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## Personal Exploration and National Trends

The Future for Students of All Faith Backgrounds

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### THE CAMPUS CONTEXT—NEW OPENNESS FOR SPIRITUAL LEARNING

As we began our exploration of spiritual life on campus, we were reminded of the momentous societal changes that underscore the context for colleges and universities, including substantial shifts in views about religion and spirituality. To set the stage, it is important to note that about a third of the American population, depending on the poll we consulted, define themselves as spiritual but not religious. According to a Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey (2009), additional findings further defined the fluidity in religious practices, including that 44% of Americans have left the faith or the denomination in which they were raised, 25% of people 18–29 years old do not affiliate with any particular religion, and men are much more likely than women to claim no religious tradition at all (p. 8).

On college and university campuses of every type, there is new energy surrounding age-old matters of faith, religion, spirituality, and meaning making—an expansive category we call “spiritual life.” Given that most private institutions in American higher education emerged with a formal connection to religious traditions, it makes sense that institutional structures that

highlight spiritual life are embedded in campus architecture, services, and culture, even after denominational ties were severed and a history of secularization unfolded. At many private nonsectarian institutions today, chaplains, chapels, and support services maintain a prominent presence. Even so, many private institutions aim to strengthen efforts to engage students around matters of spirituality, as evidenced by new facilities, personnel, and programs. In 2013, for example, Elon University opened its first multifaith center for religious and spiritual life “to encourage students to honor the spiritual dimension of life [and] to be vitally connected to a faith tradition” (Elon University, n.d., para. 1). Support for students exploring their spiritual lives is conveyed also by emerging efforts to acknowledge a broadened definition of spiritual life, even if that means a belief in the absence of God. In 2012, for example, Stanford University made news when it appointed its first chaplain for atheists. Atheist chaplain John Figdor responded this way: “Atheist, agnostic and humanist students suffer the same problems as religious students—deaths, or illness in the family, questions about the meaning of life—and would like a sympathetic nontheist to talk to” (Asimov, 2012, para. 4).

Perhaps the most notable shift in the expanding comfort with spiritual and religious life is displayed in the growing propensity of public colleges and universities to include matters of faith, religion, and spirituality in campus life by promoting a more robust dialogue around such topics. Moreover, an increasing number of public institutions have taken this advocacy further by providing institutional infrastructure signaling a substantive shift in openness to the spiritual lives of students. Although some colleagues at public universities dismiss the word *spiritual* as something outside the mission of their institutions, one of us (Frank) has pointed out, “It is important to remember that spirituality, as broadly defined in higher education, represents the pursuit of life’s big questions, meaning, purpose, and moral development in such a way that the human spirit is altered, reshaped, and transformed” (Shushok, 2011, p. 5). In fact, we agree with Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) when they argue, “In many respects, the secular institution is the ideal place for students to explore their spiritual side because, unlike many sectarian institutions, there is no official perspective or dogma when it comes to spiritual values and beliefs” (p. 6).

Many public institutions are taking the shift in environment to heart. In 2010, for example, the University of Massachusetts–Amherst established the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life to do the following:

Foster mutual understanding and respect among students of all religious backgrounds (whether religiously observant or not); to promote dialogue; and to

provide appropriate support for and heighten awareness of the diverse religious and spiritual traditions which are present on our campus. (University of Massachusetts–Amherst, 2011, para. 3)

In 2009, Florida State University launched its Spiritual Life Project to gather together religious leaders, faculty, staff, and students around discussions to strengthen spiritual programming, increase the number of spiritual spaces on campus, and explore future institutional direction around the topic (Florida State University, 2012).

What is driving this renaissance in spiritual and religious life on American college and university campuses? What are the sociological conditions moving religion and spiritual life from the margins back to an accepted position in higher education? One common assumption is that college-age people are more spiritual than previous generations were. Smith and Snell (2009), however, believed these claims are frequently exaggerated and misunderstood, especially because being spiritual is often used synonymously with being religious. In their comprehensive study of the sociological evidence, college-age people (whom Smith and Snell referred to as “emerging adults”), “are the least religious adults in the United States today” (p. 102). Although 60% of emerging adults identify as religious, Smith and Snell found “the importance and practice of religion generally declines between the ages of 13–17 and 18–23” (p. 142). Still, there is broad variance depending on subpopulations, and those with backgrounds of Latter-day Saints, conservative Protestant, and Black Protestant remain steadily involved religiously. Acknowledging research on college students reporting high levels of interest in spirituality and frequent claims characterizing young people as more spiritual than religious, Smith and Snell emphasized there remains a solid majority of emerging adults not interested in matters religious or spiritual. Smith and Snell contended the reason many survey instruments find higher levels of interest in spirituality is that “the surveys themselves are constructed in a way that leaves the language of ‘spirituality’ as the only way for respondents to register any kind of religious or nonatheistic interest” (p. 296).

