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Keeping (or Losing) the Faith: Reflections on Spiritual Struggles and Their Resolution by College Seniors.

Jodi Fisler

Holly Alexander Agati

Shannon Chance

Technological University Dublin, shannon.chance@tudublin.ie

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Jodi Fidler, Holly Alexander Agati, Shannon Chance, Amie E. Donahue, Gregory A. Donahue, Eric J. Eickhoff, Sara E. Kolb Gastler, Joseph C. Lowder, and John D. Foubert

Keeping (or Losing) the Faith: Reflections on Spiritual Struggles and Their Resolution by College Seniors

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In this qualitative study, researchers examined how college seniors experienced and resolved spiritual struggles in college. Results indicated that academic activities provided opportunities to question, learn, and grow spiritually. Although a variety of external factors influenced students' explorations of their spirituality, participants looked inward to resolve their struggles in deeply personal ways. Spiritual struggle was often manifested as a reexamination of students' pre-college values, an ongoing process for many students. Researchers identified four ways of describing students' state of resolution: (1) recommitting to an existing faith, (2) slightly readjusting their spiritual or religious values, (3) blending spiritual traditions, or (4) losing their faith.

The religious and spiritual life of college students has been a concern of higher education in the United States since its very foundation (Theelin, 2004), but the amount and scope of available research on students' spiritual development does not suggest a centuries-old interest. Although recent literature reflects heightened interest in the spiritual dimensions of students' lives, research remains limited and disjointed, especially in comparison to the body of literature that exists on other aspects of identity development (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The present phenomenological study builds on the existing literature on spiritual development and seeks to add depth to the conversation by qualitatively exploring how college students experience their own spiritual development. The research team specifically wanted to understand how a group of college students perceived and experienced spiritual struggles. Researchers also sought to understand the degree to which these students resolved their spiritual struggles during their college years. Researchers chose to focus on seniors in order to capture a reflective view of students' entire college experience.

Review of the Literature

Spirituality and Identity Development

The results of several studies by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) make it clear that spirituality and spiritual

development are issues that educators need to be prepared to address with college students (Bryant, 2006; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; HERI, 2005). Among 112,000 students surveyed by HERI (2005), 80% reported having an interest in spirituality; approximately three fourths agreed they are searching for meaning/purpose in life; and three fourths also reported having discussions about the meaning of life with friends. Almost half claimed to seek out opportunities for spiritual growth. In the 2000-2001 academic year, the percentage of first-year students who said it was essential or very important to integrate spirituality into their lives jumped from 46% in the fall to 56% in the spring (Bryant et al.).

Much of the existing literature regarding spiritual development is theoretical in nature. Fowler's (1981) text on the stages of faith development and the structuring of meaning serves as a foundation for much of today's scholarship on spiritual development among young adults. Subsequent research has explored the relationships between student development theory and spiritual development (Jablonski, 2001; Love, 2001; Love, 2002; Love & Guthrie, 1999; Parks, 2000). Parks identified three essential aspects of faith development: forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community. Forms of knowing involve cognitive aspects, through which the college student recognizes the need to shape the future and to construct faith and meaning in a contextual world. Forms of dependence involve feelings; during college, students generally discover an emerging sense of inner-dependence and self-authority. Forms of community involve social aspects of faith development, including interpersonal, social, and cultural facets. These three aspects combine to form four developmental "eras" (p. 70): adolescent/conventional, young adult, tested adult, and mature adult. Parks insisted each young adult needs a "mentoring community" (p. 134) to foster development of complex faith. She described the tension college students feel between the desires for personal autonomy and for a sense of belonging, intimacy, and connection.

