The Role of Student Spirituality in Higher Education

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In recent years, spirituality and spiritual awareness on college campuses has become an issue of interest. More literature has been written on the subject and researchers are beginning to create studies that focus solely on student’s spiritual identity (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Laurence, 1999; Palmer, 1998; Rendón, 2000; Tisdell, 2003 as cited by Astin et al., 2011). Professionals in higher education acknowledge that the current generation of students maintains a multidisciplinary model of identity emphasizing that a variety of factors contribute to the structuring of an individual (Love & Talbot, 1999). Practitioners must focus on the student as a whole concentrating on the aspects of identity that influence the formation of the individual as a distinct person (Love & Talbot, 1999; Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). After reviewing the literature three key themes emerge: the identity development and spiritual quest of a student highly impacts the teachings of higher education, student affairs professionals must reshape the graduate school curriculum to enhance their understanding of spirituality, and an institution’s organizational features influences a student’s spiritual identity and awareness.

**Theme #1: Identity Development and Spiritual Quest**

Spirituality is an important component for a student’s overall identity development and learning (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). Lindholm (2007) found that spirituality shapes the many perspectives of students and the values placed on academic pursuits. Spiritual development is a unique entity connecting a person’s individual identity to spiritual awareness (Love & Talbot, 1999). As identified in the research of Young, Cashwell, and Woolington (1998), spirituality is not only related to social support, but also an individual’s sense of meaning and moral development. There is an important relationship between spiritual development and psychosocial
features of a human being (Young et al., 1998). It is critical to integrate both development of a student and the responsibility of student affairs professionals to educate the whole student (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). The personal quest for a student to find his or her destiny helps to develop deeper experiences while in college (Love & Talbot, 1999). The spiritual quest is an innate aspect of human development, a process with no endpoint. Spirituality directs living and integrates all aspects of an individual's life (Love & Talbot, 1999).

**Theme #2: Reshaping Education of Student Affairs Professionals**

The ever-changing role of student’s spirituality on college campuses has reshaped the education for student affairs professionals. Professionals are encouraged to concentrate on spirituality in practice and research rather than ignoring this important developmental feature (Talbot & Love, 1999). The professional’s role is critical because of the pledge to teach the whole student through holistic learning (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). More institutional support and some type of educational foundation for emerging professionals needs to be developed in graduate school programs in order to build upon this new desired skill set (Kiessling, 2010). A renewed commitment to supporting spiritual journeys of students will assist in the greater understanding of student development (Hartley, 2004). Students that find a peer support network for their religious faith will feel a greater sense of belonging on their college campuses (Hartley, 2004). Kiessling (2010) notes that student affairs professionals discuss citizenship and globalization with their students, yet fail to acknowledge that social responsibility also involves an understanding of religious traditions. Graduate programs can easily integrate spirituality into the curriculum because scholars have already developed resources for this purpose (Kiessling, 2010). Temkin and Evans (1998) recognizes the importance of teaching spirituality to practitioners. A crucial step is to raise awareness of spirituality in student affairs and educate
individuals on faith development of students (Temkin & Evans, 1998). Teaching about religious diversity is as important as educating students about other aspects of diversity, especially on campuses that pride themselves on having multicultural awareness. An environmental approach is an important foundation for spiritual understanding helping to foster collaboration between student services and campus ministry (Temkin & Evans, 1998).

**Theme #3: Impact of Institution’s Organizational Features**

Organizational cultures and personal experiences influence a student’s spirituality. Lovik and Volkwein (2010) reveal that the organizational type of a university can influence an individual’s spiritual growth, especially if the institution is religiously affiliated. Students that attend faith-based institutions consistently show higher levels of spiritual engagement than students at public and private universities (Gonyea & Kuh, 2006). A mission statement or promotional materials that indicate spiritual awareness at a university can contribute to the spiritual gains of its students (Lovik & Volkwein, 2010; Hartley, 2004). Students observe a larger impact on their spiritual awareness when institutions, public or private, require the taking of courses on religion, spirituality, and theology (Lovik & Volkwein, 2010).

Campuses are encouraged to foster spiritual and religious engagement among students and peers. Individuals that engage in spiritual activities outside of the classroom prove to have greater advances in spiritual awareness and perceive to have better relationships with other people (Lovik & Volkwein, 2010). A recent longitudinal study conducted by Astin and Astin (2010) demonstrates that there is an increase in student’s spiritual awareness. The increase is even more significant when faculty encourages such dialogue about meaning and purpose (Astin, A. W. & Astin, H.S., 2010). Love and Talbot (1999) note that intentional campus efforts to expand a student’s spiritual awareness result in more student satisfaction. According to
Capeheart-Meningall (2005), student affairs professionals must "encourage intentional, engaged, and empowered learners who integrate knowledge, skills, and experiences to make meaning throughout their lives" (p.32). Intentional spiritual learning has become a focus of teaching on college campuses (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005).

**Other Issues of Controversy**

In the past spirituality has been overlooked in postsecondary education. Assessment of the issue has been focused primarily on traditional age college students’ perception of spirituality rather than the ever-growing non-traditional population of students in higher education (Love & Talbot, 1999). Selection bias plays a key role in research. The students that volunteer for the studies report a higher level of religiosity than potentially other students on campus skewing the results of the studies (Young et al., 1998). Student affairs professionals consistently promote the holistic approach of considering the whole individual. However, practitioners fail to integrate spiritual awareness and personal passions into their own work (Kiessling, 2010; Lindholm, 2007). Recently, a new way of approaching spirituality is the idea of utilizing deliberate inclusion of this concept because students are showing a stronger affinity towards their own spirituality (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm 2003; Capeheart-Meningall, 2005).

**Concluding Thoughts**

A student’s spirituality is an important concept to grasp and understand. The new population of students’ greater spiritual awareness has a great impact on the focus of student affairs professionals and the realm of higher education research. Future exploration should emphasize how the student experience and student affairs professionals can assist in directly impacting spiritual awareness. Many researchers suggest this concept, but none have yet to create a study focused primarily on such principles. More attention should also be placed on all
types of religions and spirituality rather than solely monotheistic religions. The influence of interfaith study and interactions is affecting a student’s spiritual journey, yet research fails to identify this topic of concern. Moreover, the influence of past generations ideals on the new millennial generation have not yet been a consideration.


Lovik, E.G., & Volkwein, J.F. (2010). The impact of the organizational features and student