Whether the increased acceptance of spiritual life on college and university campuses is compelled by real or perceived increases in student interest may be neither here nor there. What is important is that there are many students for whom spiritual exploration is an important aspect of the educational journey. And most compelling are the convincing data that convey that such exploration leads to all sorts of positive outcomes. Smith and Snell (2009) summarized the findings in this way: “Whatever its depth, character,

and substance, [such exploration] correlates significantly with, and we think actually often acts as a causal influence producing, what most consider to be more positive outcomes in life for emerging adults” (p. 297). Colleges and universities have recognized as much and made movement to fill the gap by opening a dialogue that conveys spiritual life, or as commonly characterized, the search for meaning and purpose, a legitimate topic for consideration. Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) also noted:

The promise and vulnerability of young adulthood lies in the experience of the birth of critical awareness and the dissolution and re-composition of the meaning of self, other, world, and “God.” This work has enormous consequences that follow in adulthood. (p. 5>

Similarly, there is a large group of students for whom such exploration will be of little interest. This perspective must not be pushed to the margin, either. However, the invitation to delve into the important questions can be extended through an open and inclusive campus environment.

There is hope that the openness, dialogue, and support for those students across religious traditions and spiritual or nonspiritual dispositions is laying the groundwork for greater sensitivity, compassion, and understanding for those from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that addressing the spiritual and meaning-making dimensions of development during college is especially important to retention and success of particular subpopulations, especially those identifying as African American (Paredes-Collins, 2012).

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, Minasian (2010) cheered rich religious diversity that is in fact even richer than one might suspect. The “big five” religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are just the start of the conversation. Minasian wrote, “Nuances in the theological continuum become more evident when you actually talk with students about spirituality, religion, and faith” (para. 1). Minasian, a university chaplain at Franklin and Marshall College, sought to nurture a campus culture where students engaged around the subject. With regard to interest in these matters, she wrote, “In the midst of being committed, hostile, curious, and even indifferent, they also seemed to be hungry to share, discuss, and consider different voices” (para. 2). Minasian, like so many educators on college campuses, found religious and spiritual dialogues are providing an important tool for many of the learning aims so coveted in higher education.

According to Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012), the flourishing openness about faith, religion, and spirituality on college and university campuses is bolstered by its grassroots origin, a profound change from past history when religion was imposed on students from positions of power and authority. In contrast to the 19th and 20th centuries, current interest appears to be emerging from the bottom up as a sizable constituency of students view spirituality as a personal journey into meaning and purpose, sometimes informed by religion—sometimes not.

### STUDENTS' MEANING MAKING IN PRACTICE

Whether the emergence of a stronger interest in issues of spirituality or meaning making is university led or student inspired, what we know for sure is that students will learn as they engage with and across religious difference. In Light's (2001) influential work, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, ways in which issues of religious difference contribute to the development of college students are clearly articulated. Light's study informs the reader that "most students feel very positive about the impact of cultural, racial, and, especially, religious diversity on college campuses" (Cowling, 2002, para. 12). These students also found value in going out of their way to meet people who disagree with their core values, particularly those with religious difference. Students indicated that although disagreement is common, dialogue around difference helped them come to know why they believed what they believed. And students reported that encounters with others of different religions could be simultaneously the most challenging and most enlightening of all the experiences with a diverse student body.

In addition to knowing that students learn when engaging within and across religious diversity, we also know that many students come to college seeking opportunities to learn about their faith, religion, or sense of spirituality; we did ourselves. I, Patty, went to a faith-based high school and considered following suit for college. But as a first-generation college student struggling with separation from and commitment to my family, I went to the state public university just 25 minutes away from my home. My mother was Methodist and my father was Catholic, so I learned early in life that for me denomination did not matter as much as theology and community. I grew up next to a cloister convent and spent considerable hours, over many years, with these cloistered sisters. Also, being one of eight Catholic children who went to Catholic grade school, I spent much time in

the church for special ceremonies and rituals. Even as a little girl, I thought about ministry work.

When I went to college my first-year resident assistant (RA) was an older student, obtaining her master's degree, and also on the journey to becoming a nun in a progressive order. I spent much time with my RA, as we became fast friends, and we talked a lot about issues of faith. My college roommates were identical twins who were Jewish. I would go home with them during academic breaks and experience the traditions and holidays of Judaism, and they deepened my understanding of and commitment to my own faith and inspired a deepened curiosity to learn about other faith traditions. I do not recall ever discussing faith or religion in the classroom, nor do I remember conversations after my time with my RA. However, I do remember that my interest in my faith grew exponentially given social interactions, yet I did not engage any religious affiliation during my undergraduate years.

