
Fostering Religious and Spiritual Development of Students during College

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Colleges and universities have always been interested in the development of the whole student, though during the past few decades, higher education has become more focused on preparing students for a career and thus has given less attention to preparing them for life. But recently there has been increased interest in holistic student development, particularly in the religious and spiritual development of students. This interest in holistic student development has been reinforced by scholars studying student development who have concluded that students do indeed develop holistically as well as intellectually. That is, students (and all persons) develop their cognitive skills and learn to think with more complexity while simultaneously developing emotional maturity, a sense of self and identity, and how to relate with others.¹ Some scholars view the time in college as one where students primarily focus in on moving toward self-authorship.² I like to think of student development in terms of investment—students investing their time, talents and energy into activities that they find meaningful to them.³

Both scholars and campus leaders are now asking two major types of questions in the interest of exploring the religious and spiritual development of students during college. First, do students develop their spiritual and religious life during college as a part of general self-discovery? And is spiritual and religious development an important part of the collegiate journey? Second, what types of collegiate experiences influence students' development, particularly those dimensions that promote their spiritual and religious development? While these questions are important for understanding students at any age, the focus has been directed toward the traditional aged students, i.e., those from 18-24 years.

Do Students Develop Their Spirituality and Religiosity during College?

The research on student faith development is beginning to converge on some general conclusions.⁴ Students come to campus not yet tested in their faith, and experience considerable challenges to their prior religious perspectives, which are often greatly influenced by their parents' views.⁵ They are exposed to new information, differing values and religious perspectives, and meet and relate to different types of people, with faculty members often expressing different perspectives from what the student experienced during high school. But not all students

necessarily turn away from matters of religion and spirituality over the course of their college career.⁶ In fact, in a national survey of 1,200 students, seven in ten of the college students agreed that “religion plays an important role in their lives” and one in four have “become more spiritual since entering college,” while only seven percent indicated that they “have become less spiritual.”⁷ One of the conclusions of the national surveys and our qualitative findings from the interviews and campus visits to ten religiously affiliated colleges is that students express a strong desire to become more engaged in their religious/spiritual journey.⁸ And a significant number (26%) consider themselves “born-again Christians” according to a national poll conducted by UCLA.⁹

Students do not leave their personal values and faith at the campus gate when they arrive as freshmen on campus, as some might suggest. In their journey through college, students seek out valid ways of knowing for themselves, seek a place to stand in the midst of uncertainty around them, and develop relationships that evolve from strong dependence upon authority figures to an interdependence amongst their peers. They cultivate social relationships with others whose personal values and religious perspectives differ from their own. As college students progress through college they begin to view matters of their religiosity and their religious practices with more complexity and diversity than before. They are more likely to become seekers rather than dwellers, more willing to question what they considered essential to their faith when growing up at home.¹⁰ In terms of religious practices, they develop new forms of religious and spiritual engagement. Many students find that their forms of worship evolve from the traditional ones of their youth into a more inclusive and diverse set of meditation and practice. They often engage in less formal church services and associate with others with different backgrounds and experiences, and share these in more informal and varied settings.

What Influences the Religious and Spiritual Development of Students?

This question relates to the conditions in the social cultural environment of the campus that influence the growth and development of students.¹¹ In a book I coauthored with my colleagues, *Putting Students First: How Colleges Foster Development Purposefully*, we divided the campus environment into four major domains in which student development takes place: culture, curriculum, co-curriculum, and community (on and off campus). Using this framework, I briefly highlight the influences of each on the spiritual and religious development of students.¹²

Culture

The mission and character of a college exerts significant influence on the spiritual journey of students. In general, students attending a college associated with a church denomination are more apt to report that they have developed a deeper sense of spiritual growth over the course of their college career than students who attend non-affiliated institutions. Those attending highly evangelical colleges who have a strong Christian focus and set of expectations about both religion and religious practices express stronger commitments to their religious beliefs than students at other colleges.

