analysis of Variance. All statistical analyses were conducted with a significance level set at 0.05. These methods allowed us to identify not just overall trends, but also nuanced variations in how students engaged with and were impacted by the retreat and recollection activities.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The average age was 24.08 years, with most falling within the 23–25 age range with 43.36%. A close second were those aged 22 and below comprising 39.45%, suggesting that the majority of participants were in their early to mid-twenties, typical of graduating college students. A 17.19% were aged 26 and above, hinting at the presence of older students who may have taken alternative academic paths or returned to complete their degrees later in life. This age variation is consistent with findings by El Refae et al. (2021), who noted that older students often bring distinct learning behaviors and life experiences that shape their academic engagement and reflective capacity.

In terms of gender, female respondents made up the majority at 60.94%, followed by male students at 35.16%. A small but notable portion of 3.91% identified as LGBTQ+, reflecting a degree of gender diversity among the respondents. This distribution may mirror broader enrollment trends in the institution reflecting dynamics in student identity. As Quibo-Quibo and Suico (2024) emphasize, the inclusion of gender-diverse perspectives in educational settings fosters richer dialogue and deeper personal reflection, particularly in activities centered on identity and growth.

Religious affiliation was predominantly Roman Catholic, with 57.42% of the respondents identifying as such. This was followed by 36.72% who belonged to various Christian denominations, while 5.86% reported being Muslim. While the student body leans heavily toward Catholic beliefs, the presence of other faiths adds a layer of spiritual diversity that could influence how students engage with retreat and recollection activities. Baring et al. (2018) argue that religious diversity plays a vital role in shaping empathy and self-awareness, especially in contexts that invite introspection and spiritual exploration.

Respondents came from all institutes within the college, ensuring a broad representation across academic disciplines. The largest group hailed from the Institute of Education and Information Technology with 32.42 percent, likely due to higher enrollment in teacher education and IT programs. This was followed by students from the Institute of Business and Governance with 24.22 percent, the Institute of Fisheries and Marine Sciences with 18.75 percent, the Institute of Human Services with 16.80 percent, and the Institute of Agriculture and Development Communication with 7.81 percent. Such distribution suggests that the study captured a wide array of perspectives, enriching the overall findings.

These demographic details provide important context for interpreting students' reflections on the retreat and recollection experience. Age variation may correlate with differing levels of maturity and life experience (El Refae et al., 2021), while gender and religious diversity offer a spectrum of views on spirituality and personal growth (Quibo-Quibo & Suico, 2024; Baring et al., 2018). The inclusion of students from all

institutes also ensures that the insights gathered are not limited to a single academic lens but rather reflect the collective voice of the graduating class.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Age (Mean=24.08; SD=3.74)</i>		
22 years old and below	101	39.45
23 – 25 years old	111	43.36
26 years old and above	44	17.19
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	156	60.94
Male	90	35.16
LGBTQ+	10	3.91
<i>Religion</i>		
Roman Catholic	147	57.42
Christian Denominations	94	36.72
Islam	15	5.86
<i>Institute</i>		
Education and Information technology	83	32.42
Business and Governance	62	24.22
Fisheries and Marine Sciences	48	18.75
Human Services	43	16.80
Agriculture and Development Communication	20	7.81
n = 256		

Retreat and Recollection Perception Level of the Respondents

Table 2 presents the respondents' level of perception of the retreat and recollection. The overall mean score was 4.39, which falls under the very high category. This indicates that the students regarded the activity as a meaningful and transformative experience, consistent with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which highlights the role of reflection in reshaping self-perception, values, and future outlook.

In the area of Self-Perception and Personal Reflection, students reported clearer self-understanding, more confidence in who they are becoming, and a greater appreciation of their journey as students, with a mean of 4.38. The highest-rated item was appreciating their student journey with a mean of 4.48, while reflecting on strengths and weaknesses had a mean of 4.36 and finding peace within themselves scored 4.41. These results echo Tesoro (2020), who observed that structured self-reflection supports identity development during transitional periods.