Upon reflection, it is clear to me that I did not engage any church-relatedness because I was struggling with my sexuality, and I knew my Christian brothers and sisters would not welcome such questioning. My own faith development accelerated when my younger brother died tragically; it was also strengthened when my grandparents, parents, life partner, mother-in-law, and older sister passed in subsequent years. I am a faith-filled Christian woman who continues to cocreate campus cultures to welcome and affirm the mind, body, and spirit connection of the whole person.

I, Frank, remember having what I now call a “spiritual sense” as a child. Wondering about spiritual matters was a natural inclination. Even though my family was involved in the Episcopal tradition in a cursory way, I was frequently maneuvering ways to be involved in church without feeling uncomfortable that the rest of my family were not regular attendees. As a middle-school student, I volunteered to teach Sunday school and record worship services—anything that allowed me to be in church but not feel awkward that I was there alone. The Episcopal tradition offered me what I now know as a “big tent” (all are welcome under the tent) way to explore my understanding of God. In short, it was a world of questions and very few answers. Yet, there was enormous reverence for a Creator and a symbolically rich environment full of stories, art, and compassionate people. As a child and teenager, I also learned from a gay music minister and a female priest and director of Christian education. This was a welcoming world for me.

I elected to attend a private faith-based college in the Protestant tradition. In many ways, it was the seriousness with which I pursued spiritual matters that drew me to a place where faith was fully integrated into the academic

experience. Every student at my college was required to take two semesters of religion courses, and other courses did not shy away from theological and spiritual questions, especially in the sciences. My in-class experiences were safe venues to explore questions, but the out-of-classroom environment seemed to provide answers rather than entertain questions. The social culture also emphasized particular political narratives, moral codes, and religious rules. In retrospect, this was dizzying. On the one hand, I celebrated that matters of faith were part of the curriculum. On the other hand, the narrowing of God's identity and activity in the world was constraining. Despite what I believe was a nonsupportive culture for broad theological exploration, I am grateful for the kind of education I received. In 1987 when I entered college, I suspect the incorporation of this important aspect of my life and learning may have been even more marginalized had I attended my second college choice—a public institution down the road.

In fact, perhaps it is precisely this sort of scenario that has given rise to greater openness of spiritual life in the public domain. As educators, we know well that students learn in holistic ways. Simply put, to lop off as irrelevant a potentially foundational aspect of a student's worldview does not convey a commitment to sound pedagogy.

The ways in which institutions of higher learning respond to the quest for faith, religion, and spirituality has significant impact on faith development of college students. According to Light (2001), campus leaders "should make a thoughtful, evidence-based, purposeful effort to get *in* each student's way; in fact, shaping a certain kind of campus culture may be the biggest contribution campus leaders can make" (p. 209). Light went on to say:

A critical role for campus leaders is to "get in the way" of each student, to help the young adult evaluate and re-evaluate his or her choices, always in the spirit of trying to do it better the next time. (p. 210)

Students in Light's (2001) study were quick to point out that only when certain preconditions exist does "the good stuff" actually happen. They indicated that campus leaders can impact the environment in important ways so that diversity strengthens learning (p. 10).

We wanted to learn more about whether or not college "got in the way" of our Virginia Tech students and staff members' faith development. We reached out to colleagues and recent graduates and told them we were writing a book chapter that focused on personal spiritual exploration of students during the college years. We informed them that we were interested in

understanding the stories of a few individuals who had traversed a spiritual journey during their college years. We asked them to respond to five questions, only offering as much or as little as desired; much was learned by their personal reflections. Several individuals gladly participated and offered permission to have their stories published. However, we changed participants' names to ensure a level of privacy.

Lauren was born and raised Baptist, and she admitted that she attended church in college because "it was a social scene" and she did not "want to be left out." She also shared that she had "too many questions to fully believe, but was afraid to not believe." Although she had many questions, her church did not welcome her inquisitive exploration nor did she have any "disbelieving role models." Before attending college, Lauren's religion taught her that "everyone who was not a Christian was going to hell." Reflecting on life before college, she felt that she "was deprived of the right to even explore other religions." As Lauren learned more via reading, observing, and asking questions, it became difficult for her to believe the things she had grown up hearing about God and religion. She developed a "new philosophy of a loving God that allowed for more than one path to heaven." She would go to church and try to "twist and mold what was being said into what was learned from books and others." For Lauren, it became harder and harder, so she "quit trying." Lauren still believed in God but did not believe that she needed to go to church to have a relationship with God. As the dissonance between what she was taught and what she was learning grew wider, Lauren decided not to believe in God as she was taught. Today, she does not define herself as religious or spiritual nor does she identify as atheist or agnostic. She believes that it is her "responsibility to treat everyone well" and that she "must do something good while here." She has "faith in people, science, nature, and community."