In our visits to colleges, we found that the entire culture at Bethune-Cookman College reflects its Historically Black College and University (HBCU) tradition, which promotes service to others and is grounded in several religious traditions, acknowledging the faith traditions of the United Methodist Church, under whose auspices the college was established and supported. The college established many rituals and events, like the graduation ceremony in the local church, that stressed the importance of living out the college's motto, "Enter to learn, depart to serve." The students viewed their tenure at college as the beginning of their life in service to others. The faculty and staff often referred to the idea that these students were blessed with talents and thus with the opportunities—and expectations based on the religious traditions of the college—to serve others who are less fortunate than they.

Rituals and ceremonies at Union University are designed for the entire community stressing its Baptist tradition of the importance of creating a supportive Christian community. The President, in his address in the matriculation ceremony, promotes the importance of Union being a community with Christ at its center. During the freshmen year, students are enrolled in a course to explore their gifts, interpreted as those given to them by God, and how they can think of and plan their career and life in terms of service to other as a form of worship to God.

Curriculum

Academic programs also influence students' understanding of religion and the role of spirituality in providing a forum for self-discovery as well as academic development. Student enrollment in religion courses has helped students develop a more complex understanding of who they are and what they believe. But students do not always find sufficient support in their quest to find meaning and purpose in life in their academic pursuits. Over half of the juniors in the UCLA study at 46 diverse institutions report that their professors never offered them opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose in life in their course. And almost 50 percent were dissatisfied with the college experiences that provided them with "opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection."¹³ Faculty consider themselves to play a larger role in the development of the head rather than the heart of students, particularly if the heart reflects a religious perspective.¹⁴ In a recent survey, faculty members also expressed the desire to assist students in matters of faith and religion, but not in the classroom.¹⁵ This may reflect the tradition of secularization in schools where teachers are reluctant to introduce matters of faith in an academic setting.¹⁶ A student's religious faith is regarded largely as a private matter, and thus its development and practice is primarily fostered and developed in non-academic settings by departments of campus ministry and student affairs, but not by academic faculty.

In our study, we found large differences among the ten colleges with regard to the centrality of religion in their curricula. At Whitworth College and Union University, freshmen students are enrolled in courses that emphasize different worldviews in which students are instructed to not only understand the various theological foundations but also to take note of the implications in their lives and to practice those that are most appealing to them in their journey of faith development. Students in the interviews often referred to their own religious perspectives when

speaking about their self-development and described how they are developing and expanding their understanding of their religious commitments and their engagement both as academic students and contributing members of society.

Other colleges, based upon our visits to campuses, require or strongly recommend that students participate in service-learning courses to increase their awareness and ability to address real-world problems and situations. In doing so, students are given opportunities for self-reflection and identity formation. The curricular strategies are not necessarily religious in intent. Rather, students are given the freedom to integrate their spiritual and religious worldviews in their reflection and interactions with others. The focus is on helping students develop their sense of personal and social responsibility as a citizen in a larger society. Many students do rely on their religious background as the starting point for their explorations. The College of Wooster uses its independent study project, required of all seniors, as an opportunity for faculty and students to explore issues that extend beyond the academic discipline major of the student in a candid, one-on-one exchange. The freshman seminar series at Hamline University is designed to assist students in integrating a liberal arts education with the practical working world. Faculty and student affairs staff work collaboratively as instructors in these courses. They integrate calling and career, and students are encouraged to make a contribution to society that meets both their personal and spiritual sense of self while contributing to a better world for all.

In sum, many colleges are not intentional in incorporating religion into their curricular offerings and teaching to assist students to live a life of purpose of meaning and purpose, but do allow students to rely on their personal values and worldviews as they reflect and commit to a life that is encouraged to be one of service to others. Even at church related colleges, most chief academic officers expect faculty to assist students in their moral and ethical development but less than one in three expect faculty to be so engaged in the religious, faith, and spiritual development of students.¹⁷ Faculty in general do not see religious and spiritual development as a part of their role as faculty. Religion is a personal and private matter.

