

Preparing Professionals to Respond to Students' Search for Meaning **Judy Rogers, Miami University (OH), and** **Patrick Love, New York University**

In working with college students, student affairs professionals deal with questions related to the meaning and purpose of life, so they cannot help but deal with issues of spirituality in the lives of their students. Additionally, spirituality is a legitimate element of student diversity and needs to be understood by the professionals working with college students. If students are treated from a holistic perspective, their spiritual needs and issues cannot be ignored. Wojnar and Malinski (2003) argue from the perspective of nurse preparation that

Spirituality, healing, and caring are intertwined human experiences for both nurse and client. If we do not teach and demonstrate caring to our students, they will not be able to demonstrate caring for clients. If we do not value and encourage a diverse expression of students' spirituality, they will have a difficult time providing spiritually relevant care for clients. If students experience stress and abuse throughout their nursing education, they will have a difficult time understanding and journeying with clients on a path of healing.

The same argument can be applied to student affairs graduate preparation.

Preparing professionals to deal with students' issues related to spirituality and the meaning of life and encouraging or facilitating the spiritual development of graduate students in professional preparation programs is a particular challenge about which relatively little is known. There is little research on how to prepare faculty to deal with the issues of spirituality and the meaning of life. In addition, there is the challenge on how to prepare spiritually sensitive professionals who sometimes will work in spiritually insensitive, dehumanizing organizations and institutions. There also are continuing challenges in differentiating issues of religion from issues of spirituality, leading some professionals to abdicate or assign responsibility for such issues solely to pastoral counselors, campus ministers, and other religious professionals.

Entry-level student affairs professionals are often those in closest contact with undergraduates. The question is: How do we prepare these new professionals to respond to and accompany students in their spiritual searching? This presentation explored the role of spiritual development as a critical component of professional preparation and the implications for graduate students and program faculty alike.

Spirituality

The definitions and perspectives of spirituality and spiritual development that guide our work include those from Teasdale; Chickering, Dalton, and Stramm; and Love and Talbot. Incorporated into these definitions and our discussion is a differentiation between spirituality and religion, two terms often assumed synonymous.

Teasdale (1999, pp. 17-18): Being religious connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition. Being spiritual suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality. Religion, of course, is one way many people are spiritual. Often, when authentic faith embodies an individual's spirituality the religious and the spiritual will coincide. Still, not every religious person is spiritual (although he or she ought to be) and not every spiritual person is religious. Spirituality is a way of life that affects and

includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging. The spiritual person is committed to growth as an essential ongoing life goal. To be spiritual requires us to stand on our own two feet while being nurtured and supported by our tradition, if we are fortunate enough to have one.

Chickering, Dalton, and Stramm (2004) used Teasdale's™ definition in their work and pointed out that the definition includes atheists. Many atheists, though not religious, share a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction and belonging and are committed to growth. Estimated at about 5-10% of the population, they need to be respected by and included in our varied efforts.

Love and Talbot (1999):

1. Spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.
2. Spiritual development involves the process of continually transcending one's current locus of centrality.
3. Spiritual development involves developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community.
4. Spiritual development involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life.
5. Spiritual development involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing.

Rationale and Context for this Discussion

This conference has explained and set the context for addressing spirituality in higher education and student affairs. The reasons why a focus on preparing professionals to respond to students'™ search for meaning and spirituality is important include

- spirituality is more and more being seen as an element of diversity in client/student populations;
- professionals (nurses, counselors, social workers, student affairs professionals) all deal with questions related to the meaning of life, each in distinct, but some overlapping, ways; and
- a holistic perspective argument™if we treat clients/students from a holistic perspective, we cannot ignore their spiritual needs and issues.

Challenges Related to Addressing Spirituality in Graduate Preparation

There are any numbers of challenges inherent in this issue of dealing with spirituality in graduate preparation programs. They include

- defining spirituality in a way that is inclusive of any orientation toward the spiritual but exclusive of absolutist ideologies that in any way discount or minimize other orientations or religious/faith traditions;
- facilitating the spiritual development of graduate students in professional preparation programs may be seen as an inappropriate focus;
- the fact that the culture we live in values secularism and materialism;
- the fact that there is little mention of how to prepare faculty to deal with the issues of spirituality and the meaning of life, especially if they see this as an inappropriate issue in their field of practice; and

- preparing spiritually sensitive professionals who may work in spiritually insensitive, dehumanizing organizations and institutions.