Like Lauren, Kelly's faith journey prior to attending college was not "very individualized to a personal experience." She used "a lot of 'Christian speak' without thinking about the depth of the meaning." Kelly was a self-identified "black-and-white thinker when it came to faith and spirituality" as it "was more defined within a box of Christian church culture." But opportunities to engage in higher learning were shaping her, especially as her faculty asked challenging questions and she learned that it was "okay to not have the 'right' answer." She was majoring in business but loathed accounting and found herself really enjoying a literature course on the Bible. Her faculty provided a classroom environment where curiosity was welcomed. This rocked her Sunday school upbringing, "where it was best to have the 'right' answers"

and “where when you didn’t know, you just needed to trust your faith, and not research further.” This unique freedom to learn and the fear she would not get this opportunity again inspired her to change her major from business to religion.

In one class, “a most pivotal academic experience,” Kelly was told that the goal of the class was to strip away all of what she believed before, then build back her personalized theological system or belief. She acknowledged “writing papers for this class was the most mentally and emotionally challenging task of my collegiate work.” This freedom to learn, deconstruct, and reconstruct provided her with “a total reframe to view God as someone who was not just reverent, but relatable.” Although Kelly had a new and solid theological framework, it was mightily challenged her senior year when one of her best friends was killed in a car accident. Once again, faculty encouraged her to think deeply about the dissonance. As such, Kelly wrote her capstone paper on the paradox of faith and doubt, which served as a “reflective and healing assignment.” Kelly reflected that her spirituality moved from a “black-and-white dualistic perspective to a dynamic of thinking in both/and/or ways.” Her spirituality grew to accommodate her “desire to combine faith with intellect.”

For Taylor the term *spirituality* was troubling. Although he believes that one can have a relationship with a spiritual being absent of the institution of religion, he believes “the overwhelming majority of people who say this . . . are at a crossroads where they’re finding it hard to have a faith for whatever reason, but aren’t strong enough to admit they don’t believe.” Taylor came to college “with every intention of finding a religious or spiritual group to be a part of.” He said, “At that time in my life I was frankly grasping for anything that would convince me my faith was real.” He described his spirituality at the beginning of college as “shaky and unstable at best.” His faith came from a place of “absolute strength” supported by every member of his family and all of his friends. He said that “it was only because I had begun to think about it and do some homework and analyze, and, yes, judge, those that I was associating with in these spiritual circles that it began to unravel.” Taylor was strongly encouraged to find a faith group at college, but he did not find one. He said that he saw “two kinds of people in these groups: either kids with everything going for them or kids with nearly nothing who came from hardship.” For Taylor, “being real average” meant he “didn’t fit.”

Then the April 16, 2007, massacre at Virginia Tech happened, and Taylor began to think more and more objectively about all of it. He then “stumbled across a video and it sort of made sense after that.” Taylor said that the turning

point for him was “wanting to make faith work.” Taylor acknowledged that there was quite a bit of anger that emerged for him when discussing issues of spirituality. He was clear, however, that he was not “angry about my journey and the result but rather angry about the rest of the followers who are in it blindly and using it as excuses for things they don’t understand.”

Lauren, Kelly, and Taylor have compelling stories about their meaning-making journeys precollege and how they came to the university actively seeking opportunities to affirm or denounce what they believed; they also had major life events happen while in college, which they sought to better understand on a spiritual level. They, like other students, will become ever more sophisticated, committed, and deeply questioning as they are supported by campus professionals.

For those of us working with students such as Lauren, Kelly, and Taylor, one appropriate question is, “What are some of the ways that campus leaders have gotten ‘in the way’ of students?” Another is, “What conditions are necessary in order for ‘the good stuff’ to emerge?” I (Frank) wrote that “students appear especially open to big questions and life learning in the midst of tragedy, and when these moments occur, making space to engage is important” (Shushok, 2010, p. 19); this is a time when the good stuff can emerge. I explored the ways unfortunate times can impact student learning. I said:

Tragedy is a special, unique and powerful time to invite students to learn about some of the most important questions related to living: Who are we? Why are we here? How can we make the world more humane and just? (2010, p. 20)

Virginia Tech got in the way after the April 16, 2007, tragedy, the very one that clearly impacted Taylor’s spiritual journey. I (Shushok, 2010) recollected a brief encounter with another student that caught my attention when the student said:

The whole thing made me question the purpose of my life. . . . Thank goodness that I had good friends and faculty to help think through these things with me. I changed my major, changed my relationships, changed my priorities, and I started taking the Virginia Tech mission, “that I may serve,” to heart. (p. 19)

This Virginia Tech experience clearly brought about a national review of safety and risk management policies and, as important, the community allowed for the bigger questions of life to take hold.

