

Creating Communities to Encourage Engagement and Spiritual Questions: An Interview with Carney Strange

By Carney Strange

In this interview, educator and author Carney Strange shares his background as it relates to becoming engaged in working to support students' exploration of spirituality in college through creating mentoring communities. Strange upholds that Student Affairs practitioners and educators, along with the entire campus community, must be actively engaged in promoting literacy around how to recognize and respond to spiritual questions in our own life and the lives of others. This is a major challenge and a greater opportunity that currently exists within the landscape of higher education.

Please share your personal and professional experiences higher education and their connection to issues of meaning, purpose, faith, and spirituality. What significant experiences led you to become involved in this work and bring you to where you are today?

Early on, I spent my undergraduate years during the Woodstock generation at St. Meinrad College, a small, private liberal arts college run by Benedictine monks, where I studied French Literature, Philosophy, and Classical Languages. Our conversations then were hardly ever about what sort of job we were going to get; rather, we were mostly consumed with questions like, *What do you believe? What do you value? To what are you committed?* And while these questions didn't do much for making career decisions, it was a very rich kind of experience about what *really counts* that helped us frame our life perspectives as young adults.

It was during a time when we were living out our history in the midst of the Vietnam War and other social turmoil within our country. We became very engaged in being part of the solution through participating in service to the local community from working with the elderly to creating a program for literacy in rural schools. This work was a very influential part of my undergraduate experience. It was during this time that I made the decision to be a conscientious objector and contribute to a philosophy of nonviolence.

This undergraduate background led me to accept my first education position – teaching junior high school in Louisville, Kentucky, two years of which quickly motivated me to figure out what else I could do with my life. I then signed on with the Social Action Department of the Catholic Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, where I completed two years of volunteer alternative service as a community organizer for a low-income housing project.

Both of these experiences demonstrate the same thread of community values that came from my undergraduate background where I was immersed in a Benedictine monastic culture, where reflection and action went hand in hand. From that exposure, I knew that somehow my life's work was going to be in service to others.

The University of Iowa wasn't too far from where I was living at the time, and following my stint at community organizing, I then applied to a master's program in Drug and Alcohol Abuse Counseling and was accepted (but only on the second try!). Within the Division of Counselor Education in this program, students were required to choose a complementary area to focus on as well, one of which happened to be College Student Personnel.

As I became more involved in the program, I realized that substance abuse wasn't an area I could sink my teeth into and, in turn, I became much more interested in the higher education and student affairs piece. Once I completed my master's degree, I pursued doctoral studies, which prepared me for my first and only faculty position at Bowling Green State University, where I have been now for 32 years.

In this role, I have been teaching courses on student development, the design and impact of campus environments, and the techniques of qualitative research, among other topics. For the past ten years, I have also taught a course on the spiritual dimensions of student development. My specific interest in the area of education and spirituality was renewed about 20 years ago when I was invited to serve on the board of overseers at my alma mater. Along with my current role as a trustee of Saint Xavier University (IL), I found myself in institutional environments where I could ask different questions than I could at the public university I served.

During this time, I also reunited with a former classmate who had lived as a Benedictine monk for as long as I have been an educator. We began asking one another "what do you do all day?" Through our conversations, I became introduced to the Rule of St. Benedict, a document that governs Western monastic culture, and began to discover some very powerful parallels and similarities between what he was doing as a monk and what I was doing as an educator at a public institution.

As educators – whether in a monastery or a classroom – we work to create *community* to enhance learning, development, and growth through recognition, design, and implementation. In this way, we are all learning to become who we are supposed to be in the presence of others. To me, this principle is fundamental to the work we do in higher education and to the lives of college students. The core experience of education is about learning to make meaning of one’s experiences, and this is what I do as an educator both in and outside the classroom. I view issues of spirituality as part of this framework of meaning-making. In this way, I see my work as an educator and interest in students’ spiritual development as connected to the larger process of learning, growth, and development.

How and why is spirituality important in the work of Student Affairs? Please discuss the significance of this work on our college campuses across the country.

The really is no reason to come together in the setting of a college or university if all you are here to do is collect information; rather, the experience of living in the presence of others is much more important – and out of this experience, the true value of higher education is realized. The more lasting impressions that come from a college education are born out of *communities* where mutual learning is most powerful.

The work of student affairs revolves around the creation and maintenance of learning communities, ranging from residence halls to student organizations and beyond; combined with the classroom learning of academic affairs, these co-curricular experiences provide multiple entry points for genuine engagement and spiritual inquiry. Our role as educators is to include, secure, engage, and invite students into these learning communities (Strange and Banning, 2001). Building, recognizing, and implementing conditions of community is what we, as educators, must do.