Defining Key Terms

One of the challenges inherent in reviewing literature on spiritual development is a lack of consistency in the terms and definitions used to describe relevant constructs. Three terms—religion, spirituality, and faith—are commonly used in reference to how people find meaning and experience the transcendent (Love, 2002; Parks, 2000). Although these terms are frequently used synonymously in daily language and

evidence suggests religiosity and spirituality are correlated (Beckwith & Morrow, 2005; HERI, 2005), many researchers recognize differences among them—particularly between religion and spirituality—and choose to define them as distinct concepts or as related aspects of a larger overall construct (Parks; Rogers & Love, 2006).

Spirituality is commonly described using such words as transcendent, subjective, meaning, and authenticity (see generally Barnett, Krell, & Sendry, 2000; Chae, Kelly, Brown, & Bolden, 2004; Parks, 2000), whereas religion is described using terms like system, institution, social, and doctrine (see Barnett et al.; Buchko, 2004; Duffy & Blustein, 2005; Love, 2002; Parks). Religion may be an expression of spirituality, but it is possible for a person to be spiritual without adhering to a particular religion and to practice a religion without an accompanying sense of spirituality. One is neither “a necessary nor sufficient condition” for development of the other (Barnett et al., p. 574).

Definitions of faith appear to be more closely akin to the concept of spirituality than to the concept of religion, although the term is often used as a substitute for religion (Love, 2002; Parks, 2000). Parks wrote about faith as a dynamic, universal construct that describes how human beings make meaning of their lives in a broad, comprehensive sense. This definition is similar to Fowler’s (1986) notion of faith as a universal construct that encompasses how humans make meaning of the world and “shape our lives in relation to more or less comprehensive convictions or assumptions about reality” (p. 15).

Why should college educators care about spiritual development? Generally speaking, understanding students’ spiritual development helps educators understand an important aspect of students’ lives—one that can form the basis for their belief systems, explain the unknown, and justify their opinions (Suyemoto & MacDonald, 1996). Students’ spiritual beliefs help them answer fundamental questions about issues such as life after death and connection to others. Stronger spiritual beliefs have also been associated with fewer high-risk behaviors, less permissive sexual practices, and more confidence in career decisions (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Beckwith & Morrow, 2005; Duffy & Blustein, 2005).

Theorists have long noted that developmental processes tend to be punctuated by crises, struggles, and other significant events (Erikson, 1982; Marcia, 1966; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 1998).

Facing and resolving spiritual questions proves to be a central issue for a significant portion of college students (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Parks, 2000). The college experience stimulates cognitive, psychosocial, and identity development partly because classes stimulate students to analyze their assumptions and beliefs (Chickering & Reisser; Love & Talbot, 1999; Perry, 1970). The process of questing, or critically examining spiritual or religious values, has been associated with higher levels of spiritual struggle among students (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Genia, 1992; Parks).

Several studies have explored how and why students struggle spiritually (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Jablonski, 2001; Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Parks, 2000). Bryant & Astin defined spiritual struggle as: “questioning one’s religious/spiritual beliefs, feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters, struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death, feeling angry at God, and feeling disillusioned with one’s religious upbringing” (p. 3). Johnson & Hayes found that one quarter of students who sought guidance from college counseling centers reported moderate or extreme spiritual or religious distress. Such distress was related to value confusion, troubled peer relationships, sexual issues, and/or worries over being punished for sin.

Because of the many varying definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion, the researchers did not wish to impose a particular set of definitions on participants in the present study. Instead, students were asked to articulate their spirituality in their own words. As a result, researchers were able to glimpse into the spiritual lives of these college students, particularly with regard to how they experienced and resolved spiritual struggles.

Method

Procedures and Participants

Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling methods in order to balance practical needs (such as proximity for in-person interviews) with the desire for highly relevant and information-rich perspectives (Patton, 2002). During the spring 2007 semester, an email was sent to the senior class of the institution with which the researchers were affiliated, inviting volunteers to participate in interviews if they had had any experiences in the last four years that may have caused them to struggle with their

spirituality. Announcements were also posted to relevant Facebook groups. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the eight interviewers. Students were invited to select a pseudonym to be used in this study to protect their anonymity. Each senior was interviewed twice, with approximately two to three weeks between the first and second interviews. Students were given a \$10 gift card to a local convenience store in return for participation.