Campus response encouraged growth and learning in a variety of ways. The community got in the way by holding a candlelight vigil to reflect, pray, meditate, and seek solidarity. Virginia Tech also responded by placing a permanent memorial in a prominent place on campus; it is a place where people can visit to pay respects, pray, reflect, and offer remembrances for those deceased and for those who survived. A student in the honors program was killed in the massacre, and this loss was enormous. Students retreated to their honors community, where “mentors in the honors house facilitated meaningful dialogue, afforded uncanny care, and perhaps unwittingly, took advantage of the learning window afforded by unfortunate times” (Shushok, 2010, p. 21). Other students started *Activelycaring4people.org* as a way to elevate acts of kindness and care, to live out the university motto of *Ut Prosim* (That I may serve). When a community member is witnessed performing a humane act, he or she is offered a green wristband as a way to show gratitude for this kindness. The recipient is asked to “pay it forward” by offering this wristband to the next person he or she experiences as kind. And still the campus got in the way via a service-learning experience where community members volunteered their time for “32 for 32,” 32 hours of community service in memory of 32 victims of the April 16 tragedy. This “32 for 32” was a foundational program that ultimately helped give birth to Virginia Tech’s VT Engage: The Community Learning Collaborative office. Today, this office continues to help Virginia Tech get in the way of students’ meaning making.

Goals of VT Engage are to “foster authentic civic partnerships by connecting the human and intellectual capital of Virginia Tech with local and global publics” and to “cultivate social and ethical responsibility through engaged learning and reflection” (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2014, paras. 1–2). Although this office hosts many service immersion programs, staff decided to facilitate a particular experience in the Dominican Republic with a focus on learning about education and training for at-risk youth as an international social issue and fostering inclusive, interfaith dialogue and reflection around service and social justice. In January 2013, 19 students and faculty embarked on an interfaith service-learning experience with intentionally structured, facilitated conversations on issues of faith and meaning making. Participants of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths were represented.

An article in the *Virginia Tech News* described the trip:

The Virginia Tech delegation designed and carried out daily computer and leadership workshops. They also performed manual labor at a ranch in

the Dominican Republic to prepare a new softball field for the youth . . . Evenings were dedicated to group discussion and reflection on topics such as social justice, poverty, faith, and moral responsibility. (Doss, 2013, paras. 11, 16)

Jake Grohs, associate director of student engagement, said:

We took great care to make this trip as inclusive and meaningful as possible . . . Our core principle when we developed it was that each individual's unique story and perspective holds inspiration and insight for others and that by honoring both our commonalities and our differences, we can embrace the beauty of what it is to be human. (Doss, 2013, para. 20)

Students were impacted deeply by this experience because Virginia Tech decided to get in the way and fostered an opportunity for transformative learning to happen. Light (2001) recommended specific ways that campuses can get in students' way. He stated:

In our interviews, student after student has shared stories that cumulatively illustrate an overarching theme, and I want to stress it. The theme is the interplay, the complex interaction, among different parts of campus life. Learning can be enhanced, sometimes dramatically, by activities outside of classes. (p. 210)

Light (2001) went on to state that religious diversity is different than other forms of diversity, given the personal nature of religion and that students learn about religious diversity as they engage this difference outside the classroom more than they do in class discussions. Integrative learning—learning that “engages the students in the systematic exploration of the relationship between their studies of the objective world and the purpose, meaning, limits, and aspirations of their lives” (Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010, p. 10)—is a pedagogical approach that gets in the way. Critics of such movements as integrative education (e.g., Fish, 2008) would say that providing conditions for students to seek meaning and purpose in their lives is not the job of universities. However, Palmer et al. (2010) responded to such criticism by saying that the need is so critical, so vital to the future of our world (p. vii), that its realization cannot be “left to chance” (p. 56). We agree.

## ENCOURAGING SPIRITUAL EXPLORATION ON CAMPUS—THREE GOOD FIRST STEPS

In Chapter 7 of this volume, Goodman, Wilson, and Nicolazzo suggest several methods for improving and institutionalizing student affairs practices related to spirituality, faith, religion, and life purpose. One of those suggestions, creating new institutional structures and partnerships, may be actualized by following three first steps.