Sharon Parks’ (2000) framework of “mentoring communities” describes this process of belonging and the impact it has on young adults. Yet, building strong mentoring communities doesn’t just happen – it’s a process that occurs intentionally over time and the complex “glue” called *culture* holds it all together. Moreover, students never experience *true community* unless they become engaged and involved, taking on significant roles as active participants in their communities.

Within the fundamental human experience still remains a deep question of, “*Who am I in the presence of others?*” Ultimately, the sense of understanding, “*I am a worthy being and have value in this world*” is foundational to the experience of being part of a larger community. As they engage with others, students must ask, “*Do I feel like I belong?*” and “*Is my identity a source of risk in this setting?*” Both of these questions point to the basic level of security students must feel as they discover a place where they belong. The first step toward community then, is to welcome students by communicating that they are accepted for who they are.

Once students are satisfied and fundamentally connected to the setting, they must have something of significance to do – that is the role of engagement and involvement. Yet, involvement in itself, although necessary, is not sufficient to achieve community. It's the ongoing investment of time and energy to a common purpose that leads to an experience of community, where it becomes possible to explore the spiritual questions that exist in the hearts and minds of our students. In this way, we invite dialogue and meaning making into the heart of the learning enterprise.

There are many fundamental questions that students begin asking themselves in college: *“Who am I? To whom/what am I connected? Where am I going and who do I want to become?”* Additionally, certain questions are connected to the deeper, spiritual side of their lives: *“Am I a worthy human being? What does it mean to be faithful? What community am I drawn to? For what would I give my life?”*

Being aware of spiritual questions in students' lives is what we need to pay attention to, along with the other big questions they are asking. As educators and student affairs practitioners, we need to be open and available to listening to and reflecting with our students to help them process these large concepts that they are pondering and struggling to understand. Many opportunities exist for engaging students in spiritual dialogue and inquiry to promote spiritual literacy within student affairs and the larger academic setting.

At Bowling Green, we have a set of core values that we espouse, including intellectual and spiritual growth, which is unique for a public institution. We recognize that the physical environment we create for students has a large impact on how students are able to engage in these communities and begin exploring these spiritual questions. For these reasons, a proposal is being considered to create a new living-learning community to engage students in these spiritual questions and to support their development in college. Titled *S.E.A.R.C.H.* (Students Engaged in Active, Reflective, Caring, and Holistic Learning), this residential community is designed around the characteristics of mentoring communities as articulated by Parks. The overall goal of this community is to increase students' literacy about spiritual questions in their own lives and how differing people in this world address such questions.

Similarly, residential communities at other institutions can use this as a model to help students explore their spiritual identities, connect with others, and search for deeper meaning and purpose during their college years. Moreover, there are many inroads with educational programming where such issues can be addressed to help support students' spiritual development. Spiritual questions that are asked by residential advisors and hall staff can contribute to a larger sense of belonging and create safer, more supportive communities on campus.

In addition to the context of residential communities, within the area of career planning, there are many avenues to explore vocation and calling, beyond just focusing on students' interests and skills. Asking, *“What are you called to do?”* is a vexing question that requires support and permission to explore without having all the answers at

present. Often with non-traditional students, this question is what brings them back to school because of changes within their own life path and personal calling.

There are also many entry points within the domain of service-learning. The whole idea of learning to give rather than get as a basic human motive, while learning to serve others, is a fundamental spiritual experience. Similarly, the work done within student activities and leadership development also provides valuable contexts where spiritually significant communities can be formed and experienced. Various goals drive students' engagement with others within these communities, such as learning to be a stronger leader or a good citizen. All of these experiences provide opportunities for meaningful engagement and create learning communities where students can interact, learn, and grow as they begin pondering these spiritual questions.

What current challenges and opportunities exist within the landscape of higher education that impacts this work?

In our question-filled world, we rely mostly on empirical processes to provide us with answers, and this is especially prevalent in an academic community. Consequently, many faculty are quite suspicious (or fearful) of any effort to do otherwise. Educator and author, Robert Nash (2001), talks about this phenomenon as *religiphobia* in his book *Religious Pluralism in the Academy*, and how such an attitude is deeply imbedded within the modern academy. It takes about five seconds to get from spirituality to religion to fundamentalism, which, in turn, closes off conversation because it becomes about answers, not questions.

This common reaction to anything spiritual comes out of scientific positivism and the focus on empirical examination of anything as a source for knowing. We tend to take these spiritual questions and we either ignore them or treat them as special cases, not having a real place at the table in the academy, mistrusting them. More often than not, people want to point to the abuses, rather than the benefits, that these questions bring to the table.

Based on the current context of university, I look at this whole challenge of spirituality within higher education as an opportunity to promote *literacy*. How we recognize and respond to spiritual questions in our own life and the lives of others is a basic component of spiritual literacy that we must develop in order to serve our students, and ourselves, better.