Participants were 16 traditionally-aged college seniors attending a small, suburban, highly selective public university in the southeast. Although researchers did not intentionally select participants to ensure a high level of diversity, the sample turned out to be quite diverse nonetheless. It included 12 women and 4 men from a variety of spiritual backgrounds, Christian and non-Christian. There were 12 Caucasians, 2 African Americans, 1 Iranian, and 1 Indian American. This reflected the proportion of students of color on this campus, but overrepresented females. The researchers considered the diversity of the participants to be an asset given that this was a qualitative study and the goal was to identify common themes from individual experiences, not generalize the results to a broader population.

The first interview with each participant used a semi-structured interview approach with questions developed in advance by the researchers (see Appendix). The purpose of the second interview was to member check the researchers' understanding of the data from the first interviews (Schwandt, 2001) and to ask additional follow-up questions. Each interviewer followed up with probing questions during both interviews as appropriate. Verbatim transcripts were used as the basis for content analysis (Patton, 2002). Interviewers transcribed and coded their own participants' data and conducted an inductive analysis to identify initial themes from those transcripts. Each interviewer also reviewed the transcripts of another member of the team to increase the likelihood that important themes were captured and subsequently incorporated into the overall findings. Weekly research team meetings were held to share analysis results and discuss researchers' insights. The codes and themes identified by individual researchers were examined and reorganized by the entire team to generate a set of common themes that cut across the participants' responses.

Results

Through the process of inductive analysis, researchers found three primary means through which students encountered and wrestled with spiritual questions: academics, external influences, and internal influences. These in turn led to four descriptions of how students' were resolving their spiritual struggles at the time of the study: recommitting, slightly readjusting, blending, or losing their faith.

Influence of Academics

The influence of academics on spiritual struggle was predominant among the overwhelming majority of participants. Academic activities on campus or abroad provided students with opportunities to question, learn, and grow in their spirituality. Participants experienced their academic endeavors as a cause of struggle, a vehicle for exploration, and/or as a means of exposure to a variety of perspectives.

Some students' academic experiences led to spiritual conflict marked by a questioning of prior beliefs, which was sometimes confusing and painful. Religion classes, perhaps predictably, were frequently cited as catalysts for spiritual questioning, but they were by no means the only classes to play that role. Courses and majors in history, Black Studies, Hispanic Studies, and biology, among others, also prompted students to engage in spiritual exploration. Claire, a Women's Studies major, struggled with the conflict between her strong feminist beliefs and her Catholicism particularly around contemporary moral issues, such as birth control. This resulted in Claire pulling away from her church and "trying to connect more on [her] own."

Generally speaking, the academic environment stimulated critical thinking which students then applied to spiritual issues as well. Approaching religion from a historical perspective and applying standards of evidence to scriptural texts prompted some students to question their theological beliefs. The relationships among science, logic, belief, and faith were also frequently discussed as perplexing. In this context, students struggled to reconcile what can and cannot be rationalized and proven.

In reflecting on their experiences with spirituality throughout college, some students noted changes in how they responded when opposing viewpoints were presented or expressed in the classroom. Elizabeth,

who identified as a Christian, had a difficult time as a freshman dealing with the negative perspectives on Christianity expressed in some of her religion classes. As a senior, she reported being able to see such views as interesting, rather than a source of physical tension.

External Sources of Challenge and Support

Participants discussed ways in which people, organizations, the campus environment, and organized religion either facilitated or served as roadblocks as they navigated spiritual struggles. Students frequently mentioned roommates, family, friends, ministers, counselors, student organizations, and peers as influencing their spiritual struggle in supportive ways. Isabel struggled with the Greek-Orthodox faith in which she was raised and appreciated being able to talk openly with her mother, who is very religious, and also with friends, who are not.