### Space and Place

Those who have been afforded the opportunity to study student development theory have likely encountered the depth of scholarship that emphasizes the influence of the physical environment on human behavior. Person–environment theories have long posited that human behavior is a function of the interaction between the person and the environment. Campus ecology approaches to student development emerged from a more general movement called social ecology (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Moos, 1986; Strange & Banning, 2001). In short, these theories of interactionism suggest that both positive and dysfunctional student behavior, and thus learning, are best understood when the environment is included in the equation. These theories, therefore, emphasize creating campus environments that recognize and support students as physical, mental, social, and spiritual beings.

Perhaps Chapman (2006) captured this sentiment best when he wrote, “The campus is a tapestry of sensory, cognitive, and intellectual experiences that are meaningful in and of themselves, and that can profoundly reinforce one another” (p. xxiv). Every university has a story to tell about itself, and, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the architecture and artifacts speak loudly into the experiences each student creates for themselves. Strange and Banning (2001), who have thoughtfully summarized the research about the impact of the physical environment, poignantly wrote, “Whether we want them to or not, or whether we understand them or not, educational environments do exert an impact on students” (p. 4). If welcoming exploration of spirituality, faith, religion, and life purpose is an aim of a campus community, the environment is the best place to begin offering signals that this aspect of student life is welcome.

In a culture where the pace of student life and the influence of technology are overwhelming, offering places for reflection, prayer, and interfaith

dialogue is a reasonable first step toward inviting students to listen to their lives in new ways. For some campuses, few designated spaces are intentionally designed as sacred or reserved places for quiet moments. Providing opportunities in the physical environment to invite engagement in spiritual life sends an almost audible voice welcoming students to explore this dimension. Spiritually laden architecture, for example, is readily apparent when touring the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, including space for meditation, reflection, and prayer. Even amid an English higher education culture that is fundamentally secular, contemporary residential colleges at Oxford and Cambridge preserve chapels and other environmental details related to spiritual growth. More recently, the University at Albany opened Chapel House, an “interfaith meditation and prayer room available to all students, faculty and staff on campus for a tranquil setting to pray and meditate” ([www.albany-interfaithcenter.org](http://www.albany-interfaithcenter.org)). The room is available for people of all religions and also for those without a practiced religion. The meditation room has sacred texts and objects from the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. The Addir Interfaith Program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Pasquerilla Spiritual Center at Pennsylvania State University (<http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/spiritual>) provide additional examples of institutions making strong commitments to student spiritual life.

On some campuses, movement away from a particular religious tradition has provided an opportunity to broaden the mission of the space. At Mount Holyoke College, Abbey Sanctuary ([www.mtholyoke.edu/religiouslife/interfaith\\_sanctuary](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/religiouslife/interfaith_sanctuary)) was once a small Christian prayer chapel, for which students, staff, and faculty implemented a two-year, community-wide plan and converted the structure to serve a more inclusive future. The following regarding Abbey Interfaith Sanctuary can be found on its website:

Open to students of all faith backgrounds (and no faith as well) for reflection, journal writing, meditation, and walking the sacred labyrinth . . . Abbey Interfaith Sanctuary holds sacred objects and texts from the different faith groups represented on campus. Each week, Abbey Interfaith Sanctuary is filled with the words, songs, and shared silence of the Mindfulness Meditation, the Unitarian Universalists service and many informal visits by individuals and groups in search of a peaceful moment away from the busyness of everyday life. (Mount Holyoke College, 2014, para. 1)

If the mission of an institution is to educate “the whole student” (NASPA & ACPA, 2004, p. 3), including spiritual life, opportunities to create spaces

that represent such priorities should become as readily apparent as spaces that celebrate the intellectual and physical lives of students. Given that students spend most of their time outside the classroom, faculty and staff members face the inevitable question, “In what spaces, other than formal chapels or sanctuaries, can we meet students where they are, with convenient locations for reflection and quiet?”

Certainly the residence hall presents options for on-campus residents, who most often share living and study space with others, sometimes in a noisy environment full of bustle and interpersonal activity. A quiet reflection lounge area in a more isolated area of a residence hall or community can provide students such a place to center their thinking without leaving the vicinity of their rooms—important for self-imposed time-outs from stress, interpersonal tensions, or loss of focus as well as deeper inquiry. These spaces can be designed during new construction or incorporated into renovations in the planning stages.

