Creating Shared Vision for Promoting Students’ Spiritual Development: An Intervention Model from Edgewood College

By Mary Klink

This article describes the year-long process designed by Edgewood’s Student Development Division staff to create, claim, and implement a vision for promoting students’ spiritual development during their time on campus. Through creating a campus Vision and Values Statement for Encouraging Student Spiritual Development and structuring intentional training and development sessions, Edgewood’s work serves as a model for introducing spirituality on an administrative level within Student Affairs. Exercises and strategies used in this process provide resources for other institutions that seek to integrate opportunities for spiritual development within holistic services and programming.

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging students’ spiritual development on college and university campuses is certainly a tall order. While opportunities abound to engage in this work – spirituality connects, after all, to all of life – faculty and staff who attempt to incorporate spirituality in their higher education field often encounter roadblocks at many turns along the way, whether the campus context is public, private, and/or faith-based.

Over the past five years, I have served as Director of College Ministries at Edgewood College, a small, Catholic, liberal arts college in Madison, Wisconsin. In this role, I have worked with the College Ministries department to provide leadership for the campus in promoting students’ spiritual development. Given this task, it didn’t take long to realize how essential it would be to enlist partners for this daunting responsibility.

Despite our institution’s religious affiliation, our overall campus climate does not foster spiritual engagement, similar to many institutions across the country. Yet, multiple entry points for engaging in this important work still exist and must be capitalized on if our goal to support students’ spiritual development is to be met.
I realized that our College Ministries’ staff of two full-time and two part-time professionals, along with a small cohort of involved student leaders could, at best, have limited impact on the campus through co-curricular programming and individualized services. Therefore, building effective partnerships with a shared vision and commitment to this work on a larger scale was a necessary first step.

The following narrative description of the work at Edgewood College provides a model for how other institutions can implement similar spiritual interventions on their campuses in order to produce this shared vision and mutual commitment. The following sections illustrate the process our Student Development Division used to address the spiritual needs of both students and staff, including establishing a partnership among a portion of our staff members, designing a retreat as an intensive professional development intervention for the entire Division, creating a campus-wide Vision and Values Statement, and integrating new learning and reflecting on our progress.

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROMOTING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Despite existing challenges, it is essential that campuses develop a climate in which the life-enhancing and transforming spiritual dimension of students, staff, faculty, and other members of the campus community can thrive. It takes openness, intentionality and quality relationships among colleagues – at least a core group of colleagues – who are willing to respect, encourage, explore, and mentor spiritual seekers. Additionally, building effective partnerships among campus colleagues for spiritual development work on campus also takes commitment to ongoing personal growth.

To begin this work, various partners were initially enlisted from the Student Development Division, including staff members working in Residence Life, the Student Resource Center, and the Vice President for Student Development/Dean of Students, among others. These individuals served as sounding boards, ambassadors, and partners in planning professional development for our colleagues. They also assisted in identifying other allies on campus who were committed to similar outcomes.

An early goal of this collaboration was to increase Student Development staff members’ willingness and comfort-level to incorporate spirituality in their individual practices. Generally, the staff was not comfortable discussing the topic and not prepared to integrate spirituality in their work. How could we get beyond this impasse? Even though the institution is sponsored by a congregation of religious women, conversations about spirituality are met with resistance, and sometimes even disapproval.

One factor that helped us to better understand this negative reaction was the realization that many staff members and faculty had received advanced degrees and/or worked at public institutions of higher education where they had either learned or assumed that spirituality was personal business – a taboo subject for public discussion or programming. This attitude of avoidance is common throughout many institutional types and prevents us from moving forward with this important work.
Unfortunately, resistance from colleagues generates a sense of isolation and can make the challenges seem insurmountable for College Ministries’ staff. By recognizing and responding to this attitude, we were able to lay the initial foundation to begin this important dialogue about how to move forward.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

For several years, staff in the Student Development Division has utilized learning communities in order to expand the staff’s knowledge and application of current developments in the field of Student Affairs. Staff members individually chose the learning community in which they wished to serve. The goal of each learning community is to provide leadership and propose initial steps to move the Division forward on an issue.

One learning community accepted responsibility to explore the role of spirituality in our programming and services. The learning community introduced the Division to the work of Sharon Parks, Arthur Chickering, Jon Dalton, and other scholars who write about spirituality. Reading assignments, journaling exercises, and small group discussions based on our common reading invited staff reactions and questions, as we undertook the challenge of describing our understanding of spiritual development, and what mature values and a self-authored belief system might look like in young adults within a college environment.