Sometimes friends, roommates, and other peers caused unanticipated spiritual challenges by creating an environment where students felt judged for their acceptance of religious views or lack thereof. In some instances the challenging individuals stimulated spiritual struggle by presenting an alternative viewpoint or having values that conflicted with the participants' own attitudes. Alternative viewpoints also came through exposure to communities outside of campus. International and domestic service trips and other travel abroad profoundly affected some students. Ben was moved by the people he encountered during a mission trip to a poor community in Central America. The joy and contentment he perceived among people in that materially impoverished community challenged him to reflect on his own spirituality and the comparative lack of contentment he perceived in himself and in the U.S. generally despite his upper middle-class lifestyle.

Another external influence participants experienced was the role of the institution. Students recognized that their college environment, separate from their academic experience, affected their struggle. For some, the campus setting fostered spiritual exploration. Charlotte stated, "I guess the college environment gives you access to a variety of religions. The fact that it was more easily accessible and all around me made [questioning my religious upbringing] just happen faster, maybe."

Several students mentioned specific campus groups (religious and non-religious) that provided a supportive community where they could express their emotions and thoughts about spiritual matters. These

groups helped them feel spiritually grounded and/or connected with others with similar values. On the other hand, some participants felt the campus climate with respect to religion hindered their search for spiritual meaning. Hitchcock, who identified as a religious minority, discussed the “Christian privilege” she perceived on campus, citing the lack awareness, community, and meditative space for non-Christian students.

Some students took issue with a particular religious tradition or with organized religion in general. Religious affiliation played a significant role in the struggles of those students who equated spirituality and religion. For the majority of students, religion was more often a source of support in their spiritual struggle than a challenge, but there were instances where individuals felt particularly conflicted due to their affiliation.

Internal Processing of Struggle

As much as students were challenged and supported by others, most also described the deeply personal ways in which they experienced and sought to resolve their struggles. In response to their desire to further understand, explore, or reconcile conflicts regarding religion and/or spirituality, students turned to books to assist with the process of affirming or reevaluating their beliefs and, in some cases, defining their own personal spirituality. Books—including non-religious works, such as autobiographies—often served as a tool for exploring different spiritual perspectives.

Most students also stated they felt intense emotions during their path to resolving spiritual conflict. Their emotions ranged from elation to desperation, guilt, fear, and anger. Tyler, who came to college as a devout Christian from a conservative town, initially experienced guilt and shame as she struggled to reconcile her faith, her liberal political orientation on social justice issues, and how she felt others perceived her. As she began to reconcile these issues and developed greater confidence in her own spiritual identity, she described feeling “more excited and more passionate than [she’d] really ever been before.” Many students coped with spiritual dilemmas and their accompanying emotions by keeping their thoughts to themselves and taking time to reflect.

Several students expressed a strong desire to feel the comfort of a god or a higher power. These students described feeling torn between believing in a god and not believing in a god. In describing his desire to develop a relationship with a higher being, Mike drew the analogy of an adopted child wanting to know the truth about his birth parents. He would like to know the truth of where he comes from in a spiritual sense, but he cannot get there by a leap of faith alone. For him, rational proof is necessary in order for him to believe, but he trusts that, if there is a god, the truth will be revealed to him at some point.

The perception of religion as comforting was frequently tied to upbringing. Most of the participants came from a religious background, although their pre-college experiences with religion varied in strictness, intensity, and tradition. Some students from religious family backgrounds were inclined to see religion as an important part of their culture. The close association between family and religion added an additional layer of complexity for these students as they questioned their beliefs or the role of religion in their lives.

Spiritual Values Reexamined

As the previous sections have demonstrated, a variety of factors triggered spiritual struggle in our participants. This struggle often manifested itself as a reexamination of students' pre-college values. The process and extent of values (re-)exploration is a useful way of understanding students' degree of resolution, as well as the nature and degree of their struggle.