For Values and Purpose, the overall mean was 4.41, showing that students experienced a deepened understanding of their values, a stronger reconnection with faith or beliefs, and greater awareness of their life purpose. Gratitude and forgiveness

received the highest rating with a mean of 4.49, highlighting the moral and spiritual impact of the activity. This aligns with Gamage et al. (2021), who emphasize that values shape decision-making and personal growth, and with Baring et al. (2018), who stress the importance of values education in navigating modern challenges.

The Relationships and Community dimension had a mean of 4.33, which was also very high. Students expressed valuing others more, being open to different experiences, and appreciating meaningful connections. However, the score for feeling closer to classmates and teachers was lower at 4.14, though still high. This suggests that while the retreat encouraged interpersonal growth, more interaction-based activities could further enhance this area. Such findings are in line with Lopez-Reyes and Galang (2009), who point out that community engagement fosters empathy and belonging.

In the Moving Forward dimension, students showed optimism and readiness for life after graduation, with a mean of 4.42. They reported being inspired to improve themselves, identifying areas for growth, and feeling emotionally and spiritually prepared for the future. Being thankful for the opportunity to reflect scored 4.47, while being inspired to improve themselves scored 4.45, making them the highest-rated items in this domain. These results support Crutchfield (2020) view that reflection-driven motivation enhances confidence in facing future challenges.

The consistently high ratings across all four dimensions indicate that the retreat and recollection were not merely ceremonial events but transformative experiences. They supported self-awareness, strengthened values, improved interpersonal perspectives, and encouraged forward-looking attitudes. These outcomes highlight the potential of structured reflective activities in promoting the holistic development of graduating students.

Table 2. The Level of Retreat and Recollection Perception of the Respondents

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
1. Participants gained clearer self-understanding.	4.39	0.88	Very High
2. They felt more confident about themselves.	4.29	0.87	Very High
3. They reflected on strengths and weaknesses.	4.36	0.86	Very High
4. They appreciated their student journey.	4.48	0.86	Very High
5. They felt more at peace with themselves.	4.41	0.88	Very High
Self-Perception and Personal Reflection	4.38	0.81	Very High
6. Participants deepened understanding of personal values.	4.31	0.86	Very High
7. They reconnected with faith or beliefs.	4.47	0.85	Very High
8. They became more aware of life purpose.	4.38	0.85	Very High
9. They committed to integrity and compassion.	4.39	0.84	Very High
10. They recognized the value of gratitude and forgiveness.	4.49	0.85	Very High

Values and Purpose	4.41	0.79	Very High
11. Participants valued people around them more.	4.38	0.84	Very High
12. They felt closer to classmates and teachers.	4.14	0.90	High
13. They let go of negative emotions.	4.32	0.85	Very High
14. They became more open to others' experiences.	4.37	0.86	Very High
15. They appreciated building meaningful connections.	4.43	0.85	Very High
Relationships and Community	4.33	0.79	Very High
16. Participants were inspired to improve themselves.	4.45	0.88	Very High
17. They felt ready for life after graduation.	4.34	0.86	Very High
18. They became more hopeful about the future.	4.40	0.84	Very High
19. They identified areas for growth.	4.44	0.83	Very High
20. They were thankful for time to reflect.	4.47	0.83	Very High
Moving Forward	4.42	0.80	Very High
Retreat and Recollection Perception (Overall)	4.39	0.77	Very High

Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Age

A significant difference in perception was observed when respondents were grouped according to age. Table 3 shows that retreat and recollection perception varied significantly across age groups, $F(2, 253) = 5.51, p = 0.005$. Students aged 22 and below had the highest mean score of 4.58, compared to those 23–25 years old with mean of 4.29 and 26 and above with 4.20. Post-hoc results confirm that the youngest students rated the activity significantly higher than the other two groups, while the difference between the 23–25 and 26+ groups was not statistically significant.

This suggests that the youngest students found the retreat more meaningful and impactful. At this stage, many are still exploring their identities and life goals, making them more open to reflective practices that help clarify their direction (Awidi & Klutsey, 2024; Colegado, 2024). Retreats provide a structured pause that can guide this search for meaning, supporting the process described in Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, where reflection encourages people to reassess their assumptions and sense of self.