Lessons and Ideas from the Fields of Nursing, Counseling, and Social Work

In the program, we discussed several issues that student affairs professionals and preparation programs face: the culture of the field vis-à-vis spirituality, suggestions and advice from other fields, and challenges, barriers, and obstacles we can expect to face. Below are items from literature in these other fields that address these issues, followed by the discussion questions we used during the presentation.

Issue #1 " The Culture of the Field Vis-à-vis Spirituality

Nursing

Nursing appears to be the field with the most advanced and extensive works on the role of spirituality in nursing practice. The profession was founded on the notion of holistic care of the patient, so spirituality has been part of the conversation from Florence Nightingale on to the present. There is support within the greater organizational context in that, currently, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) requires documentation of assessment of patient spirituality. Typically, this means that hospital admission forms require information about religious affiliation, whether the patient wishes to have a visit by a hospital chaplain, and what the health care team should be sensitive to regarding any particular religious practices of the patient.

Discussion Questions: How can student affairs/higher education develop the equivalent for all institutions and organizational contexts?
How do we incorporate spirituality in the fabric of what we do?

Issue #2 " Suggestions and Advice From the Field

Nursing

"Different ways that nurse educators sought to increase the students'™ knowledge about spiritual care included an elective course in spirituality, a seminar assisting students to explore and develop their personal spirituality, and computer based video instruction using spiritual care scenarios. . . . Baccalaureate students serving as parish/congregational nurses during their community health clinical rotation developed an increased sensitivity to spiritual needs of patients" (Meyer, 2003). In addition to including classroom and clinical content related to spirituality as part of holistic care, faculty may serve as role models by using a holistic approach during their interactions with students.

Counseling

"Incorporating spirituality within a wellness paradigm can help counselors and counselor educators value and address spirituality as an integral component of optimum human functioning. By distinguishing between religiosity and spirituality and operationally conceptualizing spirituality as a life span developmental phenomenon that is essential for achieving wellness, counselor educators can more readily incorporate spiritual issues within the philosophy of the counseling profession" (Myers & Williard, 2002, p. 142).

Discussion Question: How might these ideas be applied in student affairs professional preparation programs?

Issue #3 – Challenges, Obstacles, and Barriers

Nursing

What is lacking in the literature are many studies on training student nurses in spirituality. Tanyi (2002) sums up the nursing implications: “Understanding the spiritual dimension of human experience is paramount to nursing, because nursing is a practice-based discipline interested in human concerns. Although it is relevant for nurses to provide spiritual care, research has suggested that nurses encounter many barriers providing this care, such as insufficient academic preparation, lack of post academic training, inadequate time and staffing, and lack of privacy to counsel patients. Spiritual care is also hindered by some nurses’ perception that spiritual care is a religious issue best addressed by hospital chaplains. Optimistically, research has revealed that many nurses can recognize patients’ spiritual needs.”

Social Work

The Council of Social Work Education in the United States has added religion in its definition of characteristics of human diversity and is close to including spiritual development along with the bio-psycho-social-cultural factors that are central to social work’s philosophy of human behavior.

Among the three fields discussed in this presentation, Social Work appears to be the least advanced regarding issues of spirituality vis-à-vis the field and the preparation of social work professionals. In many ways, the field may be most similar to where student affairs is now.

Discussion Questions:

How do these barriers evidence themselves in the higher education and student affairs contexts?

What other obstacles and challenges face preparation program faculty?

Preparing Professionals to Respond to Students' Search for Meaning: Resources, Examples, and Suggestions

There are two levels to consider in this issue: the search for meaning by graduate students in professional preparation programs and helping those graduate students prepare to address the needs of the students with whom they will be working (to avoid confusion, labeled “client students”). Graduate students need to be challenged and engaged on both these levels.

