

The Role of Spirituality in Purpose in Life and Academic Engagement

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Kimberly A. Greenway, University of North Alabama

Interest has increased over the last several years regarding college students' spirituality. The recent findings in a study by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, 2004) indicate that today's college students are searching for purpose in life. Faith development theories (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000), concerned with how students develop spiritually during the college years, also suggest that students are searching for meaning and purpose. These theories support the notion that spirituality and purpose in life are related. Until recently, there has been little, if any, research that has expanded on Chickering's (1969) concept of purpose as a factor in student development.

Astin's (1984, 1993) theory of student involvement, along with Kuh's (2003) research on student engagement have supported the connections between involvement, engagement in learning, and academic success. However, these theories have focused more on the behaviors in which students engage or on the external environment's support for such engagement, rather than on the internal psychological processes that are indicative of academic engagement. Evidence from the field of clinical psychology and the new positive psychology movement suggests that such psychological engagement is positively related to academic success and that meaning and purpose are positively related to engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Finn & Rock, 1997; Marks, 2000; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). However, there is limited research that has been conducted on these psychological processes within college students, as Bean (2005) has noted.

Given the limited research into the internal psychological processes of academic engagement and the connection between such engagement and spirituality or purpose in life, a dissertation study was conducted that identified spirituality, purpose in life, and academic engagement as under-investigated variables in student development theory.

Through path analysis, the study investigated the relationships among spirituality, campus involvement (including components of time and quality of involvement, along with faculty-student interaction), purpose in life, academic engagement, and academic success. For the purpose of this presentation, the emphasis was on the effects of spirituality as a variable in the path model and the effects of purpose in life as a mediating variable to academic engagement and academic success. The path analysis was derived from the results of an online survey of 531 juniors and seniors enrolled at a regional state university during the fall 2004 semester. The survey utilized items from the College Student Beliefs and Values survey (CSBV; HERI, 2004), the Q12 (Gallup Organization, 2004) adapted for higher education, the Academic Engagement

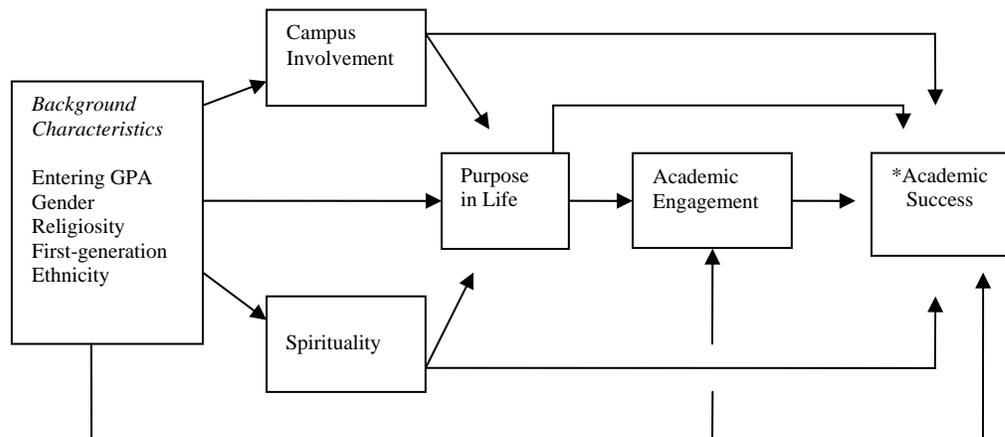
Kimberly A. Greenway has worked in student affairs for over 17 years and plans to continue her research to expand current models of student development.

Index (Schreiner, 2004), the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishiare, & Kaler, 2004); and the College Student Survey (CSS; HERI, 2004).

The definition of spirituality used in the study adapts concepts from Fowler (1981), Parks (2000), and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI; 2003); it is operationalized as the development of the inner person in regard to individual beliefs and values and the search for meaning, belonging, and purpose. Purpose in life is an awareness of meaningfulness in life that includes an understanding of having personal value and a contribution to make in life, (adapted from Frankl, 1959; Steger, Frazier, Oishiare, & Kaler, 2004). It should be noted that there is a distinction between searching for meaning and purpose (spirituality) and having purpose in life.

Academic engagement is the experience of voluntarily investing in and finding meaning and value in the learning process to such a degree that the interests and enjoyment outweigh the energy required for the experience (adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Academic success is operationalized in two ways: as cumulative GPA, and as self-reported gains in learning during college.

The path model hypothesized that spirituality would have direct positive effects on purpose in life, academic engagement, and academic success. It was expected that purpose in life would have direct positive effects on academic engagement and academic success and that it would be a mediating variable for spirituality. The path model is shown below with arrows indicating the hypothesized direct relationships.