Student centers, traditionally centers of recreation, art, and study, can also include quiet non-study-lounge spaces for reflection and renewal. Whereas on-campus students can at least retreat to their rooms as a base of operations, off-campus residents often use the student center as their base for refreshments, study breaks, and group projects between classes, and having a quiet zone set aside in the floor plan can provide sanctuary for introspection, with unscheduled time for spontaneous visits or programmed opportunities for group discussions around issues of the spirit and meaning making.

Finally, the outdoor environment can and should complement inside sacred places, with gardens, trees, shrubs, and flowers; benches and tables; low walls for seating; and walking paths strategically designed to provide way stations in the thoroughfares of sidewalks traveled by students and staff between classes and appointments. While working at Davidson College, I (Patty) supported the construction of a labyrinth: “an archetype, a divine imprint, found in most religious traditions in various forms around the world” (Artress, n.d., p. 3). It was placed on campus as a way to encourage meditative walking, quiet space, and a deeper connection. Nature can provide the backdrop for an individual’s search for serenity or a quiet place for groups to meet, talk, or even listen to music designed to decompress tension and promote reflection.

It should be noted here that a strongly emerging focus of student affairs professionals across all types of institutions is the integration of learning opportunities into the physical spaces as well as the curricula and programming for students outside the classroom or lab. This trend emphasizes collaboration

between academic and student affairs educators as they establish geographical locations, curricula, and programming opportunities for the education of the whole person. In this case, locales and intentional opportunities for students' discovery and deep reflection, discussions, and civilized debates in the area of spiritual exploration and development are as critical as other elements of student development and are best expressed in collaboratively designed and implemented spaces that directly address these needs.

### People and Roles

Physical space, of course, is but one element of the campus ecology formula for creating dynamic learning environments. The people and the roles they play also interact intricately in the equation. At Virginia Tech, student affairs staff realized that one of the most underutilized resources was the committed and diverse cadre of campus ministers and spiritual leaders working with students; people in these roles had not been fully invited into the infrastructure of university life. By inviting these professionals to serve on student affairs committees, attend university-wide celebrations and events, and collaborate in the collective work of caring for students, Virginia Tech bolstered a sense of commitment to student spiritual life. The most important outcome, however, was the recognition by students of this increased interaction. Students discerned this increase in collaboration and many of them expressed their appreciation that these efforts conveyed a belief that the university respects, appreciates, and celebrates spiritual life. The Virginia Tech Dean of Students Office also regularly convenes an interfaith council to strengthen relationships among clergy and university faculty and staff.

Whereas many private institutions have been more likely to hire a range of personnel to serve students in chaplaincy, ranging from religious traditions to Stanford's newly hired humanist chaplain, public institutions have been more reserved in this practice. Still, there are examples of public institutions like the University of Maryland–College Park, which provides physical space for chaplains in the interfaith Memorial Chapel ([http://thestamp.umd.edu/engagement/memorial\\_chapel](http://thestamp.umd.edu/engagement/memorial_chapel)). “The chaplains, supported by and representing their faith communities, serve their faith traditions while demonstrating a unity that contributes to the rich diversity and quality of life at the University and in the community” (University of Maryland, n.d., para. 1), modeling the type of peaceful acceptance and respect that is possible among faith traditions. Similarly, while working at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County, a university without a campus chapel or faith

centers adjacent to campus, I (Patty) worked to create an Interfaith Center on campus (<http://osl.umbc.edu/diversity/interfaith/>). Using a vacated space in the heart of the campus, a community space with offices and open areas for gathering and meeting was opened for faith leaders and students. The next step may be for public institutions to create and maintain a permanently staffed position that serves as a coordinating entity for spiritual life. Using the word *spiritual* in the title again serves as an outward symbol of an inherent value for spiritual lives of students.

In addition to serving the day-to-day spiritual needs of students and creating a continuity of available services, the value of such unified efforts truly shines forth in the times that crises strike campuses, whether the community is hit by violence, accident, or natural disasters. The fact that the university is already positioned for discussion and support for students' (and staff members') spiritual well-being provides a strong infrastructure through which to react to the event and begin the process of healing and returning to a sense of normalcy, safety, and pursuit of mission.

### Conversation and Community

Once educators in an institution have made a commitment to bring the concepts of spirituality, faith, religion, and life purpose forward into full view and have considered physical spaces and staffing levels that are available and appropriate to the effort as discussed above, what does the end product look like to students, parents, and the public? How does an institution present this often-sensitive subject so that the real intent of the effort is clear and is perceived as proper vis-à-vis the mission of the university? How are students alerted that these issues are relevant to them? It is certain that these issues cannot be satisfactorily addressed unless they are effectively positioned in the unique context in which each institution operates.