Through analysis of the interview data, researchers identified four general ways of describing the current state of this reexamination in the students' spiritual journeys: recommitting to familiar spiritual traditions, slightly readjusting spiritual beliefs to incorporate new perspectives, blending old and new values to create a new spirituality that differed markedly from pre-college orientation, or losing faith. These should not be considered final outcomes or progressive stages, nor are they firmly delineated categories. The difference between some students may be better described as one of degree rather than kind.

Recommitment. Those who recommitted did so after a period of doubt, questioning, or exploration of other spiritual traditions. Herb began as a Christian and returned to that faith, but valued his exploration of other religions and worldviews during his spiritual

journey. Tyler's recommitment did not necessitate first leaving her Christian tradition. As a result of her exploration, however, she became more confident in her understanding of herself as a Christian. Whereas doubt once produced feelings of guilt, Tyler's questioning no longer threatened her identification as a Christian by her senior year.

Readjustment. Like Tyler, Mary also experienced a shift regarding authority. Although she remained aligned with the religion of her upbringing, she described herself as a "synchrotist," borrowing from other traditions to help her think about her faith. The researchers considered Mary an example of someone who slightly readjusted her spirituality.

I'm more into God right now. Let's think about Jesus later. I think it's one of the things I really like about the Episcopal church. I feel it's a forum in which I can say that I still belong....I think that I still belong and I think that that's a really nice thing to say. (Mary)

Blending. Other participants blended aspects of their spiritual upbringing with new perspectives, sometimes drawn from other existing spiritual traditions, to create their own self-chosen spiritual identity. Virginia, raised Presbyterian, was strongly influenced in college by feminist theory and what she learned about Quakers historically. Even as a senior, she considered herself a Christian, but was still exploring and incorporating various expressions of spirituality into what she described as a "conglomerate."

Hitchcock and Mike exemplified blending in a different way. Neither came from a strongly religious family, but both were exposed to Christianity and other religious traditions through their families, schools or communities. In college, they explored a variety of philosophical perspectives and, through that, both developed their own unique ways of understanding spirituality, distinct from any established religion.

Loss of Faith. For Isabel and Charlotte, the spiritual struggle occurred to such a degree they lost their faith. This loss of faith was accompanied by strong conflicting emotions including pain, fear, frustration, and liberation.

It's been very disorientating to lose my faith this way, but it's also in a way very freeing because right now I don't have the guilt. I still don't

have a relationship with God. I never have, but I don't feel guilty about it now. (Charlotte)

Isabel and Charlotte both expressed a desire to return to their faith for the security and comfort it provides for others. However, they no longer saw this as a daily struggle and had come to accept where they were spiritually, at least for the time being.

Discussion

It was clear that students in this study were very much affected by the ideas and ways of thinking they encountered through their coursework. Formal and informal academic experiences introduced students to knowledge that inspired or challenged them to view spiritual matters in new ways. For some students, coursework and classroom discussion also offered affirmation of doubts and a means of intellectualizing religion and spirituality. Some students felt conflicted between logical or scientific reasoning and faith, while others were content to use their logical skepticism to help them think through questions of spirituality and faith.

Spiritual struggle was often precipitated by a variety of external factors. People, organizations, the campus environment, experiences abroad, and organized religion were frequently mentioned as both supportive and challenging influences. Depending on the situation, students were able to find comfort and a space to question, or conversely, felt implicit or explicit pressure to conform to an established set of religious expectations. For non-Christians or for Christians experiencing a crisis of faith, the perceived lack of like-minded people, organizations or space in the community added another layer of challenge.

Much of the experience of spiritual struggle was discovered to be of an internal nature. Students experienced intense emotions, conflict, and a desire for the comfort of a higher power. Many students engaged in introspective reflection, reading, and time alone as methods of coping with their spiritual struggles. Some students were comfortable being introspective, but others relied on internal means simply because they could not identify the external resources to help them process their struggle.