I. Graduate Courses on Spirituality Taught in Higher Education Programs

The following faculty have taught courses related to spirituality in student affairs graduate preparation programs:

Robert Nash, University of Vermont: "Religion, Spirituality, and Education"

Carney Strange, Bowling Green State University: "The Spiritual Dimension of Student Development"

Judy Rogers, Miami University (OH): "Spirituality and Leadership"

Larry Braskamp, Loyola University Chicago: “Spirituality and Higher Education”

II. Incorporating Spirituality in Existing Courses in Higher Education/Student Affairs

A. Authors

The topics that follow have authors listed who have addressed these issues from a spiritual perspective.

Student Development Theory: James Fowler; Sharon Parks; Patrick Love

Leadership: Janet Hagberg; Parker Palmer; Judy Rogers & Michael Dantley.

Also, consider biographies of spiritual leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi; Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Mother Theresa

Ethics, Values, Philosophy: Robert Nash; Arthur Chickering, Lisa Stamm & John Dalton

Spiritual and Emotional Intelligence:

Danah Zohar & Ian Marshall; Robert Emmons; Daniel Goleman

B. Assignments

These assignments represent ideas for how to incorporate spirituality-related assignments into graduate courses:

Journaling on Big Questions: See example below from Michael Heller, Professor of English, Roanoke College, Salem, Va., described in Transformative and Spiritual Practices in the Classroom at: www.fetzer.org/programs/prog_leadership.htm

There are three basic questions for the journal. The first is: "What matters here? . . ." This question is about taking ownership for oneself in the world, and it leads to that. That is why this classroom is a community, because we are taking ownership of our role in the classroom. The format of this is to encourage people to care "care about the work and care about each other. The second question is "Where are you now?" This question has implications about the map of our lives, where are you on the map. It is psychological and emotional. Where are you with your feelings, where are you spiritually? The third big question is "What do you know now?" This question is the question behind all traditional research papers . . . I want the students to think about knowing on different levels, not just the intellectual level. Therefore, I am trying to get them to write from their experience, to value their own experience.

Graduate students can encourage the students with whom they work to journal on the big questions in their lives.

Contemplation and Reflection

Practices to incorporate contemplation and reflection include

- Centering at the start of class, such as breathing exercises, silence, and contemplative writing;

- Ending each class with a reflection on both content and process;

- Incorporating a "Sabbath" about three quarters of the way through the class; and

- Requiring critical reflection in papers and projects

Contemplation and reflection also can be encouraged in the professional practice of graduate students.

Engaging the Client Students about their Search for Meaning

Graduate students can be encouraged to have conversations with client students about their search for meaning and the role of spirituality in their lives as aspects of courses on student development, leadership, and counseling.

III. Elements of a Spiritually Grounded and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

A spiritually relevant pedagogy would include an emphasis on authenticity (both spiritual and cultural) and create environments that allow for the exploration of

- 1) The cognitive (through readings and discussion of ideas);
- 2) The affective and relational (through connection with other people and connection of ideas to life experience); and
- 3) The symbolic (through art forms such as poetry, visual art, music, drama) [Tisdale, 2003, p. 212]

IV. Encouraging the Search for Meaning in Out-of-Class Spaces

Other ideas suggested by Robert Nash (2001) for encouraging the search for meaning outside of the formal classroom and curriculum include the following:

Mini-retreats for students, faculty, and staff emphasizing the quest for meaning

Special religious topics colloquia
Comparative religion institutes
Out-of-classroom dialogue groups
Leadership training institutes
Mediation and conflict resolution training sessions

A "first-lecture" series on "what I would like to learn about meaning"

A "last lecture" lecture series on "what I think I have learned about meaning"

Brown-bag lunches

Off-campus ally groups for religious pluralism

Deep-connection groups

Spiritual renewal communities

Stillness centers

Religio-spiritual journaling groups (p. 202)

See also "Spiritual Dimensions of Graduate Preparation in Student Affairs" by Carney Strange (2001) for creating learning communities of spirit in HESA graduate programs.

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