For older students, lower ratings may reflect different circumstances. Many in the 23–25 or 26+ groups are balancing heavier responsibilities, such as work, family, or financial pressures, that may shape how they perceive activities of this kind (Crutchfield, 2020; Holdo, 2023). While still beneficial, retreats may not feel as immediately powerful because their attention is divided between academic and personal obligations. The non-significant gap between the two older groups shows that, after the early twenties, perceptions level off.

The implication is that while retreats are especially helpful for younger students nearing graduation, adjustments can be made to better connect with older participants. Adding career-focused reflections or flexible activities may help them link the retreat

to their current realities. Similar suggestions have been made in the literature, where values clarification and meaning-making are highlighted as important supports for persistence and motivation in higher education (Awidi & Klutsey, 2024; Colegado, 2024).

Table 3. Test of Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Age

Age Groups	n	Mean	F-value	P-value
22 years old and below	101	4.58		
23 – 25 years old	111	4.29	5.512	0.005
26 years old and above	44	4.20		

Table 4. Post-hoc Test on the Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Age

Age Groups	Mean Difference	Mean	Std. Error	p-value
23 – 25 years old	0.289*	0.289*	0.104	0.016
22 years old and below	26 years old and above	0.376*	0.136	0.017
23 – 25 years old	26 years old and above	0.087	0.134	0.793

Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Gender

Table 5 presents the results of the test of difference in retreat and recollection perception when grouped according to gender. Female respondents reported the highest mean score of 4.46, followed by LGBTQ+ respondents with a mean of 4.33, while male respondents had a slightly lower mean of 4.25. Although these figures suggest small variations, the analysis showed no significant difference across groups, $F(2, 253) = 2.20$, $p = 0.113$.

This means that regardless of gender identity, students shared a similarly positive view of the retreat and recollection activities. The slight differences in scores may be explained by individual experiences, but statistically, all groups benefited in comparable ways. This finding supports previous research showing that reflective and values-oriented activities can be equally meaningful across diverse student populations (Quibo-Quibo & Suico, 2024; Rodriguez et al., 2025).

The implication is that retreats and recollections, as structured reflective practices, are inclusive in nature. They appear to create a safe and supportive environment that allows students, regardless of gender, to pause, reflect, and find meaning in their academic and personal journeys. This inclusivity is consistent with studies highlighting that shared reflective spaces can foster connection, empathy, and spiritual growth across gender lines (Perez et al., 2025; Rodriguez et al., 2025).

Table 5. Test of Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Gender

Gender	n	Mean	F-value	P-value
Female	156	4.46		
Male	90	4.25	2.196	0.113
LGBTQ+	10	4.33		

Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Religion

Table 6 shows the test of difference in retreat and recollection perception when respondents were grouped according to religion. Students who identified as Roman Catholic reported the highest mean score of 4.47. Those from Christian denominations followed with a mean score of 4.14, while Muslim respondents had a mean of 4.28. Although these averages show some variation, the analysis revealed no significant difference across groups, $F(2, 253) = 2.61, p = 0.076$.

This finding suggests that regardless of religious background, students shared a generally positive view of the retreat and recollection activities. The high scores across all groups indicate that the reflective practices were broad enough to be meaningful even to students coming from different faith traditions. Earlier studies have noted that spiritual formation activities can foster self-awareness, empathy, and values development across diverse religious groups (Villanueva, 2024; Kawakami Gilbertson et al., 2022).

The results highlight the inclusive nature of retreats and recollections. These activities appear to provide a safe environment for reflection where students of varying faith traditions can engage in personal growth. This is consistent with research that shows that interfaith or pluralistic approaches to student formation encourage respect, deeper reflection, and a stronger sense of belonging (Pazer, 2024; Kawakami Gilbertson et al., 2022).

Table 6. Test of Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Religion

Religion	n	Mean	F-value	P-value
Roman Catholic	147	4.47		
Christian Denominations	94	4.14	2.607	0.076
Islam	15	4.28		

Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Institute

Table 7 shows the level of retreat and recollection perception across the different academic groups. Students in agriculture and development communication courses recorded the highest mean score of 4.58. They were followed by students in fisheries and marine sciences with 4.37, those students in human services with 4.34, and business and governance students with 4.24. The lowest mean score was observed among education and information technology students at 4.19.