The experience of spiritual struggle can be understood as a renegotiation and reintegration of core values. This is a fluid process

and the present study captures only a snapshot of this particular point in these students' spiritual lives. Looking at these snapshots, researchers discovered that some students have recommitted to the faith they brought with them to college; some have adjusted their beliefs slightly to incorporate aspects of different traditions without moving away from their original faith; some have blended various spiritual philosophies to create something unique and personal; and some have lost their faith. Researchers in the present study do not suggest these are stages or even necessarily part of a single continuum. The distinctions between students' current degrees of resolution are often subtle and blurred. The categories above are intended to facilitate understanding, even though they risk imposing a rigid and oversimplified structure on a developmental process that is highly complex and individual.

Most participants, even those who felt committed to a particular spiritual path, were still actively exploring or questioning. Researchers perceived that the process of ongoing questioning was experienced differently by students depending on their degree of resolution. The clearest difference was between students who had become confident and committed to a spiritual paradigm versus students who had not. Tyler and Hitchcock, for example, were both so firmly grounded in their spiritual worldviews that their questioning seemed unlikely to threaten their foundation. Questioning seemed to generate positive excitement for them, rather than the guilt or sadness described by other students.

The fact that so many students indicated that they were still exploring raises the question of what spiritual resolution really means. The research question guiding the present study reflects an assumption that seniors who had struggled with their spiritual issues would have achieved resolution. Results suggest the researchers underestimated the complexity of spiritual issues. Spiritual struggles, by and large, are not intellectual puzzles that can be neatly solved. There are a variety of challenges that can be seen as spiritual, some of which lend themselves to definitive resolution and others that persist and influence multiple aspects of a person's life. Based on these findings, the researchers anticipate some of the participants will be engaged with spiritual questions for a long time to come.

Integration with Existing Theory

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate spirituality from identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Many of the struggles described by participants involved efforts to evaluate and reconcile the values of their upbringing with new perspectives to which they were introduced in college. This mirrors the critical developmental task Erikson (1982) associated with adolescence; namely, identity achievement versus identity confusion.

Building on Erikson's work, Marcia (1966, 1987) conceptualized four statuses to explain the process of resolving identity crises commencing in late adolescence. The four statuses were defined by the interaction of two factors: crisis, which is characterized by an exploration of meaningful alternatives, and commitment. Marcia's model provides a fairly simple framework for making sense of our participants' experiences. All participants explored spiritual alternatives, although the extent and nature of the explorations varied widely across the group. However, the strength of the commitments made by different participants varied considerably, and the dichotomous structure conceptualized by Marcia does not adequately capture that range.

This limitation in Marcia's model is addressed to some extent in Parks's (2000) model. Parks theorized a young adult period of development marked in part by probing commitments, which differed from the tested and convictional commitments of more mature adults. The multiple forms of commitment in Parks's model better reflect the fluidity and diversity of resolutions expressed by our participants.

A particular strength of Parks's (2000) theory is the recognition of cognitive, affective, and social influences on spiritual development, all of which were echoed in the results of the present study. For example, Parks depicted a developmental process wherein an individual begins to construct meaning and build a personalized faith, a process akin to the spiritual values reexamined theme. Current findings only partially support Parks' theory, however. Parks emphasized the importance of supportive communities in nourishing spiritual development, and suggested development does not occur without that support. Although participants talked about the desire for community or for mentors, and findings suggest students would have been aided in their resolution if such communities or mentors had been available, many participants

were nonetheless able to process their struggle and achieve a state of contentment with their spirituality on their own.

This study's findings support the dynamic and multidimensional nature of spiritual development. The researchers share Parks's (2000) reservation about the linear representation of her model. Study participants did not fall neatly into the forms of knowing, dependence, and community that comprise Parks's stage-like developmental eras. Students' positions on each of these forms often cut across eras or could not be categorized at all.