Co-curriculum

Students who participate in religious activities are more apt to have stronger religious commitments than those who are not as involved. Similarly, students who are engaged in religious activities are also more apt to be engaged in other collegiate activities. Their religious engagement is considered to be helpful in having a positive attitude toward college and developing themselves as whole persons, as well as being engaged in other activities.¹⁸ In our study, we found that colleges use a variety of strategies to foster the spiritual development of students. Villanova University supports a popular program, “Service Trips,” which integrates faith and learning in action. While the more than 600 participating students do not earn academic credit for this volunteer program, they gain many opportunities for self-reflection. Faculty members are involved as “advisors,” educating students about salient issues and challenges inherent in the program. This program is designed to take into account the full developmental needs of the students. An atmosphere of safety and openness is created for students as they are pushed beyond what they think they can do, while also providing a safe and “sacred place” for them to change.

Another example of an effective program is the Chapel program at Hope College, where students and staff of Campus Ministry work together in creating worship services and volunteer programs that help them live out their calling of service while in college. Chapel becomes a place for spiritual renewal and social support and a springboard for getting involved in service activities.

Community

A sense of community, as viewed by students, is an important factor in how students evaluate their journey through college. The relationships they develop with others—fellow students, faculty and professionals in campus ministry and student affairs—play an important role in providing the often necessary social support for students throughout their college experience. Faculty members at faith-based colleges often develop strong professional and personal relationships with students, which students appreciate, according to our interviews with them.

Community is most effective in fostering student development when students regard it as a community of support and challenge. For example, lesbian and gay students find support from their peers, African-American students are able to find support from local church congregations, and Muslim women find acceptance from peers in their veiling to be significant. In times of distress about their religious beliefs, students seek counseling, and when they are unable to find support among their peers, they will rely on support from home.

Colleges are having more and more open discussions among all members of the campus community about how students learn and develop, i.e., they are committed to fostering both student learning and personal development. Any college faces a challenge in becoming a holistic campus—a campus of support and challenge—to their students, given the competing subcultures of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. But an effective campus is one in which everyone supports and challenges students in their holistic development. Practically, this means that faculty and staff serve as models and mentors on all fronts, who do not tear down students' ways of thinking and but rather seek to build on preexisting foundations through affirmation and stretching.

College leaders at the schools we visited are also particularly aware of the importance of creating and maintaining a college community that eliminates the false impression that faith is only a subjective, emotional and private matter and the search for truth and understanding is an objective and public undertaking. Thus school administrations encourage their faculty to assist students in developing their affective, spiritual, and religious dimensions as well as their cognitive and intellectual capacities. They realize that giving student affairs and ministry professionals sole responsibility to develop the student's spirituality does not include all elements that are necessary to the life of the mind.¹⁹ To them, if religion is to be a part of the life of students, then spirituality and religion need to be nurtured *within* an academic setting, and the campus needs to proactively tackle the "big questions" in the curriculum as well as the co-curriculum. At Pacific Lutheran University, students are actively engaged in study abroad programs to make them aware of their own cultural and religious traditions. At many campuses, a working principle is that all members—faculty and staff alike—are to simultaneously challenge and support the students on their greater

journey of life, rather than only focused on their journey through college. In fact, some universities, like Creighton University have created administrative positions which report to both the provost and vice president for Student Affairs, thereby bridging the gap between academic and spiritual education.

Implications

The implications of these findings about the spiritual and religious growth of students during college and the conditions under which they grow in their religious lives are numerous. Higher education leaders, faculty, and staff no longer need to conclude that students will just naturally become less spiritual and religious during college. Moreover, colleges can actively create conditions and campus environments that foster these oft-neglected dimensions of holistic student development. I suggest two possible approaches for campus leaders who wish to more intentionally create university-sponsored environments that effectively foster spiritual and religious development alongside academic growth. Indeed, what should campus leaders and faculty consider in assisting students in their journey in college as they confront, struggle, and try to develop their own religious beliefs and values and experiment with new forms of religious and spiritual engagement while in college?