Around this same time, HERI released findings from the longitudinal Spirituality in Higher Education research project. Data in this national study provides impetus for this important work on college campuses: 80% of the college freshmen that were surveyed expressed an interest in spirituality; 74% reported having discussions about the meaning of life with friends; and 47% seek opportunities to help them grow spiritually. With statistics like this, we knew many of our students were open to exploring their personal spiritual journeys! We then set out to discover how and where we might accompany them on this important human search.

IDENTIFYING NEXT STEPS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Through the groundwork of establishing a learning community and the Division’s shared study, it was evident that more concentrated time and attention needed to be devoted to this important area of student life. To this end, a committee comprising several staff members in the Division collaborated with the Vice-President of Student Development/Dean of Students to create an intentional process of professional development for the Student Development Division Staff at the college as an institutional priority. The Division participated in a one and a half day retreat program away from campus to meet the following primary objectives and to increase awareness of:
• Common vocabulary related to spirituality, faith and religion will facilitate understanding and conversation;
• Impact of faculty/staff/institutional silence regarding spirituality for college students;
• Barriers related to Student Development Staff efforts to integrate spirituality;
• Existing events and opportunities that encourage student spiritual growth;
• Multiplicity of paths, and methodologies toward spiritual growth;
• Potential partners within and beyond Student Development for promoting students’ spiritual growth; and
• Staff members’ own spiritual journey.

Many components were identified to address these shared objectives. The following description details specific activities and materials that were incorporated prior to, during and following this retreat as well as results generated by these efforts.

Assessing Staff Comfort-Level

We conducted a brief “spirituality comfort level check-in” with staff members prior to the retreat program days in order to gauge the current status of staff members’ comfort level regarding spirituality. We also used the same check-in questions after the retreat, to assist in assessing the effectiveness of the retreat. Using a 1-5 scale, staff members were asked to rate their comfort level discussing or expressing spirituality with faculty members, group of students, and with other Student Development staff members. Staff feedback explained what helps and/or hinders feeling safe and comfortable integrating spirituality in their service to students. Salient staff comments prior to the retreat included:

“The greatest barrier I experience regarding integrating spirituality is silence – not knowing what people are thinking.”

“It would help to know what we mean by the terms and what helps to lead students to deepened spirituality; what the end really looks like for different students.”

“To feel comfortable and safe, I need a few guidelines, ground rules; knowing that people in the conversation are not judgmental. I need open minds and open hearts.”

Following the retreat, surveys from staff expressed increased comfort and ability in conversations about spirituality because the retreat provided “ground rules, common language, good information, time to explore, an affirming climate, practice, confirmation that my colleagues aren’t saddened by my beliefs or wanting/hoping to change my beliefs.” Another staff member was “humbled by how much I don’t know yet eager to try some new things that I’ve thought about as a result of this retreat. I’m going to ‘test’ my perceived barriers at the next College Assembly, the quarterly gathering of Administrators, Faculty, and Staff.”
Input from Current Student Experience

Prior to the retreat, the planning committee also sought input from students on our campus. Assuring them confidentiality, we invited student input via several open-ended questions:

- Spirituality is…
- I feel most spiritual when I…
- Time(s) at college that I have felt spiritual…
- College could “feed” my spirituality by…

Throughout the retreat, the students’ comments were posted around the meeting room, allowing time for staff to read and reflect on the comments before we discussed concerns and themes emerging from the students’ feedback. The wisdom our students expressed included:

“Spirituality is a deep connection between the mind and body. Feeling connected with a higher being. Being in touch with something deeper than what you can see. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a religion.”

“I feel most spiritual when I help others; when I communicate with others about spirituality; when I am at my church; a feeling inside brings peace to mind, body and soul; for me it is more associated with my religion but it is not necessarily that way for everybody.”

“I feel spiritual at times, walking through campus; this is a great community and so full of compassion. I like the grounds and the way the buildings are kept so beautiful. I realize this takes great effort.”

“Something that would ‘feed’ my spirituality is if, as a class, we could take a few moments before we begin lectures to clear our minds of negative thoughts; take a brief moment of silent meditation.”

These student voices illustrate how our students consider spirituality to be very connected to their experiences in higher education, further demonstrating the importance of this work.

Creating a Common Vocabulary

In order to begin discussing spirituality with a common understanding, we first needed to agree upon how to define this abstract concept. We engaged in a word association exercise during the retreat, focusing on the words faith, religion, and spirituality. Using a brainstorming approach to this exercise, individuals were invited to express any and all thoughts and feelings about these abstract concepts, including experiences, assumptions, and concerns regarding these concepts.
For our purposes, we adopted an excerpt from Wayne Teasdale’s (1999) book, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions* for common vocabulary regarding spirituality and religion. Teasdale shares:

“Being religious connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition. Being spiritual suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality. Religion, of course, is one way many people are spiritual. Often, when authentic faith embodies an individual’s spirituality the religious and spiritual will coincide. Still, not every religious person is spiritual (although they ought to be) and not every spiritual person is religious. Spirituality is a way of life that affects and includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging. The spiritual person is committed to growth as an essential ongoing life goal. To be spiritual requires us to stand on our own two feet while being nurtured and supported by our tradition, if we are fortunate enough to have one” (pg. 17-18).