Students, as a group, exhibited the characteristics of the full range of eras from adolescence/conventional to mature adult, which raises questions about how and when individuals achieve a mature spirituality. Findings suggest the need to reexamine whether forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community are indeed developmental stages or rather aspects of spiritual development that lack a maturational sequence. The researchers suggest conceptualizing spiritual growth as a highly personal and individually distinct response to ongoing interaction with one's self (social, intellectual, religious, ethnic, etc.), one's environment, and one's circumstances. Spirituality defies the predictable developmental progression that is implied by current spiritual development theory.

Limitations

It is important to consider the above findings in the context of the institution and circumstances under which this study was conducted. Participants were interviewed by eight researchers with varying levels of graduate education and professional and research experience. Each researcher was deeply familiar with the data generated by the two participants he or she interviewed; knowledge of the other participants, however, came only from reading verbatim transcripts and analyzing interviews in weekly research team meetings.

Some participants' responses may have been influenced by current events. A murder-suicide at Virginia Tech in April 2007 claimed the lives of 33 college students and professors and affected the entire nation. The campus where this study was conducted has much in common with Virginia Tech, and many students have relatives and friends at Virginia Tech. At the time of the shootings, most members of the research team had conducted one interview with each

participant, but few had conducted follow-up interviews. Researchers discussed how the events at Virginia Tech might influence the study and the team decided not to raise the issue with participants unless they brought it up. A few participants did make reference to it, but the incident did not appear to have an impact on the overall results.

Additionally, the researchers' campus was the site of a highly publicized controversy related to the use of religious symbols earlier in the academic year. Researchers anticipated the ensuing dialogue about religion on campus may have played a role in students' spiritual struggles. Although it may have prompted reflection, few participants mentioned the controversy directly.

Implications for Research and Practice

It is important for researchers and practitioners to understand how students experience and resolve spiritual struggles. Qualitative research is particularly well suited to unraveling spiritual questions because it allows participants to explain the nuances of their perspectives that standardized surveys might overlook. This study should be replicated with participants from different types of institutions to better recognize and verify possible patterns in how students approach spiritual struggles. Researchers recommend future researchers be intentional about selecting participants who are diverse in gender, age, race, and spiritual background. In particular, there is much to learn from the experiences of religious minorities and from students who do not identify with any specific spiritual tradition. Researchers also suggest localized research to identify aspects of the campus climate that hinder or contribute to spiritual identity formation.

Ideally, research on student spirituality will shape campus practice in both academic and student affairs. Even in seemingly unrelated classroom settings, faculty should be aware of the ways in which course material and assignments may stimulate questioning, struggle, or even spiritual crisis. Results of this study suggest a need to increase physical and intellectual space for spiritual expression and exploration, keeping in mind that not all students conceive of spirituality in terms of an established religion. Such a space might take the form of a religiously-neutral meditation room, or a public posting board that invites students to ask and respond to provocative questions. Students would likely benefit from opportunities to safely and openly discuss religious and spiritual matters with peers, as well as with religious and non-religious

mentors, through co-curricular programs such as structured dialogues, a film and discussion series, or a residential living-learning community. Student affairs staff should develop their own comfort talking with students about spiritual issues and involve students in efforts to create a climate that facilitates their search for meaning. The outcomes of such efforts, naturally, will reflect the unique culture, needs, and resources of each campus community. Universally, however, perhaps the most important contribution educators can make to students' spiritual explorations is to become better companions on the journey, engaging students in deep questions in an honest, respectful, and non-judgmental way.

Conclusion

The task of educating students is often difficult, and it is all the more challenging when students are wrapped up in their own struggles to understand the larger purpose of their lives. Helping students to work through life's great questions and moving them to think and relate in new ways are the vital stuff of higher education. Given the importance of inspiration and creativity in the liberal arts, Astin (2004) asked, "shouldn't we do everything we can to nurture and cultivate that mysterious, nonconscious part of the human psyche from which all of our inspiration and creativity emerges?" (p. 39). Spirituality is a part of education, no matter what name it is given or whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Acknowledging it, and thus opening ourselves to its power, seems the wiser choice.

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