The first approach promotes responsiveness to students with a quest to explore. The use of language and terms is critically important to this goal. If a campus desires to intentionally help students in their religious and spiritual journey, then terms such as meaning, purpose, calling, vocation, inner life, faith, spirituality, as well as religious engagement can be used to initiate discussions among all members of the campus community.²¹ Colleges can help students view their calling and vocation in terms of what people do in a responsible and personally satisfying way to help meet the needs of society, and thus make this a better world to live in.²² These terms can apply to a secular as well as a religious perspective on what is a meaningful life, which is important for engaging the entire campus community, both religious and non-religious.

The idea of calling is implicitly reflected in the view of the Provost at Villanova University who put it this way: “We encourage students to let their intellectual life be guided by their hearts. Students are learning and developing in college for a purpose, that is, to be of service to the world.”²³ At the colleges we studied, many leaders pointed to an alliance between being spiritual and being engaged and therefore designed programs accordingly to foster this connection. Leaders creating campus environments for students that foster religious development know that a sense of purpose in life may lead to engagement and membership in certain communities and certain activities (e.g., worship services), and a student may discern a deeper sense of a vocation through engaging in activities with particular groups.²⁴ For example, students on our campuses participated in workshops and immersion programs such as spending a weekend in an inner city social agency (e.g., Dayton University). Such programs are based on the notion that one’s investment reinforces one’s commitment, and vice versa. They are mutually reinforcing²⁵ resulting in continuous growth and development, although not always in a linear fashion. At times, particularly at the end of freshmen year, engagement in spiritual and religious practices does not match the level of

professed spirituality. While students report that they are still spiritual and desire more involvement in a self-exploration of who they are and what they should do with their lives, their level of participation is often less than it was during high school. The imbalance between the students' desires to seek meaning in their lives and their participation in activities that have traditionally fostered such meaning is one that administrators wrestle with more and more. Administrators have come to realize the importance of establishing "safe places" for students to explore and express their beliefs, doubts and struggles in finding meaning amidst a changing world for them. In the past their religious foundation served them well, but now in a new environment in which complexity, critical reflection, open inquiry, and change are very much a part the fabric of the campus community, students are challenged and at times overwhelmed. Students need both support and challenge to develop. One conclusion from our research is that students need to own the types of planned experiences, meditation, and worship that are meaningful to themselves rather than to the religious leaders or adults.

Thus, if campuses are to foster the religious and spiritual development of students, all members of the campus community—administrative leaders, faculty, and staff—need to have open discussions about how students learn and grow and must therefore develop some language that will help guide the conversations and to plan and implement some effective conditions of engagement. I offer the concept of vocation as one that embodies the ideas of religious commitment and engagement. Vocation is one that can be used by colleges in assisting students become prepared for a career and a life of purpose and meaning.

The second approach for college leaders to consider can be described by the saying, "It takes a whole campus of whole persons to develop whole students." Community—friends, faculty, staff, significant others—play an important role in religious development. Sharon Parks argues, "At its best, higher education is distinctive in its capacity to serve as a mentoring environment in the formation of critical adult faith.... It is primarily to this institution that young (and older) adults come to be initiated into critical thought and must make meaning in new ways on the other side of that discovery. Thus every institution of higher education serves in at least some measure as a community of imagination in which every professor is potentially a spiritual guide and every syllabus a confession of faith."²⁶ In short, the ideal community can be described in terms of a "mentoring community" where faculty, professionals, and fellow students play a role in helping students find meaning in their lives.²⁷ A faculty member at Hamline University stated that being a mentor (some students view her as a substitute mother) is a daunting responsibility, but once she realized that she shares this responsibility with her other colleagues in a community, she felt a sense of support and added courage to be an intentional model and mentor to students.

In creating an environment of support and challenge, all members of the community thus need to work together and become models in a "mentoring community." All members need to recognize that the private and spiritual lives of students are very meaningful to them, and that students are investing their time and talents in activities because of the meaning it brings to them. Faculty members in particular need to be engaged in fostering the religious and spiritual dimensions of student development given their natural roles as mentors. Colleges will only succeed in effectively

fostering truly holistic development when faculty address the issues of meaning, purpose, religious, spiritual and moral growth along with academic learning in the classroom and in their relationships with students, when the opportunities to do so are appropriate.

Endnotes

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