Although it seems simplistic, the educators collaborating toward the outcomes must understand the specific outcomes and have a common language in which these outcomes can be discussed. For example, the division of student affairs, academic colleagues, and participating students at Virginia Tech developed five specific student learning outcomes—goals that each student should have reached as a result of their college experience. These goals, not directly reflected by a university degree, address the need for lifelong curiosity and learning, the development of self-understanding and integrity, the practice of civility, the need for a life of courageous leadership, and dedication to a life of service to others. These goals are not meant to replace

the university mission, but to “flesh it out,” to put it in terms with which anyone can participate. These Aspirations for Student Learning are widely disseminated on the division’s web page, in brochures provided to incoming students, and in the materials used in daily operations across the division. Campus ministers and clergy have embraced the aspirations. They have become integral to discussions of resource allocation, program development, and student interventions. It is not unusual to hear the question, “How does this (idea, proposal, asset) fit within the Aspirations for Student Learning?” Certainly, aspects of spiritual development fit well into all these goals and complement the outcomes, but spiritual development alone was not the sole intent for developing these aspirations. The intent was, in common terms, the true education of the whole person.

Each university will have its own mission and guiding principles, but academic and student affairs colleagues in that institution should strive to develop a language through which they can help students make it their own, by defining the intent of these discussions of and about the spirit and meaning making. Students want to know why a subject is relevant to them directly, and they want to know before they get involved that there will be benefits from participating in the work involved in understanding the subject. For secular institutions not pursuing a particular religious agenda or platform, a presentation of clear language and intent in written and verbal information becomes even more important. Once students begin to spend time reflecting, journaling, and participating in quality informal and intentionally designed discussions of spiritual issues and they can report positive experiences, other students will be encouraged to join the discussion. To confirm this, we need only look at the most popular classes taught by professors at our own institutions; often these classes are standing room only and include students from many different majors. The classes may be history, philosophy, ecology, or ethics, but some inherent value of what the instructor has to say has reached through the words of the course descriptions and found students where they live.

The concept of marketing also fits within the context of the discussion of spiritual and meaning-making pursuits. Although the term may not seem congruent with the subject matter, communication of the intent (such as the Aspirations for Student Learning), as well as the who-what-when-where-why-how for specific opportunities such as panel discussions, roundtables, exercises, speakers, and so on, must be communicated. Social networking is a valuable tool; although more open invitations might be issued earlier in the academic year, later electronic communications might be more limited to

those who opt in to distribution lists. The same channels of communication that work for programs on other topics such as study skills or yoga are valid; programs concerning spiritual issues should be listed along with all other programming as an option.

Certainly, some guidelines emerge from the examples and discussions above. Colleagues must work as a team, with the highest dedication to keeping the benefit of individual students and the student body in mind. The personal context for each student must be respected as they balance academics and perhaps work, student organization involvement, and service-learning with their attempts to integrate and understand their personal history, family, faith background, and core belief system. They must not face condemnation, even when their deliberations lead them to face doubts or disillusionment or euphoria that has not yet been challenged. They must be encouraged to talk about these phases of the self-discovery and development process, so that those who are truly facing significant crises at some point in their college careers can seek aid and receive guidance as appropriate or necessary.

Another aspect of meeting the spiritual needs of the community of students is the feeling of inclusion among all students in the process. This is easier on the surface in the residence hall environment than it is for off-campus students, but even in the confines of the residence halls, some students intentionally or unintentionally become isolated. One of the observations of educators over the last two decades is that isolation and lack of feeling connected, spiritually as well as emotionally or interpersonally, can have negative outcomes in terms of campus violence, harm to oneself, and academic failure (Shushok, 2008). Although we strive to use the same language to describe our mission to integrate spiritual awareness and growth among students, there are many different ways to reach students. The most effective way to reach out and include students who might otherwise be isolated are repeated invitations by other students, or faculty and staff mentors, to be a part of the hall or learning community.

Of course, although it is vital that every member of the community has the opportunity to be involved in any type of student learning, we must recognize and respect that a significant number of students will opt out of these efforts for many different reasons. Some students may start out participating and change their minds, or never engage to begin with, and that is the student's absolute right. Particularly in public institutions, the academic mission and the general success of students in terms of finding employment, recruitment and retention, research, and identification as alumni are of public

interest. Just as students pursue many different interests in college—intramurals, leadership opportunities, undergraduate or graduate research—they are also at different stages of personal development. Exploration of the spiritual domain is part of critical holistic development and should be a choice we all make (both students and educators), if together we understand our greatest mission to be the utmost development of human potential.

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