*GPA and Self-Reported Learning Gains as two outcome variables

Multiple regression analysis indicated that the path model accounts for 42% of the variance in academic success. However, not all of the direct effects hypothesized for spirituality and purpose in life were supported by the findings. Spirituality had direct effects on purpose in life but had only indirect effects on academic engagement and academic success. Purpose in life had direct effects on academic engagement but only indirect effects on academic success. As for the amount of variance that can be accounted for by the variables, academic engagement accounts for 39% and 18% of the variance in GPA and self-reported learning gains, respectively; purpose in life accounts for 24% of the variance in academic engagement in both the GPA and self-reported

learning gains models; and spirituality accounts for 25% of the variance in purpose in life in the GPA model and 28% of the variance in purpose in life in the self-reported learning gains model. Another interesting finding is that faculty-student interaction, one of the other variables in the study, had direct effects on purpose in life and on academic engagement. It accounts for 53% of the variance in academic engagement and 16% of the variance in purpose in life.

One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that females scored significantly higher than males in spirituality and purpose in life and that students whose parents had attended college scored significantly higher than first-generation students on purpose in life. The responses on the spirituality items indicated that students are searching for meaning and purpose; eighty-nine percent of students said they were searching for meaning in life, 82% had discussions about the meaning of life with friends at least occasionally, 98% said that integrating spirituality into their life was at least somewhat important, 94% said that seeking opportunities to grow spiritually was at least somewhat important, and 96% said the development of a meaningful philosophy of life was at least somewhat important.

These findings have important implications for student development programming and for faculty interaction with students, as well. In considering the results and implications, however, one should keep in mind the limitations of the study. It should be noted that although path analysis can provide support for the hypothesized relationships, it cannot substantiate directionality or causality. Additionally, the sample was drawn from only one university and is too ethnically homogeneous for the results to be generalized to other populations.

The finding that spirituality's only direct effect was on purpose in life and that it had indirect effects on academic engagement through purpose in life indicates that students who are searching for meaning and purpose may not become academically engaged except through finding purpose in life: it is the meaning-making itself that leads to engagement. Purpose in life's direct effect on academic engagement and its mediating propensity for faculty-student interaction and spirituality indicate that interaction with faculty has its greatest effect through the ability to engage students and help them find meaning and purpose. However, since faculty-student interaction accounts for 53% of the variance in academic engagement and only 16% of the variance in purpose in life, faculty may be more adept at getting students academically engaged than in providing them avenues to find purpose. Coupled with the responses on the spirituality items, these findings point to the need for higher education to cultivate the search for meaning, to assist students in finding purpose in life, and to promote intrinsic motivation through personal meaning-making that leads to academic engagement.

Although higher education seems, at least to some degree, to be recognizing the need to address these implications, there are barriers to emphasizing affective domain development as a priority. According to Awbrey (2004), many institutions of higher education do not emphasize it as a goal; tenure processes emphasize research over teaching, which contributes to faculty making student interaction a lower priority; and faculty's loyalty to logic and scientific inquiry affects their desire and ability to accept the concept of developing the whole student. The diverse definitions of spirituality also present a challenge (Parks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003).

As a result of these barriers, students are not being challenged to ask the "big questions" (Parks, 2000, p. xii) that lead to "worthy dreams" (p. xii). Furthermore, questions dealing with morality, faith, and meaning have been considered irrelevant to academia (Parks, 2000). Chickering (2003) suggests that higher education may not be providing students with a sense of purpose that enables them to make a difference in society when they leave college.

Suggested responses to these barriers include providing classroom environments and other forums where students can freely voice opposing opinions and be exposed to differing points of view (Light, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000); providing students with challenges that require them to re-evaluate their own values, beliefs, and abilities; capitalizing on the challenges that already

exist in the college experience (i.e., choices regarding alcohol use, sexual behavior, tolerance, etc.); asking students to articulate why they believe what they do; and allowing students the freedom to express their feelings and choices during the developmental process and to make their own decisions.

Higher education is only now beginning to respond to the possible need to assist students in the search for meaning and purpose. Although the interest in college students' spirituality has increased, the need for more research is crucial to respond to these and other barriers and to further test the effects of spirituality, purpose in life, and academic engagement. Additional research is needed to test the presented path model with a larger, more diverse sample. Longitudinal studies are also needed, as well as those using experimental design. Although further study is needed, this initial study including spirituality, purpose in life, and academic engagement should serve as a catalyst in advancing the recognition of the role that spirituality plays in purpose in life and academic engagement. Accordingly, this study should also serve as a springboard to additional research that includes these variables in student development models and in experimental research designs that explore additional factors that facilitate students' searching for meaning, finding purpose in life, and becoming academically engaged.

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