Out of literacy comes the idea of questions and understanding, rather than just focusing on answers; this framework squares up nicely with the whole framework of an educational institution. Once student affairs practitioners and faculty recognize literacy as a valuable mechanism for development, they are more likely to engage in this work.

I, personally, have found it easier to approach spiritual questions this way at public institutions rather than at private ones, because many such religious schools (especially those of an evangelical nature) specifically express their viewpoints as the norm; as a

result, their narrower focus often tends to hinder broad spiritual inquiry as alternative views are silenced, either intentionally or inadvertently. As a result, students might be driven underground, so to speak, because of a tremendous cultural pressure to be and live the standard such institutions might promote.

Whereas, public institutions promote freedom of expression around matters of speech and religion, perhaps providing greater opportunities to speak openly and to consider diverse perspectives about spiritual issues. We need to be aware of an institution's mission and how it is actualized to support all students' search for meaning and purpose, without silencing spiritual dialogue.

In order to open the doors to spiritual inquiry, we need to promote spiritual literacy within our institutions, no matter what the type (public, private, religiously affiliated, etc.). To come out of an undergraduate experience with no facility for either understanding the nature of spiritual questions in people's lives in general, let alone their own, puts our students at a huge disadvantage in this world. Religion and spiritually-related ideas are major drivers in our society and motivate many to action for both the good and the bad. Therefore, not being able to understand these questions or potential ways of responding to them makes for an under-prepared citizenry.

Whether we like it or not, students will have to face spiritually-related issues in our global society, so we might as well be part of helping students question and understand deeper issues as educators. Student affairs has many opportunities within our institutions to integrate spiritual questions to help develop literacy among students, staff, and faculty members, who can all be partners in this venture. The opportunity is here; we just have to take the risk of engaging in spiritual dialogue to begin this important work.

What research and current work has been done in this area? Please describe any practices that you have been involved in or considerations that student affairs practitioners should be aware of as they interact with students.

We have seen a dramatic upsurge recently in work related to spirituality, especially as it relates to supporting students' development in college. I am drawn to many of the insights of Sharon Parks (2000) as she weaves questions of faith development into the fabric of young adulthood and the purposes of higher education. I also really appreciate some of the work that Robert Nash has been doing at the University of Vermont. I use his various narratives often in a course I teach on "Spiritual Dimensions in Student Development" to help illustrate spiritual questions and religion to my students. Nash (2001) talks a lot about creating conditions of moral conversation to promote critical inquiry and dialogue around these questions.

Parker Palmer's (1987) notion of the importance of creative conflict in his article "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing" also helps us better understand what we do both in and outside the classroom as a community of learners. I have used his work in my teaching and work with student development to show students how to sustain

relationships through creative conflict to produce new insights and learning as a result. His work demonstrates how epistemology and ethics are intimately connected, allowing students to engage deeper questions, while capitalizing on the benefits of differences.

I am also currently conducting a study on the differences of spiritual beliefs and religious practices of roommate pairs to better understand how residential communities impact spiritual growth and development. Though this study, I am trying to understand if different narratives lend themselves to different expressions of belief and how these spiritual concepts relate to overall satisfaction.

Additionally, many campuses are engaging with inter-faith work through dialogue groups and other approaches. The work around religious dialogue that is happening at the University of Michigan, in particular, demonstrates well how to engage students and others within the higher education community in spiritual questioning and offers other institutions models for creating similar structures on their campuses.

Moreover, the work happening at Harvard in their Religious Pluralism Project under the leadership of Dianna Eck, shows that the encounter of religious pluralism is one of relationship, not one of agreement; in this way, open, safe dialogue that explores spiritual issues and questions to promote relationships and communities on our campuses teaches students how to relate across fundamental differences.

All of these examples suggest that campuses can no longer ignore the impact of spirituality on students' developmental processes. Research and engagement around spiritual questions has gained ground in the past decade, yet there is much more that needs to be done in order to fully integrate considerations of spirituality into higher education. While much of this work can start within student affairs, it takes the buy-in and commitment from the entire campus learning community to make positive and lasting change occur. With a renewed desire to engage students around spiritual questions and create positive mentoring communities, we have an open invitation to entertain these deep questions as students make meaning of their experiences in college toward a larger life purpose.

Carney Strange is Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University (OH) where he has served as a faculty member since 1978. With a Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Development from the University of Iowa, he teaches courses focusing on student development, the design and impact of educational environments, dimensions of student spirituality, and methods of qualitative research. Co-author of *Educating by Design*, Strange has published widely and edits for three professional journals. An ACPA Senior Scholar diplomate (2003) and a NASPA Faculty Fellow (2005), he has been selected as an ACPA Diamond Honoree (1999) and a NASPA Pillar of the Profession (2006). Strange also serves on the Board of Trustees of Saint Xavier University (IL).

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