Several features of this definition appealed to us, namely that it incorporates both religion and spirituality, provides a broad and understandable description of spirituality, and recognizes, but does not require, religious practice as a legitimate spiritual path.

Creating a Shared Visual Resource

A staff member began the retreat program days by introducing a visual representation or model that described her understanding and experience of spirituality. The model drew from the work of Henri Nouwen, identifying three professional disciplines (psychology, ministry and theology), three personal movements (inward, outward and upward), and three essential questions of the spiritual journey (Who am I? How do I make a difference? Is there something more?); refer to Vision and Values Statement later in this article for a visual representation of Nouwen’s model. As any construct, this model has limits, but it continues to serve as a useful catalyst for conversation.

Discussing Related Literature

One session of the Retreat was devoted to discussing the challenges and insights that staff members gleaned from chapter six of Chickering, Dalton and Stamm’s (2006) book, *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, that addresses Student Affairs professionals’ role in students’ spiritual development on college campuses. Much of our discussion centered on a concern raised by the authors, namely a tendency for Student Affairs professionals in higher education to exclude spirituality from the conversation, despite intentional efforts to provide holistic programming and services for students.

The authors’ insights compelled us to acknowledge and address the “silence factor” surrounding spirituality on campus, by cautioning that students’ silence ought not be dismissed as indicative of students’ lack of interest, but may actually result from
negative feedback students have received, or a general sense students perceive that spiritual ideas and values don’t matter. The authors and our discussion of their work provided our staff both the challenge and opportunity to claim co-responsibility to develop competencies in the area of students’ growth toward spiritual depth.

“Spirituality Scenarios” Case Studies

The most pragmatic session during the retreat produced a practical resource booklet for participants. The session invited each staff member to suggest a situation in which s/he could imagine initiating a conversation with a student about finding meaning and values. These “spirituality scenarios” represent real-life case studies in the lives of students on campus that lend themselves to exploring spirituality. Among the situations that we proposed were a student who is unsure what to do with her life after graduation; a student who admitted contracting a sexually transmitted infection resulting from a partner’s infidelity; and a student feeling no peer support for pursuing his spiritual interests.

Using a group writing process, we applied our common language about meaning and spirituality in order to compose conversation starters and questions regarding the situation that could be used to engage students in conversations about each situation. As a group, we shared, critiqued, and contributed further ideas to each other’s conversation starters. The goal of this exercise was to build confidence and competencies in Student Development staff to provide conversation starters that capably move conversation from a surface level to greater depth, when appropriate and when both the student and staff member choose.

We differentiated three levels of conversation and developed appropriate questions and conversation starters for each of the three levels, identifying them as follows:

**Level One: Testing the Water** provides informal, open-ended comments and questions that acknowledge the situation presented by the student, while allowing the student the option to engage in or decline further conversation. A level one conversation might open in this way, “Many students I talk to are asking similar questions about their future. If you’d like, tell me a bit about your interests or the type of work you have liked in the past.”

**Level Two: Wading Pool** comments and questions respectfully seek information to assist in opening a genuine conversation when a student sends signals that further conversation is desired. Level two conversations might begin, ”Let’s talk about a past experience where you felt you made a difference. Tell me what made you feel that way;” or, “Who have been the major influences in your life. Tell me about them.”

**Level Three: Deep End** questions presume a sense of trust is present and that the time is right to encourage further self-reflection, deeper probing and the potential for transformative conversation for both parties. Level three questions might invite the student to consider, “What issues concern you? Do you sense any calling, and any way that you could dedicate your career to these concerns?” or, “How might your unique personality, talents and spirituality be leading you? Who or what might help you reflect and respond to this?”
MOVING FORWARD AS A DIVISION

While the retreat better equipped our staff to engage with students regarding spirituality, many realized that one and a half days was not sufficient to address the challenges of integrating spiritual development within our practice and programming. As a Division, we dedicated four additional 90 minute professional development sessions during the next year to further develop competencies for this important work. Outcomes sought through further development sessions included:

- Recognition of opportunities to encourage spiritual growth at both individual and programmatic level;
- Staff ability to identify best practices for promoting spiritual depth, whether working with individuals, through our services or outreach programs;
- Individual and department-level plans of action to promote student spiritual growth;
- Use of shared indicators and individual department indicators by staff throughout the division, to assess services and programming toward student spiritual growth; and
- A Student Development Division “Vision and Values statement” regarding encouraging students’ spiritual development.