The test of difference produced an F-value of 2.26 with a corresponding p-value of 0.064. Since the p-value is above the 0.05 threshold, the result indicates that the

differences in mean scores among the institutes are not statistically significant. This means that students, regardless of their academic institute, shared almost the same positive perception of the retreat and recollection activities.

The slightly higher mean score among Agriculture and Development Communication students may suggest that the reflective and values-oriented nature of the activity resonated strongly with their academic and personal context. On the other hand, the lower score of Education and IT students may reflect program demands or differences in learning culture. Despite these small variations, the overall findings highlight that the activity was broadly meaningful across disciplines. This supports earlier research showing that reflective practices contribute to holistic student growth across a wide range of academic programs (Rook et al., 2025; Sudirman et al., 2024; Datnow et al., 2022).

Table 7. Test of Difference in Retreat and Recollection Perception by Institute

Institute	n	Mean	F-value	P-value
Education and Information technology	83	4.19		
Business and Governance	62	4.24		
Fisheries and Marine Sciences	48	4.37	2.255	0.064
Human Services	43	4.34		
Agriculture and Development Communication	20	4.58		

Conclusion

This study explored how graduating students from a state college in Davao Occidental experienced their retreat and recollection. Many participants shared that the activity was meaningful, and some even described it as life changing. In areas such as self-awareness, values, relationships, and preparation for the future, the ratings were consistently high. For a number of students, the retreat served as a rare pause in their busy lives, giving them a chance to reflect on their journey and reconnect with themselves, their peers, and the wider school community. These reflections suggest that when learners are given time and space to slow down, they often discover insights that support more balanced personal growth.

Age appeared to influence the responses. Students aged 22 and below tended to give higher ratings, perhaps because they are still in the process of shaping their identities and imagining their paths ahead. At this stage, activities such as journaling or group sharing can feel very relevant. Older participants, many of whom were already handling work, family, or financial pressures, still found value in the retreat although their reflections were more measured. Interestingly, gender, religion, and academic program showed little variation, which points to the wide appeal of such activities across diverse groups.

The findings suggest that retreats and recollections are more than traditions in campus life. They provide real opportunities for students to clarify what matters to them, strengthen relationships, and prepare both emotionally and spiritually for life after graduation. For schools that serve varied learners, activities like these may be a practical way to support students during a key turning point.

Future studies may look into which specific elements such as journaling, group discussions, or faith-based practices resonate most with different groups of students. It would also be useful to trace how these experiences shape graduates once they leave school. Such follow up research can help institutions design programs that not only build academic competence but also nurture resilience, purpose, and a grounded sense of self.

The study's findings can be enriched by incorporating major sociological theories on Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, and Conflict Theory, to provide a multi-layered analysis of the student retreat experience. From a functionalist perspective, the retreat serves as a crucial social mechanism for maintaining social equilibrium and reinforcing the collective consciousness of the college community. By providing a structured time for reflection and reconnection, the activity fulfills latent functions like promoting social solidarity and teaching shared norms and values essential for students' transition into society. The consistently high ratings in areas like relationships and preparation for the future suggest the retreat successfully integrates students into the wider community, thereby reducing the anomie or social isolation that can occur during significant life transitions.

On Symbolic Interactionism, the study's emphasis on personal meaning and "life-changing" individual experiences strongly aligns with symbolic interactionism, which focuses on how individuals create meaning through social interaction. The retreat can be seen as a micro-level social interaction where students use symbols (e.g., journaling, group sharing) to negotiate and shape their self-identity and future aspirations. The differing responses based on age (younger students still shaping identities vs. older ones with established pressures) highlight how individuals interpret the same experience differently based on their unique social circumstances and self-perceptions, which are developed through ongoing social feedback.

Lastly, while the study highlights the retreat's positive aspects, a conflict theory lens would encourage an examination of potential inequalities. This perspective might question who benefits most from such activities and whether they inadvertently reproduce existing social stratifications, especially concerning the older students already handling work/family/financial pressures. Conflict theorists might argue that while retreats aim to support all students, they may prioritize the values and needs of

the dominant student group or fail to address the systemic issues faced by marginalized learners, thus maintaining the status quo rather than challenging underlying power imbalances.

By applying these theories, the study can move beyond description to a robust sociological analysis of how a campus activity influences student life, social integration, identity formation, and potential inequalities within the educational system.

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