Each individual follow-up session included group discussion to identify and make decisions regarding the guiding principles that would direct our work. We also reflected on best practices. By the conclusion of four sessions, the staff agreed upon the following Vision and Values statement, “Encouraging Student Spiritual Development: Vision and Values.” The content of this statement reflects the degree of commitment we reached regarding Student Development staff members’ role in promoting student spiritual growth.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT VISION AND VALUES
Student Development Staff, Edgewood College, December 2007

I. Vision Statement

Edgewood College, rooted in the Dominican Catholic tradition, values the lifelong and communal search for truth. Our Vision for Spiritual Development rests on core Dominican values of:

- Veritas, truth, sought through Caritas, unselfish love;
- Integrated study, reflection and action;
- Informed decision-making; and
- Encouragement of relationships that make it possible to share the fruits of one’s own reflection with others.

The Student Development Staff respects the uniqueness of each person’s spiritual journey.
We promote opportunities to discover insights from others, to sharpen our perspectives, and increase our understanding of those with whom we agree and disagree.

We will work in partnership with faculty, staff, and students to explore intellect, spirit, imagination, and heart as pathways to personal and spiritual growth.

We acknowledge the variety of developmental domains, including the intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. These domains are supported by the Student Development Staff in an integrated manner encouraging holistic health and spiritual depth.

II. Spirituality: Our Search for Truth

Who am I? How do I make a difference? Is there something more? Henri Nouwen, prominent 20th century author and spiritual guide, identified these three questions as core questions of the spiritual journey. Nouwen highlighted three inter-related movements that help us discover answers for these important questions as we reach inward, outward and upward.

These questions are essentially the same for each of us; so are the movements that help us to answer these basic questions. Still, each of us answers the questions for ourselves. The process we use to explore will not be the same for everyone. Throughout life, we revisit the questions and may discover different patterns that encourage our spiritual development.

III. Hallmarks of a climate that promotes spiritual depth include:

- An open invitation to the spiritual journey;
- Clear messages that it is safe to explore spiritual issues;
- A non-judgmental climate: there are many ways, many paths;
- Respect for the diversity of spiritual paths and perspectives;
- Offering questions not answers;
- Acceptance of where the person is on their journey;
- Acknowledgement that spiritual growth may or may not incorporate religion/religious traditions.

IV. Best Practices of Student Development Staff will:

- Reflect an integrated framework speaking to growth of the whole person, linking the five developmental domains;
- Use the Dominican tradition of study, reflection, action;
• Use common words, symbols, activities that are an explicit invitation to spiritual growth;
• Incorporate either explicitly or implicitly one of the three questions: Who am I? How do I make a difference? Is there something more?
• Role model sharing a spiritual journey;
• Develop outcomes tied to the effectiveness of programming and services provided for students’ spiritual growth;
• Evaluate and assess progress toward outcomes.

Therefore, the SDS commits to integrating spirituality and promoting spiritual development through our services and programming as we challenge and support students in their growth toward personal fulfillment, spiritual depth, and cultural competence.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT OF OUR WORK

Tangible results from a year of intentional staff development, including the spirituality model and the spirituality scenarios booklet have been widely distributed beyond the Student Development Division. Several Human Resources-sponsored training sessions were provided to introduce Faculty and Staff to the spirituality model and scenarios booklet. New faculty and staff orientation annually includes an introduction to these resources. Resident Assistants learn about the spirituality model and receive training that incorporates the spirituality scenarios pamphlet. We anticipate additional synergy arising from the revised general education curriculum, recently approved by faculty at the college, a curriculum, which includes three core classes that address questions very similar to the spirituality model questions.

With the creation of this Vision and Values Statement along with the dedication of Student Development staff across campus, our work will continue. While the concept of spirituality is certainly more acceptable in polite conversation across campus at this point, challenges still remain. The pace of academic life places great demands on people’s time and energy in higher education, such that personal and spiritual domains can easily move to the margins, not integrated into the academy’s vision of student growth and development.

Living a disconnected, compartmentalized life hurts us individually and collectively. Our world urgently needs women and men who are well-grounded, reflective, whole people. It is incumbent upon faculty and staff in higher education to model and mentor integration of all domains of human development – intellectual, moral, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual – so that today’s young adults may be well prepared to serve as leaders and builders of a respectful, just world.

With shared vision and the collective effort of our Division to support students’ spiritual development on our campus, we have laid a strong foundation upon which to further develop this important work of preparing our students for meaningful personal and professional lives of ethical leadership, service, and a lifelong search for truth.
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References


